

Parousia

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Examining an Amillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6

Whose Wrath Is It?

Prophecy Under Fire

Meet a Berean



A *Examining an* millennial *Interpretation of* R Revelation 20:1-6

by Gary Vaterlaus

*I*n the last issue of *Parousia* we examined the historical roots of amillennialism and discovered that it did not arise from a balanced, biblical exegesis of the Scriptures. Rather, the theological, political and cultural tensions and influences upon the early church of the first four centuries proved to be the mother of this theological system. In this article, we will examine an interpretation of the primary passage in the Bible, which speaks of the duration of Christ's temporal kingdom, Revelation 20:1-6:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Those in the amillennial camp, who hold to a spiritualized kingdom of unlimited duration and deny any future earthly reign of Christ, do not believe that Revelation 20 should be interpreted in a literal sense. They see this passage full of symbolism and figurative language. They teach that believers who have died are reigning with Christ right now in the heavenlies and that this constitutes the fulfillment of the millennial reign of Christ. At some point in the future, according to amillennialists, Christ will return and there will be a general bodily resurrection of all people—a resurrection of believers to life and of unbelievers to judgment. The primary textual basis for this claim is John 5:25-29, which states,

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

In order to harmonize John 5:25-29 with Revelation 20:1-6, according to this view, Revelation 20 does not sequentially follow chapter 19. In contradistinction, Revelation 20:1-6 recapitulates the binding of Satan at Christ's first coming, relates the current reign of believers with Christ in heaven, and then teaches the ultimate destruction of Satan at Christ's second coming. The phrase "a thousand years" is not taken literally but is merely a symbol representing a long time.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETATION

There are, of course, differences among the views of amillennialists, just as there are among premillennialists. For our purposes in this article we will analyze the view argued by Dr. Robert Strimple of Westminster Theological Seminary in the book, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*. In this book, Dr. Strimple writes for the amillennial position. In his discussion, he offers an interpretation of the Revelation 20 passage in question. Our purpose is to examine Dr. Strimple's exegesis of Revelation 20 in light of Scripture, evaluate his hermeneutical method, and draw some conclusions about the nature of the resurrection and the millennium.

Hermeneutics: Literal or Allegorical?

For more than a thousand years theologians have debated the meaning of the thousand years in Revelation 20. After all the arguments are weighed, the basic issue comes down to one of hermeneutics—how one is to interpret and understand the meaning of Scripture. As we have mentioned before, broadly speaking there are two hermeneutical approaches: literal (or face value) and symbolical (allegorical or spiritualizing). The face value method takes the Scripture for what it says, believing that God communicated His truth in a way that man can understand it. We take words in their normal, natural customary sense. The interpreter's job is to understand what the original intent of the author (human and divine) was. The non face value methods, on the other hand, believe that Scripture should not be taken at face value, but that there are many hidden truths in Scripture that are revealed in allegorical and symbolic language. The interpreter's job is to uncover these hidden truths through proper interpretation of symbolic words, figurative language and allegories.

Though the purely allegorical method was popular from about the third century up to the Reformation, no serious biblical scholar today would claim to adhere to a purely allegorical method of interpretation. However, there are many portions of Scripture, which are spiritualized or taken at less than face value by modern-day theologians. One of them is Revelation 20. Rather than taking this passage at face value, the

words are redefined, reinterpreted, and made to fit a predetermined theological system.

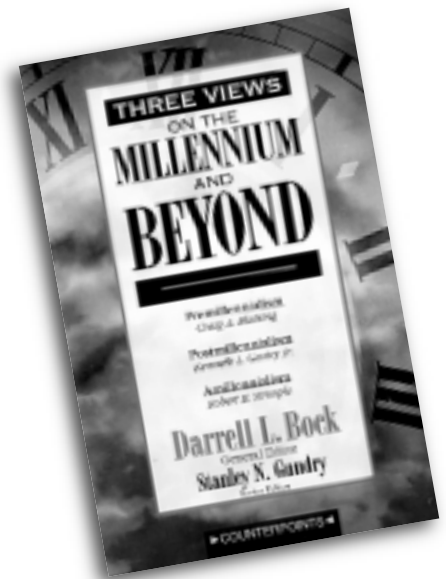
We will now turn to Dr. Strimple's exegesis of Revelation 20:1-6. He attempts to show how this portion of Scripture supports the idea of a present millennial reign of Christ and rules out the thought of a future earthly kingdom, ruled by Christ for 1,000 years.

Revelation 20: Sequence or Recapitulation?

It is Dr. Strimple's position that Revelation 20:1-6 represents a recapitulation of the first coming of Christ and depicts the present reign of the Saints in heaven with Christ. He writes:

"The order in which the visions appear in the book of Revelation is *not necessarily* the order of fulfillment. It *seems* that the end of chapter 19 brings us right down to the end of the age, the second coming of Christ, the great final battle, judgment on the beast and false prophet. It does not follow that chapter 20 *necessarily* speaks of what will happen next. Its visions *may* take us back to the first coming of Christ and the beginning of the present gospel age."¹ (italics mine)

