

Exegeting the Epistles:

**EASY?** To some extent yes. However, most of our “problem” passages come out of the epistles. Consider 1 Corinthians: 7:27 unmarried? “Do not look for a wife...11 uncovered heads...13 “tongues of angels”...14 tongues...14:34 “women should remain silent”...15:29 “baptised for the dead?”

**Occasional Documents:** Despite this variety of kinds, however, they are all what are technically called occasional documents (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific occasion), and they are all from the first century. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors—that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century—that can make their interpretation difficult at times.

- We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were—or even if there was a problem
- Listening to one of the a phone conversation...can be dangerous.
- Task Theology: Theology being written for or brought to bear on the task at hand. None of the letters, Romans included, is a systematic statement of Paul’s theology.

### **Historical Context:**

What is the occasion for the writing, who is writing to whom?

What situation is being addressed?

Are there latent problems, issues, or threats evident in the text.

*Bible Dictionary* or introductory material here are VERY HELPFUL: The New Bible Dictionary 3rd Edition (Wood, Marshall, Howard)...Holman, Baker, Eerdmans, Tyndale -Many study bibles will provide a short description...helpful to give some basic framework for the historical background.

-NT Survey Book has similar very helpful information.

-The letters themselves will sometimes hold clues too! READ IN ONE SITTING! Meant to be read that way. No personal copy back then. Sit and listen. HEAR. Forced to grab hold of the big idea.

-Notes to make

Recipients: Jews, Greeks, Slaves, Problems?, Attitudes?

Writer: Paul, Peter, etc...Tone? Attitude?

Specific Hints at the occasion?

- 1 Corinthians 1:11 “My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.”
- 5:1 “It is actually reported that there is...”
- 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12 “now about” answering questions

Remember, you are searching to answer these questions:

What is the occasion for the writing, who is writing to whom?

What situation is being addressed?

### **Literary Context: Learn to think contextually (as before)**

Read through entire text in a single sitting and strive to understand the flow of thought, the background and occasion of the writing

Issues and concerns/major themes or conflicts

Historical Context: (as above)

Look for theologically loaded ideas

References to OT passages or situations

Names of cities, people or other referents that are clues to meaning

Any natural or logical divisions of thought  
Ask 'who is writing to whom?'  
Develop a working outline

**Think Paragraphs; trace the flow of the argument as it pertains to;**

- a. Paragraphs
- b. Sections
- c. Letters
- d. the other letters if available
- e. the body of NT thought in general (Principle of Harmony)
- f. known issues in the churches, (judaizing and Gnostic heresies etc)
- g. the rest of Scripture

**Problems Passages**

**Hermeneutics: Cultural Relativity:**

The big issue among Christians committed to Scripture as God's Word has to do with the problems of cultural relativity—what is cultural and therefore belongs to the first century alone and what transcends culture and is thus a Word for all seasons.

On the extreme ends we all naturally do a great job of distinguishing Cultural vs Eternal application...Its the ones in between that are difficult.

Biggest problem? Our Lack of Consistency

**Hermeneutics in the Epistles: Rules**

Goal: Find out what is Gods word for us that leads us to obedience

**Rule #1:** A passage cannot mean what it never could have meant in its original context and to its original audience

Our common practice of 'hermeneutics';

Read verse by verse and look for cool things

Do a word study, pull things from all over scripture that 'have the same word' and string them together

Build a sermon outline, and then find supporting texts to make our points, adding 'disciples' 'fired up' 'commitment' and 'lets be that way' as needed for emphases

Inconsistency is the enemy of hermeneutics here

*Apply 'common sense' (different for everyone) and dictated by culture*

Simple example: 2 Tim 2:3 Do this; 2 Tim 4:13 do this; 1 Tim 5:23, don't do that; Why??

On what basis do we make the distinction and yet we insist that all Christians "Preach the Word" and apply 2 Tim 4, which is clearly a text written to instruct an evangelist to uphold his office and responsibilities. Not saying we are wrong, but how it that 'for us' and 'a little wine' is 'not for us'

Phil 6 "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

When we say this versus when Paul wrote this?

