

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of  
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—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

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## Those Pesky Premillennialists

Kevin T. Bauder

Disagreeing with someone's perspective is one thing, but dismissing it is something else. People can disagree respectfully. Respectful disagreement involves listening carefully to other individuals in conversations, understanding their positions, and considering carefully the arguments that favor them (or that weigh against one's own position) before replying. When a perspective is dismissed, however, it is rejected as so implausible—and perhaps so damaging—that it does not warrant a hearing. Dismissiveness is often accompanied with derision.

In certain theological circles, premillennialism, especially in its dispensationalist varieties, is almost habitually dismissed and derided. A recent example involves a sermon preached by a well-known evangelical pastor. The sermon, which was partly addressed to premillennial pastors, was mainly an exposition of Revelation 20. To be clear, the sermon contained much useful teaching. This influential pastor, however, began his treatment of the text by repeating a quip that Revelation is not "for the armchair prophets with their charts of historical events and their intricate diagrams of the end of the age." He then continued, "This is not rightly dividing the Word of Truth," a clear allusion to dispensational theology. He insisted that the purpose of the book of Revelation is to provide "warning and reassurance" to "harassed, subsistence-level Christians," to "encourage them in their struggle," and to "liberate them from fear of the enemy within and without." In other words, the purpose of Revelation is to hearten persecuted believers, not to disclose details of an eschatological timetable.

Those two activities, however, are not mutually exclusive. Granted, the purpose of the Apocalypse really is to encourage perseverance among believers who are facing oppression. Even so, that does not imply that eschatological chronology or detail is necessarily absent from the book. Indeed, it is at least possible that the details of eschatological chronology might be revealed in order to provide motivation for perseverance.

At this point, a concession is in order. Even if eschatological detail and chronology are important, not every use of these details is necessarily helpful. In fact, two uses of prophetic schematizing are damaging. These uses ought to be an embarrassment to every responsible premillennialist.

One bad use of biblical prophecy is to satisfy mere curiosity about the future. Some people experience a kind of nosiness about things to come. To satisfy this desire, unscrupulous individuals have created an entire occult industry that purports to peer into the future. Some people read biblical prophecy for much the same reason that others read Nostradamus or consult their daily horoscopes. This practice surely misses the point.

A second bad use of prophecy is to turn it into a source of entertainment. Some dispensationalists have invented a literary genre that could be called “prophetic fiction.” In their novels and movies, they surround biblical prophecies with action-packed story-telling and extra-biblical speculation. Treated this way, prophecy becomes fantasy. Some people read *Left Behind* for much the same reason that others read *Harry Potter*. Turning prophecy into amusement almost invariably debases it.

Such uses of prophecy are harmful, but they do not count against the suggestion that biblical prophecy reveals eschatological chronology or detail. Whether or not Scripture includes those details can only be determined by examining the Scriptures themselves. If the text actually communicates eschatological chronology and details, then chronology and details must be important and ought to be studied.

Not surprisingly, the dispute over eschatological detail soon turns into a dispute over the proper way of reading prophetic passages. Those who deride eschatological detail often assume that prophetic texts should be read in a non-literal way. Contrapositively, those who read the texts in a literal way usually affirm the importance of eschatological detail.

The word *literal*, however, lends itself to misunderstanding. Premillennialists (especially dispensationalists) have sometimes contributed to this misunderstanding by failing to clarify what they mean by their use of the term. Too often, “*literal*” seems to be opposed to “*literary*,” disallowing any figurative or symbolic uses of language.

Responsible premillennialists know better. They are fully prepared to grant the multiple levels at which ordinary language communicates. What they are not prepared to concede is that biblical prophecies ought to be read in a way that wholly exempts them from the ordinary use

of language. Premillennialists are not prepared to concede that figurative or symbolic uses of language authorize the wholesale spiritualization of prophecy.

Premillennialists—particularly dispensationalists—note that biblical prophecy may be divided into two broad classes. Some prophecies have been wholly and indisputably fulfilled. The fulfillment of other prophecies remains wholly or partly in the future.

The prophecies that have already been fulfilled provide a convenient way of understanding how prophetic language works. By noting how these prophecies were fulfilled, interpreters can develop a hermeneutic for interpreting prophecy. The same hermeneutic may then be applied to unfulfilled prophesy.

If interpreters do engage in that exercise, then what conclusions will they draw? The answer is that they are very likely to become premillennialists. Indeed, this kind of reading is what premillennialists mean by “literal” interpretation. Incidentally, the habit of reading prophetic Scriptures in this way is one of the marks of dispensationalism.

Prophetic chronology and eschatological detail are not antithetical to spiritual encouragement. Interpreters will be able to determine whether prophetic passages include detailed chronology only by studying those passages. As they explore the prophetic, unfulfilled prophecies ought to be understood in the same way in which fulfilled prophecies have received their fulfillment. If prophetic passages, when interpreted in this way, actually do include eschatological details and chronological markers, then those things are part of the whole counsel of God. Whatever is in the Word of God is worthy of being studied, believed, and taught.

So what about charts? Would non-dispensationalists really be happier if dispensationalists simply refused to use charts? It seems unlikely.

All sorts of people, including theologians, use charts, diagrams, and graphic representations to help them visualize all sorts of things. Biblical geography can be represented cartographically. Greek and Hebrew professors expect their classes to do sentence diagrams. The history of Israel is often taught using charts and diagrams. The relationships of biblical characters can be charted in a family tree. Charts can be very useful in distinguishing doctrines such as redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation.

Many non-dispensationalist teachers use charts for a variety of purposes. Charts can be used to help people conceptualize geographical, grammatical, historical, genealogical, and soteriological relationships. Why should they not be used to help people conceptualize eschatological ones?

Premillennialists use charts. So what? They see detail and chronology in eschatological passages. So what? They think that eschatological details matter when those details are taught by the Word of God. So what?

None of these considerations constitutes a real objection to premillennialism or even dispensationalism. None of them constitutes a legitimate, prima facie warrant for dismissing premillennial eschatology. A more appropriate response would be to treat premillennialism as a responsible alternative within the theological matrix, even if one must disagree with it. ✘

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at [inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu](mailto:inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu).

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## Holy Sonnet XII: Why Are We By All Creatures Waited On?

John Donne (1572-1631)

Why are we by all creatures waited on?  
Why do the prodigal elements supply  
Life and food to me, being more pure than I,  
Simple, and further from corruption?  
Why brook'st thou, ignorant horse, subjection?  
Why dost thou, bull, and bore so seelily,  
Dissemble weakness, and by one man's stroke die,  
Whose whole kind you might swallow and feed upon?  
Weaker I am, woe is me, and worse than you,  
You have not sinned, nor need be timorous.  
But wonder at a greater wonder, for to us  
Created nature doth these things subdue,  
But their Creator, whom sin nor nature tied,  
For us, His creatures, and His foes, hath died. ✘

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