

Christianity's End-Times Conspiracy Theories

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What more is there for their Expected One to do when he comes? To call the heathen? But they are called already. To put an end to prophet and king and vision? But this too has already happened. To expose the God-denyingness of idols? It is already exposed and condemned. Or to destroy death? It is already destroyed. What then has not come to pass that the Christ must do?

Athanasius, On the Incarnation

Christianity introduced me to a God who interacted with humanity to offer a life greater than myself. This made a lot of sense to seventeen-year-old me. It still does. Christianity in America comes with a lot of baggage, though. Along with the powerful message of the gospel come a lot of strange ideas about the creation and destruction of the world. Depictions of a violent and terrifying last days are often portrayed in both Hollywood fiction and from the pulpits of American churches. I spent many of my younger years friend to a fireball end-times preacher, who sadly died of COVID recently. Having been immersed in a church community with end-times motifs often present, it became apparent over time that evangelical Christianity seemed to have conflated faith with magic, losing touch with historical Christian beliefs. Modern interpretations of end times prophecy have become increasingly more embellished within many churches, incorporating new themes from current events into a sort of theological composite to explain present-day unrest. Such theories divorced the pattern of a historical Jesus, who advocated non-violence, with one now seemingly the perpetrator of pointless violence, judgment, and terrifying death. These beliefs have altered the entire world view of the evangelical church to adopt a militant, warfare-influenced mindset.

The concept of a violent and militant Jesus probably had its origins in the medieval period¹. The idea was first codified at the Council of Nablus in 1120, where Canon 20 permitted a clergyman to take up arms in self-defense without bearing any guilt; this was during turbulent times when Christian pilgrims were often massacred by the hundreds along their journey, leaving their rotting corpses along the road from Jaffa into the Holy Land. This one

concession, intended to be a temporary measure, seeded militant movements in Christianity starting with the Papal legitimization of the Templars movement (“God’s Holy Knights”), extremist groups such as Alfonso I’s Brotherhood of Belchite, the Pastoureaux, and now reaches into modern day militant Christian ideals. End-times theories today evolve within evangelical churches to reinterpret current events into an apocalyptic context. They attract fringe groups with similar mindsets, as they include the same elements – oracle-sourced apocalyptic theories that lead to violent, anti-establishment outcomes. Yet this conflicts with the teachings of Christ and hundreds of years of church fathers about martyrdom, pacifism, and government non-involvement. The obvious contradiction of a Christianity asserting a struggle that is “not against flesh and blood” somehow ending up with a literal war against flesh and blood is the result of a theological evolution that influenced how the church interprets scripture and forms doctrine today. To not believe in a brutal and imminent end times means, in many churches, that you don’t have a Christian faith at all.

Theories about masks, vaccines, the World Health Organization, and a new president are popular topics of recent end-times discussion within churches. The idea that anyone can speculate on end-times prophecy has attracted conspiracy groups like QAnon, which now represents up to 25% of white American evangelicals. Denominationalism, while having some benefit, has also become a significant enabler of confirmation bias in the church, allowing for tribal systems of otherwise fringe beliefs to find support. These beliefs have become more extreme through the social dysfunction created by COVID and deep divisions in politics. Beliefs about masks, vaccines, and other current topics are now loosely joined to end-times concepts of one world government, the mark of the beast, eternal punishment, or other themes in Revelation. Conspiracy theories within the church’s walls have had very real consequences. A study from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) showed that only a mere 41% of white evangelicals believe scripture provides no reason to refuse the COVID vaccine – that’s 59% of white evangelicals who think otherwise. The same polling organization found that 18% of all Americans believe in the QAnon conspiracy the “government, media and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation”. The most extreme example of end-times prophecy going off the rails was seen on January 6, where insurrectionists attempted a coup within the congress, driven by QAnon conspiracy theories. As one evangelical pastor put it, “Right now QAnon is still on the fringes of evangelicalism... but we have a pretty big fringe.”

The modern-day evangelical end-times posture can be walked back to a shift in theological interpretation of the mid-1800s. The interpretive biases that posit this theology have altered Christianity in many significant ways. Yet concepts of a sudden secret rapture, seven years of tribulation, and a thousand-year earthly kingdom all rest upon theological pillars of highly questionable origin. Such last-days concepts have no support

in historic Christianity and could be divorced from Christianity altogether. Many evangelicals, having been raised in this mindset, will deny vaccines, and literally die based on the theological system under which they were taught, firmly believing that they are honoring God in doing so. Yet it is a flawed and unfalsifiable system of theology – not Christianity itself – that is to blame. Let us attempt to tease those two concepts apart.

“If the feeble mind of man did not presume to resist the clear evidence of truth, but yielded its infirmity to wholesome doctrines, as to a health-giving medicine, until it obtained from God, by its faith and piety, the grace needed to heal it, they who have just ideas, and express them in suitable language, would need to use no long discourse to refute the errors of empty conjecture.”

Augustine, The City of God, Book 2

Literal Christianity

Not realizing it at the time, what I was taught as a young Christian was theology based on dispensational hermeneutics. This is more or less a framework for interpreting scripture and is what modern day Christian fundamentalism is most famously associated with. Specifically, dispensational premillennialism had been the popular theology of the day, even in the little Baptist church I had first found myself in. To understand how dispensational hermeneutics came about, a brief history is needed.

By the end of the medieval period, Christian theology had become so corrupted by dogmatism and symbolism that its meaning had been all but lost; even clergy were largely ignorant of scripture. As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine had disparaged the notion of an apocalyptic or earthly millennium of any kind. It wouldn't be until the 12th century, when Joachim of Fiore, likely influenced by the Crusades challenged Augustine, and revived what would be a medieval form of millennialism, igniting rampant speculation of an eventual apocalypse. Much like other theology of the time, such speculation was largely the result of ignorance. Until the reformation in the 1500s, the only real source of church doctrine came from the Latin Vulgate, and some writings of early church fathers. For a long time, the church dictated the meaning of scripture, rather than scripture dictating the meaning of the church. In the 16th century, the reformation had sparked an effort for access to, and sound interpretation of scripture. By the 1700s, theologians had made significant headway in the hermeneutic sciences by approaching scripture from a

purely objective perspective; instead of analyzing a text as the very words of God (which introduced theological bias), it was approached methodically in a neutral sense as if a historical or literary document. Shedding the doctrine enshrining scripture allowed it to be distilled and placed into a correct historical context, reflecting a more accurate interpretation – one that could serve as a foundation to then develop sound doctrine on. External witnesses such as oral tradition, historical writings, apocryphal texts, and even archaeological findings would contribute to an understanding of the context in which a text was written, and better understand how and why it would have been presented to its intended audience. The goal was to understand “the world behind the text”. This would become the historical-critical approach to hermeneutics.

Historical-critical interpretation was viewed as heretical by many, who claimed that the process, being intentionally secular, denied the very God-inspired nature of scripture. There was some validity to this. German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote, “the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power” (Truth and Method, p273). This led to a second school of interpretation, grammatico-historical hermeneutics. This school laid down a more stringent grammatical-oriented process, rejecting any broad general “sense” of scripture, and considering only a literal interpretation. Allegorical interpretation was largely rejected, and the literal meaning was to be regarded as the authentic word of God, often down to the letter. This was done in the spirit of *sola scriptura*, a term coined after Luther’s insistence on interpretation of scripture independent of the Catholic church. The grammatical-historical approach gave less weight to patristic authors, tradition, and history, and more weight to the self-witness of the text. Yet even Luther advocated for a collaborative, and therefore authoritative understanding of scripture.

