

## **Pentecostal Eschatology: Why Amillennialism is a Better Fit**

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*Abstract:* This comparison of premillennial and amillennial readings of key portions of Revelation concludes that, at each point, the amillennial approach uniquely affirms Pentecostal values. With its call for the church to embrace its identity as a Spirit-empowered, prophetic community in Revelation 11, its clear presentation of the finality of judgment in Revelation 14, its emphasis on the presence of the kingdom and realized eschatology in Revelation 20, and, finally, its breathtaking vision of the consummation of God’s redemptive plan in Revelation 21-22, the amillennial approach provides a firm foundation for Pentecostal theology and practice. These ‘Pentecostal’ themes are missed or minimized in premillennial readings, which relegate the fulfillment of these texts to the distant, and often post-*parousia*, future.

*Key words:* Pentecostal, Eschatology, Premillennial, Amillennial, Dispensational, Holy Spirit, Judgment.

The eschatological perspective of our Pentecostal forebearers was shaped by a dispensational reading of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> This dispensational orientation formed the apocalyptic vision of the fundamentalist (or proto-evangelical) movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the crucible in which the Pentecostal movement was forged.<sup>2</sup> This eschatological framework demanded a premillennial perspective. A literal millennium following Christ’s return was essential for two reasons. First, the millennium provided the necessary time and place for the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel. According to a dispensational reading, these prophecies must be fulfilled. Second, the premillennial position flowed naturally from a literal, sequential reading of

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<sup>1</sup> R. Menzies, *The End of History: Pentecostals and a Fresh Approach to the Apocalypse* (Springfield, MO: ACPT Press, 2022), 5-46.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy P. Weber, ‘Dispensational and Historic Premillennialism as Popular Millennialist Movements,’ in Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to ‘Left Behind’ Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), Loc 542; Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostal and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 251-52.

Revelation 20. This kind of literal, straightforward approach to the text was deemed essential if the errors of modernism were to be avoided.<sup>3</sup>

However, these perspectives have been rejected by a majority of contemporary evangelical scholars. On the one hand, it has become increasingly evident that the New Testament authors interpret the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel's restoration through the new lens of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and exaltation.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there has been growing recognition that a woodenly literal approach to Revelation actually serves to distort John's message, which comes to us in a particular literary genre (apocalyptic) and at a particular moment in history.<sup>5</sup> Since modernism no longer poses a major threat to today's evangelical Christians, the conservative insistence on the 'literal' reading now seems anachronistic.

This shift in perspective raises an important question for contemporary Pentecostals who have inherited an eschatology grounded in these questionable assumptions. Does the premillennial position truly offer strong support for Pentecostal theology and practice? Although the vast majority of recent Pentecostal scholars have rejected dispensationalism, almost all of them continue to affirm a premillennial approach. Daniel Isgrigg, Matthew Thompson, Larry McQueen, Peter Althouse, Robby Waddell, Chris Thomas, and Frank Macchia in various ways, all call for a reassessment of long-held Pentecostal views on eschatology, but virtually all of them continue to adhere to a premillennial perspective.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, A. B. Simpson, *The Four-fold Gospel* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2014 [original, 1890]), Loc 680.

<sup>4</sup> Menzies, *End of History*, 22-26.

<sup>5</sup> G. E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 171-94; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Manila: OMF, 1997), 231-45; and Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 99-151.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel D. Isgrigg, *Imagining the Future: The Origin, Development, and Future of Assemblies of God Eschatology* (Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, 2021); Matthew K. Thompson, *Kingdom Come: Revisioning Pentecostal Eschatology* (Dorset, UK: Deo, 2010); Larry R. McQueen, *Toward a Pentecostal Eschatology* (Dorset, U.K. Deo, 2012); Peter Althouse, 'Left Behind—Fact or Fiction: Ecumenical Dilemmas of the Fundamentalist Millenarian Tensions in Pentecostalism,' *JPT* 13.2 (2005), 187–207; Peter Althouse and Robby Waddell, eds., *Perspectives in Pentecostal Eschatologies: World Without End* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010); Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation* (Dorset, U.K.: Deo, 2006); John Christopher Thomas and Frank D. Macchia, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). See excellent reviews of the literature in Isgrigg, *Imagining the Future*, 19-40 and McQueen, *Pentecostal Eschatology*, 5-59. A notable exception to the premillennial trend is Australian Pentecostal scholar, Jon Newton. Newton acknowledges that 'nearly all classical Pentecostal denominations are officially premillennial,'

