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## Is Dispensationalism Hurting American Political Policies in the Middle East?

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“It’s hard to believe, but the Bush administration’s foreign policy and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are influenced by the writings of a cave-dwelling hermit who had apocalyptic visions some 2000 years ago.”<sup>1</sup> Such a claim, in spite of its clear overstatement, nonetheless echoes a belief that is held by religious and political liberals and many conservative evangelicals. Another concerned writer notes that “it is somewhat alarming that swathes of the evangelical community...naively accept a potted version of biblical eschatology in relation to the Middle East which puts them firmly on the side of injustice and post-colonial oppression, as far as most inhabitants of the region are concerned.”<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein, a recent edition of *Christianity Today* highlights the analysis of Kevin Phillips, a former Republican strategist, who is apparently quite unaware of the many varieties of evangelicals in America. Phillips, in a stark criticism of dispensationalism (perhaps without knowing the term), complains, “The rapture, end-times, and Armageddon hucksters in the United States rank with any Shiite ayatollahs, and the last two presidential elections mark the transformation of the GOP into the first religious party in U.S. history.”<sup>3</sup> Collin Hansen’s *CT* review summarizes Phillips’ massive tome with a test to discover if any individual is contributing to the downfall of the United States—Are you now, or have you ever: (a) attended a megachurch; (b) driven an SUV; (c) read any of the Left Behind books; (d) voted for President Bush; (e) lived in the South. Hansen asserts that the tone of Phillips’ book is that a “yes” answer for two or more of these questions means that you as an

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<sup>1</sup> Chip Berlet & Nikhil Aziz, “Culture, Religion, Apocalypse, and Middle East Foreign Policy” *Right Web* 5 December 2003, <<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/848>> (accessed 27 September 2006). Berlet and Aziz work at Political Research Associates ([www.publiceye.org](http://www.publiceye.org)) which is a self-labeled progressive Boston think tank. The cave-dwelling hermit is, of course, the Apostle John who gave us the book of Revelation. What is being criticized is the dispensational understanding of that New Testament book.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Wilkinson, “Eschatology and the Middle East” *Open Source Theology* 3 June 2006, <<http://www.opensource.theology.net/node/924>> (accessed 21 September 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Kevin P. Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), vii.

individual American are causing America's downfall.<sup>4</sup> This means deep trouble for this author. I have in my life been a member of a church of almost 20,000 members. I have read *all* of the Left Behind books in the original series. I voted for Bush *twice* (and his father *twice*). I was born and raised in the southern part of the United States. To add insult to injury I recently bought my first SUV. To those like Phillips I am a hyper-demon responsible for the coming destruction of a once-great country.

The reference above to the Left Behind series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins highlights the concern of dispensational theology, which they attempt to portray. The concern of Phillips and other critics of dispensationalism point to its undue influence in American politics especially as it relates to foreign policy related to Israel. This common complaint in our day is somewhat of an enigma. Dispensationalism is viewed as having too much power while at the same time other historians and theologians are telling us that dispensationalism is in serious decline as a theological option within evangelicalism.<sup>5</sup>

### **Dispensationalism and Neoconservatism**

It is no wonder then that there exists within the politico-religious debates in America a parallel between shrill criticism of dispensational theology and harsh aversion to neoconservatism. The latter is considered to be a movement starting earlier in the twentieth century with once-liberal activists who vigorously opposed communism and have morphed in recent times into a new wing of conservative politics. This group has been intensely pro-Israel in Middle Eastern policies. Many Jews are part of this movement although historically the term does not limit itself to Jewish proponents of the political philosophy. The Bush administration is considered to have too many of this persuasion in critical foreign policy positions. One name that often surfaces is that of Paul Wolfowitz, current President of the World Bank, but formerly the Deputy Secretary of Defense under Donald Rumsfeld from 2001-2005, a time when the Bush Administration was formulating its planned response in the War on Terror.

Dispensationalism has been perhaps the most caricatured and misrepresented theological position within evangelicalism since its rise in the early nineteenth century. Committed to a literal (grammatical-historical) interpretation of the Bible including prophecy, it has always affirmed some form of significant and institutional distinction between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalism has strongly rejected any form of replacement theology in which Israel has been done away with in God's plan for history and thus

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<sup>4</sup> Collin Hansen, "Logic Left Behind," *Christianity Today* (September 2006): 126. Hansen's critique of Phillips is largely and appropriately negative.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Ronald M. Henzel, *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism* (Tuscon, AZ: Fenestra Books, 2003).

superseded by the Church. The Church has typically not been defined as simply the collection of all the elect of all ages. Consequently, dispensationalists accept the promises of the Old Testament relative to an ultimate restoration of Israel to its land before and after the return of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) to planet earth.<sup>6</sup>

Usually dispensationalists and political neoconservatives, who disagree perhaps on many social issues, share one fundamental aspect of their world view: Israel has a right to its land in present-day Palestine. Another way to voice this shared belief is to say that most dispensationalists and neoconservatives are Zionists. Dispensationalists would be called *Christian Zionists* although not all Christian Zionists could be labeled as *dispensationalist*. Dispensationalists believe in Israel's right to the land by embracing the biblical prophecies about Israel's land in a straight-forward way. Neoconservatives would come to it from the vantage point of modern geopolitics. Therefore, as a result of the existence of neoconservatives in the present administration coupled with the fact of supposedly easy access for dispensationalists to a self-proclaimed evangelical president, the Bush administration is perceived as favoring Israel over against the Islamic Arabs in Middle-Eastern policies. Over-generalizations of this kind need to be avoided by all parties since Bush's so-called "Roadmap to Peace" includes the establishment of a Palestinian state, something that is not welcomed easily by those with a pro-Israel bent.

### **The Charge of Racism**

In a misrepresentation of dispensationalism, there is the charge that the dispensational view of the Bible, Israel, and the end-times leads to blatant racism and prejudice. One Baptist minister incredibly argues that

Dispensationalists, who are found in many fundamentalist and evangelical denominations, follow the theological beliefs of John Nelson Darby, C. I. Scofield and Hal Lindsey, who taught that ethnic Jews constitute a superior race who are destined to take over Palestine, then the entire Middle East and finally the world. This naturally leads to resentment of Palestinian Arabs, and all other Middle Eastern nations that sympathize with the Palestinians in their resistance to the program of pushing them out of their historic homelands. Dispensationalism, taken to its logical conclusion, leads to racism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> By "before and after" I mean the biblical fact that Israel must be in the land in unbelief during the seven-year tribulation period (70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel) and will be part of God's coming kingdom under Christ as a believing nation after He returns at the end of that tribulation period.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Williamson, "Dispensationalism and Racism," *Media Monitors Network 4 June 2001*, <<http://www.mediamonitors.net/williamson3.html>> (accessed 27 September

It is hard to take such a paragraph seriously. The writer shows evidence of having never actually read and studied in detail any dispensational writings, including works by the men he names—Darby, Scofield, and Lindsey. Instead, his words come across as a rant that raises the moniker of racism over the heads of those with whom he disagrees.

To parse the charge of racism, one must begin with the claim that dispensationalists teach that “ethnic Jews constitute a *superior* race.” Such a statement is acutely misleading in its use of terms. Dispensationalism teaches that the Jewish people are a *chosen* race, not a *superior* race.<sup>8</sup> While dispensationalists certainly hold that the Jewish people are *special* in God’s eyes this does not logically imply superiority to other people groups. The Bible is clear on the reason that God chose the Hebrews:

For you (Israel) are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples<sup>9</sup> who are on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all the peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deut. 7:6-8; NASB).

Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, ‘Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,’ but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. It is not your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to you fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness

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2006). At the time of this writing, Williamson serves as the Assistant Pastor at Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in Melrose Park, Illinois. The church is associated with the Baptist Missionary Association of American which split off from the landmark American Baptist Association in 1950.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this paper I will make no distinction between the terms *Jews*, *Hebrews*, or *Israelites*.

<sup>9</sup> It is probably worth noting that the King James Version (and NKJV) translates the words which NASB gives as “out of all the peoples” as “above all peoples.” This is an unfortunate translation which could be read to indicate the divine establishment of superiority for Israel above all other nations.



that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people (Deut. 9:4-6; NASB).

These passages clearly show that God's attitude toward the Israelites was not that they were a cut above the other people groups they were displacing following the exodus from Egypt. God's faithfulness to his covenant pledge to Abraham is highlighted as well as the necessary judgment in light of the wickedness of the other nations. Dispensationalists have consistently, on my reading, been faithful in pointing out these details.<sup>10</sup>

The charge of racism cited above also lends itself to the incitement of unjustified fear on the part of those who are anti-Zionists. Recall that the writer said that dispensationalists teach that the superior Jewish people are the ones "who are destined to take over Palestine, then the entire Middle East and finally the world." The brevity of the remark, without any context of Messiah's coming or without the happy kingdom sharing of all nations or people groups as taught in Scripture and by dispensationalists (Dan. 7:13-14), misses the mark horribly. It reads as if dispensationalists along with other Zionists are engaging in a kind of Israeli imperialism. This, of course, is exactly how modern-day Islamic terrorists seek to portray the nation of Israel. The modern nation of Israel, far from being established in 1948 out of the horror of the Holocaust of World War II and in keeping with its ancient homeland boundaries, is considered an oppressive occupier of territory that belongs to someone else, i.e., the Palestinians.

American Zionists, including dispensationalists, are seen as supporting the imperial bent of the founding of Israel and its continued possession of its land and nationhood. Since hostile statements against the nation of Israel are so numerous, it is hard to choose a starting place for discussion. Perhaps it is best to begin with the well-known United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 (November 10, 1975) which links South African racism and Zionism while using the expression "unholy alliance." It further quotes from an earlier Mexican declaration: "international cooperation and peace require the achievement of national liberation and independence, the elimination of colonialism and neo-colonialism, foreign occupation, Zionism, apartheid and

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<sup>10</sup> John Nelson Darby noted, "Nor did God set His love upon them [Israel] on account of their own importance, but because of the election and love of God" (*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* [Reprint ed.: Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1979], 1:291). I reviewed Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and found no hint of "superiority" language relative to the Jews and Israel. To my knowledge there is no note in the *Scofield Reference Bible* that clearly teaches the superiority of the Jews over all other peoples. Finally, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a typical present-day dispensationalist, speaks clearly of God's election of the nation of Israel to carry out His purposes without tying it to any superiority theme relative to the Jews (*Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* [Revised ed., Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1992], 567-70).

racial discrimination in all its forms...”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the United Nations sentiment officially expressed in an approved resolution is that Zionism, which primarily consists of Israel’s right to its land, is racism. The Palestinian Rabee’ Sahyoun describes Zionism with the harshest of terms. Israel should not be described in a positive way due to its alleged democracy because to “do so is to miss the normal atrocities that occur in Israel daily, the millions who are under curfew and blockade, starving and brutalized, in the Middle East’s only colonized state. To do so is to feign the reality of zionism, a racist and irredeemable movement, that survived the twentieth centuries’ other genocidal and seemingly passing revolutions such as Bolshevism, Nazism, and Apartheid.”<sup>12</sup>

Within such a mindset it is not difficult to see President Bush and current United States foreign policy as advancing a neo-colonialist agenda that marginalizes the Palestinians as a people. Added to this is the President’s refusal, two weeks before 9-11, to send U. S. representatives to a U. N. conference on racism if the conference insisted on calling Zionism a form of racism.<sup>13</sup> Since dispensationalism has more often than not supported the nation of Israel, it is easy to see the connection between the influential evangelical world and Bush administration policies as leading to racist imperialism and oppression if one accepts the premise of a pre-1948 Palestinian homeland of some sort.

In response, one must point out that belief that Zionism is racism can not be rationally maintained on such a shaky historical foundation. In the 1800s the land of Palestine was a largely uninhabited and deteriorating region.<sup>14</sup> Even Arabic leaders in those days welcomed the Jews to the land, believing them able to build it up and bring life to the region.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the beginning the Jewish return to the land was not viewed as anti-Arab. Furthermore, if Zionism is a form of racism, how can one understand the fact that there are one million Muslim and Christian Arabs as well as other ethnic groups who live in

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<sup>11</sup> *Jewish Virtual Library*,

<<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/UN/unga3379.html>> (accessed 6 October 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Rabee’ Sahyoun, “Why Zionism is Racism,” *Albalagh*,

<[http://www.albalagh.net/current\\_affairs/zionism\\_racism.shtml](http://www.albalagh.net/current_affairs/zionism_racism.shtml)> (accessed 6 October 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, “Bush Says U. N. Conference on Racism Must Not Target Israel,” 24 August 2001,

<<http://www.usembassy-israel.org.il/publish/peace/archives/2001/august/0824a.html>> (accessed 6 October 2006). This posting comes largely from a Bush news conference on August 24, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell G. Bard, *Myth and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chevy Chase, MD: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2001), 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

Israel (some even holding seats in the Knesset and all having voting rights)?<sup>16</sup> In addition, Israelis can point to the great financial and time expense to which they have gone to bring Ethiopian (black) Jews into the country.<sup>17</sup> On the other side, the absence of Jews from Arab nations is telling: “By contrast, the Arab states define citizenship strictly by native parentage. It is almost impossible to become a naturalized citizen in many Arab states...Jordan, on the other hand, instituted its own ‘law of return’ in 1954, according citizenship to all former residents in Palestine, except for Jews.”<sup>18</sup> In light of the many statements down through the years coming out of the Arab and Persian lands, which call for the extermination of the Jews and eradication of the state of Israel, the dispensationalist must be forgiven for wondering out loud if the racism is not on the other side.

### **Dispensational Theology and National Ethics**

Related to the specific issue of racism and oppression is the larger question of God’s dealings with nations generally. Some critics of dispensationalism have posited a theological deficiency as the basis for mistreatment of the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli conflict. These critics would argue that dispensationalism with its influence on American policy makers leads, probably unintentionally, to a diminishing of attention for the Arabs which, in turn, causes mistreatment at various levels.

The actual vehicle for alleged mistreatment of Arabs by dispensationalism is its undue and uncaring influence on the United States government. For example, David Brog, a Jewish friend of Christian Zionists (mostly dispensationalists), describes one actual scenario that no doubt bothers those who are not dispensationalists:

Israel has sent troops into the West Bank to seek and destroy terrorist cells responsible for a wave of suicide bombings that have killed hundreds of Israeli civilians. While sympathetic to Israel’s need to fight terrorism, President George W. Bush wants to stop Israel from conducting too long and deep a raid. A few days after the incursion begins, Bush starts pressuring Israel to pull its soldiers out of the West Bank.

This time, protest comes not only from the Jewish community but also from the evangelical Christian community. The White House is flooded with hundreds of thousands of e-mails and phone calls from the heartland in support of Israel. Evangelical Christians organize a nationwide day of prayer for Israel with the participation of an estimated sixteen thousand churches and five million parishioners. The

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Christian Coalition holds a large rally in Washington to demonstrate its solidarity with Israel.

While George W. Bush received no more Jewish support than did his father, evangelical Christians formed the core of his political base. This time, the administration could not afford to ignore the protests. And this time, due to his own evangelical leanings, President Bush was, by all accounts, predisposed to listen. When Israel kept its tanks in the West Bank for many months thereafter, the U. S. administration was silent.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the beliefs of dispensationalism concerning Israel dominate the evangelical conversation with the current administration so as to affect the outcome of major geo-political decisions in the Middle Eastern conflict.

One writer from a nondispensational perspective summarizes well a negative response: “Perhaps the most glaring weakness in the Christian Zionist program is its failure to relate to or defend Palestinian Christians, who are fleeing their homeland in record numbers not due to Islamic extremism, but because of Israel’s brutal occupation policies, including economic closures, theft of land and settlement construction, and military aggression.”<sup>20</sup> Such a statement gives an indictment of dispensationalists and other Christian Zionists on the basis of ethics. In the minds of these interpreters of the Middle Eastern situation, Zionists are turning a blind eye to the needs of others in violation of Scripture just like the priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:30-37). In light of this particular passage, one critic argues that dispensationalism has an unbiblical “bias in favor of Israelis above Palestinians” which is not in harmony with the teaching of Jesus. Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that dispensationalism is doctrinally “anti-Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Another author words the ethical challenge in a slightly different direction, when he skeptically wonders when dispensationalists will finally be obedient to Christ’s exhortation to be peacemakers instead of holding to their pro-Israel posture.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> David Brog, *Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine, 2006), 133-34. Brog is a lawyer who worked on the staff of Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania.

<sup>20</sup> Donald E. Wagner, “Short Fuse to Apocalypse?” *Sojourners Magazine* (July/August 2003),

<[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4010/is\\_200307/ai\\_n9284400/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4010/is_200307/ai_n9284400/print) > (accessed 9 September 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Steve Wohlberg, “Is Dispensationalism ‘Antichrist,’” *White Horse Media*,

<<http://whitehorsemedia.com/articles/artDetails.cfm?artID=43>> (accessed 11 October 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 267.

A dispensational reaction to such a viewpoint begins by questioning the claims of brutality and military aggression by the Israeli military. Without arguing for the perfection of the nation of Israel and its large military machine, it is quite easy to show that the reverse is generally true. One can ask a few simple questions to highlight the quandary for those who favor the Arab side of the debate. When did Israel ever attack another nation without provocation? In 1948 on the day after the announcement of its statehood, was not Israel attacked by Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon?<sup>23</sup> The only provocation from Israel's side was its existence. In the 1956 Suez War, did not Egypt blockade the Straits of Tiran? Even in the 1967 Six-Day War when Israel made a pre-emptive strike against Egypt, Egypt had massed troops on the border and had again blockaded the Straits of Tiran, Israel's major outlet for shipping—an act that could be construed as an act of war. Did not Egypt and Syria invade Israel in 1973 on the high, holy day of Yom Kippur? If Arab nations were attacked in surprise on any day of Ramadan, what would be the outcry? In 1982, was not Israel's incursion into Lebanon caused by the heavy use of katusha rockets coming from the PLO located in safe havens in southern Lebanon? Did we not recently witness a similar event this year when Israel entered Lebanon because of rocket attacks from Hezbollah? Let's make sure to get the details right. Has Israel ever declared its desire to exterminate Arabs or eliminate any particular Arab nation from the face of the earth? No, it is quite the other way. Have we ever had to worry about Jews hijacking airliners for political reasons? Who was it that murdered Olympic athletes in Munich in 1972? Has any Arab nation had to rescue its people as Israel was forced to do at Entebbe in 1976? One must confess a certain amount of consternation when confronting those who want dispensationalists to join Israelis as sweet peacemakers when it is the other side that has consistently demonstrated a lack of desire for peace apart from the annihilation of national Israel. In light of such a litany of facts, it is quite bizarre for faculty representatives from a significant evangelical school to charge that the bad theology of dispensationalism "is attributing to secular Israel a divine mandate to conquer and hold Palestine, with the consequence that the Palestinian people are marginalized and regarded as virtual 'Canaanites.'"<sup>24</sup>

The same approach can also be held relative to economic and humane treatment of Palestinian Arabs. It is not the Israelis who are on the short end of the evaluation. Arab stinginess with respect to Palestinian refugees is a well-

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<sup>23</sup> For a good summary of the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1948 to 1982, see Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the War of Independence through Lebanon* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> "An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel," *Knox Seminary* (2002), <<http://www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/WittenbergDoor>> (accessed 21 September 2006).

known fact. Little effort has been put forward by Arab and other Moslem nations to assist them financially, when oil revenues make such an undertaking easy to do if only there were the will to do so.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the maintaining of a Palestinian refugee problem serves as a political necessity for Israel's enemies as they attempt to win the propaganda war in international discourse. Millions of Palestinians remain in refugee camps while the Arab nations refuse to assimilate them for political reasons.<sup>26</sup>

Now what can be made of such discussions? First, one must point out that the debate over the ethical treatment of Arabs in Palestine by Israelis supported by the United States, which in turn is heavily influenced by pro-Israel dispensational theology, involves primarily an interpretation of *history* and not theology. For example, differences as those discussed above do not involve one's interpretation of the story of the Good Samaritan. Dispensationalists heartily concur with Jesus' given teaching and believe it to be universally applicable to Arabs in the Middle East as well as Jews in Israel. What divides dispensationalists from their critics at this juncture is an analysis of the facts on the ground, so to speak. How does one interpret the history of the rise of modern Zionism and the happenings in the Middle East leading up to the present time? Enough details have been cited above to suggest why dispensationalists enjoy the upper hand.

Second, the issue that has emerged and is alluded to in the critiques of dispensationalism's powerful influence in Middle Eastern political affairs is that pro-Israel theology leads dispensationalists to overlook treatment of the other side. In other words, the theological bent serves as a presuppositional grid which does not allow dispensationalists to consider the misdeeds of Israel or have a fair and balanced treatment of issues in the region. To be sure, the dispensationalist must be true to the facts of history, accurate in understanding current events, and exact in his exegesis of Scripture. This means that no genuine Israeli oppression of the Arabs can be justified and must be opposed even by dispensational Christian Zionists. The dispensationalist would also hasten to say that the correct interpretation of alleged Israeli oppression is not to be determined by any anti-Israeli American press coverage on CNN or by the imaginations found at Al Jazeera. An honest attempt must be made toward full objectivity.

In addition to these basic thoughts, the dispensationalist needs to remind his critics that they too must be equally leery of a potential bias on their part. For example, the position of preterism which, among other theological positions, has no future for national Israel, might be prone to lead to a presuppositional grid leaning unfairly toward the Arabs and against Israel. In fact, the existence of Israel in the land since 1948 could potentially turn out to

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<sup>25</sup> Mitchell G. Bard, *Myth and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chevy Chase, MD: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2001), 182-85.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-87.

be the precursor to God's final plan for that nation in the judgment of the tribulation period followed by its national and spiritual restoration to kingdom glory at the return of Christ. This potential alone has kept some (perhaps many) evangelicals from taking seriously the preterist proposal that most or all prophecies relative to the Second Coming have already been fulfilled. Such a circumstance could provide a strong motive for holding a pro-Arab or an anti-Israel position. After all, the preterist's ability to defend his views within the evangelical community would probably be enhanced if Israel was simply not in the land. This example shows that bias on the other side is equally plausible. Both sides need to examine their presuppositions and let the Bible arbitrate final decisions, not current events or status. Dispensationalists no doubt take great satisfaction in knowing that the earliest dispensationalists in modern times taught the same interpretation of the Bible without Israel being in the land. In the end, there will probably be no fruitful dialog in the debate between dispensationalists and their critics if the avenue of discussion is damage caused by presuppositions.