Together, both schools of hermeneutics make for a well-balanced pair, and are two of the five major legs that hermeneutics stands on today. But in the mid-1800s, an alternative form of interpretation – dispensational hermeneutics – came about, introduced by a Bible teacher named John Darby. Darby embraced a more extreme approach to the literal, grammatical approach (“the world within the text”) and rejected the higher criticism of historical-critical analysis, which added much needed temperament to the text. This created a one-sided approach where scripture was to be interpreted literally “up to the point of absurdity”. Darby’s interpretive biases did not go unnoticed, nor were they slight alterations that would leave interpretation of scripture unscathed. Darby’s own translation of the Bible was outrightly called “a faulty and pitiable translation of the sacred Book” by his peers. Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament studies at Denver Seminary, writes that without the historical-critical method, “one seeks an interpretation that is fun to read and worthy of admiration and that does not contradict itself internally at any point. Whether or not it corresponds to any external reality becomes irrelevant.” The even bigger problem with Darby’s interpretation, however, was that his dispensational theology

introduced its own major biases, which would greatly embellish an already lopsided interpretation. These biases were: 1. The fulfillment of prophetic scripture is to be interpreted literally, and 2. A distinction between Israel and the church was recognized. The resulting literal read dramatically reinterpreted large portions of prophecy, giving birth to many of the contemporary ideas around a literal judgment and destruction of the world. The second rule, the bias of an Israel-church distinction, decoupled those prophecies from Israel's history, moving the timeline of many (fulfilled) prophecies into the future, to attempt to resolve the numerous problems introduced by the first rule.

Yet it is well for us to know all that has been revealed upon the subject, for though we are not responsible for the words of Scripture, yet we shall have to render an account for the sense we have assigned to them.

Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity

Literal interpretation had been considered by some early writers, however there are some significant differences in what is done today. For one, the term literal historically has had no clear prior definition, and often simply meant “obvious” or “evident from the text”; it was frequently used to contrast accompanied “spiritual” and “moral” interpretations. To many early Christian writers, the fact that a problem existed in a literal text was an indication that it necessitated a figurative interpretation. This suggests the same writers were also honest enough to admit there were problems with literal interpretations. Athanasius, in his *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, argued “we ought to look at the sense more than the wording.” Tertullian, who was adamant about many key literal arguments supporting the virgin birth and the resurrection, specifically recognized prophecy as “generally expressed in figure and allegory, though not always” (On the Resurrection of the Flesh, Ch. 19). Jesus himself occasionally disparaged literal interpretation, pointing out the daftness of his disciples when they interpreted things too literally - whose Jewish heritage had taught them to expect a messiah that would immediately establish a kingdom on earth (Acts 1:6). Second, many writings, such as Eustathius’ *De Engastrimytho contra Origenem*, viewed Christ –as– the eschatology, rather than a prelude to it, and used such interpretations to explore what the universe meant in light of the Christ. The mere fact that writers declined to make predictions about the future suggests their interpretation of scripture didn’t support such an effort. In contrast to other writers of the time, such as Origen, who viewed everything (including nature!) as allegorical, any “literal” interpretation must have seemed a more even-keeled approach. Fast forward to the reformation, and you’ll find both Luther and Calvin disparaging figurative interpretation entirely; yet even while favoring literal

interpretation, Calvin insisted that prophecy must be interpreted in the light of historical circumstances. Luther likewise believed that context and historical circumstances were to be considered and believed that all scripture pointed to Christ and the gospel message. Both reformers only gave Revelation a passing attention. Given all these opinions, it is evident that there is broad historical dissent of the dispensational notion of a literal interpretation of prophecy.

The second pillar of dispensational theology - the notion of an Israel-church distinction - was a nonexistent concept throughout history and only a new idea introduced by Darby. At its core are 19th century philosophical arguments. Dispensationalism asserts that God has two distinct programs: Judaism (earthly) and Christianity (spiritual), allowing prophecy to be selectively applied to each. This was necessary to prop up the dispensational view of God as a narcissist: that "God's underlying purpose in the world is his own glory, not salvation" (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*). In other words, an Israel-church distinction justifies the dispensational view. It's critical to the notion that the point of history is to establish God's earthly millennial kingdom, and not to redeem humanity. The decisive choice to separate Israel and the church has all the characteristics of being circular in reasoning and instrumented around the narcissistic God philosophy. It is also without scriptural merit and fails to consider the evolution of the early church, which was inclusive of the Jewish community – because it was the Jewish community. In Jerusalem, Christianity was considered a competing Jewish group worshipping in the temple until around AD66, when Christian Jews refused to join the others in resistance against the Roman government. The *qahal* was the word for Jewish gatherings in the Hebrew; it is translated in the Septuagint as *ekklesia*, the same word used today for church. Early Christians clearly understood the connection, since in a Jewish context, *ekklesia* was associated with Israel's identity as God's people. Early Christians also continued to practice in the same Jewish traditions they had known all their lives. Pliny the Younger, in a letter to Emperor Trajan describes his process for systematically executing Christians. Pliny observed that they (Christians!) had started performing sacred rites again, including Jewish animal sacrifice (Book 10, letter 96). Jewish sects, such as the Essenes, believed they were a remnant of Israel and many from this community adopted, and even influenced Christianity as a natural continuation of their faith. The Apostle Paul even asserts an ongoing connection to Judaism, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God." (Romans 3:1-2). Any reasonable approach to scripture does not see Israel as distinct from the church. It's difficult to reconcile the historical Jesus, who disparaged the notion of an earthly kingdom, with the dispensational, narcissistic Jesus, seemingly whose entire purpose was to create one.

A Wrinkle in Time

Dispensational theology made intellectual leaps that were well out of the norms of Luther and Calvin: by reinterpreting all prophecy as literal and creating the decisive theological bias to distinguish Israel from the church, this created Christianity's greatest anachronism. It both reinterpreted and repurposed entire collections of prophecies as unfulfilled that would have otherwise been historically fulfilled in Christ's timeline through the first century. Many prophecies were reinterpreted Old Testament texts that had been decoupled from Israel, pulling them forward in time and replayed. The net effect of this was that many prophecies fulfilled by Jesus himself, the destruction of the temple, the persecution of Christians, the imperial cult, and patterns and forces that have operated throughout history were transformed into what conservative evangelical Christians see as veiled prophecies about a terrifying and imminent end of the world playing out now, instead of in ancient Jerusalem; "now" being regardless of whether you lived in the 1920s or the 2020s.

To understand the divergence of time in literalism, consider the phrase "last days", which sets the tone for dispensational end-times theology. John Oswalt, distinguished professor, and author of the authoritative commentary on Isaiah, writes that these two words "translate a phrase which literally means in the afterward of these days." He continues, "The Hebrews did not face the future as we do. Rather, they faced the past and backed into the future. So, the past was before them and the future behind them. Thus, this phrase is not a technical one in the OT referring to a millennial age or even a period beyond that." Instead, early Christians would have viewed "last days" prophecy in the context of their own lifetime, which would ultimately end up being the Jewish War with the Roman Empire. The patristic authors believed this period was already in play. Tertullian believed the millennial reign of Christ was already happening in a heavenly realm; he wrote of rumors that the spiritual city of Jerusalem had been appearing at times over Judea. Irenaeus believed the Antichrist was still alive and operating within his own time (130 AD – 202 AD) and attempted to identify him. Many other patristic authors seemed to be waiting for the eternal state and nothing more. Yet even some of the wild writings by Augustine or Tertullian failed to approach the end times imagery that Christianity holds today; such writings were rather void of specifics at all. As L. Crutchfield, author of *The Origins of Dispensationalism* and professor of early Christian history admits, "If anyone searches the fathers for a fully detailed, systematic presentation about the doctrine of last things, he searches in vain". This is where dispensationalism greatly overreached.