In the paper that follows I shall argue that the amillennial position is actually more supportive of a robust and fully-formed Pentecostal theology. My argument is *not* rooted in the commonly voiced critique of dispensationalism that its fragmented view of salvation-history is inherently cessationist. In my book, *The End of History*, I argue that dispensational theology fundamentally is not about dispensations; rather, it is a hermeneutic, a way of reading the Bible.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, our Pentecostal forebearers had little difficulty fitting their own Pentecostal approach into the dispensational schemes bandied about in their day. Therefore, I believe critiquing dispensationalism as inherently cessationist is merely scratching the surface. We need to dig deeper and offer a positive alternative. That is precisely what I intend to do in the following pages. I shall demonstrate that amillennialism is better suited to support Pentecostal values than premillennialism by comparing the manner in which the two approaches interpret key passages in the book Revelation. These key texts and related issue are:

- Revelation 11: Spirit-Empowered Witness
- Revelation 14: The Reality of Judgment
- Revelation 20: The Presence of the Kingdom
- Revelation 21-22: Our Future Hope

Before we begin our study of Revelation, however, it will be important to identify what I mean when I speak of ‘Pentecostals’ or ‘Pentecostal’ values and theology. Pentecostals are, broadly speaking, thoroughly evangelical. Thus, Pentecostals affirm the authority of the Bible, that Christ is the unique Savior, and therefore that evangelism is an important component of Christian discipleship. Pentecostals now represent the vast majority of evangelical believers in many countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In spite of these affinities with the broader evangelical movement, Pentecostals typically affirm three distinctive doctrinal convictions. Pentecostals believe: (1) the New Testament serves as a model for contemporary Christian life and ministry (thus, gifts of the Spirit are relevant for the church today); (2) baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) is a post-conversion enabling for ministry; and (3) (not all but many affirm) that speaking in tongues marks this experience, baptism in the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

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but states ‘there is no theological necessity for this connection’ (*A Pentecostal Commentary on Revelation* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stoack, 2021], 48).

<sup>7</sup> Menzies, *The End of History*, 9-46.

<sup>8</sup> Although early charismatics, such as Dennis Bennett, were thoroughly Pentecostal, the term ‘charismatic’ is now often used to speak more broadly of Christians who emphasize the power and gifts of the Spirit (essentially points 1 and 2 above) but are more flexible with respect to the relationship between tongues and Spirit baptism (point 3). For more on Pentecostal identity and

With these Pentecostal affirmations in mind, let us examine the key texts from Revelation noted above.

### **Revelation 11: Spirit-Empowered Witness**

Pentecostals rightly emphasize Luke's vision of the church as a community of prophets, inspired by the Spirit to bear bold witness for Jesus. This is why in my book, *Pentecost: This Story is Our Story*, I stated that one of the reasons for the remarkable growth of Pentecostal churches over the past one hundred years is our 'missional DNA'.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in the book of Revelation John offers a similar vision of the church as a community of Spirit-empowered prophets. This is nowhere more clearly seen than in the narrative and theological 'center' of this prophetic letter, Revelation 11.

If the vision of the throne room in Revelation 4-5 is the foundation of John's prophetic letter, then Revelation 11:1-12, with its picture of the two witnesses, is its center. Here we find the message of the entire letter summarized in short space. The structure of the letter includes three series of seven judgments: seven seals; seven trumpets; and seven bowls. Amillennialists affirm that each series describes the period between the first and second coming of Christ with a specific theological message in view.

- 7 Seals (Rev 6-8):           The church will suffer, but it will not experience God's wrath.
- 7 Trumpets (Rev 8-11):   The church has a mission to fulfill
- 7 Bowls (Rev 15-16):     The church will be vindicated and victorious

So, the church follows in Christ's footsteps. We are called to face suffering; but, by persevering and remaining faithful, we will be victorious. Thus, the message of the entire book of Revelation is beautifully summarized in Revelation 11:1-12.

In Revelation 11:1-12 we are introduced to 'two witnesses' who prophesy with great power. When their testimony is completed, the two witnesses are attacked and killed by the beast. Yet, after a short period of time, God's breath reanimates them and the resurrected witnesses ascend into heaven, vindicated and victorious. The vindication and victory of the witnesses is marked by the judgment on earth that immediately follows their ascension to heaven.

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theology, see R. Menzies, *Pentecost: This Story is Our Story* (Springfield, MO: GPH, 2013) and *Christ-Centered: The Evangelical Nature of Pentecostal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Menzies, *Pentecost*, 117-22.

