

THE END TIMES

A STUDY ON
ESCHATOLOGY AND
MILLENNIALISM



A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of
The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod
September 1989

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INTRODUCTION

The last two decades of our century have witnessed a growing interest in various aspects of Biblical prophecy. Sociologist William Martin of Rice University once observed that “Judeo-Christian history has seen numerous outcroppings of interest in biblical prophecy, usually in times of social upheaval, but few, if any, have been as widespread and influential as that now flourishing in conservative Protestant circles.”¹

Public awareness of such end-time topics as the millennium, rapture, and Armageddon has been heightened through the preaching of television evangelists and the publication of widely-read books such as those authored by Hal Lindsey. Few perhaps would have imagined that a book beginning with the words “This is a book about prophecy—Biblical prophecy” would sell 15 million copies and that its author would be named by *The New York Times* as the best-selling author of the decade of the 1970s!

These developments, however, have caused great concern among many Christians who regard some of the currently popular teachings on the end times as highly speculative and even contrary to the Scriptures and therefore injurious to faith. At the presuppositional level, serious questions have been raised regarding the principles of Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) employed by millennialist writers in their approach to and exposition of Biblical texts, particularly in those books commonly termed *apocalyptic* (e.g., Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation). Moreover, the failure to read these texts in the context of *all* that the Scriptures teach about the last things has led to confusion and doubt regarding the content of the Christian hope. The deficiency in, and most often the absence of, sacramental theology and teaching on the means of grace in general in millennialist preaching are especially obvious to those familiar with Lutheran confessional doctrine. Equally troublesome is the failure of millennialist preachers and writers to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel.

In the context of concerns such as these and in response to a specific request of the 1983 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations “prepare a

¹William Martin, “Waiting for the End,” *Atlantic* 249 (June 1982): 31.

study of the end times (eschatology), including millennialism, for the guidance of the church," the CTCR has prepared this report on eschatology and millennialism (1983 Resolution 3-25 "To Request CTCR to Study 'End Times'"). In the first section of this study the Commission presents a brief summary of four current views of the "millennium." Section two discusses pertinent hermeneutical principles, the doctrine of eschatology and some key texts that form the basis for millennialist teachings. The third part of the document presents a summary evaluation of dispensational premillennialism.

I. Current Millennial Views

While there are numerous variations in millennialist teaching today, a fourfold categorization has been widely accepted: (1) dispensational premillennialism; (2) historic premillennialism; (3) postmillennialism; and (4) amillennialism.² Of the first three categories, all of which hold to a millennium or utopian age on this earth, the most commonly held view is dispensational premillennialism. In the interest of narrowing the discussion that follows to manageable proportions and of seeking to assist the members of the Synod in their evaluation of such teaching, the Commission has chosen to focus on this more well-known and prevalent premillennialist view. Before proceeding with a more detailed examination of the various elements of millennialist doctrine, we offer the following summary of the categories mentioned above.

A. Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialism, or simply dispensationalism, is a theological system having its origin among the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and England in the early 19th century. This system's originator was John Nelson Darby (1800–82), one of the chief founders of the Plymouth Brethren movement. Dispensationalism arose as a reaction against the Church of England and the widely held view of postmillennialism (see part C. below).

The teachings of dispensational premillennialism on prophecy have spread widely in Canada and the United States, due especially to the influence of the 1909 *Scofield Reference Bible* and its subsequent editions. Today, dispensationalism is by far the most prominent form of millennialism. It is officially taught at the Moody Bible Institute (Chicago), Dallas Theological Seminary, and an estimated two hundred Bible institutes in the U.S.A. It has been promoted by television evangelists such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Kenneth Copeland, and Jack Van Impe, by independent ministries such as "Lamb and Lion" and "World Prophecy Ministry," and in dozens of paperbacks. Among the best known of these is Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which has made its way into film.

²See Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

Dispensationalists³ usually divide God's dealings with humanity into seven distinct "dispensations": Innocence (Gen. 1:28–3:6), Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 4:1–8:14), Human Government (Gen. 8:15–11:32), Promise (Gen. 12:1–Ex. 18:27), The Law (Ex. 19:3–Acts 1:26), The Church (Acts 2:1–Revelation 19), and the Millennial Kingdom (Revelation 20). A *dispensation* is defined as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."⁴ In each of these periods, a distinct revelation of God's will is dominant and tests mankind's obedience to God.

What, then, are the key elements in dispensationalist eschatology? The Old Testament, it is said, promises to the Jewish people an earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah. When Christ came, He offered this kingdom to the Jews. The Jews at that time, however, rejected Him and the kingdom. This kingdom, then, was postponed until some point in the future. In the meantime, Christ introduced the "mystery form" of the kingdom (Matthew 13) and established the church. This "parenthesis" of God's program will end at the "rapture" when all believers, exclusive of Old Testament saints, will go to heaven to celebrate with Christ "the marriage feast of the Lamb" for seven years. Then God's promised purpose for Israel resumes. During this seven-year period, a number of events will occur on earth (Revelation 6–19):

1. The "tribulation" begins, the latter half of which is called the "great tribulation."
2. The Antichrist begins his cruel reign and in the midst of the seven years he proscribes Jewish worship at the temple.
3. Terrible judgments fall on the earth.
4. A remnant of Israel (the 144,000 of Revelation 7) believes in Jesus as the Messiah and preaches the "Gospel of the Kingdom."
5. Through their witness a multitude of Gentiles is saved (Rev. 7:9).
6. Toward the end, a number of military battles take place leading up to the Battle of Armageddon.

At the end of this seven-year period, dispensationalists teach, Christ (together with the church) returns in glory and destroys His enemies. The vast majority of Israelites will be converted. Satan will be bound for 1000 years. Believers who die during the tribulation and Old Testament saints will be raised and join the church in heaven. Christ will judge the living *Gentiles* (Matt. 25:31–46). The "goats" will be cast into hell. The "sheep" and the believing Jews still living will enter the millennium in their

³Since dispensationalists differ from each other on a number of details, the following summary is based on the *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible*, ed. C. I. Scofield and E. Schuyler English, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3, 6, 13, 18, 86, 1130, 1335–36.

⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

natural bodies. They will marry, reproduce, and die. (The resurrected believers will live in the heavenly Jerusalem hovering above the earthly Jerusalem.) The millennium will be a golden age, a time of prosperity and peace, with worship centering around the rebuilt temple. Though at the beginning of the millennium only believers will live on earth, some of their children and grandchildren will not believe in Christ. These unbelievers Satan will gather in one last revolt (Rev. 20:7–9). Toward the end, all believers who die during the millennium will be raised. After Satan’s “little season,” all the *unbelieving* dead will then be raised and judged (Rev. 20:11–15). The final stage will now be ushered in, during which period there will remain a distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

Three presuppositions are critical for the dispensationalist system. These basic premises may be summarized in the following way:

1. The Distinction between Israel and the Church.

According to the dispensationalist view, throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to *earthly* goals and an earthly people, that is, the *Jewish people*; and the other related to *heavenly* goals and a heavenly people, that is, the *Christian church*.⁵ The church was not foreseen in the Old Testament and therefore constitutes a “parenthesis” in God’s predicted plan for Israel. In the future, the distinction between Jew and Gentile will be reestablished and will continue throughout all eternity.

2. The Literal Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy.

The Old Testament, dispensationalist writers argue, contains many promises that God will establish an earthly kingdom involving Israel. These promises are to be fulfilled literally. The central promise to Abraham was that Abraham’s physical descendants would be given the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. The Davidic covenant contains the promise that a descendant of David (the Messiah) would rule over Israel forever from David’s throne, i.e., from Jerusalem. The new covenant of Jer. 31:31–34, though containing features which also apply to believers in the present “church age,” is essentially a covenant for Israel. A great many passages in the Psalms and prophets are interpreted to mean that Israel will be regathered in the land of Canaan under the perfect rule of the Messiah. These promises will be fulfilled literally during Christ’s millennial reign. Similarly, much of Daniel and Revelation awaits a literalistic fulfillment in the future millennium.

3. The Manifestation of God’s Glory as the Purpose of History

While dispensationalists agree that human beings are reconciled to God by grace alone through the work of Christ in history, “the soteriological or saving program of God is not the only purpose but one of the

⁵Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 41–45.

means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself.”⁶ Thus, not salvation but the manifestation of God’s glory is the main theme and broad purpose of His activity in human history in each of the dispensations.

B. Historic Premillennialism

In contrast to dispensational premillennialism, those who hold the historic premillennialist view argue that Christ’s second advent will be a one-stage event after the tribulation. Either at this time or before, the vast majority of Jews will be converted. Believers who have died will be raised, those alive will be transformed, and all believers will meet Christ in the air and then descend with Him to earth. Christ will then slay the Antichrist, bind Satan, and set up His millennial kingdom on earth. Christ and His redeemed, both Jews and Gentiles as one people of God, will reign visibly over the unbelieving nations still on earth. People in resurrected bodies and natural bodies will live together on the earth. Sin and death will still exist, but external evil will be restrained. The 1000 years of the millennial kingdom will be a time of social, political, and economic justice and great prosperity. After these 1000 years, Satan will be loosed in order to deceive the unbelieving nations into making a final assault against the redeemed. Satan will be destroyed, and the resurrection of the dead *unbelievers* will occur. Then will come the judgment of all, both believers and unbelievers, and eternity.

C. Postmillennialism

In contrast to the above, the less common postmillennial view places Christ’s second advent *after* (post) the millennium. Only then will the rapture, the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the eternal states occur. The millennium is not understood to involve a visible reign of Christ in the form of an earthly monarchy, nor is the millennial period to be taken literally as necessarily 1000 years long. In these respects postmillennialism corresponds closely to the amillennialist position (see below).

But the postmillennial view does posit a recognizable millennial period, a golden age of prosperity and peace among all at the end of which Christ will return. The millennium will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity, leading to the pervasive reduction of evil and to greatly improved conditions in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres. In fact, the entire world will eventually be Christianized to the point that the Christian belief and value system will become the accepted norm for all nations. Matthew 28:18–20 will become a reality.

⁶*Ibid.*, 46.

D. Amillennialism

An eschatology which does not teach a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Christ may be called “amillennialist” (sometimes called “realized millennialism” because the period spoken of in Revelation 20 is now in the process of realization). Although the detailed exegesis of the pertinent texts may vary somewhat among amillennialist Christians, those who adhere to this position agree that the “thousand-year” reference in Revelation 20 is a figurative expression for the present reign of Christ which began upon His ascension into heaven and will be fully manifested at His second coming. Christ’s second coming will be one event at which time He will, in the words of Martin Luther, “raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers in Christ eternal life” (Explanation to Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed). The eschatology presented in The Lutheran Confessions is clearly amillennialist (AC XVII).

Excursus on Seventh-Day Adventism

Central to Adventist eschatology is Christ’s second advent.⁷ According to Adventist teaching, Christ entered into the holy place of the heavenly temple on Good Friday and remained there for eighteen centuries to plead His blood on behalf of sinners. In 1844 (2,300 “prophetic days” or years after 457 B.C.—Dan. 8:14), Christ entered the heavenly holy of holies to begin investigating the conduct of believers—an “investigative judgment” which will last until His second advent. When people die, they become non-existent in body and soul until this second coming. Just before Christ returns, those who were responsible for His trial and crucifixion (Rev. 1:7) and the faithful members of the Adventist denomination who died after 1844 (Rev. 14:13) will be raised to see Him come. At His return Christ will destroy the beast, the false prophet, and the wicked who made war against God and His people at Armageddon (Rev. 16:12–16; 19:11–21). Satan will have the sins of the world placed upon him as a “scape-goat” and will be consigned to a desolate earth for 1000 years (Rev. 20:1–3). At the same time, all believers who died before 1844 and all non-Adventist believers who died after 1844 will be raised (Rev. 20:4–6). All believers

⁷F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 3d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 431–42; Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah Witness, Mormons and Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 89–143; Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. and expanded ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 409–500.

who are still alive will be transformed, and both groups will go to heaven to rule with Christ 1000 years. During this period, Christ and the believers will rule for the purpose of investigating the lives of the unbelievers and determining the amount of suffering they will have to experience. After the millennium the wicked will be raised, they will suffer in various degrees on earth, and they will be gathered by Satan for a final assault on the heavenly Jerusalem which has just descended (Rev. 20:7–9). Following this, God will annihilate Satan, his evil angels, and all the wicked. Christ and all believers will then live forever on the new earth.

II. Eschatology and Millennialism

A detailed evaluation of arguments for each of the views summarized above lies beyond the scope of this study. The variety of interpretations⁸ given to the Biblical data within millennialist eschatology would make such an approach difficult, and perhaps less than helpful. (Within dispensationalism there are, for example, pre-tribulationists, post-tribulationists, mid-tribulationists, and among the mid-tribulationists there are those who hold a “partial-rapture view” and an “immanent post-tribulation view.”) Therefore, the Commission has here singled out what it regards as the principal considerations which, from a Lutheran perspective, must be kept in mind by those seeking guidance regarding the “end times.” Especially important are the principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) employed in the study of the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Old and New Testaments from which millennialist teaching is largely derived. And, since millennialist teaching represents a *system* of interpreting and shaping all aspects of eschatology, it is also necessary to review key end-time doctrines, and to do so in light of millennialist adaptations. This section will conclude with specific commentary on some of the Biblical texts which have played a determinative role in the development of some of the currently popular views concerning the end times.

A. Hermeneutical Considerations

When approaching the subject of Biblical eschatology, it is especially important that the reader of Scripture take into account the nature of prophetic and apocalyptic literature. Most of both the major and minor prophets are written in poetry, with its characteristic figurative and picturesque language. For example, Amos pictures the future eschatological blessings for God’s people by saying that “the mountains shall drip sweet wine” (9:13). The prophet hardly meant here that the hills in the Middle East will one day be covered with wine.

Symbolic language of this kind is especially common in apocalyptic literature such as Daniel and Revelation. In Revelation, for example, one

⁸See Appendix I for a set of diagrams depicting the major millennial views and the time of the “rapture” within dispensationalism.

reads of horsemen (chap. 6), locusts (chap. 9), beasts (chap. 13), Satan chained and bound in a bottomless pit (chap. 20), and more. Moreover, in apocalyptic literature numbers are regularly used symbolically⁹ (the seven horns and seven eyes of Christ [Rev. 5:6], the 144,000 sealed [Rev. 7:2–8; 14:1–5], the 1000 years of Revelation 20). Clearly, this type of literature does not purport to be speaking literally,¹⁰ as if every verse is presenting straightforward, newspaper-like prose. The goal of the interpreter must be to seek the one *intended* or *literal* sense of the text, and to do so with the recognition that God in some cases has chosen to convey meaning through symbolism and figures of speech (e.g., metonymy, metaphor, and simile).

