

Toward a Dispensational Missiology: Eschatological Parameters for the Global Task

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Charles Taber, important trainer of Bible translators and avid mission theorist, faithfully advanced anthropological and linguistic strategies on the use of Scripture in the global church. Yet a few troublingly dismissive phrases seem to summarize his experiences of years of contextualizing the Bible in West Africa: “We had found out in the field... that the national church was capable of being guided by the Holy Spirit using the Scriptures. We also found it no longer possible to trust the dispensational hermeneutic that I had learned from childhood.”² Taber seems to suggest that the more he was exposed to a West African method of interacting with Scripture, the more he grew to distrust the literal, historical, grammatical interpretive method.

Anti-colonial rhetoric that decries white late-modern-era theology and its bibliological commitments is not uncommon in contemporary evangelical literature.³ Some mission theorists

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² Charles R. Taber, *International Bulletin Of Missionary Research*, vol. 29, No. 2 (April 2005): 89.

³ Postmodern scholars criticize the evangelical propositionalism and apparent cultural ignorance of some modern era missionaries as a deleterious, top-down theological elitism which arose during the Enlightenment. See Reformed theologian Douglas Wilson’s claim that propositionalism is an evangelical “pathology” (In Douglas Wilson, “A Couple Doctrinal Pathologies,” *Blog & Mablog: Theology that Bites Back* October 19, 2008, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://dougwils.com/s16-theology/a-couple-doctrinal-pathologies.html>). The largely postmodern claim that classical propositionalists followed Enlightenment philosophies are not uncommon in contextualization theory arising from Westerners and

who influence overseas practitioners today present unchallenged presuppositions on the role of Scripture, and in so doing seem to radically diminish the centrality of Scripture in engaging cultures.⁴ But trivializing the advancements of the dispensational hermeneutic in forming global theology is a poorly presented argument.

For example, it hardly seems plausible that such an influential linguist and missionary as Taber would come to disregard a hermeneutic known for its faithful search for the original meaning of Scripture, especially when compared to the theological landscape of Africa, known for promoting a culture-first reading.⁵ Equally strange is Taber's suggestion that any

non-Westerners alike. See Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 163–79, with discussion through p. 200; Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism—Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 13–14; John R. Franke, “Reforming Theology: Toward A Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics,” *WTJ* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 1–26; F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Also see strong discussion by Nigerian Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus Christ in African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 1, 8–13, esp. 10–12.

⁴ Missions authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, for example, urge for socio-cultural accommodation practices above propositionally-driven ones. They promote various insider movement strategies that seem neither to deliver the content of the gospel in a culturally relevant way nor match conservative parameters for evangelistic engagement. By highlighting what appear to be unnecessary pragmatic concerns, they risk advocating for activities which obscure the biblical mandate to preach the truths of Scripture at all times (2 Tim 4:1–2) with utmost priority (1 Cor 9:16). See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 109, 117–21.

⁵ Nigerian theologian David Tuesday Adamo summarizes the many interpretive directions under the central tenet of cultural priority: “African biblical hermeneutics is vital to the wellbeing of African society. African biblical hermeneutics is a methodological resource that makes African social

local church, in West Africa or elsewhere, can ensure a Spirit-led interpretation of the Bible without a commitment to both rigorously understand the authorial intent of a passage and to find the appropriate local application in keeping with a consistently literal reading of Scripture.

What additional benefits might Charles Taber have offered if he had upheld the dispensational hermeneutic in all areas of the missionary task? How would promoting a consistently literal approach to the text in the global church bring theological clarity to evangelism and discipleship? Could the application of the dispensational hermeneutic in national churches steer the tide of unbiblical culture-based theology?⁶

cultural contexts the subject of interpretation.” He further defines the way in which the Afrocentric hermeneutic is to be deemed biblical: “This is a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural, ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation. It is the rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Afrocentric [sic] perspective.... The analysis of the biblical text is done from the perspective of an African world-view and culture” (David Tuesday Adamo, “What is African Biblical Hermeneutics?,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 13, no. 1 [April 2015]: 70).

⁶ The late David Hesselgrave, influential missiologist and co-founder of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS), was an exemplary voice of conservative reason. He spoke over a decade ago against the generic “evangelical ecumenism” of EMS members which has led to the propagation of sub-biblical theories across the world. From Hesselgrave’s vantage point, the varying and conflicting theological positions of the members have overhauled the once sure conservative bibliography which members pledged to uphold at the time of joining the Society. The fact that Hesselgrave would plead with so-called conservative evangelicals for the integrity, intent, and priority of Scripture evidences how prolific sub-biblical contextualization strategies have become across the globe. EMS requires adherence to the ICBI Chicago Statement on Inerrancy at the time of entrance but does not define a policy to ensure the application of inerrancy to the practical theology espoused by its members (accessed August 21, 2018, https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf). See David J. Hesselgrave, “The Power of Words,” published in *Global Missiology* (January 2006), accessed February 16, 2016, www.globalmissiology.net;

This article presents a decidedly dispensational direction for global instruction in order to highlight some of the advantages to the theological training of the global church that result from the dispensational hermeneutic.⁷ A “dispensational missiology” is constructed via two biblical doctrines: the expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ and a future for national Israel. The dispensational trajectory for missions ensures that essential principles of evangelism and sanctification are not overlooked when raising up indigenous disciples—living and serving with a heightened awareness of the future, in keeping with the pastoral teaching of the apostles.

For discussion are key NT texts that help the missionary and the national church to keep a clear focus on the biblical mission ethic and the vital parameters for evangelism. The passages are Matthew 24–25, 1 Corinthians 15, Titus 2, 1 Thessalonians 1 and 4–5, 2 Thessalonians 1–2, and 2 Peter 3. These passages reveal how Israel, the church, and future events should factor into the attitude and practice of missions today both for missionaries and for their local Timothies.

also see Richard V. Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” in *New Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 311–13.

⁷ Given the limitations of the paper and the audience’s familiarity with dispensationalism, the paper will focus on the theological implications of the literal, historical, grammatical hermeneutic rather than reconstruct its exegetical process. A concise definition of the dispensational hermeneutic is however an essential starting point. Robert Thomas adapted Milton Terry’s definition of the “grammatico-historical method” of exegesis as applied to the Bible: “A study of inspired Scripture designed to discover under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the meaning of a text dictated by the principles of grammar and the facts of history.” See Robert Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis* (Los Angeles: Robert L. Thomas, 1987), 24.

Nathan Holsteen adds a succinct yet summative definition to include a “(more) consistent literalism,” as he calls it: “A literal hermeneutic is an approach to Scripture that finds the meaning of the text in the plain or normal sense of the text in its context.” For the term and quotation, see Nathan D. Holsteen, “The Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 112–13.

Dispensational Distinctions and Their Missiological Import

Constructing a dispensational missiology hinges upon one's commitment not only to the literal, historical, grammatical hermeneutic, but also to the doctrine of perspicuity, namely that Scripture communicates God's message to its audience with verbal clarity.⁸ Because of the clarity of Scripture, it is possible to read Scripture with a consistent literalism⁹ with the aim of conserving the authorial intent of a given prophecy in order to understand it in light of redemptive history.