Prophecy plays a dominant role in this brief narrative.<sup>10</sup> The two witnesses prophesy and the miracles they perform are modeled after two of the greatest prophets in Israel's history, Moses and Elijah. The two witnesses suffer the fate of the prophets: they are rejected and killed. Yet, in terms reminiscent of the ultimate prophet, Jesus, they are resurrected by God and ascend into heaven.

Who are these two witnesses? This passage has a long history of interpretation and numerous identities have been proposed for the two witnesses.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, amillennialists uniformly identify the two witnesses as symbols representing the church. There are good reasons to read the text in this way.

The structure of Revelation suggests that the church is the focus of this passage. The interludes that appear between the sixth and seventh seals in Revelation 7:1-17 (the 144,000 and the Great Multitude) parallel the interludes that appear between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets in Revelation 10:1-11:13 (the Bitter Scroll and the Two Witnesses). As Robby Waddell notes, these interludes highlight a recurring theme, 'namely the people of God and their polemical relationship with evil.'<sup>12</sup> Whereas the interludes in Revelation 7 focus on the security of the church as the people of God—they are now sealed so they will not experience God's wrath and their eternal destiny as members of a transnational worshipping community is assured—so also the interludes in Revelation 10:1-11:13 feature the church, although now the focus is the church's ministry in the world.

John also explicitly identifies the two witnesses as 'the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth' (Rev 11:4). John's imagery has been influenced by Zechariah 4:1-14, which records Zechariah's vision of a golden lampstand and two olive trees. In John's vision, the single lampstand has been transformed into two, and the two olive trees are interpreted as these two lampstands. Since John elsewhere uses lampstands to represent churches (Rev 1:12) and he specifically states that 'the seven golden lampstands' are 'the seven churches' (Rev 1:20), it seems clear that here also John has the church in view. Although John speaks of two rather than seven lampstands, the number is probably due to the fact that valid testimony requires two witnesses (Deut 19:15). It is evident, then, that the two witnesses represent the church as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Just as the lampstand symbolized the entire temple in Zechariah's prophecy, so here the two witnesses symbolize the entire church.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Waddell, *The Spirit of Revelation*, 171.

<sup>11</sup> For a survey of these identifications see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 599-603.

<sup>12</sup> Waddell, *Spirit of Revelation*, 150.

<sup>13</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 184.

<sup>14</sup> Waddell, *Spirit of Revelation*, 174.

The two witnesses are described as powerful prophets who boldly prophesy in the face of opposition. Initially, they destroy their antagonists with fire from their mouths, reminiscent of Elijah's destruction of the soldiers of King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:10). They also have power 'to shut up the sky' and 'to turn the waters into blood' (Rev 11:6). The former judgment is an allusion to the drought induced by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1; the latter, to the plague Moses inflicted upon the Egyptians in Exodus 7:14-24. After the two prophets complete their task of bearing witness, the demonic beast from the abyss kills them. The inhabitants of the earth gloat over their corpses, which are left unburied in the streets. But, as we have noted, God vindicates the prophets. They are brought back to life, and as their persecutors watch in terror, they ascend into heaven. The allusions to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ should not be missed (Rev 11:8).<sup>15</sup>

John's message now comes into focus. In Revelation 11:1-12 he issues 'a prophetic call to the people of God to be faithful witnesses'.<sup>16</sup> In the midst of opposition and persecution, John urges the church to rely on the Holy Spirit who, through a prophetic enabling, will grant them strength to faithfully bear witness to God and the Lamb. In the end, they will be vindicated and victorious. John understands that this witness must and will be carried out: "'not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,'" says the Lord' (Zech 4:6).

This is a strong Pentecostal message. Indeed, as I have noted, John's vision of the church in Revelation is strikingly similar to that offered by Luke in Acts. Both Luke and John affirm that the church is a community of prophets, called and empowered to bear witness for Jesus.<sup>17</sup> But, it must be acknowledged that this Johannine 'Pentecostal' vision of the church is largely lost by premillennial readers. Whereas amillennialists read this passage as a description of the church in the inter-advent period (and thus a description of the church today), premillennialists tend to read this passage as a prophecy of events that will take place *in the future*, shortly before the end, and often with little or no connection to the church. For

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<sup>15</sup> Waddell aptly states, 'The entire ministry of the witnesses can now be seen as a replica of the ministry of Christ' (*Spirit of Revelation*, 181).

<sup>16</sup> Waddell, *Spirit of Revelation*, 174.