### **Dispensationalism, War-Mongering, and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

There is no question that some dispensationalists have acted in ways attempting to help prophecy along. For example, William E. Blackstone (1841-1935), who founded the Chicago Hebrew Mission in 1887, wrote a stirring summary of Bible prophecy entitled *Jesus is Coming* (1878), a fairly accurate work that is still in print. In addition to social and evangelistic outreach to Jews, he had a heart to see the Jews return to their homeland in Palestine. This was not merely a theological wish on his part nor did he leave it up to the rest of history to bring about. Instead, Blackstone, whom Brog calls the "Father of American Zionism," made specific efforts to bring about the national homeland of the Jews.<sup>27</sup> Concerned about the horrible plight of Russian Jews, Blackstone organized a petition with the signature of 413 prominent Americans, which was sent with a letter to President Benjamin Harrison in 1891.<sup>28</sup> The petition, which later came to be called the Blackstone Memorial, called for the support of the American government for the return of the Jews to their own nation, which had been taken from them by the Romans in 70 A.D. Although action was not taken by President Harrison, the petition was revived and presented to President Woodrow Wilson on June 30, 1917. In October of that year, Wilson sent word to the British government that he was sympathetic with the idea of a homeland for Israel. The next month the British government authorized the idea of statehood for the Jews in Palestine in the famous Balfour Declaration. What

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<sup>27</sup> Brog, *Standing with Israel*, 97.

<sup>28</sup> The activities of Blackstone on behalf of Zionism have been well covered by both pro-Zionists and critics. See Brog, *Standing with Israel*, 98-118 and Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 102-07.

makes the statement viable at that time is that the British were soon expected to capture Jerusalem from the Ottomans, which they did in December 1917.

All in all, Blackstone's desire to help oppressed Russian Jews, something that foreshadowed the world's response to the Holocaust after World War II, was a noble one. If his desire to help them also coincided with his belief in Bible prophecy about the end-times, so much the better. However, in more recent times, the charge has been leveled at dispensationalism that portrays such involvement as an evil in its own right. For example, David Carlson, one detractor, regrets the notion that the book of Revelation is taken in a literal fashion and that Bible prophecy is taken to support present-day Israel. Notice the strong wording: "In this view, not only are Palestinians of no value, but the sole reason for Jews to return to Israel is to hasten the slaughter that triggers the return of Christ."<sup>29</sup> This disturbing rant against dispensationalists sees them as anti-Arab and anti-Israeli simultaneously. The goal in mind for dispensationalists is the Second Coming of Christ. They desire to see, in Carlson's view, the awful tribulation period with its wars and judgments killing millions upon millions of people. Supporting Israel speeds this process up so we can get to the Second Coming. In this scheme dispensationalists are presented as not caring about any individuals along the way. No wonder that the same author elsewhere describes dispensationalism as the view where "Israeli displacement of Palestinian villages...is celebrated as a necessary part of God's plan."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Carlson notes, "An upside-down Christianity emerges with premillennial dispensationalism. It creates a skewed view of the Christian faith that welcomes war and disaster, while dismissing peace efforts in the Middle East and elsewhere—all in the name of Christ."<sup>31</sup> One can easily visualize such critics correlating the so-called dark side of dispensationalism here with the "cowboy diplomacy" of President Bush and his relatively harder line toward the Arabs, the War on Terror, and the war in Iraq.

On the face of it, such a harsh analysis comes across as mere emotionalism with nothing that is logically compelling. First of all, is it really fair to say that dispensationalists *welcome* war? Even if one assumes the most die-hard dispensationalist possible, to say that one is *expecting* war is not the same thing as affirming that one *wants* war. There is no glee or emotional satisfaction that dispensationalists get out of knowing that war is on the horizon in light of the Bible's predictions. The Bible has predicted many things, some of which have been fulfilled in the past, which were not positive experiences.

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<sup>29</sup> David Carlson, "'Left Behind' and the Corruption of Biblical Interpretation," *OrthodoxyToday.org* (2003), <<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/CarlsonPremillennial.php>> (accessed 11 October 2006). Carlson is Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin College, Franklin, Indiana. According to this posted article he is also Greek Orthodox.

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

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



For example, the text of the Bible predicts the death of Ahab and Jezebel in grizzly detail (1 Kings 21:17-24), the political intrigues and murders during the Greek period (Dan. 11:3-35), and war during the reign of David (2 Sam. 12:10ff). There are countless examples of these kinds throughout the pages of the Bible. To affirm the truth of the Bible in its predictions of war with past or future fulfillment does not turn the interpreter into a war-monger. Perhaps some of the reluctance on the part of many dispensationalists to support various peace initiatives in the Arab-Israeli conflict is founded on the track record of the Arabs which has been described earlier. At this point in history, the anti-Zionist actions of many Arabs speak louder than any peace treaty proposals. The recycling of peace proposals that are then broken may be a better explanation for the dispensational reluctance, especially when the stated goal of so many Arabs is the elimination of the nation of Israel. If all of the Arab peoples would live in peaceful harmony with Israel at this present moment in history, dispensationalists would rise up and rejoice.

Secondly, the claim that dispensationalists want to help prophecy along by influencing American policy to lead to war and conflict in the Middle East falls to the ground due to a lack of detailed information about what the dispensational position actually entails. Dispensationalists believe in a pre-tribulational rapture of the Church. True Church-Age believers will be taken to be with the Lord before the dreadful day of the Lord (tribulation period of seven years) happens on the earth. As individuals, Christians will have no direct involvement or personal stake in what goes on during that time since they will not be here. Moreover, war is not a necessary pre-condition for the rapture of the Church to take place. A critic could respond by noting that a speeding up of the events that could lead to the tribulation will of necessity move the possibility of the rapture closer to our own time. In reply, it must be noted that the only biblical prerequisites for the tribulation to take place are the existence of Israel in the land and the rise of Antichrist—these two parties sign a *peace* treaty that begins the seven-year tribulation (Dan. 9:27). In light of these prophetic realities and the love for Israel that dispensationalists possess for God's chosen people, dispensationalists should be viewed as seeking the security of Israel and not happily pursuing war.

One final comment must be made in this regard. The book of Revelation, whose literal interpretation Carlson disdained in the quote above, teaches clearly that God's ways are true and just (Rev. 19:2). These ways, on any interpretive scheme of the book, include judgment upon people for sin. Therefore, to impugn the details of the book taken at face value may also, in the end, impugn the character of God. Most dispensationalists have a healthy regard for God's bigger role in all of this, including those like William Blackstone. It is God's prerogative to bring the rapture, tribulation, Second Coming of Christ to earth, and the kingdom in His own timing and His own

way in keeping with His revealed Word. Dispensationalists understand that there is a bigger player on the field who gets to bat more often.

### Conclusion

Moslems have no doubt read the book of Genesis, taking special notice of the land boundaries promised to Abraham and his children: “To your descendents I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18; NASB). Most dispensationalists understand this text in harmony with the Moslem reading—the boundaries are from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates in modern day Iraq. Both dispensationalists and Moslems have noticed that the land boundaries have never been realized for Israel. Mitchell Bard notes, “In Iran, a map purporting to show Israel’s ‘dream’ boundaries – an empire including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and parts of Turkey and Iran – was included in a 1985 reprint of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious Czarist forgery.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, there is a myth commonly believed in the Islamic world that a large map hanging in the Israeli parliament documents the Israeli hunger to obtain the entire empire indicated by the land boundaries.<sup>33</sup> This myth is maintained tenaciously even though there is not one documented soul, including a Moslem, who has seen the map. To counter the claim that Israel is clandestinely planning the conquest of those lands through war one only has to look once again at the history of modern Israel. When it has been attacked, it has put down its enemies and generally given back the land obtained, some of it more than once (Sinai). Of course, there is the question of the West Bank, the disputed “occupied” territory. However, even on the wildest imagination, one can not turn Israel’s reluctance to give it up into a campaign to march to the Euphrates. Dispensationalists know that Messiah will one day give the entire land promised to Abraham to Israel at the beginning of His coming kingdom. Therefore, there is no need to posit some theological need to pursue conquest in the present hour. Current dispensationalists, no doubt in harmony with President Bush, only wish for the Arabs and other Moslems to leave Israel alone.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bard, *Myths and Facts*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> One related subject that is beyond the scope of this paper is the theological issue of the Jewish possession of the land while in unbelief from a Christian point of view. I have responded to this question to some degree in Mike Stallard, “A Dispensational Response to the Knox Seminary Open Letter to Evangelicals,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (Fall 2003): 5-41. See also John Piper, “Land Divine?” *World Magazine* (May 11, 2002). A corollary of this line of thought would be the question, from a dispensational point of view, of whether Israel can be removed from the land in the course of present human affairs with the dispensational theological perspective still intact. My answer is “yes” in terms of biblical reasoning, but the dispensational tradition needs to wrestle with this question a bit more than it normally does.

## The Latest Postmodern Trend: The Emerging Church

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Using the illustration of circulating blood, A. W. Tozer described a healthy soul. He said, “The red corpuscles are like faith—they carry the life giving oxygen to every part of the body. The white cells are like discernment—they pounce upon dead and toxic matter and carry it out to the drain. In the healthy heart there must be provision for keeping dead and poisonous matter out of the life stream.”<sup>1</sup>

Tozer’s illustration stresses three points: 1) dead or dying churches no longer have the ability to discern the spirit of truth from the spirit of error; 2) dead and poisonous matter cannot be removed from the church if it cannot be detected; and 3) failure to use discernment or remove dead and toxic matter will allow the poisonous matter to continue circulating, which will result in confusion among believers and false hope to the unbeliever.<sup>2</sup> The vitality of the church depends upon its members and leaders exercising discernment to “contend earnestly for the faith.” How can one defend and preach the Gospel without discerning what is the biblical Gospel? Again, Tozer wrote,

Among the gifts of the Spirit, scarcely is one of greater practical usefulness than the gift of discernment. This gift should be highly valued and frankly sought as being almost indispensable in these critical times. This gift will enable us to distinguish the chaff from the wheat and to divide the manifestations of the flesh from the operations of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Christian fads and trends will appear and disappear. It is mentally overwhelming to remember the recent crazes of one’s own lifetime. It seems that, in their search to be relevant and to be obedient to the Great Commission, many pastors and church leaders are always seeking new methods to grow the church. The contemporary church is inundated with those seeking new methods and means of church growth. Whatever pragmatic approaches allow one to accomplish church growth, it is accepted. However, time and again in the Bible, it is primarily the preaching of the Word, the enunciation of words, that God

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Mike Gendron, “The Death of Discernment in the Church,” *Proclaiming the Gospel Newsletter* 14 (July-August 2005): 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Mike Barton, “A Discerning Ear,” *Light for Life* 13 (March-April 2002).

uses to draw the lost to Himself, in addition to creating and sustaining His church.

### **Doctrinal Antagonism Today**

Is the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word, and dependent prayer of the preacher and teacher of God, being considered outdated for obeying the Great Commission? A disturbing trend that is influencing American Christianity is a growing opposition against God's chosen methods for sanctifying His church and fulfilling the Great Commission. It is crucial for pastors, theologians, seminary and Bible institute professors, teachers and students, Sunday school teachers, and other lovers of God's Word to diagnose some of the symptoms of these disturbing trends, and more importantly, to search Scripture to determine what response God demands. Defining doctrine down<sup>4</sup> or just outright rejection of theology, use of secular managerial models that promise recently discovered methods for church growth, and even wholesale heresy are sometimes tolerated and desired (*sometimes knowingly and unknowingly*) by a significant number of church leaders and members.

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<sup>4</sup> Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan from New York coined the popular alliteration "Defining Deviancy Down" in his infamous article of the same name, published in *American Scholar* (Winter 1993). Influenced by the propositions of Emile Durkheim, Moynihan suggested, "the amount of deviant behavior in American society has increased beyond the levels the community can 'afford to recognize' [i.e. the "Durkheim Constant"]." As the amount of deviant behavior increases, deviancy must be redefined "so as to exempt conduct previously stigmatized." Behavior formally categorized as abnormal by earlier standards would be quietly raised to the "normal" level. The outcome of such thinking is that behavior once deemed deviant is now considered normal. Shortly after Moynihan wrote his article, internationally syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer posited his now famous response in *The New Republic* (22 November 1993) of a concurrent movement to "define deviancy up" because "it is not enough for the deviant to be normalized." "As part of the vast social project of moral leveling," previously normal behavior "must be found to be deviant." Deviant behavior has been normalized (defining deviancy down) and normal behavior must be deemed deviant (defining deviancy up). *There are parallels with this redefinition of morality in the theological realm, as indicated by the alliteration "defining doctrine down."* Those who engage in "defining doctrine down" encourage all forms of doctrinal antagonism and those who engage in "defining doctrine up" engage in stigmatizing as irrelevant those who obey God's chosen methods to grow and mature His church. It appears that postmodernism is dividing biblical thought into reformism (those who engage in "defining doctrine down" and "defining doctrine up") and traditionalism (those who "contend earnestly for *the* faith once for all delivered to the saints"). Reformists depart from principles of biblical interpretation, while the traditionalists work to restate the historic doctrines of the Bible so people can readily understand them. Furthermore, traditionalists utilize every resource available to clarify unclear doctrines. Reformists, on the other hand, revise or remove difficult doctrines by emphasizing multiplicity of meanings and creating indefiniteness, or fluidity, of truth.

Antagonism toward God's chosen methods for growing and maturing His church, and fulfilling the Great Commission, have resulted in a confused cultural shift.

The most fascinating characteristic of this cultural shift is that a church model is available for every personality viewpoint. For instance, in his book *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, Dr. Robert Lewis emphasized community service as a model for the church. Lewis actually stated that prayer, biblical preaching, and sound doctrine are inadequate to impact the culture; rather, community service projects are needed to build relationships with our communities. Certainly local missions is not wrong, but only if the name of Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the reason for service and the proclamation of the Gospel is consistent with missions work. However, this is a major problem with "the church of irresistible influence." Lewis stated that one should not proclaim the Gospel when doing mission work. Indeed, this church model purposely does not proclaim the Gospel, and even embraces the ecumenical agenda of serving with all denominations, including Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, to be most effective in the community. Of course, this explains why they do not proclaim the Gospel because these different denominations do not agree on the essence of the Gospel.

If this model does not fit one's personality, there is the purpose-driven model of Rick Warren that combines business techniques, psychology, and theology. In this model, "felt needs" are met (of course, borrowing from psychologist Abraham Maslow's humanistic terminology). It is interesting that the purpose-driven model feels the same way about biblical preaching, sound doctrine, and prayer, as the "church of irresistible influence." Warren was even quoted by the Lewis in his book as saying, there are some who are wrong for believing that church growth will occur by remaining "doctrinally pure, preach[ing] the Word, pray[ing] more, and be[ing] dedicated."<sup>5</sup> A frightening statement considering that the early church in the Book of Acts experienced phenomenal growth by praying, preaching, and holding to sound doctrine. Of course, the next Christian leader who is cited to substantiate this point against biblical preaching and teaching is sociologist and research expert George Barna who has written a book encouraging Christians that being a member of a local church is not necessary, and encourages departing from the local church.<sup>6</sup>

A final example of the drift from biblical doctrine and the local church is the "conversation" primarily led by Brian McLaren.<sup>7</sup> The latest postmodern trend was the Purpose Driven church. Today it is the Emerging Church.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 24.

<sup>6</sup> George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> McLaren has consistently defined emergent as "a conversation, not a movement."

### The Emerging Church

In the introduction to his book, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, emergent leader Dan Kimball encouraged his readers to type the words “emerging church” into their favorite search engine.<sup>8</sup> If one heeds such advice, numerous web pages will be found stating that worship should be a holistic and mystical experience through the use of candles, images, stained glass windows, and even darkness to promote spirituality. Emergent leader Leonard Sweet has frequently used the acrostic EPIC to describe the Emerging Church: “E=experiential; P=participatory; I=image-rich; C=connective.”

The emphasis in emerging churches is upon mystical and sensual worship experiences that foster unity, as opposed to doctrinal truth that divides. For example, Brian McLaren has praised those who are seeking unity between Evangelicals and Roman Catholicism. It is no wonder then that McLaren expressed in his book, *A New Kind of Christian*, that the Bible should not be regarded as authoritative or infallible.<sup>9</sup> The accepted practice in the Emerging Church is an image-driven message as opposed to a Word-driven message. Of course, such practices will only contribute to a great lack of discernment in the church, and acceptance of counterfeit Gospels resulting in unsanctified churches that do not edify and equip the saints for the work of ministry.

The Emerging Church has an apparent contempt for propositional truth (ideas that can be affirmed or denied, such as the sixty-six books of the Bible as propositional truth) and therefore favors teaching in a “story” format. The only theology this movement embraces is Christology (a doctrine of Christ), but this Christ is solely the Savior of one’s life and obedience to His commands is optional. No propositional truth just present Christ is the idea. For example, one should not teach the Word of God, but just share the story of what it means to “follow Jesus.” The Emerging Church believes that the postmodern culture does not want to hear biblical preaching or be taught sound doctrine, so they provide an experience instead. People may not like strong medicine but it makes one physically well when ill. Similarly, people may not like sound doctrine, but it is God’s chosen means for making one spiritually healthy. Of course, this is not to affirm a lifeless orthodoxy but to affirm the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 13. It should be noted that Kimball does emphasize priority of the Word of God in his church, but he does not help one understand the core values of the Emerging Church from a biblical perspective or to explain why postmodern methodology permeates the Emergent conversation.

<sup>9</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 50-53.

<sup>10</sup> Quite simply, doctrine without practice (application) is dangerous, but practice (application) without doctrine is deadly. First Timothy 4:16 commands all believers to persevere in life and doctrine.

The relationship between the “church of irresistible influence,” purpose-driven, and Emerging Church models is twofold. First, all “new models” for the church are unbiblical (*heretical?*) shifts that have origins in earlier church history. The second is the most serious relationship: they all have a contempt for biblical preaching and teaching, followed by a superficial notion of prayer, and give greater emphasis to the demands of the culture as opposed to the commands of God. These church growth models today, which are often presented as the means for church revival, are in complete contrast to the methodology of the Bible and godly men throughout church history.

### ***True Biblical Revival***

Apart from the early church, the greatest revival in church history was 489 years ago (31 October 1517 to be exact), Dr. Martin Luther tacked his 95 Theses on the church door of Wittenberg. He protested against the unbiblical teachings and practices that were prevalent in his day and called an obstinate Roman Catholic Church back to the essential truth of the Gospel that man is justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on the Word alone, because of Christ alone, to the glory of God alone! What is needed today is an authentic and genuine reformation to right the wrong, make straight the crooked, and reclaim expository preaching of the absolute truth of God’s holy Word. All things are set straight in Christ. Pragmatics, seeker-friendly techniques, psychology in the church, ecumenism not built upon truth, the partnering with non-Christian entities to further the Gospel may appeal to a sense of “religious jihad,” but it cannot impact the life for eternity.

The last great American revival in church history was the Second Great Awakening, which began during the late 1790s and extended until the early 1830s. During this period, an extraordinary number of the lost were saved and joined the universal church. It is noteworthy that prior to the Awakening many godly men had been laboring for the Lord. Many of the men preached the same messages during the Awakening, as they had many years previous. It was the same men, same message, but extraordinary different results. What was the difference? The only difference was that during this period, the Holy Spirit took the hammer of God’s Word (cf. Jer 23:39) and made it a sledgehammer.

The early church, the Protestant Reformers, and *some* of the preachers of the Second Great Awakening were in agreement that time and again it is primarily the means of prayer and the preaching and teaching of the Word—the enunciation of words—that God uses to spread the Gospel and these are the means that He requires of His church to be faithful. There is simply no greater means, which the church can employ to experience greater lasting results. One of the revivalists of the period was Samuel Shepherd who said, “The immediate hand of [God] was strikingly exhibited in this work . . . instruction was now no other than it had been. . . . The apostle knew well that what he said when he

spoke those memorable words, ‘We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power might be of God and not of us.’”

Of course, many adherents of the church growth movements would say, “we always accompany our methods with prayer.” However, there is no intrinsic power in prayer itself. Biblical prayer is that the church recognizes and believes that we are utterly powerless and entirely dependent upon God. As an activity, there are no guaranteed results in prayer. The essential dynamic in spiritual transformation is when God the Holy Spirit does His work, by applying the Gospel message with power. This “power” works within the evangelist in addition to the one who is being evangelized. Based upon what can be learned about evangelism in the Book of Acts and the nature of human total depravity, the evangelist receives power from the Holy Spirit to speak clearly and boldly, and the one being evangelized receives power to overcome his resistance to the Gospel and to understand the truth of the message. God’s biblical means of reaching humanity is the proclamation of the propositional truths of Scripture through an attitude of complete dependence as evidenced in prayer that is persuaded by the fact that we are completely unable and completely dependant upon God.

The success of clever human efforts does not mean that God has blessed the church’s activities because of her prayers. It is possible to pray, and depend on one’s own ingenuity and methods. If secular corporations can increase their market share apart from God’s blessing, then it is possible that the church can also increase her market share through the use of the same inventive methods. The problem with casual prayer, that is evident in human dependence, is that the truly born again are not drawn by increased market share, but as Jesus said in John 6, “No one can come to Him, unless the Father who sent Him draws the lost.” God-glorifying church growth only comes through the power of God.

The biblical means of fulfilling the Great Commission is preaching the propositional truths of Scripture, and offering God-dependent prayer.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There is a tendency on the part of Christians not to understand all components of the Great Commission. For instance, there is more to it than solely preaching the Gospel and making disciples. No Christian can claim obedience to the Great Commission until he has “made disciples” through preaching the Gospel, “baptized” converts in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and “indoctrinated” converts in the whole counsel of God’s Word. It is not to say that every Christian must accomplish all components of the Great Commission in his own personal ministry. God’s has given various gifts, ministries, and offices among His people. However, it is certainly the will of God for each Christian to support actively and prayerfully that group of Christians which is wholly dedicated to this task. There is no biblical indication of a “streamlined” Commission that consists in merely preaching a “simple” Gospel and then allowing converts to decide for themselves into “the church of their choice.” Not only is there a tendency on the part of Christians not to be obedient toward all components of the Great Commission, but also there is a tendency on the part of Christians to ignore the



Therefore, if modern church movements manifest opposition for these God-ordained means, then how can one dare think that God is increasing the numbers of those saved? It behooves the church to diagnose the symptoms of these movements, but also to address the primary cause for these symptoms: lack of a confidence in the power of God's Word to accomplish His purposes (cf. 1 Cor 1:17-19; 2:1-5).

If one were to read only John 8:30-32, he may tend to think those believing are truly regenerated. Indeed, it is the truth that will make one free. It is continuing in God's Word, discipleship, faithfulness, and obedience. There is such a thing as the truth and the lie. There is such a thing as error, and Jesus Himself firmly opposed it. Very soon, Jesus would say to those who came to believe in Him, "you are of your father the devil" (8:43-47). They were willing to believe He was the Messiah, who would deliver them from the Romans, but Jesus was talking about sin that had bound them. They were expecting prosperity, healing of their diseases, receiving what they wanted, but they were not willing to listen to the truth that would correct their lives. Similarly, Paul warned in 2 Thessalonians 2 against those following after signs and wonders (the form [outward appearance] of the power of God), but did not have love of the truth and perished.

