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## The Eschatology of Covenant Theology

Paul Martin Henebury

Former Editor, *The Conservative Theological Journal*

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to give a survey of the eschatologies generated from within the school of Reformed Covenant Theology. Particular attention will be paid to the so-called “Covenant of Grace” as it functions as the main hermeneutical lens through which covenant thinkers interpret their Bibles.

### The Idea of the Covenant in Reformed Covenant Theology.

Covenant Theology was outlined by some of the Reformers (e.g. Bullinger, Calvin, and, especially, Olevianus), but it received full systematization in England in the 17th Century in the Westminster Confession, in the writings of Robert Rollock, William Ames, and John Ball, and in Holland under Johannes Cocceius and Herman Witsius. It is an attempt to find a unifying principle between the Old and New Testaments. And, inasmuch as it is perceived to have succeeded, it gains a great authority in the minds of its adherents.<sup>1</sup> Covenant theologians find two (sometimes three) Covenants which, they believe, govern all of God’s dealings with men. The first of these (in logical order) is the “Covenant of Redemption” - the agreement reached in eternity between the first two Persons of the Trinity to provide salvation for sinners. This covenant is the optional third in the system.<sup>2</sup> The second is the so-called “Covenant of Works” which teaches that God entered into covenanted relations with Adam in the Garden of Eden. The third (and the most important to the system) is the “Covenant of Grace”. This is basically the covenant which God made with fallen man after Adam’s sin. Palmer Robertson defines it as “the relationship of God to his people subsequent to man’s fall into sin. Since man

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<sup>1</sup> “The Westminster Confession is the first Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but is placed in the foreground and has been able to permeate at almost every point.” - Gerhaardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980), 239.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Witsius includes it within the Covenant of Grace in Book 2 of his *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, (Escondido: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990 reprint), Vol. 1, pp.165-192. But he does dismiss the idea that the “Covenant of Redemption” is an innovation (Ibid, 176-177).

became incapable of works suitable for meriting salvation, this period has been understood as being controlled primarily by the grace of God.”<sup>3</sup> It dictates all of God’s dealings with men - the elect (directly), and the non-elect (indirectly)<sup>4</sup> alike. In a classic article, DTS Professor C. Fred Lincoln wrote:

This covenant, it is declared, governs, qualifies, and limits all of God’s dealings with mankind from the Fall to the end of time. Their conception of the dispensations is that they are merely different “modes of administering” the Covenant of Grace. Therefore, in spite of the multitude of texts which place the “old covenant” of the law of Moses in direct contrast with the “new covenant” of grace in Christ, showing that the one was a failure and the other superseded it (comp. Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:7–12, etc), in order to maintain the unbroken continuity of the Covenant of Grace, they are forced to the unscriptural and untenable position of saying that the law of Moses was a part of the grace covenant. Having refused to recognize the vital difference between man under the law and man under grace, which difference is so extensively set forth in Scripture, the covenant teachers naturally reject the thought of man being for the purpose of testing his submission to the will of God, under any responsibility distinct from grace in the centuries before Sinai.<sup>5</sup>

The Covenant of Grace is the “big idea” that pervades the thought of the Reformed believer. This can be seen in the way the phrase “*the covenant*” crops up in their writings, whether they be concerned with the past, the present, or, indeed, the future.<sup>6</sup> A number of times in his book, Robertson makes it clear that the covenants are, in fact, one covenant. Furthermore, the Biblical

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<sup>3</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1980), p.55. It should be noted that Robertson (p.57) prefers Meredith Kline’s suggestion that “Covenant of Redemption” serve to identify what is commonly called the “Covenant of Grace.”

<sup>4</sup> Although it should be noted that most covenant theologians say that the non-elect are still under the Covenant of Works.

<sup>5</sup> C. Fred Lincoln, “The Development of the Covenant Theory,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (Jan. ‘43), 135.

<sup>6</sup> For example, John Frame’s new opus on *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 2002), is centered around the covenant (p.12). See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s comment that “the covenant” forms the center of Scripture, in his *First Theology*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 132.

covenants like the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and the Davidic, are subsumed within the one grand “covenant of redemption (i.e. grace)”<sup>7</sup> So that we may see this more clearly, it is needful to take a look at how the Covenant of Grace governs the way covenant theologians interpret the Scriptures.

### **Covenant of Grace and the Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology.**

As well as encompassing the explicit scriptural covenants like the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants, due to its extensive character, the “Covenant of Grace” basically flattens out these more easily identifiable covenants and merges them into one<sup>8</sup>. This can be seen in the following excerpt, which is one of the more blatant examples of using the Covenant of Grace as an interpretive “cookie-cutter” upon the explicit covenants:

This one plan was hinted at even as Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15), and when God covered them with the skins of animals, requiring the shedding of blood to be an adequate coverage (Gen. 3:21), thereby giving a type of Calvary where the blood of Christ was poured out in order to institute the new covenant and make adequate coverage for our sins. However, from man’s perspective, that plan has been unfolded in sections as he was able to grasp it, and these integral parts of God’s eternal whole have been referred to (by accommodation) as *the covenant with Abraham, the Mosaic Covenant, the New Covenant* (Jer. 31:31), and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*. See the diagram on page 62, and the fact all of the Biblical covenants are dealt with under the rubric of “The Covenant of Redemption/Grace.”

<sup>8</sup> Some Reformed writers have tried to avoid this by claiming that they see diversity in the covenants. Thus, Morey can write, “When someone asks me, “Do you believe in the unity or the diversity of the Covenants?” I always answer, “I believe in the unity of the Testaments and the diversity of the Covenants.” - Robert A. Morey, *How The Old and New Testaments Relate to Each Other* (Las Vegas: Christian Scholars Press, 2002), p.51. However, further on the author states, “the “string” which brings unity to all the covenants and makes them all part of one super-covenant is the concept of a “heavenly everlasting covenant of grace.””- *ibid*, p.74. Thus, a “covenant” which is stated nowhere in Scripture becomes a “super-covenant” which binds the true Biblical covenants.

<sup>9</sup> William E. Cox, *Biblical Studies in Final Things*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), pp.4-5. (Emphasis added). Note how the *implied* covenant not only covers the *explicit scriptural ones*, but how it also practically curtails

Thus, the idea of the Covenant of Grace becomes the *modus operandi* of progressive revelation. This is what leads to a denial of the Biblical Dispensations and to a confounding of Israel with the Church. Covenant theologians see the “Covenant of Grace” as *the* unifying principle in Scripture which gives continuity to Biblical Theology.<sup>10</sup> They dislike what they perceive to be Dispensationalism’s discontinuity, falsely charging it with teaching different ways of salvation, and with being preoccupied with the literalizing of the Old Testament eschatological promises to the nation of Israel.

In order better to comprehend the importance of the Covenant of Grace in this matter, we shall give the observations of some dispensationalist theologians who have concluded that the idea of the covenant, with its soteriological implications, dominates the hermeneutical methodology of covenant theologians.

Referring to the hermeneutics of Willem VanGemeran, dispensationalist Paul S. Karleen paraphrases him thus:

There is a soteriological unity in the covenant of grace; it joins all God’s people across the testaments; to ask if we are to take the prophets literally is to ask the wrong question; the issue of the interpretation of the prophets is not one of literal versus spiritual/metaphoric/figurative but of the relation of the OT and NT, *which is determined by the Covenant of Grace.*<sup>11</sup>

Karleen goes on to add, “There can be no question that the covenant of grace is *the deciding factor in the covenant theologian’s eschatology.*”<sup>12</sup>

This imposition of the all-embracing Covenant of Grace is also noticed by John Feinberg in his excellent treatment of “Systems of Discontinuity” between the Old Testament and the New.

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the national and kingly promises stated in them by demanding that they state nothing which threatens the priority of the implied covenant.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Willem VanGemeran’s essay, “Systems of Continuity” in John S. Feinberg, ed. *Continuity and Discontinuity*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), especially pages 44, 50, and 58-61.

<sup>11</sup> Paul S. Karleen, “Understanding Covenant Theologians,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1989), p.132. Emphasis added. Dr Karleen is responding to Vern S. Poythress’s book *Understanding Dispensationalists*.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* 133. Emphasis added.

Ask a covenant theologian to sketch the essence of his system and invariably he will begin with a discussion of the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption. But, of course, all these relate to soteriology; and when they are made the basic categories for understanding Scripture, it becomes obvious why covenantal systems usually emphasize soteriology to the exclusion of other issues.<sup>13</sup>

To summarize, there is no removing the spectacles of the Covenant of Grace from off the noses of Covenant theologians. They believe it is the grand unifying theme of the Old and New Testaments, as well as the great interpretive grid of Scripture. It is a magnificent schema which facilitates the purpose of God in revealing Himself to His people. As Gerhaardus Vos, in one of his best pieces of writing, could say:

...the leading principle of the covenant...is nothing but the open eye and the clear vision of the Reformed believer for the glorious plan of the grace of God, which arouses in him a consciousness of the covenant and keeps it alive, and which causes him to be so familiar with this scriptural idea and makes this train of thought so natural to him. How else could he receive and reflect the glory of his God, if he were not able to stand in the circle of light, where the beams penetrate to him from all sides? To stand in that circle means to be a party in the covenant, to live out of a consciousness of the covenant and to drink out of the fullness of the covenant.<sup>14</sup>

To Vos's mind, the "consciousness of the covenant" dictates the approach to Scripture that he takes. This paradigm inevitably affects his hermeneutical pre-understanding. Another amillennialist, Anthony Hoekema, writes in a similar vein: "Amillennialists do not believe that sacred history is to be divided into a series of distinct and disparate dispensations but see a single covenant of grace running through all of that history. This covenant of grace is still in effect today and will culminate in the eternal dwelling together of God and his redeemed people on the new earth."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John S. Feinberg, 344, n.108.

<sup>14</sup> Gerhaardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology", in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 256.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, (Downer's Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1977), ed. Robert G. Clouse, 186. See how this "single covenant running throughout all history", and which is "still in effect

## **Eschatological Options Available To Covenant Theology.**

From what we have just seen it is obvious that any system of eschatology which will be acceptable to a covenant theologian must place the covenant of grace at the very start of its prophetic interpretation so that it can dictate the hermeneutic from the outset. This means that options will be circumscribed by the dominant covenantal idea. It also means that Dispensationalism, with its emphasis upon the various distinguishable administrations throughout the progress of revelation history, is completely unacceptable. This is especially true since dispensationalism rejects the standard Reformed view pertaining to the covenant of grace.<sup>16</sup> What is more, the idea of the covenant in Reformed thought makes it essential for a grammatical-historical hermeneutic to be supplanted on those occasions when the unity of that overarching covenant is threatened by a plain reading of the passage in question. This study will narrow its scope to the trademark millennial traits which, more than anything else, define the eschatology of covenant theology.

That said, the millennial options available to those who filter their Bible interpretation through the Covenant of Grace are, Amillennialism; Postmillennialism; and, what is sometimes referred to as Covenant (or Historic) Premillennialism. These options will now be reviewed below.

### *Option One: Amillennialism:*

Amillennialism is the eschatological viewpoint which, among other things, insists that there will be no literal thousand-year Messianic kingdom upon earth. Louis Berkhof admitted that the Amillennial point of view was, “as the

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today” must *a priori* exclude a comprehensive literal fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants to Israel.

<sup>16</sup> We are, of course, aware that men like Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Walvoord, and Herman A. Hoyt have held to a unifying covenant of grace. And indeed it is possible to be a dispensationalist and hold to a form of covenant theology (See e.g. Michael A. Harbin, “The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology,” in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1995) ed. Roy B. Zuck, pp.34-35). See also Herman Hoyt’s remarks in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* ed. Robert G. Clouse, 197. While not dismissing it, Chafer said of covenant theology that “If [the Covenants of Works and of Grace] are to be sustained it must be wholly apart from Biblical authority” - Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:156. For an attempt to show that the main difference between dispensationalism and covenant theology is one of emphasis, see Stephen R. Spencer’s article, “Reformed Theology, Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck, eds. In our opinion Spencer is only half successful.

name indicates, purely negative.”<sup>17</sup> Amillennialists believe the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled spiritually by the New Testament Church. Most place a heavy emphasis upon denying the literalness of Revelation Twenty, especially the first six verses. For them the six-times repeated reference to a “thousand years” is not a thousand years but an extended period of time reaching from the first coming of Christ to His future Second Advent. Thus, the Millennium was inaugurated when Christ came. They stress the symbolic meaning of many (but not all) of the numbers in the Book of Revelation, employing a seemingly arbitrary numerology to secure their interpretations. This is even the case when the passages in view are neither poetic nor apocalyptic<sup>18</sup> in genre (e.g. Ezekiel 40-48).

As Covenant Theologians, amillennialists interpret the Scriptures under the rubric of the Covenant of Grace - a covenant that is stated nowhere between the covers of the Bible. This means that amillennialism has to employ two methods of interpretation. The literal method, and the figurative, or, spiritualizing method. This latter method of interpreting Scripture is used in redirecting prophetic portions which would, if allowed to speak literally, overthrow the notion of one Church in both Testaments,<sup>19</sup> (though oftentimes the prophecies concerning the first coming of Christ are assigned a literal meaning).

There are basically two forms of amillennialism: the Augustinian view, and the “Warfieldian” view. Augustinian amillennialism teaches that the thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation Twenty is figurative, and stands for the New Testament era from the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through to the last judgment and the creation of the new heavens and new earth. The millennium, then, is what dispensationalists call the Church-age, upon earth. Christ is now reigning on a spiritualized throne of David, over a spiritual Israel, for a spiritualized millennium. The saints on earth are also presently reigning spiritually with Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 708. Although others in this camp (e.g. A. Hoekema, W.Cox) are at pains to point out that amillennialism does set forth some positive positions of its own. Nevertheless, most of their works spend a lot of time refuting the opinions of others, especially premillennialists.

<sup>18</sup> The whole subject of what constitutes apocalyptic literature, and how it differs, if at all, from prophetic literature, needs to be addressed from a Biblical perspective. Many of the leading authorities followed by evangelicals approach the issue with unbelieving presuppositions about apocalyptic which ought to cause more concern in evangelical circles than it does.

<sup>19</sup> Such scriptures would include Genesis 15:18; Jeremiah 31:35-37; Ezekiel 37; Zechariah 14; Rev. 20:1-6 etc.

The second view, which we have called the “Warfieldian” view, affirms everything that is stated above save for the identity of those who are partakers of the first resurrection and the millennium. This view was earlier taught by the German scholar Klieforth, who, in 1874, posited that the martyred saints now in heaven, are reigning in the spiritual millennium. B.B. Warfield popularized this view in the United States. He believed the first resurrection represented “the symbolical description of what has befallen those who while dead yet live in the Lord.”<sup>20</sup> They were in the “intermediate state” of those who were “saved in principle if not in complete fruition.”<sup>21</sup> All amillennialists posit a spiritual resurrection in Revelation 20:4, but a physical resurrection in Revelation 20:5-6.<sup>22</sup>

*Option Two: Postmillennialism:*

Postmillennialism was the predominant belief among both the Puritans and the Princeton theologians. It teaches that the Church brings in the kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel to fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. They cite passages like Psalm 47; 72:1-11; 97:5; Zechariah 9:10; and Matthew 13:31-33 in support of their notion that the world will be successfully evangelized. After the Church-generated millennium (a spiritualized period of time which could conceivably last many millennia), in which the world will be “christianized,” Jesus Christ (who has been reigning invisibly in heaven), will return. The view might well be characterized as “Christian Utopianism.” Postmillennialists like to talk about the “Church-militant,” a phrase meaning to them that the Church will convert the world, or at least subdue it under Christian influence. Believing this as they do, postmillennialists like to point out that their eschatology is optimistic. As an example of postmillennial optimism we reproduce these words of J. Marcellus Kik:

We need not wait for the so-called future millennium. What we do want is peace amongst the nations and less wickedness. But that is

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<sup>20</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988, reprint), 653. We take Warfield to be amillennial rather than postmillennial.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 652.

<sup>22</sup> It has been observed that amillennialists differ among themselves on the details of this passage. Erickson writes, “in dealing with the very troublesome passage of Revelation 20:4-6, amillennialists have come up with a rather wide variety of explanations. One wonders at times whether these explanations reflect the same basic view or quite different understandings of eschatological and apocalyptic literature.” - Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, second edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 1219.

promised if we go forth conquering and to conquer in the name of Christ. Let us not be blind to what has already been accomplished and thus rob God of glory. The absence of greater victories is due to our lack of faith, and not because of the absence of millennium blessings.

Besides a too materialistic conception of millennium blessings another difficulty is that we have not paid enough attention to the parables of our Lord which indicate that the millennial blessings will pervade the earth gradually...Both the *amil* and *premil* are in error when they maintain that the millennial blessings foretold in the Old Testament must come about by a cataclysmic act at the second coming of Christ. That is not the teaching of the Bible. Both in the Old Testament and in the New it is taught that the Kingdom blessings would come about by an almost imperceptible, gradual growth.<sup>23</sup>

This quotation reveals the driving mechanism behind postmillennialist optimism. The wondrous blessings of the millennium have already been given to the Church. The only difficulty is in the Church's realization of those blessings. If only Christians would live up to their high calling the world and its institutions would be claimed for Christ!<sup>24</sup> Is it any wonder that they often disparage the "pessimistic" view of the end-times advocated by premillennialists?