Second, certain prophetic texts are best interpreted according to what has commonly been called the *shortened perspective*.¹¹ Events in the near and the distant future are often telescoped into one picture, like mountain peaks when seen from a distance. Sometimes the prophets focus on the immediate future and at other times on the distant future; however, both are seen at the same time. Joel's prophecy, for example, moves easily from the immediate situation of the locust plague (1:2–2:27) to the distant future of Pentecost (2:28–29) to the even more distant future of Christ's second coming (2:30–3:21). Jesus Himself prophesies in this way. In Matt. 24:15–28 (cf. Mark 13:14–23 and Luke 21:20–24) He projects into one picture both A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the final intensified persecution against the church before His second coming. Biblical prophecy often does not picture for us the intervening centuries which lie as valleys between the high points of salvation history.

Third, the interpreter should recognize the “historical times-coloring” of the prophetic message. Procedurally, the first task in interpretation is to ascertain what the text meant in its historical situation. Reflecting the historical situation in which they spoke, the prophets preached to a definite life situation and delivered their oracles in terms which their original hearers could understand. For example, Obadiah predicts that those in Mount Zion will escape God's wrath (Obadiah 17). The New Testament indicates that this prophecy is ultimately realized in the promise that the people of God, that is, all believers (the church), will be

⁹See Henry Barclay Swete's chapter on “Symbolism” in his *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), cxxxi–cxxxix.

¹⁰For example, C. C. Ryrie interprets Rev. 14:20 as follows: at Armageddon “the blood from the slaughter will flow 200 miles, to the depth of about 4-1/2 feet.” *The Ryrie Study Bible: New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 472.

¹¹John P. Milton, *Prophecy Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), 15. According to Milton *shortened perspective* means that “in the prophetic message the eschatological goal of the covenant is often seen as coming soon. It seems to be expected right after and in direct relation to the historical situation of the moment to which the message of the prophet is directed.”

saved (e.g., Heb. 12:22). However, Obadiah does not say “the Christian church will be saved” simply because these words are not in his B.C. vocabulary.

Fourth, Old Testament prophecy, especially when dealing with eschatological themes, is often typical or typological in nature.¹² A *type* is a person, institution, or event which prefigures and foreshadows a new and greater reality (the *antitype*). The antitype historically and theologically corresponds to, elucidates, fulfills, and eschatologically completes the type. The antitype is no mere repetition of the type but is always greater than its prefigurement. And since the Scriptures are Christological, the Old Testament’s types (which are so indicated by Scripture) are related to, centered in, and fulfilled in Christ and His people, the church.

Old Testament Israel’s history often contains this typological, future-oriented thrust. The prophets constantly express their hope for the future in terms of God’s acts in the past, which nevertheless will be repeated on a universal scale and will exceed more gloriously anything experienced in the past. Isaiah predicts a new and greater Exodus from bondage (Is. 11:15; 43:16–19; 51:10–11; 52), a new and greater Davidic King (9:1–7; 11:1–10), and a new Jerusalem inhabited by a new people (65:17–25). The Exodus from Egypt is a prefigurement of the deliverance from bondage to sin in Christ (1 Cor. 5:6–8; 10:1–11; 1 Pet. 1:13, 18–19). David typifies the Messiah (Matt. 2:23; Luke 1:26–33; Acts 2:25–31). And, Old Testament Jerusalem foreshadows the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26–27; Heb. 12:22; Revelation 21). Thus, to insist, for example, that Jerusalem in the Old Testament (Mt. Zion of Obadiah 17) refers to the modern city of Jerusalem in the Middle East is to ignore its typological significance.

The relationship between the two Testaments is similar to that of a bud and its full blossom. In the words of St. Augustine’s ancient formulation, “The New Testament is latent in the Old (the ‘bud’); the Old becomes patent in the New (the ‘blossom’).” When studying a given prophetic oracle, therefore, it is both appropriate and necessary that the reader of the Scriptures ask these questions: Does the New Testament quote it or allude to it? How does the New Testament treat the oracle’s themes and theological points?

When this is done the interpreter will discover that the fulfillment is greater than the prediction, just as the antitype is greater than the type.

¹²For more extensive treatments of typology, see Walter R. Roehrs, “The Typological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament,” *Concordia Journal* 10 (November 1984): 204–16; Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 35–59; and Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982); R. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981); Horace Hummel, “How to Preach the Old Testament,” in *Concordia Pulpit* 1986 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 1–23.

One cannot simply assume that there must be a literalistic correspondence in all details between the prediction and the fulfillment. For example, Ezek. 34:23–24 and 37:24–25 predict that *David* will rule over restored Israel. Isaiah 7:14 predicts that the Messiah's name shall be *Immanuel*. The New Testament, however, informs us that *Jesus* of Nazareth, a *descendant* of David, is in fact this promised Messiah. Without the New Testament one might be led to expect a resurrected David whose actual name is Immanuel. To be sure, the fulfillment does at times simply correspond to the predicted details. Micah 5:2 predicts that the Messiah will come from *Bethlehem*, a fact to which the fulfillment corresponds precisely (Matt. 2:1–6; John 7:42). However, the New Testament, and not some preconceived notion of consistent literalism, must determine in what way the prediction is fulfilled.

These observations presuppose that since God is the one Author of all Scripture, an organic unity exists within and between the Old and New Testaments, both with respect to their content (the doctrine of the Gospel in all its articles) and their function of making people wise unto salvation. The hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture necessarily presumes this unity. Thus, we may look to the New Testament to clarify what the persons, institutions, and events mentioned by the prophets typify. Hans LaRondelle, in *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, states the matter well:

The New Testament has been written as the ultimate norm for the fulfillment and interpretation of Israel's prophecies. A Christian would deny his Christian faith and Lord if he reads the Old Testament as a closed entity, as the full and final message of God for Jews irrespective of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, and apart from the New Testament explanation of the Hebrew writings.¹³

All of this is to say that the Scriptures themselves, and not twentieth century commentaries on current events, must provide the normative interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. Ezekiel 38–39 predicts that Gog of the land of Magog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, along with Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Beth-togarmah will make war on Israel. Dispensationalists often identify these with the twentieth century countries of Russia (Meshech=Moscow, Tubal=Tobolsk), Iran, Ethiopia, Libya (Put), Germany (Gomer), and southern Russia (Beth-togarmah) and say that these countries will attack the modern Israelis.¹⁴ The New Testa-

¹³LaRondelle, 8.

¹⁴Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 59–71. However, these identifications are not historically accurate. Meshech and Tubal, for instance, were located in central and eastern Anatolia. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982).

ment, however, interprets these references typologically by viewing these enemy nations of Old Testament Israel as illustrative of all the godless world which is hostile to the church and will intensely persecute the church for a short time before Judgment Day (Rev. 20:7–10).

Fifth, the interpreter of Old Testament prophecy should especially keep in mind the Christological focus of Scripture. The Old Testament prophets were both “foretellers” and “forthtellers.” They were preachers of the covenant, proclaiming the Law and the Gospel to their original hearers. Even their eschatological predictions were given not to provide unrelated bits of information or to satisfy curiosity about the future, but to lead their hearers to repentance and faith. Therefore, the interpreter must relate all prophecy, including eschatological prophecy, to the covenant, to Law and Gospel, and ultimately to Christ. The Old Testament dare not be treated as a self-contained entity to be read apart from Christ and the New Testament. This would amount to treating the Old Testament as a non-Christian Jewish book (cf. 2 Cor. 3:12–16). To insist, for instance, on the basis of Ezekiel 40–46 that the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that the sacrificial system will be reinstituted is to disregard Christ who is the New Temple (Matt. 12:6; John 2:19–22; Rev. 21:22) and the all-sufficient Sacrifice (Hebrews 9–10, especially 10:18). The Mosaic covenant with its sacrificial system prefigures the new covenant in Christ (Jer. 31:31–34; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:13). Now that the antitype has come, one cannot expect the reestablishment of the type (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 10:1).

Sixth, Old Testament Israel prefigured Christ and His church as the New Israel. Christ is the New Israel, Israel reduced to one. He recapitulates and fulfills Old Testament Israel’s history by obeying God perfectly where Israel disobeyed (Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:15; Deut. 6:13,16; 8:2–3; Matt. 4:1–11). “The descendants of Abraham failed and Israel’s burden in its entirety came to Jesus, whom God designated as His Israel by calling Him out of Egypt, by placing the world’s burdens on Him, and by raising Him to life.”¹⁵ Christ is the promised seed of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth are blessed (Gen. 12:3,7; Gal. 3:8,14–16).¹⁶

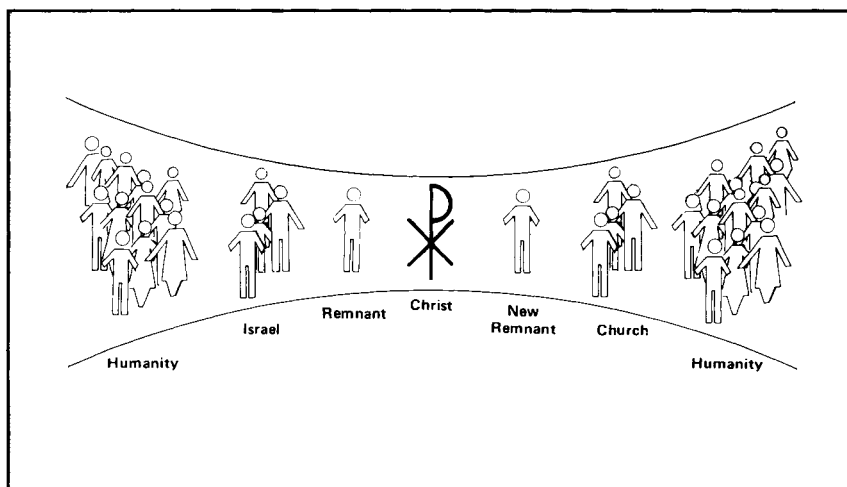
Since Christ is the New Israel, all those who believe in Him also become the New Israel, Abraham’s descendants (Gal. 3:29; 6:16; Rom.

¹⁵David P. Scaer, “Lutheran Viewpoints on the Challenge of Fundamentalism: Eschatology,” *Concordia Journal* 10 (January 1984): 10.

¹⁶Dispensationalists often apply Gen. 12:3 to the Jewish nation today rather than to Christ. The implication is that America should be pro-Israel lest it be cursed by God. The *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible* under Gen. 12:3 states, “It has invariably fared ill with the people who have persecuted the Jew, well with those who have protected him. . . . The future will still more remarkably prove this principle” (p. 18). Rather, in light of Christ who is the seed of Abraham this verse should be understood to mean that whoever blesses Christ will be blessed; whoever curses Christ will be cursed (cf. Matt. 12:30; Gal. 3:16).

9:6–8,24–26; 4:16–17; Ephesians 2; 1 Pet. 2:9–10). Christ began to reconstitute Israel by first restoring the faithful remnant of the Jews (Matt. 10:6; 15:24; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 2:5–42; 3:25–26). Then His mission moved out to the Gentiles so that they too might be incorporated into the people of God (Rom. 11:17–24; Acts 10; 13:46–48; 15:14–18; Gal. 3:14,27–29; Eph. 2:11–22). Therefore, the Christian church is *Israel restored*, heir to the promise made to Abraham (Gal. 3:29).

What is said in the above paragraphs may be visualized in the following way:



This diagram illustrates God's plan for bringing back fallen creation into a proper relationship with Himself. His means for doing this narrowed from Abraham and all his descendants (Gen. 12:1–3) to the post-exilic remnant (Hag. 2:2; Zech. 8:6; Ezra 1–2) to Christ, Israel reduced to one. From there it broadened through the faithful remnant of the Jews to the whole church of believing Jews and Gentiles. The church, however, is not an end in itself but has been given the mission of making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19–20).

One should read the prophetic promises of the restoration of Israel (such as Ezekiel 37; Hos. 1:8–11; Micah 4:1–5:9; Zeph. 3:11–20; Is. 11:10–16; 60–61) in light of the above. Thus, although these promises were partially fulfilled in the return from the Babylonian captivity in 538 B.C., the fulfillment comes in Christ, the New Israel, and consequently His church. The prophet Amos foresees that the Davidic dynasty will be rebuilt to incorporate the remnant of Edom and of all the nations (Amos 9:11–12). According to the apostle James this prophecy was fulfilled when, through

the preaching of the Gospel, God called out from the Gentiles a “people for His name” (Acts 15:13–18). It is therefore contrary to Scripture to teach as Biblical doctrine the opinion that the fulfillment of the promises of Israel’s restoration took place in the establishment of the secular state of modern Israel in 1948 and/or in the Jewish taking of Old Jerusalem in 1967.

In this connection an important difference between Old Testament Israel and the New Israel should be noted. Old Testament Israel was both church and state, both a spiritual assembly of believers and a political entity. Many of the Old Testament promises reflect this theocratic context of Old Testament Israel. The New Israel, however, is not a secular state, not even in part. The political aspects of Israel’s existence in the Old Testament have fallen away in the fulfillment. Isaiah 9:7 prophesies that the Messiah will rule His kingdom on *the throne of David* (cf. 2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 132:11–12). Isaiah’s words are fulfilled in the crucified and risen Messiah’s ascension to and session at *the right hand of God* where He *now* graciously rules over restored Israel. They are not to be fulfilled in some future “millennium” when Christ will, according to millennialist prediction, rule in modern Jerusalem (Acts 2:30–36; 13:32–37; 15:13–18; 28:26–28; Luke 1:32; 1 Cor. 15:25–27; Eph. 1:20–23; Rom. 15:12). Again, Is. 19:23–25 prophesies that *Egypt* and *Assyria* will join Israel as God’s people. The inclusion of *Gentile* believers in the New Israel, and not Assyria or Egypt as such (Acts 15:14,17; Gal. 3:28; Rom. 15:8–12), marks the fulfillment of Isaiah 19.

This is not to say that the Old Testament everywhere pictures the Messiah and His kingdom within a political frame of reference. Many of the Old Testament’s messianic promises were not formulated in political terms. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 pictures a *suffering servant* whose mission is to “make many to be accounted righteous” by bearing their iniquities as a substitutionary sacrifice. He brings *salvation* to all nations (Is. 49:6; 42:6–7). Similarly, the “one like a son of man” coming in the clouds in Dan. 7:13–14 is not an earthly, political king. Indeed, the kingdom which He establishes is clearly in contrast to temporal regnancy (cf. Dan. 2:44). Nowhere is the new Israel over which the Messiah rules portrayed as a *secular*, political entity. In fact, Jesus explicitly rejected the notion that His messianic office could be conceived of in political terms (John 18:36–37; cf. Luke 24:44–47).