**Rule #2;** When we share comparable situations as those in Scripture, Gods word to us is the same as Gods word to them.

Some things are always true, moral laws (sin lists), non-retaliation, and immorality etc, the deadliness of sin.....

### **Our Challenges:**

**Extended App:** 1 Cor 4:10-13 Body-Church to Body-Person? Need to be careful because we discard exegesis when making big jumps on extending application.

-When there are comparable situations and comparable particulars (that is, the particulars in the text are similar to ours), God's Word to us in such texts should be limited to its original intent.

### **The issue of non-compatible particulars:**

Idol food

Pagan Ritual

The 'weak and strong' passages 1 Cor 8-10, Romans 14 give us some guidance here in application, well when we are dealing with what 'could happen'

Look for a clear principle

Apply only in genuinely comparable situations, where the same things are 'at stake' (Usually if it is a really bad situation, there are clear mandates for and against it, but we need to do the hard work and understand the principles to bring forward. This builds people's faith in the word of God and it's applicability)

Differential between 'central' and 'peripheral', we call them 'opinion matters' or non 'salvation issues'. Epistles give direction on this,

E.g. Food, special days, drink, remaining un-married, instrumental music in church...etc  
Matters like this are normally cultural, rather than moral

Challenge for us when we do not agree to the designation, i.e. baptism of pouring vs. dipping, age of kids to study bible, defining 'meeting of the body'...there are principles in scripture about all these things, but very few explicit demands.

Sin Lists are always wrong; Rom 1, 1 Cor 5, 6:9-10, Gal 5, 2 Tim 3...

### **Issues of Cultural Relativity:**

Most make these distinctions using enlightened common sense but are not consistent  
There is no divinely ordained culture, and so we must apply guidelines and operate within those that seem to be...

Normative: What is normal practice for all xtians at all time

Begin with central universal issues: Falseness of man, Redemption, the work of the Spirit...

Take note of those areas where the NT gives us a uniform and consistent witness

Note where it reflect differences of practice

Distinguish between principles and specifics

### **Approaches to Cultural Relativity**

Case Study: 1 Timothy 2:8-15

Three Approaches:

**Literalism (enthroning both):** invest all scripture with the same normative authority which they attribute to the truth it expresses. Because it belongs to the Word of God, they feel unable to tamper with it in any way. So they adopt a rigid literalism, and regard other approaches as evasions of 'what the Bible plainly teaches'.

**Liberalism (dismissing both):** Far from enthroning both, they *dismiss* both. Instead of upgrading the cultural expression to the level of eternal truth, they downgrade the eternal truth to the level of its cultural expression. Instead of investing both with divine authority, authority is denied to both. Since God's Word is clothed in such ancient cultural dress, they argue, although it may have spoken to people long ago, it is now completely out of date and irrelevant.

**Cultural transposition:** For this we have to discern in Scripture between God's essential revelation (which is changeless) and its cultural expression (which is changeable). Then we are in a position to preserve the former as permanent and universal, and transpose the latter into contemporary cultural terms. The discernment we need, then, is not between texts (some normative, others disposable), but within each text (the eternal substance and the cultural expression).

Dr Fee's book *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (1991), takes 1 Timothy 2:8–15 as a test case. Fee argues that, because of the ad hoc, historically particular character of Paul's teaching here, he did not intend it 'as a rule in all churches at all times'. Gordon Fee distinguishes, in effect, between different categories of New Testament teaching. Some of it is intended by its author to be of general, eternal and universal application, while other parts are meant only to be particular, transient and local. Then, once we know which is which, we must accept the former, but are free to reject the latter.

In my view, the better and right way is to distinguish between two levels of New Testament teaching, one being the profound, fundamental word of God, and the other its surface cultural expression. Then the former must be accepted as normative, while the latter is not to be rejected on the ground of its 'cultural relativity', but rather to be transposed into a contemporary cultural form. The discernment we need, then, is not between texts (some normative, others disposable), but within each text (the eternal substance and the cultural expression). -John Stott

### **Cultural Caution**

"...some evangelical scholars now apologize for aspects of biblical ethics that are out of tune with the culture of our times, and theorize that apostolic teaching shared the cultural outlook of the past at specific points and must now be superseded by a supposedly superior view more compatible with contemporary insights."