It is interesting to note how postmillennialism as a belief rises and wanes depending on the attitudes of the times. If the age is progressive and optimistic, if there have been no wars for a time, postmillennialists point to the fact that the world is getting better. Thus they often increase or decrease in numbers according to the drift of current events. It has been noted that this eschatology flourished in the late eighteenth, and the early to late nineteenth centuries, fuelled by progress in science, Revivals, and the growth of missions. After the Second World War, there were scarcely any postmillennialists, save for the liberal theologians who believed that man is innately good, and is getting better and better.<sup>25</sup> But in the last thirty years, a movement has grown

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<sup>23</sup> J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 206-207.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this is why Kik flirted with the ecumenical movement prior to his death. Again, maybe this is why postmillennial Reconstructionists invite the cooperation of advocates of the so-called "Signs and Wonders Movement"?

<sup>25</sup> There were some notable exceptions among evangelicals, including John Murray, Loraine Boettner, and J. Marcellus Kik.

in America which is stridently postmillennial. This is the movement known as Dominion Theology, or, Reconstructionism. This is the name given to the movement within Reformed Theology which seeks to reconstruct society to fit its template of Christian law and ethics. Their great foundational text is Matthew 5:17-19, though they take pains to translate *plerosai* as “confirm” rather than “fulfill,” an interpretation that is exegetically suspect to say the least.<sup>26</sup>

The unofficial founder of this movement is the late Rousas J. Rushdoony, but many of the basic premises of Reconstructionism can be seen in the works of the Swiss Reformer Pierre Viret, as well as among some of the Presbyterian Puritans. It is certain that the recent upsurge in interest in postmillennialism is due in large part to this movement. Reconstructionists believe that the “theonomic mandate” demands an optimistic view of the subjugation of the *kosmos* by the Gospel prior to the Second Advent.

*Option Three: Historic Premillennialism:*

Historic Premillennialism (also called Covenant Premillennialism) has a long history in the Christian Church. It basically goes along with amillennialism and postmillennialism in holding to two methods of interpretation, but it does see a thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation Twenty.<sup>27</sup> Although not all historic premillennialists believe that the thousand years is literal (e.g. George Eldon Ladd), for the most part, they do. Many early premillennialists saw a correlation between the six days of creation, with its seventh-day rest, and a six thousand year history of the world followed by a thousand year “sabbath.” Historic Premillennialism, because it accepts covenant theology, does not see different administrations (dispensations) in the history of revelation. A key difference between Covenant Premillennialism and Dispensationalism is the fact that Dispensationalists hold to a distinction between the Church and Israel, whereas Covenant Premillennialists blur this distinction, believing only that Israel has a future in the plan of God, but not as the head nation among the nations of the world in the Messianic kingdom. All historic premillennarians are post-tribulationists.

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<sup>26</sup> See the full discussion in H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1988), 103-112.

<sup>27</sup> This is the main proof-text for covenant premillennarians. On a side-note, it is a curious fact that Revelation 20 plays such a large part in covenant eschatology, particularly as they are often at pains to accuse dispensationalists of deriving their entire system from this single passage.

## Inductive Versus Deductive Eschatologies.

We have tried to show that the covenant theologian is implacably devoted to a view of the covenant of grace which prevents him from considering any eschatology that will not bend under its guiding authority. Dispensational Premillennialism is just not an option. The blinkers are on and they are content to keep them on. For this reason dispensationalists need to be wary of critiques of their system from covenant theologians. This is not to sound superior; we need and appreciate good sound criticism, and there are few better at it than these brethren. But it is the case that any critique from that quarter will inevitably presuppose the single covenant of grace, and that it will form the foundation for their censures. Here, for example, is John Gerstner, in full flourish, expostulating with dispensationalists about this very thing:

Does the Scripture not set forth the idea that God gave His Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins and that, when we accept that sacrifice, we are saved by that grace? When the dispensationalist says that there is no way of salvation in any dispensation except the way of the blood of Jesus Christ, is he not affirming the “all-time covenant of grace”? Is he not therein showing that the covenant of grace is not only not untenable, but is absolutely indispensable? Does the dispensationalist, in other words, have any objection to the covenant of grace except the absence of the very expression itself?”<sup>28</sup>

We may reply to the above by answering, “yes”, “no”, “no”, and, “yes.” Gertsner’s problem is that to him, the covenant of grace is so all-encompassing it blots out the wording of Scripture. The sacrifice of Christ was on the basis of the *New Covenant* (1 Cor. 11:25).<sup>29</sup> There simply is no such thing as “the *covenant* of grace!” All of God’s dealings with sinners are by grace, but there need not be and is not any covenant of grace.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing The Word of Truth*, (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 306

<sup>29</sup> Again, we realize that covenant theologians hold that the New Covenant is the Covenant of Grace in its final expression. See footnotes 6, 7, & 8 above.

<sup>30</sup> We echo the words of Lewis and Demarest who state, “The text [viz. Gen.3:15] does not explicitly mention a covenant. Moreover,...no identifiable covenant structure exists: i.e., no explicit promise of eternal life, no condition of faith, and no explicit penalty of death for unbelief. The hypothesis that Genesis 3:15 represents the initial declaration of the covenant of grace likewise appears improbable. Rather, the verse is a prophetic promise of the sufferings of Christ and the defeat of Satan.” - Gordon R.

**Conclusion.**

In this essay we have tried to show that the eschatology of Covenant Theology is proscribed by the parameters of the covenant of grace. Although we recognize that this covenant is not the only one which Covenant theologians speak about, yet it is the covenant which they see as ruling over all the others now that the covenant of works is broken (Gen. 3). We believe that the external stipulations of this theological, but, extra-biblical, covenant act as a faulty lens which distorts proper exegesis of the prophetic passages of the Old and New Testaments. Dispensational premillennialism, with its onus on a single-sense, normative, grammatical-historical hermeneutic, can deal much more honestly with these portions of the Bible, allowing them to speak hope to the saints of God whether they be Christians or citizens of the forthcoming kingdom of Israel.

## A Survey of the Case for Literal Interpretation Of the Scriptures

**Kenneth R. Cooper**

Several years ago, Paul Lake described the current situation in hermeneutics rather interestingly. He wrote,

In Kenya, velvet monkeys take the ground  
Until a sentry gives a chattering bark  
Which in the simple velvet lexicon  
Means *snake*, and connotes *evil*, *death*, and *dark*.  
Or else the sentry makes a guttural sound  
That translates in our own more complex tongue  
To hawk or eagle circling for prey,  
And sends the monkeys scampering. Either way,  
The monkeys must take action—jump or flee  
Across the ground or to a sheltering tree.  
Should one, instead, hearing a sentry speak,  
Decide to deconstruct the fellow’s meaning  
And prove all urgent chattering oblique,  
A python’s fang or hawk’s cruel curving beak  
Will punctuate the monkey’s idle preening,  
Ending his dissertation in mid-squeak.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, it is crucial how the monkeys interpret the signal from the sentry. If they fail to understand the meaning he intended by his signal, they could run into serious trouble, not to mention become dinner for a python or a hawk.

If correct interpretation of the sentry’s signal is vital to the monkeys in this context, how much more vital is correct interpretation of God’s Word in its context for believers today? But, how do we determine the “correct” interpretation of God’s Word? If we adopt the New Hermeneutic, for instance, we may find ourselves in a maze of meanings of which few if any possess any direct relationship to the text of God’s Word. Summarizing the New Hermeneutic, Walter Kaiser notes,

Every text has a plethora of meanings that are said to exist without any norms for deciding between which are right and which are wrong. If and when norms are allowed, by some evangelical forms of this

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lake, “A Lesson in Hermeneutics,” *First Things* 120 (February 2002), 33.

hermeneutical revolution, they still stand opposed to what the author intended to say through his use of these words. Rather, it is claimed that the *text itself* is autonomous and free from the author once he has written it: it is ready only to be shaped by our act of understanding it.<sup>2</sup>

To follow these guidelines to their ultimate end would result in confusion and lack of understanding. Furthermore, to allow the reader of Scripture such latitude that he basically determines whatever meaning he chooses for the text not only leaves him in a kind of oblivion so far as the meaning actually goes but also could send him directly into Satan's cruel curving beak.

The New Hermeneutic approach sounds ever so much like the theory, if not the attitude, of Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*: "When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'"<sup>3</sup> If Humpty Dumpty is the reader/interpreter of the text, he is advocating the New Hermeneutic. If, on the other hand, he is the writer of the text, then he is laying the foundation for a more basic hermeneutic, one that has been around since the New Testament expounded interpretations of the Old Testament—and even earlier, a hermeneutic that seeks to determine the meaning *intended* by the author. Concerning Ezra the scribe and his group of scribes, for example, Nehemiah wrote, "So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8.8, KJV).

The purpose of the interpretation of a Biblical text, therefore, is at least two-fold:

1. To give the sense of the text, and
2. To cause others to understand the meaning of the text of Scripture.

If the New Hermeneutic fails to fulfill these purposes, but rather scatters meaning to the winds, how can we obtain the sense or acquire an understanding of the Word of God? This paper argues that the literal interpretation method best meets Ezra's two-fold purpose, and is therefore the one interpreters should apply when studying the Scriptures.

## **Literal Interpretation Defined**

Literal interpretation, however, has suffered some misunderstanding of its own over the years, because apparently, as G. B. Caird has noted, "Literality

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<sup>2</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. "Meaning from God's Message: Matters for Interpretation," *Christianity Today* (October 5, 1979), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (Chicago: The Goldsmith Publishing Co., n.d.), 182.

is easier to illustrate than define.”<sup>4</sup> Caird adds, “provisionally we may say that words are used literally when they are meant to be understood in their primary, matter-of-fact sense.”<sup>5</sup> We should begin, therefore, with an explanation of what we mean by literal interpretation. A number of scholars have offered definitions. For instance, Henry A. Virkler notes, “More orthodox interpreters have emphasized the importance of a literal interpretation, by which they meant interpreting God’s Word the way one interprets normal human communication.”<sup>6</sup> Paul Tan expands on this definition. Tan notes, “To ‘interpret’ means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret ‘literally’ means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to the normal, customary, and proper usages of words and language. Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means explaining the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language.”<sup>7</sup> Ramm notes that when we assert the literal meaning of words or sentences, we in no way ignore or disregard the complexity of language. Language, like geological formations, build up over the years, adding layers of encrusted meaning and changing its over-all meaning at the same time. Thus, when an interpreter asserts that we must begin with the literal meaning of words, he makes that assertion with a full understanding of the complexity of language with all its diverse meanings, forms, and nuances.

With this understanding of language in mind, Ramm finds the best definition of literal interpretation in a hundred year old Biblical Introduction by Thomas Hartwell Horne. Horne’s comment states,

Further, in common life, no prudent and *conscientious* person, who either commits his sentiments to writing or utters anything, intends that a diversity of meanings should be attached to what he writes or says; and, consequently, neither his readers, nor those who hear him, affix to it any other than the true and obvious sense.... *The Literal Sense* of any place of Scripture is that which the words signify, or require, in their natural and proper acceptation, without any trope [figure of speech], metaphor, or figure, and abstracted from mystic meaning.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 133.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 47-48

<sup>7</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1978), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (Boston: Littell and Gay, 1868), I:322, quoted in Bernard Ramm,

It is clear just from these definitions that literal interpretation is not a crude letterism, an approach which fails, inadvertently or deliberately, to recognize levels of meaning of words, nuances, figures of speech, similes, metaphors, etc. Neither is it, as some have charged, a “wooden literalism” that supposedly characterizes orthodox, conservative, or Fundamentalist hermeneutics. Clearly, literal interpretation allows room for figurative language and poetic expressions, as David Cooper’s classic “Golden Rule of Interpretation” indicates: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”<sup>9</sup> All of these definitions together indicate that the interpreter should interpret a passage using the literal approach unless the language and/or context indicate otherwise. For example, when the plain meaning does not make common sense, then we should look for a figurative sense since the Scriptures do not communicate nonsense. When we look for or discern figurative expressions, we are still using literal interpretation because we are seeking to interpret according to the “normal, customary, and proper usages of [the] language.” Roy Zuck distinguishes between ordinary-literal and figurative-literal to indicate that a literal interpretation does include figurative language and that the difference is primarily in the way the writer uses language. Zuck illustrates this distinction in a chart that links the two under the heading of “Literal-Historical-Grammatical Interpretation”:<sup>10</sup>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ordinary-Literal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normal, plain, ordinary usage</li> <li>• Plainly expressed Literal facts</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Figurative-literal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Picturesque, out-of-the-ordinary usage</li> <li>• Figuratively expressed Literal facts</li> </ul>
<p>“Literal” (historical, grammatical) interpretation</p>	

*Chart 1: Aspects of Literal Interpretation*

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*Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Third revised edition, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 121, bracketed insertion is Ramm’s.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Cooper. *The World’s Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1942), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1991), 148.

## Literal Interpretation Defended

With these definitions and Zuck's distinctions in mind, then, let us examine some of the reasons why we should use the literal interpretation approach to understanding the Scripture. First, *literal interpretation was one of the earliest methods, if not the earliest method, used to interpret the Scriptures and was practiced by some of the great Bible teachers in history.* For example, as previously noted, when Israel returned to their land from the Babylonian exile and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, there came a day when all the people gathered together in one place within those walls. The scribe Ezra brought forth the book of the law of Moses, which he and a group of other scribes read and explained to the people of Israel. Nehemiah states, "So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8.8, KJV). Scholars are divided over the meaning of *vr" \_po*, translated "distinctly," in the King James Version. Some believe it means to translate, while others define it in this context as to interpret. Derek Kidner notes, "The basic meaning of the word in question is 'to make distinct or separate,' which could denote either that the reading was well articulated or that the law was read and expounded section by section. Either of these would be appropriate; probably both were true."<sup>11</sup> While it is true that many of the Jews in Jerusalem at this time understood only Aramaic and possibly needed the law translated from the Hebrew, some scholars believe they could understand enough Hebrew to follow Ezra's reading. One such scholar, F. Charles Fensham notes that the word means either to translate into Hebrew or to interpret. He prefers the former and translates the verse, "*They read from the book of the law of God and translated it, giving the meaning so that the people understood what was read.*"<sup>12</sup> In either case, the scribes stuck with the text and attempted to express the intended meaning of its Author since, as Kidner notes, "The whole occasion emphasizes the clarity and candour of God's dealings with His people..."<sup>13</sup> As such, it is reasonable to assume that this is an early expression of the literal interpretation of the Scriptures.

Many of the early church fathers also applied this method to the Scriptures. There was, of course, a group in Alexandria, Egypt that sought to find a deeper meaning, a spiritual meaning behind the words of the text. As a result, A. Bea notes, "And against the pagans who accused the Christians of immorality, it was pointed out that the writings of Scripture were to be interpreted allegorically. Thus, because of the exigencies of the times, there

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<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Series (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1979), 106.

<sup>12</sup> F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 215, all italics are Fensham's.

<sup>13</sup> Kidner, 106.

arose the *allegorical* interpretation.”<sup>14</sup> This form of interpretation arose in Alexandria late in the first century or early in the second century with a Jewish scholar, Philo as one of its major proponents. For Philo, “The literal sense was the body of Scripture, and the allegorical sense its soul. Accordingly the literal was for the immature, and the allegorical for the mature.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, the allegorical method received primary attention. However, the foremost proponent of the allegorical method was Origen, who lived somewhere between 185 B.C. and 250 B.C.. According to Virkler, Origen “believed that Scripture is one vast allegory in which every detail is symbolic....” Virkler notes, “Origen believed that even as man consists of three parts—body, soul, and spirit—so too Scripture possesses three senses. The body is the literal sense, the soul the moral sense, and the spirit the allegorical or mystical sense. In practice Origen typically disparaged the literal sense....”<sup>16</sup> Origen felt that only the allegorical sense resulted in a true knowledge of Scripture and of the God of Scripture.

By the end of the fourth century, there arose a school of interpretation in Antioch of Syria that largely opposed the allegorical interpretation. Among its leaders, it claims Lucian, Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Chrysostom, the last two being the strongest and most well known. In hermeneutical theory, this group took a firm stand for a literal, historical exegesis. Ramm notes, “They asserted that the literal was plain-literal and figurative-literal [a varied expression of Zuck’s distinction, see Chart 1 above]. A plain-literal sentence is a straightforward prose sentence with no figures of speech in it. ‘The eye of the Lord is upon thee,’ would be a figurative-literal sentence.”<sup>17</sup> Alexandrians would allegorize this Scriptural quotation, because according to them, the literal sense would attribute real, physical eyes to God. The Antiochenes, however, claimed the literal meaning did not concern physical eyes as such, but rather reflected the omniscience of God. There is nothing that escapes His notice. “In other words,” notes Ramm, “literalism is not the same as *letterism*.”<sup>18</sup> The Antiochenes insisted that behind every figure of speech or symbol, there lay a genuine reality that the figure expressed in a unique, vivid way. Yet, still a literal way.

Theodore of Mopsuestia offers some excellent evidence for the literal interpretation espoused by the Antiochene School in Syria. In his analysis of Paul’s “allegory” in Galatians 4.24-26, Theodore claims that Paul’s use of the term allegory was more in a sense of typology than a sense of strict allegory, since the Old Testament references to Hagar and Sarah were not fictional stories but real history, real life people, not imaginary nor strictly allegorical

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<sup>14</sup> A. Bea, “Progress in the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” *Theology Digest* 1 (Spring 1953), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Ramm, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Virkler, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ramm, 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

ones. Paul uses the account of actual past events to illustrate a significant theological message. Robert Kepple notes, “Theodore then argues at length to demonstrate that Paul did not deny the historicity of the events, pointing out that Paul refers to real geographical areas (v. 25) and real time intervals (v. 29). They must be real, he argues, because ‘a comparison cannot be made if the matters compared do not exist.’”<sup>19</sup> Theodore goes to great pains to stress the historical nature of the contents of Paul’s narrative. He emphasizes how appropriate to God’s message is the comparison Paul makes. Kepple notes, “While he does not explicitly term that comparison ‘typology,’ that identification seems to underly his analysis of the passage.”<sup>20</sup> Kepple makes a similar analysis of the writings of both Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrillus as they comment on the same Hagar/Sarah narrative in Galatians 4. Kepple concludes that their emphasis on the fact that Paul’s use of the term *avllhgorou,mena* does not necessarily mean he is using allegorical interpretation is a correct emphasis. The Greek word as stressed particularly by Chrysostom and Theodoret may have a broader meaning, which for them involves a serious typology. And this in turn is a form of literal interpretation.