The distinction between the messianic kingdom as a *spiritual* reality and civil government as a temporal, political reality is maintained in the Lutheran confessional writings. The Augsburg Confession teaches that “all government in the world and all established rule and laws were instituted and ordained by God for the sake of good order” and therefore are an “outward and temporal . . . mode of existence” (AC XVI,1,4). The

Gospel teaches, however, “an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart” (AC XVI, 4). “Christ’s kingdom is spiritual; it is the knowledge of God in the heart, the fear of God and faith, the beginning of eternal righteousness and eternal life” (Ap XVI, 2). Thus, “the Gospel does not legislate for the civil estate,” though it does command us “to obey the existing laws” (Ap XVI, 6, 3). As a *hermeneutical* assumption this distinction between civil government and the kingdom of Christ serves to prevent a political reading of those texts which speak of the spiritual reign of God. Such a political rendering is not an uncommon approach in millennialist interpretation, however.

Seventh, the land of Israel prefigures Christ and ultimately the new heavens and earth. Just as the New Testament transcends the *ethnic* and *political* aspects of Israel, so it also transcends the *geographical* limitations of the Promised Land.

To understand this point, one must note the theological significance of the land of Israel. In the Old Testament, the land of Israel or Palestine was like a miniature world in which God illustrated His kingdom. The land of Israel was promised as the place (Deut. 4:21,38) where God would bless His people, the children of Israel (Deut. 26:15; 28:8) and give them rest (Deut. 12:9–10; 25:19). However, in the New Testament Christ is the heir of the promise given to Abraham and is the one through whom (Gal. 3:15–18; Heb. 1:2; 6:19–20; Col. 1:27; Titus 2:13) the New Israel receives God’s blessings (Rom. 15:29) and true rest (Matt. 11:28–29). LaRondelle states in this connection:

Wherever Christ is, there is the holy space. This is the essence of the New Testament application of Israel’s holy territory. For the holiness of old Jerusalem, the New Testament substitutes the holiness of Jesus Christ. It “Christifies” the old territorial holiness and thus transcends its limitations. This should not be regarded as the New Testament rejection of Israel’s territorial promise, but rather as its fulfillment and confirmation in Christ.¹⁷

Since those who have fellowship with Christ possess eternal life, one can also say that the Promised Land of Israel foreshadowed ultimately *the* Promised Land, the new heavens and new earth (Is. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1–3). Believers look forward to the full enjoyment of their new inheritance (Rev. 21:1,7; Eph. 1:13–14; Col. 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:3–5), when God will bless the church with eternal rest, a rest which is already ours through faith in Christ (Heb. 3:1; 4:1,8–10).

Consider how the New Testament treats God’s promise of the land of Canaan to Abraham (Gen. 12:1,7; 15:18–21; 17:8). Both Rom. 4:13

¹⁷LaRondelle, 142.

and Heb. 11:8–16 interpret this promise as a reference to the new “world” and the “heavenly” country (cf. Heb. 2:5). Jesus Himself widened the scope of this territory to encompass the new earth (cf. Matt. 5:5; Ps. 37:11). The land of Palestine in which Israel lived was, as it were, a down payment or pledge of this future world. Therefore, although the promises of the prophets that Israel will dwell in the land were partially realized in exilic Israel’s return to Palestine from Babylonian captivity, the ultimate fulfillment of these promises comes in Christ and the new earth, not in a literal return of Jews to the land of Palestine.

B. The Doctrine of Eschatology¹⁸

For an evaluation of millennialist views of the end times it is helpful to make use of a distinction between what some theologians have referred to as *inaugurated* eschatology and *future* eschatology.¹⁹ The term *inaugurated eschatology* embraces everything that the Old and New Testament Scriptures teach concerning the believer’s *present* possession and enjoyment of blessings which will be fully experienced whenever Christ comes again. *Future eschatology* focuses on events which still lie in the future, such as the resurrection, judgment, and new heavens and new earth.

1. Inaugurated Eschatology

The Old Testament throughout has a future-oriented thrust to it. The faith of the Old Testament believer was thoroughly eschatological. As the writer to the Hebrews states, “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar” (11:13). The Old Testament eschatological outlook can be summarized under the following seven points:²⁰

- a. Old Testament believers awaited a *future Redeemer*. From Gen. 3:15 onward the Old Testament points forward to the promised Redeemer. He will be the culmination and fulfillment of the offices of prophet (Deut. 18:15), priest (Ps. 110:4), and king (Zech. 9:9), the “servant” whose suffering atones for humankind’s sins (Is. 52:13–53:12), and the glorious “one like a son of man” to whom is given eternal “dominion and glory and kingdom” (Dan. 7:13–14).

¹⁸For a more detailed treatment of the material in this section see Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979). Our discussion follows Hoekema’s excellent treatment of those doctrines which are affected by millennialist views.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1. Inaugurated eschatology is to be distinguished from “realized eschatology,” the theory of C. H. Dodd that the final eschaton has come in Christ. According to this latter view, no future series of events is yet to happen. The kingdom has come and with it eschatological realization.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 4–12.

- b. The Old Testament writers look forward to the eschatological *kingdom of God*²¹ when God's reign will become a reality experienced fully not only by Israel but by the world, whether in judgment or in salvation (Psalm 93; 95–99; Dan. 2:44–45; 7; Isaiah 24–27; Obadiah 21).
- c. The Old Testament anticipates the *new covenant* which will bring forgiveness of sins and constitute the fulfillment of God's covenants in the past with Abraham, Israel, and David (Jer. 31:31–34).
- d. *The restoration of Israel* is a central element of eschatological expectation in the Old Testament period. The prophets longed for the day when God would restore His repentant, believing, and purified people (Ezekiel 36; Isaiah 35; 54–55; 61).
- e. The *outpouring of the Spirit* was another object of the eschatological hope possessed by God's people in the Old Testament (Joel 2:28–29; Ezek. 36:27; 39:29; Is. 32:15; 44:3).
- f. The prophets await the *day of the Lord* which will bring God's wrath on the wicked but salvation for the believers (Is. 13:6–16; Zeph. 1; 3:9–20; Joel 2:32; Obadiah 15–21; Malachi 4).
- g. The Old Testament looks forward to the *new heavens and the new earth*. As the earth is cursed as a result of the fall (Gen. 3:17–18), so also the earth must share in God's final act of redemption (Is. 11:6–9; 32:15; 35:1–7; 65:17; 66:22).

With the first advent of Christ, these Old Testament eschatological hopes are *fulfilled*. Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited, promised *Messiah* who has defeated Satan, sin, and death (Matt. 12:22–29; John 12:31; Col. 2:11–15; Heb. 2:14–15; 1 Cor. 15:55–57; 1 John 3:8). In His life, death, and resurrection the eschatological *kingdom of God* has appeared in history (Matt. 12:28; Luke 1:32–33, 68–75; 11:20; 17:20–21; Col. 1:13–14; Rev. 1:6; Rom. 14:17). *The New Israel* (Gal. 3:29; 6:16; Rom. 9:6–8) now receives the forgiveness of sins and all the blessings of the *New Covenant* in Christ (1 Cor. 11:25; Hebrews 8–10). The promised *outpouring of the Holy Spirit* has already come in Christ (Acts 2; 8:14–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7; Eph. 1:13–14; Titus 3:5–6; 1 Cor. 6:19). The great *Day of the Lord* has arrived in Christ (Luke 19:44; Matt. 3:1–12; 2 Cor. 6:1–2). And those who are in Christ already participate in the *new creation*; they are, in fact, “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The *eschaton* has been inaugurated; “the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Through the Gospel and the sacraments the

²¹The *kingdom of God* can be defined as God's promised ruling activity over and among people which brings judgment and mercy. “The prophets had foretold that this real but hidden reign of God would one day become manifest and universal; God would lay bare His arms finally and definitively to lead all history to its goal, to triumph over all who refused His royal mercy and to bring home to Himself His people gathered from among all nations.” W. R. Roehrs and M. H. Franzmann, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 16, under Matt. 3:2.

Christian already now receives God's promised eschatological blessings by faith (Heb. 6:5; 1 Pet. 2:2–3; Rom. 8:37–39; 6:1–11).

Thus, the Christian *now* lives in the age of the fulfillment, in the last days (Acts 2:17; 3:20–21; Heb. 1:1–2; 9:26; 1 John 2:18; 1 Pet. 1:20). The New Testament declares that the messianic age promised in the Old Testament began at Christ's first advent. The promised Messiah is now graciously ruling on the throne of David through the Gospel and the sacraments, the means through which He extends His gracious invitation (Matt. 22:1–14). The messianic age which the New Testament declares a present reality cannot be viewed, therefore, as only in the future.²²

And yet, Christians still await the *consummation* of these divine promises. They await *the Messiah's* second coming when *the kingdom of God* will be made fully manifest (Matt. 7:21–23; 8:11–12; 25:31–46; Luke 21:31; 22:29–30; 1 Cor. 6:9; 15:50; 2 Tim. 4:18). Christians eagerly anticipate the consummation of the *New Covenant* when they will perfectly know the Lord and sin no more (Jer. 31:31–34). They look forward to the day when all of the *New Israel*, Christians living and dead, will be gathered together forever to be with the Lord (Matt. 19:28; 24:30–31; 25:31–34; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). The gift of the *Holy Spirit* which was poured out on each of them at their baptisms is the down payment and guarantee of their inheritance of future glory and of the reception of their spiritual body (Eph. 1:14; 4:30; 2 Cor. 5:5; Rom. 8:23). And Christians faithfully wait for the future *day of the Lord* when they will dwell with Him forever in *the new heavens and the new earth* (2 Pet. 3:10–13; 1 Thess. 5:1–11).

Therefore, the Christian lives in the proverbial tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. This tension underlies everything that the Scriptures teach about eschatology. On the one hand, the end has arrived in Christ. The believer now receives the promised eschatological blessings through the Gospel and sacraments. On the other hand, the consummation is still a future reality. The Christian has *not yet* entered into the glories of heaven.

The life of Christians in this tension is a life under the cross (Matt. 16:24–25); the eschatological blessings which Christians have are theirs by faith, not by sight (Rom. 8:24–25). Hence, believers can expect to suffer and be persecuted in this life. But the abundant life which Jesus came to give enables them to rise above suffering and, in the midst of their suffering, helps them to focus on the future consummation (Luke 6:22–23, 26; 1 Thess. 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:10; John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Col. 3:1–4; Rom. 8:18–25). Only on the last day will Christians move from a life under the cross to a life of glory.

²²The *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible* takes the position that "Christ is not now seated upon His own throne. The Davidic Covenant . . . and the promises of God through the prophets . . . concerning the Messianic kingdom await fulfillment. It is in a still future day that God will give to His Son, once crowned with thorns by men, the crown of His father, David" (p. 1318, under Rev. 3:21).

2. Future Eschatology

When the Scriptures speak of future events of the end times they do so by simultaneously pointing to what has been called the great eschatological act of the past.²³ Since Christ has won the decisive victory over Satan, sin, and death in the past, future eschatological events are but the culmination of what has already been set in motion by this pivotal event in human history. With this in mind, we now proceed to look in detail at those aspects of “future eschatology” which are crucial for a proper interpretation of the end times.

a. The Signs of the End

Scripture reveals numerous signs which signal Christ’s return (especially in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and 2 Thessalonians 2). Before considering these signs, it is important that their purpose be understood.

First, the signs of the end do not signify events which will happen only in the future. The church of every generation can expect to witness their occurrence. Wars, famines, earthquakes, and anti-Christian forces were present already in the first century A.D., and they continue today. Even Jesus’ promise that the Gospel will be preached throughout the world can be said to have been fulfilled already in the days of the apostles (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 1:8; 10:18; Col. 1:23). To be sure, these signs will become more evident and intense immediately preceding Christ’s return, but every generation was and is acting responsibly in expecting Christ’s return in its own lifetime. Watchfulness, not laziness or apathy fostered by the mistaken notion that Christ’s return must be far off in the future, must characterize the church’s constant posture (Matt. 24:33, 42–44; Luke 21:28; 1 Thess. 5:6).

Second, the signs of the end are not intended to provide Christians a means by which they may calculate the exact time of Christ’s second coming.²⁴ In fact, the New Testament warns against all such efforts at date setting (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32; 1 Thess. 5:1–3; 2 Pet. 3:10). The signs of the end presented in Scripture assure the Christian *that* Christ will surely return.

Third, observing the signs has a positive significance for life in the present. They serve as a reminder of God’s call to watchfulness, holy living, and service to Christ (Matthew 25; Rom. 13:11–14; 2 Thessalonians 2–3; James 5:7–11; 2 Pet. 3:11–18).

²³Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 77, states, “The greatest eschatological event in history is not in the future but in the past.”

²⁴For example, William Miller, the founder of the movement producing the Seventh-Day Adventists, concluded that Christ’s return would occur between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. More recently, Edgar Whisenant received national media attention by calculating Christ’s return in September 1988, and then revised his calculations for a 1989 appearance of Christ.

Finally, the signs of the end do not belong necessarily to the category of the extraordinary or spectacular. The exhortations to be watchful, given by Jesus and the apostles, presuppose that the signs will be a part of the ordinary course of history (such not uncommon events as wars, earthquakes, famines, apostasy, and the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel) and therefore that discernment is necessary. Such discernment is also required, of course, in the case of the extraordinary; counterfeit “signs and wonders” are indeed possible (2 Thess. 2:9; Matt. 24:24).

We now proceed to a discussion of the individual “signs.” Anthony Hoekema’s outline of “the signs of the times” serves as a useful way to present what the Scriptures teach concerning the events which are to take place prior to Christ’s coming. Hoekema’s grouping (slightly revised here) is as follows:²⁵

1. The sign evidencing the grace of God: the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations
2. The signs indicating divine judgment
 - a. wars
 - b. earthquakes
 - c. famines and pestilences
 - d. signs in the heavens
3. The signs indicating opposition to God
 - a. tribulation
 - b. apostasy
 - c. Antichrist

The most important sign of the end is the missionary preaching of the Gospel to all nations (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10). It gives to the present age its primary purpose and significance (Matt. 28:18–20). The period between Christ’s two advents is preeminently the missionary age, the time when God graciously calls all people to be saved, a time foretold by the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Is. 2:1–4; 42:6–7; 49:6; 52:10; Amos 9:11–12). This sign, therefore, means that the church will carry out an ambitious program of outreach to the Jew and to the Gentile.²⁶ As the church proclaims the Gospel to all nations, nothing shall prevail against it, not even the gates of hell (Matt. 16:16–19; Rev. 7:3; 11:3–6; 20:1–6). However, we must humbly admit that only God knows when this sign will have been completely fulfilled.

