

EXPANDED EDITION

A Case for
AMILLENNIALISM

UNDERSTANDING THE END TIMES

KIM RIDDLEBARGER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2003, 2013 by Kim Riddlebarger

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Riddlebarger, Kim, 1954–

A case for amillennialism : understanding the end times / Dr. Kim Riddlebarger.—
Expanded Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1550-2 (pbk.)

1. Millennialism. I. Title.

BT892.R53 2013

236'.9—dc23

2013009356

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2007

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

In memory of my ancestors who died in Christ:

Christian Riddlespurger	(1715–1790)
John Riddelsperger	(1743–1828)
Jacob Riddlesberger	(1785–1828)
Daniel Riddlesberger	(1814–1878)
David Riddlesbarger	(1838–1909)
Albert Riddlesbarger	(1867–1931)
Glenn Riddlebarger	(1894–1964)
Clayton Riddlebarger	(1918–1969)

They have come to life and are reigning with Christ for a thousand years.

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Foreword by Michael Horton	11
Preface to the Expanded Edition	15
Introduction	21

Part 1 First Things First

1. Defining Our Terms 27
2. A Survey of Eschatological Views 33
3. How Do We Interpret Bible Prophecy? 47

Part 2 Biblical and Theological Concerns

4. The Covenantal Context of Old Testament Eschatology 57
5. These Things Were Foretold 65
6. According to the Prophets 71
7. Christ and the Fulfillment of Prophecy 83
8. The Nature of New Testament Eschatology 95
9. The Kingdom of God 115
10. The New Creation, the Israel of God, and the Suffering Church 129
11. The Antichrist 145
12. The Blessed Hope 159

Part 3 Exposition of the Critical Texts

- 13. Daniel's Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks 177
- 14. The Olivet Discourse 185
- 15. Romans 11 207
- 16. Revelation 20:1–10 223

Part 4 Awaiting the Blessed Hope

- 17. Signs of the End 255
- 18. Evaluating Millennial Options 273

Notes 291

Scripture Index 319

Subject Index 325

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the consistory of Christ Reformed Church for the sabbatical leave and support needed to do the research associated with this project. Thanks also to the members of our congregation for all your prayers and support, especially those of you who ask the hard questions during the Wednesday night Bible study. But a special word of appreciation goes to the *White Horse Inn* crew—Michael Horton, Ken Jones, Rod Rosenblatt, and our producer, Shane Rosenthal—for much encouragement and fruitful conversation throughout the years. Thanks also to Dr. Lee Irons and Dr. Brett Provance for your helpful suggestions with the manuscript. And as always, thanks to my wife, Micki, and sons, David and Mark, for being so patient.

Foreword

“Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.” Part of the communion liturgy from ancient times, this sentence is the gospel *in nuce*. For two millennia, Christians who disagree over a host of other important points have confessed this faith together. They have recognized that, according to Scripture, the promise of Christ’s future return is inseparable from his crucifixion and resurrection in the past. So we fix our eyes on Christ, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

Before taking up areas of controversy, it is important that we recognize that remarkable consensus. As we confess in the Nicene Creed, Christ “will come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.” Therefore, the issues raised in *A Case for Amillennialism* are part of an ongoing conversation—even debate—among Christians who do not question the integrity of each other’s profession of faith.

In that case, what’s the point? Why invest the time in reading a book like this, when the issues are not life and death and there seem to be so many fine Christians holding significantly different views? Let me offer a few reasons in favor of engaging these issues.

First, all of Scripture is inspired by God and therefore profitable (2 Tim. 3:16). In the Great Commission itself, Jesus commanded his disciples to teach their disciples *everything* he had delivered to them. Kim Riddlebarger and I share a similar church background, where commitment to the dispensational system (premillennial-pretribulational rapture) was expected. In fact, statements of faith often gave more space to this point than to the Trinity or the person and work of Christ. Bible conferences could spark lively debate, sometimes leading to serious dissension, over the identity of the Antichrist or the precise sequence of end-times events. In reaction, many who were raised

in a similar background profess agnosticism regarding eschatology, beyond the simple formula, “Christ will come again.” These brothers and sisters are correct to see this formula as the primary eschatological affirmation that binds all Christians, but if Scripture reveals more than this, then we are all obligated to learn more than this.