-Henry, C. F. H. (1999). *Vol. 4: God, revelation, and authority* (55). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

### **Task theology vs. Systematic theology**

The occasional nature of the documents leads to the 'task' nature of the theology, theological principles with a task and goal in mind, dealing with an issue, not a comprehensive treatment of a doctrine, per se.

We have fragmented positions on Paul's issues. Must be careful not to press the details as we do not have his systematic theology.

Resurrection, grace, his conversion (we have more detailed explanation, and so can be a bit more dogmatic. Romans is the closest thing we have

The other issue is that we are asking our questions of the text, not theirs. The reasons for the text are their issues; some issues are not addressed in scripture because they never came up in scripture.

Marriage to a gentile, for example, Jesus had no occasion to speak to this issue as it was simply not an option in the culture in which he spoke, But Paul did ("I not the Lord...)

Issues of gender and slavery, again, 'only viable cultural option' so we should not expect to see a 'theology of women at work' or a theology of infant baptism' or a 'theology of abortion' or any "modern issues" for these we must develop a systematic theology on the basis of what the entire bible tells us about the nature of God and relationships and weave together a consistent dogma about it. This is true of dating/marrying believers, for example.

Plan of salvation, we have multiple examples of 'how' people were saved, but there are differences in the actual specifics. Some things do seem to be critical, and for these we can be more dogmatic, other things are simply not conclusive.

We must apply a biblical worldview, but beware proof-texting Paul's 'opinion' about virgins and being married 1Cor 7:10-12 ff

### **Analogy of Scripture: The Hermeneutic Spiral-Osborne**

In contrast to the "rule of faith" of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther propounded the "analogy of faith". He opposed the centrality of church tradition and believed that Scripture alone should determine dogma. On the basis of the unity and clarity of Scripture, he proposed that the basic doctrines must cohere with and cannot contradict the holistic teaching of scripture. However, for Luther the system still had a certain predominance. Calvin took the final step, suggesting the principle of "analogy of scripture" as an alternative.

Basically, the idea that Scripture must interpret Scripture; the scope and significance of one passage is to be brought out by relating it to others. An example of this (Mt 19) when Jesus used Gn. 2:24 to show that Moses' law (Deut 24) of divorce was no more than a temporary concession to human hard-heartedness.

Understand what is obscure by what is plain, and never arrive at "interpretations" that contradict interpretations.

Doctrines should not be built on a single passage but rather should summarize all that scripture says on that topic. If there are no clarifying passages (baptism for the dead in 1 Cor 15:29) we must be careful about seeing a statement of dogma.

Doctrinal statements should be made on the basis of all the texts that speak to the issue rather than on the basis of proof-texts or "favourite" passages. Such an approach results in a "canon within a canon", a phenomenon in which certain passages are subjectively favoured over others because they fit a system that is imposed on scripture rather than drawn from it. That is a dangerous situation, for it assumes that one's preconceived ideas are more important than the text.

### **The Progress of Revelation:**

Simply put, progressive revelation recognises that God reveals himself—his nature as well as his word, plans, and purposes—over time. He did not reveal everything about himself and what he was doing in the world all at once; instead he graciously revealed more and more as time went on. Later revelation serves to complement and supplement what has come before.

*Example: Isaiah 7:14.* This verse has seen a great deal of discussion in the history of interpretation. The text of the verse from the NET Bible is as follows:

Look, this young woman is about to conceive and will give birth to a son. You, young woman, will name him Immanuel.