The next group of signs—wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and signs in the heavens—indicates divine judgment (Is. 19:2; 2 Chron. 15:6; Matt. 24:6–8; Mark 13:7–8; Luke 21:9–11, 25–26; Joel 2:30–31). This

²⁵See Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 137.

²⁶The New Testament clearly teaches that the church must continue to evangelize the Jews (Rom. 1:16; 11:11–24, 28–32; Matt. 10:23; Gal. 4:4–5; 1 Cor. 9:19–23).

does not mean, of course, that people who suffer from such disasters are necessarily targeted as the special objects of God's wrath (cf. Luke 13:1-5). But disruptions of this kind in nature are reminders of the fact that the present fallen world is under God's curse (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:19-22). They are manifestations of God's wrath and signal the need for all sinners to repent (Luke 13:3,5; Rev. 9:20-21; 16:9). Christians, however, are urged to regard these signs also as "birth pangs" of a new and better world (Rom. 8:22; Matt. 24:8; Rev. 21:1-4) and to take comfort in the fact that God promises to protect and preserve them in the midst of this suffering (Rev. 3:10; 7:3-4).

The third group of signs indicates opposition to God and His kingdom: tribulation, apostasy, and Antichrist. As the other signs, the sign of tribulation applies to the entire period between Christ's two comings. Just as Old Testament Israel experienced suffering and distress throughout its history, so the church can expect no less. Jesus saw trouble ahead for His people (Matt. 5:10-12; John 15:18-20; 16:33). Because of the continued opposition of the world to the kingdom of God, Christians can expect to suffer persecution in various forms throughout this age and are called to endure in faith until the end (Matt. 24:9; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19).

However, the Scriptures also teach that tribulation for the church will intensify toward the end. The Old Testament predicts heightened persecution against God's people prior to the end (Dan. 12:1; Ezekiel 38-39; Zech. 14:1-2). Jesus speaks of a "great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matt. 24:21), immediately after which He will return (Matt. 24:29-31; cf. Mark 13:14-27; Luke 21:20-28). When Jesus points to the "desolating sacrilege"²⁷ in Matt. 24:15, He probably is referring to a blasphemous desecration and destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, which then typifies the Antichrist who arises in the church (cf. Luke 21:20; 2 Thessalonians 2). With prophetic "shortened perspective" (see footnote 11), Jesus thus places both the destruction of Jerusalem and the final intensified persecution against the church into the same picture. Clearly this persecution is not limited to Jerusalem or the Jewish nation but is directed against the whole church, since in Matt. 24:22 Jesus says that those days will be shortened "for the sake of the elect." Moreover, Jesus addresses His discourse to His disciples as representatives of the church.

The Revelation to John also describes this final persecution against the church, although in symbolical language (9:13-19; 11:7-10; 16:12-16;

²⁷This phrase is quoted from Dan. 8:13 and 11:31. Most exegetes conclude Daniel is referring to Antiochus Epiphanes who erected a pagan altar in the temple in 167 B.C. This "desolating sacrilege" was then a type of the altar erected in A.D. 70 and ultimately a type of the Antichrist. The intention of the similar phrase in Dan. 9:27 is disputed. See under Dan. 9:24-27.

19:19; 20:7–9). This is Satan's "little season," when he gathers the anti-Christian world in an attempt to destroy the church and prevent it from freely preaching the Gospel to all nations (Rev. 20:7–9; Ezekiel 38–39). Satan's final assault is *symbolically* called the battle of *Armageddon*, the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *har megiddo*—"hill of Megiddo," an expression that may allude to the famous battles which took place there in the Old Testament. But in view of the nature of apocalyptic language, these verses should not be interpreted literally as if they referred to a world war in the Middle East. Nor is this great tribulation to be understood as lasting 3-1/2 or 7 years, since the numbers in Daniel and Revelation are also symbolic. When Satan's "little season" has begun or is to begin cannot be computed exactly. Since opposition to the Christian church is widespread in our day, however, there is every reason to believe that we are already in this period of time.

The purpose of the sign of tribulation, too, is to exhort Christians to "look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28; cf. Matt. 24:33; Mark 13:29). Tribulation is also God's means of refining the church and "proving" the Christian (1 Pet. 1:6–7; 4:12; Zech. 13:9; Dan. 12:10). This judgment which overtakes the church is the last preliminary to Judgment Day (1 Pet. 4:17), and as such "it warns the members of the church that to seek to escape suffering by renouncing the faith is fatally senseless; they will escape present suffering only to find certain doom."²⁸

Another sign of the end which indicates opposition to God is the sign of apostasy or "falling away." The apostasies of the New Testament era were foreshadowed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament records a history of increasing apostasy which ultimately led to the destruction of both the northern and southern kingdoms. The history of the Christian church is also marked by a continuing apostasy throughout the period between Christ's two advents (Matt. 24:10–12; Heb. 6:6; 10:29; 2 Pet. 2:20–22; 1 John 2:19; Gal. 6:12–13).

However, the New Testament also predicts a final apostasy or rebellion. Jesus speaks of false Christs and false prophets leading many astray (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). The apostle Paul teaches that the second advent of Christ will not come "unless the rebellion [apostasy] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed" (2 Thess. 2:3). Since this sign is called a *falling away* or *apostasy* and the "man of lawlessness" takes his seat in the visible church (i.e., "the temple of God," v. 4), we may assume that those who fall away will be associated with the Christian church. This final, climactic apostasy, like the sign of tribulation, will be an intensification and culmination of a rebellion which began already in Paul's day (2 Thess. 2:7).

²⁸Franzmann, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*, 265, under 1 Pet. 4:17.

Finally, opposition to God is marked by the sign of the Antichrist. The term *Antichrist* is found in John's epistles (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7) and signifies both a substitute Christ (Greek *anti* means "in place of") and an opponent of Christ.

The New Testament predicts that the church throughout its history will witness many antichrists (Matt. 24:5,23-24; Mark 13:6,21-22; Luke 21:8; 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7). All false teachers who teach contrary to Christ's Word are opponents of Christ and, insofar as they do so, are anti-Christ.

However, the Scriptures also teach that there is one climactic "Antichrist" (Dan. 7:8,11,20-21,24-25; 11:36-45; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 John 2:18; 4:3; Revelation 17-18). In the opinion of most exegetes, this Antichrist was prefigured by Antiochus Epiphanes who profaned the Jerusalem temple by dedicating it to Zeus, by taking away the continual burnt offering, and by placing a pagan altar on top of the burnt offering altar in 167-164 B.C. (cf. Dan 8:9-13,23-25; 11:21-35). He was also prefigured, it is held, by the emperor-worshipping Roman armies which profaned ("desolating sacrilege") and destroyed the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20). The Antichrist's satanic counter-thrust to God's kingdom can also be expected to intensify towards the end.

The Scriptures reveal the following distinguishing marks of the Antichrist: 1. Just as Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the temple, so the Antichrist takes his seat in the "temple of God," that is, in the Christian church (cf. 2 Thess. 2:4; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Tim. 3:15). 2. He is not Satan himself but operates "by the activity of Satan" (2 Thess. 2:9). 3. He ascribes to himself truly divine power and exhibits himself as God (Dan. 7:25; 11:36; 2 Thess. 2:4). 4. He is a pseudo-Christ, a satanic perversion of Christ. He has a "coming" to imitate the "coming" of Christ (2 Thess. 2:8-9). He performs "signs and wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9) to imitate the Christ who was "attested . . . by God with mighty works and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). He represents a "mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7) to imitate the "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4; Col. 4:3) and brings a "wicked deception," "strong delusion," and "what is false" to imitate and oppose the truth of the Gospel (2 Thess. 2:10-12). Thus, he denies Christ and persecutes Christians (1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7; Dan. 7:25). 5. He remains until Judgment Day when Christ will slay him (Dan. 7:13-14,26; 2 Thess. 2:8).

When St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he saw a restraint placed on the "man of lawlessness" which would be removed before this "man of lawlessness" would be revealed. Paul refers to this restraint as a thing ("what is restraining him," 2 Thess. 2:6) and as a person ("he who now restrains," 2:7). We do not know what or whom he had in mind. Perhaps

he meant the Roman empire and emperor whose benign power of law and order permitted the Gospel to “speed on and triumph” (3:1). One cannot be certain.²⁹

In any case, the workings of the Antichrist are under the sovereign control of God. Martin Franzmann rightly concludes, “There is no uneasy balance of power between the satanic and the divine; the man of lawlessness must, unwittingly and unwillingly, serve God’s purposes. Through him God executes His judgment, that fearful judgment which delivers up men who will not love the truth to the lie which they desire. Only those become victims of the potent lie who ‘suppress the truth’ (Rom. 1:18) and so invoke the wrath of God.”³⁰ Christians are called to “stand firm” in the faith in the face of the one who comes “by the activity of Satan” (2 Thess. 2:9,15).

Concerning the historical identity of the Antichrist, we affirm the Lutheran Confessions’ identification of the Antichrist with the office of the papacy whose official claims continue to correspond to the Scriptural marks listed above.³¹ It is important, however, that we observe the distinction which the Lutheran Confessors made between the *office* of the pope (papacy) and the *individual men* who fill that office. The latter could be Christians themselves. We do not presume to judge any person’s heart. Also, we acknowledge the possibility that the historical form of the Antichrist could change.³² Of course, in that case another identified by these marks would arise.

²⁹Dispensationalists commonly identify the restrainer with the Holy Spirit and the restraint with the church, which will be “raptured” before the “tribulation.” Then the Antichrist will appear and work for seven years. However, the belief that the Holy Spirit and the church will be removed before the “tribulation” has no Biblical support, as we have shown.

³⁰Franzmann, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*, 213, under 2 Thessalonians 2.

³¹Ap XV, 18; Treatise, 39–59; FC SD X, 21–22; SA II, iv; see the “Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod,” paragraphs 20–21, 43; also John W. Behnken, “Papacy as Anti-Christ,” *The Lutheran Layman* (Dec. 1955); and Paul Raabe, “Necessary Distinctions Regarding the Papacy,” *Concordia Journal* 14 (January 1988): 3. Attention may also be called to the Australian “Theses of Agreement” (1966), which contain a section on “Theses on Eschatological Matters” (pp. 14–18).

³²To the extent that the papacy continues to claim as official dogma the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent which expressly anathematizes, for instance, the doctrine “that justifying faith is nothing else than trust in divine mercy which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this trust alone by which we are justified,” the judgment of the Lutheran confessional writings that the papacy is the Antichrist holds. At the same time, of course, we must recognize the possibility, under God’s guidance, that contemporary discussions and statements (e.g., 1983 U.S. Lutheran—Roman Catholic dialogue statement on “Justification by Faith”) could lead to a revision of the Roman Catholic position regarding Tridentine dogma.

b. The Second Advent of Christ

The New Testament Scriptures teach that Christ will one day visibly return in glory. They refer to His second advent by using several different terms: “coming” or “presence” (*parousia*), “appearance” (*epiphaneia*; s.v. *phaneroō*), “revelation” (*apokalypsis*), and “the day of the Lord” (*hē hēmera tou Kyriou*). A study of the texts in which these terms occur reveals that Christ’s second advent is *one event at the end of history*. The Scriptures teach the following concerning Christ’s second and final coming:

1. Christ will come visibly and all people will see Him (Acts 1:11; Matt. 24:27,30; Luke 17:22–24; 21:27,35; Mark 13:24–26; 14:62; Rev. 1:7).
2. Christ will come in glory surrounded by the host of His angels (Matt. 13:39–43,49; 16:27; 24:30–31; 25:31; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 19:11–14; Titus 2:13; Jude 14, 24; 1 Pet. 4:13; Zech. 14:3).
3. When Christ returns, a bodily resurrection of all the dead will take place. Believers will be raised to salvation and unbelievers to damnation (John 5:27–29; 6:39–40,44,54; Rev. 20:11–15; 1 Cor. 15:12–57; Dan. 12:1–2). All believers, both dead and living, will be “caught up” to “meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:13–17). Death will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26,54–57; Rev. 20:14).
4. When Christ returns, He will judge all people, both the living and the dead (Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:1,8; Jude 14–15; Rev. 20:11–15). Believers will receive eternal salvation and unbelievers eternal damnation (Matt. 25:31–46; 1 Pet. 1:4–5,7; 5:4; 1 John 3:2; Heb. 9:28; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:6–10). Satan and the Antichrist will be destroyed (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 20:10).
5. When Christ returns, “new heavens and a new earth” will be created (2 Pet. 3:10–13). Nowhere, however, do the Scriptures teach that at His return Christ will establish a this-worldly, political kingdom or “millennium.”

The date of Christ’s second advent is unknown. Jesus Himself taught, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt. 24:36; cf. Matt. 24:42,44; 25:13; 1 Thessalonians 5; 2 Peter 3). The times or seasons fixed by the authority of the Father are “not for you to know” (Acts 1:7). Therefore, speculation concerning the time of the end is forbidden. This much *can* be said: the fact that God has delayed it now for almost two millennia is due to His patience and mercy, for “the Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not

wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

The Scriptural teaching concerning Christ’s second advent has a very practical purpose. God wills that all come to believe in the Gospel, lead a holy life in service to Christ, and eagerly await the last day with patience (Rom. 13:12–14; Titus 2:11–13; 1 Pet. 1:13–15; 2 Pet. 3:11–12; 1 John 3:2–3; 1 Tim. 6:14; Matt. 25:14–30).

c. The Resurrection (General)

One general resurrection of the body is a central truth in Biblical eschatology.³³ The Scriptures clearly teach that the Triune God³⁴ will raise all the dead bodily at Christ’s second coming, will give to the believers eternal life, and deliver the unbelievers to eternal damnation.

Jesus taught, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28–29; cf. Dan. 12:2;³⁵ Acts 24:15). In Revelation 20 the apostle John speaks of this single, general resurrection when he writes, “And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and they were judged—each one—according to their works” (20:13; our translation). This “general” resurrection will occur at Christ’s second advent, which is the “last day” (John 5:28–29; 6:39–40,54; 1 Thess. 4:16; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 15:23). The premillennialist opinion that there will be two, three, or more bodily resurrections separated by periods of time simply cannot be sustained on the basis of what the Scriptures themselves teach concerning the resurrection of the dead.

Excursus on Resurrection of the Body

Scripture teaches that whatever of man is in the grave (i.e., his body) rises. The identity of the risen body with the body of one’s earthly life is implicit in the term resurrection. Just as the resurrected Jesus was the same person as the crucified Jesus and was so recognized by His disciples, so also the dead who are raised are the same persons who

³³See *A Statement on Death, Resurrection, and Immortality*, a Report of the CTCR, 1969.

³⁴This work is attributed to the Father (John 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14), to the Son (John 5:27–29; Phil. 3:20–21), and to the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11).

