

WHERE DO WE BEGIN? - II

Jack C. Scott, Jr.

In our last article we stressed the need to begin at the right place in all of our studies. Also, it was stressed that a great deal of the misunderstanding that has arisen in the study of eschatology is directly attributable to failing to deal with two specific areas in particular that are always involved with the study of any eschatological issue. These two areas are (1) the time statements made regarding these events, and (2) the use of comparative biblical terminology.

This series of articles, while intended to bring benefit to all who might read it, is specifically directed toward those holding to the traditional "amillennial" view of biblical eschatology. It will not be the scope of this series, therefore, to answer every question that may arise from those of other millennial views. It is realized that other questions would also arise from someone holding a dispensational premillennial view of eschatology. Those questions will certainly be dealt with later in other articles.

We will begin with the discussion of the "time statements," that, to this writer, present the most cogent argument for the "Preterist" view of what is called "Realized Eschatology." The most brief and easy way to define realized eschatology is to state that we believe that the matters of eschatology (i.e., last things), rather than referring to the end of the material creation at the "end of time," are referring to the "end" and "last things" of the development of God's "Scheme of Redemption." Therefore, rather than ending this world (material creation) as we know it, eschatology is the teaching of the completion of God's New Covenant creation (i.e., the New World of the Spirit vs. the old fleshly world of the Mosaic law; the New Jerusalem vs. the old Jerusalem; the New Heavens and Earth of the New Covenant vs. the Old Heavens and Earth of the Old Covenant; etc.) through the consummated work of Christ and the apostolic ministry of the Holy Spirit.

It is agreed by both the amillennialist and the preterist that it is the "Second Coming of Christ" that is the consummation of biblical eschatology. The difference being that the amillennialist believes that at the "future" return of Christ, the universe will be destroyed (as per 2 Pet.3), the great judgment will take place (as per Matt.24:35-25:1ff.), and that Christ will then "turn over" His kingdom and rule to God, and take His place with us, before the throne of God, throughout eternity (as per 1 Cor.15:24-28).

Whereas, in contrast to this view, the preterist believes that the return of Christ was taught to be a first century return, was expected by all New Testament saints to be fulfilled imminently in their time, and indeed took place in 70 A.D., when Christ spiritually rendered final judgment on the "heavens and the earth" (i.e., the "world") of the Old Covenant system, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Rather than bringing to an end His reign as the amillennialist teaches, the preterist believes that His return was the final act in the completion of Christ's "eternal reign and kingdom" (Dan.2:44; 7:14,27; Lk.1:33; et al.). He does not give up his reign. Rather, having brought man back into a right relationship with the Father, and having destroyed the powers of sin and death, He, with the Father, reigns victoriously over His eternal kingdom (Jn.14:1-23; 17:1-5; Rom.5:6-21; 1 Cor.15:24-28).

All can see that this is a detailed and involved discussion, and could go on for some time and not produce very fruitful results between the two views until some common, indisputable foundations can be established. This writer believes strongly that an honest evaluation of the time statements made with regard to the return of Christ will lay those foundations and will end the debate. Let it be stressed in another way; regardless of what the return of Christ means, including what the judgment entails, and what the resurrection involves, if the Bible is very "specific" about the time in history that the return of Christ was to take place, then all of these concurrent events that would happen at His return would have to take place at that time and no other!

The question remains, "is the Bible specific about the time frame of Christ's

return or non-specific?" If the historical framework is specified, then these events must be placed in that time frame. If one does not place them in their inspired time frame, one has impugned inspiration! If the time indicators for the return of Christ are specific (and they are as will be seen), then if one's views of these eschatological events will not fit the time frame, the problem is not with the Bible's time frame or the description of the events, but rather, the problem is to be found in one's preconceived ideas and presumptions regarding the nature of Christ's return, and the eschatological events concurrent with that return.

It is this writer's firm conviction that the time statements relative to the return of Christ are very specific and very understandable. What we must then do is take several of the most plain time statements relative to Christ's return and determine what those statements require. These will by no means be an exhaustion of all the passages that could be addressed, just the clearest.