Second, all of Scripture is unified around the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is one unfolding plot from Genesis to Revelation. Although there are distinctive subplots, they too feed ultimately into the drama that begins with the promise of a Satan-crushing Redeemer in Genesis 3:15 and ends with the “Hallelujah Chorus” in the book of Revelation. From an amillennial perspective, dispensationalism tends to undermine this narrative unity that centers on promise and fulfillment in Christ with one plan of redemption for one people of God drawn from every nation. Dispensationalists respond with the charge that amillennarians have a “spiritualizing” way of interpreting Scripture that negates its literal sense. What this means is that our differences are not merely over what we believe Scripture teaches about the end times but how we interpret Scripture from beginning to end. Both sides in the controversy will agree that these differences are no small matter.

Third, although eschatology means “last things,” it has enormous bearing on the way we understand the past and the present. We are created as inherently prospective beings, with a goal. That goal to a large extent determines our identity and way of living in the present. Postmillennialism has tended to generate optimistic programs for ushering in the kingdom of God, while premillennialism (especially in its dispensational form) is by comparison more pessimistic. For amillennarians, though, things are not getting better and better or worse and worse. Rather, the whole period between Christ’s two advents is marked, paradoxically, by miraculous growth of Christ’s kingdom by his Word and Spirit alongside the obdurate opposition of the world to the Messiah and his coheirs. The kingdom is already and not yet: present here and now in the form of weakness yet in the power of Christ’s resurrection, to be revealed at Christ’s coming as the kingdom of glory. Only then will the kingdoms of this age become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ forever. Obviously, this has tremendous implications for the identity of the church and its mission—as well as its relation to the nations and empires of this age—and the hope for the future that drives us in the present.

For these and many other reasons, the topics covered in this book are of enormous importance for us. And this particular book is exactly what we have needed. While helpful defenses of the amillennial view are available, Kim Riddlebarger’s is unique. First, he once held the views he critiques. It is easier to be dismissive or to unintentionally mischaracterize the views of others

from afar. However, I've been impressed over the years with how informed and sympathetic Kim is in his engagement with alternative eschatologies. He does not lump postmillennialism with theocratic movements or premillennialism with popular end-times novels. Nor does he overlook the important differences between classic and progressive dispensationalism.

Second, Kim is a model scholar-pastor. He has studied under great biblical scholars as well as historical and systematic theologians at the graduate and postgraduate level. As a pastor, he brings these resources to bear on every sermon and lecture without burying his flock in footnotes. For nearly two decades, he has been the pastor of the same church and has brought God's Word to bear on the daily lives of Christ's people. Both of these key aspects of his calling are evident throughout *A Case for Amillennialism*.

I had the privilege of hearing this material as lectures, then reading it as a book. And now I have the pleasure of commending it in a foreword to a new and updated edition. Whether you are a seasoned scholar or a new Christian, whether you accept all of its arguments or demur, I am confident that you will find this book to be a rich and rewarding banquet on your way to "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

Michael Horton

Preface to the Expanded Edition

No one is more surprised than I that *A Case for Amillennialism* (published in 2003) is still in print and now available in an updated edition. I am very grateful for the positive feedback I have received throughout the years. I am also thankful for those who have disagreed with my particular brand of Reformed amillennialism but who have found my efforts worthy of constructive engagement. Iron sharpens iron. I, for one, have found the engagement helpful in many ways.

This edition of *A Case for Amillennialism* includes two new chapters and a foreword from my friend and colleague Dr. Michael Horton. The two new chapters are “The Antichrist” and “Signs of the End.” The latter seeks to answer the question, How do we interpret the signs of the end? while the former is a summation of the material in my book *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth about the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). Since it may be said (facetiously) that a sound eschatology must be supported by good eschatology charts, I have also included a series of outstanding charts prepared by Mark Vander Pol. The reader should note that in the two new chapters I utilize the ESV, which was not available when the first edition was published in 2003.

Since Dr. Horton was very instrumental in encouraging me to submit *A Case for Amillennialism* for publication, as well as helping me to get it published, I am thrilled at his willingness to contribute a foreword to this edition. A hearty thanks must also go to the people at Baker who listened to Michael’s recommendation and gave my manuscript consideration, and especially to Chad Allen, my editor, who has since advanced through the ranks at Baker and encouraged me to consider preparing this edition.