³⁵“Many” in Dan. 12:2 is the Hebrew way of expressing “all.”

formerly lived on earth. A continuity exists between the natural body and the resurrection body of the one who is raised.

However, there is also a discontinuity between the natural body and the resurrection body of believers. Just as Jesus' resurrected body was a "glorious body," so too the Christian's "lowly body" will be changed to be like Jesus' glorious body (Phil. 3:21). This change of the Christian's body is necessary because "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor. 15:50). Because of mankind's fall into sin, the natural body is now subject to the effects of the fall (such as sin, weakness, disease, aging, and death), a situation which will come to an end at the resurrection.

St. Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 15 is the most complete commentary on the Christian's resurrected body given in the Bible. The apostle presents six contrasts in this chapter:

- 1. What is sown corruptible is raised incorruptible. No longer will it be liable to disease or decay.*
- 2. What is sown in dishonor is raised in glory. No longer will it have the dishonor of being buried, but it will be glorified, radiant and shining like Christ's glorified body (cf. Phil. 3:21).*
- 3. What is sown in weakness is raised in power. The weaknesses which cause people to tire and need rest will no longer hinder them.*
- 4. What is sown a natural body will be raised a spiritual body. No longer will it function according to its natural instincts, but it will live completely under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit.³⁶*
- 5. This mortal nature will put on immortality (vv. 53–54). It will no longer be subject to death.*
- 6. The Christian's body which now bears "the image of the man of dust" will then bear the image of Christ (v. 49; cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:10).*

Of course, Scripture does not satisfy all of our curiosity about the resurrection (1 John 3:2). It does tell us, however, that the Christian in both body and soul will be glorious and perfect like Christ, no longer subject to the effects of the fall.

Resurrected Christians will be "like angels" in that they will "neither marry nor [be] given in marriage" (Matt. 22:30; Luke 20:35–36). However, the similarity is not to be extended to include incorporeity or loss of identity as male and female. Nor are we to believe that certain natural bodily functions will any longer be necessary in the life to come (cf. 1 Cor. 6:13).

³⁶The contrast here is not that of material and non-material but that of a natural body in this sin-cursed existence and a supernatural body enlivened by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14–15; 10:3–4). See Eduard Schweizer, "Pneuma, Pneumatikos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 6:421.

Christ's resurrection is both the cause and the guarantee of the Christian's resurrection. His resurrection is the "first fruits" of the final harvest, guaranteeing that those who are in Him shall also rise from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20; Col. 1:18; Rom. 8:29). Through baptism the Christian has already been raised to life and is thus assured of the future bodily resurrection (Rom. 6:5,11,13; Col. 2:12; 3:1-4). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who was given at baptism, is the pledge ensuring the Christian's future resurrection (Rom. 8:11,23; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14). Likewise, the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper are a foretaste of future eschatological blessings (Matt. 26:29; 1 Cor. 11:26).

d. The Rapture

The English word *rapture* is derived from the Latin translation of the verb "caught up" in 1 Thess. 4:17 (*rapiemur*). It refers to the event described in 1 Thess. 4:13-18, namely that all Christians, both dead and living, will be caught up by the Lord to meet Him in the air at His second advent. Paul mentions the "rapture" in response to a specific problem in the church at Thessalonica. The Thessalonians apparently had grieved over the death of some members of the church because they feared that these dead were excluded from the future salvation associated with Christ's second advent (1 Thess. 4:13).

Paul corrects the Thessalonians' distorted view of the end by informing them that the "dead in Christ will rise" and actually precede the living in being caught up in the air to meet Jesus. As a result, both groups of believers—the dead who will be raised and the living Christians who will be transformed (1 Cor. 15:51-52)—will "always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17; 5:10). The purpose of the "rapture" which Paul describes in 1 Thess. 4:17 is evident from the language he employs in this verse. The word translated "to meet" is a technical term used in the New Testament period to describe a public welcome given by a city to a visiting dignitary. The leading citizens of the city would ordinarily leave the city "to meet" the distinguished visitor and then accompany him into the city (cf. Acts 28:15). Paul seems to be saying, therefore, that Christians will meet the Lord in the air to accompany Him *in honor* to the earth for Judgment Day. Christians will be included in His glorious company of angels as He descends to the earth.

But when will the "rapture" take place? (See the diagram in Appendix I.) All premillennialists believe that it will occur before the "1000 year" rule of Christ on earth. Dispensational premillennialists believe it will occur either at the beginning of the "seven year" tribulation (i.e., "pre-tribulation" rapture) or after the first 3-1/2 years of the tribulation

(i.e., “mid-tribulational” rapture). They believe that the “raptured saints” will then go to heaven with Jesus and remain there for 7 or 3-1/2 years, after which they will descend to earth for the millennium. Historic premillennialists believe that it will occur at the end of the tribulation (i.e., “post-tribulational” rapture) but before the millennium.

In light of the clear passages of Scripture on this subject, it is difficult to see how such a speculative approach can be seriously defended. The “rapture” described by Paul will occur at Christ’s second coming after the “tribulation” (i.e., at the end of history), at which time there will be the resurrection and judgment day for all. The last day will come “like a thief in the night,” bringing destruction to unbelievers but salvation to believers (1 Thess. 5:1–10). The “rapture” will occur after the appearance and work of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3). Christ will gather His elect at the end of the time of tribulation (Matt. 24:29–31). At this time He will judge all people (Matt. 25:31–46). When the believers are raised, death is destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26,51–57). This destruction of death occurs after the so-called “millennium” (Rev. 20:11–15). This indicates that the “rapture” occurs *after* the symbolical 1000 years of Revelation 20.

e. The Final Judgment

The Scriptures teach that there will be one final judgment day which will take place at Christ’s second advent at the end of human history (Matt. 13:40–43; 25:31–32; 2 Pet. 3:7; 2 Thess. 1:7–10; Zephaniah 1; Isaiah 24–27). This last day is referred to as “the day of judgment” (Matt. 11:22), “that day” (Matt. 7:22; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:8; Isaiah 24–27; Zephaniah 1), and the “day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5; Zeph. 1:15). There is nothing in these texts that would support the premillennialist view that there will be two, three, or more judgments separated by periods of time, or one long, drawn-out trial.

The final judgment of the world has been committed by the Father to the Son. He has been appointed the final Judge (Rom. 14:10; John 5:22; Acts 17:31; cf. 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1,8; Acts 10:42; Rom. 2:16; Matt. 25:31–32; Rev. 19:15).³⁷ That Christ will be the Judge is good news, since He is the one Who died and rose again for the salvation of all. Those who are clothed in His righteousness will meet Him as the Savior, whereas those who rely on their own righteousness will meet Him as their condemning Judge.

³⁷There are passages in the New Testament which appear to teach that the basis of the sinner’s acquittal on Judgment Day will be works of righteousness. St. Paul writes, for instance, in Rom. 2:13 that “the doers of the law . . . will be justified.” The Apology of the Augsburg Confession teaches that we are to understand a passage such as this in the sense that “God pronounces righteous those who believe in him from the heart and then have good fruits, which please him because of faith and therefore are a keeping of the law” (Ap IV, 252; Tappert, p. 143).

f. The New Creation

When Christ returns, God will create new heavens and a new earth (Is. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). The Scriptures indicate that a continuity and a discontinuity will exist between the present world and the new world, just as there is a continuity and discontinuity between the Christian's present body and the resurrection body.

The future new creation will in some sense involve the present creation and will be the culmination of Christ's redemptive work.³⁸ Rom. 8:19–23 speaks of creation as waiting with eager longing and groaning in travail for the time when it will be set free from its bondage to decay. One of the results of Adam's fall is that the ground is cursed and brings forth thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17–18). Just as human beings who return to dust at death will one day be raised, so creation itself will be set free from its bondage: "But the same continuity that makes the body of the future one with our present body connects the new unsullied world of God with the world we know, the world whose frustrated beauty makes us marvel still, whose futile workings still can testify to Him who once said 'Very good!' and will again say 'Very good!' to all His hands have made."³⁹ As noted earlier, the promised land of Canaan and the city of Jerusalem prefigured the Promised Land and the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Rom. 4:13; Heb. 3:11–4:11; 11:8–10, 13–16; 13:14; Gal. 4:26).

The Scriptures describe the new creation in terms similar to these Old Testament realities. Isaiah pictures it as a new world with vineyards and a perfect harmony even in the animal kingdom (65:17–25; cf. 11:6–9). Joel and Amos picture it as a rich land flowing with wine and milk (Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13–14). Ezekiel portrays it as a land made alive with living water (47:1–12). John speaks of it in terms of a new Garden of Eden (Rev. 22:1–4), and as a new Jerusalem made of precious jewels (Rev. 21:10–27; cf. Is. 52:1; Ezekiel 40–48). All of these descriptions, of course, are written in poetic and picturesque language whose details should not be interpreted in a literalistic way. However, Paul's discussion in Romans 8 makes it clear that the new creation will in some sense be similar to the present creation. The Christian should not be embarrassed by Scripture's seemingly "earthly" description, nor should the attempt be made to transcend its description on the basis of human reason or a "spiritualization" which scorns our creatureliness.

³⁸J. Behm, s.v. "*Kainos*," TDNT 3: 447–50. The continuity between the new creation and the present creation might well be suggested by the Greek terms employed for "new." The word translated "new" (*kainos*) in 2 Pet. 3:13 and Rev. 21:1 usually means new in nature or in quality, in contrast to another Greek word (*neos*), which generally designates what is new in time or origin.

³⁹Martin H. Franzmann, *Concordia Commentary: Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 150.

Yet, an element of *discontinuity* will exist between the world as we know it and the future world. The present heavens and earth will “pass away” (Matt. 5:18; 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; 21:33; Rev. 20:11; 21:1). They will grow old and be rolled up like a garment (Heb. 1:10–12; Ps. 102:26–28), and are now being stored up for fire (2 Pet. 3:7). The heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars) will be dissolved by fire (2 Pet. 3:10). The sky will be rolled up like a scroll (Is. 34:4; Rev. 6:14). The mountains and islands will be removed (Rev. 6:14; 16:20). The earth will be desolated and consumed (Zeph. 1:18). “The earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10).

The new creation consists in a new order of things. Day will be continuous with no more night, nor sun nor moon, since God and the Lamb will be the light and lamp (Rev. 21:23; 22:5; Zech. 14:6–7; Is. 60:19–20). Created ordinances such as marriage and government will cease (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34–35; 1 Cor. 6:1–11).

Finally, heaven and earth will be joined in harmony as the place of His presence. This is the point of Rev. 3:12 and 21:2–3, which picture the heavenly Jerusalem coming down. Now human beings will be in a perfect relationship with God, seeing Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

g. Eternal Damnation

In both “body and soul” unbelievers will suffer eternal separation and condemnation in hell (Matt 18:8; 25:46; Mark 9:43; John 3:36; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 13; Rev. 14:11).⁴⁰ Indescribable torment will be experienced consciously, the degree determined by the nature of the sins to be punished (Matt. 11:20–24; 23:15; Luke 12:47–48).

Hell is pictured as a place, spatially undesignated, of unquenchable fire where people will weep and gnash their teeth (Matt. 5:22; 13:41–42; 18:8–9; 25:30; Mark 9:43; Luke 16:23–24; Rev. 14:10–11). It is a place of outer darkness (Matt 8:12; 25:30; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13), a lake that burns with fire and sulfur (Rev. 21:8), and a place where men will drink the cup of God’s wrath, a metaphor commonly used in the Old Testament (Obadiah 16; Ps. 11:6; 75:8; Is. 51:17,22; Rev. 14:10; 16:19).⁴¹ Eternal damnation consists in everlasting exclusion from communion with God (Matt. 8:12; 25:41; 2 Thess. 1:9), a state in which the full force of God’s wrath will be experienced (Rom. 2:5,8). Unbelievers are already in this state of damnation, which will be fully manifested at Christ’s second

⁴⁰Scripture uses the same adjective for “eternal” (*aionion*) to refer to both punishment and life (Matt. 25:46).

⁴¹Some passages use the verb *apollymi* (“to destroy”), which in the middle voice means “be lost” or “perish” (*apollymai*). The word refers to everlasting perdition, a perdition consisting of endless loss of fellowship with God, not annihilation. A. Oepke, s.v. “*apollymi*,” TDNT, 1:394–97.

advent (John 3:18,36; Rom. 1:18). "One thing is sure, hell contains no atheists, because the damned actually experience God as the righteous Judge."⁴²

The cause of eternal damnation is man's refusal to believe in Christ's atoning work (John 3:18,36). Where forgiveness for Christ's sake is not received, the sinner is condemned (Ezek. 18:20; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 5:6; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Rev. 21:8; 22:15). This Scriptural teaching is the strongest form of the Law possible and is intended to lead the sinner to repentance, to warn against unbelief and carnal security so that the person might be saved. Since Christians are still sinners, this threat of the Law should be preached among them also. It should not be weakened by the substitution of other ideas on the basis of human reason, such as the annihilation of the wicked, the possibility of a purgatory after death, universalism, and the possibility of the conversion of those living who are not "raptured."⁴³

h. Eternal Life

In "body and soul," and in everlasting joy, believers will see God as He is—which is the essence of eternal life (1 John 3:2). To be sure, the believer already "has eternal life" (John 3:36) and thus is in a right relationship with God through faith in Christ. Yet in this life the believer knows God only through His Word, that is, mediately. When Christ returns, then God will be known perfectly and seen face to face (1 Cor. 13:8–12; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4). The hope of eternal life springs from faith in the Gospel of the God of hope (Rom. 15:13).

Eternal life is pictured in the Scriptures as a state of never-ending "blessedness." This means, on the one hand, that Christians will live forever in perfect freedom from sin, death, and every evil (Is. 25:8; 49:10; 1 Cor. 15:26,55–57; Rev. 2:7,11; 20:14; 21:4). At the same time, they will experience the unending joy of being with God in the new heavens and new earth (e.g., Revelation 21–22; Ps. 16:11). Forever eliminated is the possibility of falling away from God. This blessedness will bring with it the joy of being in eternal communion with fellow believers, whom we have reason to believe we shall recognize (cf. Matt. 17:3). And, there will be no limitations or degrees attached to the enjoyment of the happiness to be experienced, though there will be degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth, producing praise to God but no envy (see 2 Cor. 9:6; Matt. 20:23).

⁴²Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3:546.

⁴³Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses teach annihilationism; Roman Catholicism, purgatory; the Unitarian Universalist Association, universal salvation; and premillennialism, post-"rapture" conversion.

The unmerited grace of God in Christ alone, not the believer's works or even faith itself, is the *cause* of eternal life (Eph. 2:8–9). Only those who in this life believe in Christ and His saving work become the recipients and possessors of the gift of life. All forms of work righteousness must be declared contrary to the Scriptural Gospel of God's unmerited grace.