Robert Bernard offers an excellent, succinct summary of this school of interpretation. Bernard notes, “What one can learn from the extant Antiochene writings is that their writers had no use for Alexandrian allegorical interpretation. The school of Antioch founded its approach on consideration of the literal text: its literal meaning, grammar, and historical context.”<sup>21</sup>

Not only did literal interpretation characterize early church hermeneutics, but it also impacted the Protestant Reformation. Both Luther and Calvin, the leading reformers, developed their hermeneutic from their exegesis of Scripture, adhering strictly to the text as written. Both of them received most of the credit for “restoring some sanity by abandoning (for the most part) allegorical interpretation in favor of a more literalistic approach.”<sup>22</sup> Luther himself explicitly declared that for a long time while he was a monk he succumbed to allegorizing the Scriptures. He notes, however, that when he came to a full knowledge of Christ and His salvation, he changed his approach

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<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Kepple, “An Analysis of Antiochene Exegesis Of Galatians 4.24-26” *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (Spring 1977): 241. The quotation from Theodore is taken from Henry B. Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in epistolas b. Pauli commentarii: The Latin Version with the Greek Fragments, with an Introduction, Notes, and Indices*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1880), 1:xxxv.

<sup>20</sup> Kepple, 243.

<sup>21</sup> Robert W. Bernard, “The Hermeneutics of the Early Church Fathers,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, edited by Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 63.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Stallard, “Literal Interpretation: The Key to Understanding the Bible,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4 (Spring 2000), 23.

to the Scriptures, abandoning the allegorical approach for the literal interpretation. Through his study of Romans, for instance, Luther says,

...I came to some knowledge of Christ. I recognized then that allegories are nothing, that it's not what Christ signifies but what Christ is that counts. Before I allegorized everything, even a chamber pot, but afterward I reflected on the histories and thought how difficult it must have been for Gideon to fight with his enemies in the manner reported.... It was not allegory, but it was the Spirit and faith that inflicted such havoc on the enemy with only three hundred men. Jerome and Origen contributed to the practice of searching only for allegories. God forgive them. In all of Origen there is not one word about Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Luther was a firm proponent of *sola scriptura*, affirming the Bible as the final source of truth and of authority for the Christian faith. When he also proclaimed *sola fide*, Luther essentially initiated a shift in hermeneutics to one that was faith oriented. Faith in God enables the interpreter to understand God's Word in its plain expression. For Luther and for Calvin, "biblical truth is inaccessible to human reason unless the interpreter's mind first is informed by faith and illumined by the Holy Spirit. Such faith has two sources. First, it is rooted in an intuitive knowledge of Christ, God's Word revealed personally to the believer by the Holy Spirit. Second, it derives from a confidence that the Bible is the self-authenticating Word of God: the message itself and the Holy Spirit's influence convince the believer of this fact."<sup>24</sup>

John Calvin, unlike Luther, made no personal statement of his "conversion" from allegorizing Scripture to a literal form of interpretation. Instead, Calvin demonstrated his adherence to the literal approach through his exegesis of Scripture. "Calvin's commentaries," notes Stallard, "are especially significant as one watches the famous exegete lay out the text according to grammatical and historical concerns."<sup>25</sup> Both of these concerns lie at the heart of literal interpretation, and lay the foundation for a full-blown grammatical-historical exegetical method that grew out of the Reformation and today is used widely by most who profess the practice of literal interpretation.

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, *Table Talk* No. 335 recorded by Veit Dietrich, Summer or Fall, 1532, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54 ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, n.d.), 46–47.

<sup>24</sup> Jim Spivey, "The Hermeneutics of the Medieval and Reformation Era," in Corley, Lemke, and Lovejoy, editors, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Stallard, 23.

In developing his exegesis of Scripture, Calvin, according to Hans-Joachim Kraus, “made use of all the fields of scholarly endeavor of the Reformation period: Hebrew and Greek linguistics, geography, classical studies, medicine, and philosophy. All available research and knowledge was called on to aid in the explanation of the biblical text.”<sup>26</sup> Since explanation of the Biblical text is what hermeneutics is all about, it is clear that Luther and Calvin and very likely many who were influenced by these men, practiced and stressed a literal interpretation of Scripture. It is true, as some have noted, that they failed generally to apply this approach and its principles to the interpretation of prophecy, but it is also true that the overall direction of how to read and interpret Scripture was tied more to a literal interpretation at this time than it had been before this. So, one reason to apply a literal interpretation is that for the most part this is the method used by Christian leaders from the beginning.

A second reason for using literal interpretation is that *literal interpretation focuses on the intent of the author of the Biblical text*, not the whim or imagination of the interpreter. Recall Tan’s initial statement given above: “To ‘interpret’ means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer.” This approach assumes the author has something to say and that he intends his readers to understand the meaning of what he has to say. Granted, when attempting to understand Scripture, we encounter a unique problem in discerning the author’s intent, the problem of which author’s intent does the text express. For example, Elliott E. Johnson notes, “There are, however, some unique features in Biblical authorship. The intention must be discovered in the shared Divine/human expression of the text.”<sup>27</sup> All Scripture has two authors—God Himself and the human author He chose as the writer of the words He wished to set down.

So, the interpreter is confronted immediately with a mystery that needs to be addressed before continuing the task of interpretation. J. I. Packer describes this mystery clearly as he notes, “...the identifying of the human and the divine words in the one case, like the taking of manhood into God [the Incarnation] in the other, was a unique creative divine act of which we cannot fully grasp either the nature or the mode or the dynamic implications.”<sup>28</sup> Before we can determine the author’s intent, we must penetrate this mystery to the extent humanly possible, so that we can identify which author’s intent is

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<sup>26</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, “Calvin’s Exegetical Principles,” *Interpretation* 31 (January 1977), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, “Author’s Intention and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, edited by Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984), 415.

<sup>28</sup> J. I. Packer, “Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, edited by E. R. Gehan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 144-145.

expressed in the text of Scripture, the Divine or the human or both. This may seem obvious to the evangelical, but it is a serious consideration. Packer elaborates on his description of the mystery: “Scripture is as genuinely and fully human as it is divine. It is more than Jewish-Christian religious literature, but not less, just as Jesus was more than a Jewish rabbi, but not less. There is a true analogy between the written Word and the incarnate Word. In both cases, the divine coincides with the form of the human, and the absolute appears in the form of the relative.”<sup>29</sup> By describing the mystery in this way, Packer offers a solution to the question which author’s intent does the Scripture express. Packer does not explain the mystery by declaring a distinction between the divine and the human authors behind the text. On the contrary, he focuses on authorship in terms of true deity and true humanity blended together.

For the expression of Scripture to be truly human, it involves a share in the meaning of the text that allows the author to write in his own language, using his own personal style of writing. At the same time, the Divine author expresses His meaning through the writing of the human author in such a way that the human author retains his individuality and the writing still is wholly Divine in origin and content. The Divine author impacts the writing in a way that results in the human author’s intent coinciding with the Divine author’s intent. “This does not necessarily imply dictation,” Johnson notes, “for even the believer is responsible to have his ‘mind renewed’ through divine instruction (Rom. 12.1,2). True divine authorship affirms that the content arose from God (2 Pet. 1.20,21). The origin of Scripture is divine. God then providentially shared the meaning with the human author.”<sup>30</sup> The human authors communicated the message God gave them as they were moved by His Holy Spirit. As a result, Johnson concludes, “The product is a verbally inspired text which is shared as God’s word and the human writer’s word (2 Tim. 3.16).”<sup>31</sup>

Most conservative interpreters share Packer’s identification of God as the author whose intent needs to be discerned within (not behind) the text penned by the human author. The sense in which God expresses His intention lies in the usual forms of language. Rowan Williams, for example, identifies that intention in his discussion of the hermeneutic technique of Thomas Aquinas, who apparently insisted on the literal sense. Williams notes, “[Aquinas] takes the literal sense to be that which refers to the intention of the author—who, in the case of Scripture is God.”<sup>32</sup> As he continues his discussion, however, Williams seems to fudge a little when he interprets the author’s intention in terms of divine acts and divine events rather than in terms of the words of the text. Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that the narrative of

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<sup>29</sup> Packer, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, 415.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Rowan Williams, “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” *Modern Theology* 7 (January 1991), 123.

Scripture detailing these acts and events provides the authority of the text and therefore the basis for the significance of the Scripture's teaching. Consequently, he notes, "All readings of Scripture are finally answerable to this [authority], so that nothing in *doctrina* can be established solely on the basis of a non-literal reading."<sup>33</sup> As such, Williams declares the primacy of the literal interpretation for all interpreters.

Over the last hundred years, scholars have drifted away from the idea that the author's intention should guide our quest for meaning. At the beginning of the twentieth century, to be sure, scholars held to the general assumption that the author determined the meaning of the text he wrote down. The text meant whatever the author attempted to convey through the words he had written. "Texts were understood as a form of communication," says Robert H. Stein, "and in communication we seek to understand what the author of that communication seeks to convey."<sup>34</sup> This seems to be the common sense approach to any communication and conflicts with, even contradicts the New Hermeneutic of an arbitrary reader-response to the text. The New Hermeneutic "seeks meaning, not from what the author consciously willed to say or from what the text means in isolation, but from the reader. This reader-oriented criticism argues that it is the reader who gives meaning to a text."<sup>35</sup> Thus, under the New Hermeneutic, the meaning of a text is not what the author meant when he wrote it. It is, rather, as T. S. Eliot said of poetry, "what the poem means to different sensitive readers."<sup>36</sup> Although Eliot is talking about English poetry, what he says clearly expresses the reader-response interpretation of Scripture that characterizes the New Hermeneutic. Eliot goes so far as to question whether a valid interpretation of a poem, and by application a Scripture text, can be assumed to express the intent of the author, consciously or otherwise.

Although he does not say so in so many words, Eliot actually argues that there are as many interpretations of a text as there are readers. What he overlooks or ignores completely, as do scholars who adopt this view, is that such an approach to any text results in confusion and ultimately the absence of any meaningful meaning of the text whatever. E. D. Hirsch, himself a literary scholar, argues, "Thus, when critics originally banished the original author,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Some might want to classify Williams on the "Evangelical Left".

<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Stein, "The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44(September 2001), 451.

<sup>35</sup> Stein, 452.

<sup>36</sup> T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), 126. Eliot was a pioneer of the New Hermeneutic in English and American literature, and it wasn't long before his "different sensitive readers" approach was adopted by Biblical scholars. A good example of the reader-response approach to a major segment of Scripture is Russell Pregeant's New Testament survey, *Engaging the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

they themselves usurped his place, and *this led unerringly to some of our present day theoretical confusions.*"<sup>37</sup> Hirsch argues that whenever we attach meaning to any group of words, we cannot escape the author. They are *his* words, and, therefore, *his* meaning. Even the best meaning, according to Hirsch, if not the author's meaning, must be the reader's meaning. Consequently, if a text is to have any significant meaning at all, the author's meaning must prevail over all other meanings. Along these lines, Hirsch notes that verbal meaning, meaning that can be expressed in words, is itself a part of a writer's intention that can be shared with others; and, while it can possibly be expressed in different ways, it remains clear and self-identifiable through its various expressions. Hirsch, therefore, argues, "Verbal meaning is the sharable content of the speaker's intentional object. Since this meaning is both unchanging and interpersonal, it may be reproduced by the mental acts of different persons."<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the verbal meaning expressing the author's intention that he shares with the reader of his text offers the best understanding of the text to the interpreter. And literal interpretation provides the best hermeneutic in this case because it focuses on determining the author's meaning rather than the interpreter's. Furthermore, to sum up this point, Stein offers a number of valuable benefits resulting from seeking the author's intention, including some not discussed in this paper:

1. It is the common sense approach to all communication;
2. Any special hermeneutic suggested for works of "literature" have the difficulty of defining what "literature" is and defending why literature should be treated differently than other forms of communication;
3. The main argument against author-determined meaning, the "intentional fallacy," confuses the willed meaning of an author with the process or "mental acts" which produced the work;
4. In some cases, the author appears to have willed not just a limited meaning to a text but rather a paradigm that has implications going far beyond the specific text under consideration as illustrated in Paul's quotation of Deuteronomy 5.4 in 1 Corinthians 9.9. The text of Deuteronomy, as paradigm, goes beyond oxen to include

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<sup>37</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 5, italics are mine.

<sup>38</sup> Hirsch, 219. While Hirsch applies this argument to a speaker in this place, what he argues also applies to written communication.

other animals and even men who should reap fruit from their labors;

5. A single, author-oriented meaning avoids the need of seeking a different and separate divine meaning in difficult texts.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, the best way to determine what the author of a Biblical text intended to communicate is to apply to that text the literal interpretation method.

Third, *literal interpretation is consistent with the long-standing grammatical-historical exegetical method of hermeneutics*. This method has the advantage that it is text based and text focused. It began as a form of historical criticism that attempted to establish a valid text of the Scriptures through the examination of many manuscripts and textual variants. Focusing on textual issues, it avoided issues of philosophy and theology, which should rightly develop from an accurate reading, and exegesis of the text. In fact, according to Gerald Bray, “The mainstay of this type of criticism was textual analysis....”<sup>40</sup> Textual analysis naturally requires a solid working knowledge of the languages, not only lexical knowledge but also syntactical knowledge, thus contributing to the grammatical part of the approach.

But there are several contexts to consider. Those adhering to the literal interpretation method, also seek to place the text in both its literary context and its historical and cultural context. Concerning the literary context, Elliott Johnson notes, “First, a historical-grammatical interpretation is a consistent, contextual understanding based upon the text seen in the immediate context. This reading of a text in its immediate context is a natural reading of an Old and New Testament passage and is sufficient because the Old Testament text alone introduces what is necessary at that time in history and faithfully anticipates what will follow in the progress of revelation.”<sup>41</sup> Language is too complex to try to determine meaning apart from the literary context; but at the same time, the interpreter should seek the meaning in the grammatical expressions within the text itself as it relates to that context. As an example, the simple word *bear* differs in meaning according to its grammatical usage in any given context. Consider the samples in chart 2 and note some of the nuances accompanying each usage.

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<sup>39</sup> Stein, 462-463.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 354.

<sup>41</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, “What I Mean by Historical-Grammatical Interpretation and How That Differs from Spiritual Interpretation,” *Grace Theological Journal* 11 (Fall 1990), 158-159.

<b>Grammatical Usage</b>	<b>Grammatical Meaning</b>
“Bear one another’s burdens...” (Galatians 6.2)	Carry, transport.
The letter bears his signature.	To carry with or on something.
Elizabeth is expected to bear a son next week.	To bring forth or to give birth.
John must bear the expense of his venture.	To hold up, sustain.
Aaron had to bear a great deal of ridicule.	To undergo successfully, to withstand, to endure.
This situation will bear some investigation.	To be capable of withstanding.
Mark bears himself well.	To conduct oneself, behave oneself.
He bears a grudge.	To carry over, to hold onto.
Grief bears heavily upon her.	To be oppressive, to weigh down.
On our last visit to Yellowstone, we saw at least five bears.	A large animal with shaggy fur.

*Chart 2: Grammatical Method*

The first sample might be a metaphorical use because we would not necessarily be bearing a physical weight, but a literal interpretation seems appropriate because we are admonished to share a burden of some kind currently weighing down a brother or sister in Christ, a burden they are experiencing in a real, historical setting. There is no need to “spiritualize” or “allegorize” the passage to make it mean something other than sharing another person’s burden. The other samples in the chart clearly show the need for a sound grammatical approach to Scripture.

In addition, the interpreter must consider the historical and cultural context. To understand the text properly, we need to understand what was happening at the time, what events may have given rise to the text, what forms of literature influenced the form of the text, and what characteristics of the time and the culture impacted the way the text was composed. Johnson expresses this clearly: “Historical context includes both the expectations of the occasion in which the book is written and the subject matter about which the book speaks. However, if the understanding is based upon the text, the historical context neither dictates the meaning of a text nor does it determine meanings unexpressed in the text but rather fills in the exegete’s knowledge of shared historical meanings expressed in the text.”<sup>42</sup> While this certainly is true, the historical context may also illumine the meaning or provide hints that help the interpreter discern the meaning.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

A classic example is the discovery of the treaty forms of the great kings of the ancient Near East and how these treaties have impacted at least some of the Old Testament texts. Meredith G. Kline, for instance, has noted the significance of the ancient Near Eastern treaty form as it is reflected in the Decalogue and especially in the Book of Deuteronomy. In his book *Treaty of the Great King*, Kline argues convincingly that the suzerainty treaty pattern of ancient Near Eastern treaties can be seen clearly in Deuteronomy; and his outline of the book itself illustrates this point.<sup>43</sup>

Historical context is also important because God did not deliver His Word to mankind in a vacuum. As Tremper Longman III notes, “Divine revelation was addressed primarily to its first audience using the language, literary forms and conventions, metaphors and genres which were familiar to that audience’s culture.”<sup>44</sup> In the context of this statement, Longman stresses the need and the importance of the interpreter’s distancing himself from our contemporary context. It is vital to see the Biblical text in its own context as much as this is possible to the modern reader. And contemporary scholarship has gone a long way to enabling the reader to do just that. Using the Old Testament, which is his main area of specialization, Longman lists several ways the modern reader can perform this distancing:

1. Time: the Old Testament was written thousands of years ago. Since many of us grew up with the Bible, we forget this simple, yet significant fact, even if we are scholars.
2. Culture: the Old Testament originated in an ancient Near Eastern, not Western culture. Thus we must do our best to distance ourselves from our own culture and place ourselves in ancient culture....