This writer feels very strongly that we have accurately and consistently interpreted such time references as "at the door," "nigh," "soon to come to pass," and "at hand," in relationship to the imminent establishment of the kingdom of Christ (Matt.3:2; 4:17, as well as what these words "always" mean in other non-eschatological passages), in our denial of the premillennial postulate that the kingdom of Christ has not come. The sad inconsistency comes when we deny that the plain and clear identical terms and references have the same meaning when found in a context dealing with the return of Christ.

If these terms demand an "imminent" time frame in the context of the coming kingdom as well as all other times they are used, how can it be said by the amillennialist (or the premillennialist) that they don't require an imminent time fulfillment with reference to the return of Christ? The fact is, they do mean and require the same thing in "every" context, that is, a very short period of time, not centuries or millennia. The honest Bible student must admit the import of these terms and not contrive some other meaning for them. The only time this is necessary, as is the case with the Parousia (i.e., return, second coming, arrival, presence of Christ, all terms describing the same biblical event), is when one's predisposed ideas about

the Parousia of Christ will not fit the time demands. Such, however, is not biblical exegesis (to bring out the meaning), rather it is eisegesis (reading into the text our meaning). It places the proverbial "cart before the horse." As expositors, we must let the words have their biblical, consistent meaning, then bring our conclusions into harmony with the Bible, not the other way around! It is encouraged that the reader do a word study from the original language on such terms as "at hand" (engus), "soon to come to pass," as well as the other referents that modify the time of these events.

Before progressing into a sampling of these various time statements, this writer feels compelled to introduce one more foundational law of biblical hermeneutics (i.e., the science of Bible study). That law being: WHEN IT IS WRITTEN IT IS INSPIRED - PERIOD!! To put it colloquially, man has no right to put a question mark(?) where God placed an exclamation point(!). This writer is aware that most of his readers are saying, "well that's so simple as to be absurd, and needing no comment." Please remember that as we examine the "specifically" worded time statements with reference to the return of Christ, as well as other concurrent areas of biblical eschatology. Where God gives a "specific" time statement, man cannot give a "generic" application to it.

This writer would like to "go out on a limb" and submit a challenge both to himself and to the reader of these words. The challenge being, that every major element of Christological and Soteriological eschatology is historically limited by a "specific" time constraint. In other words, the specific time statements lucidly identify the historical time frame in which these events must take place. It will be this writer's obligation, having made this challenge, to prove this. It will be the obligation of those who oppose the preterist view to show harmony within their view, that allows millennia to pass without the fulfillment of these great eschatological events, and the constraints of the time statements. In other words, they must show that there are "NO TIME CONSTRAINTS" in order to continue to espouse their positions. And they must be able to build a biblical case for a generic application to the time statements that we will examine.

We will now begin dealing with some of the passages that hold these specific time referents in relationship specifically to the Parousia of Christ,

of which a great deal is said in the New Testament, and regarding which there was a great deal of anticipation by the Christians of that day. But first one last admonition. It must be our primary goal to first ascertain what these instructions meant to those who were the original recipients of these writings. Not until we have done this will we ever know how to apply these teachings correctly to our own lives and times. These letters were not written to twentieth-century Christians from America, using our language or our traditional application of their language. It was written mainly in Hebrew and Greek to people 2000+ years ago in the common way that "they" used the language. The Bible will never be understood correctly unless this cardinal rule is remembered. Now to some of the more pertinent passages.

1. Matthew 10:23: "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." I mention this passage at this time to demonstrate that it cannot be said that the disciples were not taught to expect the return of Jesus in their life time. This is a passage that most commentators really wrestle with. Many of the most conservative scholars attribute this passage to the coming of Christ in 70 A.D., which is certainly this writer's view. Others fail to identify a specific day and just say it is a "hard passage." But what is it that makes it hard? Almost all rule out that it could refer to Christ's coming in any fashion prior to His death, during the "limited commission," because of the events and persecutions that Christ says will take place before His coming. All careful scholars acquainted with the historical facts will readily admit that nothing prior to the death of Jesus fits these prophecies (e.g. The Pulpit Commentary on Matthew). So, anything prior to the death of Christ is ruled out.

