

# Systematic Theology and Premillennialism

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When we hear the words "dispensational premillennialism," the first branch of systematic theology that comes to mind is eschatology. Ecclesiology soon follows. Beyond that, we don't see much of a connection.

Actually, premillennialism touches on almost every major branch of systematic theology to one degree or another. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the significance of this pervasive influence, and, by contrast, the perverting influence of amillennialism and postmillennialism.<sup>1</sup>

## *Christology*

Premillennialism has little disagreement with amillennialism and postmillennialism in the area of Christology. All hold to the full deity of Christ and the full humanity of Christ, for example. Differences surface in the matter of Jesus' role as the Davidic King.

The normal understanding of passages such as Luke 1:32 is that Jesus will sit on a literal throne in Jerusalem someday: "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." Amillennialists don't see it that way.

Amillennialist Louis Berkhof spends several pages in his *Systematic Theology* speaking about the Kingdom of Christ (406-411), but says nothing about the Davidic Covenant except its eternity.<sup>2</sup> "But though He was permitted to rule as Mediator even before His incarnation, He did not publicly and formally assume His throne and inaugurate His spiritual kingdom until the time of His ascension and elevation at the right hand of God, Acts 2:29-36; Phil. 2:5-11."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Berkhof believes Jesus is now on David's throne.

Postmillennialist Charles Hodge agrees and states that the "Jews were not disappointed in the general impression made on their minds by the predictions relating to the Messiah. It was only in the explanation of details that they failed. The Messiah was a king; He did sit upon the throne of David, but not in the way in which they expected ..."<sup>4</sup>

## *Pneumatology*

Premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism do not share the same understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Dispensationalists believe the Church began when the Spirit began His baptizing ministry in Acts 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of this article is based on John Walvoord's *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Pub. Co., 1959; repr. Zondervan, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Logos version), 3:791.

There could be no Church on earth until the advent of the Holy Spirit; for the most basic and fundamental reality respecting the Church is that she is a temple for the habitation of God through the Spirit. She is regenerated, baptized, and sealed by the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Amillennialists acknowledge this aspect of the Spirit's ministry but do not view it as particularly significant. I searched through Hodge and Berkhof on this issue and found almost nothing. Hodge mentions the baptism of the Spirit but does not associate it with the Church. The index of Berkhof's work does not list the baptism of the Spirit. Both camps seem to teach that the work of the Holy Spirit is essentially the same in the Old and New Testaments.

Some non-dispensationalists associate the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the beginning of the New Testament Church, but nevertheless label it "spiritual Israel."

The baptism of the Spirit, or baptism with the Spirit, is thus the work of the risen Christ. By this act he brought his church into being. The church - the people of God in New Testament times - is continuous with the people of God in Old Testament times ...<sup>6</sup>

### *Angelology*

Amillennialists cannot agree among themselves as to the state of Satan and his demons. They seem to teach that evil angels are bound but can still have some influence on humans, like a dog chained to a tree. Yet this explanation doesn't harmonize well with the biblical data.

Berkhof writes that demons "are even now chained to hell and pits of darkness ... II Pet. 2:4; Jude 6."<sup>7</sup> The flaw here is that 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 do not refer to *all* demons. The bound evil spirits mentioned by Peter and Jude are a certain group of demons, probably the ones discussed in Genesis 6 since both authors talk about other stories from Genesis in the next few verses.

Hodge, on the other hand, allows more freedom for demons than does Berkhof. He writes that "evil spirits ... are represented as being exceedingly numerous, as everywhere efficient, as having access to our world, and as operating in nature and in the minds of men."<sup>8</sup>

Amillennialists give conflicting assessments because they are not sure what to do with Revelation 20:2, "And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." Amillennialists believe that the Millennium is the Church Age, and thus since the Millennium has already started, Satan is already chained.

As noted above, that conclusion contradicts numerous passages which speak of the activity of Satan and his demons. Peter wrote, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Premillennialists offer a simpler explanation. Satan isn't bound because the Millennium hasn't started yet.

### *Soteriology*

Covenant theology holds to two or three theological covenants. They believe there was a Covenant of Works (between God and Adam), a Covenant of Grace (between God and the elect; some say all of fallen

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48; repr. Kregel, 1993), 4:45.

<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Jesus: Past, Present, and Future* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof, 149.