We shall then be changed in a moment into the substance of angels, even by the investiture of an incorruptible nature, and so be removed to that kingdom in heaven...

Dispensational theology adapted end-times prophecy into a modern narrative by adopting what's called progressive revelation – but applying it backwards. Progressive revelation is the concept that God revealed his plans in fuller depth in the New Testament (i.e., progressively), based on Hebrews 1:1-2. This has traditionally been viewed by scholars as meaning that newer texts are used to reinterpret and explain older texts, to demonstrate how they were fulfilled in the Christian tradition. It is consistent with the viewpoint of the Hebrews, where the past was “in front” of them, and the future was behind them. Dispensational theology, however, does the opposite (as does our western view of time), and instead flipped this around into futurism. *Futurism* is a misapplication of progressive revelation, where instead of using the New Testament to explain the Old, scripture was turned forward facing, viewed as a means of explaining the future in a context far beyond their boundaries. For example, instead of using Revelation to interpret Daniel, dispensationalists use Daniel to interpret the book of Revelation, as if it is a text about the future. This is where creative license takes over; after all, if prophecy is more progressive over time, there are no constraints in applying the texts to an even grander revelation of the future. Yet even the book of Revelation itself discourages such an interpretation, asserting “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophesy” (Rev 19:10), insisting that prophecy is to be interpreted as all pointing to Jesus Christ and the gospel message.

[on divine revelation]... For the teaching of our Lord at His advent, beginning with Augustus and Tiberius, was completed in the middle of the times of Tiberius. And that of the apostles, embracing the ministry of Paul, ends with Nero.”

Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies, Book 7

Futurism created numerous structural problems in scripture. This required added layers of explanation by introducing new and unsupported concepts to cover over the problems it created. One significant example of this is the second temple. The book of Revelation assumes the second temple is still standing in Jerusalem (which was destroyed in AD70) and so to account for this structural problem, dispensational theology interprets this as meaning a third temple will someday be built, even in the overwhelming absence of any scriptural evidence. Through literal interpretation of these prophecies as future tense,

Revelation concepts such as the “man of lawlessness” (who exalts himself over everything that is worshipped and sets himself up in God’s temple, 2 Thes 2:4) becomes no longer attributed to Titus (who did just this in AD 70, Josephus, Wars of the Jews, book VI, Ch. 6), but is displaced as part of a future narrative to support the literal dispensational end-times view. Likewise, the great beast, whom history refers to as Nero (Sibylline Oracles 8:157), now suddenly becomes a future villain, playing into early first century lore that Nero would return one day. History shows Nero to have been the most brutal emperor of all the Caesars; he castrated and raped young boys, dipped Christians in wax and burned them for illumination at night, sewed animal hides to their skin to be attacked by wild animals, and committed other depraved acts, murdering countless people for pleasure. Nero was such a cruel and brutal persecutor of Christians that his return was feared for two to three hundred years after his death, and even invented in fiction and poetry.

Nero’s fingerprints are, in fact, all over some of Revelation’s most popular concepts. Consider the famous numerical “666”, which has been cited by scholars as a common mathematical riddle (gematria) that resolved to the Hebrew spelling of Nero Caesar; it was even altered in some texts (Codex Ephraemi and Oxyrhynchus, among others) to “616” to reflect the Latin form of his name, demonstrating this interpretation in antiquity. You might look at the riddle as a crude one-way hash; this was a very common practice just as it is today, where the contents matching the hash are revealed at a later point in time. Just like we post one-way hashes on Twitter today, such riddles have been found in ancient graffiti in Pompeii, Smyrna and in many writings. One sample of graffiti in Smyrna reads “I love her whose name is 1308”. Another, “I love her whose name is 731”. It’s important to note, as Smyrna was one of the seven churches that Revelation was specifically addressed to; the region was heavily involved in the imperial cult of worshipping Caesar as a god. They also undeniably understood gematria. Of course, Jewish readers would have understood the deeper meaning behind the pericope as an allusion to man’s total obedience to either God or Caesar. They would not, however, have taken it as a literal branding of “666” onto the body. Note Isaiah 1:5’s use of “wounded at the head”, and consider the Roman civil war nearly destroyed the empire!

There are entire books that effectively parallel Revelation’s symbolism to history. Yet where dispensationalism forced the literal reinterpretation of all prophecy, it opened the door for history to be replayed in a modern-day setting. So instead of the book of Revelation being understood as a historical detail of persecution, it is decoupled from Israel. The modern-day interpretation then becomes an oracle among evangelicals about the future, including the revival of the Roman Empire – in a strange twist, bringing Nero back from the dead!

Many rush from their first profession of faith to the last book in the Bible, treating it as little more than a book of hallucinations, hastily disdaining a sober-minded attempt to allow the Bible to interpret itself – and finding, ultimately, only a reflection of their own prejudices.

David Chilton, Paradise Restored, A Biblical Theology of Dominion

There are two possible accepted datings for Revelation, one around 64-68 AD (before the destruction of the temple) has built significant support among scholars recently. Another dating puts it shortly after its destruction, around 95 AD². A pre-siege dating casts Revelation as a deeply symbolic, God-inspired apocalyptic of events to come shortly thereafter, which Jesus himself predicted would happen within a generation. The latter dating would have cast Revelation as an accurate apocalyptic chronicling events that had just recently occurred and were still fresh on the minds of the readers. Even in AD 95, the text would have been understood as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. It was not uncommon for apocalyptic literature of the time to chronicle historical events as if they had been written prophetically in the future tense. Consider, for example, television networks still occasionally replay 9/11 broadcasts. Had John been attempting to imply these events were post-70 AD, he would have left readers wondering how, while Jerusalem still lay in ruins, that it would be destroyed exactly. The Romans had already wiped Jerusalem off the face of the earth until it was rebuilt in 130 AD. Readers of the time had no alternative than to understand the events in John's vision as the destruction of the second temple. It would have been a rather bitter pill too, if the apostles had remained conspicuously silent about one of the most brutal persecutions and mass exterminations of Christians, only to write about some future persecution thousands of years later. Reinterpreting Revelation to predict events some twenty centuries into the future commits a major breach of accepted hermeneutic rules, which insist upon interpretation through the eyes of the readers at the time.

As a matter of fact – and quite surprisingly to the modern evangelical Christian – much of Revelation's vivid imagery lends itself admirably to the catastrophic events of the Jewish War.

Kenneth Gentry, Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation

Despite the significant problems with a dispensational interpretation of Revelation, the futurist narrative gained popularity in American churches and became part of modern Christian pop culture and belief. It's easy to see how wide-eyed such views can get when seen through the lens of a terrifying world that exists when symbolism is interpreted literally and displaced in time. Dramatic interpretations are to be expected when you take books such as Ezekiel, which are strongly influenced by Mesopotamian symbolism, pull them out of their ancient contexts, and apply a literal translation influenced by modern American dystopian culture. It has defined a Christian's entire world view for much of the past hundred years, affecting our politics, society, relationships, and today even our public health.