What the Scriptures reveal concerning eternal life is intended to serve as an incentive to people to believe in the Gospel (John 20:31), as well as to persevere in the faith in the midst of trials and persecution (Matt. 5:12; Rom. 8:37–39; 13:11–14; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 13:13–16; 1 Pet. 1:6–9; 2 Pet. 3:13–14; Rev. 2:10). The church is also moved to carry out the Great Commission in earnest (Matt. 28:18–20). The Christian doctrine of eschatology should always be taught and emphasized in the church with this practical concern in mind.

C. Contested Texts: Romans 11:25–27 and Revelation 20

A survey of the literature today which attempts to present the Biblical basis for a millennialist eschatology indicates that certain texts are pivotal for this system of thought. In fact, oftentimes these texts, however difficult for the modern reader, are themselves employed as an interpretive device to read into other texts meanings which were never intended by the Biblical writers. Because they are so central to millennialist doctrine, Rom. 11:25–27 and Revelation 20 are among those which deserve to be singled out for more extended commentary. (See Appendix II for a discussion of other contested passages.)

1. Romans 11:25–27

Among New Testament scholars, differing opinions exist regarding the precise interpretation of these verses, especially the meaning of the phrase “and so all Israel will be saved” (v. 26). Those who hold to a millennialist eschatology find support for some kind of mass conversion of the Jews prior to the day of judgment, while others reject this view on the grounds that it reduces the Pauline concept of “Israel” as a spiritual reality, largely if not entirely, to a political phenomenon. The varying interpretations of this text generally fall into one of the following four categories:

1. The whole Jewish nation, including every individual Jew, will be converted in the future.⁴⁴

⁴⁴H. A. W. Meyer, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1884).

2. The Jewish nation as a whole, but not necessarily every individual Jew, will be converted in the future or at Christ's second advent.⁴⁵
3. All the elect from among the Jews will be saved throughout history.⁴⁶
4. All the elect, both Jews and Gentiles, will be saved throughout history.⁴⁷

The first two views stand in conflict with Paul's basic line of argumentation in Romans 9–11. The apostle begins his discussion with the assertion that not all Jews by race can be called "Israel," but only those who believe the promise—which was fulfilled in Christ (cf. 2:28–29; 9:6–8, 27; Gal. 3:7). Paul states that Jews, "if they do not persist in their unbelief," will be saved (11:23), and are in fact being saved "now" (11:31).⁴⁸ The apostle recognizes that not all Jews will be saved (9:27; 11:14). He would hardly contradict himself in 11:26 by teaching that all Jews or the Jewish nation as such or as a whole will be saved in the future or at Christ's second advent.

The third interpretation merits attention for the following reasons advanced by W. Hendriksen and A. Hoekema. They argue that Paul uses the term *Israel* throughout Romans 9–11 (including 11:26) to refer to Jews in distinction from the Gentiles. However, they understand *all Israel* in 11:26 as referring to the totality of the elect among Israel (i.e., true Israelites from among the Jews; 9:26), not to the entire Jewish nation. They maintain that Paul makes no distinction in operation between the gathering of the fullness of the Gentiles and the gathering throughout history of all true Israelites. This interpretation views the salvation of the

⁴⁵This is the most common interpretation espoused today. Within this view, however, there are some variations: (a) Dispensationalists teach that after the rapture the Jewish nation will be converted, either just before or at the very moment of Christ's return to establish the millennium [John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988)]. (b) Other scholars, premillennial but not dispensational, look for a future massive salvation of the Jewish nation as a whole [George Eldon Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974)]. (c) Still others, neither dispensational nor premillennial, similarly expect a conversion of the totality of the Jewish nation at Christ's second advent [C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979)]. Roy A. Harrisville, *Romans*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980], 182–87, interprets the text to mean that all Israel according to the flesh will be saved, but it is not clear whether this includes every Jew and/or a massive conversion at Christ's second coming.

⁴⁶William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968); A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*; also see R. C. H. Lenski's discussion of Romans 11 in *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961).

⁴⁷Martin H. Franzmann, *Romans*, 210–12.

⁴⁸The best manuscripts contain the word *now* in 11:31b.

full number of Gentiles, which is occurring between Christ's first and second coming, as God's operation of grafting non-Jews onto the one olive tree (i.e., "Israel"). The salvation of *all Israel* is viewed as God's operation throughout history, between the call of Abraham and Christ's second coming, not as some formal conversion of the Jewish nation at the second coming of Christ. "*All Israel*, therefore, differs from the elect remnant spoken of in 11:5, but only as the sum total of all the remnants throughout history."⁴⁹

For the reasons given above in the evaluation of the first two interpretations, however, the fourth option seems most probable. The apostle plainly states that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (9:6). The "children of the promise," not the "children of the flesh" (the national Israel), are God's children (9:8). If *Israel* refers merely to Jews as a nation, then this distinction is removed. However, if *Israel* refers to "children of the promise," then the distinction is maintained and Paul's argument in Romans 9–11 continues—namely, that God's elect, both Jews and Gentiles, will be saved according to His plan in history which has been revealed in the Gospel (the "mystery"). The heirs of the promise are those who believe, Jew and Gentile alike (Romans 4). Thus it is that elsewhere the apostle can refer to the church as "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

A closer look at Paul's discussion in chap. 11 substantiates the fourth explanation above. In Rom. 11:1 Paul addresses the question whether God has *rejected* all Jews, not whether He will *save* all Jews. In vv. 1–10 he answers in the negative. There is even in Paul's day a remnant of believing Jews. In the rest of the chapter, the apostle explains the purpose served by the unbelief of the majority of the Jews. Paradoxically, through their rejection of the Gospel, the Gospel went to the Gentiles (11:11–12, 19, 25, 30). In turn, the salvation of the Gentiles serves to make the unbelieving Jews "jealous," i.e., to incite them to hear the Gospel and also be saved (10:19; 11:11, 13–14, 31).

The mystery revealed in 11:25–27 is that "a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved." The word *so* means "in this manner," that is, in the way just described, not "then," as if it meant *after* the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. How will all Israel be saved? The answer is given in v. 25 and is explicated throughout the chapter. The hardening upon part of Israel has allowed the Gospel to go to the Gentiles, and the inclusion of the Gentiles serves to incite the unbelieving Jews to believe the Gospel and thus be saved (regrafted into the one tree). This process will continue until the end, "until the full number of the Gentiles comes in." The quote

⁴⁹A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 145. For a more complete explanation of this interpretation see W. Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy*, chaps. 3 and 4.

in vv. 26–27 also summarizes this process. Christ came *from* Zion (the Jews) to the Gentiles (cf. John 4:22; Acts 1:8), and He will forgive the sins also of the Jews “if they do not persist in their unbelief” (11:23). Verse 26b is not referring to Christ’s second advent but to His first advent.

In summary, “all Israel” consists of the groups mentioned in v. 25, the believing part of the Jews and the “full number of the Gentiles.” “All Israel” is the whole olive tree consisting of the natural branches (Jews who believed), the wild olive branches (Gentiles who believe), and the regrafted branches (Jews who will believe). These constitute the “all” in verse 32.⁵⁰ “All Israel” is made up of “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord” (10:13), the elect of the Jews and Gentiles, the “New Israel” (Rom. 4:11–12,16; 9:24; Gal. 3:26–29; 6:15–16).

The dispensationalist view that Jews will be converted *after* the “rapture” of the church posits a second chance for conversion after Christ’s second advent, and is therefore contrary to the Scriptural Gospel. Moreover, the view that Jews will be converted instantaneously at Christ’s second advent contradicts the order of salvation which Scripture reveals, according to which the Holy Spirit creates faith only through the means of grace in the present. It has also been suggested that Jews will automatically be saved at Christ’s second advent *without* a conversion.⁵¹ All three of these views offer a false hope and are dangerous to the salvation of people. Rejecting such empty and illusory promises, the church ought to make every effort to reach Jews also with the proclamation of Law and Gospel as did the apostle Paul, and to do so without delay (Rom. 11:13–14; 1 Cor. 9:19–20).

⁵⁰Franzmann, *Romans*, 210–11, points out that Rom. 11:17–24,25–27,28–32 are parallel sections. Each section closes with a reference to all the elect, both Jew and Gentile.

⁵¹Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976). See also L. Gaston, “Paul and the Torah,” in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. A. T. Davies (New York & Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979), 48–71; J. F. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York & Oxford: University Press, 1983).

Excursus Regarding the Jews

Christians recognize with appreciation the role of the Jews⁵² in saving history. "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), and the New Testament testifies that this salvation was accomplished through the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ born of David's line. The apostle Paul argues that there is a sense in which Jews even occupy a position of special privilege, for "they are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom. 9:4–5). Indeed, Gentile Christians should not boast, but rather ought to thank God that they as "wild olive branch[es]" are grafted into the "cultivated olive tree" by God's grace (Rom. 11:17–24). Therefore, anti-semitism in every form should be rejected by Christians and in its place a loving regard for the Jewish people should characterize the church's attitude.⁵³ This is to say nothing of the gratitude owed Jews (for their contributions to civilization and society throughout history), as well as understanding and sympathy (for losses and sufferings they have endured).

However difficult it may be for some Jews to understand, Christian love constrains the church to share the Gospel of salvation with them. Martin Luther, in his last sermon, said concerning the attitude of Christians toward the Jewish people, "We want to treat them with Christian love and to pray for them, so that they might become converted and would receive the Lord."⁵⁴ Christians believe that there is still hope for the unbelieving Jews. "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable," Paul reminds his readers (Rom. 11:29). God still offers them salvation through the Gospel. Therefore, the church should continue to share the Gospel with them (Rom. 1:16), for it is the only

⁵²Judaism originated and developed in the intertestamental period. One should not speak of Jews in the Old Testament. The people of God in the Old Testament should rather be referred to as Israelites or Judahites. In later books, beginning with Jeremiah, the Hebrew word is literally translated "Judahite," not "Jew."

⁵³See Resolution 3–09 "To Clarify Position on Anti-Semitism" adopted by the 1983 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1983 *Convention Proceedings*, p. 157).

⁵⁴D. Martin *Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1914), 51:195. See also Martin Luther's "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," in *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 45:195–229.

means by which they may be saved (Acts 4:12).⁵⁵ Believing Jews, together with Gentiles, constitute the New Israel. In Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28).

In speaking of the place of Jews within saving history, the Scriptures do not ascribe a political fulfillment to Old Testament texts which deal with the future of "Israel." The modern Israeli state is not the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The view of an earthly millennium with the temple rebuilt cannot be substantiated. Quite simply, the Scriptures are silent regarding modern political events in the Middle East and any Jewish right to the land there. Judgments concerning such matters are therefore not theological questions.

2. Revelation 20⁵⁶

The book of Revelation was written by John, who was exiled on the island of Patmos because of persecution (1:9), probably during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian about A.D. 95. The purpose of the book is to strengthen the churches in Asia Minor in their trials, to assure them of their victory in Christ who is Lord over all evil powers now assailing the world, and to increase in them true hope in Christ who will come in glory for them.

The book is written in apocalyptic language and therefore, as noted earlier, must not be interpreted literally. Sometimes John gives the interpretation of the symbolical elements in a vision (e.g., 1:20). At other times he does not. Usually the apostle's symbols are derived from the Old Testament so that one must be aware of their Old Testament background to understand his intention. In general, the principle should be followed that Revelation must be interpreted in the light of other clear, non-figurative parts of Scripture rather than the reverse.

A recognition of the repetitious character of chaps. 6–20 has a significant bearing on how certain key texts are interpreted. John's prophecy concerns the things that will occur from Christ's ascension (chap. 5) to Christ's second advent. His prophecy is structured according to several

⁵⁵In recent years some theologians, including Lutherans, have held to the view that non-Christian Israel will be saved at Christ's second advent apart from faith in Christ. See Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 4. Stendahl emphasizes that Rom. 10:17–11:36 contains no explicit mention of Jesus Christ. The argument is that Paul had resigned himself to the fact that Israel would not be saved through Jesus Christ since that attempt had failed (p. 132). Only a miraculous act of God could accomplish that salvation. Thus, there are two distinct means of salvation according to this view ("Two Covenant View"). The Gentiles are justified by grace through faith in Christ. The non-Christian Jews will be saved on the basis of their faith in the Old Testament covenant.

⁵⁶For a helpful introduction to Revelation, see William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967).

repeating cycles which are parallel to each other. Each cycle describes the same period of time, from Christ's ascension to His second advent, but with differing emphases. These cycles consist of three earthly views (seven seals, 6:1–8:5; seven trumpets, 8:6–11:19; seven bowls, 15:1–16:21) and two cosmic views (12:1–14:20; 20:1–15). That Revelation has this recapitulating character can be seen from the fact that the end of history is described five times with key features repeated:

- 6:12–17, sixth seal: earthquake, every mountain and island is removed; great day of wrath has come
- 11:15–19, seventh trumpet: the wrath came; time for the dead to be judged; lightning, voices, thunder, earthquake, hail
- 14:14–20, the final harvest: the wrath of God
- 16:17–21, seventh bowl: "It is done!"; lightning, noises, thunder, earthquake; God's wrath; every island and mountain fled
- 20:11–15, hail, great white throne judgment; earth and sky fled away; dead were judged

The studied arrangement of John's revelation outlined here has important implications for understanding chap. 20. Chapter 20 is parallel to 12:1–14:20, both of which begin with Satan's defeat and end with judgment day. Chapter 20 summarizes history from Christ's first advent to His second, but it says nothing about the Jewish temple, people, or land. Rather, 20:1–3 states that Satan is bound for 1000 years in a bottomless pit. If we allow the non-figurative parts of Scripture to help us interpret this passage, we see that this binding took place at Christ's earthly life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Satan was cast out, judged and defeated at Christ's first advent (John 12:31; 16:11; 1 John 3:8; Luke 10:18; Heb. 2:14). The reference to "binding" Satan (*deo*) occurs only in Matt. 12:24–29 and Mark 3:22–27, where it refers to Christ's first advent (cf. Luke 11:15–22). This "binding" of Satan is parallel to Rev. 12:7–13 where he is cast out of heaven and no longer allowed to accuse the saints as he did in Old Testament times (Zechariah 3; Job 1–2).

The text also says that he is bound in the sense "that he should deceive the nations no more" (20:3). He is no longer able to deceive the nations and prevent them from hearing the Gospel, as was the case in general in Old Testament times (cf. Acts 14:16; Matt. 16:18). He is still "a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), but he cannot prevent the Gospel from going to the ends of the earth (Matt. 24:14).

As is true generally with apocalyptic literature, numbers are symbolic, representing concepts (e.g., Rev. 5:6). The number 1000 represents completeness (10³). It indicates the complete time period for the

church to carry out its worldwide mission, not a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on earth.