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truth that Christ and His apostles gave utmost emphasis upon indoctrination of converts in "the whole counsel of God's Word." For instance, in the New Testament, one reads how the apostles won converts, baptized them, and organized them into local churches for the purpose of doctrinal and practical edification and observance of all biblical commands. Although evangelism and communicating to a lost person the reality of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone are vitally important components of the total responsibility of the local church, the church must continually remind herself that the New Testament places the utmost emphasis upon the feeding (teaching) of those who are already Christians! Indeed, it may be said that the indoctrination of converts in the whole counsel of God's Word is the basic New Testament pattern for world evangelization. Apart from this emphasis, Christian evangelism will soon become ineffective and superficial. It is important to understand that deep, tender, feelings of affection in the Christian life are not more important than doctrine. Indeed, the New Testament never emphasizes such feelings as greater than doctrine and truth. To be very blunt, the greatest impact of biblical love is upon obedience to all of God's Word. In the Old Testament, love is inextricably related to covenant and obedience (Exod 20:6; Deut 7:6-8; 10:12; 11:13, 22; 19:9; 30:19-20; Josh 22:5; 1 Sam 18:1-3; etc.). In the New Testament, love is most frequently related to discipleship and obedience (John 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:9-10; 1 John 2:4-6; 5:1-3; 2 Jn. 6a; etc.). The standard of biblical love is doctrine. As a Christian virtue, love is more important than faith and hope (1 Cor.13:13), but it is not more important than doctrine and truth. Indeed, true Christian love cannot increase apart from an atmosphere of Christian truth. Of course, liberals have denied this importance of doctrine and truth for years, and if Christians endure this false separation, it will constitute one of the greatest victories of Satan against the modern church. The church cannot ignore the emphasis on the importance of true doctrine in the life of a Christian.

### **Purpose-Driven or Emergent?**

Interestingly, Rick Warren is quite supportive of the Emerging Church. In his forward to emergent leader Dan Kimball's book, *The Emerging Church*, he wrote,

This book is a wonderful, detailed example of what a purpose-driven church can look like in a postmodern world. My friend Dan Kimball writes passionately, with a deep desire to reach the emerging generation and culture. While my book *The Purpose-Driven Church* explained what the church is called to do, Dan's book explains how to do it with the cultural creatives who think and feel in postmodern terms. You need to pay attention to him because times are changing.<sup>12</sup>

The past decade indeed has seen many fads and trends come and go. Again, Warren wrote in the forward,

As a pastor, I've watched churches adopt many contemporary styles in worship, programming, architecture, music, and other elements. That's okay as long as the biblical message is unchanged. But whatever is in style now will inevitably be out of style soon, and the cycle of change are getting shorter and shorter, aided by technology and the media. New styles, like fashion, are always emerging.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Dr. Thomas Hohstadt who is an emergent leader providing "a prophetic compass for the Emerging Church" (and whose ministry is endorsed by Brian McLaren, Leonard Sweet, and Sally Morgenthaler) stated,

Changes in today's church are happening so frequently, so profoundly, that we can't tell for certain where we're going. In fact, if we finally get there, will we even call it "church"?<sup>14</sup>

As response to all the changes, the church needs to consider whether all the styles are based upon sound, biblical doctrine. Essentially, the reason for the plethora of so many styles in the church is that Christians have been vulnerable to "winds of doctrine" that have no biblical basis. According to Timothy, the

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<sup>12</sup> Rick Warren, "Forward," in Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hohstadt, "Will We Even Call It 'Church'?" (FutureChurch, 2005, accessed 13 November 2006) available from [http://www.futurechurch.net/archives\\_view.asp?articleid=53](http://www.futurechurch.net/archives_view.asp?articleid=53).

last days would be characterized by “winds of doctrine” that are actually “doctrines of demons” which will influence Christians to apostasy and accept ideas that “tickle their ears” (1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 4:3). Warren has not only been supportive of the emerging church, but also he believes that it has come at the opportune time. He believes his purpose-driven church model is the foundation for the Emerging Church in the postmodern world.

In the past twenty years, spiritual seekers have changed a lot. In the first place, there are a whole lot more of them. There are seekers everywhere. I’ve never seen more people so hungry to discover and develop the spiritual dimension of their lives. That is why there is such a big interest in Eastern thought, New Age practices, mysticism and the transcendent.<sup>15</sup>

He explained what is necessary for the Emerging Church to have success.

Today seekers are hungry for symbols and metaphors and experiences and stories that reveal the greatness of God. Because seekers are constantly changing, we must be sensitive to them like Jesus was; we must be willing to meet them on their own turf and speak to them in ways they understand.<sup>16</sup>

What is Warren’s reasoning? The world is hungry for an Eastern thought, New Age practices, mysticism, and spiritual enlightenment. To be consistent with his reasoning, would one not conclude that to meet unbelievers “on their own turf” would require Christianity to become more mystical and New Age? Indeed, this is the principal problem with the Emerging Church. Revealed propositional truth is being considered outdated for edifying and equipping the saints for the work of ministry, and obeying the Great Commission.

### **What is Emerging?**

Rick Warren is not alone in stating that Christians need to give attention to the Emerging Church. Times are changing, and it is believed that the Emerging Church has the answers for this generation. But what will emerge from this movement? Will it be a movement that values experience more than the Word of God?

Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, is the founder of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California. In the introduction of his book, he wrote,

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<sup>15</sup> Warren, “Forward,” 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

I believe with all my heart that this discussion about the fast-changing culture and the emerging church must take place. While many of us have been preparing sermons and keeping busy with the internal affairs of our churches, something alarming has been happening on the outside. What once was a Christian nation with a Judeo-Christian worldview is quickly becoming a post Christian, unchurched, unreached nation. New generations are arising all around us without any Christian influence. So we must rethink virtually everything we are doing in our ministries.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, as Kimball stated, the spirituality in North America has changed drastically over the past decades. Rick Warren, Dan Kimball, and others use the term “post-Christian era” to describe the contemporary generation. To illustrate what is meant, Kimball began his book with a criticism of the modern “seeker-sensitive” movement that he stated was successful in attracting a generation of “baby-boomers” to Jesus with its sterile environment, loss of transcendence, and preacher-as-motivational speaker model. Kimball is correct that this church model creates a sense of consumerism among the congregation. Often when people leave a “seeker” church, the feeling is that they have attended a Broadway play. In other words, they have a program, an opinion about the show, and not much else. There is no genuine encounter with God, just an entertaining way to pass an hour. Kimball argued that the teaching in such churches is near its lowest point as it has become preaching like a “self-help guru Tony Robbins—like teaching with some Bible verses added.”<sup>18</sup> Those in attendance too often appear self-focused and the evangelism of the church is irrelevant and weak. For this reason, Kimball believes the church needs new pioneering methods to reach the current generation for Christ.

Kimball’s greatest protest against the “seeker” movement is not that there is an antagonism toward biblical teaching or that the preaching is too shallow, but his criticism is that the movement is fundamentally irrelevant to the desires of today’s generation. In other words, those in their 40s may enjoy clever dramas and skits, bright lighting, and singers in color-coordinated outfits, but today’s young people want something different. Today’s young people desire “authenticity.” They want a multi-sensory spiritual experience and to be reminded that Christianity is an ancient faith.

Kimball not only provided criticism of the modern church, but also provided his answers and solutions. The church for the future, he believes, must be more multi-sensory (sensual) and based on experience. This church of the

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<sup>17</sup> Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), xii.

future, he calls “Vintage Christianity.” A citation of a few chapters from Kimball’s book will give an idea of what is meant by “Vintage Christianity” and the direction of the Emerging Church. Part two of Kimball’s book is entitled “Reconstructing Vintage Christianity in the Emerging Church,” some of the chapters are “Overcoming the Fear of Multisensory Worship and Teaching,” “Creating a Sacred Space for Vintage Worship,” “Expecting the Spiritual,” “Creating Experiential Multisensory Worship Gatherings,” “Becoming Story Tellers Again,” and “Preaching Without Words.”<sup>19</sup>

It should be obvious that the Emerging Church is based upon experience not grounded in the whole counsel of God’s Word. Furthermore, God’s Word is secondary to the primary emphasis upon sensual and experiential worship in the Emerging Church (just as it is secondary to community service in the “church of irresistible influence” and to “felt needs” in the purpose-drive model). Is the church to base its beliefs and worship on experience or the Word of God? Jesus said, “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” “Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My word. ‘You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.’” (John 8:31-32, 43).

If one listens and reads attentively to the statements of the Emerging Church it is apparent that emergent leaders are proposing the notion that truth is primarily paradoxical and relational. It is certainly true that truth of God’s Word is relational. When the Father draws the unbeliever to come to Jesus (cf. John 6), those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world come to Jesus (cf. Eph 1:3-14), who is Truth (John 14:6). However, coming to Jesus, who is Truth, on the authority of God’s Word does not mean Jesus becomes Truth. Before truth is relational, it must be understood as the objective, historical, and inspired revelation of God. However, the postmodern epistemology of the Emerging Church is against this type of revelation.

The Living Word (cf. John 1:1-18) and the Written Word (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21) is Truth regardless of whether one experiences it. The error of the Emerging Church is thinking that truth is dependent upon experience and understanding. Indeed, this is the perennial question of Pilate at the arraignment of Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Pilate was standing in the presence of incarnate Truth, the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet his question has lingered for almost two thousand years and has infected the twenty-first century culture so that it is best described as post-everything.

Certainly, it is irrelevant to question the sincerity to evangelize the postmodern generation by those in the Emerging Church because Emergents sincerely believe the movement is what God would have them to do. It is pointless to argue with people’s sincerity. What can be done is to examine the

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<sup>19</sup> Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 127, 133, 143, 155, 171, 185.

emphasis and practices of the Emerging Church. It also needs to be admitted that worship is a fundamental of the Christian faith, but such worship must never supersede or be contradictory with God's Word. An emphasis on extra-biblical experience that deviates from Scripture is certain to bring deception with it.

### **Emphasis on Experience and Unbiblical Practices**

The Emerging Church believes in attracting people through candles, community, and meditation. Kimball, for example, argued that the church needs to provide opportunities for postmodern people to worship in a manner that is accommodating to their inclinations. He believes in a new worship generation for the future based upon experience. In a section subtitled, "Truly Worshipping in a Worship Gathering," he wrote,

We should be returning to a no-holds-barred approach to worship and teaching so that when we gather, there is no doubt we are in the presence of God. I believe that both believers and unbelievers in our emerging culture are hungry for this. It isn't about clever apologetics or careful exegetical and expository preaching or great worship bands. . . . Emerging generations are hungry to experience God in worship.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, this "no-holds-barred approach" will require incorporating some radical changes. How would such changes appear? It is difficult to describe briefly what such a worship gathering would require, but a few forms of the new style of worship include:<sup>21</sup>

- Images of Jesus to keep things focused upon Christ
- Tapestries to provide a "tabernacle feel"
- Candles and incense to provide a "spiritual" feeling
- Crosses (preferably Celtic) scattered throughout the room
- Darkened sanctuaries to provide a sense of spirituality (definitely no lighted or cheery sanctuaries)
- Services must be spiritual-mystical and experiential
- Stained-glass windows and nature scenes should be projected on video screens
- Ancient and mystical forms should be used (technology can be used to project images onto the walls to establish mood)
- The sermon (teaching from God's Word) is no longer the focal point of gathering, but it should be a holistic experience

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<sup>20</sup> Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 185.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 185; Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 85, 92, 160, 168.

- Tables with sand, vines, and seeds to aid in meditation
- Art and prayer stations should be prominent as a creative outlet during the sermon (sermon must be authentic, and non-monolithic)
- Use of ancient-faith practices

Certainly, it is easy to recognize that visual stimulation is a desired commodity to capture the attention of people. However, one must consider the biblical teaching regarding what is most important. Never does Scripture elevate experience above the Word of God. God is the seeker (cf. Rom 3). He draws unbelievers to Himself through the preaching of His Word, and sanctifies His church through the teaching of His Word. Visual stimulation is never presented as the means for inducing a spiritual atmosphere to bring “seekers” to Christ. The emphasis upon a generation “hungry to experience God” to the exclusion of “apologetics” and “careful exegetical and expository preaching” appears to be yet another trend for defining doctrine down. In contrast to the Word of God, experience is insufficient and incapable of providing answers as to the nature of man, the nature of God, the will of God, and the sovereign movement of history in complete fulfillment of every prophecy of the Bible.

Why is there such an emphasis of the Emerging Church on the mystical? As the following paragraphs indicate, Emergents have a disdain for understanding biblical doctrine and systematic theology, and appear to reject any understanding that application and practice that is divorced from both doctrine and theology will quickly become superficial and deadly for the life of the church.

‘Emergent’ folks are Christians who are impatient with rigid megachurch formulas and noisy doctrinal in-fighting. They want to nurture a “vintage Christianity” that promotes the love of Christ for the emerging (non-churchgoing) generation. They’re hammering out a theology that’s friendly to ancient faith practices (contemplative prayer, labyrinths, hospitality) in a postmodern world of quantum physics, 24/7 media and coffee-house culture.

The assumption is this: The church-growth models that work for baby boomers don’t work for young people today. Boomers who were alienated from traditional church warmed to new worship experiences that avoided churchy details (crosses, stained glass, silence). But many in the emerging generation have no impression of church either way. They weren’t raised with church... So Emergent worship evokes spiritual imagination (using candles, darkness, art work on curtained walls). It is interactive (some churches have couches, not pews). It engages the body (a Minneapolis congregation offers yoga and massage therapy).

Emergent leaders value Holy Communion and Bible reading. They're willing to praise liberals (sometimes) for promoting biblical values of justice that conservatives denied for decades.

The Emergent vocabulary includes ritual, liturgy and generosity. Generosity might be the most important at the moment. It's as if today's born-again Protestantism has settled its doctrinal battles and become the dominant brand of public Christianity; now it's time to be generous in victory.<sup>22</sup>

There are *two important responses* to this description of emerging church beliefs and practices. The *first* is in response to the statement that "generosity might be the most important at the moment." Brian McLaren's book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is subtitled, "WHY I AM A missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + anabaptist/Anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished CHRISTIAN." The intent of the subtitle is to activate the sense of disorientation that postmodernists so deeply desire and value. Postmodernists think that the exposed action of combining contradictory terms while smiling and humming a melody that uses terms "love" and "flowers" results in something deeply spiritual. If one is simply postmodern in orientation then every statement, including clear denials of the unchanging truths of historic Christian doctrine, is considered loving, spiritual, and Christian (i.e. defining doctrine down). However, if such denigration of historic Christian doctrine is offensive, then one is considered hateful, irrelevant, unkind, unloving, and unspiritual (i.e. defining doctrine up). Of course, this is just one aspect of the Emerging Church conversation. Is it any surprise that the Apostle Paul, or any biblical author, is not the favorite writer in the "conversation"?

*Secondly*, one of the more popular trends in the Emerging Church is contemplative spirituality and mysticism. Most in the Emerging Church believe that such practice allows them to draw closer to God, but there are some very real concerns. The mystical emphasis in the Emerging Church should provoke a haunting vexation of spirit. The following two paragraphs are from pagans describing contemplative spirituality and mysticism.

And it is mysticism that is the common thread to all of the world's religions and spiritual traditions. On the surface, religions and spiritual practices are quite different, however, at their core they are all very much the same. The world's mystical traditions vary somewhat in their focus and emphasis—some may highlight

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<sup>22</sup> "Emergent' Christians Seek Spirituality without Nasty Theological Squabbling" (*The Tennessean*, 28 May 2005, accessed 20 April 2006) available from <http://www.tennessean.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050528/NEWS06/505280346/1023/NEWS>.



surrender while others may highlight transformation and purification—but they all follow the same basic progression and formula for reaching complete spiritual maturity—a state known as enlightenment.<sup>23</sup>

The mystical arms of the Islam, Christian, and Jewish traditions, along with western mystery traditions such as Gnosticism, all in large part have shared, developed, or stem from, ideas found in the ancient Zoroastrian religion. Established several thousand years ago, it posits life as essentially a battle between the forces of good and those of evil. Our original home was in a heavenly realm, but due to mishap, we have fallen from our previous, more blessed locale. The meaning of life is to regain this realm. And Zoroastrianism affirms that in the end, the powers of good shall triumph and we shall indeed return to a better realm of existence. The later mystical traditions have all used this as a metaphor to explain the transformation that a serious spiritual practitioner undergoes. Techniques common to all these paths include renunciation, reliance upon a spiritual teacher, devotion, study, prayer, fasting, and contemplation.<sup>24</sup>

Mysticism and contemplative spirituality are dominant in the conversations of Emergents, who believe and practice contemplative spirituality and pay close attention to the writings of “Christian” mystics. Preceding the Emerging Church, the mystics gave more desire to the experience as opposed to understanding the nature and will of God as revealed in Scripture. For example, “contemplative prayer in its simplest form, is prayer in which you still your thoughts . . . this puts you in a better state to be aware of God’s presence, and it makes you better able to hear God’s voice correcting, guiding and directing you.”<sup>25</sup> An even clearer definition described it as follows: “Its practitioners are trained to focus on an inner symbol that quiets the mind. . . . When practitioners become skilled at this method of meditation, they undergo a deep trance state similar to auto-hypnosis.”<sup>26</sup>

Contemplative prayer was first discovered by monks in the third century upon isolating themselves in monasteries. Today, practitioners and promoters of contemplative prayer are rampant in the Emerging Church. It is staggering to consider how many professing Christians embrace and practice

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<sup>23</sup> “Home Page” (Spiritual Teachings, accessed 20 April 2006) available from <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~greg.c/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> “Western Mystical Traditions” (Spiritual Healing / Counseling, accessed 20 April 2006) available from <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~greg.c/mystic.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Jan Johnson, *When the Soul Listens* (Harrisburg, PA: NavPress, 1999), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Jacquelyn Small, *Awakening in Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 261.

contemplative spirituality in light of its description and use by mystics (cf. Col 2:6-8). In reading the “Christian” mystics, there was a common tendency to seek experience rather than the Word of God. Contemplative spirituality was a means of entering into the “dark night of the soul” where God could be met.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Robert Crane, president of Pillsbury Baptist Bible College (Owatonna, MN), provided several reasons for rejecting contemplative spirituality.<sup>28</sup> *First*, the contemplatives sought union with God “through a self induced altered state of consciousness” that excluded “the mind’s relationship to physical reality.” *Second*, the contemplatives sought “to internalize [their] relationship to God” through meditation within the created order as opposed to God’s self-revelation in Scripture. *Third*, the contemplatives sought the practice of emptying themselves as a means of being filled with God.<sup>29</sup> *Fourth*, the contemplatives distorted grace as divine enablement and taught that it could be earned through various means of abasement and self-affliction. *Fifth*, the contemplatives embraced a metaphysical spirituality based on experience as opposed to the historical, objective, propositional, written self-revelation of God in Scripture. *Sixth*, the contemplatives were fixated upon experiences in the “dark night of the soul” as opposed to “the God whom [they] were supposedly meeting there.” *Seventh*, the contemplatives “perverted the meaning of the Cross of Jesus Christ, making it an experience rather than a historical event.” *Eighth*, the contemplatives essentially regarded redemption through experience as opposed to grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Not only did Crane provide several reasons for rejecting contemplative spirituality, but also he provided several reasons illustrating that it fails every test of biblical spirituality. *First*, it receives revelation independent of the Word of God. *Second*, it accepts Satan’s lie to Eve to distrust the Word of God. *Third*, it generally assumes an evolutionary “coming of age” for the church to reunite man with God. *Fourth*, “it is a source of great demonic deception and false

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<sup>27</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, “The Contemplative View,” in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 178-180.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Crane, “Contemplative Sanctification: The Dark Side of Mysticism.” National Leadership Conference at Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, Lansdale, PA, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> “Metaphysical spirituality is antithetical to an ethical (biblical) approach to spirituality. “Metaphysical spirituality teaches that a believer is directly connected to God and that His Spirit is infused into the believer, as electricity flows through a motor, energizing to action. It is taught that when a believer sins the flow stops; when sin is dealt with, the flow resumes. The standard of spirituality may or may not be character development, but usually focuses upon internal experiences and power displays. This is the view universally taught by mysticism. Ethical spirituality teaches that our relationship with God is mediated indirectly and develops in a way analogous to physical growth” [Thomas Ice, “The Filling of the Holy Spirit: A Quality of Life,” *Chafar Theological Seminary Journal 2* (Spring-Summer 1996): 9].

doctrine.” *Fifth*, “it is ecumenical, blending Christianity with Eastern religions.” *Sixth*, it is lacking in power to sanctify the believer ethically or spiritually.

### **Ancient-Future Faith**

When nearing the end of his undergraduate studies, this author was first exposed to the writings of Dr. Robert “Bob” Webber in a class on foundations of biblical worship. He is director of the Institute for Worship Studies. Webber is one of the foremost promoters of the Emerging Church. His “ancient-future worship” is characterized by rediscovering the act of God through the “sacred signs of bread and wine,” laying on of hands, oil, and water; rediscovering “the central nature of the table of the Lord in the Lord’s Supper, breaking of bread, communion, and Eucharist;” and, rediscovering that celebrating Advent, Christmas, Easter, Epiphany, Holy Week, Lent, and Pentecost produces “congregational spirituality.”<sup>30</sup> One wonders if the Emerging Church will move more in the direction of the late Pope John Paul II’s vision as outlined in his Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. In the “Decree on Ecumenism,” The Roman Catholic Church clearly delineated the parameters of Roman Catholicism’s agenda. The ecumenical unity that characterized “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” is hauntingly present in the Emerging Church. Although the Emerging Church claims to be evangelizing to reach the postmodern generation, this author wonders whether the Roman Catholic Church is primarily doing the evangelization. While searching for examples of the influence of Webber’s *Ancient-Future Faith* among the evangelical church, an interesting website was located. Ancient-Future.net explains that the website’s domain name was taken from Webber’s book.