<sup>8</sup> Hodge, 1:644.

humanity), and possibly a Covenant of Redemption (among the Members of the Godhead). None of these are found in the Bible. Concerning the Covenant of Works, Hodge states directly that it “does not rest upon any express declaration of the Scriptures.”<sup>9</sup>

Covenant theologians (of which most are amillennialists) contend that the salvation of humans is the overriding theme of the entire Bible.<sup>10</sup> They try to support this notion by claiming that (1) the Covenant of Grace is mentioned in various passages from Genesis to Revelation, and (2) the biblical covenants (Abrahamic, Davidic, New, *etc.*) are progressive revelations of the Covenant of Grace.

The covenant of grace, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is essentially the same as that which governed the relation of Old Testament believers to God.<sup>11</sup>

They try to prove their point by claiming that particular passages contain "covenant terminology," especially something on the order of "I will be your God, and you will be My people" (Gen. 17:7; Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9, 10).

Dispensationalists acknowledge the consistency of God's plan of salvation, but we disagree with the covenant theologian in seeing every phase (or dispensation) has having soteriological significance. In this regard, two covenants chiefly stand out – the Noahic and the Mosaic. In the Noahic Covenant, God promised He would never again flood the world as He had just done (Gen. 9:9-11). The Mosaic (or Sinaitic) Covenant focused on a way of life, not on eternal life.

Finally, dispensationalists assert that the overriding theme of the Bible is God's glory, which includes the salvation of man but is not limited to it.<sup>12</sup> Other aspects of the Lord's creation and work that bring Him glory are (1) the good angels who praise Him, and (2) the final judgment on fallen angels and unbelieving people.

### *Ecclesiology*

This section will be discussed in four parts: the Origin of the Church, the Members of the Church, the Church and Israel, and the Church and the Kingdom.

*The Origin of the Church.* Non-premillennialists cannot agree among themselves as to how and when the Church started. Berkhof agrees with the Belgic Confession: "This Church has been from the beginning of the world ..."<sup>13</sup> However, he also believes that the "establishment of the covenant with Abraham marked the beginning of an institutional Church."<sup>14</sup>

Wayne Grudem, an historic (or covenant) premillennialist, contradicts himself in this matter, too. He gives this simple definition: "The church is the community of all believers for all time."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the Church began with Adam. But later on when he writes about the Spirit giving spiritual gifts at Pentecost, he says that "happened in the early church."<sup>16</sup> How could the activities of Acts 2 be described as taking place in the early

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2:117.

<sup>10</sup> If this is true, then covenant theologians have a very difficult time explaining how angels fit into God's grand plan.

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, 299, 300.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say covenant theologians ignore the glory of God. Berkhof (272) wrote that the common aim of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace is to glorify God.

<sup>13</sup> Berkhof, 571.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 853.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1018.

years of the Church if the early years of the Church were actually in Genesis?

Dispensationalists have good reasons for believing that the Church did not commence until the pouring out of the Holy Spirit as detailed in Acts 2. This baptizing ministry of the Spirit was unknown until then (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13).

Nowhere in the Old Testament is the Church mentioned. This is supported by the fact that Paul classified the Church as a mystery.

If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. (Eph. 3:2-10)

Whatever this mystery is, it was completely unknown before the time of Paul. He writes that it was "hidden in God" and "in other generations was not made known to the sons of men." The mystery, it turns out, is that the Jews and Gentiles are "fellow heirs," "fellow members," and "fellow partakers." These terms mean that Gentiles are equal participants with the Jews in the favoritism shown to them by Jehovah.

The word "fellow" is significant here. It comes from a translation of the Greek prefix συν-, found in the front of all three words used in this verse (συγκληρονόμος, σύσσωμος, and συμμετοχος). It's not that the Gentiles are second-class heirs, members, and partakers. They can now experience the exact same privileges that the Jews experience.

Amillennialists argue that "the body" of which the Gentiles are members was a body that existed previously. The Gentiles were merely added to it. But that is not how Paul explained it. He equates this body with the "one new man" (Eph. 2:15; emphasis added). So this body (which is the Church of course) is not old, it only recently came into being.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18 are another indication the Church did not exist in Old Testament times. Christ said: "I will build [future tense] My church." It would seem odd to speak of the Church in the future tense if it were already under construction.