Notice the uncertainty of his statements. He punctuates his comments with phrases such as *not necessarily, it seems, may*, etc. The reason for this is the absence of textual indicators that provide an explicit basis for such claims. Unless Scripture gives us explicit indications that chapter 20 is a recapitulation we ought to take these chapters sequentially. While recapitulation is found in the book of Revelation (e.g. chapters 12 and 13), there is simply no contextual reason to not take chapter 20 of Revelation as following in sequence chapter 19. A face value reading of this passage presents the following order: After the battle of Armageddon the Beast and False Prophet are consigned to the lake of fire. This is followed by the binding of Satan and the resurrection of beheaded saints. The reign of those saints for a thousand years follows these events, while Satan is bound. After the thousand years, Satan is released. He fights against the "camp of the saints" (20:9)



Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond.
Darrell L. Bock, editor. Published by Zondervan
(Grand Rapids, MI) 1999.

is defeated and thrown into the lake of fire. Following this is a general resurrection of the wicked dead (minus those judged at the sheep and goat judgment) and those righteous folk who died during the millennial reign of Christ. This is generally labeled the Great White Throne judgment. This judgment results in eternal punishment for the wicked in the lake of fire.

The Binding of Satan: Now or Later?

Concerning the binding of Satan mentioned in Rev. 20:1-3, Strimple argues that:

"...the New Testament emphasizes two climactic points in Christ's victory over Satan: victory at the cross, and victory at his second coming... Revelation 20:1-10 is a figurative representation of Christ's victory over Satan at each of the two climactic points. At the cross Satan is bound—but not absolutely. Revelation 20:2-3 does not say that Satan is bound, period. He is bound in one respect only, namely, "to keep him from deceiving the nations [the Gentiles] anymore."²

Strimple claims, as do almost all amillennialists, that the binding of Satan in these verses refers to Christ's victory over Satan at His first coming. Consequently, Satan is now bound as a result of the victory that Christ

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won at the cross. While Christ's victory at the cross certainly spelled the beginning of Satan's ultimate doom, there remains a major problem with Dr. Strimple's interpretation. We are told throughout the New Testament that Satan is alive and active in his role as tempter (1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Thess. 3:5). 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 explicitly states that Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers. Paul writes, "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."

What does Paul mean by *veiled*? He states that "the god of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel." Therefore, a veiled unbeliever who is perishing is a blinded unbeliever who cannot see the truth. How then does Satan blind unbelievers? That is, how does Satan keep unbelievers from the truth? Clearly, he deceives them to believe a lie rather than the truth. Revelation 2:20 indicates Jezebel the prophetess "leads My bond-servants astray." This is the same Greek word, which means, "to deceive." This practice of deceiving, John calls the deep things of Satan (Rev 2:24).

Thus, Satan is very active and apparently unhindered in his role as the deceiver. In fact, the book of Revelation describes Satan as follows: "...the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world..." (Rev. 12:9). If the Bible is accurate in describing Satan as presently in the business of deceiving the whole world, then he cannot be bound at this time in the manner described in Revelation 20:1-3. Satan will be bound after the return of Christ and will remain so during the thousand-year reign of Christ.

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The Resurrection: One or Two?

Dr. Strimple writes of the resurrection spoken of in Revelation 20:4-6:

"Verses 4-6 are a vision of the reign of Christians with their Savior after they depart this life and as they await Christ's second coming, the resurrection, and eternal bliss. The saints are pictured as martyrs for their Lord. Perhaps this picture represents all God's people."³

Notice his "reinterpretation" of this passage. How can these verses be speaking of all of God's people who have died throughout the ages when it quite specifically identifies this group as "the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand"? Not all believers are martyrs. All believers are not confronted with the decision to take the mark or not take the mark. It is clear that John is speaking of a limited group of believers—those who had been beheaded for their faithfulness to Christ and those who had not taken the mark of the beast. Dr. Strimple ignores the plain sense of this passage and interprets it in a way that suits his theological bias, without any attempt to reconcile his view with the actual text of the Scripture.

Continuing with his exegesis of these verses, Dr. Strimple writes:

"In verse 5 we read that "the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended." The point that John is making is not that they will live then. Rather, he is emphasizing that the unbelieving will not enjoy this wonderful blessing that the saints enjoy, the wonderful blessing of living and reigning with Christ throughout the thousand years."⁴

We must question whether Dr. Strimple knows what John wanted to emphasize in this text. Instead of speculating as to John's main point, one should look at the language employed by John to determine what he

meant. The phrase "came to life" (ἐζήσαν), meaning "lived" in the Greek, speaks of physical life—resurrection. When this word is used elsewhere in the book of Revelation it always refers to physical life, not spiritual (see Rev. 2:8, 13:14). John writes that the rest of the dead "did not come to life until the thousand years were ended." This means that after the thousand years they will come to life—there will be a physical resurrection.

Dr. Strimple argues that the term "until" used in the New Testament does not necessarily mean that a state of being will continue for a certain time and then change. For instance, when Paul writes in Romans 11:25 that "a partial hardening has happened to Israel *until* the fulness of the Gentiles has come in", Dr. Strimple says that this does not mean that Israel's hardening will be removed after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, but just that it will last that long, up to the final eschatological day.⁵ However, he ignores the very next verse that reads, "and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The deliverer will come from Zion. He will remove ungodliness from Jacob."

When my children want some dessert, I tell them that they cannot have dessert "until" they have finished their dinner. I do not mean that they will not enjoy the benefits of eating dessert up to and including the end of dinner time. Rather, I mean that AFTER they finish their dinner THEN they may have dessert. In the same way, Revelation 20:5 is saying that the rest of the dead will not come to life UNTIL the 1,000 years are completed, that is, they will come to life AFTER the 1,000 years.