Then there is the clear factor that He was foretelling events that were surely to happen to the apostles during their lifetime. So there is absolutely no reason to insist that this is something beyond their life span as some would like to postulate, or that this is somehow referring to a yet future coming of Christ from our present time. Solid reasoning for applying this to the Lord's coming in 70 A.D. is buttressed when one compares what Jesus here foretells with what He foretells about the destruction of Jerusalem and the events to precede it (Matt.24:9-11). To the unbiased, it is a perfect parallel.

2. Matt.16:27-28: "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to His works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (see also

Mk.8:39-9:1; Lk.9:26-27). The clear and forceful impact of this context upon the traditional position is staggering. The reason we use this context rather than its companion in Mark, is that this one is virtually always avoided in favor of the Markan account. This is fascinating indeed. The Markan context is appealed to often in coordination with Acts 1:8 and 2:1-4 to teach that the kingdom of Christ came in its full power on the Day of Pentecost. The argument basically stated looks like this:

Major premise: "The kingdom would come with power" (Mark 9:1).

Minor premise: "But the Power was to come when the Holy Spirit came" (Acts 1:8).

Conclusion: "Therefore, when the Spirit came with Power on the Day of Pentecost, the kingdom came with Power" (Acts 2:1-4).

It is more than just a passing coincidence this writer has noticed, that whenever this method is employed to teach the full establishment of the kingdom on Pentecost, that virtually never do the writers employ or even allude to the Matthean passage. Dear reader, ask yourself why such is the case. Read the context of Matthew and the answer will be obvious. To appeal to the Matthean context even though it is surely the parallel to Marks's, devastates the traditional construct in numerous ways. Not that the Markan account will do any less when not removed from the last verse of the eighth chapter. Note the following:

A. First of all, and most obvious, let it be stated that the "Spirit coming to give the apostles power" to begin the preaching of the kingdom and the establishing of the Church is an entirely different discussion and subject than that of the "kingdom coming with power." Just because the word "power" is used doesn't mean that these are synonomous events. This writer absolutely believes that the Holy Spirit came with power on the Day of Pentecost, and the gospel was preached for the first time. But the Markan context prophesied the coming of the "kingdom with power," not the "Spirit". The Spirit's coming in power was the prophecy of Jesus in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8. This writer positively affirms that the work of the

Spirit that would bring the fulfilled kingdom to mankind was begun that day. But to say that it was begun is not to say that it was finished, or that there was nothing left to do after Pentecost that was necessary to fulfill its coming in power. And to say that the Spirit began His work of power is not the same thing as saying the kingdom came with power. These are two different issues.

B. Next, all must admit that the Matthean context as well as Mark's and Luke's, do not just talk about the "kingdom coming with power," they teach that the "Son of Man will come in His kingdom." There is a very big problem in this for the holders of the traditional view of a yet future coming of Christ. One can begin to see the major difficulty therein. In what way did the Son of Man come? Is this not Jesus Himself, foretelling His own second coming? The only rational ground on which to deny such is simply one's preconceived ideas about the nature of the coming and that this cannot be the time frame for it. The coming of Christ in this context simply does not fit the traditional view. Such is why the Markan text is almost exclusively used; the language "appears" to be more helpful to the traditional view in that it does not directly mention Christ's coming, just His kingdom. But Mark 8:38 does, and that is in the immediate context and relays the coming of Christ for the same purpose. (Dear reader, please remember that the breakdown of the text into chapters and verses is a later invention of man and cannot be trusted as to where one thought ends and another begins).