<sup>17</sup> The Paraclete promises (John 14-16) appear to John's way of speaking about the prophetic anointing received by the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. See R. Menzies, 'John's Place in the Development of Early Christian Pneumatology,' in Wonsuk Ma and R. Menzies, eds., *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Russell P. Spittler* (London: Continuum, 2004), 41-52. Note also that Richard Bauckham sees a distinction in Revelation between the ministry associated with the 'Seven Spirits' (from Zech. 4:1-14) and that of the Spirit, although both are inspired by the Holy Spirit. According to Bauckham, 'the Spirit speaks through the prophets to the churches; the seven Spirits address the whole world through the churches' (Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 118).

example, Premillennialist Stanley Horton sees the two witnesses as two Spirit-filled individuals who minister during the ‘Great Tribulation’.<sup>18</sup> George Ladd, an historic premillennialist, describes Revelation 11:1-12 as unrelated to the church, but rather ‘a prophecy of the preservation and ultimate salvation of the Jewish people’.<sup>19</sup> Although premillennialist Robert Mounce does view this passage as describing the church, he does not see it in relation to *our church, the church today*. Mounce understands ‘the entire section [Rev 11:1-12] to be symbolic of the fate of the witnessing church during *its final period* of opposition and persecution’. Furthermore, of Revelation 11:7, he states, ‘The scene is *the last epic struggle* between the kingdoms of the earth and the witnessing church.’<sup>20</sup>

The contrast is vivid. While the amillennial approach offers a powerful, Pentecostal reading of Revelation 11, the premillennial approach obscures John’s message. Whether a literal description of Jewish evangelists, a symbolic portrait of the preservation of the Jewish people, or a prophetic description of events that will take place shortly before the end, the relevance of this passage for John’s first-century church and our church is lost.

### **Revelation 14: The Reality of Judgment**

I write as a missionary and a key reason I was drawn to Revelation is that I am convinced our eschatology shapes our missiology. The early Pentecostals had a strong sense of urgency about ‘the mission’ because they believed that judgment was real and the time is short. Sadly, by focusing on rather peripheral issues (the nature of the tribulation and specific end-time scenarios), today we are missing the truly important issues confronting the church. Most recent studies on eschatology from the Pentecostal academy claim to be premillennial,<sup>21</sup> but either downplay or largely reject the notion that God will judge nonbelievers. God will transform and perfect creation, but the fate of people (including those outside of Christ) is generally understood in terms of God’s grace overwhelming judgment in the end.

Daniel Isgrigg’s recent book, *Imagining the Future*, is a good example of this tendency.<sup>22</sup> Isgrigg doesn’t seem to have much room for judgment, especially the judgment of people. His discussion of judgment emphasizes the purgative aspect of God’s judgment and implies that final judgment may be more akin to

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<sup>18</sup> Stanley M. Horton, *Ultimate Victory: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Springfield, MO: GPH, 1991), Loc 2598-2612, 2641.

<sup>19</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 150.

<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 218, 225 respectively (italics mine). For a similar perspective, see Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 176-187.

<sup>21</sup> Though, as I have noted, they are stridently anti-dispensational.

<sup>22</sup> Isgrigg, *Imagining the Future*.

sanctification than judgment as it is normally conceived.<sup>23</sup> Isgrigg writes, ‘By envisioning the final judgment as a final sanctifying work of the Spirit, it opens the possibility for judgment to be reconciliatory.’<sup>24</sup> The lostness of sinful humanity, the finality of judgment after death, and the urgency of proclaiming the gospel are all largely missing. With this diminished view of God’s holiness and judgment, Isgrigg follows a growing trend in the Pentecostal academy. Amos Yong, Frank Macchia, Chris Thomas, and Matthew Thompson all seem to be moving in this direction.<sup>25</sup>

In their commentary on Revelation, Thomas and Macchia suggest that during the millennium unbelievers will have another opportunity to repent and respond in faith to Christ.<sup>26</sup> Macchia’s incredibly optimistic vision of the end leads him to assert that ‘grace towers over judgment in Revelation’.<sup>27</sup> On this reading, one is left to wonder if judgment is really a serious concern after all.