A Theology in its Infancy

Dispensational hermeneutics, in any systematic form, has only been in existence since the mid-1800s, and only became widely incorporated into Christianity in the early 1900s. It was first preached in the United States in 1870, by Darby, in which Dwight Moody was one of his early listeners. Prior to this, it had been largely limited to a small movement of fundamentalist separatists in Ireland going by the name of *The Plymouth Brethren*, of which Darby was a member. By any standard, a theology so recent is an incredibly young line of thinking. Darby didn't cite any prior work or give credit to any prior theologians or other sources; he claimed that his theology came exclusively from the Holy Spirit. According to Crutchfield, Darby had a disdain for prior scholarship, including the work of the reformation, which he believed was markedly deficient. He advocated for a "trust no one" approach to scripture. Dispensational concepts such as an Israel-church distinction and a two-stage coming of Christ (e.g., today's idea of *rapture*) were entirely new ideas that Darby had introduced around the same time that Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*. Theologians in this era helped create a dichotomy where new scientific ideas and new theological ideas were at odds with each other, sending many theologians into frenzied work to either deny science (fundamentalism) or embrace evolution in the church (modernism); this even though Christianity did not call for any scientific position on human origin whatsoever. Even Luther who, three hundred years prior, had advocated for a literal interpretation of Genesis, declined to make any scientific claims about it. Because literal creation theology opposed basic science (such as a young earth), science became the enemy of Christianity again. By this time, followers of dispensationalism had long forgotten that such ideas diverged from historical concepts of Christianity. Darby's beliefs, too, were considered heretical by many, and were largely unrefined and disorganized. Despite efforts

by his fans to propagandize his scholarly abilities as having “rare attainments in almost all branches of knowledge, of preeminent logical power, of moral and metaphysical analysis hard to match”, Darby himself had not formally studied any theology; he had studied law. Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of his own scholarship, his theology gained acceptance among his followers who felt that Darwin’s ideas threatened Christianity itself. This positioned dispensationalism as the savior against science that, at the time, was married to a strong bias of atheism.

There are four things to be considered... the height of spiritual doctrine; the dignity of those who teach it; the condition of the listeners; and the order of communicating..

Thomas Aquinas, On the Commendation of Sacred Scripture

Dispensationalism grew from a fringe following and gained more popularity in the 1880s, both popularized and re-interpreted by a lawyer-turned-theologian named Cyrus Scofield. Scofield’s character was questionable; he was accused of accepting bribes, committing financial fraud, and later in life giving himself a fake Doctor of Divinity title. A biography by Joseph Canfield refers to him as an abject liar and opportunist promoter of baseless theology. It is unsurprising that someone also having a lawyer’s background, who also had never formally studied theology, would resonate with the interpretation of scripture through a literal and litigious interpretation, even if it did not align with 1800 years of theology to the contrary. The lack of academic application may explain why dispensational ageism reads more like a prophecy of its own, rather than a carefully reasoned hermeneutical methodology.

The fundamentalist application of sola scriptura went much further in asserting the right of personal, private interpretation, and the pursuit of “truth” rather than, and often even disparaging “doctrine”³. Perhaps for this reason, Scofield’s adaptation of dispensationalism took hold in American culture, despite its infancy and its lack of vetting. Dispensationalism became popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s resulting from the Niagara Bible Conferences and the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, both of which Scofield had direct involvement in. Being the first Bible indoctrinated with dispensational theology, Scofield sought and obtained the funding of the same *Plymouth Brethren* that Darby had belonged to. Ernest Sandeen, author of *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, said of the Scofield Reference Bible that it was “subtly but influentially powerful” at disseminating Darby’s

viewpoint to, “hundreds of thousands who have regularly read that Bible and who often have been unaware of the distinction between the ancient text and the Scofield interpretation”. The conferences themselves focused on development of thematic end-times elements such as the rapture, traits of antichrist, and many other modern end times ideals. It also attempted to elevate dispensational hermeneutics as the only correct means of interpreting scripture. This forced the polarization of many theologians, and the conferences eventually fell apart due to infighting over disagreements about doctrine, as well as potential legal issues (ironically, stemming from some of Scofield’s actions). Shortly after, oil money flowed in. Publishing campaigns funded by the founder of Union Oil helped popularize dispensationalism from 1910-1915, which helped legitimize the theology and disparage the higher criticism much of the rest of the academic world accepted.

The timing was perfect, as the stage was set for the world to become far more receptive to biblical doomscrolling. As Kim Riddlebarger writes in *A Case for Amillennialism*, “Several important social and cultural factors made dispensationalism popular among American evangelicals, who had been overwhelmingly postmillennial just a generation earlier. The horrors of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and the tense Middle East situation can all be explained by the dispensational system. When people are uncertain about the future and afraid of what might come to pass, dispensationalists assure them that when things go from bad to worse, the church will be raptured from the earth and Christians will not be around to experience the great tribulation or the wrath of the Antichrist. In this way, dispensationalists offer comforting answers to painful questions.”

Reinterpreting an end-times set in the 1900s had obvious appeal. No one could blame society for being tempted to parallel the Antichrist to Hitler, or the sufferings of the Great Tribulation to the horrible sufferings of the Holocaust, especially with a relatively new form of theology circulating that fit with current events. The 1918 Influenza breakout had killed millions and birthed a spiritual madness for seances and the occult. The more pessimistic society got, the more it was open to accepting a fiery, terrifying end of world theology. Common recurring themes in the world such as inflation, war, disease, and genocide are seen by dispensational Christians as a concise sign of the end of the world, even though these concepts play out repeatedly throughout history. As historian David Redles points out, many apocalyptic movements begin with a chaotic destabilization of society, “the multiplicity of causality, the convergence of cataclysmic events, creates rapid, sudden, and irrevocable change in society and change within the psyches of those who experience it.”

Thus truth beyond the dull wit of man is the prize of faith equipped with reason and knowledge

Historical Interpretation

The church hasn't always interpreted scripture this way, though; in fact, hermeneutics have evolved greatly over time. Dispensational hermeneutics, in all its relative newness, is fundamentally at odds with older and more accepted forms of interpretation. Historical protestant hermeneutics generally see scripture through a different lens: 1. The New Testament should explain the Old Testament (not the other way around), 2. Old Testament concepts are reinterpreted in the New Testament, and 3. Scripture (and especially prophecy) is interpreted *analogia fidei*, interpreting the complicated and ambiguous biblical passages in the context of the more concise passages and patterns about the topic; scripture interpreting scripture (*scriptura scripturae interpres*, as Harry Potter might say). While it became more or less of a science after the reformation, such concepts find support in the writings of many church fathers, as we have already seen. Tertullian, for example, argued that "uncertain statements should be determined by certain ones, and obscure ones by such as are clear and plain" (On the Resurrection of the Flesh, Ch. 21).

More traditional approaches to interpreting scripture reveal a Christianity that was far distinct from the dispensational approach. For one, such interpretations give license to be a Christian and simultaneously acknowledge the allegorical cues in both Genesis and Revelation⁴. It allows for a Christian faith without the notion of a violent, bloody destruction of civilization and spacetime, as prescribed by dispensational ideals. There are sane alternatives to be found in history, up to and including the preterist viewpoint we've been flirting with, which positions Revelation in the early first century.