Webber writes about how many Christians today, especially younger ones, are seeking a faith connected to the ancient Church. Thus, postmodern Christians are seeking an ancient and future faith, one that embraces the past for the future, rather than ignoring the past completely. Also, thanks to the reality of relativity (how’s that for an oxymoron!), gone are rational apologetics, and coming back are embodied apologetics (i.e. defending the faith by living as Jesus did). Creeds and Councils are in, as is mysticism and community. Editor David Bennett admits that Webber’s writings helped lead him to the Catholic Church, although much of what Webber says is far too “cafeteria” in approach. Also, Church Tradition is treated more as an evangelical trend as opposed to

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Webber, “Wanted: Ancient-Future Talent,” *Worship Leader* (May-June 2004): 10.

what it is: the Truth. Nonetheless, Webber is a good transitional author.<sup>31</sup>

TheOoze.com is a website of the Emerging Church. When asked the question, “What you look out to the future, what do you think the North American evangelical church is going to look like 25 years from now?” Webber responded,

Christianity will be less national, less culturally formed. It will be smaller pockets of communities in neighborhoods. The church will focus on people, not buildings, on community, not programs, on scripture study, not showy worship. Biblical symbols such as baptismal identity and Eucharistic thanksgiving will take on new meaning. The church will be less concerning about having eschatology and more committed to being an eschatological community. This kind of community will reach out to a broken world to offer healing of broken lives and service to the poor [sic] and needy.<sup>32</sup>

In his book *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, Webber restated much of the same thinking.

A brief glance at the teaching of the Eucharist from the pre-Nicene period provides insight into the early church’s understanding. The Fathers taught that continual spiritual nourishment was provided to believers at this great feast. First it is clear from the writings of Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century that this is no empty symbol. Christ is really present in the bread and wine. He feeds us in the remembrance of His salvation. He feeds us through His presence which is accomplished through prayer.<sup>33</sup>

The practitioner and promoters of the Emerging Church state they are passionate about evangelism. The Emerging Church wants to communicate in an understandable format to today’s generation, which is certainly a commendable goal. Whereas the “seeker” churches removed crosses and Christian symbols, the Emerging Church wants candles, crosses, liturgy,

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<sup>31</sup> Ancient-Future.net, “Ancient and Future Christian Reading List” (accessed 13 November 2006) available from <http://www.ancient-future.net/apcbooks.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Jordon Cooper, “An Interview with Robert Webber, author of *The Younger Evangelicals*” (TheOoze, 11 December 2002, accessed 13 November 2006) available from <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=385>.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 114.

sacraments, and stained-glass returned. In *The Lutheran*, Julie Sevig explained the purpose for the return of these symbols, in addition to the attraction of classic liturgy and contemplative worship.

Postmoderns prefer to encounter Christ by using all their senses. That's part of the appeal of classical liturgical or contemplative worship: the incense and candles, making the sign of the cross, the taste and smell of the bread and wine, touching icons and being anointed with oil. In *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Zondervan, 1999), Leonard Sweet says: "Postmoderns want a God they can feel, taste, touch, hear and smell—a full sensory immersion in the divine."<sup>34</sup>

Webber was also quoted in the article.

Attraction to liturgical and contemplative worship is partly a response to society's ills and advances, which this generation has known firsthand, says Robert Webber, author of *Ancient-Future Faith* (Baker Books, 1999).<sup>35</sup>

Karen Ward, ELCA associate director for worship, was also consulted.

This return to the traditional—the sacred—crosses denominational lines, Ward says. In fact, an interesting marriage is occurring between evangelicals and the liturgy. "Evangelicals are using traditions from all liturgical churches from Orthodox to Lutheran to Catholic," she says. "Though they have limited experience using their new-found symbols, rituals and traditions, they're infusing them with vitality and spirit and life, which is reaching people."<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, the Emergent practice of contemplative spirituality and disdain for understanding and then applying the Bible demonstrate the inability to edify and equip God's church and to bring glory and honor to Him. The Emerging Church also appears to be building a bridge to Roman Catholicism. The inspired Word of God is not the emphasis. Dark and mystical churches, candles, crosses, icons, incense, relics, statues of Mary and "saints" are the emphasis. The sensual and mystical are the emphasis, and there is little evidence that the Bible is being taught.

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<sup>34</sup> Julie B. Sevig, "Ancient New," *The Lutheran* (September 2001): 36.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

### Final Thoughts

It cannot be disputed that the church should be relevant. The church should be persevering in making worship clear. However, the primary responsibility of the church is to worship God according to His Word, and to do so regardless of whether the “emerging generation” desires it. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, gave the charge to preach the offense of the cross even to a generation that may not value it. Paul did not shrink from preaching a foolish message to a group of pluralistic scoffers at Mars Hill (Acts 17) and neither should the church.

As with any critique of the modern church, there may be some points of agreement. However, the Emerging Church has misdiagnosed the problems in the church. Emergents are critical of a church that, as the result of modernity, they believe largely holds a dead orthodoxy. The Emerging Church also believes that the postmodern culture does not want to hear biblical preaching or be taught sound doctrine, so they want to provide an experience instead. However, a 2002 survey by Barna found that the majority of “Americans are most likely to base truth on feelings” and 53% of “evangelicals” question objective truth. The problem is that the postmodern culture and even the majority within the church are *already* living an experiential Gospel and form of Christian spirituality, but have no knowledge of doctrine and theology (based upon all the inspired and inerrant propositional truth, and logical implications, of Scripture as the sole epistemological criterion for truth). Spiritual vitality in the life of a Christian and in the local church is always identified by a commitment to sound orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The heteropraxis leaders of the Emerging Church may appear to be providing a higher level of Christian spirituality, but their fleshly quests in the “dark night of the soul” have already compromised biblical preaching and teaching and will eventually disregard the Bible completely as the propositional truth. The heteropraxis will work to deny the authority of Scripture until the Bible is perverted to conform to the heterodoxy of Emergents and the Emerging Churches. An indication of the drift *from* revealed propositional truth in the Emerging Church is the drift *toward* postmodern deconstructionism. D. A. Carson defined deconstructionism as

a literary approach, under the hermeneutics of suspicion, that hunts down tensions and inconsistencies in a text (those who deploy deconstruction insist that all texts have them) in order to set them at odds with each other and thus *deconstruct* the text, to generate new insights that might actually contradict what a text ostensibly says.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 84.

In other words, as Derrida insisted, it is impossible to agree on the correct interpretation of words. The deconstruction emphasis is not on the correct interpretation and meaning of words (and certainly would not affirm the validity of an historical, grammatical method of interpretation), but the experience that the listener or reader has with the words. As a result of rejecting the authority of Scripture and its propositional truth (doctrine), Emergents cannot believe that truth can be proved, therefore, it cannot be known, and all that remains is mystery (paradox). Postmodernist Stanley Fish has stated there is “no objective standard for proving truth.” According to Fish, there is no “independent standard of objectivity” because it is impossible to prove truth definitely to others. Herein is the dilemma of the Emerging Church, the Bible is esteemed for its mystery, not its propositional truth. Therefore, by rejecting the primacy of biblical preaching and teaching for the spiritual vitality of the church, the Emerging Church is left with Christian sensitivity sessions wherein everyone can share their ignorance of the biblical text and what experience the Bible supposedly created. Furthermore, biblical orthopraxis is not derived from Scripture or the Holy Spirit but internal experiences and displays of power through contemplative spirituality and the musings of “Christian” mystics resulting in heteropraxis (which always leads to heterodoxy). The spiritual vitality that Emergents insist they desire is now beyond their reach. Truth is only relational because it is objective. The foundation of biblical (ethical) spirituality is the objective, historical, and inspired revelation of God. Since the postmodern epistemology of the Emerging Church is against this type of revelation, the Emerging Church can only affirm the postmodern emphasis upon experience, and being relational as opposed to speaking the truth in love. As a result of this careless and unbiblical doctrine and practice, the Emerging Church has relinquished the doctrinal and historical objectivity of the Gospel, which is the foundation of all biblical spirituality.





## A Short Primer on Hermeneutics

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### Introduction

The respective catalogs of both Calvary Bible College and Calvary Theological Seminary describe our theological convictions as fundamental, premillennial, and dispensational. Among other areas that distinguish this institution of Christian higher education, it can be clearly noted that Calvary is dispensational. As taught at both the College and the Seminary, we further identify ourselves as “normative” in our dispensational theology. For those unfamiliar with the terminology this would be the description of dispensationalism made popular (and understandable) for the most part by Charles C. Ryrie.<sup>1</sup> This means that we do not subscribe to extremes of dispensationalism, such as “ultradispensationalism,” nor do we agree with the relatively recent appearance of the apparent moderating position of “progressive dispensationalism.” Most certainly, we do not subscribe to the theological system known as Covenant Theology.

But why do we hold to the distinctive of dispensationalism? Is it really that important? What are the implications of this theological position? What is the significance of describing ourselves as dispensational? We shall attempt to answer these questions during this inaugural McCarrell Lecture Series from four different perspectives. First, I will examine briefly the issue of hermeneutics or the principles of accurate biblical interpretation. Second, Professor Joel Williamson will demonstrate the importance of these principles to Old Testament interpretation as he examines the issue of the Sabbath and the Mosaic Law. Third, Dr. Neil Nelson will examine several critical exegetical issues in Matthew 24. Fourth, Professor John Klaassen will summarize our position by contrasting Dispensational Theology with Covenant Theology. Our purpose will be to clarify for the reader why being dispensational matters to the individual Christian as well as to the Church at large.

### The Importance of Hermeneutics to Dispensational Theology

What are the distinguishing features of dispensationalism? Ryrie asked and answered this question by suggesting the *sine qua non* of the system in his definitive publication. The answer included three critical elements. The first is the distinction between Israel and the Church. The second is the matter of plain hermeneutics or literal interpretation. The third aspect concerns the ultimate purpose of God in the world to be bringing glory to Himself.<sup>2</sup> While the essence

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<sup>1</sup>See his original book, Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) and his revision and expansion, Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 38–41.

of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the Church, Ryrie emphasizes that “this grows out of the dispensationalist’s consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation . . . .”<sup>3</sup>

In a chapter contributed by Ryrie to a book examining issues in dispensational theology,<sup>4</sup> he notes that in the early days of the formulation of the dispensational system it can be demonstrated that John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and other contemporaries, though not necessarily agreeing on all details of dispensationalism, did insist on the literal interpretation of all of Scripture. “This literal hermeneutic was deemed especially important to the correct understanding of Revelation, Daniel, and other Old Testament prophecies. . . . The hermeneutic of early dispensationalism was literalistic.”<sup>5</sup> As dispensationalism developed in America through the several Bible conferences of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the various speakers utilized what they themselves called a grammatical-historical method of interpretation. In a comment about the very popular and influential Scofield Reference Bible (1909) Ryrie acknowledges that this work popularized dispensationalism perhaps more than any other entity. “Literal interpretation and the distinction between Israel and the church (and other distinctions) are preeminent in its notes.”<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on the consistent use of a literal hermeneutic which leads the interpreter to maintain the clear distinction between Israel and the Church has been a key element in normative dispensationalism up to the present time.

### What Is A Literal Hermeneutic?

When one attempts to define or describe a literal hermeneutic, or the literal interpretation of Scripture, it is somewhat like trying to maintain a grip on an eel. Critics of literal interpretation often refer to it as “wooden literalism.” They accuse literal interpreters of not recognizing figures of speech, symbolism, or apocalyptic imagery.<sup>7</sup> When the Bible uses the phrase “the four corners of the earth” critics think that a literal interpretation demands the understanding that the Bible teaches a flat, even square, planet. They insist also that the number 1000 (as in 1000 years) does not always mean 1000. A literal Millennial Kingdom is negated by taking a symbolic meaning for the number from a different context and reading that meaning into Revelation 20:2–7.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps a better term than literal would be “normal.” When one reads the newspaper, for example, one has little trouble understanding what is being

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, General Editors, *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>7</sup> A recent example of such criticism is dealt with in Thomas Ice, “Literal vs. Allegorical Interpretation,” *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, vol. VIII, number 18, October 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, the Bible Answer Man, is guilty of this. See Thomas Ice, “One Thousand Years: Literal or Figurative?” *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, vol. VIII, number 19, November/December, 2004.

communicated. The reporter uses words, putting them together in sentences, in order to communicate ideas or historical facts or even his own opinions. The same is true for magazines, novels, fictional and nonfictional books, and technical articles. The reader understands that words have meaning as they are used in sentences (the context) and that one expects facts from a newspaper, entertainment from a novel, and analysis of history from a book on the Second World War. If one is simply trying to understand what the author wrote, regardless of the type or style of writing, and shares the language of the writer, the task is really not that formidable.

The same should be true when interpreting the Bible. The interpreter's task is really quite simple. He must come to an understanding of what the author of the biblical passage was communicating, the author's intended meaning.<sup>9</sup> How does one do this? The Bible was originally written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) over a period of at least 1500 years by about 40 different (human) authors covering a very long time historically speaking. American Christians residing in the twenty-first century are most often dealing with an English translation of the Bible having at least some notes and cross references to help us understand what we are reading. If one does not possess the knowledge or skill of Hebrew or Greek exegesis, one comes to an understanding of the author's intended meaning by an inductive method of the study of the English translation.

First, one must observe what the passage says. Then, using a normal hermeneutic, one interprets the passage understanding the meaning of the words by the way they are used in the context of the passage, taking into account the grammar and syntax of the passage, as well as the historical situation surrounding the passage being studied. This is the time honored method known as the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.<sup>10</sup> The consistent application of this method will yield the author's intended meaning.

Why is it necessary to determine the author's intended meaning? What if the interpreter thinks the passage means something else? The answer is simple. The meaning of any biblical passage or book, indeed, the meaning of anything written, resides in the text being examined and is determined by the author of the text, not by the interpreter. The interpreter's function is to uncover by careful and diligent examination the meaning that the author intended to communicate to his original readers. The interpreter is never to impose his meaning or any other foreign meaning onto the text of Scripture. That would not be exegesis, that would be eisegesis. We contend that a careful and consistent application of a normal hermeneutic... a normal system of

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<sup>9</sup> See Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990); Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002); and other works advocating a normal hermeneutic.

<sup>10</sup> For classical works describing this system of hermeneutics see Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 reprint), originally published by Hunt & Eason, 1890; and Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Third rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970).

interpretation... to the entirety of Scripture results in Dispensational Theology, not Covenant Theology. (It also results in other conclusions, of course, but the subject of this series is Dispensationalism.)

Please note that consistently using a normal hermeneutic (not to be confused with a woodenly literal methodology) recognizes the author's use of figurative language, symbols, figures of speech, parables, and allegories, to name only some examples. However, the use of the above is determined from the context, from the way the author uses language, from an analysis of the grammar of the passage, and recognition of the historical circumstances surrounding the passage. It is not determined by the interpreter after deciding that all remaining unfulfilled prophecies will not be fulfilled literally, but must be fulfilled spiritually, as is done in Covenant Theology or by amillennial commentators.

### **Covenant Theology**

As a system of theology, Covenant Theology antedates dispensationalism by about fifty years, being associated with the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1648. In this system the whole of Scripture is viewed as being covered by the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption (although not all covenant theologians include the latter covenant). The entire Bible is understood in terms of these covenants. The problem, however, is that none of these covenants are biblically stated covenants, as is the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, and New covenants. They are theological covenants inferred from Scripture, but not being explicitly found therein.

The covenant of works is understood to be between God and Adam before the Fall in Genesis 3. In this covenant God offers life for obedience and death for disobedience. Man fell. Therefore, God instituted the covenant of grace between Himself and the elect sinner in which He offers salvation for faith in Christ. The covenant of redemption is between the Father and the Son in which the Son agrees to redeem the elect as a basis for the covenant of grace. Obviously, a corollary of covenant theology is limited atonement, the idea that Christ died only for the elect and not for the world. This third covenant is more recent in development and is not found in the Westminster Confession.

The biblical basis for these three covenants is scant. Rather than resulting from an inductive examination of Scripture, it results as a deduction from certain evidence. There is no scriptural reference to these specific covenants. Consequently, as a result of these covenant ideas, the hermeneutic of Covenant Theology is inconsistent literalism. The Old Testament is interpreted in light of the New Testament resulting in forced interpretations, faulty exegesis, bad typology, and allegorizing and spiritualizing of Scripture. The New Testament must be read back into the Old, and so the Church becomes the "true Israel" and the promises to Israel must be realized by the Church (hence,

the Church takes the place of Israel inheriting all the promises, i.e., Replacement Theology).

### **Inconsistent Literalism**

Basic rules of interpretation accepted by covenant theologians<sup>11</sup> include that words must be understood in their plain historical sense (the grammatical-historical sense); that Scripture is of divine origin and contains no contradictions; that Scripture should explain Scripture (the so-called “analogy of Scripture”); and that the Holy Spirit must illuminate the meaning of the text for us.

However, covenant theologians modify these basic rules in actual application and use as follows:

- Literal interpretation of prophecy not yet fulfilled is entirely untenable.<sup>12</sup>
- Prophecy must be interpreted in a spiritual or allegorical sense (that is, prophecy not yet fulfilled).
- A “theological interpretation” must be added to the grammatical-historical method (especially to unfulfilled prophecy).<sup>13</sup>
- The Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament (resulting at times in a new meaning of the Old Testament passage).

With such modifications, of course, the result is an artificial exegesis.

The imposition of a theological system (Covenant Theology) upon the Bible forces a re-interpretation of prophecy not yet clearly fulfilled (it is difficult to reinterpret a prophecy already literally fulfilled, such as the birth place of Jesus<sup>14</sup>). The extent of this imposition controls the interpretive outcome. The outstanding characteristic of nondispensational hermeneutics is the inconsistent use of the basic rules, which would yield normal, literal interpretation, especially in the area of prophecy. Thus, a normal hermeneutic using the principles of grammatical-historical interpretation applied consistently throughout Scripture, will lead the interpreter to Dispensational Theology. If the rules are modified and theological interpretation is added to the grammatical-historical method (inconsistent literalism), the result is Covenant Theology. The spiritualizing of all unfulfilled prophecy and the identification of true Israel with the Church results in full-blown Amillennialism. Less spiritualizing of prophecy and the allowance of a future of some kind for Israel leads to Covenant Premillennialism.

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to the following sources: L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1939, 1941), 712; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973 reprint), 187–188; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 114–119; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86–109, 187–189.

<sup>12</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 712.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism” (Doctor’s dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 147.

<sup>14</sup> Micah 5:2.

### Examples of Abnormal Hermeneutics

If the grammatical-historical method of interpretation is the literal or plain or normal method, then any other hermeneutic that deviates from these principles would be “abnormal.” The inconsistent literalism discussed above falls into this abnormal category as does a full blown allegorical method of interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation may have originated with the ancient Greeks to cover up embarrassing episodes in Greek mythology. It was passed on to the Jews who in turn passed the method on to the church Fathers. It became the dominant mode of biblical interpretation throughout the Middle Ages up to the Protestant Reformation. Allegorical interpretation is defined as creating a level of meaning completely foreign to the author’s intentions by the fanciful use of figurative language. However, unlike legitimate use of figurative language, allegorizing is often farfetched, absurd, or unreal. Meanings are imported into the text by the interpreter. Rather than attempting to determine the author’s intended meaning, allegorical interpretations are highly subjective and liable to change with the moods and feelings of the interpreter.

An example of allegorical interpretation from early church history is seen in one of Augustine’s sermons on the gospel of John. John 2 describes Jesus’ first public miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. Water was placed into six large stone water pots, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. The water was turned into wine by the Son of God. Augustine interprets the six water pots to signify the six ages or six periods, each probably referring to a thousand years (hence, six thousand years).<sup>15</sup>

Another example of allegorizing from the medieval period of church history is taken from a commentary of the gospel of John by Rupert of Deutz (about the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Commenting on the 153 fish caught by the disciples (see John 21:11), Westcott summarizes Rupert’s interpretation: “Rupert of Deutz . . . regards the three numbers [100, 50, 3] as the proportions of three different classes united in one faith. The ‘hundred’ are the married, who are the most numerous, the ‘fifty’ the widowed or continent who are less numerous, the ‘three,’ the least in number, are the virgins.”<sup>16</sup> Examples could be multiplied, but the point is made. The interpretation obviously did not come from the text; rather it was read into the text. It did not result from carefully applied normal hermeneutics, but from inconsistent hermeneutics.

To illustrate what is done with prophecy using abnormal hermeneutics, consider the following examples:

Revelation 7:4–8 describes the 144,000, stated in the passage to be 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. They are identified by Ladd<sup>17</sup> to be the “true Israel” (the true people of God) in the Tribulation. In his view they are not the literal twelve tribes and not literal Jews. Rather, there is a spiritual

<sup>15</sup> St. Augustine, “Homilies on the Gospel of John,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Phillip Schaff, ed., 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol. VII, 65.

<sup>16</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1950), 307.

<sup>17</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1956), 126.

significance to this group of people. The true people of God will be preserved complete during this time. Not one “true one” will be lost during the time of God’s wrath. However, he apparently is not so certain about his interpretation to be dogmatic about it (for example, he says “. . . whoever they are”).

Fairbairn<sup>18</sup> also sees the 144,000 as “the Lord’s people generally” who are kept safe from the desolations sweeping the earth during the Tribulation. The twelve tribes historically composed the professing church in the first century.

The problem with interpretations such as this is that the biblical text plainly states that the 144,000 are composed of 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel and names each of the tribes (Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin). This would seem to be wasted information if all the author were intending to communicate was that the true people of God, whoever they are, will be preserved through the Tribulation period.

Another curious interpretation is given by Fairbairn of Ezekiel 38–39, the attack by Gog against the people of Israel. Fairbairn regards this as an ideal delineation of certain dangers and assaults against the people of God in the distant future.<sup>19</sup> At this time, the “future,” the condition will be peace, the enemies of the people of God will be hostile powers from remote regions under the command of an enterprising leader named Gog, and the distance really means a moral distance from God, not a literal physical distance.

Mickelsen proposes to interpret prophecy in terms of equivalents, analogy, or correspondence.<sup>20</sup> He notes that prophecy is fulfilled in the future, therefore, all language would be symbolic of something future at the time of fulfillment. Some examples of the equivalents or correspondence would be cars instead of chariots; guns instead of swords; or church instead of temple. On the surface this sounds very appealing. The problem here is that we must know the time of fulfillment in order to identify the exact equivalent! When Mickelsen applies this technique to Ezekiel 40–48, the twelve tribes of Israel are equivalent to the unity of the people of God. The 144,000 of Revelation 7 are equivalent to the entire church of the end time.

This use of equivalents is not used exclusively by nondispensationalists. Hal Lindsey of *The Late Great Planet Earth* fame uses these same principles to equate the weapons of war of Ezekiel 39 to atomic bombs, missiles, tanks, helicopters, and the like.<sup>21</sup> This, however, assumes that he knows the time of fulfillment, which, of course, no one knows except God alone.

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<sup>18</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy, viewed in its distinctive Nature, its special Function, and proper Interpretation* (Edinburgh, 1865; New York, 1866), 251.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 485–487.

<sup>20</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1963), 296–305.

<sup>21</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1970).