Since the publication of the first edition of *A Case for Amillennialism*, two important eschatological controversies have arisen that readers may expect me to address in this edition. The first of these controversies is the case of date-setter Harold Camping, whose stubborn unwillingness to grasp the meaning of Matthew 24:36 (“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”) brought repeated embarrassment to himself and his followers. It was Camping’s contorted end-times calculations, and his misuse of the biblical signs of the end, that, in part, prompted the inclusion in this volume of a new chapter dealing with the signs of the end and the way in which we should seek to interpret them.

The other controversy that merits discussion is that raised by John MacArthur’s lecture “Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Is a Premillennialist,” given at the Shepherd’s Conference at Grace Community Church on March 7, 2007. In his lecture, MacArthur made the startling claim that dispensational premillennialism is the only eschatological position consistent with five-point Calvinism. Such a claim came as a surprise to many, since the framers and the current signatories of the Canons of the Synod of Dort (from which the five points come) are overwhelmingly amillennial. Although I chose not to include my response to MacArthur’s lecture in this revised volume, interested readers can find it in its entirety by consulting the notes.¹

Several matters, however, should be addressed in this preface. Several dispensational writers have seized upon my admission that two leading pre–World War II Reformed theologians (Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof) dismissed dispensationalism on a number of grounds, one of which was the dispensational insistence that Israel would become a nation yet again (see chap. 18). That Bavinck and Berkhof got this wrong was all too evident in 1948, when Israel became a nation just as dispensationalists had expected.

This fact is taken by some as evidence of the inability of Reformed amillenarians to properly explain the role of Israel in biblical eschatology. MacArthur takes my admission as an illustration of the need for “those of a Reformed mindset to reconsider their eschatology in light of their commitment to literal hermeneutics and the doctrine of sovereign election.”² The fact that a number of Reformed theologians do indeed believe there will be a future conversion of Israel (e.g., Beza, Vos, Holwerda, Venema, Horton) is taken by dispensationalists as confirmation of the inconsistency supposedly inherent in amillennialism because of a conflict between a literal interpretation of passages about Israel and the spiritualizing and allegorical hermeneutic that amillennial Christians allegedly utilize elsewhere when interpreting prophecy.

There are several things to say in response to this charge. First, I ask the reader to carefully consider the interpretation of Romans 9–11 set forth in

chapter 15 of this volume and then ask whether or not this is a faithful and plausible interpretation of Paul's discussion of Israel's future role in redemptive history. While Reformed Christians disagree about the meaning of "all Israel" (in Rom. 11:26), all Reformed amillenarians do agree that in Romans 9–11—the one passage in which Paul does speak directly to the future of Israel—he fails to mention a single event that dispensationalists claim will come to pass for Israel based on their so-called literal hermeneutic. Paul makes no mention of Israel returning to the land. There is no mention of a rapture of Gentile Christians before the appearance of the Antichrist at the dawn of a seven-year tribulation. There is no mention of an earthly millennial kingdom. You would think that if these things were predicted for Israel throughout the Old Testament, the apostle Paul might think it important to mention them when he addresses Israel's future (*vis-à-vis* the role of the Gentiles). He does not. While it is important to be willing to reconsider one's viewpoint in light of new evidence to the contrary, I humbly ask that others be willing to do the same.

Second, all Christians interested in eschatology should learn the lesson Bavinck and Berkhof unwittingly teach us. Everyone who writes in the field of Bible prophecy and eschatology needs to ask themselves how someone reading our works a generation or two from now (barring the Lord's return, of course) will react to our conclusions, expectations, and predictions. While the Bible does not err, none of us is infallible, and none of us knows the future. A certain amount of restraint and a willingness to admit error come with the eschatological turf. Even though Bavinck and Berkhof were wrong about Israel, their eschatological opinions have largely withstood the test of time. This assertion is supported by the fact that even their contemporary critics find it noteworthy that they were wrong about Israel, and this comes as a matter of some surprise! Of all the different schools of interpretation associated with Bible prophecy, dispensationalists should be especially careful not to make too much of Bavinck's and Berkhof's comments regarding Israel, given the well-known propensity of many popular dispensationalist writers to make eschatological predictions that do not come to pass.