One helpful way to work toward the missiological import of dispensationalism is to syllogistically represent the theological axioms that derive from the hermeneutical distinctives. At least

⁸ Brad Klassen ably defends the doctrine of perspicuity, and offers a useful definition: "Simply stated, to affirm the clarity or perspicuity of verbal revelation means to affirm that when God speaks, he does so in such a way that his words will be clear and intelligible to his intended audience God communicates his intent effectively, employing the most appropriate forms and structures of human language to make the knowledge he desires to reveal comprehensible to mankind. He never misses the mark." See Bradley D. Klassen, "A Light Shining in a Dark Place: The Clarity of Verbal Revelation According to Moses and the Prophets" (PhD Dissertation, The Master's Seminary, 2016), 1.

⁹ Holsteen, "Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism," 112. In his chapter, Holsteen carefully parses through various uses of the dispensational claim to literalism. He helpfully notes how, in the early years of progressive dispensationalism, Blaising might have exaggerated the emphases between dispensationalists, as literalism "is still a common feature in all forms of dispensationalism" (120–21n27). For essential discussion on what constitutes literal vs. non-literal hermeneutics with regard to the apostolic treatments of types, see John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 74–75. For a lengthy yet unsatisfactory discussion which fails to recognize or respond to the key hermeneutical debate raised by Feinberg, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 109–126, esp. 113, 117–18.

seven dispensational axioms can be traced, as is done here with some preliminary comments.¹⁰

1. God clearly reveals his will through the Scriptures, the written “oracles of God.”

The inspired written form of the “oracles of God” (Acts 7:38; Rom 3:2; Heb 5:12; cf. 2 Tim 3:16) is the direct revelation of God. The prophets were fully aware of the message they proclaimed¹¹ and their role in proclaiming it.¹²

¹⁰ The syllogism presupposes that the dispensational hermeneutic supports its findings even though the exegetical steps involved in the hermeneutical process are not detailed here. Given the practical theological interests of this paper, only some treatments and sources will be used in supporting the syllogism.

¹¹ It is important to distinguish between “objective” and “subjective” clarity, along the lines of Luther’s “external” and “internal” *claritas*. Klassen raises the distinction and defines the objective clarity, stating, “A fundamental distinction exists between two perspectives on the clarity of verbal revelation: the nature of verbal revelation as it is defined by God and intended for man, and the manner in which man receives it. Strictly speaking, the clarity of verbal revelation as a quality of God’s word refers to the former, not the latter To acknowledge that verbal revelation is objectively clear is not to contend that it must *appear as clear* to its readers” (Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 2n4; emphasis in original). Klassen defines the “subjective” clarity similarly to Luther’s “internal” *obscuritas*: “A responsible, comprehensive definition of the doctrine of clarity must certainly include reference to the obfuscating effect of sin, the necessity of spiritual regeneration, the Holy Spirit’s ministry of illumination in believers, and the role of the community of God’s people in the interpretive process” (Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 2n3). For discussion of Luther’s dual *claritas* in relation to his dual *obscuritas*, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999), 164–65.

¹² Klassen details the prophet’s self-recognition as “God’s human mouth,” acting as “covenant prosecutors” in full recognition of their task and message. See Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 281–91.

2. The eschatological details taught God's faithfulness and demanded faithful response.

For example, Genesis 15:6 is an early indicator that faith in God is the belief in God's faithfulness to accomplish his future plan—the righteous person is the one who trusts that God will fulfill at a time yet to be revealed what he has promised by oath.¹³ Predictive prophecy is useful for understanding God's eschatological trajectory and for living presently in God's will.¹⁴ Both the present-day ethical dimension and the predictive eschatological dimension worked in tandem to deliver a timely message to the original hearers.¹⁵

¹³ Well stated in *ibid.*, 297.

¹⁴ To the contrary, Brent Sandy finds little support that the OT prophets could predict the distant future with enough detail to bring the kind of gravitas to their original hearers that present-day readers assume. He argues that the literary style employed by the prophets makes predictive prophecy “inherently ambiguous and in some ways less precise.” See D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 158. In Klassen's terms, Sandy understands OT prophecy to be more “kaleidoscopic” than “telescopic,” and his observations appear to strike against the conservative understanding of perspicuity. See Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 295n47, 303.

¹⁵ This concept is explained by Mike Stallard, who helpfully pushes back against Sandy's conclusion that the metaphorical and at times emotional language of the prophets is shrouded in a layer of obfuscation and mystery which might sacrifice eschatological detail (Mike Stallard, “The Certainty of Prophetic Language,” Pre-Trib Research Center, accessed August 27, 2018, <https://www.pre-trib.org/articles/dr-mike-stallard/message/the-certainty-of-prophetic-language/read>). Klassen also responds to Sandy, writing, “By stressing so ardently the limited value of distant-future, non-Messianic prophecy, [Sandy and others] have diluted the value which distant-future, Messianic prophecies had for their original audiences.... It is much more capable of effecting moral transformation in the present than they acknowledge” (Klassen, “Light Shining in a Dark Place,” 299).

3. Jesus and the apostles literally connected their prophecies to OT eschatology.

The dispensational hermeneutic expects prophetic harmony between the Testaments because all of Scripture is one storyline.¹⁶ There is “a united rationale amongst the biblical authors” as to the hermeneutic to employ and the eschatological content to maintain across Testaments.¹⁷ Contemporary readers are to follow this rationale.¹⁸

¹⁶ Dispensationalist Michael Vlach adds hermeneutical precision on Scripture’s trajectory: “The Bible’s storyline as revealed in the Old Testament is the same storyline that is fulfilled in the New Testament over the course of Jesus’ two comings. The New Testament does not reinterpret or transcend the Bible’s storyline” (Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* [Los Angeles: Theological Studies P, 2016], 57–58).

¹⁷ Abner Chou makes a strong case for the interconnectedness and intertextuality of OT and NT prophets. As one example of eschatological alignment, Jesus, the ultimate prophet (Heb 1:1–2), sources his teaching on the timing of the abomination of desolation (Matt 24:15–16) in Daniel’s chronology in Dan 9:27. Other OT prophecies interwoven in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse include Isaiah 27:13; Daniel 7:9–13; 12:1; Zechariah 9:14. See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 159. In another example, Peter explicitly links the predictions of his letter to those of the OT prophets, Jesus, and his apostles (3 Pet 3:2). Throughout 2 Peter 3:1–18, Peter bases his description of the eschatological day of the Lord and the new heavens and earth on allusions and quotations from Isaiah 13:6; 65:17; and Malachi 4:5. What’s more, in 3:10, Peter echoes the “thief in the night” image from Jesus (Matt 24:43) as well as Paul (1 Thess 5:2). See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 188.

¹⁸ Considering each prophecy in its specific context in the canon requires what Chou has coined “prophetic, apostolic, and Christian hermeneutics.” The prophets wrote with a view to the future, and the NT writers understood their task of exegeting and expounding OT teaching for the NT context. Chou remarks, “Literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics is not a modern formulation but how the biblical writers read the Scriptures. The Christian hermeneutic follows the prophets and apostles,

4. Consistent literalism preserves the reader from distorting the trajectory of the prophecy.

Non-literal results do not flow from literal hermeneutical methods; the obfuscating of the eschatological details ultimately changes the nature of the original message.¹⁹ When a passage is allowed to speak for itself at its particular point in the progress of revelation, then the prophecy is seen for what it really is: a promise that must be completely fulfilled.²⁰

5. The promises to Israel must be fulfilled in distinction from the church.

and is thereby a hermeneutic of obedience.” See Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 22–23, with quotation on 23.