If our face-value reading is correct, then we should expect the book of Revelation to confirm this interpretation. And it does. Just a few verses later we read:

And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison... And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat

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upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. (Rev. 20:7, 10-13)

These verses speak of a resurrection of the dead AFTER the thousand years for the purpose of judgment. Those whose names are not found written in the book of life will be thrown in the lake of fire, which is the second death. Revelation 20:7-13 repeats and confirms the order of events spelled out in verses 4-6: another resurrection follows the 1000-year reign of Christ.

The First Resurrection: Spiritual or Bodily?

Dr. Strimple continues with his exegesis of Revelation 20:

“In verses 5-6 Johns speaks of “the first resurrection.” Clearly, this phrase implies a second resurrection. But does this mean that premillennialism is correct after all, that there will be two resurrections, the resurrection of believers at Christ’s coming and the resurrection of unbelievers a millennium later? Not at all! The reference to the first resurrection implies a second, true—a second resurrection for the same people! Similarly, “the second death” (v. 6) implies a first death—but also for the same people, the unbelievers.

“We might say that the believer in Christ will experience one death and two resurrections. The first resurrection occurs when he or she departs this life and is immediately ushered into the presence of Christ to reign

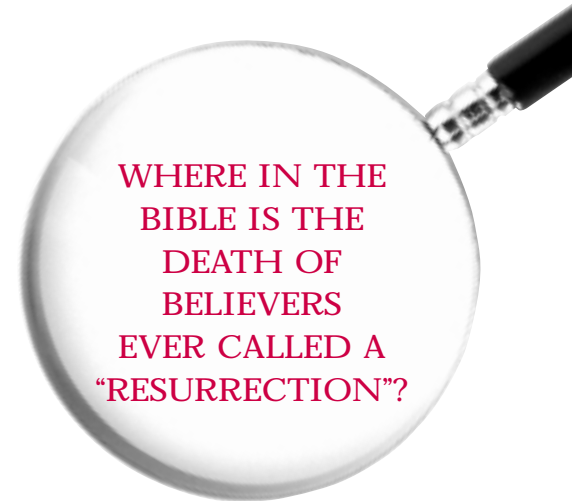
with him. The second resurrection will be bodily at Christ’s second coming, when believers are made ready for the eternal state.”⁶

Again, Dr. Strimple reads his own bias into the Scriptures. Where in the Bible is the death of believers ever called a “resurrection”? Where is there ever a spiritual resurrection spoken of? Rather, whenever Scripture speaks of “resurrection” it means a bodily resurrection. Notice that John first sees the “souls” of these martyrs and then sees them “come to life.” What can this mean but a resurrection from the dead? It would make no sense to say that these souls in heaven “come to life” by dying and then reign with Christ in heaven. John already sees them as souls in heaven who have died. Then they “come to life” and reign with Christ—this is the First Resurrection.

Why is this called the “first resurrection”? My colleague, Charles Cooper, addressed this in a recent FAQ on our website. Here is his lucid answer:

The New Testament does not have a single term for the resurrection. John 5:28-29 indicates that there will be a resurrection to life and a resurrection to judgment. However, no indication is given that these two events will not happen at the same time. It is the apostle Paul who delineates stages or groups of the resurrection. He writes, “...by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming, then comes the end... (1 Cor. 15:21-24a).” It is clear that Paul saw the resurrection of Christ and “those who are Christ’s at His coming” as two distinct aspects of a single resurrection.

Paul designates the Lord’s resurrection as “first fruits.” This is important. The term *fruit* in the Greek is a singular term, but represents a plural number (what is called a collective noun). The concept of a “first portion” or “first fruit” is a familiar one. In the natural order, the first fruit of any crop would involve more than one, thus, the NASB’s translation first fruits. Interestingly, Matthew 27:52-53 states, “and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints



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who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.” These individuals should be included in the first fruits of the general resurrection.

The essential point that we can deduce from 1 Corinthians 15 is that the separation of one phase of the resurrection from another does not nullify the designation of a general resurrection. Therefore, the indication in Revelation 20 that a resurrection will occur in close proximity to the beginning of the millennium is consistent with the teachings of the apostle Paul. John limits this particular resurrection to those beheaded for refusing to actively participate in the worship of Antichrist. Killed for their faithfulness to Christ, the beheaded faithful are blessed because they have “a part (literally, to experience along with others [Louw/Nida, § 90.83]) in the first resurrection.” Only by spiritualizing this passage and ignoring the textual details can this group be made to represent all believers of all the ages. John clearly intends a smaller group, every single one of them, beheaded.

Consequently, we are able to posit that John’s resurrection to life and his first resurrection both refer to a general multi-phased resurrection of the righteous. It stretches from the resurrection of Christ and those raised with Him (Mat. 24:52-53), to those raised at the Rapture/Parousia (1 Cor. 15:23), to those beheaded martyrs raised in close proximity to the beginning of the millennium (Rev. 20:4-5). This is the first resurrection.

John does not designate the resurrection that will follow the millennium as the “second resurrection.” Probably the reason John does not do this is that the resurrection after

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the millennium will be distinctively different from the first. In Revelation 20:5, John records that “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed.” This by definition must involve the wicked that have not been raised to this point in biblical chronology. Revelation 20:11-15 describes the resurrection unto judgment, which John alluded to in John 5:38-39. This judgment is generally called the white throne judgment. John states that anyone whose name is not found in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire—the second death.