Peter noted that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit happened "at the beginning" (Acts 11:15). The beginning of what? The Church!

A number of verses suggest the Church could not have come into being until the death, resurrection, and

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<sup>17</sup> Amillennialists also look to the word εκκλησια to fortify their contention that the Church was present in the Old Testament. They point to Acts 7:38 where Stephen talks about "the church in the wilderness" (only the KJV, RV, and RSV use "church" in this verse). But Stephen is not using ekklesia in the technical sense of "church" but in the general sense of "assembly." Amillennialists also point out that εκκλησια is used in the LXX to identify a gathering of God's people. However, εκκλησια did not have the meaning "church" in 200 BC.

ascension of Christ. Acts 20:28 is one example. In this farewell address to the Ephesian elders, Paul states that they should "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." That is, the Lord did not obtain the Church (so to speak) until His crucifixion.

A number of other passages in Ephesians are crucial to our understanding of the beginning of the Church.

In chapter 1 Paul reveals that only *after* the Father raised the Son did He make "Him as head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:19-22).

Ephesians 2:20 makes it plain that the foundation of the Church consists of Jesus and the apostles. A foundation is laid at the *beginning* of a project.

Ephesians 4:8-12 declares that the body of Christ could not be built up until Jesus provided spiritual gifts, and that couldn't happen until Christ ascended to the Father's right hand.

*The Members of the Church.* Covenant theologians practice infant baptism. This observance came about as a result of their belief that just as circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant, so baptism is the sign of the New Covenant. Furthermore, since all male Jewish infants eight days old were circumcised, it stands to reason that children born to believing parents should be placed in the "covenant community" of the Church.

Some of Berkhof's statements, though, are at best confusing and at worst contradictory. He asserts that baptism "is intended only for properly qualified rational beings, namely, for believers and their children."<sup>18</sup> By "children" I assume he is including infants – but are babies rational beings? And what does he mean by "qualified"?

Berkhof later admits: "Now it is perfectly true that the Bible points to faith as a prerequisite for baptism, Mark 16:16; Acts 10:44-48; 16:14, 15, 31, 34."<sup>19</sup> But on the same page just a few lines down he claims the Bible "nowhere lays down the rule that an active faith is absolutely essential for the reception of baptism."

The primary proof-text is Colossians 2:11, 12: "and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Much could be said in response to this connection between circumcision and baptism but only a few remarks will be given. Circumcision and baptism are too different from each other to consider them related. Infants were eligible for the rite of circumcision because of physical birth. People are eligible for baptism because of a spiritual birth. Infants are not mentally capable of understanding what is going on. Candidates for baptism must have exercised faith in Christ. Circumcision was an external sign that this male baby is a Jew. Baptism is an external symbol for something that has already happened internally.

It seems clear from the New Testament that only those who acknowledge that they are sinners and trust Christ for their salvation are entitled to baptism.

*The Church and Israel.* The relationship between the Church and Israel is perhaps the key issue that distinguishes premillennialism from other forms of millennialism. Fruchtenbaum summarizes the viewpoints

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<sup>18</sup> Berkhof, 631.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 637.

nicely.

Covenant Premillennialism believes in both a national salvation and a national restoration of Israel. Postmillennialism believes in a national salvation, but not a national restoration of Israel. Amillennialism rejects both.<sup>20</sup>

One can see from that quote that this issue is rather complex. That those in a certain camp sometimes disagree among themselves further complicates things. Let's take covenant premillennialism as an example of what happens when the line between Israel and the Church is blurred.

Covenant premillennialism appears to teach that the Church has replaced Israel for now, but there will be a distinction between them during the Millennial Kingdom.<sup>21</sup> Like all debates concerning theology or the Bible, this one boils down to hermeneutics.

Covenant premillennialist George Ladd declares that the New Testament should be used to *reinterpret* some passages in the Old Testament.