The most visible issue surrounding this verse is the translation of the Hebrew word עַלְמָה (*'almah*). The NET Bible uses the phrase “young woman,” while many translations use the word “virgin.” The arguments center upon two main points: the actual meaning of the term as it is used in Hebrew, and the use of this verse in the New Testament. There is a great deal of debate about the actual meaning of the Hebrew word. However, in the New Testament when this verse is cited in Matthew 1:23 the Greek word παρθένος (*parthenos*) is used, and this word can mean nothing but “virgin.” Therefore, many people see Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy about the virgin birth with Matthew 1:23 serving as a “divine commentary” on the Isaiah passage which establishes its meaning. The interplay of these issues makes a resolution quite complex. It is the opinion of the translators and editors that the Hebrew word used in Isaiah 7:14 means “young woman” and actually carries no connotations of sexual experience, so the grammatical context of the verse in the Old Testament is in our opinion fairly straightforward. Neither does the historical context of Isaiah 7:14 point to any connection with the birth of the Messiah: in its original historical context, this verse was pointing to a sign for King Ahaz that the alliance between Syria and Israel which was threatening the land of Judah would come to nothing. The theological context of Isaiah 7:14 is also limited: it is a presentation of God’s divine power to show himself strong on behalf of his people. The role or birth of the Messiah does not come into view here. So the historical and theological contexts of the verse support the grammatical: the word עַלְמָה (*'almah*) means “young woman” and should be translated as such. Within the book of Isaiah itself, however, the author begins to develop the theological context of this verse, and this provides a connection to the use of the passage in Matthew. In Isaiah 8:9–10 the prophet delivers an announcement of future victory over Israel’s enemies; the special child Immanuel, alluded to in the last line of v. 10, is a guarantee that the covenant promises of God will result in future greatness. The child mentioned in Isaiah 7:14 is a pledge of God’s presence during the time of Ahaz, but he also is a promise of God’s presence in the future when he gives his people victory over all their enemies. This theological development progresses even further when another child is promised in Isaiah 9:6–7 who will be a perfect ruler over Israel, manifesting God’s presence perfectly and ultimately among his people. The New Testament author draws from this development and uses the original passage in Isaiah to make the connection between the child originally promised and the child who would be the ultimate fulfillment of that initial promise. The use of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 draws upon the theological development present in the book of Isaiah, but it does not change the meaning of Isaiah 7:14 in its original context. (Biblical Studies Press. (2006). *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible*. Biblical Studies Press.)

### **The Simplicity & Clarity of Scripture-The Hermeneutical Spiral-Grant Osborne**

After everything we’ve covered so far maybe your heart is crying out, “Can I actually study it and understand what it means to me?!?” Over the centuries the “church” has wrestled with the simplicity and clarity of scripture. At times it has removed scriptures from the average person...In all this its easy to lose sight of the fact that the bible is easy to understand.

The clarity of Scripture simply means that the Bible is clear and understandable. This, of course, includes the reality that comprehension relies upon an ability to understand oral communication and or written discourse as well as other factors such as spiritual maturity and affirmation within the context of the believing community (the church). Most importantly, the clarity of Scripture is dependent upon regeneration as monergistically

accomplished in the heart of the believer. That is, Christians have been born again and possess the Holy Spirit within them providing illumination as they read and study the Scripture. Non-Christians have no such ministry of the Spirit.

We learn from the Bible that it is itself a “lamp to our feet”, which speaks to its clarity, for the Scriptures themselves provide light and need no external assistance. Scripture also is affirmed (Psalm 19) as a tool of God making wise the simple. For the simple to become wise, the Scripture must be understandable. Another example of the simplicity and clarity of Scripture is that of 2 Peter 2:1-3 where Peter describes his audience as newborn babies. The Scriptures are clear enough for new believers to understand and apply the teaching of the Bible within the context and discipleship of the local church.

### **The Unity and Diversity of Scripture-The Hermeneutic Spiral-Osborne**

A failure to grasp the balance between these two interdependent aspects has caused both evangelicals (stressing the unity) and non evangelicals (stressing the diversity) to misread the Scriptures. Diversity is demanded by the analogical cast of Biblical language. Since few books in Scripture were addressed to similar situations, there is great variety in wording and emphasis. moreover, the doctrine of inspiration itself demands that we recognize the personalities of the sacred authors behind their works. Each writer expressed himself in different ways with different emphases and quite different figures of speech. For example, John used “new birth” language to explain regeneration, Paul used the image of adoption. Paul emphasized faith--James works. There are not contradictory but diverse emphases of individual writers.