As for tying the dispensational view of Israel's role in redemptive history to the doctrine of election, it should be made clear that MacArthur distances himself from the way the Reformed tradition has historically framed the doctrine of election when he treats the election of national Israel in isolation from those covenants of works and grace that serve as the means through which God sends Jesus Christ to save his elect. At this point, we see the inseparable connection between Reformed varieties of amillennialism and covenant theology—an important connection for readers of this volume to make.³

To summarize briefly, the Reformed doctrine of election holds that God chooses those individuals whom he intends to save based on his own good pleasure and purpose and not because of anything good God foresees in the sinner. In his incarnation, Jesus came to earth to accomplish those things necessary to save those whom God has chosen (to die for their sins and fulfill the righteous requirements of the law). The Holy Spirit calls those whom God has chosen and for whom Jesus has accomplished his redemptive work. Those called by the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel exercise faith in Jesus Christ, are justified, and begin the lifelong process of sanctification. Presumably, MacArthur would agree with all of these points.

God has also chosen the nation of Israel to fulfill specific redemptive purposes—to bring forth the Word of God and the Messiah. But God also deals with his people (including Israel) through a series of covenants.⁴ In the covenant of works, God created Adam to be the biological and federal head of the entire human race. The basis for acceptance before God under the terms of this covenant was perfect obedience (in thought, word, and deed) to all the commandments of God. When Adam fell into sin, the entire human race sinned in and with Adam and came under the curse (death). This is why no one can save themselves (because we are dead in sin), and this is why God must graciously choose to save particular individuals—those chosen amount to a multitude that cannot be counted—if any are to be saved.

God has promised to redeem all those whom he has chosen to save through a gracious covenant. Under the terms of the covenant of grace, the covenant mediator (Jesus Christ) will fulfill all the terms of the covenant of works and then impute his own obedience, as well as turn aside the wrath of God from those whom God has chosen but who cannot save themselves because they stand condemned under a covenant of works. This gracious covenant was promised to Adam, was formally ratified with Abraham, and was then renewed with David. According to the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah), this covenant pointed ahead to a new covenant (the final fulfillment of God's gracious promises) fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The new covenant, then, is this same gracious covenant promised to Adam now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In the case of Israel, God established his covenant with the nation at Mount Sinai. While this covenant was based on the works principle established under the original covenant of works (blessing promised for perfect obedience and curse threatened for any disobedience), this covenant was administered to Israel as part of the covenant of grace. This can be seen in the fact that God gave to Israel a priesthood, animal sacrifices, and a tabernacle (and then a temple) to relieve their guilt of sin and to instruct them about the coming Messiah and the nature of his saving work. This

explains the typology present through the Sinai covenant and its temple, priesthood, etc.

When the nation of Israel comes under God's covenant curses because of their repeated disobedience and lack of repentance, and the nation is first cast from the land during the Babylonian captivity and then again after the events of AD 70, this has no bearing whatsoever on the fact that God has his elect believers among the Israelites (and who are, under the terms of the covenant of grace, saved by grace through faith in the promised Messiah), even though the nation of which they were citizens (Israel) came under God's covenant curse threatened in the covenant sanctions established at Sinai. Israel's possession of the land of promise, therefore, was part of a national covenant and was conditioned upon national obedience. The New Testament writers are clear (much to the dispensationalist's dismay) that the everlasting land promise God made to Abraham is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is the true Israel. This becomes clear when Paul universalizes the Abrahamic promise of a land in Palestine now extending to the ends of the earth (Rom. 4:13). Abraham is now depicted as heir of the world.

Therefore, to tie God's choice of Israel to serve a critical role in redemptive history (as recipients of the Sinai covenant) to God's choice of those particular individuals whom he chooses to save ("sovereign election," to use MacArthur's phrase) is to overlook a very important distinction made throughout the whole of the Bible. One might be part of the visible people of God yet not be a true believer, nor numbered among God's elect. This is the classical distinction between the visible and the invisible church. To paraphrase Paul in Romans 9:6, "Not all Israel is Israel." Yet, says Paul, within national Israel (which receives and possesses the land based on obedience—Josh. 21:43), there is an elect remnant according to grace (Rom. 11:5–6) whom God will indeed save through the merits of Jesus Christ received through faith alone.

So to argue as MacArthur and other dispensationalists do—that the Reformed view of the election of Israel to be God's covenant nation is directly tied to God's decree of those particular individuals whom he will save through faith in Jesus—does not reflect the historic Reformed position. The basis for MacArthur's claim is the unfortunate conflation of Israel's divinely ordained role in redemptive history with God's sovereign choice of those individuals whom he intends to save. This reflects the dispensationalist's rejection of covenant theology as expressed throughout the Reformed tradition and confessions and illustrates an unfortunate willingness to discuss sovereign election in the abstract—apart from the biblical means and redemptive-historical context in which God saves his elect sinners (i.e., the covenants of works and grace) as these covenants unfold in biblical history.