Paul's use of the Old Testament is not so much to seek a one-to-one equating of prophecy and fulfillment as to place the new redemptive events squarely in the stream of Old Testament redemptive history. This leads him to find in the Old Testament meanings that do not readily appear in the quotations in their Old Testament setting. Thus he can apply to the church quotations that in the Old Testament refer only to Israel (Rom. 9:25-26; cf. Hos. 2:23; 1:10). This cannot be labeled a manipulation or misuse of the Old Testament. ... Jesus ... is the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament, and that the people of the Messiah are the true people of God, continuous with the Israel of the Old Testament. The church is in fact the true Israel of God. Therefore the Old Testament must be read in the light of its fulfillment in Christ with the illumination of the Holy Spirit ... the Spirit enables the believer to understand from the Old Testament the meaning of the redemptive event wrought in history in Jesus Christ. The new understanding of the Old Testament is controlled by the event of Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup>

LaSor contends that there is only one distinction between Israel and the Church, and that has to do with chronology.

There is a sense in which the church is *not* Israel. Most obvious, of course, is the simple chronological fact that the church exists this side of Calvary, and Israel in the Old Testament was on the other side, before Calvary was a historical event.<sup>23</sup>

Notice he has to specify that it was the Israel of the *Old* Testament, as opposed to the Israel of the *New* Testament.

LaSor then pursues two lines of evidence to prove that the Church is indeed Israel. Those two lines are (1) the similarities between the two entities, and (2) some passages which supposedly demonstrate that the Church is (for now at least) Israel.

Some of the similarities he sees are that both are a people called out of the nations by God, both were redeemed by God's work of redemption, both were given the Law (to Israel on stone, and to the Church in our hearts), both are called a kingdom of priests, both have Jesus as their Messiah, and both look forward to a day

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<sup>20</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1996), 314.

<sup>21</sup> Most of this section is based on Fruchtenbaum's *Israelology*.

<sup>22</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, rev. ed.), 433, 434.

when the Son of David will reign in righteousness.<sup>24</sup> None of these factors are of any consequence because similarity does not mean identity.

The passages LaSor utilizes to buttress his thesis are the same ones used by virtually all covenant theologians – Romans 9:4-8, Galatians 6:15, 16, and Ephesians 2:11-19.

Romans 9:4-8 reads,

... who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

LaSor is correct that in this passage Paul is speaking of two groups, namely, physical Israel and spiritual Israel. The problem is LaSor goes beyond the evidence and concludes Paul is equating spiritual Israel with the Church. But notice the context. For the next several verses in Romans 9 Paul writes about people and events from the *Old Testament*, not from the *New Testament*.

Moo concludes the second use of "Israel" in verse 6 does not refer to the Church because ...

(1) Verses 1-5 establish the parameters within which Paul's language of Israel in Rom. 9-11 must be interpreted, and these verses focus on ethnic Israel. Throughout these chapters, Paul carefully distinguishes between Israel and the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles on the other. Only where clear contextual pointers are present can the ethnic focus of Israel be abandoned. (2) Paul explains v. 6b in vv. 7-13 with examples of God's selection of his people from *within* ethnic Israel. (3) Verses 27-29, which, as we have seen, relate closely to vv. 6-13, feature OT quotations that focus on the idea of the remnant — again, a group existing within ethnic Israel. The "true Israel" in v. 6b, therefore, denotes a smaller, spiritual body *within* ethnic Israel rather than a spiritual entity that overlaps with ethnic Israel. Paul is not saying "it is not *only* those who are of Israel that are Israel," but "it is not *all* those who are of Israel that are Israel."<sup>25</sup>

Galatians 6:15, 16 reads,

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Non-dispensationalists make much of the phrase "the Israel of God," claiming it is another name for the Church.

... like all Covenant Theologians, [LaSor] ignores that there are two groups mentioned in the passage: the *them* and the *Israel of God*. As has been shown before, there is no textual or contextual reason to depart from the primary meaning of *kai*, which means "and," or to resort to a secondary meaning of "even." The *them* refers to the Gentile believers to and of whom Paul had been writing throughout the epistle. The *Israel of God* refers to Jewish believers specifically and

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<sup>23</sup> William S. LaSor, *Israel: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 85. Emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 94, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996; NICOT), 574. Emphasis in original.

not to the Church at large. There is no exegetical reason to make the Israel here a reference to the Church.<sup>26</sup>

Dispensationalist Earl Radmacher adds,

Whether the *kai* is taken as a simple copulative joining two different groups or whether the "Israel of God" is singled out from the total group (which interpretation seems more likely) it nevertheless distinguishes between Jewish believers and Gentile believers in the church.