¹⁹ Any system which contends for a NT reinterpretation of prior prophecy, rather than expansion thereof, does not employ a literal hermeneutic even though it may propose to do so. Progressive Covenantalists Gentry and Wellum see dispensationalists and nondispensationalists as employing the same hermeneutic (in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 113), even though nondispensational systems tend to expect the redefinition of OT predictive prophecy in the NT. Blaising and Bock rightly ask of the nondispensational claim to a “literal” hermeneutic: “If language says one thing in terms of intention but really means something else, then is this not still a type of allegory?” See Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 393. On the basis of such observations, Bock surmises that nondispensational eschatology is ultimately unhelpful in the quest to understand the work of the church today: “Confusion about the identity of the kingdom, its subjects, and its nature leads to confusion about the church’s mission and mandate” (Darrell L. Bock, in Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 66).

²⁰ So Beecher: “From the time when [a promise] was first given it was doubtless thought of as something by which future ages would be able to test God’s ability to reveal coming events.... In this aspect of it, it would stir their imaginations, and set them to looking forward” (Willis Judson Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1905], 212–13).

Concerning the aspect of future salvation, for example, OT prophecy concerning both Jew and Gentile must “be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT.”²¹ There are many unique features with regard to future Israel that point to the coming reality that Israel will serve as the vehicle for the global, physical, and spiritual blessing of all peoples of the earth.²²

6. The missionary activity of the apostles was motivated by prophecy.

The NT prophets understood that the events which culminate in national Israel’s salvation would follow the return of Messiah. NT missionary activity was directed to both Jew and Gentile in keeping with the direction of prophecy.²³

²¹ Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” 75. A consistently literal reading of the “new man” of Ephesians 2:11–16 cannot deny the diversity of Israel within the Christian unity of Jew and Greek. Carl Hoch notes the discontinuity inherent to the concept of “newness,” while conserving continuity in God’s plan of salvation to save Gentiles and establish the church. See Carl B. Hoch, “The New Man of Ephesians 2,” in Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 98–126. Neither can a literal hermeneutic deny the perpetuity of Israel’s blessing in the physical land simply because salvation has now extended to the nations and folded Gentiles into the blessing promised to the “seed” of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; Rom 4:11–12). See Paul Feinberg’s logic on the concept of multiple fulfillment in Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 109–28, esp. 127.

²² Scripture itself expects that the nation of Israel will one day receive physical land as an inheritance by God (Gen 12:1–3), and that one day “all Israel” will live to the glory of Messiah (Rom 11:26). Jesus Christ will one day rule all the nations from the land of Israel in an intermediate state for 1,000 years (Rev 20:1–6) before the eternal state begins (1 Cor 15:24–28).

²³ Transcending OT prophecy would cause the NT writers to diminish Israel’s distinct future so that they would have given singular eschatological significance to the church. The meaning and significance of OT passages in their original contexts at their stage of revelation would have become

7. Predictive prophecy ought to motivate and guide missionary activity in the church today.

The reliability in God's character hinges upon the expectation of absolute and total fulfillment for both Jew and Gentile.²⁴ Missionaries must operate in the hope of a future restoration of environment, society, economy, and politics in the millennial reign of Christ.²⁵

distorted, and the apostolic teaching and mission would have been inappropriately weighted in a largely non-Jewish trajectory.

It is instructive to highlight the importance the apostles gave to seeing Israel saved in accordance with prophecy. In a quick scan of Acts 17–18, Paul employed a distinct Jew-first missionary strategy (cf. Rom 1:16). He made it a matter of course to enter a city and begin witnessing about the Christ in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In the Thessalonian synagogue Paul and his missionary companions engaged in discussion about Jesus Christ on three consecutive Sabbaths (17:1–2). In Berea they immediately did the same (17:10). Beyond Macedonia, in Athens, before arriving in the Areopagus, he witnessed to Jews and Greek God-fearers in the synagogue, but also to a general pagan audience in the marketplace, which was the center of social life and local commerce (cf. 16:19; 17:5). In Corinth, after finding the Jews Aquila and Priscilla, his main interactions were in the synagogue on the Sabbath (18:4), though doubtless he used his leather-working trade as an opportunity to testify of Christ to all peoples in the interim (18:3, 5). Paul's missionary efforts in Corinth appear to have been specific to the teaching of the Word of God in the synagogue, though increasing Jewish hostility shifted Paul's focus toward the Greek proselytes (18:4–11).

²⁴ Since God made unbreakable, unconditional promises, He must sustain them along the timeline of salvation history, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29; unless otherwise specified, all verse selections are taken from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). The believer believes that God spoke of the future truthfully in the past, and expects that what was specifically declared will be completely fulfilled in the future.

²⁵ Because Jesus provided a sneak preview of his future reign in his first coming, the missionary is free to serve him today with the understanding that only under his physical rule in the future will true justice and peace be accomplished in the nations. However, understanding Israel's future role or part in the grand narrative of salvation history is both varied and vague in missiology. Evangelical missiologists commonly describe the grand

Select New Testament Eschatological Highlights

Dispensationalism wagers that Scripture is clear about how Israel, the church, and future events should factor into everyday ecclesiology. But dispensationalism goes further, to direct the attitude and practice of missions. Missiological implications can be derived from several NT passages, including Matthew 24–25; 1 Corinthians 15; Titus 2; 1 Thessalonians 1, 4, and 5; 2 Thessalonians 1–2; and 2 Peter 3. The passages teach national believers to expect the imminent return of Christ and to conduct themselves in godly ways, just as the original audience was commanded, in the interim.

Matthew 24–25

In this longest record of the Olivet Discourse (cf. Mark 13:1–37; Luke 21:5–36), Jesus did not reveal a clear timeframe for the “end of the age” (cf. Matt 24:3) Rather, he decried speculative efforts to determine the timing of his immediate return, showing them through parables the impossibility of discovering such information.²⁶

narrative of Scripture in biblically appropriate terms, namely that God is faithful to save sinners according to the Abrahamic covenant. Yet, there appears to be no consensus view on the degree to which Israel actually mediates the Abrahamic covenant. For equivocation on the role of future Israel, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, ed. *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 262–63.

²⁶ Cf. 24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13; Mark 13:32. The signs Jesus did provide pointed to his appearance at the end of the coming “day of the Lord” but the timeframe of the beginning of His eschatological return remained shrouded in mystery. So John F. Hart, “Jesus and the Rapture: Matthew 24,” in *Evidence for the Rapture*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 52. So John MacArthur Jr., *Parables: The Mysteries of God's Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 125–26; also Craig Blaising, “A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, ed. Alan Hultberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 50–51.

Jesus taught on imminency²⁷ to urge believers to remain faithful regardless of what may appear to be end time events. The fruit of expectancy, that patient anticipation of the Lord's imminent return, is an all-encompassing tension in the life of the Christian.²⁸ To this end, believers were to be alert at all times, watching for his return (Mark 13:33–37), and ministering boldly until he comes (cf. Rev 3:2; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Thess 5:6; 1 Pet 5:8). In 24:45–51 Jesus called his disciples to holy living and the priority of servanthood.²⁹ In 25:1–13, He demanded urgent

²⁷ Thomas uses the term to describe the sudden return of Jesus Christ without warning or sign (see Robert L. Thomas, "The Rapture and the Biblical Teaching of Imminency," in *Evidence for the Rapture*, 23–24, 31.