Unless and until these hermeneutical differences between covenant theologians and dispensationalists are resolved, Reformed amillenarians and dispensationalists are not going to agree about Israel's role in redemptive history, nor will we agree about the way in which the New Testament reinterprets the Old in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ and the dawn of the messianic age.

This is why I hope the debate will continue and why I ask you, the reader, to weigh these matters with both an open mind and a well-worn Bible. It is my prayer that this expanded edition of *A Case for Amillennialism* will help you do exactly that.

Introduction

From my earliest youth, I was taught that a secret rapture of Christian believers was a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. I recall our family gathering in front of the television to watch Howard C. Estep of the World Prophetic Ministry explain how the Arab-Israeli conflict was setting the stage for the coming of the Antichrist. This man, Estep told us, would dazzle the world with his solution to the problems of the Middle East, guaranteeing peace for Israel. In the panic caused by the sudden removal of Christians from the earth after the rapture, the entire world would embrace this demonic leader, who would preside over a ten-nation confederacy and a revived Roman Empire of sorts. Shortly thereafter, Israel would be betrayed, and seven years of horrible tribulation would pass before Jesus Christ would return to earth to put an end to the Antichrist and the devil, who empowered him. The subject of Bible prophecy has interested me ever since.

As a teenager, I read with utter fascination Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey gave biblical answers to the tumult and uncertainty that characterized the sixties. I wasn't the only one fascinated by Lindsey's book. *The Late Great Planet Earth* became the bestselling book of the 1970s, ensuring that dispensational premillennialism—a term for his book's view of the end times—would remain a major influence on American evangelicalism for a generation to come.

Many of us thought that the coming and going of Y2K and the beginning of a new millennium would cause people to question dispensational assumptions and preoccupation with signs of the end. However, the success of the Left Behind series of end-times novels, authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, proves the influence and staying power of dispensational teaching. LaHaye and Jenkins have equaled if not surpassed Lindsey's amazing publishing success.

Because dispensationalism is so popular, the question is rarely asked, Do these books and the dispensational theology they represent reflect what the Scriptures actually teach about the return of Christ and the millennial age? As one born and bred a dispensationalist, I know these authors and the people who read their books to be sincere and committed Christians. But after a difficult journey from dispensationalism to the theology of the Protestant Reformation, I have come to believe that these books and the particular interpretation of biblical prophecy they present seriously default at many points. My goal in writing this book is to humbly attempt to point out these errors and provide what I think is a more biblical way to understand the Bible's teaching on the coming of the Lord and the millennial age.

It is difficult to write a readable book on a complicated subject. Eschatology—the study of future things—is by all accounts a complicated subject. Christians are deeply divided about these matters, and discussions of future events naturally tend toward sensationalism and undue speculation. Sadly, this is what we have seen in many recent books about this subject. Therefore, a brief word of explanation about the nature and scope of this book is in order.

My purpose is to set forth the historic Protestant understanding of the millennial age. This position is commonly known as *amillennialism* and is centered in the present reign of Jesus Christ. Amillennialism is grounded in *redemptive history*, the historical acts of God as they unfold in the Bible to provide for the salvation of his people.

Although it is commonly argued that amillenarians do not believe in any millennial age (the term itself, *amillennial*, could imply as much), this is not the case. Amillenarians believe that the millennium is a present reality (Christ's heavenly reign), not a future hope (Christ's rule on earth after his return).

Although amillennialism has fallen into disfavor among prophecy devotees, I believe this position makes the best sense of the biblical passages that address the subject. So I write from a Reformed perspective and make no pretense of being neutral on the millennial question. However, *A Case for Amillennialism* is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of eschatology. That has already been done.¹ The scope of this effort is limited to an evaluation of the three prominent millennial views held by Christians: amillennialism, postmillennialism, and premillennialism.

Because this is a controversial subject, a number of biblical, theological, and historical matters are developed in some detail. Recent discussions of this subject, while interesting and informative, have suffered due to space limitations and editorial constraints.² To make my case for amillennialism in an effective manner, I have divided the discussion into four parts, each of which treats one particular aspect of this topic.

Part 1 includes definitions of key theological terms associated with the millennial question, including an overview of millennial viewpoints. This is followed by a discussion of hermeneutics—the science of biblical interpretation—which grapples with the question, How do our theological presuppositions affect our understanding of the millennial age?