In Rev. 20:4–6 John mentions the “first resurrection.” Again, the rest of Scripture helps us to define this phrase. The reference is no doubt to conversion, that is, being raised with Christ in baptism (cf. Rom. 6:2–5,11; Col. 2:12–13; John 5:24; 11:25–26; 1 John 3:14; 5:12; Rev. 3:1; Eph. 2:1–6). Those who share in this “resurrection” are no longer under the power of eternal death (20:6,14–15). Rather, they are “priests of God and of Christ” (20:6; cf. 1:6; 5:10).⁵⁷ All Christians “who had not worshiped the beast or its image” already reign with Christ, a rule which does not end at temporal death nor will it ever end (20:4; cf. 5:10; 22:5; Rom. 5:17; Eph. 2:6).

Revelation 20:7–10 describes in pictorial language the final intensified persecution of the church by the anti-Christian world (cf. Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21–22). Satan will be loosed for a “little season” to deceive the nations and lead them in an attack on the “camp of the saints and the beloved city,” i.e., the church (20:9; cf. 21:2,9). This final persecution against the church is also mentioned elsewhere in Revelation, usually pictured as a battle (9:13–19; 16:12–16; 19:19). *Armageddon*, the “hill of Megiddo” in Hebrew, is the specific term used for this battle and, as noted earlier, an allusion to the place where several famous battles occurred in the Old Testament (16:16). The term, however, does not refer to a nuclear war as some have opined but to an intensified persecution against the church. Nor does the apostle understand “Gog and Magog” to be representatives of modern political states (20:8). Drawing his imagery from Ezekiel 38–39, John is referring to the whole anti-Christian world.

Whether or not the church is already in Satan’s “little season” is difficult to answer. Yet, one can certainly see that the anti-Christian world is persecuting the church today and that the church cannot carry out its mission in various parts of the world as freely as it once could. Although there have indeed been periods of severe persecution in the past, an intensification of the stress of the approaching end of history might well be upon us.

Chapter 20 ends with a picture of the final judgment of *all* as in 11:18 and 14:14–20. Those whose names are not found in the Book of Life are thrown into “the lake of fire” (20:15).

John’s message in chapter 20 is a very practical one for the church. He calls the church to endure faithfully in the midst of increasing persecution (cf. 13:10; 14:12), at the same time assuring Christians that they are already more than conquerors and reign with Christ by faith.

⁵⁷Note that this was already true for John and his original readers and not still awaiting fulfillment in the distant future (1:6; 5:10).

III. An Evaluation of Dispensational Premillennialism

The Commission's study of eschatology and millennialism has focused primarily on basic features of the eschatology of dispensational premillennialism. We offer now a summary evaluation of this view for the study and guidance of the members of the Synod as they deal with questions that arise concerning millennialist doctrine. In offering the following critique the Commission recognizes that there are many elements of dispensationalist teaching which those committed to Lutheran confessional doctrine are also prepared to affirm. Those who teach a dispensational premillennialist view generally confess the Scriptures to be the verbally inspired, inerrant Word of God. Their eschatology emphasizes a visible, personal return of Christ. Justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is taught among them. Nevertheless, dispensationalist teaching contradicts the Scriptures at many critical points and therefore seriously endangers the pure teaching of the Gospel.⁵⁸

1. Dispensational premillennialism teaches that the Messiah and His kingdom promised in the Old Testament are essentially *political* in nature. In this respect it takes a position which resembles the Messianic expectation of first-century Judaism. Christ's atoning work on the cross is not central in God's plan according to this view. Rather, He is wrongly perceived as coming to set up a this-worldly kingdom, and when rejected, as postponing it.
2. The view regards the Messianic age as only a future reality. It tends to exchange the "now" for a "not yet," thereby depriving people of the comforting promises of the Gospel in the present. In truth, Christ inaugurated the kingdom of heaven at His first advent, a kingdom which is now ours by faith even while it is yet hidden under the cross until its consummation at Christ's second advent.
3. Dispensational premillennialism tends to regard the glory of God as the center of theology, rather than the mercy of God

⁵⁸See Theodore Engelder, "Dispensationalism Disparaging the Gospel," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 8 (September 1937): 649–66; and Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 194–222.

revealed, and yet hidden, in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world. The visible manifestations of God's power at the end of history and obedience to the will of God become the primary foci, instead of the grace of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2:2)—which by faith the Christian regards and accepts as the place of God's definitive triumph over sin and every evil (in Lutheran theology, the "theology of the cross" as opposed to a "theology of glory").

4. Dispensational premillennialism underestimates, and even ignores, the significance of Biblical typology. All prophecy points to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment. He is the antitype of the Old Testament types. When the reality to which the Old Testament points does come, one cannot revert back to the "shadows," such as the Old Testament temple (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 10:1).
5. The compartmentalization of Scripture into distinct dispensations seriously overlooks the Law/Gospel unity of the Old and New Testaments. For example, it makes a radical distinction between the Mosaic "law" period and the church age of "grace." The relationship between the Old and New Testaments is that of promise and fulfillment, not one of distinct dispensations.
6. Ultimately, the eschatology of dispensationalism offers a dangerously false hope. The views of a pre-tribulation or mid-tribulation rapture offer the Christian the false hope of exemption from the intensified persecution toward the end. Moreover, they offer a second chance of conversion for those who are left after the rapture. The focus of the Scripture's hope is not an earthly kingdom lasting 1000 years but eternity with Christ.
7. The dispensationalist view of a radical break between Israel and the church contradicts the Scriptural teaching that the cross of Christ has eliminated forever the distinction between Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11–22; Rom. 2:25–29).
8. The dispensational hermeneutic of consistent literalism is contrary to the Scripturally-derived principles of interpretation (cf. section one above).
9. Dispensationalism's multiple resurrections and judgments are contrary to the clear Scriptural teaching on eschatology (cf. section two above).
10. The assurance and hope of salvation tend to be grounded on an interpretation of the signs of the times rather than on the sure Word of promise imparted in the means of grace.
11. The sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of which are important for a Biblical understanding of eschatology, have little place in dispensationalist teaching.

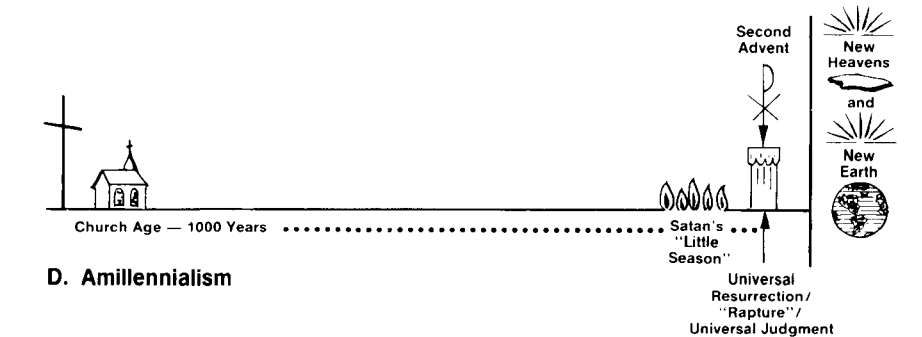
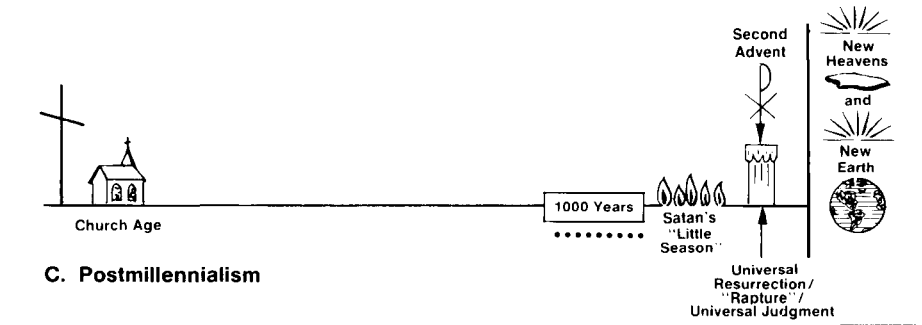
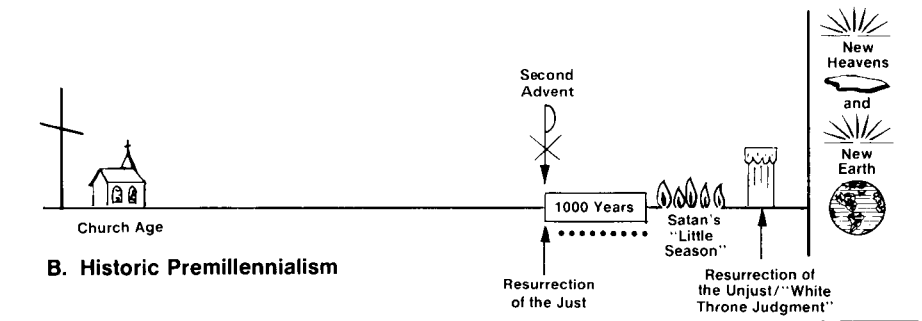
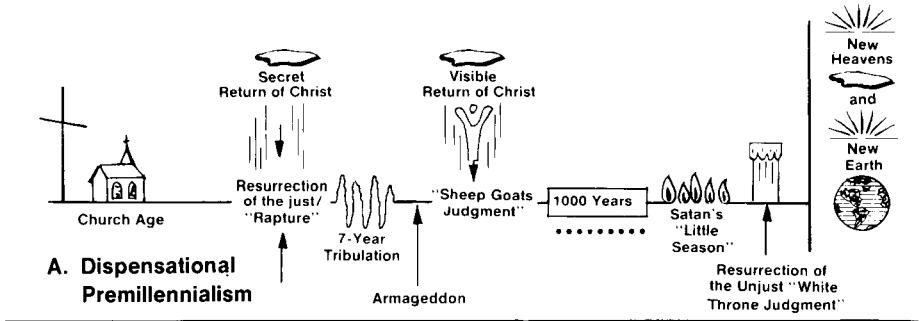
CONCLUSION

In the foregoing study the Commission on Theology and Church Relations has sought to evaluate contemporary approaches to eschatology in light of what the Scriptures themselves teach concerning the “end times” and the interpretive assumptions required for a faithful reading of the Biblical data. It is also the Commission’s desire that this report will stimulate renewed interest in and study of the subject of eschatology. But even more importantly, the Commission hopes that this report will lead to a reevaluation of the place and significance of Biblical eschatology, not only in the preaching and teaching activity of the church but also in the personal life of faith of individual Christians as they await the “blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for Himself a people of His own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:13–14).

Taken in its totality, the Scriptural teaching on eschatology will prevent Christians from succumbing to two opposite extremes which from apostolic times have been a recurrent threat to faith—feverish preoccupation with the “signs of the times,” and spiritual laxity based on the mistaken notion that Christ’s coming is no longer imminent. Neither of these distortions of the eschatological hope which is ours through Christ takes with full seriousness the meaning of that hope for life in the here and now. Typical of the New Testament’s articulation of the Christian hope is the implication drawn that *now* is the time to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). And such a life is to be lived with full awareness of what hour it is, “for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). Also repeatedly taught by Jesus and the apostles is the truth that the exact hour of Christ’s coming remains hidden in the secret counsels of God (Matt. 24:36). The church ought not therefore engage itself in uncertain speculations regarding the signs of the times. Rather, Christians must devote themselves to the clear proclamation of Law and Gospel, that people may come to faith in Jesus Christ, and through daily repentance prepare for His coming.

APPENDIX I

Diagrams of Millennial Views



APPENDIX II

Exegetical Review of Additional Texts

1. Isaiah 11 and 65:17–25

Isaiah 11 pictures the Messianic age. The Messiah will come from the fallen Davidic line (v. 1). The Spirit and His gifts will rest upon Him (vv. 2–3). He will acquit the faithful and slay the wicked (vv. 3–5). He will usher in an era of perfect harmony and peace (vv. 6–9). He will gather the faithful remnant of Israel which was dispersed in the eighth and sixth centuries B.C., and the other nations will come to Him (vv. 10–12). Israel will return from captivity (vv. 15–16) and will be victorious over its foes (vv. 13–14). With the prophetic “shortened perspective” Isaiah envisions both the return of the exiles in 538 B.C. and Christ’s first and second advents, with the emphasis on the latter two events.

The New Testament writers expressly declare that Isaiah’s words in chap. 11 were fulfilled at the coming of Jesus Christ. He is the “branch” (Hebrew: *nēṭser*) upon whom the Spirit rests (Matt. 2:23; 3:16). His life, death, and resurrection lead “to acquittal and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18; 3:21–26). Christ has gathered the remnant of Israel (Acts 2; 3:25–26; Rom. 11:1–5) and has incorporated Gentiles into His people (Rom. 15:8–12). Yet, the promise still awaits its consummation at Christ’s second advent. At this time He will slay the wicked who reject His righteousness (Rev. 19:11,15). At Christ’s coming again new heavens and a new earth will be created in which “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” in harmony (Is. 11:6).

Isaiah 65:17–25 focuses primarily on this new creation to be established at Christ’s second coming. In the language of the New Testament, God will create “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1) and a new Jerusalem in which there will be no more weeping or crying (Rev. 21:3–4). In an age characterized by longevity (Is. 65:20), the days of God’s people will be “like the days of a tree” (v. 22).⁵⁹ In an allusion to Isaiah 65, the apostle John explains that “death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:4). God’s people will enjoy His blessings in full (Is. 65:21–23). Creation will be restored to perfect harmony (v. 25). Although enjoying even now the blessings of the new creation by faith, believers long for the day of the Lord when at last they will enter the eternal paradise of God.

⁵⁹The NIV accurately translates the Hebrew of v. 20: “He who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.”

Dispensational premillennialists, however, read into Isaiah 11 and 65:17–25 the millennial kingdom.⁶⁰ They hold that at His second advent, after the seven-year tribulation, Christ will rule from Jerusalem for 1000 years. During this period, there will be harmony in the animal kingdom (11:6–9; 65:25); the Gentiles will seek Christ (11:10); He will restore the Jewish nation, which will defeat its enemies (11:11–14); people will die although they live longer (65:20), will plant fruitful vineyards (65:21–22), and will bear children (65:23). This dispensational premillennialist view not only fails to take seriously the New Testament's commentary on the Isaiah texts, but it is also not able, despite its claim to take the Scriptures *literally*, to find a single explicit reference to a 1000-year reign in these Old Testament texts.

2. Ezekiel 37–48

In Ezekiel 37 the prophet combines into one picture, again in the prophetic “shortened perspective” both the return from the Babylonian exile in 538 B.C. and the Messianic age. God promises to reestablish His covenant with the restored people of Israel and to set up their king (namely David) who will shepherd them forever (37:24–28).