This cultural distance has a tremendous impact on the task of exegesis.<sup>45</sup>

Longman adds a third way the interpreter should distance himself from contemporary culture by his reference to Redemptive History. However, this

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<sup>43</sup> See Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963): 48-49 for the outline. Part 1 of the book argues the covenant background, while Part 2 illustrates the covenant structure with a commentary of Deuteronomy.

<sup>44</sup> Tremper Longman III, “What I Mean by Historical-Grammatical Exegesis: Why I am Not a Literalist,” *Grace Theological Journal* 11 (Fall 1990), 139.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Longman illustrates this cultural point well with a brief discussion of shepherds in the ancient culture and how knowledge of this image impacts our understanding of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

way seems to reflect a possible theological bias rather than a historical or cultural distancing and would require a separate paper to address it.

The grammatical-historical exegetical method was used in various forms as far back as the third century with Theodore of Mopsuestia, but it seems to have come into its own during the Protestant Reformation under the influence of Luther, Erasmus, and Calvin as they worked it out in their exegesis of the Scriptures. Bray notes that the method relied heavily on exegetical principles worked out since the time of these reformers, particularly Erasmus. David S. Dockery, however, stresses the influence of Calvin. Dockery notes, “John Calvin (1509-1564), the greatest exegete of the Reformation, more than anyone else developed the trend toward using the grammatical-historical exegetical method as the foundation for developing the spiritual message from the text.”<sup>46</sup> Luther took it a little further and incorporated a form of the Redemption History noted by Longman; but as an exegetical interpretive method, Erasmus who stressed the priority of the literal sense of the text and Calvin who developed it as an exegetical method, together made the greatest contributions.<sup>47</sup>

Before leaving the grammatical-historical exegetical method, a final observation relating it to literal interpretation suggests itself. This method amplifies the second reason noted above; that is, the grammatical-historical exegetical method also focuses on the intent of the author as a study of the text’s historical and cultural background illuminate that intent clearly expressed through the grammatical forms of the text. Virkler summarizes this point succinctly: “This method suggests that the meaning of a text is the author’s intended meaning and that the author’s intention can be derived most accurately by observing the facts of history and the rules of grammar as they apply to the text being studied.”<sup>48</sup>

Literal interpretation has its criticisms and its misunderstandings. Nevertheless, it stands as the best approach for determining what the Bible means by establishing what it says as accurately and as clearly as possible. It focuses on the original author’s intent and examines the text in its various contexts to arrive at its actual meaning. It provides a pathway for exploring Biblical literature to enrich our lives spiritually and enable us to benefit from the Scriptures that are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3.16-17, NASB). Remember Paul Lake’s Monkeys? Without a literal interpretation of the “chattering bark,” Lake’s

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<sup>46</sup> David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 160.

<sup>47</sup> See under the first reason above, p. 5 and following for more details on the grammatical-historical exegetical method.

<sup>48</sup> Virkler, 73.

monkeys might take the wrong action and find themselves the main entrée of a hawk or an eagle. And for Christians, the situation can be just as serious. Without the approach of literal interpretation, Biblical studies could find themselves adrift in a sea of philosophical and theological driftwood with no mooring and no direction to any valid port of call.



## **Does Pretribulationism Lead to Idleness? A Consideration of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12**

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*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12, NASB)*

### **Introduction**

Most evangelical commentators have concluded that the issue Paul was addressing in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 was a problem of “idleness” within the church which was the direct result of confusion concerning the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ at the resurrection of Church-age saints (the Rapture). A brief sampling of such statements may be helpful in setting the stage for the following discussion.

The traditional interpretation is that because of the Thessalonians’ expectation of the imminent coming of Christ, they gave up working and sponged off others.<sup>1</sup>

What was the original cause of their idleness is not known. There seems no reason, however, to doubt that it was much increased by their expectation that the Saviour would soon appear, and that the

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. (New York: The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000), 455.

world would soon come to an end. If this was to be so, of what use would it be to labor? Why strive to accumulate property with reference to the wants of a family, or to a day of sickness, or old age? Why should a man build a house that was soon to be burnt up, or why buy a farm which he was soon to leave?<sup>2</sup>

The eschatological excitement and mistaken idea that the Day of the Lord had arrived was the occasion, if not the cause, of much idleness.<sup>3</sup>

Unbalanced notions about the day of the Lord started the stopping of work and the busybody's running around spreading false notions.<sup>4</sup>

[W]e can only surmise from the completely eschatological atmosphere that they reasoned within themselves, "The end is near, work is a waste of time."<sup>5</sup>

These lazy people were asking the church to support them, expecting the church to provide their livelihood. They reasoned that Jesus was going to come back soon, so why not just live off the church until that time?...Even some Christians refused to work because they said, "The Lord is coming soon! Why should we work?"<sup>6</sup>

Some members of the church had become idle because they thought the coming of the Lord was imminent and felt that there was no need for diligence in worldly occupations and secular matters. They were under the impression that the end would soon

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Thes-Phil.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1951), 99.

<sup>3</sup> E. J. Bicknell, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians.* (London: Methuen and Company, 1932), 93.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon.* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1937), 465.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Best, *Black's New Testament Commentary: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians.* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1972), 334.

<sup>6</sup> James T. Draper, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of a Waiting Church.* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), 239-240, 244.

come and there was no need for them to attend to any business except to prepare for His coming.<sup>7</sup>

The view that the day of the Lord had already set in and that the Lord would return at just any time would naturally stimulate their native tendency to give themselves to excited discussion in preference to dull manual labor.<sup>8</sup>

Some members of the assembly had misinterpreted Paul's teaching about the return of Christ, left their jobs, and were living off the generosity of the church. They were idle while others were working. Yet they expected the church to support them.... They had time on their hands and gossip on their lips, but they defended themselves by arguing, "The Lord is coming soon!"<sup>9</sup>

[T]he ataktoi were Christians whose belief in an imminent parousia led them to abandon what they considered mundane material pursuits. They may have reasoned that working for material gain was to commit the error of building up treasure on earth at a time when all such material stuff was about to pass away.<sup>10</sup>

In view of the nearness of the Parousia (as they thought) they were refraining from doing any work.<sup>11</sup>

Doctrinal error concerning the day of the Lord had led to disorderly conduct in the church. Paul dealt with the latter problem forcefully in this section. This cause-effect relationship is not stated explicitly in the epistle, but it is a safe deduction. ...The offense was idleness, deliberate loafing which led some to interfere in the work of others (2 Thes. 3:11) and to expect others to provide for their needs (v. 12).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*. (Greenville: The Gospel Hour, 1964), 295-296.

<sup>8</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 346.

<sup>9</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol 2)*. (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1989), 204.

<sup>10</sup> D. Michael Martin, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Thessalonians (vol 33)*. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 274.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 251.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *Second Thessalonians*, in Walvoord, John F. and Zuck, Roy B. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 723.

It seems clear that some of the saints at Thessalonica had stopped working for a living because they were so intently waiting for the Lord's return.<sup>13</sup>

Evidently the precious truth of the second coming of our Lord had gripped the hearts of these Thessalonians so that they were fully expecting Him to return in their lifetime. I gather from this passage and the corresponding verses in the first Epistle that some of the members of the Church at Thessalonica who did not particularly enjoy hard work, were saying, "Well, if the Lord is coming soon what is the use of working? Why not take it easy? Others of the brethren have enough laid up for the future; let them divide with us. There is no necessity for our working."<sup>14</sup>

Now disorder and confusion at Thessalonica had resulted, in some cases, from a few among them who, waiting for the Lord's coming, gave up their daily employment and went visiting from house to house, doubtless to discuss their "blessed hope."<sup>15</sup>

The great body of commentators, including the ablest, attribute this idleness to the erroneous notion that the Lord was about to come.<sup>16</sup>

Many conservative, Premillennial commentators are among the group which advances this view of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12, but what may not be clearly recognized is that this view opens the doctrine of Premillennialism to criticism by those in opposing eschatological camps. Opponents of Premillennialism are able to say, in effect, that belief in the doctrine of Premillennialism results in deficiencies in character, and they can point to Paul's Thessalonian letters for Scriptural support that Premillennialism leads to "idleness" or "unruliness." For example, in attempting to bring the doctrine of the imminent Rapture of the Church into disrepute, Allis states that, "The nearness of the goal may appeal to a man's selfishness, ambition, pride, even to his indolence."<sup>17</sup> In a later section

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<sup>13</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: New Testament*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 874.

<sup>14</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians*. (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1975), 119.

<sup>15</sup> Cornelius R. Stam, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*. (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1984), 141.

<sup>16</sup> J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans*. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1940), 47.

<sup>17</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947), 169.

entitled *Pretribulationism Appeals to Unworthy Motives* Allis says, “Before examining the evidence brought forward in support of this doctrine, it may be well to notice how singularly calculated it is to appeal to those selfish and unworthy impulses from which no Christian is wholly immune.... Christians who hold this doctrine are encouraged to view the present evil state of the world with a composure which savors not a little of complacency.”<sup>18</sup> Another commentator who was writing about 2 Thessalonians 3:6 plainly declared that, “The effect of the expectation of the speedy appearing of the Lord Jesus has always been to induce men to neglect their worldly affairs, and to lead idle lives. Man, naturally disposed to be idle, wants the stimulus of hope that he is laboring for the future welfare of himself, for his family, or for society, nor will he labor if he believes that the Saviour is about to appear.”<sup>19</sup> [emphasis added] From statements like these it is clear that Premillennialists should thoroughly examine the evidence supporting their view of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12. A careful exegesis of this passage will show that the conventional view presented above is by no means demanded by the text. Needless criticism of the Premillennial doctrine can be avoided by maintaining a proper view of the “unruliness” which Paul addresses in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12.

### **The Problem of *Unruliness* in Thessalonica**

From Paul’s Thessalonian letters it is apparent that there was a problem with some of the church members refusing to support themselves by working at their normal business. Paul affirms that this was occurring even during the time he was first with them in Thessalonica: “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either” (2 Thess. 3:10). After Paul departed from Thessalonica, however, this behavior was still occurring. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul instructed them:

Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need. (1 Thess. 4:9-12, NASB)

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>19</sup> Barnes, 99

At the conclusion of this first letter, the apostle Paul also gave the church instructions for dealing with this on-going issue when he declared, “Admonish the unruly” (1 Thess. 5:14). As a first step, Paul was hopeful that these unruly brethren would listen to the voice of authority and reason, and that they would change their behavior.

It is clear from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, however, that the unruly ones within the church did not change their behavior after being admonished. Toward the end of his second letter Paul was forced to handle this issue in more detail, and he gave the church new and different instructions for decisively dealing with this problem (2 Thess. 3:6-15). It is evident that in both of the Thessalonian letters Paul was dealing with a small but specific group of believers, and that his instructions were intended to correct a specific offense. One of the first questions that must be addressed is, “What was the nature of the *unruliness* with which Paul was dealing?”

### **The Meaning of *Unruly* in the New Testament**

In 1 Thess. 5:14 Paul had directed the church to “admonish the unruly,” and in 2 Thess. 3:6 he commanded them to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life.” Lenski shows that these two occurrences of the term *unruly* are connected when he says, “True, the lone reference to the *ataktoi* in 1 Thess 5:14 might refer to any kind of irregular conduct; but in 2 Thess 3:6, 8, 11 the same word is used, *ataktō* twice and the verb *etaktōsamēn* (we gospel ministers ‘did not act disorderly among you’). The only fair deduction is that we have a reference to the same kind of disorderliness as that mentioned in 1 Thess 5:14.”<sup>20</sup> Paul is addressing the same issue in the two Thessalonian letters, and it will be important to establish the intended meaning for the *atakt-* word group if a proper understanding of this issue is to be obtained.

One of the challenges in arriving at the intended meaning for this term involves the limited number of occurrences of this word group in the New Testament. Elias explains that, “One side of the puzzle centers on the meaning of several words, all with the same Greek root (*atakt-*, which literally means ‘not in proper order’). This word-group appears in the NT only here in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. Since these three words occur nowhere else in the NT and only once in the Septuagint (3 Macc. 1:19), we are largely restricted to the clues contained within these two epistles.”<sup>21</sup> Because the wider context of the NT instances of these words does allude to “working with your own hands,” many scholars have concluded that the *atakt-* word group must be translated with the sense of *idleness* or *laziness*. For

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<sup>20</sup> Lenski, 456.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob W. Elias, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*. (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1995), 319.

example, BAGD gives the following brief definition of the verb *atakteo*: “In our literature only 2 Th 3:7, where the context demands the meaning *be idle, lazy*.”<sup>22</sup> However, if idleness, unfruitfulness, unemployment, or laziness were intended, then a different Greek term (*argo* would have better represented this meaning. “*Argos* means a) indolent, useless, unemployed, and b) incapable of action. It occurs in the NT in the secular sense in Mt. 20:3 (unemployed), Mt. 20:6 (inactive), and Tit. 1:12 (idle). It also has a religious sense in 2 Pet. 1:8, namely, ineffective, i.e., without works that express faith and hence unserviceable or worthless.”<sup>23</sup> Thayer explains that the word *argo* means, “Free from labor, at leisure, Mt. 20:3, 6; 1 Tim. 5:13. Lazy, shunning the labor which one ought to perform, Jas. 2:20; Tit. 1:12; 2 Pet. 1:8. Of things from which no profit is derived, although they can and ought to be productive.”<sup>24</sup> Since *atakto* was used in the Thessalonian epistles rather than *argo*, the distinct meaning of *atakto* should be carefully examined.

Words of the *atak-* group consist of the negative particle (a-) and a derivative of *tasso*, meaning to arrange in an orderly manner. The primary sense, then, is to be disorderly or to deviate from the prescribed order. “*atakto*” means disordered, disorderly, undisciplined, unbridled, without law or order. *atakteo* means to set oneself outside the order.”<sup>25</sup> Thayer comments that *atakteo* was used “of soldiers marching out of order or quitting the ranks,”<sup>26</sup> and Barnes remarks that, “It is not difficult, in an army, when soldiers get out of the line or leave their places in the ranks or are thrown into confusion, to see that little can be accomplished in such a state of irregularity and confusion. As little difficult is it, when the members of a church are out of their places, to see that little can be accomplished in such a state. Many a church is like an army where half the soldiers are out of the line; where there is entire insubordination in the ranks, and where not half of them could be depended on for efficient service in a campaign.”<sup>27</sup> The idea represented by this word group is that of deliberate disorderliness, insubordination, or unruliness. As Gaventa says, “Although the refusal to work appears to be one of the leading problems with these believers, the word itself suggests something other than sloth; it suggests a sense of insubordination that results in disorderliness – and therefore includes a refusal

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 119.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridged)*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 76.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 72.

<sup>25</sup> Bromiley, 1156.

<sup>26</sup> Thayer, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes, 57-58.

to work.”<sup>28</sup> Elias concurs when he states that, “This group cannot be characterized simply as idle or lazy. In addition, they seem to have been socially disruptive, perhaps also resisting instruction and guidance given by the leaders of the congregation generally.”<sup>29</sup> In order to determine in exactly what manner these believers were being unruly, it will be necessary to analyze the descriptions given of them by the apostle Paul in the Thessalonian letters.

### **What Characterized the Behavior of the *Unruly*?**

From 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 there are at least seven characteristics of these believers which help to define the exact nature of their unruliness. First, they were described as Christian brothers. “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother” (2 Thess. 3:6), indicating that the unruly ones were fellow-believers within the Thessalonian church. As believers, they would therefore come under the jurisdiction of the exhortations of the apostle Paul and the church as a whole. In 2 Thess. 3:15, Paul cautions the church not to treat the unruly ones as enemies, but continue to admonish them as brothers in Christ.

Second, these believers were acting in disobedience to the tradition that Paul had given them. “Keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us” (2 Thess. 3:6). Broadly speaking, this tradition consisted of Paul’s general example and instructions which were passed on personally when he was with them, as well as through his written epistles (2 Thess. 2:15). Although the unruly believers were members of the group which was obligated to adhere to the instructions of the apostle, there was a specific way in which they had departed from these instructions. Obviously Paul had admonished them to resume earning their own livelihood, but they continued to be unwilling to do so. The question remains as to whether their refusal to resume work is what fully constituted their “disobedience to tradition” or whether this was merely a symptom reflecting a larger problem of insubordination and unruliness.

Third, the unruly brothers were living off of others within the church and becoming a burden to them. Paul clearly contrasts his own behavior with that of the unruly believers when he says, “We did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you” (2 Thess. 3:7-8). When Paul used the expression *eat anyone’s bread* he was indicating more than simply receiving a meal from members of the church. “To eat bread is evidently a Semitism. It means not

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<sup>28</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>29</sup> Elias, 319.

simply ‘get a meal’ or even ‘meals,’ but rather ‘get a living’ (cf. Gen. 3:19; Amos 7:12, etc.). Paul does not mean that he had never accepted a hospitable invitation, but that he had not depended on other people for his means of livelihood.”<sup>30</sup> By way of contrast, Paul shows that the unruly ones were depending on church members for their livelihood and thereby becoming a burden to the church.