The issue is whether the differences are irreconcilable or whether a deeper unity underlies the diverse expressions of the various traditions in Israel and the early church. Yet we dare not overstate the unity of Scripture, so as to remove James’s or Paul’s individual emphases. Such can lead to a misuse of parallels, so that one author is interpreted on the basis of another, resulting in an erroneous interpretation. Nevertheless, behind the different expressions is a critical unity. The concept of diversity is the backbone of Biblical theology, which I believe is the necessary link between exegesis and systematic theology (centering on the unity). While it is true that the finite human can never produce a final “system” of biblical truth, it is not true that one can never “systematize” biblical truth. The key is to allow the system to emerge from the text via biblical theology, to seek Biblical categories that summarize the unity behind the diverse expressions of Scripture.

## Acts

The question of Luke's intent is at once the most important and the most difficult. It is the most important because it is crucial to our hermeneutics. If it can be demonstrated that Luke's intent in Acts was to lay down a pattern for the church at all times, then that pattern surely becomes normative,

Acts has frequently been divided on the basis of Luke's interest in Peter (chs. 1– 12) and Paul (chs. 13– 28), or in the geographical expansion of the gospel suggested in 1: 8 (chs. 1– 7, Jerusalem; 8– 10, Samaria and Judea; 11– 28, to the ends of the earth). As you read, notice the brief summary statements in 6: 7; 9: 31; 12: 24; 16: 4; and 19: 20.

In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections or panels that give the narrative a continual forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem, with Peter as its leading figure, toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure,

notice the brief summary statements in 6: 7; 9: 31; 12: 24; 16: 4; and 19: 20.

1. The key to understanding Acts seems to be in Luke's interest in this movement of the gospel, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon.

Luke's interest also does not seem to be in standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity.

Acts has certain elements present in all conversions for example

There is a pattern of unity, generous giving, extreme evangelistic fervor and movement across boundaries

There is a non sectarian movement across gender, race and political or other human constraints

Baptism, almost always 'immediate' and accompanied by the Holy Spirit, especially with apostles present

Key Doctrines are supported other places in Scripture and in Paul's personal account of his experience of salvation for example

Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative (i.e. obligatory) way— unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.

Purposeful Pattern? Then it just isn't about history its about laying down a pattern for the church at all times...Normative: what God requires of all Christians under any conditions.

Seldom do we think of these narratives as serving as patterns for Christian behavior or church life. Even in the case of those few we do treat this way—for example, putting out a fleece to find God's will—we never do exactly what they did. Read more at location 1955 • Delete this highlight



As you read the first eleven chapters, for example, it is difficult to imagine that what Luke has included there has in fact covered a time span of ten to fifteen years.

Exegesis of Acts, therefore, includes not only the purely historical questions like “what happened?” but also the theological ones such as “what was Luke’s purpose in selecting and shaping the material in this way?”

The question of Luke’s intent is at once the most important and the most difficult. It is the most important because it is crucial to our hermeneutics. If it can be demonstrated that Luke’s intent in Acts was to lay down a pattern for the church at all times, then that pattern surely becomes normative, that is, it is what God requires of all Christians under any conditions. But if his intent is something else, then we need to ask the hermeneutical questions in a different way. To find Luke’s intent, however, can be difficult, partly because we do not know who Theophilus was or why Luke would have written to him, and partly because Luke seems to have so many different interests.

this is much like thinking paragraphs when exegeting epistles. But in this case it moves beyond paragraphs to whole narratives and sections of the book. Our exegetical interest, therefore, is both in what and why. As we have already learned, one must begin with what before asking why.

Acts has frequently been divided on the basis of Luke’s interest in Peter (chs. 1–12) and Paul (chs. 13–28), or in the geographical expansion of the gospel suggested in 1:8 (chs. 1–7, Jerusalem; 8–10, Samaria and Judea; 11–28, to the ends of the earth). Although both of these divisions are recognizable in terms of actual content, there is another clue, given by Luke himself, that seems to tie everything together much better. As you read, notice the brief summary statements in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:4; and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections or panels that give the narrative a continual forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem, with Peter as its leading figure, toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal. Once Paul reaches Rome, where he once again turns to the Gentiles because they will listen (28:28), the narrative comes to an end.

much of Acts is intended by Luke to serve as a model. But the model is not so much in the specifics as in the overall picture.