²⁸ So it was in the life of the apostle Paul, who hoped to remain in the flesh until the appearance of Christ (cf. Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 10:11; Phil 4:5) yet eventually recognized his physical end might precede Christ's return (2 Tim 4:6–8). See brief treatment on Paul's expectancy in Thomas, *Evidence for the Rapture*, 31.

²⁹ In the parable of the two servants in 24:45–51, the timing of the return of the Master is unknown and surprising. Both the faithful and the wicked servant believe in the imminent return of their Master, but the wicked servant compounds a lack of constraint with moral degradation in his absence. While the wicked servant does not doubt that his Master will one day return, he does not view the return as impending, and thus disregards the prerogatives of his stewardship to his own peril. He is an example of the one who is not ready for the Son of Man to return (24:44). The parable of the two servants points to the accountability required of every servant of Christ: where the knowledge of the Lord's return does not foster an eager expectation which results in a work ethic commensurate to the truth, sin may abound and a fearful judgment will result (cf. Mark 8:38).

expectation for His return in all godliness,³⁰ and in 25:14–30 He taught on the importance of responsible labor for the Kingdom.³¹

In light of the prophetic content and exhortations, the missionary must reinforce the expectancy of Christ's sudden return with local disciples: serve the Master with all diligence and haste until the *parousia*. The national believer, just like every believer, must be characterized by moral living, eager preparedness to be with him in glory, and faithfulness in ministry. As Jesus taught, failure to appreciate the imminence of Christ's return opens the door to folly and peril.

³⁰ In the following parable of the ten bridesmaids (25:1–13), Jesus addresses his imminent return from the human standpoint of a delayed arrival. An excessive interval of time before Christ returns might be as surprising to a hopeful believer as an unsuspecting return would be to an unfaithful servant, as is the case in the previous parable. Expectations may need to be extended and care must be given so that hope does not wane while waiting for the Bridegroom. As throughout the Olivet Discourse, the question is not whether Christ will return, for Christ's return is presumed to occur imminently. The question is whether the believer will live with a sense of urgency which spurs faithful conduct and witness since His return could be at any time (cf. Rom 13:11; 1 Cor 7:29; 1 Pet 4:7). Long or short in human years, the time of the *parousia* will come unexpectedly like a thief (cf. 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; Matt 24:40–44 [Luke 12:39]). Failure to be ready for him is a foolishness tantamount to the wickedness of the immoral servant of the previous parable, for the negative result is permanent.

³¹ The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30 underscores the work ethic demanded of the believer until the return of Christ. To be given of the Master's resources is to be given an opportunity to invest it wisely in order for it to produce dividends (v. 27). Not putting the Master's resource to use is considered a wicked action by a lazy and worthless person (vv. 26, 30). Such wastefulness in the absence of the Master leads to ruin when he returns at an unexpected time. Jesus again highlights through this parable the folly of being unprepared for his imminent return. The Lord, however, is pleased by the diligent work of his faithful servants, and so he shares his joy with those who deliver a return on their stewardship to the degree of faithfulness commensurate with the resources given to them (vv. 15, 21, 23, 29). The Apostle Paul later emphasized the importance of understanding and meeting one's responsibility before Christ: "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1–2).

1 Corinthians 15

Paul delineates the doctrine of bodily resurrection and rapture in order to offer a transcendent hope which will buttress the church in the face of false teaching.³² In the increasingly secular 21st-century world, Paul's message resonates strongly, especially to those who suffer opposition to the gospel: living faithfully before a faithless world is in part shaped by a biblical view of the future, for "if we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (v. 19).

The illogical claim that believers would not be raised from the dead (v. 12) is countered by the reality that Jesus Christ was raised as the "first fruit" of all who die in the faith (vv. 13–23, esp. 20, 23). Were there no resurrected Christ, there would be no redemption in Christ, nor would there be resurrection or rapture in him. And if, in the end, death held authority over the believer rather than Christ, then there would be no motivation to serve Him during times of suffering (vv. 30–32).³³

If the missionary teaches the national believers to expect the rapture and the bodily resurrection with the imminent return of Christ, then he will have been faithful to the work and will stand confidently before Christ in the day of glorification and reward

³² First Corinthians 15 describes the rapture as a fact for all believers (vv. 51–52). No time reference is supplied, but the fact that believers will receive glorified bodies in that instant (cf. Phil 3:20–21) distinguishes this event from the final event of His coming (cf. Rev 19:14). So Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 213. Mayhue succinctly analyzes the major contrasts between the rapture event and the second coming of Christ to earth on linguistic and contextual grounds. See Richard Mayhue, "Why a Pretribulation Rapture?," in *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 93–94.

³³ The passage bookends the eschaton by instructing that after Christ has subjected all powers and authorities, including death, then his millennial reign will conclude and the eternal state will commence (vv. 24–26). If neither Christ nor his followers resurrected, no one would be caught up in the clouds nor have a glorified body incapable of corruption. Death could not be defeated and the thought of an eternal reign in an eternal kingdom in the presence of the eternal Son would be ludicrous.

(Phil 2:16; cf. 1:6; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 4:5; 2 Cor 5:9–10). Eschatologically informed believers will live above the evils of this world and will be more ready to proclaim the gospel to their people. The stronger their convictions about the truth the more confident their ministry to their people—eschatological hope is a key motivator being a light in this crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15).

Conversely, the missionary who denies the global church the rich exhortations that arise from eschatology is guilty of theological ignorance both for himself and for those he serves. Considering eschatology to be a minor topic to be sidelined, or even an advanced topic kept at bay from young believers, leaves the believer exposed to worldliness and uninspired to set his focus on heaven (vv. 33–34).³⁴ What’s more, beyond implicitly hindering one from living heaven-bound, the national church will not be sufficiently motivated to defend the truth of God that Paul affirms. Quelling the kinds of eschatological heresies which plague the church, as was the case in Corinth, becomes all the more difficult to the theologically dull and undiscerning.

Titus 2

Paul’s message to his missionary delegate Titus in the overseas context of Crete outlines the godly behavior required of both the missionary and the indigenous believer, and does so on exegetical grounds.³⁵ The missionary must authoritatively

³⁴ Matthew Henry preaches it well: “If there will be a resurrection and a future life, we should live and act as those who believe it, and should not give into such senseless and sottish notions as will debauch our morals, and render us loose and sensual in our lives” (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 2275).

³⁵ Paul instructs Titus to proclaim that salvation will advance from the spiritual to the material realm at a future time in which Jesus Christ appears in his glory. Only at his second advent will spiritual redemption be brought to fulfillment, and so the believer’s hope is also his eschatological tension in which he is spiritually redeemed, yet with further redemption coming at an unknown future time. While little here is delineated about the nature of Christ’s coming revelation, it will be physical, as connoted by ἐπιφάνω. See Titus 3:4, and the use of ἐπιφάνω in the physically fulfilled prophecy

proclaim how saving grace powerfully intervened in the world at Jesus Christ's first coming (v. 11) and now provides spiritual redemption and purification to all who will believe in him today (v. 12). But the proclamation of the gospel (cf. v. 15) is not complete unless it points to the final redemption promised at Christ's future physical appearance. The hope that Christ will soon be revealed in his unfading glory provides the motivation for boldness in proclaiming the gospel now (v. 15; cf. 2 Cor 3:10–12).