Thus, the grammar alone presents a strong argument for the distinction. There are other arguments, however, which add great strength to this interpretation. The context of Galatians is favorable to the idea of singling out the true Jews for special mention. The apostle's argument is with the Judaizers . . .

After attacking these Jews, who would be considered Israel after the flesh, it is perfectly logical for Paul, when extending his blessing, to recognize those Jews who had left this legalism and were following the rule of the new creation, the *ekklesia*. Thus, he clarified to the Gentiles that he was not attacking Jews as such, and, likewise, he expressed his love for his "brethren according to the flesh."

Surely, if the New Testament wanted to equate the *ekklesia* and Israel, it would have done so plainly, and in many places, for the term *Israel* is used frequently throughout.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars of every stripe agree that the vast majority of occurrences of "Israel" in the New Testament refer to ethnic Israel, yet some want to make an exception for Galatians 6:16 with no compelling reason for doing so.

A third passage covenant theologians emphasize in equating Israel and the Church is Ephesians 2:11-19,

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands -- remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household.

In this quote from amillennialist Robert Reymond, note that he (1) mentions the similarity between Israel and the Church, and (2) stresses the soteriological nature of the Church.

And Gentiles who come into this *ekklesia*, as Paul would later declare, "have been brought near" to the "commonwealth . . . of Israel" and Israel's "covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12-13), and . . . with elect Jews are God's "new man" (Eph. 2:14-16). Jesus' *ekklesia* then is the true New Testament "assembly of the Lord" and thus the continuing expression of that spiritual "Israel" within Old Testament national Israel of which Paul speaks (Rom. 9:6). That is to say, just as

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<sup>26</sup> Fruchtenbaum, 252. Italics in original.

<sup>27</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1996), 184, 185. Italics in original.

there was a true spiritual "Israel" within Old Testament national Israel, so also Jesus' *ekklesia*, as the Israel of God exists within professing Christendom. And just as Old Testament Israel was God's national theocratic kingdom, so also Jesus' *ekklesia* is God's soteric theocratic kingdom with Messiah as its sovereign and its members responsible to obey their Sovereign's every command (Matt. 28:20).<sup>28</sup>

But this passage does not state that Gentiles are now within the covenants of Israel, for the Church (the "one new man," v. 15) never was a party to the covenants. No passage of Holy Writ mentions a covenant between God and the Church.

After explaining that there is no difference between the two Greek words for "new" (*καινο* and *νεο*),<sup>29</sup> Hoehner gives the natural interpretation of Ephesians 2.

In the present context *καινο* is used to show that Christ has created a whole new person entirely different from the two former persons, namely, Jews and Gentiles. It is not that Gentiles become Jews as Gentile proselytes did in pre-NT times nor that Jews become Gentiles, but both become "one new person" or "one new humanity," a third entity. ... The new corporate person, who is called "one body" ... in verse 16, refers to the church. ... This coincides with Paul's admonition not to offend three groups of people: the Jews, the Greeks/Gentiles, and the church of God (1 Cor 10:32). The Jews and the Greeks/Gentiles are presented as unconverted and the church is that which is composed of Jewish and Gentile believers. They are not Jews or Gentiles but a body of Christians who make up the church.<sup>30</sup>

Even Barth admits,

Correspondingly, when in Eph 2:15 Christ is called creator and creates a person, then the term "one new man" must mean a person distinct from Christ. No other person can be meant than the "bride of Christ." While this bride is never explicitly named the New Eve, she is identified as the church in Eph. 5:23-32 (cf. II Cor 11:2) or as the people or property of God in 1:14.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the definition amillennialists have for the Church conflicts with their position as to when it started. Amillennialist Bruce Milne defines the Church as the "total people of God spread through all the ages, the total company of the elect."<sup>32</sup> I assume that "all the ages" would go back at least as far as Abraham, and maybe even to Adam.

It is no surprise, then, that Berkhof believes that at the time of the exodus it was the Church that was coming out of Egypt. He writes that "the whole nation constituted the Church."<sup>33</sup> The problem is most of those people were not believers as shown by the fact that they were eager to make a golden calf!

As this section reveals, Israel and the Church are completely distinct entities.

*The Church and the Kingdom.* Amillennialists and postmillennialists perceive very little difference

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<sup>28</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revised and updated), 824, 825.