What is the point of this narrative or speech? How does it function in Luke’s total narrative? Why has he included it here?

How do the individual narratives in Acts, or any other biblical narrative for that matter, function as precedents for the later church, or do they? That is, does the book of Acts have a Word that not only describes the primitive church but speaks as a norm to the church at all times? If there is such a Word, how does one discover it or set up principles to aid in hearing it? If not, then what do we do with the concept of precedent? In short, just exactly what role does historical precedent play in Christian doctrine or in the understanding of Christian experience?

It must be noted at the outset that almost all biblical Christians tend to treat precedent as normative authority to some degree or another. But it is seldom done with consistency. On

the one hand, people tend to follow some narratives as establishing obligatory patterns while neglecting others; on the other hand, they sometimes tend to make one pattern mandatory when there is a complexity of patterns in Acts itself.

The crucial hermeneutical question here is whether biblical narratives that describe what happened in the early church also function as norms intended to delineate what must happen in the ongoing church.

Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative (i.e. obligatory) way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.

Problems with this arise when people move to the area of biblical history. Is something taught simply because it is recorded—even when it is recorded in what appears to be a favorable way?

God's Word is to be found in the intent of the Scripture.

**On the basis of this discussion the following principles emerge with regard to the hermeneutics of historical narrative:**

1. The Word of God in Acts that may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative was intended to teach.
2. What is incidental to the primary intent of the narrative may indeed reflect an inspired author's understanding of things, but it does not have the same teaching value as what the narrative was intended to teach. This does not negate what is incidental or imply that it has no word for us. What it does suggest is that what is incidental must not become primary, although it may always serve as additional support to what is unequivocally taught elsewhere.
3. Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to intent. That is, if it can be shown that the purpose of a given narrative is to establish precedent, then such precedent should be regarded as normative. For example, if it were to be demonstrated on exegetical grounds that Luke's intent in Acts 6:1–7 was to give the church a precedent for selecting its leaders, then such a selection process should be followed by later Christians. But if the establishing of precedent was not the intent of the narrative, then its value as a precedent for later Christians should be treated according to the specific principles suggested in our next section. The problem with all of this, of course, is that it tends to leave us with little that is normative for those broad areas of concern—Christian experience and Christian practice.

## **Revelation**

Twice, the angel tells John that the vision is of events which "will soon take place." (for example Revelation 1:1). I think that Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are quite straightforward. Chapters 4-19 are clearly more difficult. This is apocalyptic language. In this kind of biblical literature one must take what is said to be symbolic unless the context dictates otherwise. The visions, with all the creatures, and numbers and so forth are admittedly difficult to understand, but they are about the attacks on the church by the Roman persecutors and the fact that God is in control and that victory is God's. Rome will not prevail. Judgment will come on the enemies of God's people. There is way too much there, and I do not think you asked me to interpret all the visions, but just to give you a feeling, Revelation 17 is definitely about judgment on the Roman empire and the persecutors of the church. The fifth king is the persecutor Nero, while the eighth king is Domitian—also a persecutor of the church. The theme of the book is that God is in control and his children may be persecuted but they will be victorious.

the preterist view, that it describes in veiled language events of John's own time, and nothing more; the futurist, that it is largely a prophecy of events still to come;

the historicist, that it is a chart of the whole of history from Christ's first coming to his second, and beyond; and

the idealist, that between messages for the first century and prophecies of the far future it deals chiefly with principles which are always valid in Christian experience. Opinions also divide over the particular matter of the 'millennium', the thousand-year period described in chapter 20; premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism<sup>1</sup>

## **Millennium Mess**

Those who endeavor to take Revelation literally insist on a thousand-year reign, or "millennium" (Revelation 20). The dispute is about the position of Jesus' second coming. Some say it will come after the millennium (the post-millennialists). Others, the majority in fact, put the second coming before the millennial rule (the pre-millennialists). Millennialists believe that the kingdom of God will be wrought on earth through a slow and gradual process, while amillennialists deny that the numerical picture in Revelation 20 should be taken literally in the first place. Once again, the most popular interpretation is the Premillennial one.