That the book of life would be consulted at this point highlights the fact that both believers and unbelievers will be present at this judgment. Isaiah 65:17-25 supports this conclusion. There, Isaiah indicates that those who enter the kingdom in physical bodies will live long lives during the temporal kingdom on earth. However, he also indicates that these people will die. While the resurrected saints will not die, those Jews and Gentiles who survive the sheep and goat judgment of Matthew 25:31, ff. will enter the kingdom, but will not live the entire 1000 years. Thus “the white throne judgment” will involve all the wicked dead of all the ages—with the exception of Antichrist, the false prophet (Rev 20:10), and the goats from the sheep and goat judgment of Matthew 25:41—and the righteous dead who died during the 1000 years.

The Reign of the Saints: On Earth or in Heaven?

Dr. Strimple argues that the saints will reign with Christ in heaven, but not on earth. He writes:

There is also reference here to thrones. Throughout Revelation, the throne of Christ and his people is always in heaven. In 3:21 this specific promise is given: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father in his throne.” Revelation 20:4 pictures the fulfillment of that blessed promise.”⁷

Dr. Strimple ignores some very clear statements in Scripture regarding the reign

of the saints with Christ. Matthew 19:28, and 2 Timothy 2:12 both speak of the reign of believers with Him. Revelation 5:10 explicitly states that those purchased by the blood of the Lamb, “will reign upon the earth.” Our reign with Christ does not consist entirely of sitting with Him in the heavenlies, but will be fulfilled by an earthly reign. Christ is not now ruling the nations “with a rod of iron” as the book of Revelation says that He will (Rev. 2:27, 12:5, 19:15). Are we experiencing perfect justice? Are we experiencing true peace? These will be fulfilled after His return. It is clear that this picture in Revelation 20:4, of the saints coming to life and reigning with Christ, speaks of a physical resurrection and an earthly reign.

A Thousand Years: Literal or Symbolic?

Concerning the meaning of the term “a thousand” as used in Revelation 20, Dr. Strimple writes:

“But what is the significance of the number “one thousand”? We may readily assume that the number is symbolic, for numbers are used symbolically throughout Revelation.”⁸

There are two problems with this statement by Dr. Strimple. First, he assumes that numbers, when used in the book of Revelation, are symbolic. The book of Revelation is full of numbers: four, seven, ten, twelve, forty-two, one thousand two hundred and sixty, one hundred and forty-four thousand, two hundred million, a thousand, etc. When Dr. Strimple says that these are symbolic and are not to be taken literally, he reveals his allegiance to a non-literal hermeneutical method. We cannot just assume that since the book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book that all references to numbers are symbolic. Unless context demands a figurative interpretation of the numbers in Revelation, we must take them literally. The second problem with Dr. Strimple’s statement is found in the phrase, “we may readily assume that the number (one thousand) is symbolic.” That is a big assumption. Even if there is evidence that some numbers in the book of Revelation are used symbolically, that does not warrant us

taking every number as symbolic without additional contextual clues.

Dr. Strimple makes the following bold statement about the premillennial position in his article:

“Not only does the New Testament not teach a future millennial kingdom, in what it teaches us about Christ’s second coming, the New Testament *rules out* an earthly millennial kingdom following Christ’s return... Because this is so, Scripture has to be forced into artificial interpretations in order to fit in a millennial period after Christ’s return...”⁹

Dr. Strimple accuses premillennialists with twisting Scripture to try and “fit in” a millennial reign of Christ after His return. After having examined Dr. Strimple’s exegesis of Revelation Chapter 20, we must ask the question, who is truly the one forcing Scripture into “artificial interpretations?” A face value interpretation of Revelation 20 (and the rest of the Old and New Testaments) leads clearly to a premillennial view of Christ’s return. When He comes again he will rescue the righteous, punish the wicked, and set up His one thousand-year reign upon earth. It all boils down to hermeneutics.

For those unaccustomed to the amillennial interpretative system, most would recoil at

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their interpretation of Revelation 20:4-6. Their exegesis is so blatantly poor. If their interpretation of Revelation 20 was the sole basis of their position, few outside the amillennial camp would give it the time of day. However, most Amillennialists base their position on three critical Scriptures. John 6:40 is primary. It states, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” Similarly John 12:48 states, “He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.” The final passage of the amillennial triumphant is John 5:27-29, which states,

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

At first glance, these verses would seem to settle the debate. The resurrection of the righteous and the wicked will occur “at the last day,” then a general judgment will occur followed by God’s reign in eternity. However, to maintain a literal face value interpretation of these passages from John’s gospel, Revelation 20:1-6 must be sacrificed. The reason this is necessary is because if one takes Revelation 20:1-6 at face value, the Amillennialist sees a contradiction. Thus, the problem is clear. Revelation 20:1-6 will not allow anything less than a face value interpretation. John’s statements in his gospel are clear—the resurrection occurs *on the last day*. We have a contradiction, but contradictions are not acceptable in our hermeneutic. Are we at a standstill? No! The problem is created by the assumptions one has regarding two phrases in John’s gospel. What does Jesus mean by “an hour is coming” and “on the last day?”