This is not to suggest that miracles don't exist in the Bible – they absolutely do; this hermeneutic model allows the context to tell us what should be taken figuratively, but what is also intended to be of historical witness, such as the resurrection of Christ. Such a framework allows scripture to interpret itself – letting us better suss out what is literal and what is figurative or allegorical, more importantly what prophecies have already been fulfilled by history and what, if anything, scripture has left in it to tell us about the future. Concepts such as a secret rapture, the Great Tribulation (seven years of suffering), and rebuilding a third temple evaporate under historic Protestant interpretations. Without the literalism of the dispensational hermeneutic, "no earthly kingdom is in view for Israel" (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*).

To best summarize the difference between Dispensational hermeneutics and traditional hermeneutics is this: dispensational interpretation uses books like Daniel and Ezekiel to interpret Revelation as a prediction of the future, but historical Protestant interpretation uses Revelation to interpret Daniel and Ezekiel, to reveal God's redemptive work throughout history, especially how it points to the conclusion of prophecy in Christ.

Who, then, is He Who has done these things and has united in peace those who hated each other, save the beloved Son of the Father, the common Savior of all, Jesus Christ, Who by His own love underwent all things for our salvation? Even from the beginning, moreover, this peace that He was to administer was foretold, for Scripture says, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles, and nation shall not take sword against nation, neither shall they learn any more to wage war."

Athanasius, On the Incarnation

Speculation Run Amok

Scholars defending dispensationalism have argued that departing from a literal interpretation of scripture lends itself to speculation and dogma, but just look at what literal interpretation has done for speculators in the past hundred years.

Between the 1920s to 1940s, many in the west were speculating that Hitler was the Antichrist, while those within his ranks believed he was the messiah returned. Dietrich Eckart, a mentor to Hitler to whom he later dedicated *Mein Kampf*, painted the Jewish race as the Antichrist, reinterpreting the Old Testament and writing an antisemitic exegesis on the book of Revelation. Hitler's speeches, fully embracing his fiction, attempted to convince the Germans that the Jewish intended to use the hyperinflation of that period to enslave them through famine, "for the second revolution under the Star of David". Nazism's rise was fueled by its apocalyptic sentiments of a "millennial Reich". Redles points out, "the Nazi conception of the tausendjährige Reich, literally millennial kingdom, was taken to be a perfect world, one cleansed of racial degeneracy, among other things." He goes on, describing the appeal as, "the message of that piercing voice was one of impending apocalypse, with salvation possible only through Nazism. Nazi rhetoric struck a chord with the millenarian longings of many hopeless and frustrated Germans." While the

Nazi apocalyptic diverged far from a Judeo-Christian interpretation of Revelation, “Nazi messianism and apocalypticism were central to the Nazi construction of reality”. It was recognizable enough to the Catholic Church, and when the Third Reich failed to establish a thousand-year reign on the Earth, the Vatican in 1944 issued a statement that millennialism cannot be safely taught. It cannot be understated how central Nazi apocalyptic eschatology was to the racist motivations of the regime. Historian Mary Fulbrook wrote of Nazism and Christianity, “it seems that, for many Germans, adherence to the Christian faith proved compatible with at least passive acquiescence in, if not active support for, the Nazi dictatorship.”

The Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 70s taught that the end of the world could happen at any moment, popularized by Hal Lindsey’s “The Late Great Planet Earth”, which pitched a sensationalized literal interpretation of prophecy as the only correct one⁵. Lindsey connected pop culture and current events to eschatology, teaching that the end of the world was imminent, that a third temple would begin construction very soon, and the only thing standing in the way was the Muslims. This led to end-times fanaticism, supernaturalism, intensified hatred of Muslims, and the mindset of the world approaching Armageddon – themes still present in many churches today. The Jesus People had left jobs, school, families, and all their responsibilities in the belief they would be raptured any day. Decades later, many are still trying to get their broken lives back together. Some from this movement, now fundamentalist denominational leaders, later speculated raptures throughout the 1980s, and that the Y2K bug would usher in the apocalypse. This led many Christians to, again, quit their jobs, build underground bunkers and train with militias.

Christians have relentlessly attempted to identify the Antichrist, even in modern day America. In 2008, many adopted a widespread belief that Obama was the Antichrist based on an off-the-cuff remark about the working class “clinging to their guns and religion”, leading to numerous assassination plots. In early 2021, fringe conspiracy groups planned to assassinate President-Elect Biden to usher in a new heaven and earth, some believing the book of Revelation’s ten days of darkness began with Trump’s Twitter suspension. Any incoming leader who does not ascribe to the fundamentalist view of Christian values is, to many fundamentalists, Antichrist.

Today, otherwise intelligent Christians are protesting a COVID vaccine because of the strong anti-government sentiments modern evangelicalism teaches, or believe it is somehow related to any number of end-times concepts that may cost them enslavement or eternal damnation. Both sadly and ironically, many needlessly have suffered and died because of these very beliefs. If historic Protestantism is guilty of speculation, dispensationalism has been sensationally guilty of it. Dispensationalism gave Christians a square peg they are constantly trying to fit into something in the present, rather than

looking at how it fit into God's redemptive work in the past. This has kept the church needlessly preoccupied for a hundred years.

One might think that because dispensationalism is bound to a literal reading, it would have offered some guard rails to prevent speculation from running wild. Over time, however, many of the constraints of fundamentalism have been lost. Evangelicals frequently layer symbolism on top of a literal ideology that relies on the absence of symbolism for its mere existence in the first place. One of the most common criticisms of dispensational eschatology is the figurative interpretation of the many time cues that bracket the entire book of Revelation, which describe events that must take place "soon" and "without delay". The symbolism gets far more extreme in modern-day churches, where many must be constantly reminded that a literal interpretation dismisses symbolic ideas such as a vaccine, a tracking chip, or cashless payments as a mark of the beast⁶. This is unsurprising given that a literal interpretation calls for fires to burn a third of the earth, a meteor to destroy a third of fish, a third of all water poisoned, darkness over a third of day and night, and months of smoke and locust torture, all while the temple is still standing.

Things make sense if you interpret prophecy figuratively and in a correct historical context. They make sense as symbols the Jewish readers of the time (including some in Caesar's household) would understand but would be indecipherable to Roman officials or other outsiders. Literally, however, it's easy to see why none of this fits. It's fraught with problems. To resolve so many irreconcilable differences, dispensationalism creates a terrifying, literal apocalyptic scenario in the future, concluding that there will be another Antichrist, that the temple will again be rebuilt, and that Jesus will reign on earth for a thousand years. Yet this makes little to no sense for a Jesus who claimed to have replaced the temple with "something better" and referred to the temple as only a shadow of his kingdom in heaven, which he brought through his coming with a new covenant. It makes no sense to a Jesus who, in a cruel irony, stopped referring to the temple as "my temple", and called it "your temple", and cursed the fig tree (metaphorically representing the temple). If Revelation wasn't describing second temple Jerusalem, then it was conspicuously silent about what would have been a recent and catastrophic destruction of the entire city, to instead predict... some other catastrophic destruction of the entire city. No, it's very clear that Jesus' intention was to depose the original temple and replace it with "something better", creating a new sacrificial system based on his own life rather than animal sacrifice and other temple praxis.

Many have conveniently adopted the constructs afforded them by dispensational hermeneutics while simultaneously abandoning the very pillars that it relies on – allowing for wild symbolic conspiracy theories to run rampant in an end-times scenario that otherwise only exists if you take everything literally.