C. This brings us to the most irreconcilable aspect of this passage with the traditional view. "For the Son of Man will come...with His angels and...will reward each according to His own works" (Matt.16:27). Let there be no mistake, this is clearly a judgment passage. Christ is foretelling His own coming and judgment. When pressed the traditional amillennialist will respond that this is the second coming of Christ yet future to our time. But the honest reader can see that it takes absolute "eisegetical" (reading into) gymnastics to take two verses in all three synoptic contexts that immediately precede and follow one another, that were never meant to be separated, and make the first one (i.e., Matt. 16:27; Mark 8:39; Luke 9:26) refer to a coming of Christ 2000+ years from the time it was spoken; and then take the following verse in all three contexts back to the first century for a coming at Pentecost. Jesus was clearly dealing with one event and one judgment (the reader is encouraged at this time to stop and read Matt.24:29-33; Mk.13:24-27; Lk.21:25-33, then ask himself why it is that these words of Christ which are so obviously parallel to His words in Matt.16:27-28 are almost universally applied to the destruction of Jerusalem at 70 A.D.; yet in our texts under consideration even though parallel, are dissected and applied to the "end of time" and the "Day of Pentecost?"). The only person that can't see this is the person that has already decided what he wants the judgment of Christ to be, and a first-century return of

Christ simply doesn't fit that person's presumption. This first-century application is also in complete harmony with the context of Revelation, the sixth through the fourteenth chapters. Dear reader, without being intimidated by the signs and symbols, read these chapters and you will clearly be able to see that the completion of the Gospel system, the full establishment of the kingdom of Christ, and His coming with his angels in judgment are all concurrent events, not events separated by millennia (note especially 6:9-17; 11:7-19; 12:7-10; 14:6-20).

The only other alternative that is able to harmonize these events in a first century-context is the preterist view. Does the Bible anywhere teach the coming of Christ in judgment at the same time as the coming of His kingdom in its fulfilled state? First of all, one can see that the passages already examined demand such an application. Secondly, the teaching of Christ in other eschatological contexts completely supports this. This writer believes that the whole context of Matthew 24-25 is in complete support of this motif. This writer is fully aware of the debate on the dichotomizing of Matthew 24, making the first part (i.e., 1-34) refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and the second part (i.e., 35-51) refer to the end of the world (the reader is encouraged to compare Matt.24 with Luke 17:20-37, and one will immediately recognize that there is no way to divide Matthew's text as referring to two different subjects separated by at least two millennia). Regardless of this debate (which will need to be addressed in other articles and certainly will be), the first part of Matthew (24:10-34; actually 23:34-24:34), teaches the very same thing that we are addressing in our present discussion.

The passage that is the absolute last word on the subject, however, is the twenty-first chapter of Luke. It is an understood truth that this chapter is the Lukan parallel to Matthew 24. Luke's procession of thought cannot be missed and certainly must be stressed. First of all, it is a first-century context with a first-century fulfillment (vss.5-21). Secondly, it is clearly a passage teaching the coming of Christ in judgment (22-28). Thirdly, it is a passage that distinctly and lucidly teaches the coming and judgment of Christ at the same time as the full coming of the Kingdom (29-36; note especially verse 31).

Jesus said, in relationship to His coming and judgment upon the Old Covenant system and Jerusalem, "So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near" (21:31). Although this writer has heard some clever manipulations of this text in order to harmonize it with the idea that the kingdom was fully established on the Day of Pentecost, and so that the judgment concept can be evaded, there is no way in the world to linguistically (grammatically or syntactically), separate all these great events from that 70 A.D. time frame.

D. We started off trying to find an explanation for the time problem of linking the coming kingdom with the judgment of Christ. The traditional view of the full establishment of the kingdom on Pentecost and a yet future judgment of Christ can never be harmonized with the clear teachings of these texts which we have examined. The preterist view is, I believe, the only way of harmonizing these great passages in their first-century "Redemptive-Historical" context.

In conclusion, let it be stated, that it is believed that the holder of the traditional amillennial view of eschatology is left with some tough choices. Because of the clear time constraints of these passages one must either: (1) adopt a "Pentecost-judgment" view, meaning that the judgment took place at Pentecost, or (2) adopt some form of the premillennial view of a future coming of Christ in judgment when the kingdom will also come, or (3) admit that the preterist view must at least be considered. For in truth, it is the only view capable of harmonizing these great events, taking nothing away from any of them in their "redemptive-historical" significance. (To be continued).

2301 Monte Verde Dr.
Pinole, CA 94564