This is a clear case of reading the simple sense of an English translation without considering the author’s intended meaning. John 5:27-29 states the *fact* of the resurrection, but it gives few details concerning the *process* of the resurrection. Because of 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, we know that there are other details concerning the resurrection of the righteous that are not given in John 5:27-29. The critical phrase for our discussion in John 5:27-29 is, “an hour is coming...” Is this phrase to be taken literally or metaphorically? In the gospel of John, eight specific “hours” are identified.¹⁰ It does not take much investigation to reveal that when Jesus refers to “an hour,” He is not referring to a literal sixty-minute hour. One would get the correct sense by substituting the word *time* for *hour*. In John 2:4 Jesus states, “My hour (time) has not yet come.” In John 12:27 the Lord states, “What shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour (or time of intense suffering)’? But for this purpose I came to this hour (time of intense suffering).” These passages clearly indicate that “hour” does not refer to a literal sixty-minute hour. Rather, the Lord is referring to a specific time that will involve his death, burial and resurrection, which will occur over many days and hours. Therefore, John 5:27-29 does not limit the resurrection of both

the righteous and wicked to a single hour. Whether there is or is not a gap in time between the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked cannot be argued based on John 5:27-29. It merely states the fact of the resurrection, but nothing of the process of the resurrection.

John 6:40 and 12:48 are a bit more difficult to explain. It is very tempting to accept the simple sense of the English translation. The first question that screams to be answered is this: the last day of what? The apostle John uses this phrase six times. It is unique to the Gospel of John. It does not appear in any other gospel or epistle in the New Testament. Is the Lord referring to a literal twenty-four hour day or is He speaking metaphorically?

In the gospels, the issue is always the *fact* of a resurrection and not the *process* of the resurrection. This is clearly seen in John 11:24. Martha tells the Lord, “I know that he [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” *In the resurrection on the last day* affirms the fact of the resurrection, but says nothing about the details of the resurrection. This is affirmed in Matthew 22:28. There, the Sadducees use the same expression. They question Jesus about a woman who married six brothers. Their question concerns whose wife the woman will be “in the resurrection [at the last day]?” Matthew begins this story by telling the reader that the Sadducees “say there is no resurrection.”

In His answer to the Sadducees’ question, Jesus uses two very important phrases: (1) *in the resurrection* and (2) *the resurrection of the dead*. It is our contention that *in the resurrection* refers to the fact of the resurrection. Jesus makes two points in response to the Sadducees’ question. First, He says, “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Jesus makes no distinctions at this point. Is this true for the wicked as well as the righteous? Will the lifestyle of the wicked be the same for the righteous? Jesus does not say. The fact of the resurrection is the Lord’s point here. Resurrected people (whether righteous or wicked) have no need for marriage as such.

The Lord’s second point to the Sadducees concerns God’s relationship to the dead. He

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states, "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." Why does Jesus refer to *the resurrection of the dead*? There is no other kind of resurrection other than the dead. This is Jesus' point. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "He is not the God of the dead but of the living." Therefore, Jesus is here speaking of the resurrection of the righteous dead. He clearly distinguishes between the righteous dead and the wicked dead. This proves that Jesus is referring to the fact of the resurrection and not the process.

On/at the last day cannot refer to the last twenty-four hour day of this age. The Old Testament prophetically details that the Day of the Lord is the last day of this age (Zeph. 1:14-18). Acts 2:17 states, "And it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind..." This indicates that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost occurred during *the last days*. This also confirms that the phrase *the last days* does not refer to literal twenty-four hour days, but to a time involving possibly years, months and days. Similarly, *the last day* does not refer to a single twenty-four hour day, but to a period of time during which the res-

urrection of the righteous and the wicked will occur. Again, whether a gap in time occurs between the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked cannot be argued based on these texts.

Conclusion

As I stated earlier, the key to understanding the Millennium is one of hermeneutics. Our hermeneutic influences not only our understanding of the Millennium, but may affect our understanding of other doctrines in the word of God as well. Some of those who have abandoned a consistent literal hermeneutic have strayed into erroneous beliefs about salvation, such as Universalism (all people will eventually be saved) or false views of hell, such as Annihilationism (the wicked will cease to exist). Others have adopted incorrect views of God, such as non-trinitarianism (denying the doctrine of the trinity).

We must be very careful to come to Scripture with the belief that it is the infallible word of God and we must study carefully to find the truth of the Scripture. We must never come to Scripture with a system, and then interpret the Scripture so that it fits our system. It appears that this is what Dr. Strimple has done with the text of Revelation 20. Rather than saying we are

dispensationalists, Calvinists, Arminianists, premillennialists, or adherents of any other system, we must say we are "biblicists", that is, that the Bible is our sole authority. All of our systems must be subjected to the teaching of the Bible. All of our doctrines must come from the clear teaching of the word of God. As A.W. Tozer said, "When you find the truth of Scripture, that truth always stands in judgment of you; you never stand in judgment of it."

ENDNOTES

1. Darrell L. Bock, Ed. *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 120-121
2. *Ibid.*, p. 123
3. *Ibid.*, p. 126
4. *Ibid.*, p. 126
5. *Ibid.*, p. 117
6. *Ibid.*, p. 127
7. *Ibid.*, p. 125-126
8. *Ibid.*, p. 127
9. *Ibid.*, p. 100-101
10. John identifies 8 specific "hours" in his gospel: (1) an hour of death (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:29); (2) an hour of true worship (4:21, 23); (3) an hour of resurrection (5:25, 27, 28); (4) an hour of glorification (12:23; 17:1); (5) an hour of murder (16:2); (6) an hour of childbirth (16:21); (7) an hour of plain truth (16:25); (8) an hour of scattering (16:23).