Part 2 develops a number of biblical and theological matters, which will enable us to correctly understand the biblical data regarding the millennium. This section also discusses the Old Testament expectation of the last days and the development of this theme throughout the New.

I will offer a survey of the New Testament writers' use of the terms *this age* and *the age to come* as well as the related terms *already* and *not yet*. This so-called two-age model serves as the interpretive grid through which amillenarians should understand the biblical concept of future history. Such a model enables us to make sense of eschatological language in the New Testament, specifically as it relates to the future and the millennial age. I will also discuss the kingdom of God, Christ's resurrection, the new creation, the New Testament's identification of the church as the Israel of God, and the biblical teaching regarding the Antichrist. Part 2 concludes with a discussion of the heart of New Testament eschatology: our Lord's second advent.

Part 3 discusses key biblical passages that have bearing on the millennial age. The exposition of Daniel 9:24–27 calls attention to the context of messianic prophecy and answers the specific question, Does Daniel teach a future seven-year tribulation period? The exposition of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13) discusses Jesus's teaching about the signs of the end and the future course of redemptive history. The exposition of Romans 11 wrestles with the question, Is there a distinct future for ethnic Israel in God's redemptive purposes? Concluding part 3 is an exposition of the critical millennial text, Revelation 20:1–10, and such matters as John's use of symbolism, the binding of Satan, the first resurrection, the revolt of the nations, and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Part 4 evaluates the signs of the end and how to interpret them before concluding with a discussion of the main problems associated with each of the millennial positions. What are the biblical and theological questions facing pre-, post-, and amillenarians? What about the presence of evil during the millennial age? Does the Bible teach that a golden age lies ahead for the church? Does the Bible teach that the millennium is characterized by a return to Old Testament "types and shadows" as claimed by dispensationalists? Does the Bible teach that Christ's coming occurred in AD 70 when God's judgment fell upon Israel, Jerusalem, and its temple as claimed by preterists? What about the charge that amillenarians do not interpret the Bible literally? What about

the future of the nation of Israel? There are consequences for our millennial views, and we need to be aware of them.

One final note is in order. Sadly, when it comes to eschatology, a great deal of ad hominem argumentation goes on. For example, dispensationalists accuse amillenarians of being anti-Semitic, liberal, or of spiritualizing the Bible by not taking the Bible literally. Amillenarians accuse dispensationalists of being literalists who are prone to sensationalism. While we may have to agree to disagree, we should always strive to conduct this debate with charity and respect.

P a r t 1

FIRST
THINGS
FIRST

1

Defining Our Terms

Whenever discussing theological topics about which so many Christians disagree, it is helpful to define important terms that will be used throughout the discussion. Theologians have developed an extensive vocabulary regarding this subject, and rather than avoiding the use of technical terms, I think it better to use them and thereby gain clarity from the precision of language. What follows is a discussion of the primary theological terms associated with this area of study.

Eschatology

Eschatology is a combination of two Greek words, *eschatos*, “last,” and *logos*, “the word,” meaning “the doctrine of last things.” Most often eschatology is understood as referring to events that are still future, in relation to both the individual Christian and the course of world history. With regard to the individual, eschatology is concerned with physical death, immortality, and the intermediate state—the state of a person between death and when all people will be resurrected at the end of the age. In terms of world history, eschatology deals with the return of Christ, the bodily resurrection at the end of the age, the final judgment, and the eternal state.¹

In much of contemporary evangelicalism, the study of eschatology is often devoted to the timing of the rapture, the role that Israel plays in Bible prophecy, and the period of time popularly known as the tribulation. Many Christians

understand the tribulation to be a future seven-year period of unsurpassed political and spiritual turmoil in which those who remain on earth suffer at the hands of the Antichrist. Those left behind also endure the frightening images of God's judgment that appear throughout the book of Revelation (e.g., the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments).

In much of popular literature about Bible prophecy, eschatological matters are read through the lens of current events, with Bible-prophecy experts correlating biblical texts to current geopolitical crises. This not only gives the Bible great relevance, we are told, but also ensures a never-ending stream of prophecy books designed to show how the Bible explains that a particular current event was foretold by the Hebrew prophets.