Additionally, it is that longing for the realization of the future hope, that expectancy, which fuels the church to live in righteousness presently (cf. Titus 2:12). The renunciation of sin, the practice of righteousness, and eager service today are zealously lived out under the looming shadow of Christ's appearing (v. 14).

Therefore, keeping a focus on the "blessed hope" strengthens the missionary's resolve to instruct nationals on the importance of godly conduct now. The expectancy of Christ's imminent physical return is the context whereby the faithful missionary must rebuke believers who are not living "self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (v. 12).

1 Thessalonians 1, 4, 5

Eschatological teaching permeates the first letter to the Thessalonian church (cf. 1:10; 2:12; 2:19; 3:13). According to 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10, all believers are commanded to uphold the doctrines of the rapture,³⁶ bodily resurrection, and the physical

of Luke 1:79 (Burkhard Gärtner, "Ἐπιφάνεια," in *NIDNTT*, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 319–20).

³⁶ A specifically pretribulational orientation creates a particularly urgent zeal for church planting. The only time in which the church may participate in reaching the lost is collocated within the "day of salvation" (cf. 2 Cor 6:2; cf. Rev 1:3; 6:1–8). The language of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 indicates that the rapture of the church will be pretribulational. The trumpet will sound with authority and urgency (v. 16). If it were otherwise, the Thessalonians would have raised pointed questions and fears about life in the tribulation. Tribulation would have been imminent rather than the coming of the Lord. The believers are to be both informed (v. 13) and comforted (v. 18) by the reality of an imminent rapture for themselves, and the resurrection of their

return of Christ. Paul's recap of the Thessalonian conversions provides a clear example of how evangelization and a precise eschatology pair together in a missionary context. The passage indicates that a successful gospel witness must lead to a successful discipleship in which eschatology is incorporated into the early theological instruction of new converts from an unchurched setting.

Missionaries ought to find Paul's model of evangelization and eschatological instruction among the Thessalonian believers useful. In the narrative the new converts received the gospel with full assurance (1:5) and renounced their idolatry, demonstrating sincere repentance by serving the true and living God (1:9). They continued to live out their Christian hope by eagerly awaiting the return of the resurrected Christ who saved them.³⁷ The

dead in Christ. The encouragement tied to this rapture teaching parallels the teaching in John 14:1–3 in which believers are promised a presence with Christ when he comes again to snatch his people on earth (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17). See Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 211; Mayhue, "Why a Pretribulation Rapture?," 91–92.

Dispensationalist Paul Benware highlights how futuristic premillennialism raises at least three important results of the rapture which are gloriously hopeful for believers alive today. First, Christ's promise to retrieve his own will be fulfilled. His commitment to unbroken fellowship with His saints will be faithfully and finally realized. Second, the believer's salvation will be complete insofar as the rapture will release us from the bondage of sin by transforming the believer's flesh from mortal to immortal. This grand mystery (1 Cor 15:51) will be a final act of saving grace to those already saved by grace through faith in Christ. Third, the rapture will unite the dead in Christ and the living church so that the invisible body of Christ will be brought to fruition. The thought of complete unity in Christ in the air is an excellent comfort to all affected by the grief of death (1 Thess 4:18) (Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 214).

³⁷ The Christian's future hope is grounded in the eschatological image of Christ. Jesus' physical return from heaven (cf. Acts 1:11) corroborates the biblical witness that, once slain, Jesus was resurrected to life and is active today in the presence of the Father as Melchizedekian High Priest (Heb 7:16, 23–28; cf. 2:10–15). When Christ returns at an unspecified time in the future, he will come as the loving Deliverer to save true Christians before he pours out his wrath as the Judge of the unrepentant.

missionary who girds the national believer with eschatology actually bolster's the believer's Christology—the believer now lives a life of expectancy, permeated by service to the Savior who will return.³⁸

Yet, emotional and intellectual challenges arise as a disciple grows in the knowledge of doctrine and love for God and others. The Thessalonian believers, who had been instructed on the return of Christ by Paul (2 Thess 2:5), raised troubling questions about those in the church who died or would die before the rapture (1 Thess 4:13). Apparently they needed follow-up from Paul, despite Timothy's efforts to root them in doctrine (cf. 3:2), in order to resolve tensions about the timing of the resurrection of the saints and their uncertainty about whether those they mourned would participate in the glorious return of Christ.³⁹ To

The term meaning “to await” or “expect” in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 ἀναμένω is *hapax legomenon* to the NT. If there is a question as to whether this waiting intends the quality of Christian hope often applied to γρηγορέω (cf. Matt 24:42; 25:13; 26:41; Mark 13:35, 37; 14:38; Acts 20:31; 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Thess 5:6; 1 Pet 5:8; Rev 3:2f; 16:15), the LXX may assist. In Jeremiah 16:13, LXX translates הַקָּדָשׁ (“to await” or “to hope”) with ἀναμένω to capture the emotional search for illumination in a time of dark judgment. See “הַקָּדָשׁ,” in Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), 1082; “Ἀναμένω,” in F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Based on Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th ed, eds. K. Aland and B. Aland, with V. Reichmann. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 68.

³⁸ So R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), 234–35. Lange suggests that they needed more time to work through the ramifications of the doctrine, in Lange, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, trans. and ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869), 74–75.

³⁹ So Lenski, *Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 323. For helpful discussion of the timing and participation view in light of problematic proposals, see Kevin D. Zuber, “Paul and the Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4–5,” in *Evidence for the Rapture*, 151–55.

this deeply emotional question Paul instructs on the future bodily resurrection.⁴⁰ The doctrine was Paul's remedy for grief, especially in the face of the hopelessness common to nonbelievers in the local culture (4:13). For the believer, death must not generate hopeless sorrow but rather an abiding hope because of the teaching on life after physical death. Death is an inherently eschatological topic, for death as sleep (cf. John 11:11) implies the promise of an awakening (1 Thess 4:16).

There are world events today that look horrifically "tribulational" from the vantage point of history. Persecuted global Christians might tend, like the Thessalonian believers, to wonder if their fiery trials constitute *parousia* events. To address such concerns about end time events, Paul opens 1 Thessalonians 5 on the new topic of the Day of the Lord.⁴¹ Instruction about the terrifying, wrathful event is meant as an encouragement to keep doing the important reciprocal work of edifying the saints—those experiencing a fearful anxiety about the future should encourage one another (5:11). The sincere faith of believers can only be strengthened when recognizing that the terrifying cataclysmic events are not for their destruction but for the wicked (v. 3). The thought that the dead in Christ will be resurrected when the living believers will be snatched away, all before the day of the Lord, is designed to be a great comfort to the church.

The prophetic content ought to not only replace angst but lead to clearheaded thought and action in the work of the ministry (5:6–8). Christ is even now sanctifying all who are identified with him now with faith, hope, and love, and his sanctifying work

⁴⁰ The dead in Christ will be raised at the second coming of the Lord, and that day will come as a surprise (cf. 5:2). The teaching parallels the resurrection teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. The Thessalonian believers understood that Jesus was to come back, just as the apostles were instructed by Jesus (John 14:1–3). Through a report by Timothy, Paul learned that they questioned whether the dead brethren would they also participate in the coming blessings and glories of Christ.