With great regret, the staff of Sola Scriptura and The Sign Ministries reports to our larger ministry family the sad news that **Bill Lee-Warner** went to be with the Lord September 10, 2001.

After less than a year's struggle with an inoperative brain tumor, Bill closed his eyes to this world. In our age of longevity, when someone "falls asleep" at age 55 it is not uncommon to hear it said, "He was so young." In Bill's case, we agree. We are naturally saddened to see Bill "fall asleep." However, having watched a vibrant, energetic, and joyous co-laborer for the Lord slowly lose weight, hair, and fast wit, we gladly surrender him to eternal blissfulness.

Bill was a graduate of Oregon State University, received his M.Div. from Western Evangelical Seminary, and pastored churches for more than twenty years before serving Sola Scriptura and The Sign Ministries faithfully as a writer, lecturer, editor, and friend. He will be greatly missed.

On behalf of the Lee-Warner family, we at the ministry acknowledge your cards, letters, emails, prayers, and calls of concern over this past year.

We salute our brother - a soldier retired from active duty.

Whose Wrath Is It?

Prophecy Under Fire • Critics & Critiques

by Charles Cooper

Ronald E. Showers' critique of the prewrath view in a *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* warrants a line by line response. Not because he presents a compelling case for the rejection of the position, but because he so clearly demonstrates the typical "knee-jerk" response of pretribblers to those who attempt a biblical solution to the Rapture question other than pretribulationism. Case in point: under the heading *Problems with the View, Concerning the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord*, Showers writes:

1. The [prewrath] view requires a complete distinction between the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, insisting there is no overlapping of the two, that the Great Tribulation contains only human wrath, that the Day of the Lord contains the wrath of God, and that the Scriptures never associate Tribulation with the Day of the Lord's wrath. There are at least three difficulties with this distinction, (1) the Bible associates both the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1-2) and the Great Tribulation (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21) with the unparalleled time of trouble. This common association prompts the conclusion that the Great Tribulation cannot be totally separated from the Day of the Lord. (2) Certainly God's wrath is far worse than human wrath. In light of this, how can the Great Tribulation be the unparalleled time of trouble if it will contain only human wrath? (3) The Scriptures associate Tribulation with the Day of the Lord's wrath. The same Hebrew word that communicated the concept of Tribulation or trouble was used for both the Great Tribulation (Dan. 12:1) and the Day of the Lord

(Zeph. 1:15). Paul associates Tribulation with "the day of wrath and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5-9).

It should not escape the reader's attention that Showers fails to quote one explicit text, which would have settled this debate summarily. The reason Showers does not state the case otherwise is that there is no explicit scriptural basis for associating "the great tribulation" with "the Day of the Lord." Showers correctly states that the prewrath view differentiates between the wrath of God and the wrath of Satan/Antichrist. The Great Tribulation is the wrath of Satan. The Day of the Lord is the wrath of God. However, he errs with the statement, "[the prewrath view requires] that the Scriptures never associate Tribulation with the Day of the Lord's wrath." By leaving out the term "great", Showers misleads the reader. The prewrath view insists, "that the Scriptures never associate the *Great* Tribulation with the Day of the Lord's wrath." Now this is a true statement. There will certainly be tribulation for the wicked during the Day of the Lord. However, as Showers uses the term tribulation (meaning Great Tribulation), there is no biblical basis for teaching that Scripture indicates overlap between the Day of the Lord and the Great Tribulation, as we shall see below.

Showers' first difficulty with our distinction regarding two periods (the Day of the Lord versus the Great Tribulation) concerns Scriptures' association of these two events. Based on Joel 2:1-2, Daniel 12:1 and Matthew 24:21, Showers concludes that Scripture does associate the Day of the Lord and the Great Tribulation. As people who truly want to dialogue with pretribulationists regarding the timing of the Lord's return, we are often frustrated by pretribblers who will not look honestly at the Scriptures. Joel 2:1-2 states,

Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land (of Israel) tremble, for the Day of the Lord is near; surely it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. As the dawn is spread over the mountains, so there is a great and mighty people; there has never been *anything* like it, nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations.

Now without getting into the finer points of this text, let's deal with the obvious. First, this passage refers only to *Zion in the land* (of Israel) and not the whole world. Second, the Day of the Lord is near, but not there yet. Third, the Day of the Lord is not the immediate danger, but "a great and mighty people, [an army]" is approaching. Fourth and finally, in context, the unparalleledness that Joel is referring to concerns the approaching army and not the Day of the Lord. Therefore, Joel 2:1-2 has no bearing on the issue Showers is discussing. He takes this passage totally out of context. He assumes a connection simply because the Day of the Lord is mentioned. However, closer examination rules out that the unparalleledness refers to the Day of the Lord.

...There is no explicit scriptural base for associating "the great tribulation" with "the Day of the Lord."

Regarding Daniel 12:1 and the issue of unparalleledness, notice:

Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands *guard* over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.

Again, stating the obvious, this text addresses the nation of Israel. The people of Israel will face an unparalleled time of distress. After the unparalleled time of distress, the elect will be rescued. Matthew 24:21 states, “For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.” It is clear, in context, that the Lord is describing the same event depicted in Daniel 12:1. However, at no point and in no way does Daniel 12:1 and Matthew 24:21 indicate that the “time of distress” and “a great tribulation” refer to the wrath of God. In fact, the context states otherwise. In both cases, the elect are rescued from the “trouble” caused by the one who sets up “the abomination of desolation.”