<sup>29</sup> A previous generation of scholars held these two words were not synonyms, but that they are used in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 interchangeably suggests they are synonymous.

<sup>30</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 378-380.

<sup>31</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 309.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998, rev. ed.), 265.

<sup>33</sup> Berkhof, 570.

between the Church and the Kingdom, and since they believe the Church is the "new" (or "true") Israel, the Church, the Kingdom, and Israel are essentially the same.

One reason Berkhof puts forth to demonstrate the intimate relationship between the Church and the Kingdom has to do with the fact that Christ is the head of the Church. He claims that the word head "as applied to Christ, is in some cases practically equivalent to 'King.'"<sup>34</sup> He cites these passages: 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22, 5:23.

If we were to apply Berkhof's reasoning to the other parts of 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:23, the result would be nonsense. Do we want to set up the husband as "king" over his wife?

Too, amillennarians have no adequate explanation for the Kingdom promises to Israel found in the Old Testament. Most of them hold to one of the following two methods.

The first method is to spiritualize those promises. They are either being fulfilled in the Church, or will be fulfilled in heaven. Calvin proposed this view in his *Institutes*.

The ground of controversy is this: our opponents hold that the land of Canaan was considered by the Israelites as supreme and final happiness, and now, since Christ was manifested, typifies to us the heavenly inheritance; whereas we maintain that, in the earthly possession which the Israelites enjoyed, they beheld, as in a mirror, the future inheritance which they believed to be reserved for them in heaven.<sup>35</sup>

One promise in the Hebrew Scriptures is that Israel will be regathered. The Lord declared to Ezekiel (Eze. 37:21): "Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land." Keil and Delitzsch believe this passage

is not to be taken literally, but symbolically or typically, and that we are not to expect it to be literally fulfilled.

We are forced to this conclusion by the fact that, through the coming of Christ, and the kingdom of heaven which began with Him, the idea of the people of God has been so expanded, that henceforth not the lineal descendants of Abraham, or the Jewish nation merely, but the church of confessors of Jesus Christ, gathered together out of Israel and the Gentiles, has become the people of God, and the economy of the Old Testament has ceased to constitute the divinely appointed form of the church of God.<sup>36</sup>

A second method to get around the Kingdom promises is to assert that they were conditional and thus Israel has forfeited them by her disobedience. The short answer to that is simply to ask, how many of us deserve our salvation?

Amillennialist R. V. G. Tasker is stark in his comments on Matthew 21:35-43.

Because of this rejection of Jesus the Messiah, which came as the climax of a long series of rejections of the prophets God had sent to it (Mtt. 21:35, 36), the old Israel as such would forfeit the right to receive the blessings appertaining to the kingdom of God. These blessings would in consequence be made available to a less exclusive people of God which would contain men of all

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Logos version), II, xi, 1.

<sup>36</sup> C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (E-sword version).

racess and nations (Mtt. 21:43); and the murderers of God's Son would themselves be destroyed (Mtt. 21:41).<sup>37</sup>

Postmillennialists utilize many of the same anti-Semitic arguments. Boettner speaks for many postmillennialists when he postulates ...

In or about the spring of the year 30 A.D., the mass of those who then called themselves Israelites ceased to be such ... having forfeited their citizenship in the commonwealth of Israel by refusing to accept the Messiah.<sup>38</sup>

Here is Hodge's opinion.

The literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies relating to the restoration of Israel and the future kingdom of Christ, cannot by possibility be carried out ...<sup>39</sup>

In comparing and contrasting amillennialism and postmillennialism, Walvoord writes,

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

It is clear, however, to all that many of the promises cannot be literally applied to present earth conditions. Two expedients are followed by the amillennarian and postmillennarian interpretation. Some promises are cancelled as having been conditional in the first place. Others are spiritualized to fit the pattern of the present age. This interpretation is based upon a somewhat contradictory set of principles. One view is that the promises to Israel were never intended to be taken literally and hence are rightly spiritualized to fit the church. The other is that they were literal enough, but cancelled because of Israel's sin. The concept of Israel prevailing among amillennarians and postmillennarians is therefore confused and inherently contradictory. There does not seem to be any norm or central consistency except in their denial of a political and national future for Israel after the second advent. What unity exists in their system rests upon this denial.<sup>40</sup>

Once all of the factors are considered, it makes the most sense to understand the Scriptures as teaching that the Kingdom promises to Israel still apply, and will be fulfilled during the 1000-year Millennial reign of Christ on earth.