⁴¹ Περὶ δὲ ("Now as to," or "Now concerning") uses an accusative of reference to mark a shift in topic to what follows. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 379. For discussion on the use of the construction in 5:1, see Zuber, "Paul and the Rapture," 161.

will be made complete at the rapture or bodily resurrection of the dead in Christ. Furthermore, the fact that Christ's return will bring swift and severe punishment on unbelievers serves to motivate the church to evangelize the lost while time permits—the coming wrath necessitates urgent Christian witness.

The question is not whether Christ will fulfill his promise to rapture the church and raise dead church-age believers, but whether believers will pursue the completion of their sanctification with integrity and marked growth in holiness during their earthly years. Such an eschatologically aware believer will become a mature believer who is emotionally grounded and positioned well to counsel and lead others to live sanctified lives in the hope of the soon coming Christ. Blamelessness of spirit, soul, and body are not just ultimate goals but real desires that should tangibly mark every Christian. For a missionary to in some way neglect teaching this eschatological content to persecuted global Christians is, on a very real and practical level, unconscionable.

2 Thessalonians 1:1–2:12

The severity of the affliction suffered by the church caused the Thessalonians once again to fear they were living in the vengeful day of the Lord (1:4). Though they were maturing in faith and love since Paul's first letter (1:3), they apparently waned in eschatological hope due to their pressing difficulties. In Paul's second letter he addresses the believers' debilitating concern that they had somehow missed the gathering of the saints at rapture (2:1–2). Yet, as bad as the suffering may have been, there was still little correlation with the ultimate day of the Lord because specific events would need to take place before Christ would come to rule (2:3–4).⁴² Ultimate relief from suffering and persecution must wait for an unknown future time when Christ in his wrath metes out all due vengeance against the wicked (1:6–10; 2:8, 12).

⁴² Similarities between the persecution of the first century and that of the eschaton were felt insofar as the lawlessness of the wicked world system and false religions was already very much at work to torment believers and corrupt society (2:7; cf. 1 John 2:18; 3:4; 4:3).

Having a right view of the end to the wicked is necessary so that the suffering Christian might understand both the full extent of God's justice and the present call to personal righteousness. A correct eschatological framework is essential for reinforcing the believer's steadfast pursuit of a worthy walk full of deeds commensurate with true faith, all done to the glory of the Lord (1:11–12; cf. Phil 1:9–11). Once again, it is the missionary's task to adopt these doctrines, live in the light of them, and ensure that they are taught and applied to the very difficult circumstances in which the Global Church suffers.

It would be a mistake, however, to see theological instruction as a stale lecture devoid of pathos and relevance. Paul's letter indicates that the Thessalonian disciples believed the doctrine of the rapture. What they needed now was pastoral care so that they could live godly lives in light of the prophecies. Paul, in his wisdom, actually addressed their concerns with a more detailed doctrine of eschatology. The missionary would do well to utilize doctrine to instill a Christian hope, and to do so pastorally, especially as the global church faces increasing persecution.

2 Peter 3:1–18

Peter reminds his readers to be attentive to the eschatological teaching that they receive because the predictive prophecy he proclaims comes from the OT prophets, and also from Jesus and the other apostles (vv. 1–2). No Christian should disparage the doctrine of the return of Christ with some feigned “pan-millennialism,” which is no better than the position of the false teachers.⁴³ In fact, Peter does not record the prophecy lesson simply to fill out his readers' eschatology. Rather, he does so to help the maturing believers grow stronger in discernment and

⁴³ “Pan-millennialism” is the humorous position that “everything will ‘pan out’ in the end.” But denying the prophetic content is tantamount to following the example of the false teachers which have begun to rise up in the church who knowingly mocking the return of Christ as a lie (3:3–5; cf. 2:1–3). Rather, the believer is commanded to wait for Jesus' second coming with patience (3:8). After all, it is the patience of the Lord to await the fullness of salvation (v. 15), no matter how long that may seem from the human perspective (vv. 8–9).

fight more astutely against the false teachers who preyed on them with twisted theology (v. 16).

Peter's eschatology, as a weapon for the fight, covers the following aspects. First, Christ's return is imminent (v. 10), and will come when his patience, which should be considered a gracious opportunity for salvation (v. 15; cf. 2 Cor 6:2; Acts 2:40), runs out (cf. 2 Pet 3:9; Phil 4:5; James 5:8–9; Rev 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). The timing of the return of Christ is sovereignly determined based on when Christ completes his saving work in this epoch. Second, the events of the *parousia* will ultimately usher in drastic cosmic changes, and such knowledge is motive for believers in the interim to remain unmovable in their faith and exhibit the fruit of holiness and godliness in all their affairs (2 Pet 3:11–12).

The missionary is tasked with proclaiming the predictions that come from the OT and NT prophets. Knowing the future is designed to impact the present. Precisely because the Lord has promised that the new heavens and a new earth will be inhabited in righteousness (v. 13), the believer must now practice righteousness (v. 14). Despite the fiery trials now being faced (cf. 1 Pet 4:12), and no matter the global upheaval to come (2 Pet 3:10, 12), true believers must live in peace (3:14). Peace now, in view of the coming cosmic chaos, is true stability of heart and mind (vv. 16–17). The missionary must stave off the perversion that comes from biblical ignorance (v. 16). Peter sees eternal fruit in the proper understanding of eschatology: believing and applying the truths of the *parousia* lead to growth in “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” and ultimately the ascription of more glory to Him “both now and to the day of eternity” (v. 18). Such is the hope for believers in all cultures of all generations, until the Lord has accomplished the fullness of His salvation.

Summary

There are many purposes for teaching eschatology in the foreign context from a distinctly dispensational perspective. The dispensational eschatology is not some vague, esoteric, or sideline enterprise that the missionary can take or leave when making indigenous disciples.

Understanding the prophetic hermeneutic is significant for the Christian's convictions today in at least three ways. First, the believer has a sure future upon which to fix his or her thoughts so that during the fiercest of earthly trials he or she may hold an unwavering hope in the ultimate rescue of Christ. Second, biblical clarity on the fate of those who are not caught up in the air demands a level of urgency in evangelism and ethical conduct among unbelievers so that they might be won to Christ and saved from his targeted wrath. Third, the delay in returning has thus far given believers more opportunity to follow Christ in his virtues, namely by cultivating patience and steadfast faith, and a richer sanctification during this time of sojourn.

It has been sufficiently established that the missionary must treat the whole of Scripture's teaching on the end time's events with clarity and precision, for the good of the local disciples. The dispensational framework for eschatology is both true to the text and relevant to daily life, and so a global theology built upon the dispensational framework will benefit the mission of the local church. As the select NT passages demonstrate, the concept of a surprise rapture event and *parousia*, when interpreted with a consistent literalism, helps contend for the faith, provides the impetus to live a holy life, and calls the believer to serve the coming king with urgency. On the other hand, an eschatology that is not built from a consistent interpretation of prophecy may lead to weaker faith. When key exhortations designed for these presently dark days is hidden from the church, the battle for biblical living becomes unnecessarily difficult.