In a similar vein, Matthew Thompson suggests that the order of the believer’s transformation in this life (justification, sanctification, Spirit baptism) is reversed after Christ’s second coming as the entire cosmos experiences a final, cosmic Spirit baptism, sanctification, and justification.<sup>28</sup> Although Thompson’s creative proposal highlights a number of helpful points, the value of his approach is limited by three factors: Thompson does not seriously engage the biblical text;<sup>29</sup> his understanding of Spirit baptism, following John Fletcher and nineteenth century Holiness teachers, is a confused mixture of holiness and empowering themes;<sup>30</sup> and he does not critically interact with Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>31</sup> Although Thompson does reject the incipient universalism in Moltmann’s writings, his

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<sup>23</sup> Isgrigg, *Imagining the Future*, 248-52.

<sup>24</sup> Isgrigg, *Imagining the Future*, 251. We are not told how this view of post-mortem sanctification and reconciliation is to be reconciled with Hebrews 9:27 or John 5:28-29.

<sup>25</sup> Amos Yong, *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 241-48, 267; Thomas and Macchia, *Revelation*; Thompson, *Kingdom Come*.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas and Macchia, *Revelation*, 354, 619. See also the views of Allan Anderson and Amos Yong, to whom I respond, in my article, ‘Judgment as a Motivation for Missions,’ *Journal of Youngsian Theology* 57 (2021): 7-27.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas and Macchia, *Revelation*, 621 (quote), 621-622.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom Come*. Thompson calls for Pentecostals to embrace an eschatology that is informed by a Wesleyan view of sanctification, Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of hope, and the Russian Orthodox perspective of Sergius Bulgakov.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 101 (Eph 1:14); 120, (‘all truth’ and John 14:26; 16:13); and 151 (Luke 12:6-7).

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 100-108, 120, 131.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 89-108.



rejection appears at the end of his work, almost as an aside.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, he embraces an inclusive position with regard to a theology of religions.<sup>33</sup> These limitations create considerable distance between Thompson's proposal and Pentecostal eschatology, which has been marked by a studious reading of the Bible, a sense of urgency regarding the mission of the church, and an understanding of the Pentecostal gift as the means by which the task of bearing witness to the world is carried forward in power. The premillennialist connection and pneumatological emphases cannot hide the great gulf that separates these very different visions of the end of history.

The movement toward incipient universalism is also found in the premillennial emphasis on the salvation of 'all Israel'. The restoration of Israel becomes the quintessential mark of the millennium and is often described as taking place in ways that can only be described as 'another gospel' (e.g., dual covenants).<sup>34</sup>

This tendency to minimize the finality of judgment after death undercuts the motivation for Pentecostal missions. However, a clear-eyed, amillennial reading of Revelation 12-14 presents a very different picture. An amillennial reading views Revelation 12-14 as presenting a picture of the cosmic conflict between the forces of the triune God and those of the Dragon and his beasts. The emphasis here is on the finality of judgment. In Revelation 13-14 John contrasts his descriptions of the Beast from the Sea, which represents the idolatrous social system of the world (Rev 13:1-10), and the Beast from the Earth, which symbolizes its message (Rev 13:11-17), with his descriptions of the Lamb and his followers, which represent God's society (Rev 14:1-5), and their message (Rev 14:6-13). The message of the followers of the Lamb is characterized by references to three angels and their corresponding proclamation: the Angel of Grace (Rev 14:6-7); the Angel of Doom (Rev 14:8); the Angel of Warning (Rev 14:9-11).

A: The Beast out of the Sea = the world's society (Rev 13:1-10)

B: The Beast out of the Earth = the world's message (Rev 13: 11-17)

A': The Lamb and his followers = God's society (Rev 14:1-5)

B': The Three Angels = God's message (Rev 14:6-11)

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<sup>32</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 160n74.

<sup>34</sup> Isgrigg (*Imagining the Future*, 241) quotes with approval Moltmann's cryptic statement, 'the church is eschatologically "parallel to Israel, and over against Israel"' (Moltman, *The Coming God*, 199).

This analysis of the structure of Revelation 13-14 helps clarify John's message. Here John describes the mission of the church, which centers on proclaiming the 'eternal gospel' (Rev 14:6), as offering the only alternative to eternal damnation, which is graphically described (Rev 14:10-11, 17-20). As John notes, the seriousness of this mission and the high (eternal) stakes involved call 'for patience endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus' (Rev 14:12).

Once again, the contrast between premillennial and amillennial readings of Revelation is stark. The former, particularly in their contemporary expressions, serve to obscure the reality and finality of God's judgment of the unrepentant.<sup>35</sup> The latter, in this case with respect to Revelation 12-14, emphasize the importance of proclaiming the 'eternal gospel'.