When did prophet and vision cease from Israel? Was it not when Christ came, the Holy One of holies? It is, in fact, a sign and notable proof of the coming of the Word that Jerusalem no longer stands, neither is prophet raised up nor vision revealed among them. And it is natural that it should be so, for when He that was signified had come, what need was there any longer of any to signify Him? And when the truth had come, what further need was there of the shadow? On His account only they prophesied continually, until such time as Essential Righteousness had come, Who was made the ransom for the sins of all.

Athanasius, On the Incarnation

Restoration of God's People

It's important to note that what being advocated for here isn't replacement theology; even Pope John Paul II acknowledged that God's original covenant with the Jewish people was never revoked. Justification before God is a question dating back to what is possibly the earliest book of the Old Testament (Job), who asked "how can mere mortals prove their innocence before God?". Luther describes justification as "before the face of God"; e.g., grace cannot be quantified (especially if it is infinite), which is why establishing forensic justification is a worthy, but also futile effort. Calvin underscores the importance, "for unless you understand first of all what your position is before God, and what the judgment which he passes upon you, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid, or on which piety towards God can be reared." For that matter, God cannot revoke a covenant, else he would be "dashed to pieces" by his own rules. Theologically, he is incapable of moving the goalposts; God's own righteousness is intertwined with faithfulness to his own promises.

Some scholars believe the book of Hebrews positions Jesus' ministry as an alternative sacrificial system inside Judaism rather than superseding it. The concept of dual-covenant theology has as many problems as replacement theology, however. While attempts to reconcile this have been underwhelming, what's important is to understand the difference between God's covenant with his people and the sacrificial system that was disrupted with the destruction of the temple. This can be seen in Jesus' parable of the wine skins. While the object lesson is about the incompatibility of an old system with a new one, it's often mistaken that this has anything to do with the Christian church; in fact, it is quite interesting that Jesus cites the old system as better. What is being discussed here? The sacrificial system itself, and not justification or his covenant with the Jewish people. To the

contrary, Jesus' statements here serve as a referendum of the pharisaical legalism and established ethnic boundaries that wrongly tied strict Jewish sacrificial praxis to justification in the first place. This legalism was contrary to the redemptive Edenic model laid out in the Old Testament. It was at odds with the plans of the early church to merge the qahal (or ekklesia) to make Jew and Gentile into one; this certainly couldn't happen under such a strict system of legalism. Jesus condemned the Pharisees' poor shepherding of God's people, and their system of justification by observing the law, rather than justification through faith in God. Joel B. Green argues that Luke 5:39 suggests it was the system of false piety that was the incompatible "new wine"; this legalism was the "new garment" tearing away God's relationship with his people, leaving the old Jewish system in tattered disrepair. This underscores God's redemptive work as deeply inclusive of the Jewish people, to save them from what was a counterfeit sacrificial system that had never been the intention of the old covenant. This is supported by the New Testament object lesson *par excellence* in Abraham justified by faith, and not the law (citing Gen 15:6). So, the theme, even in the Old Testament blueprint, has always been salvation through grace by faith. What Jesus intended was to bring about was a renewal, not replacement, of the Old Testament's original redemptive work by deposing the broken Jewish leadership of the time and choosing to personally shepherd his people, e.g., "God with us", as evident in Ezekiel 34.

The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them. "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

Ezekiel 34:1-16

So, to the contrary, the mission of Jesus is portrayed as an extreme opposite of the anti-Semitic replacement viewpoint and instead one of God pursuing the Jewish people to rescue them from the leadership that so miserably failed them, to restore them to the original blueprint of Genesis. Part of his mission included tearing down what became a competing sacrificial system incompatible with the Genesis model. This is consistent with Jesus' debates with his contemporaries, where he often corrected or reframed the Mosaic Law by citing the original Edenic blueprint as taking higher priority. This was the "something better" that Jesus was talking about – he intended to become the greatest

love note and the great rescue for the Jewish people, and to the world. At the core, there has effectively only ever been one covenant and not two; the basis for salvation has always been the first two commandments (Hosea 6:6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings).

“He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.”

Nicene Creed

Christ’s Second Advent

Many view the last two chapters of Revelation as symbolic of some future earthly kingdom, yet scholars acknowledge that the entire book of Revelation is bracketed by time constraints requiring all events to take place “soon”, and “without delay”. Singling out the last two chapters breaks this structure, so an explanation is needed if we are to be confident in removing them from the equation of some future earthly kingdom.

The destruction of the temple was a significant event for Christianity. Protestant theologian Heinrich Ewald said of the destruction of the temple, “as by one great irrevocable stroke the Christian congregation was separated from the Jewish, to which it had heretofore clung as a new, vigorous offshoot to the root of the old tree and as the daughter to the mother.” Church historian Philip Schaff wrote that the destruction of Jerusalem, “marks that momentous crisis at which the Christian church as a whole burst forth forever from the chrysalis of Judaism, awoke to a sense of its maturity, and in government and worship at once took its independent stand before the world.” If indeed the bulk of Revelation describes the Jewish War and destruction of the temple, then the last two chapters naturally illustrate the subsequent birth of the Christian church. Jesus spent much of his ministry on earth defending the Edenic blueprint. It makes sense that his work on earth would conclude with “Eden restored” through the birth of his church. This is consistent with his claim that he would build “*my ekklesia*” (the word play in this is quite poignant and implies something much bigger than just the disciples’ work). The emergence of the church is quite consistent with the language used throughout these two chapters: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple”, “The nations will walk by its light”, “No longer will there be any curse”, “The throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him” – all make sense (without

squinting!) as a depiction of the emerging church. These are not passages about a future earthly kingdom, but the one that is already here. They echo the Psalm of David in Ps. 122, "I rejoiced with those who said to me 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'".

The symbolism used in the New Testament delineates the atonement of Christ as the most significant singular event in redemptive history. It describes heavenly visions of enthronement and a reordering of heaven, along with a transformation of earth symbolized by the veil being torn providing access to God for all. If you take the imagery of the New Testament as any indication, these events effectively restructured heaven and earth creating a new era. History agrees. The massive social impact of Christianity has been written about at length throughout history. The emergence of the church was the intersection at which the resurrection reached the world at a global scale; it was the consummation of the work of Jesus – his "ekklesia". From a Christian perspective, suggesting these events were anything less than the creation of a "new heaven and earth" is to miss the gravity of the gospel. Christians themselves downplay this when they demote Revelation 21-22 to some future event, yet in its proper context, Revelation describes a dramatically new paradigm in the Christian church.

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful." And He said to me, "It is happened [done, born]! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.

Revelation 21:1-6

To a Christian, this is the idealized new life in Christ. While one might look at this passage as a future hope, the point of it was to convey that the hope is already here. Verse 14 could not be more clear that this represents the Christian Church when it states, "The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."

Without the support of an apocalyptic Revelation, a future earthly kingdom dissolves, and we are left with a loose collection of scattered passages that now suddenly seem to convey something begging for context. It leaves one to question whether the original futurist conclusions about them could have even been drawn in the first place without an apocalyptic bias. Specific passages throughout the New Testament are often singled out to support a future coming but interpreting them this way seems to be instrumented around a future apocalypse, the absence of which has been the bane of the church for centuries. The theology begs to be revisited⁷.