In this section on ecclesiology, we have examined the Origin of the Church, the Members of the Church, the Church and Israel, and the Church and the Kingdom. The consistent use of a literal hermeneutic leads to the conclusion that the Church began in Acts 2, the Members are those who have trusted Christ as their Savior, the Church and Israel are two distinct entities, and the Church has not taken over the Kingdom promises to Israel.

### *Eschatology*

It goes without saying that the greatest disparity among premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism is in the area of eschatology. Premillennialists alone consistently use a literal hermeneutic.

<sup>37</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961; TNTC), 204.

<sup>38</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1964), 318.

<sup>39</sup> Hodge, 3:809.

<sup>40</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Millennial Series: Part 11: The Theological Context of Premillennialism" (*BibSac* 108:431), 278, 279.

Amillennialists and postmillennialists believe Jesus will literally return,<sup>41</sup> yet, because the way their theological system functions, they are forced to spiritualize His 1000-year Kingdom and the Tribulation.

Anthony Hoekema tries to clarify the amillennialist position.

The term *amillennialism* is not a happy one. It suggests that amillennialists either do not believe in any millennium or that they simply ignore the first six verses of Revelation 20, which speak of a millennial reign. Neither of these two statements is true. ... it is true that amillennialists do not believe in a literal thousand-year earthly reign which will follow the return of Christ ... amillennialists believe that the millennium of Revelation 20 is not exclusively future but is now in process of realization.<sup>42</sup>

Hoekema clearly believes Christ's Kingdom has already started. One reason offered for this conclusion is Revelation 20 does not follow Revelation 19 chronologically. "Rather, Revelation 20:1 takes us back once again to the beginning of the New Testament era."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it is assumed that Christ took the Davidic throne at His ascension. In regard to Revelation 20:4-6, Hoekema writes,

There is no indication in these verses that John is describing an earthly millennial reign. The scene, as we saw, is set in heaven. Nothing is said in verses 4-6 about the earth, about Palestine as the center of this reign or about the Jews. The thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:4 is a reign with Christ in heaven of the souls of believers who have died.<sup>44</sup>

What is likewise strange about non-dispensational beliefs is that the Tribulation is also happening during this age. Apparently both amillennialists and postmillennialists advocate this doctrine.<sup>45</sup> Concerning Matthew 24:21, Hoekema claims,

There is no indication in Jesus' words that the great tribulation which he predicts will be restricted to the Jews, and that Gentile Christians, or the church in distinction from the Jews, will not have to go through it. This view, commonly taught by dispensationalists, has no basis in Scripture. For if tribulation, as we have just seen, is to be suffered by Christians throughout this entire age, what reason is there for restricting the final tribulation to the Jews? What reason is there for restricting the elect for whose sake the days of that final tribulation will be shortened (Matt. 24:22) to the elect among the Jews?<sup>46</sup>

My reply is, how could the Kingdom and the Tribulation possibly be contemporaneous?

Postmillennialists hold to many of the same views. They teach that the Church Age will eventually become the Kingdom. Boettner summarizes this belief.

Postmillennialism is that view of the last things which holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly

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<sup>41</sup> Except for full preterists.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium* ed. by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977), 155, 156.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>45</sup> It is quite difficult to ascertain what amillennialists and post-millennialists believe about the Tribulation because they write so little about it.

<sup>46</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 151.

called the millennium. It should be added that on postmillennial principles the Second Coming of Christ will be followed immediately by the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the introduction of heaven and hell in their fullness.<sup>47</sup>

Later he writes,

The postmillennialist looks for a golden age that will not be essentially different from our own so far as the basic facts of life are concerned. This age gradually merges into the millennial age as an increasing proportion of the world's inhabitants are converted to Christianity. Marriage and the home will continue, and new members will enter the human race through the natural process of birth, as at present. Sin will not be eliminated but will be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual environment of the earth becomes predominantly Christian.<sup>48</sup>

Hodge talks about the tribulation taking place just before the Second Coming, but says nothing about it being seven years in duration.