Fourth, it was possible that the unruly brothers were claiming the same right to the support of the church which Paul could have claimed. “We kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this” (2 Thess. 3:8-9). Again, Paul is setting up a stark contrast between himself and the unruly ones. He had a legitimate right to the support of the church, while they could not claim that right. The implication is that they were attempting to claim the same right of entitlement to church support which is due a recognized member of church leadership.

Fifth, the unruly believers were not willing to work at their own business in order to earn their own livelihood. “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all” (2 Thess. 3:10-11). The word that is used for *work* is the Greek term *ergazomai*, and it is the same term that Paul had used to describe his own example of laboring at his trade while in Thessalonica so that he would not be a burden to anyone. Thayer explains the meaning of this term as, “to trade, to make gains by trading, do business.”<sup>31</sup> The unruly believers were neglecting their normal business activities and expecting to receive their livelihood from the church.

Sixth, these unruly brothers were certainly not inactive, lethargic, or idle loafers. They were very busy in other people’s affairs. “Some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies” (2 Thess. 3:11). The final clause of this verse contains a very interesting play on words in the original Greek: *meden ergazomenou alla periergazomenou*, which could be translated literally as “working nothing but working around.” Thayer comments that the term *periergazomenou* was “used apparently of a person officiously inquisitive about other’s affairs.”<sup>32</sup> The meaning of this term certainly goes beyond that of *idleness*, “suggesting that they actively interfere in the life of the community.”<sup>33</sup> Bruce maintains that it might “be a symptom of that religiosity which must always be prying into the

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<sup>30</sup> Morris, 253.

<sup>31</sup> Thayer, 247.

<sup>32</sup> Thayer, 502.

<sup>33</sup> Best, 340.

private lives of others.”<sup>34</sup> It appears, then, that the unruly believers were very active in the life of the church, possibly in a self-appointed “official” capacity.

Seventh, the unruly ones were out from under proper authority or acting on their own authority. “Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread” (2 Thess. 3:12). Paul commanded these insubordinate believers to stop their meddlesome activities and return to their normal business. It is important to recognize that Paul is focusing on the aspect of *quietness* in his injunction for them to return to their regular work. “The emphasis rests on the phrase *meta esuxian*. This phrase is placed forward for the sake of emphasis just as in 1 Thess 4:11 *esuxazein* is placed forward for the same reason.”<sup>35</sup> As Bruce declares, “Such quiet behavior is the antithesis to interfering in other people’s affairs and being a general nuisance.”<sup>36</sup> A sense of stillness, silence, or ceasing from undue commotion would be the natural result of obedience to Paul’s command, but the emphasis on quietness also contains an implied connection with submission to proper authority. “Spicq (*Les Thesaloniens*) claims that those living *ataktō* were resisting authority. This is perhaps implied in v. 6 since the people involved are said not to be living according to the traditions received from Paul.”<sup>37</sup> In another of Paul’s epistles the same term for *quietness* is used in the discussion of women submitting to the teaching authority of the church leadership: “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Timothy 2:11-12). The implication in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 is that the unruly, insubordinate believers are to submit to proper authority, to cease their unauthorized activity, and to focus their efforts on their normal livelihood.

### **What Was the Cause of This Unruliness?**

This is a very important question, but what must be recognized is that the apostle Paul does not give an answer to this question in the inspired text of his epistles. Many commentators have acknowledged this fact:

We are not told why the minority does not work.<sup>38</sup>

What was the original cause of their idleness is not known.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (vol 45). (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), 207.

<sup>35</sup> Lenski, 465.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce, 207-208.

<sup>37</sup> Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 281.

<sup>38</sup> Best, 334.

What motivates this pattern of disruptive behavior, in which some decide that they will no longer work but will work at meddling in the lives of others? The writer does not provide an explanation.<sup>40</sup>

However, the text never states what motivated the ataktoi, and assuming they had succumbed to an aberrant eschatology is only one of the viable options for explaining their behavior.<sup>41</sup>

At the outset of this discussion it must be admitted that no sincere biblical expositor can be absolutely dogmatic about this issue, simply because the text of Scripture does not clearly reveal the specific cause for this unruly behavior. One thing that is certain, however, is that the Thessalonians to whom Paul was writing would have known exactly what he was talking about. Several possible causes for the unruliness of these believers have been suggested, and five different proposals will be discussed here.

#### *The Character Flaw of Laziness*

Some have suggested that the Thessalonians had an inherent character weakness toward indolence which was the cause of their idleness. As Hiebert has said, “They may simply have been cloaking a disposition to idleness under a mask of feverish activity, perhaps spending on ‘religious’ work the time that should rightly have been given to manual labor.... The habit of idleness seems to have been a part of the background of some of the Thessalonian church members.”<sup>42</sup> This view receives support from the fact that the members of the Thessalonian church were all new believers at the time Paul wrote to them. Christian maturity is a process that occurs over a span of time, and the Thessalonian believers were “babes” in Christ. It is quite possible that many of them had a natural bent toward laziness, but this does not seem to be a sufficient reason for Paul to address them as insubordinate, disorderly, or unruly.

#### *The Trauma of Persecution*

Another view is that the trauma resulting from the intense persecution of the Thessalonian believers was causing them to despair of their lives, and a corollary effect was that they gave up their normal work activities. It is certainly true that the Thessalonian Christians were being severely afflicted, as the apostle Paul confirmed:

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<sup>39</sup> Barnes, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Gaventa, 129.

<sup>41</sup> Martin, 274.

<sup>42</sup> Hiebert, 346.

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews. (1 Thess. 2:14)

Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. (1 Thess. 3:1-4)

Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thess. 1:4-8)

While it is true that the Thessalonian believers experienced serious affliction, and the trauma associated with such experiences often does impact one's ability to function normally, this does not seem to provide a satisfactory basis for Paul to address them as insubordinate or unruly. In addition, rather than rebuking them for their reaction to persecution, Paul actually gave them high praise for their response to affliction.

#### *The View of Labor as Degrading*

Some have suggested that there was a general prejudice in the Greek mind against all manual labor. McGarvey and Pendleton explain that, "Many of the Thessalonian converts were from the laboring classes. Now, laborers in that day were brought into competition with slave labor, and hence were disposed to look upon all manual work as degrading. This false view of life was the main influence which produced that vast multitude of parasites that then swarmed in every large city of the empire. To correct this mistaken pride, and to restore labor to its just dignity, Paul had made tents and supported himself by his hands

while at Thessalonica. For these and other reasons he had also waived his right to support and had sustained himself while at Corinth (Acts 18:3; 2 Cor. 11:9) and at Ephesus (Acts 20:34).<sup>43</sup> Best adds that, “Perhaps they also had the Hellenistic scorn for manual work; as Christians they are the free children of God and cannot be expected to work like slaves.”<sup>44</sup> While it is possible that this sort of attitude was held by some within the Thessalonian church, it is unclear why such “free children of God” would deliberately choose to gain their livelihood from other “free children of God” who were still earning a living by doing their normal business. There is no evidence for the existence of a “laboring” class of Christians from whom a few “enlightened” believers were allowed to gain their livelihood.

### *The Nearness of the Rapture*

Probably the most commonly held view is that the nearness of Christ’s return led the Thessalonian believers to the conclusion that they could abandon their normal work activities while waiting for the Rapture to take place. Lenski states, “We may picture them sitting around for hours in the bazaars and little shops of the other members, making a nuisance of themselves, and trying to unsettle the stable members with their fanatical notions.”<sup>45</sup> Typically this view relies on making a connection between the injunctions regarding work/idleness and the eschatological sections of the Thessalonian epistles. In describing the typical argument Martin says that “eschatological concerns appear to dominate 2 Thessalonians, a letter that has the treatment of the *ataktoi* as its primary ethical concern. Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians it is concern that believers work (4:11-12) and not be idle (5:12-14) that brackets Paul’s eschatological discussions in 4:13-5:11. Finally, the connection between the *ataktoi* and an eschatological motivation seems both logical and true to human nature.”<sup>46</sup> Martin goes on to say, “However, the text never states what motivated the *ataktoi*, and assuming they had succumbed to an aberrant eschatology is only one of the viable options for explaining their behavior. Neither letter explicitly connects the expectation of an imminent *parousia* and the actions of the idle.”<sup>47</sup> Regarding the connection between idle behavior and eschatology, Malherbe comments, “The traditional interpretation is that some Thessalonians thought that the coming of Christ was so imminent that they saw no reason to work and thereby prepare for the future (e.g., Rigaux, Best, Bruce, Jewett)... Several factors make this interpretation improbable. The connection between idleness and eschatology is not made anywhere in the Thessalonian letters.”<sup>48</sup> In fact the

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<sup>43</sup> McGarvey and Pendleton, 46.

<sup>44</sup> Best, 334.

<sup>45</sup> Lenski, 463.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, 274.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Malherbe, 253.

matter of “working with your own hands” (1 Thess. 4:11) is directly connected to the previous issue of expressing brotherly love, rather than to the subsequent topic of the resurrection of deceased believers. Malherbe insists that “Paul is correcting some Thessalonians who were abusing the love of the congregation by refusing to work, and instead looking to the church for their livelihood.... Partly because the connection between love and idleness is not explicitly made by Paul, it has not been examined in detail, and quite diverse interpretations of the situation have been offered.”<sup>49</sup> At least in 1 Thessalonians 4, then, it is clear that there is not a causal relationship between eschatological confusion and idle behavior.

Specifically regarding the passage in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12, McGarvey and Pendleton explain that, “The great body of commentators, including the ablest, attribute this idleness to the erroneous notion that the Lord was about to come; but there is no hint of this in the text.... Moreover, such expectations as to the Lord’s coming have often been repeated in history, and have not been found to be very productive of idleness, and certainly not in that ‘busybody’ form which is here rebuked.”<sup>50</sup> Green also states that “in the present text and the others that deal with this problem, the eschatological expectation is not addressed, and Paul does not imply that this is the source of their rejection of labor. Although this and the previous letter are deeply concerned with eschatology, the author does not link this teaching with the problem of labor. In fact, the discussion on labor in 3:6-15 is not even juxtaposed with the eschatological concerns addressed previously.”<sup>51</sup> Hiebert adds, “Only the doctrinal error concerning the day of the Lord receives a fuller treatment (2:1-12). There is no expressed connection between the doctrinal error and the disorderly conduct of certain members. The doctrinal error apparently did not produce the practical problem.”<sup>52</sup> Along these same lines, Malherbe argues that “there is no connection made anywhere in the Thessalonian letters between eschatology and work or idleness. The latter objection to the eschatological interpretation especially carries weight with respect to 2 Thess 3:6-12. The traditional interpretation is that because of the Thessalonians’ expectation of the imminent coming of Christ, they gave up working and sponged off others.... If there were a connection between eschatology and the unwillingness to work, 2 Thess 2:1-2 poses a problem, for the eschatological error mentioned there is not an imminent futuristic expectation, but an already realized eschatology.”<sup>53</sup> It is clear, then, that the

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>50</sup> McGarvey and Pendleton, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 341.

<sup>52</sup> Hiebert, 337-338.

<sup>53</sup> Malherbe, 455.

typical association between eschatological confusion and idle behavior is not directly supported by the text of the Thessalonian letters.

*The Self-Proclaimed Authority of Some*

Some have proposed that a small group of believers was exercising a self-appointed spiritual ministry within the Thessalonian church, and that they were claiming the right of support from the church as a result. “Ellis had suggested that the *ataktoi* were a small group of Christian workers who were living off the church rather than working at other jobs to supply their needs. If such were the case, it certainly would have been appropriate for Paul to cite his own example of self-support as evidence that his coworkers in Thessalonica should support themselves as he had (vv. 7-9). Such persons might be characterized as idle, but as we have already seen, disorderly or insubordinate probably would be a better characterization of the *ataktoi* than idle.”<sup>54</sup> Bruce presents this view by saying that, “Ellis thinks of ‘a group of Christian workers’ as addressed not only here but in 2 Thess generally. So far as the present context is concerned, he points to vv 7-9, where the persons addressed ‘are commanded to imitate Paul in one specific respect, that is, in forgoing the Christian worker’s right to unqualified support,’ and to v 10, where ‘these persons are receiving financial support or, at least, communal meals.’”<sup>55</sup> Jewett also holds this view. “He maintains that Paul’s argument in vv. 6-10 was directed toward the *ataktoi* whom he says may have claimed apostolic privilege for receiving support from the community.”<sup>56</sup>

The question remains as to why certain Thessalonian believers would have attempted to claim the right of support from the church, and DeBoer explains several aspects of their behavior which may shed light on this question.

The excitement of the disorderly brethren may very well have involved a grasping for positions of superiority and an assuming to give instruction and inspiration to the rest. In short, there is much to recommend the view that some of the Thessalonians had been infected with devious ideas about what constitutes true spirituality and a really mature Christian way. They had become enthusiasts and fanatics in spiritual matters, laying aside their ordinary earning of a living, and were devoting themselves to prophesying, edifying their fellow Christians, and ministering to the spiritual needs which, according to them, were being

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<sup>54</sup> Martin, 274-275.

<sup>55</sup> Bruce, 204.

<sup>56</sup> Wanamaker, 280.

neglected. For this they expected to receive support from the congregation.<sup>57</sup>

This view gains support from the fact that some within the Thessalonian church were employing the spiritual gift of prophecy, and in his first letter the apostle Paul provided brief guidelines for the exercise and evaluation of such utterances. “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” (1 Thess. 5:19-22) Paul’s treatment of the gift of prophecy here is certainly not as extensive as in his subsequent letter to the Corinthian church, but what must be recognized is that those exercising this prophetic gift would be seen as having a certain degree of authority even though they may not have been part of the official leadership of the church. Holmberg describes the situation in the following words:

The prophets, glossolalists and miracle workers are persons who have received a “charismatic,” supernatural endowment from God. But we cannot with certainty maintain that this entails the exercise of any concrete leadership within the church, except possibly in the common act of worship. Acknowledgement of their supernatural gifts does not necessarily make them leaders of the church. We observe that Paul sets limits to the exercise of prophecy during the act of worship (1 Cor 14:29-32), and, interestingly enough, the local prophecy is firmly placed under the apostle’s authority (1 Cor 14:37-40). He does not seem to wish this charismatic endowment to be manifested in an extraordinary way of life, but exhorts all brothers “to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you” (1 Thess 4:11). 2 Thess 3:6-12 may be interpreted as a criticism of the kind of exercise of charismatic authority within the local church that demands payment of the other members.<sup>58</sup>

Donfried concurs when he declares that, “The author of this letter is critical of a ‘charismatic authority’ being exercised by some in the congregation who are claiming that because of their self-claimed authority they are to be supported by others in the congregation.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Willis Peter DeBoer, *The Imitation of Paul*. (Amsterdam: J. H. Kok N. V. Kampen, 1962), 133.

<sup>58</sup> Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power*. (Lund: Studentlitteratur AB, 1978), 159.

<sup>59</sup> Karl Paul Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 63.

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to the believers in Thessalonica, however, the prophetic utterances had gotten out of control and were causing confusion within the church. “Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.” (2 Thess. 2:1-2) The majority of biblical commentators<sup>60</sup> take the term “spirit” here to refer to prophetic utterances delivered by individuals within the church, and that these individuals were claiming the authority of divine revelation for their proclamations. A few believers were speaking as if from God, but the content of their message was contrary to the tradition which Paul had given them concerning the second coming of Christ. These individuals had assumed a role which was more akin to that of the itinerant philosophers of that era. Malherbe explains this phenomenon of the first century:

Meddlesomeness was a common notion, as were the other terms he uses in 1 Thess 4:11-12, in the society at large in Paul’s day. Philosophers were frequently accused of being busybodies. They could claim that they had given up their professions in order to better serve humanity in their teaching, but the slur that they were busybodies meddling in other people’s affairs was constantly hurled at them. The persistence of this criticism is evident from the defensiveness with which it was insisted that the genuine philosopher is not a busybody (e.g., Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.97; cf. 1.21; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 21.2-3). Thus Paul uses a well-known term of opprobrium that was applied by his contemporaries to people who thought of themselves as representing higher values.<sup>61</sup>

Paul himself had made every effort to distance himself from such slurs. For example, when commenting on Paul’s strong statement that he always worked at his trade when he was with the Thessalonians, Elias affirms that, “Paul and his coworkers may want to differentiate themselves from some itinerant philosophers who abuse their right to hospitality.”<sup>62</sup> However, some members of the Thessalonian church were not maintaining this distinction but were emulating the pattern of the worldly philosophers.

Based on the descriptions given by the apostle Paul of the general situation in Thessalonica, as well as of the specific characteristics of the unruly believers, the view that they were assuming some self-appointed authority

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<sup>60</sup> For example, see Morris, Robertson (*Word Pictures*), and Vincent (*Word Studies*).

<sup>61</sup> Malherbe, 453.

<sup>62</sup> Elias, 321.

within the church does seem to fit the facts rather well. All seven characteristics of the unruly brothers which were outlined previously can be easily reconciled with this view, and it also seems to explain several aspects of the Thessalonian epistles which would otherwise remain disconnected. Again, however, since the apostle Paul does not provide explicit details of the situation, the biblical interpreter cannot be absolutely dogmatic about this issue. What is clear, however, is that assuming a connection between idleness and confusion over eschatology is by no means the only option for explaining the behavior of the unruly believers.

### **What Is Paul's Solution for Dealing with This *Unruliness*?**

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians, the unruly brothers had already been admonished by the members of the church and yet they still persisted in their error. In Paul's second letter he outlined a new course of action that was intended to bring an immediate end to this particular problem. His solution consisted of two parts:

1. Church members are to "keep away" from the unruly (2 Thess 3:6, 14) while continuing to admonish them, and
2. The unruly brothers are to stop their meddlesome behavior and return to earning their living at their own business (2 Thess 3:12).