Consider Hebrews 9:28. The NIV reads, “so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” The verse is often interpreted as a second advent proof, but this is plainly not what the author of Hebrews is implying. Much of this chapter is a reference to Isaiah’s fourth servant song. The author is echoing what Ben Sira celebrates in describing the high priest emerging (appearing) from the holy of holies after making atonement, to affirm the sacrifice was accepted by God (Sir. 50:5-19). This happened during the atonement acts of the priest (Lev 9). While some misattribute this function to the ascension⁸, the context of the verse would insist this second appearing is at the *resurrection*, where Christ was affirmed an accepted sacrifice, and that sins have been forgiven. The future tense of the word “appear” lends itself to apocalyptic speculation, but identical use in the LXX suggests this is unlikely⁹. Based on the LXX usage, the verse is better translated, “in this manner, Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many; appearing a second time without sin to those that eagerly wait for him unto salvation”. This translation fits cleanly into the servant context and fits with Greek usage of that period. Many apocalyptic proof texts like this can be cleanly reframed in a more sensible context when the events of Revelation don’t bias interpretation. In fact, it is surprisingly difficult to be both a preterist and a millenarian at all, leaving one to question the necessity or purpose of a second advent in the first place.

The concept of a second future advent of Christ has enjoyed a long postmillennial history in the traditions of the church, and so one may be cautious to avoid completely disavowing the idea, yet at the same time non-dispensational millennialism didn’t wholly exist until after AD 1000 and has gone through many absurd adaptations itself. Just like the disciples failed to grasp many of Jesus’ words and actions, a second coming is something the church has grappled with since its inception. Should a second advent be considered, it at least resembles nothing of the apocalyptic future that dispensational theology has fabricated. One is, however, in the good company of St. Augustine to reject the notion of an earthly millennium entirely, or a physical kingdom of God on earth. History has spent centuries churning on a second advent. Was one even promised – even a teeny weeny one? Regardless of that answer, a Christian’s chief concern should be living

according to 2 Peter, “What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives... make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”

Conclusion

In John 18:36, Jesus made it clear when he said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Many misunderstand the book of Revelation to be about prophesy. It is not a book about prophesy, but of fulfillment. Revelation is the consummation of Jesus Christ: namely, the birth of the Christian church through the persecution and war that would soon follow.

Dispensational theology has muddied the waters about what Christianity is and isn't, and this has turned away many who would otherwise accept the historical Jesus, were it not married to such dramatic end-times ideas. There is no scriptural support for the kind of end-times judgment and destruction predicted by dispensational theology. The identity politics this interpretation has led to in America have no doubt also turned many off to what historically was a very apolitical Christianity. Having been heavily involved in the evangelical church for decades, it would not be incorrect to accurately describe the world view of a typical fundamentalist end-times believer as that of a disposable, dying world that is not worth saving. Many of today's evangelicals likewise believe the world is on a steady decline into apostasy. This is not an uncommon belief across all forms of what psychology refers to as “apocalypse complex”; if everyone around you is believed to be eternally damned, there is little motivation to contribute to the greater good. The irony is not lost here, as such a mindset is in direct conflict with the teachings of Jesus and the prophets, who teach that social justice and good works are a byproduct of righteousness. The pessimist world view of a “throw away earth” has adversely affected politics, public health, and society in ways that have become very visible in recent years. Yet there is only a scriptural basis for the opposite – hope. Christianity's true message is that humanity has been redeemed. Church fathers wrote of the blessed hope we have, and the subsequent transformation of society that resulted from Jesus' coming. Athanasius called the Cross the “healing of creation”. Jesus transformed the world; so dramatically that it birthed a “new heaven and earth”. God reached down to earth and made atonement with his own body once and for all – his plan was to become a ransom for our souls, not to establish an earthly kingdom. It is only those who have misappropriated scripture to create such a terrifying fiction of final judgment who see this world as eternally damned. For the Christian who is paying attention, we are surrounded by hope; a light has come into the world.

Scholarship has spent too much time judging God by their own constraints in understanding him. Revelation can be a symbolic, prophetic fulfillment of what is now

history, yet still offer insight of a universal scope that can benefit modern day readers – without the need to replay symbolism literally or reduce it to a mere pattern. On the one hand, Revelation is highly figurative, but on the other, it would have been clearly understandable to first century readers. Literal interpreters insisting that scripture must be plainly clear only fail to understand Revelation because of where they're standing. To suggest that God must, through this text, reveal the future is to make Christ's death and resurrection a footnote in history, rather than the crescendo.

The scriptures do not presume to be a science book or even a history book. It is a record of redemptive history from start to finish; it is a compendium of interventions giving us a history of God's covenant. Jesus fulfilled all that he planned to on earth. It is human nature, however, for one to feel the need to make the present a prophetically significant era¹⁰; those that do are sadly without scriptural support. Such an effort detracts from the significance of the gospels. The purpose of Revelation was to bring comfort to the persecuted church, and to detail the birth pains and emerging age of Christendom that would soon follow. The glory of the last two chapters is representative of the idealized spiritual Christian reality that Jesus brought into the world – living this worthy Christian life on earth is what the Christian should be focused on.

Religious scholar Simon J. Joseph put it well when he made the argument that Jesus did not come with an apocalyptic message, at least in the sense that we perceive today.

The word "eschatology" refers to the "last things," but it can also refer to the expectation of a divine renewal without envisioning a catastrophic end of the space-time continuum. Similarly, the word "apocalypse" refers to a divine "revelation", but it does not necessarily envision a catastrophic end of the space-time continuum... the problem is that the Jesus of the Gospels does not predict the annihilation of the nations or announce the ingathering of the twelve tribes of Israel. Moreover, Jesus does not seem to be interested in delineating the periodization of history, nor does he seem preoccupied by astronomy, the calendar, or "cosmic cartography". These "apocalyptic" literary motifs are conspicuous in their absence in the career of "the apocalyptic Jesus."

Simon J. Joseph, Jesus, The Essenes, and Christian Origin

Dispensational views were not part of the narrative of the church until recent history, and there are very good reasons for that. The theology has been disorganized and flawed since its inception, with various expositors being unable to agree on its most basic principles¹¹,

and what symbolic concessions to make to avoid absurdity. Robert K. Johnston, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Seminary, wrote of the deeper intrinsic problem of evangelical theology, “That evangelicals, all claiming a Biblical norm, are reaching contradictory theological formulations on many of the major issues they are addressing suggests the problematic nature of their present understanding of theological interpretation. To argue that the Bible is authoritative, but to be unable to come to anything like agreement on what it says (even with those who share an evangelical commitment), is self-defeating.”

American end-times theology has had far reaching consequences for evangelicalism. It followed us into the wild movements of the 60's and beyond, where the church clung to many other forms of cult phenomenon, and the fruits of that are Christians who have conflated their faith with an American dystopia. Evangelical laypersons generally don't understand the dispensational principles that are the underpinnings of such a theology. Were it preached today in churches, dispensationalism may very well have been dismissed as an eccentric and over-spiritualized sermon. There are consequences for allowing popular culture to drive movements in the church, no matter how harmless they may seem at the time. Sound doctrine is vitally important, and the fruits of the church's tolerance of poor ideas from church leaders is evident today. There are consequences when Christian leaders, academics, and congregations fail to be adequately protective of scripture, allowing unsound teachings to be entertained in the church community. Those consequences have quite literally killed people. Be it far from us to presume that a gospel forged well before our country's existence and in an ancient culture should be interpreted through 20th century Christian pop culture.

¹ While some earlier splinter sects popped up advocating violence, such as the Donatists, these were largely considered heretical by the church and were of limited impact.