### Is Consistent Literalism Biblical? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism

We have argued that normal hermeneutics . . . consistent literalism . . . applied to the entire Bible leads the interpreter to Normative Dispensational Theology, not to Covenant Theology. It also leads the interpreter to other conclusions, such as a supernatural (miraculous) creation of all things from nothing by the triune God in six normal days as we would define them, not very long ago (thousands of years, not billions of years). Mark Noll has observed that “a biblical literalism, gaining strength since the 1870s, has fueled both the intense concern for human origins and the end times. Literal readings of Genesis 1–3 find their counterpart in literal readings of Revelation 20 (with its description of the thousand-year reign of Christ).”<sup>22</sup> Noll also speculates that the earlier spread of dispensationalism connects with the later popularity of creation science through the common thread of literal (normal) interpretation and the observation of major discontinuities in biblical history, both past and future.<sup>23</sup> Despite Noll’s and others’ criticism of normal (literal) interpretation, this connection between Creationism and Dispensational Theology has merit and we might even consider Creationism as a kind of “scientific dispensationalism.”

Normal (literal) interpretation is not without its critics, however. In a collection of essays arrayed against Creationism, historian George M. Marsden makes the astounding claim that literalism or normal interpretation of Scripture is “. . . not derived from the Bible itself, but from philosophical assumptions that appear to be closely related to the Enlightenment Baconianism of their tradition – which lends itself toward a strong preference for definite and precise statements of fact.”<sup>24</sup> Marsden further suggests that fundamentalists can abandon the “literal where possible” approach while still believing that “the Bible is true.” He concludes his analysis by saying that “the point of Genesis . . . is not to tell us the details of *how* God created, but to assure us *that* God created the universe and the human race.”<sup>25</sup> If this is actually the case (and we do not think it is), then why are the details in the text at all? Taking this line of thinking to its logical extreme we could then suggest that the point of the Bible is not to tell us the details of *what* God revealed, but to assure us *that* God revealed His Word to the human race. Or, the point of the Bible is not to tell us the details of *how* we can be saved, but to assure us *that* we can be saved. Again, the point of the Bible is not to tell us the details of *what* will occur at the Second Coming, but to assure us *that* there will be a Second Coming. The absurdity of such reasoning is self evident.

Clearly, if God communicated His Word to us through the special revelation of the Bible, it seems axiomatic that He expects us to understand what He has communicated. From the perspective of philosophy it seems that

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<sup>22</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 194.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>24</sup> George M. Marsden, “Understanding Fundamentalist Views of Science,” in Ashley Montagu, ed., *Science and Creationism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 111.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



the purpose of language requires normal interpretation. How would we even be able to understand the criticism of a normal hermeneutic from Noll and Marsden, for example, except by understanding what they wrote in a normal, literal manner? Contrary to Marsden's claim that literalism is not derived from the Bible, we simply point out that the prophecies in the Old Testament of the first coming of Christ, including His birth, childhood, ministry, death, and resurrection, were all fulfilled literally! There simply are no nonliteral fulfillments of these prophecies in the New Testament. If this does not argue for a biblical basis for the literal method, what does?<sup>26</sup>

Without normal interpretation of Scripture, any objectivity to determining the author's intended meaning is lost. A consistent application of a normal hermeneutic to the entirety of the Bible will lead the interpreter to Dispensational Theology, among other critical conclusions. The key to a person's theological convictions resides with his hermeneutic. Calvary Bible College and Calvary Theological Seminary teach and hold to a normal hermeneutic, hence we are convinced that Normative Dispensational Theology is correct.

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<sup>26</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue see the chapter on "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" in Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86–89.



## The Importance of the Davidic Covenant

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“When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up **your descendant** after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his **kingdom**. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish **the throne** of his kingdom **forever**. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And **your house and your kingdom** shall endure before Me **forever**; **your throne** shall be established **forever**.” (2 Samuel 7:12-16)<sup>1</sup>

The Davidic covenant defines God’s covenanted throne, kingdom, and heir. God’s covenanted theocratic kingdom program and David’s throne and kingdom are the same. This is also known as the millennial kingdom where Christ will reign from David’s throne over Israel and every nation literally for one thousand years. The Davidic covenant establishes David’s seed who literally descends from the lineage of David, and who literally reigns from David’s throne over David’s kingdom of Israel, the Jews. This covenant fully establishes David’s house, throne, and kingdom *forever*. The Davidic covenant is of great importance and is essential to God’s program, and to understand God’s program one must fully understand the David covenant.

### Kings Were Promised in the Abrahamic Covenant

God had already established there would be kings coming from the Abrahamic seed line (Gen. 17:6). This line was identified as far as Jacob (Gen. 35:10-12), and then Judah (Gen. 49:10-12), but the continuation and details of the kingly line and the kingdom were not established and fully covenanted until David (2

<sup>1</sup>Note this is ‘your seed’ quite literally. This must be a physical seed אֶת־וְרֵעֶךָ or descendant of David which must come forth *from David* מִמְצֵיךָ. The descendant of David אֶת־וְרֵעֶךָ who will be Solomon will have his **kingdom** אֶת־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ established. Solomon will build the house or temple הַבַּיִת לַשֵּׁמִי and the **throne** of Solomon’s kingdom אֶת־כִּסֵּא מַמְלַכְתּוֹ will be established forever. God promised never to remove His (lit. My) lovingkindness הַחֶסֶד מִמֶּנּוּ from Solomon as He did from Saul אֶת־חֶסֶד יְהוָה מִסָּאוּל. David’s (lit. your house) **house** בְּיַתְד or dynasty and David’s (lit. your kingdom) **kingdom** מַמְלַכְתְּךָ will be established forever עַד־עוֹלָם. David’s **throne** will be established *forever*. Observe carefully the promise of **the house, kingdom, and throne**, with the emphasis on the **throne of the kingdom** (Solomon’s) being established *forever*, and David’s **throne** being established *forever*. To confuse David’s throne, kingdom, Solomon’s throne, and kingdom (identical thrones and kingdom) for some other eternal or heavenly throne and kingdom, is to purposely avoid the promises of the Davidic covenant. If there is another throne and kingdom with David, Scripture speaks nothing of it, and it is of very trivial concern, unless one wishes to violate this covenant for another theology. All Hebrew quotes are from the BHS; *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia : With Westminster Hebrew Morphology*. 1996, c1925; morphology c1991. Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary.

Sam. 7:12-16). The covenant with David defines the throne and kingdom of David, along with all the essential details of the seed line and its establishment so it is definite as to who inherits the Davidic throne and kingdom.

In the history of the kings of Israel, it was obvious that Saul was not God's choice as king; this was the will of the people. God had already planned to establish a kingdom with a king, because a king was a part of his promise to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:6). Prophetically, the kingly rule or seed line is to come through the tribe of Judah not through Benjamin (Saul). *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, Until Shiloh<sup>2</sup> comes, And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples"* (Genesis 49:10). This is a remarkable prophecy especially referring to the one who is coming, and *"to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."* If the kings came directly through Jacob with no other explanation or prophecy, then there would be no need for a further detailed lineage of kings or rulers. However, this makes it quite clear that the kingly line must come through Judah. The Davidic covenant will establish the seed line of Davidic kings (the royal seed line), which will culminate in the final seed, God's anointed, or the Lord's Messiah.

By Israel's selection of Saul or effectively any king, the nation actually displayed a willful ignorance or disdain for God's kingdom program having been established or rooted in the Abrahamic covenant. The rule of God over Israel must be accepted as a part of the Abrahamic covenant, or else it would be needless for God to say *"but they have rejected Me from being king over them"* (1 Sam. 8:7). There are several reasons for this.

At the time of the selection of Saul by the people, there were no other biblical covenants with anyone concerning Israel, and especially not one that promised kings, a kingly line, or rule. There would be no other reason to have the promise of kings and establish a kingly line unless for the establishment of a kingdom with Israel, and this proves even more that *the kingdom program* is rooted in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:6; 35:11). This is obvious by God's reaction to the selection of Saul by the people God having promised kings by covenant decree. Jehovah being the supreme King or Theocratic King of the universal kingdom would eventually provide the covenanted (earthly) kingly line and king. Rejection of His choice of kings specifically through Judah (Gen. 49:10-12), displays the willful decision against the Lord as their King. (1 Samuel 8:7). All this becomes significant when the Lord eventually

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<sup>2</sup> The NASB renders the third line of Genesis 49:10, "Until Shiloh comes." Many sources, including the Targum (Aramaic paraphrase of the OT), see "Shiloh" as a title of the Messiah. However, the Hebrew word *šilōh* should be rendered "whose it is," that is, the scepter will not depart from Judah . . . until He comes whose it (i.e., the scepter) is (or as the NIV puts it, to whom it belongs)... (Isa. 61:6-7; 65:21-25; Zech. 3:10)." Allen P Ross, "Genesis," in *The Bible knowledge commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983), 98-99.

establishes *the promised seed line for the throne and kingdom* with David rooted completely in the Davidic covenant.

### **The Covenanted Kingdom With David**

The covenanted kingdom and throne were fully established with David and his seed by the Davidic covenant (1 Sam. 7:12-13). To fully understand this kingdom and throne, a comprehensive study of this covenant and all the details and prophecies associated with it are mandatory. For without the Davidic covenant and a systematic understanding of it, there is no defined seed, no defined throne, no defined kingdom, no defined house (dynasty), and no defined Davidic progeny to inherit the throne and kingdom of David. The definition and establishment of the Davidic kingdom would be open to interpretation and speculation as to what God has promised and covenanted with David through the nation Israel.

The essential nature of the covenanted kingdom and throne of David is complete in the Old Testament and does not change in the New Testament. God has taken oaths that He will fulfill what He has promised (Ps. 89:3-4; 33:37; 132:10-12), and He has sealed the covenants ultimately with His Son's own blood. It should be understood that the establishment of God's kingdom program with David as specifically covenanted is a vital key to understanding all future prophecy and promises related to it. Prophecy does not establish the kingdom program of God. The biblical covenants do (the Abrahamic, land, Davidic, and new). The defining of His entire redemptive program and the defining of the throne and the kingdom God are in the covenants themselves. In addition, all biblical prophecy ultimately flows from the biblical covenants. The prophecies progressively display God's development toward His covenanted kingdom program and the final purpose of Jesus (the Messiah, the second man and the last Adam) ruling as God's anointed from David's covenanted throne over David's kingdom (Is. 9:6-7; Zech. 14:9<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:32-33).

It is a necessity to comprehend the certain and fixed promises made to David and his seed in the Davidic covenant concerning God's kingdom program. Without the Davidic covenant, there is no clarification concerning the seed, the house, or the dynasty of David. The throne and the kingdom themselves would not be established, and even the Messiah could not be identified as the one who must reign from David's throne. Effectively without the Davidic covenant, you have nothing defined in relation to the throne and the kingdom of David. This is perfectly obvious. Not even David's ultimate Seed, the Messiah, would ever be revealed as the Son of David, for there would be no reason for anyone to expect someone in the lineage and progeny of David to inherit David's throne and kingdom (Is. 9:6-7; Luke 1:32-33). No one would know who He was, for apart from the Davidic covenant, the kingdom and

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<sup>3</sup> See George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), Proposition 25.

throne, the lineage, and ultimately Messiah (the Christ) have literally no identity and literally no meaning.

Therefore, if nothing were defined or understood regarding the seed of David or his kingdom promised in the Davidic covenant, then what the angel Gabriel said to Mary at the annunciation (Luke 1:30-33) would have virtually no significance. It is by covenant design that the throne referred to by Gabriel, which would be given to the child in Mary's womb, must be the same as the throne of His father David. Moreover, that throne is made known exclusively *only* in the Davidic covenant. There would be no Jew, including Mary, who would be able to understand the annunciation if the Davidic covenant were not taken literally (a plain normal meaning).

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him **Jesus**. “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him **the throne of His father David**; and He will reign over **the house of Jacob forever**; and **His kingdom will have no end**” (Luke 1:31-33).<sup>4</sup>

### The New Testament Writers Assume All Biblical Covenants Are Fully Understood

When coming to the New Testament, Scripture assumes all the biblical covenants are fully understood, for the defining of the land, the throne, the kingdom etc. are completely given in the Old Testament biblical covenants. There was no explanation of the throne and kingdom given by anyone in the NT. It was not necessary, as Israel understood there would be coming the covenanted kingdom for them (Luke 2:25; 36-38; Act. 1:6; 28:31). Israel was and is still the elect of God as a covenanted people and nation (Deut. 7:6-8) created by God (Is. 43:1, 15) for this very purpose. All the biblical covenants can only be fulfilled with the direct heirs of the covenants. These are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Jesus, and the nation Israel, the Jews, and this can never change (Eph 2:11; Rom. 11:28-29). One reason for this is that *all* the biblical covenants are by the declaration of God eternal or everlasting and God has not changed one tittle of any covenant especially with the Jews. Only Israel as a

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<sup>4</sup> This is a very powerful passage in light of the Davidic covenant. The throne of David is only that which was known as that one David occupied and his son Solomon and his sons. David is called the father of Jesus as he is the true father through whom Christ, the anointed, inherits David's throne, so it can be literally said δώσει α τ κύριος θε ζ τ ν θρόνον Δαυ δ του πατρ ζ α του and He will reign forever. That throne is not in heaven in these or any passages. Jesus must get the only one throne of David. If there are several (which there are not) which is *the antitype*? especially in this verse or any other? "ο τος σται μέγας κα υ ζ ψίστου κληθήσεται κα δώσει α τ κύριος θε ζ τ ν θρόνον Δαυ δ του πατρ ζ α του, κα βασιλεύσει π τ ν ο κον ακ β ε ζ το ζ α ωνας κα της βασιλείας α του ο κ σται τέλος." (Luke 1:32-33).

nation can completely fulfill the eternal covenants and that is why Israel is a continuously preserved people by God (Jer. 31:34-37).

Paul's *magnum opus*, the epistle to the Romans, would have no validity if the Davidic covenant were not literal and eternal. In Romans, Paul speaks of the gospel of Christ and the righteousness that flows from it (Rom 1:16-17). Paul reminds the Romans that Christ Jesus is the eternal Son born Who came<sup>5</sup> by the seed of David. If Jesus is not the descendant of David and Heir according to the flesh, the Messiah of Israel to rule from David's throne, there is no gospel (1 John 5:1). The Messiah is the God-man, He is fully God and fully man, but man according to the flesh of the literal seed of David through Mary, Heir Apparent to the throne. Paul begins Romans with this fact. This also shows the absolute importance of the Davidic covenant (Rom. 1:1-4).

Matthew's gospel begins by referring first to Jesus as the son of David (Mat. 1:1). By putting David first for emphasis, Matthew is proving Jesus is not coming into the sheepfold by any other way than by the correct Davidic genealogy to assume the throne of David (Mat. 1:1-17). This is His birthright as given by covenanted design and decree to David's seed through Joseph. Jesus, Israel's Messiah, is the promised and covenanted Heir Apparent to the Davidic throne as the King of Israel. He is Heir as son of David, *the king* (Mat. 1:6). He is the King of *the Jews*.<sup>6</sup> Matthew was neither confused about the Messiah, the king, nor the kingdom, nor the throne (Mat 25:31; 26:62-68; John 3:1-2). He is the eternal Son of God taking flesh as the Son of man. He is truly the God-man in one person.

“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” **They said to Him, “The son of David.”** He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet” (Matthew 22:41-44).

Jesus asked the Pharisees, “*If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?*” (Matthew 22:45). “Christ was trying to make the Pharisees see that the Son of David was also the Lord of David (Ps. 110:1); i.e., the Messiah was

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<sup>5</sup> Note the word being used is from γίγνομαι to be or become not born of γεννάω.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus will be given one throne over one kingdom as Messiah from which to reign (Dan. 7:13-14), and His kingdom will be over *the Jews, the nation Israel*. This kingdom will include other nations, but it will be a Jewish kingdom. The Scriptures are very clear about this covenanted kingdom. There is absolutely no doubt about this, and it is just a matter of time. It is a Jewish kingdom and everything is heading in that direction. This is the truth of the Scriptures. Nothing less than His kingdom over the Jews will fulfill any David throne or Davidic kingdom rule as Scripture reveals (Jer 23:5-8). Anything more than this or less than this simply is not biblical. He must sit on David's throne over the Jews, the Jewish nation Israel and *for this He died*. “Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And Jesus said to him, “It is as you say.” (Matthew 27:11). “And they put up above His head **the charge** against Him which read, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (Matthew 27:37).

David's human descendant and Divine Lord."<sup>7</sup> "Psalm 110:1 uses two different Hebrew words for God. The first, translated as Lord, is the name Yahweh, the proper name of Israel's God. The second Lord means "Master." David, the king of Israel, calls one of his offspring "Lord" or "Master," a title for deity. The implication is that Jesus, the Son of David, is God. He is a descendant of David and therefore human, but He is also divine."<sup>8</sup> The Messiah is truly the God-man, but the Messiah must come in David's royal line. The Davidic covenant must be taken literally to fully understand any of this.

Israel's Messiah had to be in direct lineage as the literal son of David to assume rightfully the throne and kingdom of David. Not every son of David in the royal line was qualified to rule as the king of Israel (Mat. 1:12; Jer. 22:28-30). There is only one throne and kingdom of David, for the biblical covenants, especially the Davidic covenant describe but *one*. David knew no other, Israel knew no other, and Jesus knew no other. Jesus' lineage proves He is in the correct seed line, and He is the only one who has the covenanted right to the throne of David.

The Pharisees and Sadducees could have challenged Jesus' right to the Davidic throne on this exact issue. There is not one inference, nor one word, of His not being of the correct lineage of the seed of David in the New Testament. The genealogies given by both Matthew (Mat. 1:1-17) and Luke (Luke 3:23-38) only prove and accentuate His genealogy. They prove He is the Seed of David and the sole Davidic Heir to the throne and kingdom. This also demonstrates the importance of the Davidic covenant, and its final and future fulfillment by His assumption of the throne of the kingdom of David forever. He must assume this identical throne for the complete fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and all prophecy related to it.

There have been no changes in Scripture especially in the NT to the covenants because they are unconditional, unilateral, and eternal. There were neither changes nor fulfillments to the prophecies concerning the throne which arose from the covenant/s either (Luke 1:32-33). Christ has not ascended to the throne of David as defined by the Davidic covenant. David knew of no throne in heaven that was to be his by covenant promise. The Davidic throne is always over Israel, the Jews, in Jerusalem and He will only ascend to this biblical throne at the second coming (Mat. 25:31). No other Davidic throne exists biblically. The Messiah must be from the literal seed of David to assume the literal throne biblically (Mat. 1:1-17).

Peters comments on this issue, "The doctrine of the kingdom is first taught by covenant, theocratic ordering, and prophecy in the Old Testament, and it is *taken for granted* in the New Testament as a subject derived from the Old Testament and *well understood*; for the kingdom is preached without any

<sup>7</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 1486.

<sup>8</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, gen. ed., *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1618.



appended explanation.”<sup>9</sup> Anything less than a full understanding and belief of Jesus being the Messiah and rightful Heir to David’s throne from the covenanted progeny of David’s seed, proves willful ignorance. The Scriptures are crystal clear with all this information. While there were those who were accusing Him of being illegitimate (John 8:41), there was never one challenge of Jesus’ right to the Davidic throne and kingdom as the Messiah because He did not come in the proper Davidic lineage to assume the Davidic throne. This would have been one of His enemies’ greatest challenges for disqualifying Him as the proper seed to assume the throne.

This is why the people of Israel were saying, questioning, and continually proclaiming things related to Jesus especially in reference as coming in the covenanted line of David. The following are just a few verses concerning this exact issue, but they simply do not exhaust all the New Testament references to Jesus as the Son of David (over 50 such verses) based on the Davidic covenant concerning David’s seed (2 Sam. 7:12-13). Great care should be taken when referring to Jesus being David’s legal son, as He is the rightful Heir to the throne and kingdom and verified as such even by miracles (Mat. 11:2-5; 12:22-37; John 3:1-2; 20:30-31).

“And all the multitudes were amazed, and began to say, “This man cannot be the **Son of David**, can he?” (Matthew 12:23). “**Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David**; Hosanna in the highest!” (Mark 11:10). “To a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the **descendants of David**; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” (Luke 1:27). “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him **the throne of His father David**; and **He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end**” (Luke 1:32-33). “And he called out, saying, “**Jesus, Son of David**, have mercy on me!” And those who led the way were sternly telling him to be quiet; but he kept crying out all the more, “**Son of David**, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:38-39). “Others were saying, “This is the Christ.” Still others were saying, “Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He? “Has not the Scripture said that **the Christ comes from the offspring of David**, and from Bethlehem, **the village where David was?**” (John 7:41-42).

### **There Is One Covenanted Earthly Seed, House, Kingdom, and Throne**

The Davidic covenant established an earthly seed, an earthly house, an earthly throne, an earthly kingdom, in an earthly land, over an earthly people, Israel, *the Jews*. There is no covenanted heavenly rule or heavenly kingdom and nothing is being transferred or has been transferred to any other people or place. There would have been no Jew living who would have associated the throne with a heavenly one or a kingdom or land with any other than that in Israel.

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<sup>9</sup> Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1:157.

The Messiah or the Christ is defined as the son of David exclusively from the Davidic covenant as the Heir to the Davidic throne. Any other definition simply does not apply when trying to understand the covenanted seed, the covenanted king or Messiah, to rule over the Messianic or Davidic kingdom over the nation Israel from Jerusalem. Any other Messianic or kingly rule than that as covenanted by God over Israel from Jerusalem rooted in the Davidic covenant, would have no meaning to David, his seed, or to the nation Israel. Scripture does not even hint at any other form of the kingdom. The kingdom as it is promised from the covenants and consistently developed as proven through prophecy is over Israel, the Jews, from Jerusalem, in the covenanted land. It must be continually remembered that there is only *one* covenanted throne and kingdom over which Messiah must reign. The Messiah did not come to reign over the church, for neither is the church a covenanted entity, nor is it a covenanted kingdom with a king. It may be defined that way by certain theologies, but not by biblical covenants, especially the Davidic.

### **Many Theologies Hold to Multiple Kingdoms**

It is amazing how many kingdoms there are which some believe are biblical, such as Christ ruling in hearts or Christ ruling from David's throne in heaven. Some believe a heavenly throne or rule is more spiritual, but this simply is not true. George Peters makes this statement over 100 years ago, "The meanings usually given to this kingdom indicate that the most vague, indefinite notions exist concerning it."<sup>10</sup> The Scriptures simply do not teach multiple covenanted kingdoms, and multiple forms of the kingdom with various thrones. There is neglect and oversight of the covenants that leads to so much confusion. Israel and its biblical covenants are usually not the starting points of a good systematic or biblical theology. While some theologies begin with certain covenants s.a. works, grace, or redemption, these are not biblical covenants but assumed theories. Israel and the covenant promises to this nation are the unconditional fundamental foundation for a proper understanding of all theology, especially concerning His purpose in this world. Even the dispensations cannot be properly understood without this sharp distinction.