Paul declared, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). The term translated "keep away" is the Greek word *stellesqai* (present middle infinitive), which means "to remove one's self, to withdraw one's self, to depart."<sup>63</sup> In 2 Thess. 3:14 Paul elaborates on this command by saying, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him." These brothers are to be clearly identified, and the members of the church are not to "mix themselves up" with those that are so marked. Paul is, in effect, saying, "Discontinue your support for these brethren; withdraw your resources from them." He is obviously not commanding the church to excommunicate them or never to talk to them again, because in 2 Thess. 3:15 he commands, "Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." The church is to continue to tell the unruly brothers why they are being cut off from fellowship and support.

The nature of Paul's solution to this problem certainly fits well with the interpretation that the unruly believers were assuming a self-appointed authority and claiming the right of support from the church. It is not as clear why Paul would recommend such a solution if the cause of the problem in

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<sup>63</sup> Thayer, 587.

Thessalonica involved an incorrect view of the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ at the resurrection of Church-age saints. He gives a specific solution for a particular problem, and it was not intended as a general solution to be applied to every problem within the church.

## **Conclusion**

The present study has shown that the common view of 2 Thess. 3:6-12 is that the unruly believers had forsaken their normal livelihood in order to wait for the Rapture of the Church. This view, however, opens the doctrine of Premillennialism to undue criticism. After investigating the meaning of the *atakt-* word group, as well as the characteristics of the unruly brothers provided by the apostle Paul, several views of the cause for this unruliness were examined. It was concluded that the commonly held view was by no means demanded by the text, and in fact an alternative view of the unruly was a much better fit for these facts. It appears that Paul was dealing with a small group within the Thessalonian church who were exercising a self-appointed spiritual ministry and claiming the right of support from the church as a result. Paul's instructions to the church were intended to rectify this specific problem by cutting off support and forcing the unruly ones to return to their normal lifestyle. Because the apostle Paul did not provide an explicit statement of the cause for their unruliness, no sincere biblical expositor can be absolutely dogmatic about the issue. It is clear, in any case, that the doctrine of Premillennialism can be freed from unjust criticism on this point. A proper view of 2 Thess. 3:6-12 (and related passages) provides no basis for asserting that Premillennialism leads to idleness.



**A Review of**  
***Science and Grace: God's Reign in the Natural Sciences,***  
**by Tim Morris and Don Petcher**

(Crossway, 2006, \$14.99, ISBN 1-58134-549-6)

**Jonathan Henry**

Authors Tim Morris and Don Petcher, a biologist and a physicist respectively, are professors at Covenant College. At the outset of *Science and Grace*, they state their commitment to "[refer] directly to Scripture" rather than making their "confessional heritage" their "primary reference" (p. xii). They generally fulfill this commitment, though at times they find themselves talking in exclusively Reformed terms. *Science and Grace* has three broad goals: (1) to show how modern science arose in a Christian framework and has been shifting recently toward a non-Christian post-modern stance; (2) to show how Christ governs the natural realm; and (3) to explain some of the ways in which Christian faith ought to make a biblically-based science distinct from the secular version. Threads addressing each goal are interwoven throughout the book.

*Science and Grace* is a timely book. The common perception is that Christianity has hindered science rather than facilitating it, so the first goal is a needed corrective. Likewise, a popular idea is that natural law somehow governs the creation, rendering God irrelevant to science, so the case for Christ's governance of creation is a timely topic. Finally, Christians often rationalize ways of blending into the secular landscape, and we need reminders of the need to show our faith openly in all we do, including the practice of science.

**Christian Origins and the Post-Modern Shift in Science**

Morris and Petcher begin by emphasizing that, "Science has never known a non-Modern backdrop for its operation" (p. 2). This is an amazing statement considering that all non-Western cultures, ancient and contemporary, are thereby excluded from having practiced science. Nevertheless, more than a few historians and philosophers of science concur (e.g., Dawson, 1950, p. 17; Jaki, 1985, p. 42; Quigley, 1961, p. 334). There is a balanced discussion of the Renaissance, "in which the focus was increasingly on man, in contrast to the heavenly themes of the past ..." (p. 19). This was a productive trend as long as it led to a fruitful study of God's physical creation, but a dangerous trend once Enlightenment advocates sought to co-opt science in a war against Christianity.

Descartes (1596-1650), the "father of the Enlightenment" (pp. 20-21), was a Euclidean in his view of nature as a manifestation of mathematics (Descartes, 1636, p. 7). Although in hindsight we see in Descartes the seeds of

what became the mechanistic cosmos of Diderot and Laplace, Descartes in his day was, like Francis Bacon (1561-1626), simply opposing the unfruitful search for Aristotelian "first causes." Rather than searching for the first cause in the physical creation, we must search the Scriptures instead, for the Bible clearly points to the Creator as the First Cause Who mediates His will through the phenomena known as "natural law." Thus "Descartes and Bacon were ... arguing from within a Christian framework" for a study of the physical creation which would lead to modern science (p. 24). Morris and Petcher rightly conclude that since even the early Renaissance figures operated at least implicitly from a Christian vantage point, there is no case to be made for the origin of modern science being somehow non-Christian.

A recurrent thread in *Science and Grace* concerns the subjectivity associated with interpretations of natural phenomena. A key historical example of this subjectivity is the "Enlightenment project." This was the deliberate effort of skeptics in the 1700s to generate a situation in which "science would be billed as the means to lead humans out of `bondage' to religion" (p. 25). Christianity and the Bible were the real targets. "The project was conceived in 1749 when some Parisian booksellers approached Diderot [1713-1784] about helping with a translation of Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopedia* into the French language. Diderot convinced them rather to entrust him with an entirely new project ..." (p. 25). Morris and Petcher cite the 1950 edition of Chambers' *Encyclopedia* as saying that Diderot's revision "would contain articles on all artistic and technical subjects, but under cover of a design apparently disinterested [to be] a means of demolishing `prejudices,' as Christian beliefs were then called. The leading authorities of the day were enrolled, and also the leading infidels" (pp. 25-26), including Condorcet (1743-1794) and Laplace (1749-1827). Thus Morris and Petcher supply the staggering fact that the current anti-Christian bias in science didn't "just happen," but was premeditated and aggressively implemented.

It was at this time that Isaac Newton's (1642-1727) theory of gravity and laws of motion were reinterpreted to imply a godless, mechanistic universe, a conclusion with which Newton would have disagreed vehemently. This "mechanistic philosophy also began to move into biology in the late eighteenth century, culminating in Darwin's theory of evolution ..." (p. 28).

With the Enlightenment rejection of God and biblical truth, the inevitable consequence was David Hume's (1711-1776) assertion that reality is only in the mind. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) refined Hume's ideas, deciding that "the basic notions of our experience were not necessarily `out there,' but they were categories in our mind ..." (p. 33). Kant therefore "introduced a kind of dualism between science and religion" (p. 34) in which the two were non-complementary mental constructs constituting a kind of "truth," but not the truth revealed in Scripture. The stage was now set for the Enlightenment brand

of "science" to displace the Bible, leaving Christian faith valid only in the private sphere, not in public life.

Kant's dualism was actually a re-introduction of the "Two Books" concept enshrined by Aquinas in which science and religion were conceived as mutually exclusive activities with neither informing the other. Scripture teaches (e.g., Romans 1:20) that science and biblical faith are indeed complementary and that God reveals Himself through the physical creation in ways understandable to all men. Kant's re-introduction of the faulty "dual revelation" concept paved the way for Christians later to accept unbiblical theories of origins on the basis that religion reveals Who created and why, but that science reveals "how and when" God created. Morris and Petcher appear not to have thought through this issue sufficiently, as will be discussed below.

The Enlightenment rejection of biblical truth reached its zenith in Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who rejected the notion of universal truths residing in the human mind. According to Nietzsche, "there are no universals; there are only particulars" (p. 37). Nietzsche's position laid the foundation for the current post-modern trend which asserts that no truth exists. The fashionable emphasis on "scientific reductionism" also traces back to Nietzsche. In scientific reductionism, the whole is always the sum of its parts. Reductionism implies that if we dissect life down to the molecular level of the DNA, we can deduce what makes life happen and maybe produce it in the lab. The Human Genome Project has drawn not a little of its inspiration from this hope. According to the Bible, reductionism is not an over-arching principle, for after fashioning the human body, God breathed into man the breath of life (Genesis 2:7), a phenomenon that no lab will ever duplicate.

Morris and Petcher assert that science has now become thoroughly post-modern, being a "socially driven" (p. 43) rather than truth-driven enterprise. This judgment is more accurate for the "soft" sciences than for the hard sciences such as chemistry and physics. In the hard sciences a "modernistic" view continues, with practitioners often believing -- unbiblically -- that they can apprehend universal truths via science (DeWitt, 2004, p. 309).

## **Christ's Governance of His Creation**

Morris and Petcher are right on target in describing how a Christian view of natural law differs from the secular (Enlightenment) version. The two views revolve around whether Christ governs creation or not. Natural law and miracles are both an outworking of God's governance of creation. "Thus both law and miracles are part of God's providential workings in the world" (p. 128). Insightfully, Morris and Petcher observe that "miracles can only be recognized by virtue of their contrast to the backdrop notion of the laws of nature ..." (p. 136). Further, "law ... is not something that God Himself must obey. Rather it is part and parcel of the way God governs His creation" (p. 142). This fact

challenges the origins accommodationists to consider that God was not constrained to follow natural law in the creation week. Morris and Petcher do not follow up on this pregnant thread.

However, the authors do suggest a productive corrective to common notions of quantum mechanical randomness. In opposition to the fashionable post-modern belief that the universe cannot be known nor the future determined even by God, Morris and Petcher say, "There is no reason to believe, according to Scripture, that God is in any way ignorant of the future" (p. 152). Thus not only is the unpredictable future of evolutionary "progress" challenged, but also the emerging heresy called "open theology," which claims that God alters His plans as the future, unknown even to Him, unfolds.

### **A Science Built on Christian Faith**

In discussing the differences that Christian faith ought to make in how one does science, Morris and Petcher rely heavily on the thought of Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). Much of what Kuyper wrote about science and theology was a response to the modernism of his day, as well as a response to patterns of theological post-modernism that were emerging in his lifetime. According to Morris and Petcher, "Kuyper explicitly denies the objectivity of a scientific enterprise based on reason and experience alone" (p. 69), and "from Kuyper's point of view, those who insist that there is only one kind of science deny the reality of sin" (p. 73). However, Kuyper hoped "that some common productive work could be done even across the antithetical [Christian/non-Christian] divide in the Calvinist doctrine of common grace" (p. 75). While this sentiment may be realistic in the observations and measurements of the hard sciences, its attainment is questionable in the area of technological application, and in the historical sciences such as geology and cosmology. Christians and non-Christians may observe and measure the same phenomena in the present, but what these data mean for life now, and what they imply for developments in the past, are questions answerable only with reference to revelation. Outside of biblical revelation in which Christian understanding is guided by the Holy Spirit, man is a lie-seeker rather than a truth-seeker (Proverbs 14:12, 16:25).

Following Kuyper, Morris and Petcher rely on the "common grace" of Calvinism to "[keep] the whole enterprise of science on track" (p. 11). Common grace "allows valid insights to be made by those who are not believers in Christ" (p. 75). Morris' and Petcher's emphasis on common grace is not surprising, being reflected in the very title *Science and Grace*, but they never specify the insights which common grace confers. However, the commonality which they allege to exist actually weakens their ability to specify how a Christian view of science ought to be different from one that is not Christian. For Morris and Petcher, a Christian approach to science means serving "the

Spirit of God" instead of serving "the spirit of an idol" (p. 78), a theme repeated several times throughout the book. This idolatry is not clearly defined, and one concludes that it is perhaps supposed to mean beliefs impinging on science that are unbiblical. Examples of such beliefs are not suggested in the context of mentioning this idolatry.

Thus although Morris and Petcher assert that "the theories of science cannot help but reflect the religious beliefs of those who hold them" (p. 82), they appear to have conflated common grace with general revelation. A non-Reformed view of God's work among humankind recognizes the general revelation of Romans 1:20, but also asserts that there is no common grace leading men into truth apart from biblical revelation which the Holy Spirit mediates in the heart of the recipient. General revelation is inferior to special (biblical) revelation (Thiessen, 1949, p. 33), and in itself is no guarantee that fallen man can avoid following lies.

This idea that common grace somehow confers a truth-finding ability may partly explain the tendency of Reformed theologians over the past decades to find an accommodation between biblical creation and evolutionary "science." After all, if the scientific consensus is approaching truth, there are no biblical grounds for questioning it. Meredith Kline, for example, has become an outspoken advocate of accommodationist views of origins (Kline, 1996, p. 2). Morris and Petcher quote Kline for support of the Reformed belief that God has made a "Covenant of Creation," i.e., a covenant with the creation (p. 99). Morris and Petcher rightly define a covenant as a "binding agreement between two parties" (p. 99), but apart from Reformed interpretation, the Scriptures say nothing of a covenant with the physical creation. In the Bible, God made His covenants with men as rational, responsible parties (e.g., the covenant with Noah, Genesis 9:8-17). The physical creation cannot be a "party" to an agreement. Except for mankind, the physical creation passively experiences the ramifications of covenants that God has made with man, despite Morris' and Petcher's reading into the Noachian covenant an alleged agreement with the creation. *Science and Grace* also treats the announcement of the new covenant (Jeremiah 33:20-22) as a covenant with creation. A non-Reformed view sees God's governance of the creation here, but not a covenant with it.

Morris and Petcher claim that God "appeals to the certainty of His faithful upholding of His decrees governing nature in order to assure His people that the New Covenant will surely be enacted" (p. 102). Reformed theology "needs" for God to have made "decrees" to justify the Calvinist view of predestination and divine sovereignty. But in Jeremiah 33:20-22 there is no decree as such, only a proclamation of God's exercise of power over the creation. Perhaps the Reformed emphasis on *decree* rather than on God's *power* partly explains the difficulty that Reformed theologians like Kline have with God's ability to create by fiat without recourse to long ages and evolutionary mechanisms. After all, accommodationist origins models such as

theistic evolution or progressive creation can be seen as processes which God has advanced by making "decrees" as required.

Another difficulty is the tendency of Morris and Petcher to view biblical history as "divine theater" (p. 166) for which we need to develop skills in "story-thinking" (p. 169). Though elsewhere they acknowledge that the Bible is history, recognizing that "words ... are not plastic in an unlimited way" (p. 229), the view of the Bible as "story" weakens our obligation to accept the hard facts of history revealed in Scripture. In particular, the "story" mentality lessens our obligation to accept the creation as a historical event transcending all natural laws. When telling a story, it is easier to focus on the parts that are more natural to our understanding and to ignore the hard parts. Thus it is significant that in this context, Morris and Petcher criticize "the twentieth-century evangelical and fundamentalist fixation on the when and how of creation." According to them, we should be focused "the more settled Christian teachings concerning the who (the triune God), what (everything), and why (for His glory) of creation" (pp. 176-177). Unfortunately, Morris and Petcher appear to be unaware that they come close to echoing liberal sentiments on this point (e.g., Gibson, 1981, pp. 2, 11, 13). The "when" and "how" of creation are less settled only with respect to accommodationist views of origins that assert God must have used evolutionary mechanisms to "create." On the other hand, in other places Morris and Petcher give little ground to biological evolution. They elevate the biblical history of creation instead. They write, for example, that "one doesn't get the idea ... that Adam willy-nilly named the animals in terms of any random impulse that popped into his mind" (p. 214). As for cosmic evolution, they characterize the popular nebular hypothesis as "clearly based on [Laplace's] commitment to a naturalistic explanation of all things" (pp. 317-318).

One wishes that Morris and Petcher had consistently followed through in suggesting that a Christian view of science can answer the hard questions about the when and how of origins. Because of their reluctance to engage such issues, their prescriptions for being different as a believing scientist generally relate only to the private and social spheres, although their prescriptions are certainly biblical as far as they go. For example, "Christians in science should avoid temptations to establish their own credentials by being harshly critical of the work of others" (p. 260). Further, "a Christian is always to have an eye for practical application, especially for applications that soften or counteract the effects of the Fall in God's world" (p. 269). One is here reminded of John Clerk Maxwell's prayer (Campbell and Garnett, 1882, p. 323) in which he made the request we might learn "to study the works of Thy hands, that we may subdue the earth to our use, and strengthen the reason for Thy service; so as to receive Thy blessed Word, that we may believe on Him Whom Thou hast sent, to give us the knowledge of salvation and the remission of our sins."

Morris and Petcher are strongest when discussing the Christian origins of modern science and the shift into post-modernism. Their treatment of Christ's governance of His creation is also well worth reading. Their assessment of Christian distinctives in science is the weakest aspect of *Science and Grace* because of (1) their reliance on the Reformed interpretation of common grace, and (2) their reluctance to tackle some of the hard issues in the biblical presentation of history, especially relating to origins. Nevertheless, the strong points of *Science and Grace* make the book worth reading.