My purpose here is not to argue that premillennialism is incapable of conveying the seriousness of God's final judgment. Anyone who has watched the rapture-themed movies, *A Thief in the Night* (1972) or *A Distant Thunder* (1978), must acknowledge that, for all of its shortcomings, dispensational theology did generate considerable fear and, as a result, much-needed reflection about one's final destiny. Additionally, the early Pentecostals were all premillennialists and they were clearly gripped with a sense of urgency concerning the need to save the lost from an eternity of separation from God and torment.<sup>36</sup> No, my purpose here is more modest. I simply seek to highlight an important point: today's premillennialism is not your grandfather's version. Just because someone says that they are a premillennialist, this in no guarantee of fidelity to traditional Pentecostal doctrines or values.

### **Revelation 20: The Presence of the Kingdom**

Revelation 20 looms large in the debate between amillennialists and premillennialists. The central question, simply put, is this: How do the events described in Revelation 20 relate temporally to the description of Christ's second coming and his victory over his enemies found in Revelation 19:11-21? Premillennialists argue for chronological progression, linear movement forward. George Ladd states the matter directly, 'There is absolutely no hint of any recapitulation in [Rev] 20.'<sup>37</sup> So, premillennialists insist that Christ's second

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<sup>35</sup> More traditional premillennial readings of Revelation 14 typically interpret the passage as a description of future events that immediately precede the end (e.g., Horton, *Ultimate Victory*, Loc 3281).

<sup>36</sup> William D. Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 20, 24.

<sup>37</sup> G. E. Ladd, 'Historic Premillennialism,' in Robert Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 190.

coming (19:11-21) is followed by his millennial reign (20:1-6), which culminates in yet another Armageddon-like conflict when Satan and his followers are defeated (20:7-10). This victory then leads to the final judgment (20:11-15).

Amillennialists read the entire book of Revelation, and particularly this portion of it (Rev 20), very differently. They insist that John's narrative is characterized by a constant pattern of recapitulation. Anthony Hoekema, for example, affirms an approach he terms, 'progressive parallelism.'<sup>38</sup> Hoekema finds seven sections in Revelation which run parallel to each other, 'each of which depicts the church and the world from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of his second.'<sup>39</sup> Many variations on this same theme might be listed. Additionally, it should be noted that recapitulation in the book of Revelation is found on the micro-level—that is to say, within a number of the smaller, narrative units—as well as on the macro-level.<sup>40</sup>

My goal here is not to argue for one view over against the other. I have already attempted to do this in my book, *The End of History*.<sup>41</sup> Rather, I will highlight *the implications* that emerge from these divergent readings of Revelation. More specifically, I want to examine how the amillennial reading of Revelation 20 uniquely affirms, in Pentecostal fashion, a strong sense of *realized eschatology in this present age*.

A great example of this realized eschatology is found in the description of 'the binding of Satan' we encounter in Revelation 20:2. The key passage reads:

[An angel] seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound [*deō*] him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving [*planaō*] the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time (Rev 20:2-3).

Many interpreters look at our world today, wracked as it is by conflict, oppression, and sin, and conclude that there is no way that Satan can be currently 'bound'.

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<sup>38</sup> Hoekema, 'Amillennialism,' in Robert Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 156 (citing Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*). These sections include: Chapters 1—3; 4—7; 8—11; 12—14; 15—16; 17—19; 20—22.

<sup>39</sup> Hoekema, "Amillennialism", 156-57.

<sup>40</sup> A case in point is the text we have previously discussed, Rev 11:1-13.

<sup>41</sup> See especially pp 47-84.

Although this response is understandable, it fails to take seriously the biblical context that informs John's writing.<sup>42</sup>

The gospels do describe a binding of Satan. In fact, all three synoptic gospels record Jesus's response to the charge leveled at him by the teachers of the law,<sup>43</sup> 'He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons' (Mark 3:22). Jesus responds to this charge with a parable:

'How can Satan drive out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. <sup>27</sup> In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying (*deō*) him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house' (Mark 3:23-27).