## **Premillennialism**

Premillennialism is rooted in the belief that the truth of Revelation is basically a literal truth; and that in two respects. First, *description* is to be taken at its face value. This does not necessarily mean a crass literalism which would involve, for instance, imagining Satan to be physically bound (spirit being though he is) with an actual metal chain. But it may very well mean a literal thousand years; and it certainly does mean a binding of Satan and a reign of the saints such that his helplessness will be unmistakable, and their authority will be manifest, in a way which has never yet been known.

Secondly, *sequence* is to be taken as it stands. In the order of history, the binding of Satan will follow the parousia, because in the order of the book chapter 20 follows chapter 19. It is agreed that this chapter is the only place in Scripture where the idea of a millennium following the parousia seems to be clearly taught. But taking its order seriously means that this sequence of events, though unique, has just as much authority as the outline given, for example, in Matthew 24; therefore it is to be regarded not as a mere underlining of

something already contained in our Lord's teaching in that place, but as the addition to it of extra truth which was there omitted. The teaching of the passage is 'extensive', not intensive.

The interpretation which grows from these roots is, in summary, as follows. Christ's return in power and glory will deprive Satan of all his power, raise the Christian dead, and set up the kingdom of the saints on earth. After a thousand years, Satan will re-emerge from his imprisonment, attempt once more to destroy the saints, fail, and be destroyed himself. Then will come the resurrection of the rest of the dead, the judgment of the great white throne, the final destruction of the wicked, and the making of a new heaven and earth. Events of the fourth group mentioned above (those found in other parts of the New Testament—the appearing of Antichrist, the tribulation, the rapture, and so forth) are usually held to have taken place before Christ's coming in victory, and that in turn comes before (*pre-*) the millennium: hence the name of this interpretation.

Because of its literal approach, premillennialism is open to two kinds of danger. Taking the descriptions of Revelation too naively has led in the past to the excesses of what is known as 'chiliasm', an expectation of a thoroughly materialistic 'rule of the saints' which appeals to the worst instincts of men. Attempts to take its sequence too pedantically, on the other hand, and to build them into a detailed time chart, can lead to excess of another kind: prolonged debate as to whether the tribulation precedes or follows the rapture, detailed calculations of the 'times of the Gentiles' or the length of the 'little season', a futurist view of the book which makes its practical contribution to Christian living little more than a vicarious thrill, or explorations of the wilder reaches of dispensationalism. Where chiliasm promised to feed the hunger of the belly, such ingenuities feed the vanity of the mind. But the positive value of present-day premillennialism is that it has refused to treat Revelation as a book shackled either to the personal mysticism of John or to the remote historical circumstances of the first century. It may overreact against the older liberal notions which did this, and thereby kept the book's immediate challenge at arm's length; but it does at least take Revelation seriously as a message from God for our own time, and the time to come.

### *c. Amillennialism*

The view of the amillennialist arises from a different understanding of the sense in which Revelation is 'true'. He holds that neither descriptions nor sequences can be taken at their face value. So much description in the book is (indeed is actually stated to be) symbolic rather than literal, that he presumes this to be John's general rule, and non-metaphorical language to be the exception. The chain and the pit are not literal; probably, then, neither are the thousand years. He still has to decide, of course, which is symbol and which is not, and then how the symbols are to be explained. If he is wise, he will do so not by a subjective judgment but by a comparison with the rest of Scripture.

This, moreover, is the only way he can interpret the sequences of the book. The premillennialist believes in an actual millennium, which, though mentioned nowhere else, nevertheless stands in its own right on the basis of Revelation 20, and is therefore to be built on to the existing fabric of prophecy. The amillennialist, not believing this, has to find some other way of fitting in the thousand years, and (again if he is wise) will try to do so in terms of the rest of Scripture.