Historically, however, Christian theologians wrestled with the biblical text by itself, doing the more challenging but less sensational work of comparing Scripture with Scripture. The historic Protestant understanding of eschatology has a number of emphases that are different from what many evangelicals are accustomed to discussing under the heading of Bible prophecy. This study will not attempt to find biblical texts that explain current events in the Middle East. I will not evaluate potential Antichrist candidates. Nor will I discuss how rapidly developing technology is preparing the way for a totalitarian world government. Rather, this book's focus will be on biblical teaching about things future, and it will explore different biblical themes to develop a full understanding of the millennial age as taught by biblical writers.

With this in mind, we consider the following reminder that a study of eschatology concerns not only the future but also the present:

We must insist that the message of biblical eschatology will be seriously impoverished if we do not include in it the present state of the believer and the present phase of the kingdom of God. In other words, full-orbed biblical eschatology must include both what we might call "inaugurated" [present or realized] and "future" eschatology.²

This is why theologians often remind us that God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures and his mighty acts in redemptive history are necessarily connected. There is no proper way to discuss what God will do in the future unless we have our feet firmly planted in biblical teaching about what God has done in the past. Looking back at the history of redemption, we see what God has done for his people to rescue them from the guilt and power of sin. This in turn helps us to understand how God's promises regarding the future will come to fruition.

It will become clear that a truly biblical expectation for the future is centered in the Christian hope of Christ's second coming. This means the Christian faith is thoroughly eschatological, and the subject of a millennial age must be considered from the perspective of the past, present, and future.³ Until Jesus Christ returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new, Christians will always be concerned with the future and the unfolding course of history. Our redemption draws near as the days tick away before our crucified, risen, and ascended Savior returns. But the second coming makes sense only in light of what God has already done on Calvary and in the garden tomb. Therefore, developing these biblical and theological themes is critical to evaluating millennial views.

The Millennium

Another key term used throughout this study is *millennium*, which is derived from the Latin words *mille*, meaning “thousand,” and *annus*, meaning “year.” The term refers to a thousand-year period.⁴

Revelation 20:1–10 discusses this period of time, and it is characterized by the following: (1) it includes the binding of Satan (vv. 1–3) and (2) the testimony of the witnesses, the beheaded souls who have not worshiped the beast (vv. 4–5); (3) those who participate in the first resurrection reign with Christ because the second death has no power over them (vv. 4–6); (4) those who do not participate in the first resurrection do not live until after the millennium (v. 5); (5) Satan will be loosed for a brief period at the end of the millennium only to be thrown into the lake of fire (vv. 7–10); and (6) the thousand years ends with a great apostasy and the rebellion of nations led by Gog and Magog (v. 7).

The three major viewpoints regarding the millennium are *premillennialism*, which claims that the return of Christ precedes the millennium; *postmillennialism*, which holds that Christ returns after the millennium; and *amillennialism*, which holds that the millennium is not limited to a thousand years but includes the entire period of time between the first and second coming of Christ.

A related term is *chiliasm*, which comes from the Greek term *chilia*, literally meaning “thousand years.” Historically, Protestants used this term to deride those who believed in a literal earthly millennium. As Richard Muller has pointed out:

The Protestant orthodox, both Lutheran and Reformed, denied the notion of an earthly millennium to dawn in the future and viewed the text [Rev. 20] as a reference to the reign of grace between the first and second coming of Christ, the age of *ecclesia militans* [church militant]. The orthodox did distinguish

between the *chiliasmus crassus* [gross millennialism], as taught by the fanatics, and *chiliasmus subtilis* [subtle millennialism], as found among the pietists.⁵

The Protestant orthodox also used the more polemical term *chiliasmus crassissimus*, “the grossest millennialism,” regarding those who stressed the earthly and Jewish elements of the millennial age, much like contemporary dispensationalists.⁶ Most Protestants regard chiliasm as incompatible with Reformation orthodoxy. This may come as a surprise to many American evangelicals who assume that Bible-believing Christians throughout the centuries have held to premillennialism.

The Rapture

Another important term is *rapture*. “Though the word ‘rapture’ does not occur in our English translations of the Bible, it is derived from the [Latin] Vulgate rendering of the verb ‘caught up’ (*harpagesometha*) in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, *rapiemur*.”⁷ The rapture conveys the idea of the transporting of believers from earth to heaven at Christ’s second coming. When used by dispensational writers, the term refers to Christ’s secret coming when all believers are suddenly removed from the earth before the great tribulation.

Those who believe this sudden, secret event takes place seven years before Christ’s bodily return to earth hold to a *premillennial*, *pretribulation* view of the rapture. This is the position taken by dispensationalists.

