

Part 19: Premillennialism and the Church

by John F. Walvoord

This sermon explores the intricate relationship between ecclesiology and premillennialism, emphasizing the church's role in God's divine program and the concept of the church age as a parenthesis in biblical prophecy.

Scripture: Acts 2:1

Topics: "Ecclesiology", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significance of the doctrine of the church, emphasizing its crucial role in understanding God's divine program and ultimate purpose. He explores the relationship between ecclesiology and premillennialism, highlighting how different views on the millennium correspond to varying concepts of the church in the present age. Walvoord discusses major types of ecclesiology, including covenant theology, kingdom theology, and dispensational theology, and their implications on premillennialism. He also addresses the formation of the body of Christ at Pentecost and the church age as a parenthesis in God's predicted program for Jew and Gentile.

Transcript

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

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

Major Types of Ecclesiology

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

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

Kingdom theology. Another type of ecclesiology is afforded by those who emphasize kingdom ideology in the Scriptures. While this is often identical with covenant theology, it is not necessarily so. The kingdom of God is regarded as the embrative term including the church in the present age and the millennium in the future. Like covenant theology, however, it tends to identify the kingdom as soteriological rather than governmental and to all practical purposes it is covenant theology all over again but without the covenantal background specifically. [4] Cf. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God*, pp. 80-85, 92-94. To some extent kingdom theology has been carried over into modern liberalism with its identification of the kingdom as the whole purpose of God in human history, often reducing it to a simple moral concept. Kingdom theology as a whole tends to minimize the distinctive character of the millennial kingdom and to make it an aspect of kingdom truth such as is found throughout human history. Like covenant theology it is more in harmony with amillennial theology than with premillennial, but it has nevertheless had its place within premillennialism.

Dispensational theology. While the dispensational idea is as old as theology itself, with elaborate dispensational systems being evolved even before Christ, in recent years the term has been applied to a specific point of view taught by modern dispensationalists. Dispensationalism in the past was not confined to premillennialism, and well-defined systems of dispensationalism are found in Augustine, an amillenarian, in Hodge, a postmillenarian, and in practically all Protestant systematic theologians. In the contemporary meaning of the term, however, dispensationalism is largely confined to premillennialism. While not denying an essential unity to divine dealings in human history, it distinguishes major stewardships or purposes of God, particularly as revealed in three important dispensations of law, grace, and kingdom. Saints of the present age are regarded as fulfilling the present purpose of God to call out a body of saints from Jew and Gentile alike. By contrast Old Testament saints are considered a separate people and in particular Israel is regarded as fulfilling a purpose of God peculiarly for them. The future

millennium is considered a separate age, different from either the law or grace periods, and having a form of stewardship distinct from all previous dispensations. Christ did not say, "I am building," but "I will build." It is significant that this is the first reference to the church in the New Testament, and is here regarded as a future undertaking of Christ Himself.

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

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

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

The Church Age as a Parenthesis

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

Daniel's seventieth week for Israel. One of the classic passages related to this problem is Daniel 9:27, defining the last of Daniel's weeks for the fulfillment of Israel's program. As generally interpreted the time unit in the "weeks" or "sevens" is taken to be a year. Conservative scholars usually trace the fulfillment of the first sixty-nine sevens of years as culminating in the crucifixion of Christ, predicted in the terms that "the anointed one be cut off and shall have nothing" (Dan 9:26). While the most literal interpretation of the first sixty-nine sevens is thus afforded a literal fulfillment, nothing can be found in history that provides a

literal fulfillment of the last seven or the seventieth week. It has been taken by many that this indicates a postponement of the fulfillment of the last seven years of the prophecy to the future preceding the second advent. If so, a parenthesis of time involving the whole present age is indicated.

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

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

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

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

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

Even in types, the interval is anticipated. The yearly schedule of feasts for Israel separates widely those prefiguring the death and resurrection of Christ and those anticipating Israel's regathering and glory. In the

New Testament, the use of the olive tree as a figure in Romans 11 involves the three stages: (1) Israel in the place of blessing; (2) Israel cut off and the Gentiles in the place of blessing; (3) the Gentiles cut off and Israel grafted in again. The present age and Israel's time of discipline and judgment coincide and constitute a parenthesis in the divine program for Israel.

Sir Robert Anderson in regard to 1 Kings 6:1 finds the discrepancy of 480 years as opposed to 573 years, which was the actual length of time for the period from the departure from Egypt to the building of the temple, is solved by subtracting 93 years during which Israel was cast off as a nation--five different periods of time (Judg 3:8, 14; 4:2-3 ; 6:1 ; 13:1). If Anderson's findings are accepted, it provides a clear illustration of time intervals embedded in a chronological program of the Old Testament.

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

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