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## The Sufficiency of Scripture

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### The Necessity of Revelation

#### *General Revelation*

Cornelius Van Til makes this remark about the natural man and his attempt to reason, “if the natural man is to make any intelligible assertions about the world or “reality” or “fact,” which according to him is what it is for no rational reason at all, then he must make the virtual claim of rationalizing the irrational.”<sup>1</sup> Van Til strongly points out that man cannot even reason about reality because his worldview cannot account for reason itself. The minute you begin to reason, you posit structure. This is unavoidable and it is at the thrust of the doctrine of general revelation. Paul says, “That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them” (Rom. 1:19). Acts 14:17 says, “And yet He did not leave Himself without a witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” God has given all men a revelation of Himself. Paul did not say that this knowledge of God was obscure and insufficient to accomplish its purpose. Paul said that God has made it evident to them. That is to say that God has made it plain to them. Paul went on to say in the next verse, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” (Rom. 1:20). However, according to Bahnsen<sup>2</sup>, “Natural revelation was never intended to operate on its own without God’s verbal communication as a supplemental and necessary context for understanding.” Quoting Van Til he continues, “God’s revelation in nature, together with God’s revelation in Scripture, form God’s one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man. The two forms of revelation must therefore be seen as presupposing and supplementing one another....Revelation in nature and revelation in Scripture are mutually meaningless without one another and mutually fruitful when taken together.”<sup>3</sup> Man knows and he does not know. Man understands and he does not understand. Paul says that general revelation is sufficient to condemn man and hold him morally culpable for his knowledge of God that he receives through

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 166.

<sup>2</sup> [NB. Endorsement of Bahnsen the apologist does not mean endorsement of him as a theonomist] – Ed.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Bahnsen *Van Til’s Apologetic* (NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998) 195.

nature. Man was originally created with the ability to think God's thoughts after him. He was to interpret things in the way that God interpreted things. What God called the result of a divine creator man was not to call the result of an accident or random process. What God called right, man was to call right. Man was to enjoy what God had created him to enjoy. But the fall has changed all that now. Man's ability and desire to interpret facts according to God's interpretation of the facts has been disturbed by sin. Man has an evil desire to be autonomous, independent of God. This has brought man's will into the bondage of sin and Satan and has skewed the way man looks at things.<sup>4</sup>

But man is not left without the fact of God before. The problem is the effect of sin has so disturbed man's intellect that he willingly suppresses this truth and knowledge about God. Romans 1:18 says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." Paul goes on to say in verse 21, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." All the time the fact of the general revelation is never brought into question. It was presupposed by Paul that God has revealed Himself to man through nature. This is seen in creation, it is seen in the uniformity of nature, it is seen in the conscience of man, it is seen in the ability of man to reason and make sense of anything at all. Everywhere we turn the creation witnesses of the glory of God. This revelation is enough to hold men morally culpable for their suppression of the truth.

Van Til sums general revelation up this way:

By the idea of revelation, then, we are to mean not merely what comes to man through the facts surrounding him in his environment, but also that which comes to him by means of his own constitution as a covenant personality. The revelation that comes to man by way of his own rational and moral nature is no less objective to him than that which comes to him through the voice of trees and animals."<sup>5</sup>

### *Special Revelation*

The need for special revelation from God is not something new. It did not show up sometime after the fall with the purpose of restoring communication between God and man. The fact is that special verbal revelation was necessary from the very beginning of creation and has always been necessary. After the fall, man lost the privilege of being the recipient of face-to-face revelation. He was cut off from God (Gen. 3:24).

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<sup>4</sup> This is what affects his ability.

<sup>5</sup> Van Til , 73.

Natural man does not only require a special revelation to be redeemed, he also needs some miracle in order to be able and willing to accept the contents and life transforming power of that revelation. Indeed, man's plight is dire to say the least. Van Til says, "*It is only natural that only the supernatural revelation of God can inform man about such a system as that. For this system is of a nature quite different from the systems of which the natural man speaks.*"<sup>6</sup> The special revelation of God stands over against all that the natural man thinks is reasonable in his way of reasoning. Yet it is this revelation which will rescue him from eternal damnation. Paul says in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Van Til remarks, "*He needs this revelation in an infallibly inscripturated form lest he himself destroy it.*"<sup>7</sup> This evil, sinful tendency to destroy, twist and pervert the revelation of God in Scripture remains in all of us and we must be alert, aware and on guard to make sure we do not sin against God in this way. Psalm 119:11 says, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against you." But the natural man despises God's revelation because of the sin which dominates him. He suppresses the truth revealed in general revelation and rejects the life-transforming truth revealed in special revelation. He rejects the truth revealed in special revelation because it is hid to his eyes. He is blind to it. Paul, in speaking to the church at Corinth says, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:3-4).<sup>8</sup> Paul had already told the Corinthians in 3:14, "But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ" (2 Cor. 3:14).

Man sits helpless to relate to God in any positive sense. He distorts every ounce of knowledge of God that is within him willingly, and naturally. I think it is clear that the New Testament writers understood and believed that without a revelation from God, man was doomed for a life of separation from God. Obviously, this revelation could only come by God's grace and mercy. Man was not deserving of such a revelation. But man is helpless without such a revelation. Van Til says,

As a hater of God he does not want to hear about God. The natural man seeks to suppress the pressure of God's revelation in nature that is about him. He seeks to suppress the pressure of conscience

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<sup>6</sup> Van Til, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The conditional sentence here is a first class and assumes for arguments sake that the protasis is true. The follow-up statement in verse 4 indicates that indeed the gospel is hid to those who are perishing because their eyes are blinded by the god of this world.

within him. So he also seeks to suppress the idea of the revelation of grace that speaks in Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

If man is to maintain his autonomy, then he has no alternative but to behave this way. Above all else, man desires to retain his autonomy, and he will do so at all cost. Unregenerate man claims to possess knowledge on his own, independent of God. But when pressed on the question of how he knows anything at all, he cannot give an account for it. The Christian worldview says that we know because we are created in the image of God who Himself has placed that knowledge within us. We are His creatures and we think his thoughts after Him, interpreting His creation according to His interpretation of His creation. The facts of creation exist in the mind of God and they did so prior to creation. Man can only get it right when he interprets it according to what lies in the mind of God concerning it. As Van Til says,

Only on the assumptions of divine self-sufficiency and man's complete dependence upon God can the difference between Christian and the non-Christian points of view be clearly made out. Only this can the issue be clearly drawn.<sup>10</sup>

If it is then true that God exists and that all knowledge has its source and origin in Him, then nothing is intelligible if you presuppose that God does not exist. How could you account for knowing anything at all? With this being the case, man is in dire need of both general and special revelation from God. Without it, life is one short journey from irrationalism to irrationalism and nothing makes sense from beginning to end. Bahnsen says,

Christian philosophy is a way of restating what God has authoritatively revealed about Himself, the world, man, etc.—the Christian worldview—and thus the way in which we know anything at all is first and foremost a matter of revelation.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Nature of Scripture**

Scripture is a body of writing identifying itself in distinction from all other writings as the Word of God. Granted that human agency was used in the collection of the several books of the Bible into the canon of Scripture; it remains true that Scripture identifies itself as the Word of God. The human agents did the subordinate work of collecting that which witnessed to itself as

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<sup>9</sup> Van Til, 194-195.

<sup>10</sup> Bahnsen, 554.

<sup>11</sup> Bahnsen, 164.

divine in each part as well as in the whole. Then this self-identified body of writings claims to give men a finished system of interpretation of human life and history. What does the “modern mind” think of this?<sup>12</sup>

It is in Scripture that God has proffered to us everything that is necessary to live a godly life. I am stupefied every time I hear someone say something like, “well, you’re not supposed to worship the Bible you know.” This statement is almost always made in the context of the biblical correction of a view that does not comport with Scripture. The individual being corrected almost seems to want to separate God from His word as if God is alright with certain things that His word is not alright with. The point of Scripture is that it is “the revelation” of God Himself to man. If there were more that God wanted us to know, He would have certainly revealed it to us. This is the kind of God we serve.

What are the essential characteristics of Scripture? And how do we know that these characteristics are the essentials ones? What is the origin of Scripture? As it relates to apologetics and evangelism, are the Scriptures sufficient to convert men from the non-Christian worldviews to Christianity? In his first letter Peter says that the word of God is not perishable; “You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). The word used here for perish means, *subject to decay and destruction.*<sup>13</sup> The word of God is not subject to destruction or decay, but is rather “imperishable.” How is it that God’s word, which is holy and perfect and pure in every way, could ever be scrutinized for accuracy and truthfulness by men who are corrupted by sin and whose own hearts are deceitfully wicked above all else? Why would man think he could sit on the bench while placing the word of God in the dock? It is because man is deceived and in terrible need of a revelation even to understand his own sinfulness. Jeremiah tells us about the condition of the heart, “The heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). This explains why man has the disposition he has toward God’s word. Jesus said that the word of God could never be broken. John 10:35 says, “...and the Scripture cannot be broken.” The word of God is eternal and unbreakable. The word of God also protects from error because it is the eternal truth of God’s revelation to man. In John 17:17 Jesus prays to the Father and says, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” Jesus did not say that God’s word contained truth. He said that the very word of God itself is truth. He also rebuked the Sadducees in Mark 12:24, “Jesus said to them, is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God?” In other words the Scripture will protect us from all error if we seek to

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<sup>12</sup>Cornelius Van Til & Eric H. Sigward. *The Works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895-1987.* electronic ed. New York: Labels Army Co., 1997.

<sup>13</sup>Rogers & Rogers, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 570.

understand it. The nature of Scripture is that it is perfect truth and is able to keep one from error. The Scripture can also keep one from sin. Psalm 119:11 says, “Your word have I treasured in my heart that I might not sin against you.” The idea is that if we are constantly considering Scripture, it will keep us from sinning against God. John 17:17 also tells us that the Scripture has a sanctifying effect in our lives. This is the nature of Scripture. It is no wonder that almost every attack within and without the church is leveled against the word of God in one way or another. Satan hates the word of God and is working triple time to destroy it or belittle it in whatever way he can. No where does the Scripture call upon man to test and evaluate it to see if it is telling the truth. On the other hand, everywhere the Scripture speaks, in every place, about and everything in which it speaks, it speaks with explicit authority. It is the self-attesting, ultimate authoritative revelation of God to man. Something so holy and so divinely prominent should never be belittled. It is true that we do not worship the Scripture themselves, but the fact is that without them, we have no way of knowing God accurately or of worshiping Him. Van Til makes the following observation:

In the first place it must be affirmed that a protestant accepts Scripture to be that which Scripture itself says it is on its own authority. Scripture presents itself as being the only light in terms of which the truth about facts and their relations can be discovered. Perhaps the relationship of the sun to our earth and the objects that constitute it, may make this clear. We do not use candles or electric lights in order to discover whether the light and the energy of the sun exist. The reverse is the case. We have light in candles and electric light bulbs because of the light and energy of the sun. So we cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns of its proper function from Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

The Scripture is self-attesting, self-authenticating. It does not need to prove itself to man. Asking the Scripture to prove itself to man is like asking the sun to prove itself to a blind man. The inability to grasp and understand it is something man has no control over. He is unable to hear and understand. What he does understand about God, that, he rejects. Man does not come to God because, in his own wisdom, he connects the dots. Paul says, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those that believe” (I Cor. 1:21). The world does not come to God as a result of its

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<sup>14</sup> Bahnsen, 210.

own reasoning and wisdom. If left alone, the world will continue in its God-hating ways right into eternal damnation. The unbeliever has fundamental presuppositions about being, knowing, and ethics and unless we point those out by ripping off his mask and demonstrating the fallacy of those presuppositions, we do not honor God in our apologetic method. Calvin says,

By the ‘wisdom of God’ he means the workmanship of the whole world, which is an illustrious token and clear manifestation of his wisdom: God therefore presents before us in his creatures a bright mirror of his admirable wisdom, so that every one that looks upon the world, and the other works of God, must of necessity break forth in admiration of him, if he has a single spark of sound judgment.<sup>15</sup>

Paul says that man does not come to God as a result of observing general revelation. He says that instead, God chose the message of the gospel to save those who believe. The message of the gospel is obviously the revealed word of God. It is the nature of the revealed word of God to be essential to the redemption of lost men.

It is the nature of the word of God to set free. Jesus said in John 8:31-32, “If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” As we ponder this verse, what is it that truth primarily sets one free from? I suggest that truth delivers and sets free from everything that is contrary to truth. The truth sets free from error in our sinful living, sinful thinking, and sinful condition. That is not to say that this is primarily what this text is dealing with. However, on a previous occasion Jesus told the Sadducees that they did err, not knowing the Scriptures. If one walks in the truth, one cannot walk in a lie at the same time.

The one thing that the Holy Spirit uses to reach deep into the stony heart of the unbeliever to convert him is the word of God. Is it any wonder that this is the very thing that Satan tempts us to compromise on in our daily lives?

## **The Sufficiency of the Word from God**

The question as to then sufficiency of the Scriptures affects all the departments of Christian life, whether it be doctrine, consecration, apologetics, or evangelism. This is a question which is asked not only in the area of apologetics, but also in several other branches of thought as well, in particular, in the area of counseling. Is the word of God sufficient to meet all the needs of man? If it is not, then in what areas is the word of God deficient? How do we

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<sup>15</sup> John Calvin *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Torrence, Torrence, & Fraser, ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 4

know that the word of God is deficient in those areas? And if the word of God is deficient in any area, then to what authority do we turn to place our trust in so that these areas of man's needs may be addressed? Is it possible that we can hold to the ultimate authority of the word of God in all matters pertaining to life and godliness, and at the same time deny the view that the Bible is itself sufficient to deal with all matters pertaining to life and godliness? As it relates specifically to apologetics and Christian thought, can man know God accurately and with certainty apart from Scripture? Can man in and of himself, apart from God, reason himself to God? Can man know anything metaphysically without consulting the pages of the Bible? Can man live a life that is ethically pure without being guided in that ethic by the word of God? Can Christians vindicate the Christian worldview without first vindicating the Bible as God's single authoritative revelation to man? Can belief in Jesus Christ be justified using some other approach than the gospel itself? These questions have to be asked when you are dealing with the question of the sufficiency of Scripture. It is my aim to demonstrate that if you do not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, then you cannot believe that it is the perfect revelation and ultimate authority from God to man. The consequences of such a view are indeed far reaching and as I will show, it affects a number of other orthodox doctrines of the Christian faith.

What can man know about the facts of creation, being, or ethics, apart from God? Van Til suggests that

We must know or interpret the facts after we look at the facts, after they are there and perhaps after they have operated for some time. But God's knowledge of the facts comes first. God knows or interprets the facts before they are facts. It is God's plan, God's comprehensive interpretation of the facts that makes the facts what they are. Thus God's knowledge of created things is also analytical in the sense defined above.<sup>16</sup>

God knew the facts before they were even facts. God knows things about the heart of man and its intentions even better than man knows his own heart and intentions. Surely if there is any hope of rescue for man, it lies with the revelation of God. Is man capable of curing himself? Can man know enough about who he is and about what is right to cure himself? I suggest that you must either concede the sufficiency of Scripture in all areas or you must believe that man is indeed the ultimate authority on all matters, even matters related to God's revelation, and hence, God Himself. The position of the authority of Scripture in all matters cannot be given up for even a second and must be vindicated at all times. Van Til says, "*All objections that are brought against*

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<sup>16</sup> Van Til, C.: *Christian Apologetics*, pg. 27.

*such a position spring, in the last analysis, from the assumption that the human person is ultimate and as such should properly act as judge of all claims to authority that are made by any one.*"<sup>17</sup> There is no middle ground on this issue. If man is extensively depraved, then he is in no position to offer assistance to God to accomplish his own redemption or to achieve a right state of being in life. How can anything that a depraved mind recommends as a cure be trusted, considered reliable, or even taken seriously? That would be like me making recommendations to the NASA scientists about how they should approach their next shuttle launch. My mind is completely uninformed in that area due to a gross lack of knowledge and understanding of the complexities involved in such a process. Even so is the mind of the unregenerate man equally uninformed, lacking knowledge and understanding in the things of God to be able to make any intelligent contributions whatsoever to the dilemma of the human condition. Not only that, the mind of man is a sworn enemy of God and all things that pertain to God. There is between man and God, a gulf fixed. It is not unlike an impassable canyon. Paul says that all wisdom and knowledge are deposited in Christ. Col. 2:2-4 says, "that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument." All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden, have been hid in Christ. The only way for us to penetrate them and experience their pleasure is for us to also be hid in Christ. Col. 3:3 says, "For you have died and your life is hidden with God in Christ." So if all knowledge is deposited in Christ, then how is it that we allow unregenerate men to claim that they do possess objective and accurate knowledge about reality, God, and ethics? Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning wisdom." So we have the inspired word of God informing us that both the very beginning of wisdom and knowledge are bound up in the fear of the Lord. Simple logic would say that if the fear of the Lord is the beginning of these, then the opposite of the fear of the Lord could not also lead to wisdom and knowledge. We have the choice of taking God at His word or of taking man at his. In this case, the two oppose one another and therefore cannot both be true. Van Til makes an excellent point when he says, "*On what positive ground, we ask, do men stand when they, with such confidence and assurance, reject the traditional view of Scripture? The confident rejection of this view is unintelligible unless those who make it have themselves offered something better.*"<sup>18</sup> Of course I have debated the issue enough times to know that those

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<sup>17</sup> Bahnsen, 210.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 714.

who disparage the Scriptures never offer a better alternative. They are like the atheists who foolishly deny God's existence even though they know He is here. They offer nothing in His place. Not only that, they borrow from the Christian worldview every day their feet hit the floor. They cannot make sense of anything apart from objective reality. The problem with their position is that if there is no creator behind it all, objective reality cannot be known, let alone postulated in some abstract philosophical framework. Man simply cannot know anything about anything without the revelation of God in nature and in Scripture informing him. Because of the helpless condition of man to pull himself up out of this miserable ambience in which he finds himself, it was absolutely essential that God give us a punctilious and reliable revelation of Himself. And it was equally essential that God give us a revelation that is self-sufficient to rescue mankind from his plight. What does it mean when we say that Scripture is sufficient? Wayne Grudem gives a good definition of the sufficiency of Scripture,