Missiology in View of the Millennium

Belief in the premillennial physical return of Jesus Christ generates a natural desire to understand what the Bible has to say about the location and nature of his return. Where he goes and what he does in the future is of great importance to every dispensationalist. Because the millennium is not yet realized, global evangelism and theological training today must be done with the expectation of Christ's imminent return and closure of the church age. Such expectancy requires expediency—doing faithful ministry with hope and urgency to bring God glory now. From the missiological standpoint, then, it is vital to know how

Scripture portrays the future for church age believers and the nation of Israel in the eschaton. Dispensationalism permits as clear a picture of the millennial reign of Christ as possible from Scripture. Consistent literalism avoids assigning some arbitrary significance to Israel.⁴⁴ Rather, the dispensational hermeneutic ties Israel's future to the Messianic hope which all Jewish people hold to some degree even today.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Rather, the glory of Christ will be seen in physical Jerusalem when he comes to reign, and later the eternal presence of God will reside in the New Jerusalem of the eternal state. It is problematic to downgrade the reality of the physical city of Jerusalem to a local concept that applies to any sort of missionary activity, as Ed Stetzer has done: "We Christians will each want to do all we can to fulfill our own mission—from our own Jerusalem." A poor exegesis of the Jerusalem Council (p. 590) and statements of Jerusalem's transitory influence in NT witness (see esp. 585–86) flatten Stetzer's argument to a mishmash of unguarded concepts, such as his Pentecost reference: "Let us wait in one accord for the coming of the Spirit" in order to advance the mission of God outside of provincial legalism (593). While Stetzer's ethical exhortation to pursue mission is not missed, using Jerusalem as an allegorical motif disconnects the historical geopolitical capital from its future in God's plan and purpose for the city. See Ed Stetzer, "The Trouble with our Jerusalems," in *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century*, ed. Mike Barnett (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 585–99.

Indian theologian Eliya Mohol runs in a similar direction as Stetzer in defining the missional trajectory of many different forms of Zionism. After he treats the biblical concept of Zion as the physical location of Jerusalem and hub of eschatological missionary activity, he traces the transcendent principles of love and unity which bind syncretistic forms of Zionism in India, South Korea, and South Africa. Mohol's objective is not to point out error in light of Scripture, but to urge Christian Zionists to remove Jerusalem from the center of eschatological import and rather hold to the purely ethical goals of the syncretized groups: "The monotheistic groups that want to lay exclusive claims on the physical Jerusalem can learn lessons from these universal communities in emphasizing the ideals of Zion and not hankering after land in Jerusalem" (Eliya Mohol, "Zion," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007], 450).

⁴⁵ Eliya Mohol recognizes a modicum of Zionist expectation in all participants of Jewish celebrations when they pray "May the Redeemer

In the briefest of snapshots, the following statements summarize select biblical evidence for a millennial kingdom. Jesus Christ will sit on David's throne (Matt 19:28; 25:31), according to the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:13, 16; Ps 89:3–4, 35–37), in the physical city of Jerusalem (cf. Zech 8:20–23) for a one-thousand year reign of peace and justice (Rev 20:4–7; Zech 14:9; cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28). By that time, “all Israel” will be saved (Rom 11:25–29) so that the promise of the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled in the land (Gen 12:1–3). In the millennium the land covenant of Deuteronomy 29–30 will finally be realized and the borders of Israel will be restored to the fullest extent for the Jewish people when they convert to serve Messiah as their rightful King. Only when the salvation of the Gentiles is complete (Rom 11:25; cf. Luke 21:24) and the judicial act of spiritually blinding Israel is reversed will the millennial kingdom be established and the biblical covenants be fulfilled.⁴⁶

The coming reality of the millennium affects the missionary's ethic today. Because the millennium will one day come, missionaries need to discern the types of activities worth engaging in the nations. If missionary activity today is to be done in light of Jesus Christ's millennial reign, then at least a few key considerations come into play.

1. The missionary must engage in individual evangelism and making faithful disciples.

All missionaries are initially tasked with bringing individuals from all nations and worldviews to the saving knowledge of the King of Kings, that they might worship him as the only God. There is no room for a fatalism that would impede evangelism: even though many sinners will one day die for their active rebellion against God (John 8:24; Rom 6:23; cf. 1 John 3:4; Isa 59:2), the missionary should be motivated by God's patience in the

come to Zion,” or they greet one another, “Next year in Jerusalem!” (Mohol, “Zion,” 449–50).

⁴⁶ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 216.

current dispensation (2 Pet 3:9) to labor in any way useful for the salvation of even a few (1 Cor 9:19–23).

A further antidote to fatalism today is to consider the need for evangelism in the millennium, even when there are no false religions or idols competing with the Lordship of Christ. Understanding that there will be a final rebellion of the apostate children of believers in the millennium (Rev 20:8–9) is a reminder that even at a time of unparalleled peace there should be the desire to mercifully and fearfully rescue as many sinners as possible from their impending destruction (Jude 22–23).

Conversion, however, is itself not the goal but the gateway to a God-glorifying life. Today's believer must be disciplined into a mature person who will serve the King now, throughout the millennium, and into eternity (cf. Rev 5:10). Making biblical disciples requires great toil in the indigenous church because it involves the transformation of the believer's cultural orientation (cf. Titus 1:12–13).

Biblical discipleship also strikes against the common evangelistic practice of open-air campaigns, which are common to the Third World. Such campaigns tends to focus on mass conversion without a discipleship strategy at the local church level.⁴⁷

The body of Christ has but one King, Jesus Christ, who reigns spiritually now, and will physically reign from David's throne in the millennium. Therefore, the missionary must labor to ensure that formerly false worshippers who proclaim Christ now submit to his lordship and put an end to dual authority—a syncretized faith in Christ that is marked by old, unbiblical ways of thinking and acting (cf. Titus 1:13–2:1).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Thanks go to South African theology student, Warrick Jubber, whose personal experiences with tent campaigns corroborate my own observations in South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, border towns of Mexico, Dominican Republic, and southern regions of Italy.

⁴⁸ So Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2008), 28–29.

2. The missionary must invest in training pastors for the ministry of the local church.

True disciples are maturing Christians, and spiritual growth happens, by God's design, through the godly leadership of Christ's under-shepherds in the local church (1 Pet 5:1–5). Paul and his missionary delegates considered the raising up of elders for the church worth their greatest efforts (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim 1:3, 5–7, 18–19).

Elders are themselves to be mature men, qualified to give spiritual oversight to souls in their care (Heb 13:7, 17; cf. Titus 1:6–9; 1 Tim 3:1–7). The elder best suited to teach eschatology in the church is the one who accurately handle God's Word and puts it into practice in his own life. Both the prophetic content and the application need to come from a man who believes it and lives it, otherwise his disciples will see right through his flimsy convictions and find more excuses for not living according to his exhortations. Of course, raising up elders of this caliber first requires that the missionary himself be such a man shaped by theological clarity and personal conviction (cf. Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:21–23).

Local church leadership must make great pains to be the kinds of examples their people should imitate. Living for Christ, and if necessary, dying for him as martyrs, is the biblical antidote to any local church member who self-identifies as a victim of the corrupt, persecuting world. The indigenous pastor must teach radical sacrifice to his people, no matter how oppressed or materially challenged they may be (cf. 2 Cor 8:1–5). The eschatological passages on reward provide the kind of daily motivation to live and serve the King with an unwavering heart despite earthly circumstances (Dan 12:3; Matt 5:10–12; 16:27; 25:20–23; 1 Cor 3:8, 11–15; Phil 3:14; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 5:3; Rev 22:12).