Many Protestants have historically seen this event as one aspect of the general resurrection at the end of the age (1 Cor. 15:50–55; 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11). The rapture, therefore, refers to the catching away of believers who are living at the time of Christ’s bodily return to earth. When they are caught away in the resurrection, they join those who have died in Christ. While these two resurrection passages are often used by dispensationalists as biblical proof texts for a sudden and secret rapture, historically, Protestants have believed that both texts speak instead of the resurrection of believers from the state of life or death to glorification at the return of our Lord.

Those who place this event at the visible return of Christ to the earth hold to a *posttribulation* view of the rapture. Historic premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism are all committed to this view. Christ returns at the end of the tribulation period, which is understood to be the entire church age (amillennialism) or the time of great apostasy that occurs immediately before the return of Christ, marking the end of the millennial age on the earth (postmillennialism).

Preterism and Futurism

In addition to the pre-, post-, and amillennial terminology, several other important terms relate to how one interprets the book of Revelation. Though these terms most often refer to events in the first century or future events, they have a much broader application as well.

The *preterist* understanding of biblical prophecy sees Christ's predictions in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13) as referring to the Roman army's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. Preterists also argue that the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation before AD 70 and that it describes Nero Caesar's persecution of the church.⁸ The references to judgment on Babylon refer to Israel, not Rome. This means that virtually all the Bible's teaching about future things was fulfilled within the lifetimes of Christ's disciples. "Full" preterists contend that Christ's parousia (the second coming) occurred in AD 70, along with the resurrection and final judgment.⁹ Moderate or partial preterists argue that the events of AD 70 fulfill the prophecies of the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation, but the general resurrection and the final judgment have not yet occurred.¹⁰

The opposite of preterism is *futurism*. A futurist is "one who centers his theological beliefs around national Israel, and believes that most prophecies concerning Israel are to have a literal fulfillment *in the future*, after the Christian church has been taken out of the world."¹¹ As with preterism, there are two types of futurism, a moderate approach and a more radical one. According to George Ladd:

The futurist view has taken two forms which we may call the moderate and the extreme futurist views. The latter is also known as Dispensationalism. . . . A moderate futurist view differs from the extreme futurist view at several points. It finds no reason, as does the latter, to distinguish sharply between Israel and the church.¹²

According to this definition, dispensationalists are thoroughgoing futurists, while historic premillennialists and progressive dispensationalists tend to be moderate futurists. The next chapter discusses these views in more detail.

There are approaches to the book of Revelation other than preterism or futurism, however. One approach is the so-called *historicist* school, the traditional Protestant interpretation that stresses the identification of Babylon the Great with the city of Rome.

This perspective views Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church down to the return of Christ and the end of the age. The numerous

symbols of the book designate various historical movements and events in the western world and the Christian church. . . . One of the prevailing features of this interpretation has been the view that the beast is the Roman papacy and the false prophet the Roman Church. This view was so widely held that for a long time it was called the Protestant view.¹³

Few contemporary commentators hold this position, since, if true, it would mean that the apostle John was not speaking to his first-century audience but to Christians living centuries later.

A number of amillennial interpreters of Revelation (e.g., William Hendriksen) are idealists, contending that the book of Revelation is structured along the lines of *progressive parallelism*. Recently, however, amillennial interpreters such as G. K. Beale and Dennis Johnson have set forth highly refined and improved versions of the approach taken by Hendriksen. Progressive parallelism is the idea that the series of visions in Revelation describe the course of history between the first and second coming of Christ, each from a different prophetic perspective, although these visions intensify before the time of the end. As such, Revelation contains both prophetic and apocalyptic material. John's visions are revealed against the backdrop of Roman persecution of the church, and the image of the satanic beast clearly draws upon the historical image of Nero Caesar as a reference to a series of anti-Christian empires and their leaders throughout the age.

According to this view, Revelation is more likely to have been written after AD 70. John does not intend for his reader to see Babylon as referring to apostate Israel but to an evil secular empire that persecutes God's people. Given the nature of apocalyptic literature, those holding this view contend that Revelation cannot be reduced to strict preterist or futurist interpretations. According to the idealist interpretation, the Roman Empire may be a figure of continual persecution of God's people throughout the church period. This means that Revelation is a combination of historicist, preterist, and futurist elements. To insist that the book be read through one particular lens to the exclusion of the others, says this view, is to miss an important aspect of the genre of apocalyptic literature, namely, its complexity.¹⁴