Toward the end of this Messianic age (38:8,14,16), God will gather the far-off, hostile nations to make war against His people.⁶¹ He will then vindicate His holy name before the whole world by destroying the enemies of His people. This destruction will be so fierce that it will take seven months to bury the dead, whose corpses will be devoured by birds and beasts (39:11–20).

Ezekiel 40–48 describes the vision which Ezekiel saw in 573 B.C. In chaps. 40–43 Ezekiel describes the temple, its courts and altar. Chapters 44–46 relate the ordinances of this temple and the allocation of the land around the temple. Chapters 47–48 describe the flow of water from the temple (which fructifies the Dead Sea Valley), the boundaries of the land, and the land's allocation to the twelve tribes of Israel.

As we survey the material in Ezekiel 37–48, we observe that the language is apocalyptic and highly symbolic. Ezekiel prophesies concerning the vision of the valley of dry bones (37), the feasting of the birds and animals (39:17–20), the fructifying waters from the temple (47:1–12), and the boundaries and divisions of the land (which are geographically impossible; see 47:13–48:29).

⁶⁰Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible, 689–90, 744–45. This version separates 65:17 from the verses following.

⁶¹Gog of the land of Magog cannot be identified for certain, but some scholars see it as possibly a reference to Gyges, king of Lydia in western Turkey. Meshech and Tubal were located in central and eastern Anatolia. Cush was ancient Ethiopia. Put refers to Cyrenaica in North Africa, Gomer to the ancient Cimmerians from north of the Black Sea, and Beth-togarmah to Til-garimmu, capital of Kammanu on the border of Tubal. See Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier*.

When those who hold the dispensationalist view read this section of Ezekiel, they insist on a literal fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision in the future. The modern equivalents of the countries mentioned in chapter 38, they predict, will attack Israel toward the end of the seven-year tribulation of the battle of Armageddon. Chapters 40–48 describe the millennial kingdom. The temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and the sacrificial system will be reinstated.⁶²

What can be said in response to this way of interpreting the Ezekiel texts? First, it must be recognized that Ezekiel is not writing an architect's blueprint which is to be fulfilled literally either in the post-exilic period or in the distant future. For example, when Ezekiel, in his vision of the future new age, describes the worship life of those who are redeemed in the priestly terms of offering animal sacrifices at the temple, he is pointing to a reality that far transcends B.C. forms. Similarly, the apostle John writes by revelation that there is no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem since "its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22). Nor are there animal sacrifices, since Christ's sacrificial death is the final, all-sufficient sacrifice (Hebrews 8–10; Rev. 5:6).

Second, careful consideration must be given to the parallelism which exists between the Ezekiel texts and Revelation 20–22. Rev. 20:1–6 contains the message of the "first resurrection," the Messianic age inaugurated at Christ's first advent, which is parallel to the resurrection of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Rev. 20:7–10 parallels Ezekiel 38–39, Satan's "little season," when all the anti-Christian forces ("Gog and Magog") engage in their final assault on the church and are then consumed by fire (cf. Ezek. 39:6). Chapters 21–22 of Revelation picture the heavenly Jerusalem and the promised land with its fructifying river and parallel Ezekiel 40–48. The reference here simply cannot be understood in a literalistic sense to designate a millennial kingdom.

3. Daniel 2 and 7

In Daniel 2 and 7 God reveals four world empires to Daniel, who was taken to Babylonia in 605 B.C. In chap. 2 these empires are pictured as a great image consisting of a head of gold, breasts and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and legs and feet of iron and clay. In chap. 7 these empires are portrayed as a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a nondescript beast. These four empires can best be identified as Babylonia, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.⁶³

⁶²Most dispensationalists believe that these sacrifices will be memorial in character, looking back to Christ's sacrifice and having no expiatory value. Some, however, deny that there will be animal sacrifices and regard Ezekiel as presenting the worship of Israel in using the terms familiar in his day. *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible*, 864.

⁶³Note that the leopard with four heads and four wings (7:6) is the same empire as the goat with four horns reaching toward the four winds (8:8), which is identified as *Greece* (8:21). Therefore, the fourth empire is probably a reference to Rome.

Daniel prophesies that God will set up His eternal kingdom in the days of the kings of the fourth empire (2:44). The fulfillment of this prophecy was inaugurated at Christ's first advent during the rule of Rome and will be consummated at Christ's second advent.

In chap. 7, Daniel is permitted to see further into the future to the final judgment. Out of the fourth empire come 10 horns which are identified as 10 kings (7:24). The number 10 is a symbol of completeness, that is, the complete number of kings to rule between Rome's demise and the rise of the little horn. But then a little horn who speaks great things arises after them. The little horn who speaks words against the Most High and persecutes God's people (7:25) is to be identified as the Antichrist, the "man of lawlessness" of 2 Thessalonians 2. He persecutes God's people for "a time, two times, and half a time" (7:25). The expression *time* here is deliberately indeterminate and does not mean "year" (cf. 2:8,9,21; 4:16, 23,25,32; 7:12). "Two times" indicates that his power will double. But instead of his power doubling again to four more times giving a total of seven, indicating complete power, we read "half a time," signifying his sudden end.

The final judgment comes when the "one like a son of man" receives the kingdom from "the Ancient of Days" (God the Father) and the Antichrist is destroyed (7:13). This "one like a son of man" is an *eschatological, messianic, divine* individual who is like a *human being*. This can be seen from the following: He appears at the final judgment; He receives the kingdom; He comes with the clouds of heaven; and the phrase "son of man" means a human being (cf. 8:17). The New Testament, of course, identifies Him as Jesus Christ (Matt. 24:30, 44, et al.). Of Him it is written that, "His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him" (7:27 NIV; cf. v. 14).

Those who make use of historical criticism usually interpret these two chapters differently.⁶⁴ They identify the four empires as Babylonia, Media, Persia, and Greece. The little horn is then regarded as Antiochus Epiphanes, the same as the little horn of 8:9, who rises out of Greece. The "one like a son of man" is thought to be a collective title for all the saints of the Most High. However, this view charges Daniel with historical inaccuracy since Media alone did not conquer Babylonia, and it makes Daniel into a false prophet since the everlasting kingdom of God was not inaugurated during the rule of Greece.⁶⁵ Moreover, it fails to accept the New Testament's identification of the "son of man" with the person of Jesus Christ.

⁶⁴For example, Norman W. Porteous, *Daniel: A Commentary*, 2d rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1979); and W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984).

⁶⁵For a critique of this view, see Edward J. Young, "The Prophecy of Daniel," in *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949).

Dispensationalists also offer a variant interpretation.⁶⁶ They agree that the four empires are Babylonia, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. However, Rome is divided into two phases separated by over 1000 years. The first phase of Rome, they contend, ended in A.D. 476. After the rapture of the church, Rome will be revived in the form of a 10-nation confederacy which corresponds to the image's 10 toes (2:42) and the fourth beast's 10 horns (7:24).⁶⁷ The ruler of this revived Roman empire is the little horn, the Antichrist, who will defeat three of these nations (7:24–25). He will persecute the Jewish nation during the last 3-1/2 years of the tribulation (7:25). At His second advent in glory, Christ will destroy this revived Roman empire (2:44) and the little horn (7:26), and then set up the earthly millennial kingdom (2:44; 7:14,27).

In response to this interpretation, we note that there is no indication of a time gap between Rome and the 10 kings (7:24). Nor is there any reason to interpret the 3-1/2 "times" as 3-1/2 years. As we have seen, the kingdom of God is not an earthly, political kingdom of 1000 years, at the end of which the nations attack Christ (Revelation 20). Rather, Daniel 2 and 7 emphasize the difference between the kingdom of God and the four previous kingdoms. These four empires are human and temporary, overcome by each succeeding kingdom, and they are beastly. In contrast, the kingdom of God is divine, everlasting, unconquerable, and humane. Jesus and the New Testament continually emphasize that His kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36; Rom. 14:17).

4. Daniel 9:24–27

Daniel 9:24–27 is one of the most disputed passages in all of Scripture. In our judgment two interpretations have been given that are in harmony with the rest of Scripture and the analogy of faith. Both are possible, and it is difficult to decide between the two.

One can be called the "traditional-Messianic" view,⁶⁸ which sees the prophecy as climaxing in Christ's first coming. Daniel is given a vision of "seventy 'sevens' " (NIV) concerning the future of God's people and Jerusalem. Some understand these "seventy 'sevens' " as 70 weeks of years, i.e., 490 years. A symbolical understanding of these figures is more likely in view of the apocalyptic nature of Daniel. From the decree to restore and build Jerusalem (538 B.C. or 458 B.C.) to the coming of Christ, there are seven *and* sixty-two sevens, i. e., sixty-nine sevens. During this period Jerusalem will be rebuilt (v. 25). During the seventieth seven

⁶⁶E.g., the *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible* and John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971).

⁶⁷Often this confederacy is identified as the European Common Market. See Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 88–97.

⁶⁸E.g., Young, "The Prophecy of Daniel."

Christ is crucified and the Romans under Titus destroy Jerusalem (v. 26). Verse 27 is parallel to v. 26. Christ confirms the covenant with many, but in the midst of the seventieth seven He is crucified, thereby fulfilling and abolishing the sacrificial system.

Another possible interpretation may be labelled the "typical-Messianic" view,⁶⁹ which regards Christ's second coming as the climax of the prophecy. This view also understands the "seventy 'sevens'" symbolically. From Cyrus' decree to restore Jerusalem (538 B.C.) until Christ there are seven "sevens."⁷⁰ During the next sixty-two "sevens" the church, the antitype of Jerusalem, is built (v. 25). Toward the end of history, during the seventieth "seven," Christ and the church have little or no external influence and prestige (cf. Rev. 20:7-9; Matt. 24:21-22). Rather, the people of the Antichrist, the antitype of Antiochus Epiphanes, will attack the church (v. 26). Again, we note that v. 27 is parallel to v. 26. The Antichrist confirms a covenant with many and hinders worship. However, he will be swiftly destroyed. Then God's eternal purposes will be consummated (v. 24).

Historical critical scholars⁷¹ usually understand the seventy "sevens" as 490 years. The first 49 years, they hold, are from the destruction of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) to Joshua or Zerubbabel (538 B.C.). The following sixty-two "sevens" (434 years), in which Jerusalem is rebuilt, end with the murder of the priest Onias III in 171 B.C. During the following seven years Antiochus Epiphanes persecutes Jerusalem. In the middle of this seventieth "seven" he prohibits temple worship (167 B.C.). The author then predicts that 3-1/2 years remain until the consummation of God's purposes (v. 24). This view must be rejected because it charges Daniel with historical inaccuracy for not calculating the years correctly. Moreover, the promise of v. 24 was not fulfilled in 164 B.C.

Dispensationalists offer still another interpretation.⁷² They understand the seventy "sevens" as 490 years of 360 days each. The first seven and sixty-two "sevens," i.e., sixty-nine "sevens," are from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (445 B.C.) to Palm Sunday (A.D. 29). After these sixty-nine "sevens," Christ is crucified (five days later) and the Jerusalem temple is destroyed by Titus (A.D. 70). Between v. 26 and v. 27 there is a gap of almost 2000 years. This is the age of the church, which is not revealed in the Old Testament. When the church is raptured, the seven-year tribulation (the seventieth "seven") begins (v. 27). The Antichrist

⁶⁹E.g., H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949, 1969).

⁷⁰This view places a "period" after the first "seven 'sevens.'" The first view places a "period" after the "sixty-two 'sevens.'" "

⁷¹E.g., Porteous, *Daniel: A Commentary*.

⁷²E.g., *Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible*.

confirms a covenant with the Jews. After 3-1/2 years the Antichrist outlaws the Jewish temple worship, sets up the "abomination of desolation" (cf. Matt. 24:15), and persecutes the Jews for the remaining 3-1/2 years. At the end of the seventieth "seven," Christ returns in glory, destroys the Antichrist, and brings in the blessings of the millennial kingdom (v. 24).

There are serious exegetical and theological problems with this latter view. First of all, there is no indication of a gap between v. 26 and v. 27. The verses are in fact parallel, describing the seventieth "seven." Second, it is problematic to interpret in a crassly literalistic way the seventy "sevens" as 490 years, and still less, as years of 360 days each. Third, this view wrongly asserts that events such as the worship of Jews at a rebuilt temple and the activity of the Antichrist will occur after the rapture. Finally, the promises of v. 24 are not those of a millennial kingdom after which Satan has a "little season" (cf. Rev. 20:7-9). Rather, the promise of v. 24 is that sin is put to an end and everlasting righteousness comes in.

GLOSSARY

Amillennialism. The view that there will be no (“a”) 1000 (“mille”) year visible earthly kingdom or “millennium.” This view is better termed “realized millennialism” since it teaches that the *symbolically* understood 1000 years of Revelation 20 began at Christ’s first advent.

Armageddon. Derived from Hebrew *har megiddo*, “the hill of Megiddo,” in Palestine, Armageddon refers to the battle mentioned in Rev. 16:16.

Apocalyptic Literature. Derived from the Greek word *apokalypsis* (Rev. 1:1), “uncovering” or “revelation,” this type of literature, most notably found in Daniel and Revelation, uses highly symbolic imagery.

Dispensationalism. Also called *dispensational premillennialism*, this is a system of theology which divides history into distinct dispensations or periods of time in which God gives a specific revelation and man is tested with respect to his obedience of it. All dispensationalists are premillennialists, but not all premillennialists are dispensationalists.

Eschatology. Derived from the Greek word *eschaton*, “end,” eschatology is the study of the end times. *Eschatological* means “pertaining to the end.”

Millennium. Derived from the Latin words *mille*, “a thousand,” and *annus*, “a year” (Revelation 20), millennialism teaches that there will be a 1000-year, visible kingdom of God on earth. It is also called *chiliasm* from the Greek word *chilia*, “a thousand.”

Postmillennialism. This is the view that Christ’s second advent will occur after (“post”) the “millennium,” understood as a golden age on earth but not necessarily lasting 1000 years.

Premillennialism. This is the view that Christ’s second advent will occur before (“pre”) the “millennium,” understood as a 1000-year rule of Christ on earth.

Rapture. This refers to the event described in 1 Thess. 4:14–17 when believers will be “raptured” or “caught up” (Latin: *rapiemur*) in the clouds to meet Christ in the air. The “pre-tribulational rapture” view holds that the rapture will occur before a seven-year tribulation; the “mid-tribulational rapture” view places the rapture in the middle of a seven-year tribulation; the “post-tribulational” view holds that the rapture will occur after the tribulation.

Tribulation. This refers to the intensified persecution against God’s people preceding Christ’s second advent. Dispensationalists understand it as a seven-year persecution against the Jewish nation, while amillennialists see it as a persecution of unknown duration against the church.

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