The Scriptures, then, as they have been generally understood in the Church, teach that before the Second Advent, there is to be the ingathering of the heathen; that the Gospel must be preached to all nations; and also that there is to be a national conversion of the Jews; but it is not to be inferred from this that either all the heathen or all the Jews are to become true Christians. In many cases the conversion may be merely nominal. ... enough [will] remain unchanged in heart to be the germ of that persecuting power which shall bring about those days of tribulation which the Bible seems to teach are to immediately precede the coming of the Lord.<sup>49</sup>

Both amillennialists and postmillennialists have little to say about the Tribulation such as that mentioned in Daniel 9 and 12, Matthew 24, Revelation 7, and other places. Again, this silence is explained by the fact that non-premillennialists are not sure what to do with it. The postmillennialist in particular, with his optimistic outlook on life, has a difficult time inserting it into his scheme.

Dispensationalists contend that the Millennial Kingdom and the Tribulation cannot and should not be so readily allegorized and overlooked. No good reason has ever been presented as to why Revelation 20 should not be taken literally. How strange that John would write "thousand years" several times in the first few verses if that expression were to be taken in some non-literal manner. He could have used the indefinite phrase "a long time" just as he used "a short time" in verse 3.

Too, take a close look at Acts 1:5-8, one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

"... for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ..."

This would have been the perfect opportunity for Christ to inaugurate His Kingdom, but He didn't. In fact, He contrasts the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit with the coming of the Kingdom in a very clear manner ("but," ἀλλὰ).

Similarly, the Scriptures are not that enigmatic about the Tribulation. It is mentioned in numerous Old and New Testament passages (Isa. 26:20, 21; 34:2-8; Jer. 30:5-9; Dan. 12:1; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 2; Matt. 24; 2 Thess.

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<sup>47</sup> Loraine Boettner, "Postmillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 117.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>49</sup> Hodge, 3:811.

2; and most of Revelation). One of the most powerful descriptions of the Tribulation is given in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4.

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

The Bible is about as clear on the subject of the duration of the Tribulation as it is on the subject of its future existence. The more significant passages here are Daniel 7:25, 9:27, 12:7; Revelation 12:6, 14.

Daniel 9:26, 27 announces that "the prince who is to come ... will make a firm covenant with the many for one week." The most logical way to understand this "week" is to interpret it as a seven-year period.<sup>50</sup> No other unit of time (day, week, *etc.*) makes good sense here.

### ***Bibliology***

I purposely placed Bibliology last on the list because hermeneutics is *the* issue for any debate of a biblical or theological nature. A person's principles of interpretation are the cornerstone for how the rest of his belief system works itself out. Any addition to a plain or normal hermeneutic (such as progressive dispensationalism's complementary hermeneutic), or any inconsistency (such as the switch to the spiritualizing method of the non-premillennialist) can result in nothing but error. The Bible student who sets aside the literal hermeneutic also sets aside all the norms, standards, and controls for understanding the Sacred Text properly.

Then what is the direct connection to Bibliology? Walvoord answers that it has to do with the reliability of the Bible.

While amillennialism can hardly be blamed for destructive higher criticism which has undermined faith in the Bible, it can be said that it had no defense against it as far as its method and attitude are concerned. After all, if Scripture which teaches something contrary to a preconceived theory can be altered by spiritualizing it, of what importance is the concept of inerrancy?<sup>51</sup>

Boettner criticizes the literal method because, like most non-premillennialists, he doesn't understand it. "Premillennialists often materialize and literalize the prophecies to such an extent that they keep them on an earthly level and miss their true and deeper meaning."<sup>52</sup>

The Lord did not reveal His Word to us in the form of a puzzle. He communicated using normal human language. That being the case, we should approach the Scriptures with that principle in mind.

### **Conclusion**

The average pew-sitter has very little concern as to whether he is an amillennialist, premillennialist, or postmillennialist. He can't comprehend what the fuss is all about. What he needs to be told is a Christian's method of interpretation is what the fuss is all about, and choosing the right method is very important.

<sup>50</sup> See Charles H. Ray, "Daniel 9:24-27, Part I" in *The Conservative Theological Journal* August 2001, Vol. 5, No. 15, 168-178.

<sup>51</sup> Walvoord, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Boettner, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 137.

What this article has demonstrated is one's hermeneutic impacts virtually every branch of systematic theology.