Furthermore, certainty of the millennial kingdom in which Christ is physically present enables radical sacrifice because of the confidence it engenders for a

future of peace and plenty. And beyond the blessing and prosperity of the millennium, believers are promised the ultimate comfort of a sin-free world—in the new heaven and new earth He will wipe away every tear (Rev 21:4; cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28).

3. The missionary *must not* prioritize activities that compete with or compromise the mission of the church.

Basic Christian duty must at least include upholding human dignity, maintaining a godly reputation in practical dealings with government, and responsibly preserving the environment as a stewardship. Thus, from one perspective, social, political, and environmental activities can be good ways to testify to the upright moral and societal conduct befitting a disciple of Christ. Dispensational missionaries, however, must discern ways in which even good activities can exceed the biblical mandate and betray the missiology that derives from their hermeneutic.

Faithfulness in missionary service can be measured by the correlation between prophecy and practice. Assigning environmental priority over church planting, for example, would show no correlation between prophecy and practice. The earth itself groans for renewal, but the renewal will only come in the millennium (Rom 8:18–22). No man can fully realize the reverse of the curse on the earth in this age; only the God-Man can fulfill bring renewal in the future (cf. Isa 35:1–2; 65:21–22, 25; Joel 3:18).

Dispensational missiology also decries the problems of viewing social justice and political restoration as the work of the church. Walking in the light of God might be the present reality of some individuals from many nations, but in the millennium the nations, no longer under the deception of Satan (Rev 20:3), will flock to the city of Jerusalem to apply Christ's justice in their governments (Isa 2:2–5; cf. 60:3). Christ will teach God's law to them from his seat in Jerusalem as the head of all

world governments (2:3), and he will judge the political and legal cases they bring to him (2:4). His justice will seem right to the nations, such that they apply his law and become peaceful nations (2:4). Yet, today, the nations are not submitted to the lordship of Christ but are submitted to the deceiver who rules over the whole world (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2; cf. Rev 12:9).

It is important, therefore, for the missionary to ask whether his involvement in a particular environmental, social, or political cause competes for time and resources with evangelistic and discipleship strategies that are in line with the dispensational eschatology.⁴⁹ If so, the activity risks shifting the missionary's focus from urgent gospel proclamation to a pragmatic "Christianization" effort. In such a case the missionary will have ignored the eschatological reality with a misplaced zeal, and must work to realign his "holistic mission" efforts with the true work of the church.⁵⁰ If the aid the missionary provides

⁴⁹ Joel James and Brian Biedebach, long-term missionaries to Southern Africa report on "holistic missions" from the front lines with the following assessment: "Social action projects are like black holes—they have a habit of sucking in all the ecclesiastical resources within reach of their gravitational pull. While the theory states that the gospel, preaching, and the church are the main things, in regard to budgets, planning, staff, and effort, what's actually first is all too clear" (Joel James and Brian Biedebach, "Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions, *The Master's Seminary Journal* 25, no. 1 [Spring 2014]: 36).

James and Biedebach also comment that the increasing connection between social justice and gospel ministry in the church has led to confusion by those involved in promoting and supporting the mission of the church: "Pastors and missions committees barely seem aware of the distinction between missionaries who focus on social action and missionaries who focus on Bible translation, theological training, church planting, and gospel proclamation" (*ibid.*, 33).

⁵⁰ As a basic guideline, any specifically non-evangelistic, non-disciple-making activity that can be better conducted by a local government ought to be done through the local government, or by a non-governmental office (NGO) tasked with executing the program. From a more spiritual perspective, the dispensational missionary must be sure that the activities of

does not fit squarely into the church planting motif, then his activities do not fit squarely with Scripture.⁵¹ He must change course quickly, because the Lord could return at any time, and he will have to give an account of his stewardship.

Conclusion

Promoting a dispensational eschatology as the basis for a faithful missiology is not only reasonable but right. A consistently literal approach to interpreting prophecy provides a strong theological framework with a clear eschatological trajectory from which to develop missiological teaching and practice. It could be said that a “dispensational missiology” today is the continuation of the missionary strategy employed by the apostles. Several NT passages highlight the attitude and priorities befitting the missionary, and set a standard from which to evaluate field activities. In this way, dispensationalism provides not only interpretive clarity concerning the text, but direction for today’s practices. The living Word jumps off the page and onto the field!

Hopefully this preliminary attempt to formulate a “dispensational missiology” will lead to other treatments that look both behind and ahead, to the history and the future of

establishing Third World hospitals, irrigation projects, and cleaning polluted environments, for example, serve legitimate kingdom purposes in this dispensation.

⁵¹ Meeting temporal, physical needs should be primarily an act of spiritual compassion with the goal of leading people to Jesus, the Bread of Life, who met the needs of the hungry and the sick (Matt 14:15–21; 15:30–38) not only for the temporary good of the people but to proclaim the gospel (John 6:26–27, 35–38). James and Biedebach conclude for their African context: “Long after the AIDS orphans have grown up, the wells have been blocked with sand, and the medical clinics have closed due to a lack of Western funding, the people of Africa will need churches to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. But if the Western church continues to send missionaries focused on social action, who will plant and pastor those churches? The church in Africa and around the world can flourish, but it takes the right kind of national leaders, and from the West, it takes the right kind of missionaries doing what only Christians can do” (ibid., 50).

missiology. It would be helpful to discuss the historic missionary service by dispensationalists over the last century and a half. How did the early faith missions and early Christian Zionists apply the dispensational hermeneutic to the work of the church across the globe? Was their ethos and practice compatible with this “dispensational missiology”? Likewise, it would be useful to analyze the history of non-dispensational missionary efforts to see areas of missiological contrast. Did employing a different interpretive method for prophecy lead to different goals, strategies, and results on the field? Have revisions to non-dispensational theological systems over time changed the tenets and practices of mission?

As to the direction of mission theory and practice, further work needs to be done to challenge today’s prevalent contextualization practices in light of the eschatological teaching of Scripture. One example is immediately within reach: dispensational missiology confronts “felt need” evangelism strategies and calls for their revision. In reaction to the cultural and spiritual felt needs of a society or people group, it is common practice to substitute the clear proclamation of the gospel for roundtable dialogue and a variety of alternatives to direct, propositional evangelism, which may include socially-oriented programs which do little more than provide secular aid under the Christian banner of “mercy.”⁵² Such missions efforts are tragically misplaced in view of Christ’s return, because when he comes he will judge every person who remains in his sin (Rom 2:6–8), and will judge the missionary as to his gospel priority (2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 2:5; cf. Rom 14:10–12). Truly loving sinners means placing socio-cultural felt needs in subjection to “ultimate

⁵² For example, individual evangelism stands in stark contrast to the tenets of liberation theology, particularly in Latin America, where the ultimate eschatological goal is the complete man in a complete society, a people group with limitless potential to rise above their current oppression through the restructuring of socio-economic and political structures. For discussion of the eschatology of liberation theology, see Emilio A. Núñez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 273–75.

needs, those seen from God's perspective."⁵³ The missionary must labor to make unashamed workmen of all disciples, no matter how difficult the task. The Lord is coming quickly (Rev 22:20), and one day, when all the nations worship the one true God in spirit and in truth, the missionary will see "the triumph of hope realized."⁵⁴

⁵³ Tim Matheny, *Reaching the Arabs—A Felt Need Approach* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), 153.

⁵⁴ Peters, *Biblical Theology of Missions*, 326.