Therefore, Showers has not established an overlap between the Day of the Lord and the Great Tribulation. There is no explicit or implied basis to do so. One text that has bearing on this discussion is Jeremiah 30:7, which states, “Alas! For that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s distress, but he will be saved from it.” This text does in fact state that a period of unparalleledness awaits Jacob (Judah and Israel). Contextually, this period is described as “that day.” *That day* is a semi-technical term used throughout the Old Testament to refer to the Day of the Lord. Therefore, Scripture explicitly states that the Day of the Lord will be a period of unparalleledness for Jacob (Judah and Israel). Scripture also states that the Great Tribulation (three and a half years) will be a period of unparalleledness for Israel. However, does it naturally follow that there can only be one period of unparalleledness? We shall see!

Showers’ second difficulty with our distinction regarding two periods (the Day of the Lord versus the Great Tribulation) concerns the distinction between the wrath of God and the wrath of Satan/Antichrist—particularly, the fact that the wrath of God is by definition worse than the wrath of Satan. Therefore, Showers asks, “How can the great Tribulation be the unparalleled time of trouble if it will contain only human wrath?” This question turns on a very subtle issue. Fundamentally, the issue is this: can there be more than one unparalleled time in human history. The answer is obviously “yes” for two reasons. First, the executor of the unparalleledness must be different. Secondly, the object of the unparalleled persecution must be different! This is the case here. Both Daniel 12:1 and Matthew 24:21 speak of an unparalleled time of trouble for unsaved Israel and God’s elect (elect Israel is put in protective custody, Rev 12:6, 14-16). Jeremiah 30:7 and Zephaniah 1:18 speak of a time of unparalleled trouble for Israel and the world by God. That’s the difference. Is this an explicit biblical distinction?

No one doubts that the eschatological Day of the Lord is a day of trouble for Israel (Jer 30:7) and the world (Zep 1:18). That’s explicit. That the Great Tribulation is three and a half years long is also explicit (Dan 9:27, 12:11). That the reign of “the prince of the people who is to come” is three and a half years long is explicit in Scripture (Dan 9:27, Rev 13:5). That *the man of lawlessness*—“the prince”—is empowered by Satan is explicit in Scripture (2 Thess 2:9, Rev 13:2). Revelation 12:12 indicates that Satan is thrown down to the earth by Michael and his angels “having great wrath.” The word *wrath* used here is the same word used to describe the wrath of God elsewhere in Scripture. Therefore, it is possible for Satan and God to pour out the same kind of wrath. The objects of the wrath is the difference.

Satan comes down to earth “having great wrath” because Michael, the archangel drives him from heaven (Rev 12:7, Dan 12:1). Now Revelation 12:12 indicates that after Satan is thrown down to the earth, “he has *only* a short time.” This time is further limited in Revelation 12:13-14 to *time, times and half a time*—three and a half years or forty-

two months. This can be none other than the same time as Antichrist (the prince of the people to come) rules on the earth, which is the same time as “a time of distress” (Dan 12:1) which equals “a great tribulation” (Matt 24:21). It should not escape the reader’s attention that at no point is God’s wrath indicated at any point during these activities. In fact Jesus explicitly states that the sign that indicates the imminent outbreak of the eschatological Day of the Lord will follow the great “tribulation of those days” (Matt 24:29). In the whole of Matthew 24:4-27, there is not one explicit or implied event attributed to the wrath of God. Only after the tribulation of those days does the wrath of God come. Therefore, the reason there can be two unparalleled times of trouble is because the objects are different. God punishes the wicked with His eschatological Day of the Lord’s wrath. Satan punishes the people of God with his eschatological Great Tribulation wrath. Sorry, Dr. Showers, you are wrong again.

Showers third and final difficulty with our two separate unparalleled times concerns the fact that “Scriptures associate Tribulation with the Day of the Lord’s wrath,” which is true. This however, is not the question. The question is this: Does Scripture associate the eschatological Day of the Lord with the Great Tribulation? The answer is an emphatic “no!” Now Daniel 12:1 does use the same word for *trouble* that is used in Zephaniah 1:15. However, Zephaniah 1:15 makes clear that God is causing the trouble, but Daniel 12:1 does not in any shape, form, or fashion say God causes the trouble to Israel. This is an unwarranted assumption on Showers’ part.

Equally, the apostle Paul does state in Romans 2:5-9 the following:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to His deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambi-

BY CHARLES COOPER

tious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

However, it is yet to be proven that Paul is describing the period known as the Great Tribulation (three and a half years) by Satan/Antichrist of God's people. It is clear that Paul is describing a future judgment of Jews and Gentiles by God. Paul describes this judgment as a part of "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." When does this judgment occur? *The day of wrath* puts this time frame clearly

within the Day of the Lord. However, we have demonstrated above that the "day of God's wrath" and the time of Satan/Antichrist's wrath are not the same and there is no explicit or implied scriptural basis to claim otherwise.