The fact that all the biblical covenants are effectively with Israel (not the church) marks a complete distinction between Israel and the church with completely separate programs. Scripture is very clear on this and it is actually quite simple. This is really the *sine qua non* of classic or traditional dispensationalism. This is as true today as it was when God planned His kingdom program centered in the nation Israel from eternity. God's program centered fully in and with Israel not the church. God's kingdom program if understood correctly shows unity of purpose and design for *all* creation (Eph. 1:10). The kingdom is far more than salvation or Christological. It becomes this if the biblical covenants are not kept in first place pointing toward

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<sup>10</sup> Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1:39.

Messiah's kingdom and God's glory. And this must be, for the most significant design and purpose God has given concerning man will ultimately be in the kingdom of His Messiah which will be given to Jesus as the son of man (Dan. 7:13-14; Mat. 6:33) not as the Son of God. All this points to the doxological purposes of God's entire program with creation.

### **David's Promised Seed Not in Heaven**

David was promised that God's kingdom program and the Messiah of this kingdom are inherent in the family and seed of David by covenant design. To depart from this promise of the Davidic covenant in any way is to depart from the defined covenanted kingdom program God has established. God had made it very clear to David that his seed  $\text{ךָרִצְיָא}$  (literally your *seed* masc. sing.) would be heir to the throne and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-13). Not only this, but also David's physical seed line or descendants are the only true heirs to the literal throne and kingdom (Mat. 1:1-17) over the nation Israel in the literal land promised to Abraham. The throne and kingdom of the Lord (Jehovah) can only be in the literal covenanted land over Israel, the Jews. "*And of all my sons (for the Lord has given me many sons), He has chosen my son Solomon to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel*" (1 Chronicles 28:5). Many other passages also confirm this, and prophecy is repeated to support and prove the covenanted promises. It is not possible for these promises to be broken or violated in any manner, or there would be a bogus or pseudo throne, kingdom, or rule, and would represent a departure from the covenanted kingdom promises of God made with David.

The kingdom and throne are so well-defined exclusively inherent to the literal seed of David that any rule from heaven simply enters into mere conjecture and speculation. There is no biblical basis for it whatever and cannot be supported. Chafer makes these comments:

Here the observation may be made that David himself believed this promise was of an earthly throne, which would not be located in heaven then or ever. It would be difficult to begin, as one so inclined must do, with David's own understanding or interpretation of Jehovah's covenant with him and then, in tracing subsequent relations between Jehovah and David's line, to find a point where the literal, earthly throne promised to David becomes a spiritual throne in heaven. David was not promised a heavenly, spiritual throne, and the one who contends that David's throne is now a heavenly rule is by so much obliged to name the time and circumstances when and where so great a change has been introduced.<sup>11</sup>

(Well, Lewis your own school which you founded has such people right on faculty who proclaim the great change of time and circumstances) God

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<sup>11</sup> L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 4:323-324.

never gave David or any man a throne in heaven from which to rule, especially one covenanted with sinful man. Jesus, who has been given all authority, is able to rule from several different capacities for He is the Christ, both the son of man and the Son of God (Is. 9:6-7; Mat. 22:41-46; 26:63-64). However, God never promised or covenanted with David a throne, a rule, a kingdom, a seed, which was *heavenly*. Everything promised to David and his seed pertains to this earth. There is not one Scripture which supports a heavenly throne or kingdom being promised to David or David's physical seed. This would simply dismiss literal and complete covenant promises given to David. For David to have a heavenly throne would be much less spiritual for this means utterly nothing and is contradiction to the kingdom program of God.

There is absolutely no way David would have understood any promise in this manner. To have a rule from some throne in heaven actually diminishes and vitiates the throne of David to something *less* than what was promised to him. This does not fit in at all with God's covenanted program for the rule promised is over the nation Israel *forever* (Is. 9:6-7; Dan. 2:44; Luke 1:33). God promised David that He would never take the kingdom away from him as He did with Saul. *"But My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you"* (2 Sam. 7:15). If this throne or rule were shifted to heaven or changed in any manner, God would be taking the kingdom away from David, his seed, and Israel. God promised a throne and kingdom that was of this earth, but this does not make the throne and kingdom any less spiritual. To exalt the covenanted human throne to a place, which has an equivalency to deity, presents many problems, including a violation or breach of the promises of the Davidic covenant. To do so would be to exalt humanity and an earthly rule to a place of a godly rule. The Messiah is able to rule from heaven, but not from a covenanted human throne in heaven supposedly based on the Davidic covenant that defines the Davidic throne over the Jews.

### **Details of the Covenant**

It is essential to study the details of the original Davidic covenant. The house or progeny of David is definitely defined, for this is the royal house from which only certain ones were qualified to assume the throne of David. To depart from this literal understanding is to demean the covenant, the promises of Jehovah, and that is less than spiritual. This would literally contradict God and His kingdom program. That is why there is great warning in the New Testament as to how the nation Israel, the Jews, and the covenants are treated (Rom. 11:17-21; 28-29; Eph. 2:11-12). It seems this would be a wake up call to some in the church. The church has proven to be very cavalier in taking these covenants very seriously. The warning carries over from the original covenants and promises that were made with the nation Israel (Gen. 12:3; Jer. 31:35-37; 33:19-26).



character is at stake as is His own holiness in His keeping all the promises to David and his seed.

The importance of God keeping His word cannot be overstated especially as it relates to the Davidic covenant. Again, there is nothing like this in all of Scripture. “**My covenant** I will not violate, Nor will I alter the utterance of My lips.” (Ps. 89:34). God intends to carry out every detail of the Davidic covenant. David understood all that God had promised and covenanted with him very well. David misunderstood absolutely nothing promised to him. There was no possibility of confusing anything in the Davidic covenant. There have been many interpretations for various reasons, mostly to support some theological system, but God shows His determination not to allow any violation or misunderstanding in what He has covenanted with David.

When God said “**My covenant** I will not violate, ל' אֶ־אֶחָלֵל ” (from PT<sup>14</sup>TP *to pollute, defile, profane or violate the honour of, dishonor, crown of Davidic kingdom; kingdom of Judah; violate a covenant*), He meant very clearly He would never dishonor or violate one tittle of the Davidic covenant. First of all God calls this **My covenant** בְּרִיתִי which it is by definition. The fact that it is the Lord's covenant, and He stresses this very important fact, speaks volumes especially in the context in this Psalm. All the biblical covenants are His for He has declared them unconditionally and unilaterally for they depend totally on Him. The declaration here in Psalm 89 is that God is saying this is My covenant, and I alone will carry it out, no one but Me will fulfill it in every detail. “The covenant with David is sacred with God: He will not profane it (חָלַל), to loose the bonds of sanctity). He will fulfill what has gone forth from His lips, i.e., His vow, according to Deut. 23:24[23], cf. Num. 30:3[2].”<sup>15</sup>

There is no possibility God will alter or rescind any promise in the Davidic covenant. This would be a violation (חָלַל a polluting, a defiling) of a contract or a covenant that is dependent on the Creator and a violation of the holiness of God upon which God has solemnly sworn to carry out all that He has promised. If anything failed in the slightest as to any detail in the Word, then God would not be the holy God He has claimed to be, for His holiness would literally fail. Then God would fail to be God as He had claimed to be in all His promises made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, and inevitably with all men. For even though all the biblical covenants (promises) are ultimately made with the nation Israel, *the Jews*, and must be fulfilled in Israel, *all men* are

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 89:35 III : אֶ־אֶחָלֵל בְּרִיתִי וּמוֹצֵא שְׁפָתַי ל' אֶ־אֶשְׁבֹּחַ: [חָלַל] **pollute, defile, profane:** 1. *pollute, defile oneself a.* ritually, by contact with dead. **b.** *sexually.* 2. *be polluted, defiled,* of holy places, name of God and even God himself 2. *violate the honour of, dishonor, crown of Davidic kingdom; kingdom of Judah.* 3. *violate a covenant.* Whitaker, R., Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A., *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1907, reprint 1981), 320.

<sup>15</sup> Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 5:588-599.

granted great blessing from the biblical covenants (Gen. 12:1-3; Rom. 9:4-5; 11:11-24).

### **The Unilateral Nature of the Covenant**

This covenant is not only eternal and unconditional, but God makes this covenant so obviously unilateral, so completely and utterly dependent on Him, He repeats Himself at least five times: *“I will not break off, I will not deal falsely, I will not violate, I will not alter the words, I will not lie”* (Ps. 89:33-35). The Lord certainly did not have to say any of this at all, for He will certainly keep His Word especially His covenants. God’s oath accentuates His guarantee of a future restoration of David’s throne and kingdom. Nothing can violate what God has promised to Abraham, Isaac, Israel, and especially to David and his seed, for the Davidic covenant as well as all the other biblical covenants are sure and rendered unalterable, inviolable, and irrevocable.

Therefore, no exegesis, no theology, no reading back into these biblical covenants from the New Testament, no altering of any words, no altering of any promises, nothing based on later revelation, no infringement of one tittle can be allowed without God becoming less than God or *a liar*. If God is all that He has declared Himself to be, then He will carry out the Davidic covenant literally, for He will never lie, *“I will not lie to David”* (Psalm 89:35).

Psalm 132:10-18 also shows the greatness and significance of the Davidic covenant. Psalm 132 makes it extremely clear that God will keep the promises to David, and He swears not to turn back from keeping the truth. *“The Lord has sworn to David, a truth from which He will not turn back.”* There is really no need for repetition, but in case there those who are not taking what God has promised to David, to Israel, the Jews, contained in the covenants very seriously or literally, and holding them tenaciously as the basis for a complete biblical theology (Rom. 11:29), God repeats Himself many times. This does not take very much to comprehend and understand and is very simple if taken literally with the Jews. God is totally committed to completing His kingdom program that which He has spelled out concerning the throne with David in the Davidic covenant. It is virtually impossible to have a misunderstanding of any of this unless one’s system of theology and understanding the Scripture does not permit it. Again, God is very serious about His covenants and His kingdom program for His Holiness is literally on the line (Ps. 89:35).

*“For the sake of David Thy servant, Do not turn away the face of Thine anointed. **The Lord has sworn to David, A truth from which He will not turn back;** “Of the fruit of your body I will set upon **your throne**. “If your sons will keep My covenant, And My testimony which I will teach them, Their sons also shall sit upon your throne forever”* (Ps. 132:10-11).

Notice the Psalmist is speaking of a literal descendant of David who must reign from David's throne, "*of the fruit of your body I will set upon your throne.*" This has to be understood exclusively as a rule from David's covenanted throne over the covenanted kingdom (2 Sam. 7:16). The throne is always over the kingdom of Israel (1 Chr. 28:5; 29:32; 2 Chr. 7:18; 9:8). David could have not understood this throne to be anything else, for there are no other covenants related to the throne of David wherein there are changes made to the promises. David sinned and so did all his sons especially in the royal line, but God has preserved Israel and David's seed because of what He has promised unilaterally and unconditionally to carry out concerning the covenant (Jer. 33:14-17).

### **There Were Warnings in the Covenant**

The promise was that David's sons would remain *perpetually* on David's throne if they were obedient. They were not obedient, but this does not annul or change any of the promises of the covenant pertaining to the sons of David being the rightful heirs. The promises of the covenant anticipate the discipline that will come on the house of David (2 Sam. 7:14-15; 1 Kings 9:4-9; 11:9-13), Solomon (1 Kings 11:9-13), and David himself (2 Sam. 12:7-14). Nevertheless, it is not possible to invalidate any of the promises of the covenant in any way (Ps. 89:30-37).

### **Jesus is the Rightful Heir to David's Kingdom and Throne**

When Jesus appeared in the New Testament and presented Himself as the King of Israel, the Messiah, these biblical covenants were representing His claim to the throne. He was the only true covenanted legal heir with all rights going back to Abraham (Gal. 3:16). There was the expectation of the Davidic kingdom and restoration (John 1:49; 12:13), for He was presenting to Israel the gospel of the kingdom (Mat 4:23; 9:35). This is why Matthew begins his gospel proving Jesus is the son of David as the Messiah and David's ultimate son to inherit David's throne and kingdom. He is the true King of the Jews, the King of Israel. He is not the covenanted King of some heavenly kingdom with some throne of David promised there or somewhere else.<sup>16</sup> He is the true King of Israel, and He will be the King reigning from David's throne. Moreover, if this is too earthy or earthly, or too Jewish, then who's King is He? If He is not the King of the Jews, then all that is promised to David in the Davidic covenant means nothing, even though Jesus came in the proper seed line to inherit the Jewish throne and kingdom, for He is *King of the Jews*.

*"And they put up above His head the charge against Him which read,  
"THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Matthew 27:37). "And*

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<sup>16</sup> This makes no biblical sense whatever if those reading the biblical covenants will allow the normal use of language and consider, as they should the covenants as the *true* foundation of God's kingdom program, especially the Davidic covenant.



*the inscription of the charge against Him read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Mark 15:26). "Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Luke 23:38). "And Pilate wrote an inscription also, and put it on the cross. And it was written, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (John 19:19).*

Only the true son of David in the true kingly line may claim the covenanted and authorized throne of David. Again, was Jesus the correct one or not? The biblical covenants and specifically the Davidic covenant define this kingly line (Mat. 1:1-17). Is the kingdom to be restored to the Jews or not? If not, then when have the biblical covenants been fulfilled with all the promises and all the details, and all the prophecies attached to them?

The greater the work contemplated – and there is none greater than this kingdom – the more clearly ought we to see the intelligence of the Mind that originates it, and the power of the Will that performs it. If that Mind and Will has proposed, in Revelation to man, a certain, determinate plan of operation by which the kingdom shall, after a while, be openly revealed; if the design and mode of procedure and result commends itself to faith and reason as adapted and desirable; if history and experience plainly sustains the developments of such a plan through the ages, *then* we may rest assured that in harmony with such a purposed plan, with its corroborating history and adjustment to the necessities of man and creation, there must be, as the Bible wisely and scientifically affirms, a guiding mind and controlling will.<sup>17</sup>

Everything in this world is progressing toward this covenanted kingdom. This is the main prayer of the church (Mat. 6:10). Herein is proof also of a unity of design and purpose to the creation (Mat. 6:10, 33; 25:34; Acts 1:6; 28:31; 2 Tim 4:1). Anything other than Jesus inheriting the literal throne of David is simply not the biblically restored kingdom and throne of David. The kingdom must be centered in Jerusalem, and it cannot be given to another people or race. Anything other than the rule of David or one of his sons from David's throne in Jerusalem violates every promise in the Davidic covenant. This also would abrogate the covenant itself and the other biblical covenants, and would simply present a bogus rule or kingdom that is much *less spiritual* because of all the violated promises.

There was never any other covenant made with the Jews by God, or any other covenant concerning the Jews, which changes or could possibly change any of these Davidic promises. For anyone to deny these promises to David and his seed, or the nation Israel, would be to deny God's intent to keep His words exactly. To change or deny the promises to David simply vitiates God's program, and lessens the importance of the fulfillment of the Davidic

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<sup>17</sup> Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1:37-38.

covenant in God's entire program. To play down the importance of the Davidic covenant or any of the biblical covenants and their literal fulfillment especially to Israel, is to demonstrate that God can and is able to violate His promises to David, *therefore He is able to lie*. To say that the Davidic covenant is already fulfilled in some manner, as also the other biblical covenants, is to simply ignore all the *details* of the covenants and their intended recipients. Most theologies other than dispensationalism are not concerned with the details of the biblical covenants with Israel.

The ramifications of denying any of these covenants as to their complete and literal fulfillment, especially the Davidic covenant, proves an enormous breach in the understanding of God's inerrant Word. Perhaps inerrancy is the issue, but the covenants will be fulfilled literally, precisely, and accurately just as God has declared and promised. The fact that all of this is irrevocable (Ro. 11:29) and is absolute or fixed with certainty based on additional prophecy and promises, should be enough for any serious student of the Word to become immersed in the biblical covenants, particularly the Davidic covenant.

Ultimately, if God is not faithful to David by keeping His promises in every detail, then why should God be faithful in keeping any of His Word? The promises in Gen 3:15 and the promise of salvation or justification to the families (nations) of the earth (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8) might as well be cast aside. If His covenant with David is not that important, why should He keep His Word? Why should He carry out exactly what He has promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, David, and finally the Messiah? For the covenants are foundational to all that God has and will do. These covenants must be fulfilled exactly, all that was promised in every point, and fulfilled to *the exact recipient and heir* of the covenants as specified. To play down these covenants in any manner is to diminish what God has promised, not only to Israel but also to all the nations of the world. Salvation is of the Jews. Salvation is known through the covenants, and He will carry them out perfectly and faithfully.

### **Final Thoughts**

God has put Himself literally under contract, and He will show man that He will accomplish everything He has promised in the biblical covenants. He has already fulfilled some of which He has covenanted,<sup>18</sup> (definitely not in the church) but none of these covenants comes close to being fulfilled as pertaining to all the specific details of the covenants. There might be more at stake here than God's mercy and grace. That would be a very bold statement ordinarily, but He has covenanted exactly what He is going to do and how He is going to

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<sup>18</sup> Several personal promises to Abraham have been fulfilled. Abraham's name became great; he has been a blessing. Blessings have come to the Gentiles (Gen. 12:3). David's son ascended to David's throne and so did his seed referring to Solomon and Rehoboam (and his seed) (2 Sam. 7:12-16). These are just a few examples. This is an indication that God intends to carry out all of what He has promised for these few examples fall far very short of complete fulfillment in the nation Israel in the Messianic kingdom.

carry it out in the earth with the nation Israel by covenant and prophecy. There is a covenanted land, people, kingdom and throne, all very well defined, and the one who must reign from that throne in that covenanted land over the Jews. All the prophets and prophecies continually and repeatedly point toward this very end. Just because it has not happened in two thousand years more or less, what is that to God, a few seconds? Faith says that God will carry out His Word for He is faithful, and He will not violate what He has declared. What is at stake is His very *Word* upon which a believer's faith rests and by which *all faith rests*.<sup>19</sup> 'Take away the Word, and no faith will then remain' (John Calvin, *The Institutes*).

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<sup>19</sup> “Πολλὰ μὲν οὐκ ἄλλα σημεῖα ποίησεν ἰησοῦς νόμιον τῶν μαθητῶν [αὐτοῦ], ὅτι ἐκ στίβου γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ· **ταῦτα δὲ γέγραπται να πιστεύσητε τὴν ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν χριστὸς υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ να πιστεύοντες ζῶν ἔχητε ἐν νόμοις αὐτοῦ**” (John 20:30-31). “ Ἐπεὶ ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἰσχυροῦς, ὁ δὲ κὸς διὰ ἡμᾶτος Χριστοῦ” (Romans 10:17). And Calvin made it very clear: “Faith rests upon God’s Word.... Therefore if faith turns away even in the slightest degree from its goal toward which it should aim, it does not keep its own nature, but becomes uncertain credulity and vague error of mind. The same Word is the basis whereby faith is supported and sustained; if it turns away from the Word, it falls. Therefore, take away the Word and no faith will then remain.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 1:549.



## Exposing Barbara R. Rossing's *The Rapture Exposed* and A Problem or Two with Ben Witherington's *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*

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### Introduction

Polemical attacks on Dispensational Theology are not new. Arguably the most vitriolic (purportedly scholarly but seriously defective) work of recent memory is John H. Gerstner's *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*<sup>1</sup>; a work ably reviewed and answered by Richard L. Mayhue<sup>2</sup>, of *The Master's Seminary* and David L. Turner, in *Grace Theological Journal*.<sup>3</sup> Before Gerstner of course, there were the works of men such as Clarence B. Bass<sup>4</sup> and O.T. Allis<sup>5</sup>; and the list could be expanded many-fold by citing anti-dispensationalist journal articles published over the last sixty years; and the list could reach nearly incalculable proportions by citing anti-dispensationalist web-sites and web-blogs that attack dispensational theology daily. Generally speaking these attacks came (and come) either from former dispensationalists, who through the avenues (it is alleged) of more serious biblical scholarship (as *they* would define *serious scholarship*) came to "see the light" of covenant theology and/or the (supposed) errors of dispensationalism,<sup>6</sup>; or they came (and come) from the advocates of covenant theology, the arch evangelical rival of dispensationalism.

With the publication of Barbara R. Rossing's book *The Rapture Exposed*<sup>7</sup> (hereafter cited as *Exposed*) dispensational theology is faced with a polemical attack from a new challenger. Rossing is a Lutheran and teaches New

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, "Who's Wrong? A Review of John H. Gerstner's *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 3/1 Spring 1992. [73-94]

<sup>3</sup> David L. Turner, "Dubious Evangelicalism? A Response to John Gerstner's Critique of Dispensationalism," *Grace Theological Journal*, 12/2 Fall 1991. [263-77]

<sup>4</sup> Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed) 1945.

<sup>6</sup> One may see the brief, and to my mind effective, answer to this argument (i.e. further scholarship will invariably lead one to repudiate dispensationalism) in Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody) 1995, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press / Perseus Books Group) 2004.

Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. The dust jacket of her book notes “She holds a doctorate from Harvard University Divinity School and Masters of Divinity degree from Yale University Divinity School. [She is an] ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” In short, Rossing is not an evangelical.<sup>8</sup> Or one might observe that, at the least, she is not a covenant theologian in the tradition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, nor is she a former dispensationalist who has come to a (purported) realization of the errors of the tradition of her youth. Rossing’s critique of dispensational theology is, therefore, something a bit different than those previous critiques (although she rehashes a number of old arguments and employs some of the old fallacies of previous critiques). Furthermore, Rossing’s book has received a wider exposure<sup>9</sup> than previous critiques of dispensationalism. She has appeared on the CBS news program “60 Minutes”, CNN, National Public Radio as well as several local media outlets across the country. Her work is given the patina of “scholarship critical of pop-theology,”<sup>10</sup> the latter being drawn principally from the so-called *Left Behind* series of books written by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. It is also important to note that her work has been cited approvingly, as a scholarly work, by other scholars (for instance by Ben Witherington’s *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*<sup>11</sup>). For these reasons dispensational theology must address the critique of Dr. Rossing’s book.

But then again, especially in the light of these reasons, one is dismayed that Dr. Rossing’s book must be addressed because it is such a poor book. That is, as I will demonstrate in this review paper, Rossing’s book is so poorly researched, so badly argued and the tone is so uncharitable that one is distressed that it has been so well received and given the press, the coverage and the

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<sup>8</sup> I suppose it should be acknowledged that one might see a rather glaring contradiction here since Rossing has just been identified as an ordained minister in the “Evangelical Lutheran Church.” In response I would say that, while it cannot be argued here in detail, I believe it could be argued that “Evangelical” as an identifier associated with “Lutheran Church” has a very different connotation than the term “evangelical” used to identify both dispensationalists and their rivals, covenant theologians. In other words, my assertion, to be proven, would take something like unpacking the theological differences between Harvard and Yale Divinity Schools on the one hand and Dallas and Westminster Seminaries on the other and the appropriateness of the identifier “evangelical” for the latter schools in distinction from the former schools; a project much too large for this study.