² Interestingly, the only potential witness to this date (Irenaeus) believed that Revelation was imminent, and even attempted to name the identity of the antichrist, long after the tradition of Nero Caesar as the beast had been lost to antiquity. There is much debate among scholars about the wording Irenaeus used, too, suggesting he was making a reference to the last time he'd seen John, as opposed to when he wrote Revelation. Irenaeus is considered an unreliable witness for other reasons, not the least of which is the apparent mistaken dating surrounding Jesus himself that would have had him live to around 50 years old!

³ One of the biggest differences between “truth” and “doctrine”, in practice, is that sound “doctrine” can be reconciled across the broad range of scripture, tradition, and history, whereas “truth” is often attributed to individual passages, or even fragments of a single verse of scripture, and frequently

decoupled from both scriptural space and time. Without a firm theological background, personal and private interpretation often leads evangelicals, even today, to dangerously toe the line of Gnosticism.

⁴ A literal seven-day creation and young Earth is more of a relic from the reformation that carried over into dispensational theology. Luther could be described as the stronger of the modern advocates of literal interpretation, believing in a literal creation and a young earth, but was also captive to the beliefs of his time, and thought the sun revolved around the earth too. If you really want to blow the mind of literal creationists, read Augustine's wild interpretation of Genesis.

⁵ Lindsey mostly cited the theology of the late John Cummings, who had been heavily criticized as being obsessed with the "end-times", and predicted judgment day would occur in the late 1800s.

⁶ If the mark of the beast has any historical basis outside of its symbolic implications, some possibilities include a reference to goddess cults, whose members (and temple prostitutes) were known to seal themselves by branding with hot needles (Peristeph 10) and may have required such an identifying mark to buy or sell sex work. Others have posited it may be related to Jewish promissory notes, which included Caesar's title. Likely, however, this mark was symbolic in one form or another of those who worshipped Caesar as a god.

⁷ 2 Tim chapters 3 and 4 are often used in an apocalyptic sense, but this too violates time cues. It's easy to forget the epistles were letters. Paul is writing to Timothy about how some will act in the "last days" and tells Timothy to have nothing to do with these very same people. He obviously expected Timothy to be alive during these "last days". Chapter 4, likewise, seems to reference Christ's first advent, and not a second one, "in view of his appearing and his kingdom"; that is, in view of his first advent, and his reign. 4:1 states that Christ Jesus will judge the living and the dead, yet there is no evidence that this takes place at some second coming or earthly kingdom – this is assumed by modern readers. It could just be a reference to eternal judgment, or to the concepts in Hebrews 4:12 of God's word "judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart". Another popular text is Matthew 24 and is likewise victim to the same bias interpretation. Here, Jesus describes two people going about their business, and "one is taken, the other left". He utters these words in a long discourse about the destruction of the temple, yet readers often break the structure to single out this passage as apocalyptic. Placing a "rapture" here would be conspicuously out of context with the wrath of God linked here to the Noah tradition, in which it was the wicked who were "swept away" in judgment. What Jesus describes is eerily reminiscent of the tragic reality documented by Josephus during the siege of Jerusalem, where lethal darts (similar to WWI-era flechettes) from war engines killed priests conducting their services in the temple, dropping dead right on the spot. A simpler possibility makes it a passage about receiving salvation. The Greek for 'taken' here simply means brought, such as "take me with you", or accepted (vs. rejected, or even abandoned), and does not carry the meaning of a mystical snatching up to heaven as modern interpreters like to conjure. Acts 1:11, describes Christ as returning "in the same way you have seen him go into heaven", yet the Greek is clear this is not intended to be a literal comparison. The same Greek phrase is used in Mat 23:37 to compare gathering children "as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings". Clearly, this is symbolic. If the angel had intended to tell Jesus' disciples that they would see Jesus' return, then the angel was clearly wrong. Lastly, 1 Cor 15:50-57 (and in fact most of that entire chapter) is incredibly clear about the context being one of death, and our transformation "in the twinkling of an eye" into an imperishable state. This is a passage about inheriting eternal life, not a second advent. The only alternative is to interpret that Paul had his

own Jewish Eschatological ideas in mind, which would have put resurrection immediately before the ingathering of the twelve tribes and the end of the world, believing he would have himself been alive to see it. If this were the case, he was clearly wrong. These, and many more verses in scripture change entirely when the apocalypse of Revelation is no longer the default assumption – and, in fact, present far more edifying and insightful meanings without an apocalyptic bias.

⁸ Christ's ascension is sometimes paralleled with the priest's service while making atonement in Lev. 9, but the ascension was an unrelated royal coronation of sorts. By the time of the ascension, Jesus had already been enthroned, and atonement had already been affirmed through his emergence from the empty tomb, which is the foundation for the Christian faith. Luke, on the other hand, makes little fanfare of the ascension, giving it only a passing attention, while Matthew fails to even mention it in his Great Commission. By the time Matthew ch.28 occurs, Christ is already acknowledged as the enthroned king having all authority on heaven and earth; it is dis-congruent with the timeline to suggest that Christ (the atonement) had not already been accepted by God, and this was clearly already affirmed to his disciples. If Christ's ascension had the significance of being intertwined with atonement, it would have been cited as a fulfillment proof by Matthew, and at least mentioned by other gospel writers. It would make little sense for the author of Hebrews to look to the second advent here, as it would imply that Christians worship a messiah that was not attested to by God; this would not be Christianity, but a terribly deceptive form of idolatry.

⁹ The identical form of this Greek word ὀφθήσεται is quite relevant in its LXX use in Psalm 84:7, having a present-perfect-passive sense (or even a conjunctive-present sense), "They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion". Similar use can be found in Ps. 102:16, "For the Lord builds up Zion; he appears in his glory". Such usage allows the tense to refer to an event chronologically forward of Christ being "offered once", but also constrained to the time span of the leading event. The form of the word can also be understood as a completed action, such as in Num 23:21, "He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel." Note also, the verse translates "without sin", just as the high priest emerged without sin. There is nothing in the Greek that translates, "not to bear sin" as NIV has criminally added; it is not present in most other translations. See Eerdman's long discourse about the many uses of ὀράω, and it will become apparent how an apocalyptic bias crept into many translations (including Darby's!).

¹⁰ A "coming in the clouds" and "the day of the Lord" is symbolic throughout scripture of God's judgment, not a literal appearance in the sky. The symbolism of Jesus reigning in a physical temple with walls 1500 miles long is likely symbolic of the historical bifurcation and launch of Christianity after the temple was removed, and not a literal temple descending from heaven or a physical reign on earth. The number 1,000 is symbolic elsewhere in scripture as an immeasurably large number, like "a bazillion years", and is more likely a reference to the reign of Christianity on earth than it is any literal earthly millennial reign. Consider, too, "with the Lord, a day is like a bazillion years", and "for one day in your courts is better than a bazillion elsewhere". These, and other symbols, have been tortured throughout time to reflect many a scholar's imaginations and biases.

¹¹ Not only do supporters disagree on the number of dispensations, but the dispensations are very unevenly distributed. The first three dispensations supposedly occur within the first few chapters of Genesis, with the remaining spanning across the rest of scripture and time. This also downplays the significance of the resurrection of Christ, by putting it onto the same footing as several other less significant events. Each dispensation also hinges upon having its own judgment, yet these judgments

are unbalanced as well and vary in severity greatly, from cataclysmic judgments such as the great flood, to much lesser judgments. Overall, the concept of dividing scriptural history into distinct dispensations is loosely put together, greatly unbalanced, and without consensus even among its supporters. It attempts to split the scripture into a series of “mini apocalypses”, each ushering in a new age. This is the opposite of rational theology.

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