Meet a Berean • Pastor Eric VanBuskirk

As senior pastor of Church Triumphant, Pastor Eric VanBuskirk has weathered the storms of many struggles that twenty-four years in a single pastorate can bring. One of those struggles is his journey to adopting the prewrath position as his view on the timing of the Lord's return. A true Berean, let's read his testimony. He writes:

In the mid-1970s as a relatively new Christian, I requested and was granted permission by my pastor to show the popular new release, *Thief in the Night*. The movie featured the then growing and fashionable doctrine of the pretribulation Rapture. Naturally, the film portrayed the removal of Christians from the earth prior to the coming a great tribulation the Bible warns of, and the commencement of Antichrist's regime. As with all movies, which advance this doctrinal position, past and present, the rapturing away of the Christian church signifies the time when the world will become consigned to utter chaos. "Would be" Christians are left with the decision to wholly reject Christ or suffer martyrdom. Thus, the church is portrayed as removed, entirely unscathed by the trouble that is coming to this earth—current Christian persecution, martyrdom and global distress excluded, of course.

The movie, much like the books promulgating the pretribulation Rapture, was relatively entertaining and creative for the times, and thought provoking in many aspects. Nonetheless, while the film could not be accused of a dull evangelistic thrust, it could be heavily criticized based on flawed biblical hermeneutics. Although I could not clearly articulate a Scriptural argument against this production at the time, I was able to discern, based upon my limited understanding of

eschatology, that something was inherently wrong with it.

It wasn't until the early 1980s, and then as an ordained minister that members of my own congregation would request that I teach on the subject of eschatology. The challenge was readily accepted and materials were garnered from every corner of the earth. My desk was piled high with books by those who, at the time, were considered to be experts on the topic, i.e., Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye, J. Vernon McGee, Jack Van Impe, just to mention a few. Added to these materials were numerous other commentaries and theological works compiled by contemporaneous and time-honored authors and, finally, the ultimate source of all truth, the Bible. Obviously, the Bible would become the filter through which the various exegeses and eschatological apologies would be examined.

It was during this research that I realized how critically important it becomes for one to thoroughly examine Scriptural truth based upon Scriptural texts, in context, before venturing into the arena of popular and widely accepted teachings. At one point, it seemed my studies were taking me farther away from a plausible biblical interpretation into that of mass confusion. That is, until I turned to *sola scriptura*.

Eventually meticulous *contextual* examination of Scripture deepened my conviction that the pretribulation Rapture position was built upon a shifting foundation of sand. It became quite clear to me that Christian apologist's, regardless of how intellectually astute, do not necessarily always produce sound theology. Clearly apparent was the fact that many teachers on end times were merely parroting what they had been taught



within their circles of influence—primarily, C.I. Scofield's notes.

It should also be understood that I arrived at these conclusions by merely examining each author's interpretation of Scripture against the Scriptures themselves. Moreover, I had no bias or preconceived theology regarding the topic in my initial approach to the study. I would later learn that many other students came to the same conclusions as myself using the same method. *The Sign* by Robert Van Kampen is one such example. His book was a breath of fresh spiritual air, especially in light of the fact that he had the courage to admit he had only been teaching what he had been taught not what he had studied. Amazing things do happen when we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into an understanding of that which He inspired.

My elementary examination of the pretribulation Rapture position found the doctrine to be filled with textual and semantic hyperbole which, for the casual observer, places suppositional interpretation of scripture [allegorical deduction] on equal par with literal face value interpretation. A classic example of this is found in Revelation 3:10 in which Jesus speaking to the "faithful" church of Philadelphia said,

"Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who are on the earth."

Proponents of the pretribulation Rapture are notorious for drawing upon this Scripture to infer

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Meet a Berean • continued from inside

that all Christians will escape the hour of trial that is to come upon the earth. Compare this passage to Revelation 2:10 in which Christ is speaking to the “faithful” church in Smyrna:

“Do not fear those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the Devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Here we have, in *context*, two “faithful” churches coexistent with each other yet receiving what appears to be a completely divergent message. Is God then to be considered partial to the church at Philadelphia and impartial toward Smyrna? Alternatively, have scholars attempting to find Scriptural basis

for “their doctrine” blindly rejected one passage while readily accepting only that that applies to their doctrinal position? I’m not a “brain surgeon”, but such methods represent poor hermeneutics by any standard. If Rev. 3:10 pertains to the church of the last days, how then can Rev. 2:10 be any less significant to the same?

An issue like this drove me away from a pretrib view to what I later would find entitled a prewrath Rapture. There was also the matter of a simplistic “common sense” approach to scriptural interpretation. First of all, the Bible clearly teaches that the sufferings of Christ are common to the Christian in every generation. The great tribulation is no exception, for it represents a period when iniquity will abound and

man’s hatred for God and His righteous seed will become intensified. “Great Tribulation” simply means more trouble than previously experienced, much like the labor pains a woman undergoes before giving birth to a child. While such conditions have existed throughout history, this period will hasten the climax of the ages, dwarfing all that, which has occurred in previous generations. Instead of regional and intermittent persecution, such despotism will become universal in scope. Yet, at the same time, this does not mean that all will suffer martyrdom. If that were the case, who are the elect Jesus is coming after? It remains, however, that more people have been martyred for their faith in Christ in this generation than in all previous generations.

A look at history and a look around, coupled with some common sense would go along way in helping us to understand how easily the inculturation of Western thought has corrupted our understanding of simple biblical truth. As critical as this may sound, it needs to be said and without apology. Nowhere does the Bible teach or remotely imply an escapist theology. Why should we consider ourselves above those who have suffered before us and that are contemporary with us? It appears elitist to say the least. The only thing Christians are promised in connection to “final things” is deliverance from the wrath of God that is to come on an unbelieving and rebellious world.

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