<sup>9</sup> The Lutheran School of Theology web site has a list of the media venues where Dr. Rossing has made an appearance or given an interview; [http://www.lstc.edu/news/on\\_homepage/rapture\\_index.html](http://www.lstc.edu/news/on_homepage/rapture_index.html).

<sup>10</sup> See Rossing, *Exposed*, 54; “Since I am a New Testament scholar . . .”

<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University) 2005, 94, 95, 270n3, 270n5.

scholarly endorsements it has been given. And on top of that her basic thesis is simply wrong.

### Thesis Flawed

Dr. Rossing's thesis, as articulated in the first chapter titled "The Destructive Racket of the Rapture," is that "Rapture theology" advocates an "escapist ethics" (*Exposed*, 4) that it is "disastrous for the Middle East and it is even more dangerous for planet earth." (*Exposed*, 2). According to Rossing proponents of "Rapture theology" "revel in the prospect of the destruction of the earth; [but] the Rapture will be their 'great escape' from earth." (*Exposed*, 3). Rossing argues, "today's Rapture proponents have no such love for creation" because the Rapture only saves human beings while plants and animals "get left behind on earth to suffer destruction." (This, by the way, is in contrast, according to Rossing, to the care God demonstrated in the Genesis flood when "God took care to save animals from every species—a signal of God's love for the whole created world." (*Exposed*, 9).<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, according to Rossing, proponents of "Rapture theology" have a "warlike end-times script," they support "an all-or-nothing mentality of conquest for Israel, and they look forward to more violence in Israel as the so-called prophetic countdown to the end approaches." (*Exposed*, 47; emphasis added) They have a "militant, triumphalistic vision for Jerusalem," (*Exposed*, 47) and, based on "ridiculous interpretations of the Bible," their view "is distorted and dangerous. It is a hazard to peace—a militant script for the Middle East that ends in Armageddon." (*Exposed*, 49). This, contends Rossing, means that "World War III is more than a bit player in the dispensationalist script. Its onset is supposed to be a cause for rejoicing among true Christians." (*Exposed*, 71). Dispensationalists are said to be eager for the onset of the violence associated with the end times, they are said to "revel in the prospect of destruction for the earth," and they are anxious for the destruction that will come with Armageddon (*Exposed*, 3). In short, because they believe they will

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<sup>12</sup> At this point let me note were I to attempt to point out and unpack every non-sequitur such as this, in the book, I could easily produce a volume twice as large as *The Rapture Exposed*. But just to complete the thought at this juncture, it should be pointed out that the flood did destroy all the plants on earth (assuming a universal flood—which Dr. Rossing may or may not assume); and of course, the vast majority of animal life; ("Birds, butterflies, flowers, trees, badgers, and 'all the dear creatures,' as C.S. Lewis calls them in the *Chronicles of Narnia*," *Exposed*, 9-10) these also perished in the flood. And furthermore, the point of the entire flood account was to demonstrate God's intolerance of human sin not his "love for the whole created world." "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth . . . And the LORD said I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; I am sorry I have made them." (Gen 6:5, 7) Perhaps Dr. Rossing should rethink her use of the flood account as a "counter" example to the destruction that will come on all the earth in the end times judgments on the earth.

“escape” by means of the Rapture, dispensationalists are anti-peace for the Middle East, they are unconcerned about the environment.<sup>13</sup>

I cannot assert more strongly that this thesis (that dispensationalists are escapists, *eager* for the destruction to come at the time of the Tribulation and Armageddon and are consequently disinterested in preserving the environment) is simply false. For one thing, Dr. Rossing has not shown there is a necessary correlation to the doctrine of the Rapture and what she calls “escapist ethics.” Indeed, she herself affirms “Jesus is coming. We can agree on this. Christians are to live every moment *as if the world may end tomorrow*,” (*Exposed*, 15; emphasis added); but it takes very little imagination to see that that statement may be used to justify “raping the planet” by any extremist-christians whose eschatology, in any form, anticipates the Second Coming. Take for instance a quote from such an “extremist” cited in Rossing’s own book: the former “Reagan-era Secretary of the Interior James Watt.” (*Exposed*, 7) Watt justified the clear-cutting of the nation’s forests by saying, “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.” Rossing leaps to the conclusion, “Watt’s ‘use it or lose it’ view of the world’s resources is a perspective shared by many Rapture proponents, whose chief preoccupation is counting down to earth’s violent end.” (*Exposed*, 7) Rossing goes on to cite “right-wing pundit Ann Coulter” to the effect that the earth belongs to us, and so we can “Take it, Rape it” (*Exposed*, 7). However, Dr. Rossing cites no advocate of “Rapture theology” who uses such terms. The point is, Watt’s statement was not about the Rapture but the Lord’s coming and without context Watt may just as well be using Rossing’s theology of a Second Coming (“to live every moment *as if the world may end tomorrow*” *Exposed*, 15) to justify

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<sup>13</sup> Rossing (*Exposed*, 14-15) selects a scene from the third book in the *Left Behind* series to indicate that proponents of what she calls “Rapture theology” are fascinated with violence and indifferent toward the environment. This is one of over forty references to the *Left Behind* series in *The Rapture Exposed*. In response, first, it needs to be pointed out that these are novels, in which the writers have exercised “artistic license” and are not nuanced expressions of dispensational theology. (Indeed, it would be relatively easy to find instances of wanton, glorified violence and indifference to environmental concerns in many popular novels that have absolutely nothing to say about dispensational theology.) Secondly, Rossing has “missed the point” in citing the scene noted above: the panic and “suspension of normal life” depicted is indicative of the post-rapture environment of the Tribulation. Thirdly, and most noteworthy for this paper, this is an instance of something that happens repeatedly in *The Rapture Exposed*, that is, Rossing cites highly selected popular (novels and televangelists) advocates of dispensational theology, extrapolates highly dubious implications from those citations and indicts all of dispensational theology from those implications. The result is an inaccurate and biased book that is as exploitive and sensationalistic in fear mongering against dispensational Christians as she accuses dispensationalists of being.



his policy.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Ann Coulter does not speak as an apologist for dispensational theology. Maybe some people do have a “use it or lose it” view of the environment and the world’s resources, but this attitude cannot be justified by, nor is it a necessary aspect of, dispensational theology.

More generally the implication that people like D.L. Moody (cited *Exposed*, 13) and Tim LaHaye (cited over twenty-five times) are advocates of a “theology of despair,” and “escapist ethics” and are therefore unsympathetic to social concerns and indifferent to the condition of people’s lives today because they expect to be taken in the Rapture is again, simply wrong. These men and many other dispensationalists have not only been active in evangelism (in the light of the basic human need of the forgiveness of sin for eternal life) but have spent much of their ministries and efforts to improve the condition, social and political, of country and countrymen.<sup>15</sup>

Dispensationalism is not “escapist” theology. Indeed a much more representative and theologically nuanced book on biblical prophecy states that one purpose of Bible prophecy is that “it motivates holy living” and “Prophecy can assist us in making better choices in the present as it reminds us of things that have eternal value.”<sup>16</sup> Another dispensational author expresses the value of prophetic study this way: “The recognition of Christ’s return for His church leads the Christian also to a conviction regarding service for God. This conviction is closely related to the desire for holiness of life. The Christian is prompted not only to live properly, but to serve diligently.”<sup>17 18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It does not take much to see Dr. Rossing’s “left-leaning” political orientation in these citations. See also her description of her activities in protest of Israel’s occupation of Bethlehem, *Exposed*, 78ff, and her comments about the indifference of “extreme right-wing Christians” to the plight of Palestinian Christians, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Demonstration of this assertion is not possible in the scope of this review but one might cite the work of D.L. Moody in relieving the suffering of soldiers in the Civil War and LaHaye’s “Christian Coalition.” The latter might not suit Dr. Rossing’s political bent but it does show Dr. LaHaye’s interest in improving things here and now and not ignoring social or political matters based on some so-called “escapist ethic.”

<sup>16</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody) 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Leon J. Wood, *The Bible and Future Events* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 17.

<sup>18</sup> I would like to direct the reader to a new book by Marvin J. Newell, *A Martyr’s Grace* (Chicago: Moody, 2006). This book is a compelling collection of twenty-one stories of martyrdom, all graduates of Moody Bible Institute. Here are the stories of men and women who were not “escapist” but servants who were intent on making a difference *in this world*. The first story is that of Bonnie Penner Witherall who was killed in Sidon, Lebanon in 2002 while she was serving in a pre-natal clinic. Bonnie and thousands who are not martyred but continue in life long service to Christ and His concerns (reaching the lost with the real-world compassion of Christ) are the legacy of the vision, and the real story of the theology, of D.L. Moody.

### Poor Scholarship, Poorly Researched, Poorly Argued

While few dispensational scholars would want to defend every (or even most) of the popular expressions of dispensational pre-tribulational premillennialism, it surely is unfair to characterize the whole by citing (selectively and many times out of context) the least nuanced expressions of dispensational theology. Which brings this review to the matters of scholarship. Other flaws in her thesis will be exposed as we consider these matters.

Rossing's book is poorly researched. While she cites several sources from Harvard University Press, Fortress Press, Orbis, and Oxford University Press (these indicate she could access more scholarly sources if she choose to do so) she does not cite, much less interact with, a single reputable dispensational scholar. Several key dispensational scholars are mentioned by name, such as Lewis Chafer, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie; but even then these men are linked to "Hal Lindsey, as well as televangelists, Bible school graduates, and many others." (*Exposed*, 24) She *cites* dispensationalist opponent and preterist Gary DeMar (identified as "a conservative evangelical critic") even citing the title of his book (*Exposed*, 41). She *cites* "Lutheran historian Martin Marty" (to the effect that dispensationalism was "invented less than 200 years ago"; this to support the assertion that "The dispensationalist system is a fabrication of Darby.") (*Exposed*, 30). She *cites* "New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright (*Exposed*, 178). But nowhere in the book does she cite or substantively interact with any noted and/or scholarly dispensational theologians. Nowhere in the book is there interaction with carefully articulated and nuanced expressions of dispensationalism as a whole or doctrines like the Rapture in particular.

Perhaps due to this glaring oversight, she betrays an astounding lack of understanding of dispensational theology. For instance, in the "Epilogue," in which she purportedly is answering dispensationalism's "highly selective biblical literalism" she alleges that dispensationalists use Matthew 24:39-42 in combination with 1 Thessalonians 4 "to piece together their notion of 'left behind'—their scenario in which some Christians will be taken up suddenly to meet Christ and go back to heaven with him for seven years, while others will be left behind on earth." (*Exposed*, 177-78) How does one begin to unravel the misunderstandings of the dispensational view of the rapture in that one sentence alone? For one thing, the most common view among pre-tribulational dispensationalists is that Matthew 24:39-42 is not describing the event of the rapture but that of being taken in judgment at the second coming.<sup>19</sup> Also, unless one wants to introduce the notion of a partial rapture, the "others" who are "left behind" cannot be "other Christians" (at least at the moment of being "left

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<sup>19</sup> On Matt 24:32-44, Louis Barbieri writes ("Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, Wheaton: Victor, 1983, 79) "The Lord is not describing the Rapture." Cf. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 230-31; cf. 259-60.

behind”). And one wonders what Rossing thinks happens to raptured Christians after “the seven years”? The misunderstandings Rossing brings to her analysis of how dispensationalists use Matthew 24 renders her whole discussion, wherein she quotes N.T. Wright and B. Brent McGuire (“a Lutheran critic from the Missouri Synod”), moot! She writes, “McGuire, like Wright, points out that when analyzed in the overall context of the gospel, the word ‘taken’ means being taken away for *judgment*, as in . . . Matt 27:27.” (*Exposed*, 179) But dispensationalist Louis Barbieri would agree.<sup>20</sup> Rossing has simply displayed her ignorance of dispensationalism.

In another instance of misunderstanding, if not blatantly misrepresenting dispensationalism, Rossing suggests that dispensationalists “bank their entire hope for the Second Coming upon the rebuilt temple” (*Exposed*, 60). Rossing charges that dispensationalists look forward to the rebuilding of the temple “in order for it to be desecrated by the Antichrist.” (*Exposed*, 57-58) She alleges that dispensationalists base this “bizarre notion” (*Exposed*, 58) on literal interpretations of Daniel 9:26-27 (she makes no mention of Ezekiel) which indicates there will be a temple because the text speaks of the sacrifices being stopped. (Of course, dispensationalists do view Daniel 9:27 as still future; Rossing however accepts the late dating of Daniel and the view that Daniel 9:27 is an account of the work of Antiochus IV Epiphanes who ruled 175-163 B.C. and who destroyed the temple in 168 B.C.). Then she writes “In the New Testament, gospel writers again turned to this Daniel text and saw its fulfillment in Rome’s traumatic desecration of the temple in 69-70 A.D.” She cites no instances from the gospels that support that view; neither does she explain why, if Daniel was writing about an event that had already happened, the New Testament was seeing Daniel 9:27 as something to be fulfilled. She continues,

But dispensationalist arguments for temple rebuilding betray a blatant disregard for the New Testament and indeed, for Jesus’ own words in the Gospel of John. Neither temple rebuilding nor the restoration of the nation of Israel is (sic) mandated in the New Testament. The clearest discussion of the Jewish temple in the New Testament is in chapter 2 of the Gospel of John, where the evangelist specifically states that the temple that will be rebuilt is the *temple of Jesus’ resurrected body*—not the literal temple building itself: ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,’ Jesus says. ‘The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body,’ the gospel

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<sup>20</sup> Barbieri, “Matthew,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 79.

of John explains (John 2:20-21). [Tim] LaHaye and [Hal] Lindsey largely ignore this passage from John 2. (*Exposed*, 58)

Needless to say I am with LaHaye and Lindsey on this one; John 2 has nothing whatsoever to do with the eschatological temple! Jesus' comments in this context say nothing whatsoever about the fulfillment of Daniel 9:27!

For Rossing the problem with wanting the temple to be rebuilt is that the "beautiful," "peaceful and tranquil," "beloved" Dome of the Rock (*Exposed*, 59) must be dismantled for the temple to be rebuilt. She asserts that dispensationalists are eager to see the Dome of the Rock destroyed and as an example of this radical view Rossing cites the instance of "an American Jewish [note: not dispensationalist, not even Christian] extremist who, in 1982" opened "fire on the Dome of the Rock using an M-16." (*Exposed*, 59). It needs to be observed that this example is very poorly chosen; the individual (as noted) was not a dispensationalist, nor was he eager for the end times scenario of dispensationalism to begin and he was probably mentally unbalanced. (Acts of random violence perpetrated in Israel and other Middle Eastern countries happened, and happen, with alarming frequency; but very few, if any, can be said to be motivated by a desire to "precipitate the required prophetic events." (*Exposed*, 60) While it may be admitted that there are many dispensationalists who affirm, on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, that the Temple *shall be* rebuilt, this in and of itself, indicates neither a *desire* for the destruction of the Dome of the Rock nor do most dispensationalists *seek* the destruction of the Dome of the Rock. In fact, as the majority of dispensationalists would affirm, dispensationalism teaches that the "imminent coming of Jesus Christ means that there are no signs or events that must take place prior to His return."<sup>21</sup> Hence, there is nothing we could do to expedite or delay the Rapture. Perhaps there are such extremists but any fair-minded assessment of a movement or system of theology will not judge the main body by the words and actions of "extremists" as Rossing does. In short, dispensationalism as a system is not the war-mongering, violence loving system that Rossing depicts in her book.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 226.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted, even if space prevents a detailed demonstration, that Dr. Rossing's left-leaning ideology is driving much of her argumentation. Several individuals are identified as "right-wing" (*Exposed*, 7, 53, 65) and others are labeled "fundamentalist" ("Christianity, Judaism and Islam all have extremist fundamentalist strands." *Exposed*, 61) This left-leaning ideology can be detected in much of the argumentation in the third chapter "The Rapture Script for the Middle East" which is only marginally tied to dispensational theology. Dr. Rossing's concern for the plight of the Palestinians is commendable (although she notes her participation in a "demonstration against the Israeli occupation" of Bethlehem, *Exposed*, 78) and she is entitled to her view opposing the Israeli settlements in the occupied territories (of

### Poor Exegesis

Another example of a misunderstanding of dispensationalism and flawed exegesis is found in Dr. Rossing's take on 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. With respect to 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 she attempts to argue that that this text refers only to the resurrection of the dead, whereas dispensationalism teaches this text is a reference to the rapture of the church. Rossing cites the text: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised." She argues, "But take a closer look at this verse from First Corinthians and you see that what St. Paul is writing about is not Rapture but the resurrection from the dead—as can be seen from the phrase 'the dead will be raised'." (*Exposed*, 31-32) But the dispensationalist would suggest that Dr. Rossing and her readers take yet a closer look at the *entire* text; and when one does it will become clear that the apostle Paul has two groups in mind: those who are dead, who shall be raised, and those who are not dead, "We shall not all sleep" (sleep being a very common euphemism for Christians who die (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff). And a yet look closer will reveal that "all shall be changed." In short, in 1 Corinthians

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course, the settlers are labeled "extremist"). And she correctly notes that some groups (e.g. "Christian Friends of Israeli Communities") base their support of the settlements on their view of biblical prophecy. But there are many Americans who support the settlers, who are not doing so based on their views of biblical prophecy; and there is no real evidence that the "dispensational myth" (*Exposed*, 71) is a driving, or is even a materially significant influence on United States foreign policy in the Middle East. The fact that the president claims to be a "born-again" Christian and invokes "theological terms" to describe the war on terror is simply not evidence that "fundamentalist Christians" and the "apocalyptic visions" of dispensational theology are driving US foreign policy. How often have former presidents invoked "God" in the war, battle, struggle of any particular moment in the nation's history? No one would claim these invocations are driven by the "apocalyptic visions" of dispensational theology. Indeed, Dr. Rossing herself notes that while Jack Van Impe claimed to have contacted the White House "his claim has not been substantiated." And "President Bush has not spelled out his own beliefs about dispensationist (sic) biblical interpretations regarding the Middle East." This however does not dissuade Rossing who concludes, "But the widespread influence of such prophecy beliefs may play a role in expanding America's apocalyptic rhetoric of war and evil—and possibly even actual policy decisions coming out of the White House." (*Exposed*, 45-46). In response it need only be noted that such assertions are unproven and un-provable; Rossing *has not* made her case that dispensational theology is dangerous to the Middle East; she *has* indicated that she thinks conservative politics is dangerous to her left-leaning perspective on the Middle East. In addition, it says something about Rossing's rhetoric to equate a suggestion that the so-called "Palestinians" should be allowed to create a Palestinian state among the surrounding Arab nations as a desire for "ethnic cleansing" as Rossing does. (*Exposed*, 71-72)

15:51ff Paul is clearly talking about more than the resurrection of the dead; he has in mind the resurrection of the dead *and* the transformation of *both* the living and the dead. The similarity to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is so striking very few commentators deny that Paul has in mind the same event in both texts.

What then is Rossing's take on the Thessalonian text? In the "Epilogue" she takes the same tact as she used in dealing with the 1 Corinthians 15 text, namely, "it is not about the Rapture . . . but about resurrection from the dead at Christ's second coming." (*Exposed*, 175) But then what is all the detail in this passage about? Here Rossing appeals to the image (used by others<sup>23</sup>), which amounts to seeing the picture as that of an arriving dignitary being greeted by the people of a city. While this view cannot be completely ruled out of hand, still Bruce points out, "... there is nothing in this context which demands this interpretation; [and] it cannot be determined from what is said here whether the Lord (with his people) continues his journey to earth or returns to heaven."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Robert L. Thomas, commenting on 1 Thessalonians 4:17, writes,

The nature of this "meeting" (*apantēsin*, v. 17) deserves comment. Some feel that the technical force of the word obtains—i.e. a visitor would be formally met by a delegation of citizens and ceremonially escorted back into the their city . . . . Whether this is true is debatable. Even if it were true, Christ would not necessarily be escorted back to earth immediately. Usage of the noun in the LXX as well as differing features of the present context (e.g., Christians being snatched away rather than advancing on their own to meet the visitor) is sufficient to remove this passage from the technical Hellenistic sense of the word. A meeting in the air is pointless unless the saints continue on to heaven with the Lord who has come out to meet them. Tradition stemming from Jesus' parting instructions fixes the immediate destination following the meeting, as the Father's house, i.e., heaven (Jn. 14:2, 3).<sup>25</sup>

In summary several points may be made: one, the view that 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 are speaking *only* of the resurrection of the dead is, as has been noted above, untenable on the face of the texts themselves; also, the view that these passages must teach the "visiting dignitary view" and cannot be teaching a Rapture, is not and cannot be proven by

<sup>23</sup> E.g. R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker: 1998) 169.

<sup>24</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: 1982) 102.

<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," *Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 1978) 279.

Rossing; furthermore, one should adopt the view which harmonizes the most passages (and this reviewer would argue that *that* view is the view of a pre-tribulation Rapture depicting Christ returning for His Bride, the Church; this view brings John 14:1-2, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4, Ephesians 5 and Revelation 19 together under the single Bride / Bridegroom metaphor); and finally, in the light of the serious dispensationalist studies of these texts (which studies she ignores completely) it is simply unacceptable for Rossing to dismiss the dispensational view of the Rapture as “escapism,” or “Beam me up” theology. (*Exposed*, 35)

In another instance Rossing resorts to special pleading to dismiss dispensational teaching. She asserts that there is “no scriptural basis” for the teaching of a seven-year tribulation. She acknowledges that this teaching comes, in part from Daniel 9:27, which speaks of a seventieth week (of years) and that dispensationalists see “Daniel’s seventieth week” in Revelation 11:2, which speaks of a period of forty-two months, along with 11:3, which speaks of a 1,260 day period of time. She then asks, “But if chapter 11 of Revelation supposedly spells out the seven years of tribulation, it is striking that not one of the three crucial words—‘seven,’ ‘years,’ or ‘tribulation’-is found in Revelation 11. Why did Revelation not make the seven-year calendar more explicit if Daniel’s ‘seven-years’ provides the chronological framework for the book?” (*Exposed*, 37). This is a very weak argument. For one thing, how much more explicit than “forty-two months” plus “1,260 days” can one get if one is looking for chronological precision? Furthermore, taking up Rossing’s line of reasoning, one might ask, “If Paul really meant to teach justification is by faith *alone* in Romans 3 why was that not made more explicit? Why did Luther have to add the word *allein* in 3:28?” The answer of course is Paul is teaching that justification is by faith alone in Romans 3, and this *is* very clear, even if he did not use the word “alone.” In other words, to suggest any biblical author is not teaching some point of doctrine, because (in the opinion of the commentator) that point of doctrine could have been made more explicit is simply an erroneous argument.