The Greek verb, *deō*, often translated 'to tie up' or 'bind,' is used here (Mark 3:27; cf. Mt. 12:29) and in Rev. 20:2. In the context of Mark's gospel the verb describes the reason that Jesus is able to cast out demons. He has 'bound' the strong man, Beelzebub or Satan. Therefore, Jesus can plunder Satan's possessions. In Matthew's version, Jesus concludes by saying, 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Mt. 12:28; cf. Luke 11:20). This strong emphasis on *the presence* of the kingdom of God, now inaugurated with Jesus's ministry and powerfully demonstrated in his exorcisms and healings, is characteristic of the synoptic gospels and runs throughout the entire New Testament.<sup>44</sup> The book of Revelation is no exception. Indeed, Revelation is saturated with realized eschatology, centered on the death, resurrection, and present reign of Christ. In Revelation John declares in diverse ways and with multiple images that with Jesus, God's kingdom *has arrived and is now in the process of being realized*. This process will reach its culmination and then, at the proper time established by God, Jesus will take full possession of the marred creation that he is restoring, and he will transform it. Indeed, John's great purpose is to help his churches see the truth that lies behind the apparent hegemony of Rome: God and the Lamb sit on the throne and reign over this world. With this important theological and verbal (*deō*) link in mind, it is not difficult to understand the description of the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-3 as a reference to

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<sup>42</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 985-87.

<sup>43</sup> Mark 3:22-27; Matt 12:22-30; Luke 11:14-23.

<sup>44</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (revised version edited by Donald A. Hagner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 249-344, 397-614.

Jesus's *first coming* and his glorious defeat of Satan through his life, death, and resurrection.<sup>45</sup>

While Revelation 20:1-3 describes the church age in terms of the binding of Satan, Revelation 20:4-6 describes this same period from the perspective of the saints—all who faithfully follow the Lamb and do not worship the beast.<sup>46</sup> Amillennialists argue that 'they came to life' (*zaō*), in Revelation 20:4, refers not to the resurrection of the body; but rather, to the spiritual transformation of the believer that takes place at conversion (regeneration).<sup>47</sup> With reference to the followers of Christ, John declares: We reign with Christ. We sit on thrones and judge with authority. Of course, this reality is not obvious to all, especially the persecuted Christians to whom John writes. This truth is certainly not easily understood or grasped. While we may recognize that in Christ God's kingdom has arrived and is now being realized, it is also true that this process has not reached its denouement. Jesus has not yet taken full possession of his kingdom. Creation remains broken and continues to cry out with groans in anticipation of its redemption, as do we (Rom 8:18-27). Nevertheless, John states the matter directly. He removes the veil that hides this heavenly reality, which is even now impacting and transforming our world. The followers of the Lamb reign with him!

John's realized eschatology is tempered by the recognition that God's kingdom will only be consummated with Christ's return. Nevertheless, this emphasis of the presence of the kingdom of God uniquely supports Pentecostal perspectives and praxis. "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17). This is how Peter's explanation of that first Pentecost begins. This sense of expectation also marked those who gathered together at that little Azusa Street mission. They declared, "God is now pouring out his Spirit upon us just as he did on the Day of Pentecost." The amillennial reading of Revelation 20 nurtures this Pentecostal outlook. Yet, this emphasis on *the presence* of the

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<sup>45</sup> Note also that Satan is bound 'to keep him from deceiving [*planaō*] the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended' (Rev 20:3). Rev 12:9 declares, 'The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray [*planaō*]' (Rev 12:9). Rev 12:9, which parallels Rev 20:3, thus also presents Satan's decisive defeat as taking place during Christ's first coming.

<sup>46</sup> John describes the church collectively, all of the faithful followers of the Lamb, as 'martyrs' (Rev 11:3, 7-10). This interpretation is supported by the juxtaposition of the descriptions, 'They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark' (Rev 20: 4) and 'those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image' (Rev 19:20). The former describes the saints *in toto*; the latter, all who are unrepentant and oppose God.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), Loc 2552-2558.

kingdom is entirely lost with the premillennial reading, which relegates Revelation 20 to the distant, post-*parousia* future.

### Revelation 21-22: Our Future Hope

My premillennialist friends often insist that since Christ has entered into our world of time and space in order to redeem us and God's creation, his redemption must take place in this world—in time and space; not beyond it. This is what the millennium is all about: the victory and vindication of Christ in this world—in time and space.<sup>48</sup> The millennium (Rev 20) then stresses continuity with our world and describes Christ's reign over it. The New Jerusalem (Rev 21-22) stresses discontinuity with our world and God's transformation of it. The millennium is God's redemption of our world; the New Jerusalem, his redemption beyond it.