Let us see what grows from these roots. The New Testament knows of only one parousia, and that is the 'day of the Lord' which will end all things. If this 'end' is described in chapter 19, then the thousand years described in chapter 20, even though they follow it in the book, must precede it in actual history; in a word, 20:1–6 is a flashback. The binding of Satan, the first resurrection, and the millennium are all metaphors for the present situation in this world, covering the period between the first and second comings of Christ. There is still to come the last revolt of evil, which is held to be the setting for such other predicted events as the great tribulation and the appearing of the man of lawlessness. It will be

ended by Satan's overthrow and the judgment, which are described not only in 20:9–15 but also in 19:11–21. On this view, Christ will return without (*a-*) any millennium of the kind envisaged in other interpretations, that is, a thousand years which are only one section of Christian history, distinguished from the greater part by its extremes of good and evil. The danger of such an approach is that when particular symbols are 'explained away' as general truths, they tend to lose their force. The hard edges are blurred; the immediacy, the expectancy, is toned down. The amillennialist must remember that the truths he claims to see beyond the metaphors are not vague spiritualizations, but demanding realities: not less, but more, solid than the stuff of his vision.

Indeed, this points up the special value of the amillennialist view. Which is more real, a 'spiritual' reign of the saints which is in fact the present church age, or an actual earthly reign of the saints after Christ's return? The latter is concrete and definite, and fosters Christian hope. But the former, by the very fact of being a generalization, challenges Christian experience not only yesterday and tomorrow, but *today*.

#### *d. Postmillennialism*

Suppose you do not feel able wholly to accept either of these views. As regards the sequence of events, the simplicity of the amillennialist time scheme, with its single 'day of the Lord' destroying evil and bringing history to an end, seems more in accordance with the plainer prophecies of the New Testament. You feel that the complexities of Revelation are less likely to be an extension to the basic scheme (extra pieces tacked on to a patchwork quilt) than to be a repetition of it in different words (the working-over in paint of a pencil sketch). So far as the description of the millennium is concerned, however, you side with the premillennialists, in hoping for a rather more effective 'binding of Satan' and 'reign of the saints' than most of the Christian centuries seem to have experienced. You would expect there to be, near the end of history, one period when the power of evil will be markedly less, and the authority of the church markedly greater, than at any previous time. You are a 'literalist' to the extent that you look to see Satan chained and the saints crowned, if not physically, yet still in a more obvious way than the vague 'spiritual' binding and crowning of which the amillennialists speak. If this is how you interpret Revelation 20, you are a 'postmillennialist'. You envisage a thousand years, which may or may not be a literal thousand years, but which is certainly a special period distinguished from the rest of history by the way good triumphs over evil in the course of it. Some have understood this in terms of social improvement; others, truer to the biblical emphasis, have looked for a great spiritual advance, with the conversion of Jewry on the largest scale (Rom. 11:12) and the gospel 'preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come' (Mt. 24:14). There will be a single climax to history, the parousia; and it will come after (*post-*) the millennium.

Whatever his view of prophecy, every Christian is an optimist, because he knows that God is ultimately in control. But taking the third view could make him more optimistic than he really has a right to be, since it tends to concentrate on the promises of success for the church and to play down the equally numerous warnings of coming trouble. The danger of being too sure that things are inevitably on the upgrade is of course that one becomes complacent about them, and misses the urgency of Christ's summons to zeal and watchfulness. What may nevertheless be said in favour of postmillennialism is that, at its best, it sets before us an inspiring vision of the church as it might be, were all its members to realize the challenge of worldwide evangelism. There were Christians who thought they saw the golden age dawning in the days of nineteenth-century Colonialism, when the opening up of 'dark continents' was followed by an unprecedented spread of the twin benefits (as they seemed then) of civilization and Christianity. There is a very postmillennial ring about many of the missionary hymns we have inherited from the Victorians. The gloom of our own century has made us take a rather more realistic view of

the difficulties of the task. But we should not give up reaching after an ideal simply because we fail to grasp it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wilcock, M. (1986). *The message of Revelation: I saw heaven opened*. The Bible Speaks Today (23–24). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>2</sup> Wilcock, M. (1986). *The message of Revelation: I saw heaven opened*. The Bible Speaks Today (176–181). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.