There are other examples to demonstrate that Rossing’s exegesis is flawed. In a stunning instance of “missing the point” Rossing suggests that the image of the Lamb in Revelation is an “image of the Lamb’s non-violent power.” The image of Christ in Revelation chapter one “is quickly eclipsed by the portrayal of Jesus as the Lamb.” The Lamb appears in chapter 5 as the Lamb slain and, Rossing maintains, stands in contrast to the power of Rome (*Exposed*, 109). Rossing observes, “Actually, the Greek word John uses is not just ‘lamb,’ but the diminutive form, a word like ‘lambkin,’ ‘lamby,’ or ‘little lamb’ (*arnion* in Greek)—‘Fluffy,’ as Pastor Daniel Erlander calls it.” (*Exposed*, 111) Thus, “Lamb theology is the whole message of Revelation.” Lamb power is subversive and non-violent. “Lamb power” . . . is the power of non-violent resistance and courage in opposition to injustice.” (*Exposed*, 112).

For Rossing, the Lamb is not the one bringing judgment but overcoming violence by “the power of our acts of hope and resistance, our songs and solidarity.” (*Exposed*, 113) But a simple reading of the text of Revelation chapters 5 and 6 makes it obvious that it is the Lamb, who opens the seals (Revelation 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12); which seals unleash the judgments that Revelation 6:16-17 identifies as “the wrath of the Lamb” and the One who sits on the Throne (“the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?”). It appears that “Fluffy” has an attitude! Rossing’s exegesis of Revelation 5 and 6 simply gets it wrong. The non-dispensationalist Lutheran commentator R.C.H. Lenski gets it right:

The slaughter of this Lamb made it the Victor forever, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, that is worthy to take the book and *to carry into execution all that is sealed therein*. The act of taking the book as here described is shown to John only in this vision . . . The taking of the book refers to the act of proceeding to convert its contents into reality . . . all these agents of the Lamb in the execution of the Lamb’s triumph do their work here on earth in their relation to the throne.<sup>26</sup>

Of course the point to be made is, it is not dispensationalists alone who see the Lamb as executing judgment (violent and destructive of “birds, butterflies, flowers, trees, badgers, and ‘all the dear creatures’) and so any theology of coming judgment is liable to Rossing’s critique, even that of a fellow Lutheran.

### Other Issues in Brief

Rossing attempts, as so many opponents have done before, to discredit dispensationalism by charging that it is recent in origin and the invention or fabrication of John Nelson Darby<sup>27</sup>; by attacking C.I. Scofield and the success of the *Scofield Reference Bible*<sup>28</sup>; by guilt through association (she cites “once jailed televangelist Jim Bakker as disavowing his pre-tribulation Rapture theology . . . calling it a racket that preached a false gospel of prosperity.”) (*Exposed*, 4); by simplistic mischaracterization (“Jesus is coming back. . . But that does not mean God is getting ready to destroy the earth and take Christians away to another planet.”; here she cites a children’s song “Somewhere in outer space God has prepared a place . . .”) (*Exposed*, p. 5). These are faulty

<sup>26</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943) 201-02.

<sup>27</sup> Charged by many and answered by Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 61-77, among others.

<sup>28</sup> Since Witherington picks up on these points using Rossing’s book I will address them below in dealing with Witherington’s book; but for the moment—it is an *ad hominem* and an irrelevancy.



arguments and unfair characterizations and once pointed out they ought to be arguments in themselves of the fallaciousness of *The Rapture Exposed*. But the most egregiously unfair tactic of all is a sustained and pervasive, astoundingly vitriolic, vocabulary of denunciations: dispensationalism is charged with being a fiction, xi; a predictive screenplay, xi; a violent script; a racket; destructive, 1; disastrous for middle east peace, 2; dangerous for planet earth, 2, 6; “beam-me-up” theology, appalling, 12; “an apartheid like separation of Israel and the church,” 28; convoluted, dubious, 41; militant, war-like, 47; ridiculous, 49; terrifying, distorted, 46; bizarre, 58; extreme right wing, 61; a myth, 71, 74; gloating triumphalism, 125. Such language used of a system of theology that has been carefully articulated, and faithfully and sincerely advocated, by people who love the Word of God and Jesus Christ as Lord is unconscionable. I fail to see how even the most unsympathetic opponent of dispensationalism can endorse this acerbic and thoroughly uncharitable volume.

Sadly, such an endorsement comes from the New Testament scholar Ben Witherington in his book *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*; (hereafter *The Problem*).

Witherington’s *Problems*

Witherington’s book is sub-titled *Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism*. Only three chapters of this book are devoted to his critique of dispensational theology: chapter 5 “Enraptured But Not Uplifted: The Origins of Dispensationalism and Prophecy,” chapter 6 “What Goes Up Must Come Down: The Problem with Rapture Theology,” and chapter 7 “Will the Real Israel of God Please Stand Up?”<sup>29</sup> In order to keep this review short only two matters will be addressed.

### **Historical Origins or *ad hominem* Attack?**

It is noteworthy that Witherington begins by suggesting that of the three systems his book critiques dispensationalism is “clearly the most exegetically problematic” (*The Problem*, 93) and yet he begins his critique with an overview regarding the origins of dispensationalism; (for those familiar with this sort of argument do not expect anything new.) In making his arguments regarding the origins of dispensationalism, Witherington relies on Rossing’s book *The Rapture Exposed*. (*The Problem*, 93-96; 270n3). He argues that dispensational theology arose, not from “profound study of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures” but from a “vision” (in 1830 in Glasgow, Scotland by a young girl who was attending a healing service); which vision foresaw two comings of Christ, one pre-, one post-tribulational; which vision would have been forgotten except that John Nelson Darby “heard the story and spread it far and wide.” (*The Problem*, 93, 94; cf. *Exposed*, 22) From this Darby articulated the doctrine of the “rapture” in spite of the fact, Witherington notes, that “The term *rapture*, of

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<sup>29</sup> Witherington, *The Problem*, 93-168.

course, does not occur anywhere in the New Testament” (*The Problem*, 94) Continuing, Witherington asserts Darby, went on to “invent, ‘dispensations.’” The system was picked up by men such as D.L. Moody and C.I. Scofield; the former promoted dispensational theology through the Moody Bible Institute, which was supported in part by a Chicago businessman, (and “avid Zionist” “William E. Blackstone, who himself had already *cached in* on the rapture theology” with a book on the subject. (*The Problem*, 95;emphasis added). But it was C.I. Scofield, Witherington avers, who “hit the jackpot, selling millions” of copies of his Reference Bible. Witherington describes Scofield in these terms: “What few know about him today is that he was an embezzler and forger who abandoned his wife and children and did time in jail even after his conversion to Christianity.” (*The Problem*, 95) This inflammatory accusation is not substantiated by Witherington from any source. However, this sentence, and the entire paragraph is clearly based on Rossing’s work (see *Exposed*, 23; quoting Rossing, “Cyrus I. Scofield was a dubious character who embezzled money, served six months in jail for forgery even after his conversion to Christianity, and abandoned his wife and daughters, according to critics. Scofield hit the jackpot with his annotated *Scofield Reference Bible* . . . With sales in the millions.”) And what of Rossing’s source? Rossing is quoting an interview with an un-credentialed critic of dispensationalism in the September / October 2001 issue of *The Door Magazine*.<sup>30</sup> (*Exposed*, 188n4). And what of that critics’s sources? Well, in a word or two: dubious and debatable. The point to be made in terms of this review is this: both Rossing and Witherington are giving a “scholarly tincture” to some very dubious and defaming speculations; this is unfair, unscholarly and a disservice to their readers on both sides of the question. And in the end the point is irrelevant! And the argument is *ad hominem*. (The question is not what sort of man wrote the notes but are the notes in accord with the teaching of Scripture?) Witherington goes on to allege that this system of “theology did not have any scholarly grounding or basis” and that Dallas Theological Seminary was founded “in part to shore up the exegetical and theological liabilities of Dispensational theology.” This is a gross misrepresentation and mischaracterization of the historical facts and, again, beside the point. The men who founded, and the men who served with scholarly distinction at Dallas Theological Seminary for many years (and the many who continue to serve at DTS) and the many who took graduate degrees over the years deserve a better accounting of their scholarship than this dismissive sort of inaccurate and irrelevant argument. Repeated attempts have been made to discredit dispensationalism by the charges of its recent origin, by

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<sup>30</sup> See the analysis of the critic interviewed and his views at [http://www.raptureready.com/who/Dave\\_MacPherson.html](http://www.raptureready.com/who/Dave_MacPherson.html); a paper by Tommy Ice. *The Door Magazine* styles itself as a “Christian satirical magazine”; in the opinion of this reviewer it is the neo-evangelical equivalent to the secular *Mad Magazine* and decidedly *not a credible source* for such defamatory accusations.

*ad hominem* attacks on early dispensationalists, by charges of “lack of scholarship,” by charges of it’s being “too popular.” The point is these charges have been made *and answered many times* and it is unfortunate to see them surface again with the gloss-of-scholarship in Rossing’s and Witherington’s books.<sup>31</sup>

### **Exegetical Problems or Merely Asserting Hermeneutical Conclusions?**

In spite of the promise to deal with the exegetical issues of dispensationalism Witherington notes, “It is not possible to deal with all the enormous exegetical and theological problems that Dispensationalism presents us with, and so the reader is directed to Rossing.” (*The Problem*, 270n5). But the *problem* is, of course, that (as seen above) Rossing’s exegesis is seriously flawed; a flaw Witherington exhibits in his analysis of Matthew 24:36-41 which passage he also mistakenly suggests is one of the “favorite texts to prove that the rapture is biblical.” (*The Problem*, 112; cf. 117) However, since (as noted above) this is a simple, if glaring error, it virtually makes the rest of Witherington’s argument regarding Matthew 24 in which he denies that this text refers to the Rapture (*The Problem*, 117-18) moot!

Just before Witherington makes that mistake, he makes another when he writes, “It is easy enough to show the problems in Dispensational theology when it comes to a text like Revelations (sic) 4:1 . . .” which he then quotes. Witherington’s comment follows: “This is not a description of a magic carpet ride to heaven taken by John of Patmos. It is a description of a visionary experience.” (*The Problem*, 111) But no proponent of the pre-tribulational rapture would claim that this text is referring to the rapture (of the church), (much less a “magic carpet ride”); nor would a dispensationalist deny that this is a “visionary experience.”<sup>32</sup>

Turning to 1 Thessalonians 4 Witherington’s treatment of the text amounts to three arguments. First he ties 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 to the Matthew 24 text and essentially argues the reverse of what he (mistakenly) attributes to dispensational exegesis. Witherington sees Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4-5 drawing on “the Jesus tradition found in Matthew 24” and he lists the parallels between the two texts and concludes “Paul does not think there is some difference between the *parousia* and the second coming (or glorious

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Ryrie attempted to dispense with these sorts of specious arguments back in the 1965 edition of what is now *Dispensationalism*, then titled *Dispensationalism Today* (Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 9-15; 206-12).

<sup>32</sup> See Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1968) 33 and John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Revelation 1-11* (Chicago: Moody, 1999) 144. Benware (*Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 208-09) lists the more or less standard texts that teach the pre-tribulational rapture of the church which are John 14:1-3; Titus 2:13; Philippians 3:20; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 15:51-53 and the key text 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

appearing).” (*The Problem*, 117) Second, Witherington argues that Paul is also drawing on texts like Daniel 7:13-14 and referring to the imagery of *apantesin*, the arriving dignitary image noted above. (*The Problem*, 118-23) Third, Witherington argues that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 forms a single eschatological paranesis about the *parousia* and asserts that any attempt to see 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 as referring to events subsequent to the “catching up” is “special pleading.” (*The Problem*, 123-24)

The limitations of this review prevent a detailed response to these arguments but these observations may be offered. First, if Witherington is actually seeking to interact and critique the dispensational view of the relationship between 1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 24 he should have consulted some dispensational writings on the matter. Had he done so he would not have made the error of suggesting dispensationalists view the Matthew 24 text as referring to the rapture and he would have seen that there are solid exegetical reasons to see those texts as describing different events. Indeed, he cites non-dispensational commentaries on 1 Thessalonians (he admits he relies on G. Beale’s commentary on 1-2 Thessalonians, *The Problem*, 272n15) but (like Rossing) interacts with no dispensational authors or commentators. We have already seen that the imagery of *apantesin* is by no means certain and that dispensational commentators have dealt with that view. And finally, Witherington’s dismissal of the view that 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 5:1-11 are referring to two separate events as “special pleading” is disappointing in as much as Witherington himself notes that the *peri de* (*peri de*) of 5:1 indicates “a new topic.” Once again, Witherington interacts with no dispensational writer who argues that the significance of the *peri de* (*peri de*) is precisely that “a new aspect of the *parousia* is being considered.”<sup>33</sup>

In short, Witherington’s supposed exegetical *critique* of dispensational theology amounts to nothing more than a *report* of non-dispensational exegetical conclusions on the pertinent texts.<sup>34</sup> There is nothing new here; he asserts, as if inarguable, non-dispensational interpretations of texts without interacting or even actually consulting dispensational exegesis of those texts.

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<sup>33</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 208.

<sup>34</sup> This point applies particularly to the whole of chapter 7 “Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up.” This chapter is a reworking of some of Witherington’s previously published work on Romans 9-11. In this chapter one finds some fairly standard non-dispensational treatments of these chapters and virtually no interaction with or analysis of dispensational writings on these chapters. In short, he offers the reader examples of his exegesis without refutation of (or even reference to) dispensational exegesis. Needless to say I believe there are solid dispensational responses to these non-dispensational conclusions; which, of course, are much too involved to attempt to reproduce in this review. But the reader should not miss the point: Witherington has offered this book as a “testing of the exegetical foundations” of dispensationalism whereas in fact it is not that, but a “presenting the exegetical conclusions” of Dr. Witherington.

Witherington is simply not delivering on the promise of his subtitle—he's not "testing the exegetical foundations" of dispensationalism, he's merely asserting the conclusions of non-dispensationalists! Dr. Witherington is certainly entitled to his views and dispensationalists should take note of them and respond to them; but again, Witherington's book is not actually dealing with dispensationalism's exegetical foundations so much as it is simply offering alternative exegetical conclusions. Alternatives, by the way, of which dispensationalists are aware and to which they have responded. However, Witherington gives the reader no indication that dispensationalists are cognizant of these alternative views and have responded to them and so the reader is left with the false impression that dispensationalism is untenable.

Returning to chapter 5 of Witherington's book, the "critique" here amounts to a description of how he thinks biblical prophecy works and how, therefore, dispensationalism would not work. For instance, he argues,

The problem in part with Dispensationalism was not only that it did not recognize that a good deal of biblical prophecy has been fulfilled (though sometimes in a less than absolutely literal manner) but also that a good deal of biblical prophecy was conditional in nature to begin with (and when the conditions were not met, the fulfillment never came). (*The Problem*, 96)

Witherington *asserts*, "from the Christian point of view, all the Old Testament promises and prophecies are to be fulfilled in or by Christ, not apart from Christ and/or the church." (*The Problem*, 109) Again, Witherington *asserts* that much that dispensationalism sees as yet future has been fulfilled ("to fail to see that much of this material has been fulfilled in generations gone by is a major mistake" *The Problem*, 109); he *asserts* that the figures and events are not future and are not referring to actual historical realities ("There will be no Armageddon between human armies. There will be no rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem . . ." *The Problem*, 109.) But when one reviews Witherington's analysis of the nature of biblical prophecy in the previous pages one is hard pressed to see how those assertions / conclusions follow necessarily. Simply put, Witherington's argument comes down to nothing more than this: "Here is my take on biblical prophecy and I think that means dispensationalism is wrong." For instance, Witherington makes this assertion: "At no point in biblical prophecy, either Jewish or Christian, are there envisioned two separate peoples of God to who different groups of prophecy apply." (*The Problem*, 109) But the reader will be hard pressed to find in the argument of the previous twelve pages anything that demands that conclusion. Indeed, Witherington continues, "Always the people of God is either Jews with Gentile adherents united in Israel or, in the later Christian schema, Jew and Gentile united in Christ." (*The Problem*, 109) One wonders how Witherington can make that last assertion in the light of the former one! (How can he even identify those two

groups, united in Israel / united in Christ if “at no point in biblical prophecy . . . are there envisioned two separate peoples of God”?) Clearly, Witherington’s problem with dispensationalism is not with exegesis per se but with hermeneutics or even more to the point with hermeneutical conclusions since dispensationalists would agree with much that he says about the nature of biblical prophecy.

In sum, he *asserts* that much prophecy has been fulfilled or abrogated; he *asserts* the impossibility of literal hermeneutics, he *asserts* that there are not “two separate peoples of God to who different groups of prophecy apply,” and then he concludes dispensationalism is untenable. For anyone even marginally familiar with the debate between dispensationalism and covenant theology these arguments should be familiar; and their rebuttal fairly simple. But the point to be reiterated is that Witherington has not argued, much less proven these assertions.

### Conclusion

Works like those of Rossing’s and Witherington’s that have the “patina of scholarship” but which are actually weak criticisms of dispensationalism have the unfortunate effect of leading many to dismiss dispensational theology without giving it a fair reading. Indeed, two points made with respect to both of these works bear repeating: both engage in irrelevant and *ad hominem* attacks and neither author has interacted with, or even significantly referenced, serious dispensational scholarship. Both authors are entitled to their views but that entitlement does not give them license to be less than accurate, complete and balanced in their appraisal of dispensationalism; and it certainly does not give them the right to be dismissive, derisive, harsh, or censorious in their criticisms of dispensational theology. I suppose all we can do is repeat the words of one of the true scholars of dispensationalism: “Normative dispensationalism is a legitimate, worthy, and conservative viewpoint. Other Christians do not have to agree with it, but they should represent it fairly and treat its contributions with respect. This is simply a matter of Christian integrity and courtesy.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 210.

## Book Reviews

*The Book of Proverbs (Chapters 1-15)*, by Bruce K. Waltke, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004, 693pp., hardback, \$50.00

*The Book of Proverbs (Chapters 15-31)*, by Bruce K. Waltke, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 589pp., hardback, \$50.00

This massive work of Proverbs in 2 volumes is part of the New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Eerdmans) edited by Robert L. Hubbard Jr. Bruce Waltke is professor emeritus of biblical studies at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, and professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Oviedo, Florida. Dr. Waltke has been working on this truly exegetical commentary for more than twenty-five years. For those working with BHS text (Hebrew) this will bring some clear understanding to those seemingly difficult passages tying them together. Technically, even Massoretic accents are brought into focus. But this work also puts the cookies on the shelves for anyone interested in a deeper meaning of Proverbs. No one should feel intimidated by a great Hebrew scholar dealing directly with Scripture in the original language. Bruce Waltke brings understanding to many passages with his easy reading style. There should be something here for everyone interested in a deeper understanding of the Proverbs. This reviewer believes this will be a standard to many years to come.

Dave Olander

*The Portable Seminary*, David Horton General Editor, Bethany House, 2006, 784pp., hardback, \$34.99

*The Portable Seminary* has as its writers the Portable Seminary “Faculty” which includes over 60 mostly prominent writers and theologians. This work brings together an international faculty of evangelical Christian scholars and practitioners writing on subjects such as: theology, biblical languages and interpretation, background and survey of Old and New Testaments, Christian history, apologetics and world religions, missions, Christian education, leadership, Christian ethics, and more. The disclosed purpose is to offer an introduction, an overview, to graduate levels of education related to the mentioned areas plus much more. This includes those who are in ministry, who have not had time or opportunity for graduate study, or for laypersons interested in a deeper theological knowledge and understanding. This work has a virtual plethora of information for anyone and an extensive bibliography at the end of each chapter’s endnotes. It is not a systematic theology nor does it claim to be. The various authors are from very diverse theologies and backgrounds. One must keep this in mind, yet most of the presentations are

fairly conservative. Its strength is that it exposes the reader to many great theologians and writers in almost every area of theology. Its weakness is that no one area of theology is fully developed. As the work is not dispensational in any true sense, it speaks of the formation of a faithful new Israel. ‘In Christ the Old Testament God speaks so that the New Testament church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament congregation’ (p.184). For those in good bible churches, bible studies, or dispensational studies, or those who have a very good study bible, much of the information presented in this work would be much too basic.

Dave Olander

***Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*** by Roger E. Olson, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 264 pp., hardback, \$25.00.

Although evangelicals will continue to disagree theologically, Olson’s work is an attempt to address the myths concerning Arminian theology. The author is concerned about misperceptions by detractors of Arminian theology and even Arminians who do not understand the theological position. The book addressed ten myths:

- Myth 1: Arminian theology is the opposite of Calvinist/Reformed theology
- Myth 2: A hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism is possible
- Myth 3: Arminianism is not an orthodox evangelical option
- Myth 4: The heart of Arminianism is belief in free will
- Myth 5: Arminian theology denies the sovereignty of God
- Myth 6: Arminianism is a human-centered theology
- Myth 7: Arminianism is not a theology of grace
- Myth 8: Arminians do not believe in predestination
- Myth 9: Arminian theology denies justification by grace alone through faith alone
- Myth 10: All Arminians believe in the governmental theory of atonement

Olson’s work provides clarity regarding classic Arminianism since most criticisms of Arminian theology today are responses to modern Arminianism. The Arminianism that the author defends is “that form of Protestant theology that rejects unconditional election (and especially unconditional reprobation), limited atonement, and irresistible grace because it affirms the character of God as compassionate, having universal love for the whole world and everyone in it, and extending grace-restored free will to accept or reject the grace of God, which leads to either eternal life or spiritual destruction” (pp. 16-17). Olson believes Arminianism has deep roots in the Protestant Reformation, and distinguished Arminian theology from semi-Pelagianism and hyper-Calvinism. Olson’s work will likely become the definitive defense of Arminian theology, and for this reason alone it is recommended reading.

Ron J. Bigalke Jr.,



*Controversies in the Book of Revelation*, by David Criswell, Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2006, 609pp., paperback, \$39.95

In this appropriately named book, the author discusses variant interpretations within the premillennial system. While the book does not attempt to be exegetical, it is an excellent reference work for any serious student of Revelation. As it is a comparative work of various scholars, the author has chosen five eras or categories of scholars for rather exhaustive analysis. These are the church fathers, the medieval fathers, Reformation scholars, post-Reformation scholars, and modern evangelicals. David Criswell makes it clear he chose the most influential and popular of expositors. He also encourages the reader to examine the appendices (almost 200 pages) before attempting a complete study of this book. For diligent students of the Book of Revelation and Biblical prophecy, this book is highly recommended.

Dave Olander

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