Yet, this approach misses two important aspects of John's narrative. First, Revelation's New Jerusalem is not simply 'other worldly'.<sup>49</sup> On the contrary, it includes elements of continuity with this world as well as elements of discontinuity. The continuity with our world is most clearly stated in Revelation 21:24, where of the New Jerusalem we read, 'The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.' This powerful statement declares that aspects of our present world will be swept up, redeemed, and find a place in the glorious consummated kingdom of God. Not only will the followers of Christ serve God as his stewards, but the splendor of our world will be included in this new, transformed and redeemed world. The implications for our present work are profound. This suggests that much of what we do here (including achievement in the fields of art, music, and science) may indeed have eternal value, particularly if it is done with a heart for God.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For example, Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 127: 'Pentecostalism is millenarian...because amillennialism does not do justice to the earthly and future nature of the coming Kingdom of God.'

<sup>49</sup> Robby Waddell, 'Apocalyptic Sustainability: The Future of Pentecostal Ecology,' in *Perspectives in Pentecostal Eschatologies*, 110: 'The early Christians and the Jews before them expected an end to the "*present world order*" but not a cosmic end to the space-time universe.'

<sup>50</sup> The notion that our world will be destroyed in a fire ball is an incomplete view of the future at best. This view is based on 2 Peter 3:10-13, where we read that 'the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire.' Yet the context here, which centers on judgment and the 'destruction of ungodly men' (2 Peter 3:7), suggests that what is said here parallels closely what is stated in Rev 21:22 of the New Jerusalem: 'Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.' In other words, the reference to the 'elements' being 'burned by fire' refers to the destruction of all that is impure. It

Secondly, the millennium not only receives scant treatment in the book of Revelation (six verses), it covers a relatively short period of time in comparison to eternity. Does it really make sense to say that this relatively short period, which culminates in rebellion, is a necessary and powerful this-worldly expression of Christ's vindication and victory? It seems much more fitting, both in terms of the narrative of Revelation and the larger theology of the New Testament, to emphasize that in the post-*parousia* state God and his Lamb will be worshipped, exalted, and adored for eternity. This alone represents the vindication and victory that are worthy of Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection. It is a triumph that is eternal (and thus, it transcends time), but it remains thoroughly rooted in this world—transformed to be sure, and now the intersection of heaven and earth, where God is perfectly present, but still this world, only now reborn.

This is a consummation worthy of the Lord who pours out the Spirit upon his church. When the King of kings and Lord of lords returns, evil is eradicated, not simply held in abeyance. This is a Pentecostal vision of complete sanctification (1 John 3:2).

## Conclusion

Our Pentecostal elders operated with a premillennial eschatological paradigm. In their minds, premillennialism was synonymous with fidelity to evangelical orthodoxy, the antidote to the ills of the modernism that was devastating the mainline denominations of their day. Yet, today we must acknowledge that this paradigm is no longer operative. Premillennialism is no longer viewed as an elixir capable of curing all theological errors. So, in this new context, it is necessary and important for Pentecostals to consider once again our eschatology and how it relates to our Pentecostal experience and mission.

In this article I have argued that a careful reading of the Apocalypse reveals the amillennialist approach is actually more supportive of Pentecostal values than that of the premillennialist. With its call for the church to embrace its identity as a Spirit-empowered, prophetic community in Revelation 11, its clear presentation of the finality of judgment in Revelation 14, its emphasis on realized eschatology and the presence of the kingdom in Revelation 20, and its breathtaking vision of the consummation of God's redemptive plan in Revelation 21-22, the amillennial reading provides a firm foundation for Pentecostal theology and practice. So much

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is not a comprehensive statement about the future state of our world and all that is in it. How could it be, when we see that the New Jerusalem will contain its splendor?

so, amillennialists can scarcely escape the conclusion I have argued for elsewhere: John the Revelator was a Pentecostal.<sup>51</sup>

By way of contrast, these ‘Pentecostal’ themes are missed altogether or minimized in premillennial readings, which relegate the fulfillment of these key texts to the distant, and often post-*parousia*, future. Additionally, it must be recognized that today’s premillennialism is not your grandmother’s version. Many contemporary expressions of premillennialism found in the Pentecostal academy obscure the reality and finality of God’s judgment of the unrepentant. Thus, they undermine rather than support a strong Pentecostal understanding of the mission of the church.

Will we hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches? I believe that the realized eschatology of amillennialism, tempered as it is with the recognition that God’s redemptive plan will only find fulfillment with Christ’s return, might assist Pentecostals as we seek to hear and proclaim afresh John’s message: “‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord’ (Zech 4:6).

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<sup>51</sup> R. Menzies, ‘Was John the Revelator Pentecostal?’, in Craig S. Keener, Jeremy S. Crenshaw, and Jordan D. May, eds., *But These Are Written: Essays on Johannine Literature in Honor of Professor Benny C. Aker* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 221-34.