The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.<sup>19</sup>

As it relates to apologetics, we must say that Scripture is sufficient to persuade men of the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is especially true that if the Scriptures are sufficient to guide man in his living, then they must absolutely be sufficient to convert men to Christ. If this is the case, then why must we appeal to the autonomy of man in our apologetic method? Scripture alone is sufficient to convert the unregenerate. In fact, if it is true that man is extensively depraved, then what can he contribute to the process of conversion that would not also corrupt it at the same time, therefore, frustrating the entire process? Everything man touches in his depraved state, he corrupts. This is because he does not seek to honor God in everything he does. This is who man is by nature and by volition. God must bridge the gap if it is to be bridged at all. And this bridging must be the activity of God in its entirety because of the inability and unwillingness of man to make positive contributions to such a pure action. Because man hates God and is hostile to God in every way, man will not initiate nor respond positively to God's activity. Man must be changed. And if man is to be changed, an agent and a means must be selected. Both the agent and the means must be separate from sinful man. And neither the agent nor the means can depend upon the cooperation of sinful man for the efficacy of their work. If it were true that

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<sup>19</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1995) 127.

either the Holy Spirit or the Word of God required assistance from man in some way, in his current sinful condition, they would not be fully sufficient. In order for the work of God in the heart of the unbeliever to be fully “the work of God,” man cannot be permitted to have a hand in it in his current state. Van Til says, “*Only on the assumptions of divine self-sufficiency and man’s complete dependence upon God can the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian points of view be clearly made out.*”<sup>20</sup> If we do not have in our possession, a revelation from God which is self-sufficient, then man is either left without hope or he is left without the need for such a revelation. If man needs the revelation, then it must be self-sufficient. If the revelation is not self-sufficient, then man’s need for it evaporates. Since God’s word is the means by which faith leading to salvation is produced through the work of the Holy Spirit, we conclude that such a revelation has been given because it was absolutely necessary, and since such a revelation was necessary, that it is indeed at the same time and is necessarily self-sufficient in and of itself. We make these assertions because this is precisely what the Bible says about itself and about the state of man. 2 Tim. 3:15 says that “each and every Scripture is God breathed and is profitable.” Each Scripture has its origin in God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the writers who penned His instructions to us all. James 1:18 says, “In the exercise of His will, He brought us forth by the word of truth.” We are brought forth by the word of God. We do not make calculations and evaluations as unbelievers about the Bible, decide it is the best option, and then choose it. Man knows that God exists and he suppresses his knowledge of the truth. Since man knows, it is not an epistemological problem, *per se*. It is an ethical problem first. Man willingly and according to his nature reacts a certain way with this knowledge. It is this behavior that must be addressed before anything else is addressed. And it is precisely this unethical epistemology of the unbeliever that makes the case for a self-sufficient revelation from God to man in a manner in which sinful man could never destroy. Man’s intellect cannot be trusted to judge what is right and wrong in his current state. A miracle precedes the humble submission of man to God’s ultimate, self-sufficient revelation of Scripture. The sinful, stony heart must be replaced with a new heart of flesh. But man in his current condition will never give up his heart. God must intervene in an incredible act of grace. 1 Cor. 1:18 says that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but it is the power of God to those who are being saved. 1 Cor. 1:21 says that God was well pleased to save those who believe through the message preached! It has nothing to do with the sophistication of our arguments and everything to do with the simple proclamation of the gospel message. If this is true, then what else needs to be said about the sufficiency of Scripture? Where is the problem here? I suggest it is two-fold. One, I believe man is always seeking to take at

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<sup>20</sup> Bahnsen, 554.

least a little credit for things, even when none is due him. Chalk it up to his sinful nature. Second, I believe man has trouble trusting God's word to get it done, so he thinks he needs to help it along. This is, no doubt, a reflection of his depraved, sinful mind. And when you begin to try to help God's word accomplish its intention, you reflect a lack of faith in the sufficiency of Scripture. In 1 Cor. 1:24, Paul says that the preaching of Christ is the wisdom of God and the power of God.

In *Jerusalem and Athens*, Van Til responds to Gordon Lewis with the following, The word of God is self-authenticating. It bears its own testimony to truth; it seals its own validity. If the Word required something more certain than itself to give it validity, it would no longer be God's word. If God, by definition, is that than which no greater may be conceived, then his word is that than which no truer may be conceived.<sup>21</sup>

Van Til continues, quoting Carnell,

When God says something it is true, for God cannot lie; and when man reposes in God's word, he has faith. If he fails to rest in it as truth, we call him an infidel, i.e., he is not one of the faithful. The power by which the heart is enabled to see that the word of God is true is the Holy Spirit. The Word of God is thus self-authenticating.<sup>22</sup>

If we are of our father the devil who is a liar and the father of lies, then how is it that we can contribute something to the work of that which is wholly true and pure such as God's word? God's word must stand sufficient in and of itself, not only because of its very nature as being what it is, God's Word, but also because we simply have nothing to offer due our sinful nature. This sinful condition is extensive in nature, extending to the intellect, the will, and the emotions. Everything has been touched and therefore tainted by sin. Because of this we must have a self-authenticating, self-sufficient revelation to convert us and direct us. We cannot be left to trust in our own hearts, because the heart is deceitfully wicked above all else, who can know it (Jer. 17:9). Because of the nature of sin, our trust must be placed in something which transcends us. It cannot be placed in human nature, ability, intellect, will, feelings, experience. All of these things have been distorted by the fall. The fact is that natural revelation was never sufficient in and of itself to communicate God's will to us. Special revelation was just as necessary for Adam and Eve as it is for us today. I have never read anyone who asserted that the special revelation which was given in the Garden was insufficient to guide Adam and Eve into a life that was honoring to God, thinking God's thoughts after Him, and interpreting the facts

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 565-566.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 567.

of creation according to God's interpretation. Such a suggestion would never be taken seriously by the church. Special revelation was sufficient in the Garden and it is sufficient today. To think otherwise would be a departure from orthodoxy. Yet the affects of sin upon the mind of man can easily be seen in the world as well as in the church. Everywhere man is, there is the desire for independence from everything. Man seeks to be self-reliant. But this goal evades him at every corner. Like it or not man must rely on God's self-authenticating, self-sufficient, ultimately authoritative Word. He has no where else to go. Yet as a result of the curse, man will continue to suppress the truth of God and what he knows about God so that he can delude himself into thinking that he can have it his own way.

The fact of God's election dictates the sufficiency of Scripture. If it is true that God has predetermined the method, the means, and even the individuals, then it logically follows that since it is clear that Scripture is the means, it then must be sufficient.

The fact of God's sovereignty demonstrates that Scripture must be sufficient. If God said it, he will do it. If he spoke it, he will bring it to pass. How could it be that God could be sovereign and his revelation be anything less than fully sufficient? In Romans 9:6, Paul makes a very prominent point about the sufficiency of Scripture. He says, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;" On one side Paul is acknowledging the fact of the promise of God to save all Israel. But on the other hand it is evident that Israel slipped into apostasy before, during, and after the exile. It is also apparent that they have rejected the Messiah. How is it then that God's word can be defended for it seems to have failed to accomplish what God has promised. But Paul points out that just because someone is descended from Israel that that does not mean they are necessarily of Israel. It is the remnant that God has reserved to himself according to the counsel of his own will. It is to the elect of God that the promise has gone out to. And this promise will not fail because it does not depend on man's cooperation. Paul points out that God is sovereign and that the basis for his decision remains within himself, and not in man or in the actions of, nor will of man. God's sovereignty makes the sufficiency of Scripture absolutely necessary if we are going to be coherent in our presentation of the gospel.



## **Book Reviews**

*Word Pictures of the New Testament, Matthew and Mark Vol. 1*, by A. T. Robertson, Revised and updated by Wesley J. Perschbacher, Grand Rapids, Kregel Publishing, 2005, 412pp., hardback, \$28.99.

*Word Pictures of the New Testament, Luke Vol. 2*, by A. T. Robertson, Revised and updated by Wesley J. Perschbacher, Grand Rapids, Kregel Publishing, 2005, 311pp., hardback, \$24.95.

*Word Pictures of the New Testament* was first published over seventy years ago. This work has been considered a classic by many and has been of great value to anyone using the Greek New Testament. *Word Pictures* has been updated and edited by Wesley J. Perschbacher. One does not need to know Greek to use this edition although it would be a great asset anyway. The editor notes exactly what he has done in the preface concerning the revisions. Several of these include using the New American Standard Bible (1995 ed.) except where noted rather than the Canterbury Version, the Greek alphabet is used instead of transliteration, also Arabic numbers replace the Roman numbers. There are several other revisions which only enhance this great work. For any pastor, teacher, or diligent student of the Word of God, this work is *highly* recommended. It is a great tool and an asset to any library.

Dave E. Olander

*The Book Of Origins* by Philip Eveson, Auburn: MA, Evangelical Press USA, 2001, 592 pp., paperback, \$24.99

In this commentary on Genesis, subtitled “Genesis simply explained,” British scholar Philip Eveson, Principal of London Theological Seminary, has given us a fine example of commentary writing. The book is easy to follow, while at the same time being packed with solid teaching, especially biblical theology and sound application. It must have taken a great deal of toil to distill this much instruction into this volume. The book is quite large but is reader-friendly, with lots of white space to encourage new students. The author has wisely spent a larger proportion of his allotted space on the first half of the book, and has drawn much from the text, including excellent word-studies. His defense of the six literal days of creation is also appreciated.

It was this reviewer’s privilege to sit under the teaching of Mr. Eveson, and the commentary well reflects his warm teaching style.

This is not to say I agree with all he has written. As a hopelessly loyal dispensationalist, I find his arguments for a “Christian Sabbath” and the fulfillment of the Land Covenant of Chapter 15 (in Solomon’s reign naturally) to be completely unconvincing. Nevertheless, I was blessed by reading the book, as will be the reader of this review.

Paul Martin Henebury

***Understanding End Times Prophecy, Revised and Expanded***, by Paul Benware, Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2006, 421pp., paperback, \$19.99

I must admit that it was with some anticipation that I first perused Benware’s revised and expanded *Understanding End Times Prophecy*. As a former student who has been profoundly impacted by his approaches to teaching and writing, I have always found his presentation to be of both clarity and precision. These characteristics, as expected, are present in his updated volume. The newest revision is 78 pages heavier due primarily to elaboration on such vital issues as distinction between Israel and the church and a thorough explanation of methodology and conclusions in preterism.

As a whole, this newest installment of *Understanding End Times Prophecy* moves logically and comprehensively through foundational elements of framework regarding interpretive methods and the covenants as basic building blocks of the prophetic plan. Likewise handled with thoroughness are the summaries of the major views on Biblical prophecy. Benware is both fair and gracious in his handling of views with which he disagrees. In the spirit of Ryrie, Benware emphasizes definition, offering simple yet technically accurate explanations of terms and concepts. To leave no stone unturned in this regard, also provided is an appendix dedicated to significant definitions.

Benware’s classic, newly refined, presents an outstanding dispensational primer for the new student, and an excellent source of reference for the veteran, and should therefore find a home in every library – next to classics by Chafer, Walvoord, Pentecost, and Ryrie.

Christopher Cone

***Dictionary of New Testament Background***, edited by Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter, Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, xxxiv + 1328 pp., cloth, \$50.00

This work has been lauded by all and sundry as an indispensable text for the serious student and scholar. This review will not demur, but it will include a note of caution. Before serving notice of its shortcomings let me say a word

about the overall usefulness of this work. Many of the entries are extremely good. A fair sampling of which (after over a year reviewing the book!) are the following: Andrew Clarke's three articles pertaining to Alexandria; David daSilva on the Ruler Cult; Clinton Arnold on the Magical Papyri; Hoehner on the Herods; Barton on Social Values and Structures; Keener on Adultery, Divorce; Harrill on Asia Minor; Caragounis on the Letter of Aristeeas; Porter on the Greek of the New Testament; Seeman on Judea. John McRay's seven entries, including Archaeology of the New Testament are very good, written with the non-specialist in mind. Not so the article on the Archaeology of the Land of Israel by Steven Ortiz, which is filled with unexplained jargon, and too much stress on Hellenism. The articles on Apocalyptic Literature (by J. J. Collins), and Apocalypticism (by Aune, Geddert and Evans) – doubtless fawned over by the scholarly elite, were a big disappointment to this reviewer since I do not share their liberal assumptions. In the former Collins thinks that the book of Daniel's overview of history, "is presented in the guise of a prediction, much of which was prophesied after the fact..." On the Olivet Discourse he opines: "Scholars dispute whether or how far such predictions should be attributed to Jesus himself or were composed by his followers after his death." Perhaps scholars like him do, and we are content to leave them to it and pass on.

Despite such unhealthy doses of unbelief, the dictionary is a production of real merit. The scholarship is definitely there, and it is usually put to the service of the student of the New Testament and the message preparer. Recommended.

Paul Martin Henebury

***Genesis Beginning & Blessing***, by R. Kent Hughes, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004, 702pp., hardback, \$34.99

In this generally thorough, often popularly styled, and always respectful, expository commentary on Genesis, Hughes identifies early on that his interpretive goal is to "say no more and no less than what Scripture says"<sup>1</sup>.

In identifying his interpretation of the creation account he de-emphasizes the issue, and sadly presents an incomplete basis for the literal understanding<sup>2</sup>, thus giving way to his own conclusion that "Here, in the immediate context, the seventh day is not a twenty-four-hour day. Thus it indicates that the preceding six days must be similarly understood."<sup>3</sup> He further justifies the use of the word

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<sup>1</sup> p. 24

<sup>2</sup> saying, "Those who hold that the word 'day' here must be a twenty-four-hour day do so by arguing that every place in Scripture that the word 'day' (yom) is used with a designating number, it is a solar day."

<sup>3</sup> p. 27

yom by saying God created in “His days”<sup>4</sup>. He further says “the first three days remedy the fact that the earth was formless and void”<sup>5</sup>, giving further possibility in his interpretive process to something other than a literal six-day conclusion.

The author deals well with the unity of Genesis, identifying the significance of *Yahweh-Elohim*, and he also deals well with the divisions of the book handling the *toledot*<sup>6</sup> clearly and concisely.

His exposition on the events leading up to the fall is both detailed and devotional, and he identifies the reality of human depravity based on Adam’s sin.<sup>7</sup> He acknowledges the *protevangelium* in 3:15<sup>8</sup>.

He steps into a bit of trouble when dealing with 6:1-8, saying “God’s terrible resolution was grounded in the promise that he had made that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head (cf. 3:15). The race was thoroughly demonized and incapable of delivering such a seed, and thus it was only right that humanity be destroyed.”<sup>9</sup> The author does not seem to recognize the difficulty of his conclusion here. How could it be ‘only right’ that God break His redemptive promise? If the author makes a mistake here, he doesn’t in addressing the scope of the flood. He gently deals with the issues, but solidly concludes that the flood was indeed universal.<sup>10</sup>

The author is decidedly focused on secondary application throughout, and often the primary application suffers as a result. Regarding the land element of the Abrahamic covenant (15:17-21), the writer seems unconcerned with the significance of this prophecy, moving right past it directly to a secondary application.

As a part of the ‘Preaching The Word’ series, this work purposes to be expositional, and while it succeeds in many areas, I can’t help but be disappointed at the lack of exegetical attention.

Christopher Cone

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, and see p. 31

<sup>6</sup> *i.e.*, p. 50 & 117

<sup>7</sup> p. 76

<sup>8</sup> p. 85

<sup>9</sup> p. 128

<sup>10</sup> p. 139

***The Christian Pastor's Manual***, by John Brown, Editor, Morgan: PA, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2003 retypeset edition of 1826 original, 421 pages, hardback, \$29.00

Despite it's being over one hundred and fifty years old, this is one of the very best books on the Christian Ministry. It is certainly on a par with J.A. James's *An Earnest Ministry*, and Charles Bridges' *The Christian Ministry*, which were published at around the same time. The editor was John Brown (of Edinburgh), a brilliant expositor of the Word, who wrote a number of NT commentaries that are still esteemed today. Being a Brit myself, I was keen to read this work when *Soli Deo Gloria* first reprinted it several years ago. This new edition is in a more attractive format, which will hopefully attract the attention of many pastors and ministerial students, who are serious about representing the Lord properly to their congregations. It provides an urgently needed tonic to the newer books on the subject, which seem more geared towards producing wafer-thin Christian talk-show hosts than real men of depth who will make true Shepherds of God's flock.

Some of the chapters include, "The Evil and Danger of Neglecting Souls" by Phillip Doddridge, "Preaching Christ," and, "Particular and Experimental Preaching," both from the pen of John Jennings, "The Qualifications Necessary for Teachers of Christianity," by John Erskine, "The Snares and Difficulties Attending the Ministry of the Gospel" by John Newton, and much more besides. All the chapters evince the wisdom and gravity of their notable authors. For example, in his second essay, Jennings writes, "It is true that the whole scheme of gospel duty is deducible from the general heads of faith and love; but, alas, most men's minds are slow, confused, and erroneous in long deductions; and it is our business to lead them on in every step, and to show what particular duties to God, our neighbour, and ourselves, will flow from these principles, and are necessary to make them (sic) the man of God perfect." (pp.53-54). This reviewer cannot think of a better description of the instruction of God's flock than this. Pick of the bunch, for me, is the chapter by John Mason on, "Directions to the Student and the Pastor." This masterful little treatise is the longest of the Manual's fifteen chapters, and is worth the price of the book alone. Readers unfamiliar with the archaic style (slightly updated) would be advised to master it in such works as this. To discount this book on account of the old style would cut off from a minister a spiritual treasure-trove. We recommend it.

Paul Martin Henebury

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