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BIBLICALLY DERIVED PREMILLENNIALISM AS A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR A BIBLICAL SOCIO-POLITICAL MODEL

Dispensationalists have been accused of, among other things,¹ being pessimistic (as by Marsden and Bube)² and anti-semitic (as by Wilson),³ in large part due to our premillennial understanding of Biblical eschatology. However, upon exegetical consideration of several foundational prerequisites of Biblical socio-political thought, it is evident that Biblical socio-political undergirding in fact *requires* the premillennial understanding, and that such an understanding affords dispensationalists an appropriate (i.e., Biblical) degree of care, realism, and constructiveness for the world around us. In short, owing much to our premillennial understanding, dispensational thinking – far from being a hindrance to the progress of society, is a great benefit to society. This has profound and far-reaching practical implications not only for dispensational thought, but also for practical ministry in the church and for interaction with those outside the church.

Prolegomena

A Biblical worldview, by definition, must include at least two characteristics: (1) it must be Biblical – derived exclusively from the Biblical record, and (2) it must be, in fact, a worldview – that is to say it should be, as Vidal puts it, a “collection of concepts allowing us to ‘construct a global image of the world, and in this way to

¹ Tweeted by @Ligonier, 1/20/2012, 8:26pm: “Why aren’t you a dispensationalist?” R.C. Sproul replied, “Because I think that dispensational theology is goofy.” <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/twitter-highlights-12212/>; “Dispensational pre-millennialism typically causes a predisposition toward pessimism in world affairs and a general worsening of international relations. A pre-millennial reading of Bible prophecy paints a dismal picture of a world disintegrating toward a cataclysmic end where we are forced to confront the wrath and judgment of God. Assumptions and plans based on this worldview will be less than ideal” (Major Brian L. Stuckert, “Strategic Implications of American Millennialism,” Monograph submitted to School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2008.).

² “This view [premillennialism] emphasizes the pessimism of the present day, in which we can look forward to nothing more than continued degradation of the world and disintegration of human society until Christ returns to establish justice and righteousness by His power” (Richard H. Bube, “Optimism and Pessimism: Science and Eschatology, in *JETS*, Fall 1972; 217.); “The area where dispensationalists were perhaps most out of step with the rest of nineteenth-century thinking was in their view of contemporary history, which had little or no room for social or political progress. When they spoke on this question, dispensational premillennialists were characteristically pessimistic” (George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 66.).

³ “It is regrettable that this view [that Gentiles are occasionally instruments of God’s retribution on Israel] allowed premillennialists to expect the phenomenon of anti-Semitism and tolerate it matter-of-factly” (Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillennial Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 16.).

understand as many elements of our experience as possible.”⁴ Vidal’s characterization of worldview is consistent with the German concept of *Weltanschauung*⁵ as foundational, internally cohesive, and comprehensive – three important traits for a *meaningful* worldview.

Foundational

A Biblical worldview should be foundational, in that it works from the ground up. This is a challenge for historical dispensationalism, which has been largely considered an extraction from Reformed theology with but a few reformations of its own. Rather than viewing dispensational thought as a Biblical outworking that stands independently and as constructed purely on Biblical foundations, we sometimes perceive dispensationalism as a refocusing of Reformed theology especially in the areas of eschatology and ecclesiology.⁶ But as we begin to acknowledge that dispensationalism is not a hermeneutic through which we view the Bible, but is instead the result of the Bible examined through a particular method (the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic), we may recognize the necessity of attending to the foundational aspects of dispensational thought instead of simply borrowing foundations from other theological traditions.

Internally Cohesive

A Biblical worldview must also be internally cohesive, in that its components should fit together and should progress in some logical sequence. Much like Paul describes the church as built on the cornerstone that is Christ and on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and as being built up with all the saints, there is a logical flow and interconnectedness in a meaningful worldview. That progress demands an internal consistency in the sense that one area of examination cannot contradict another without the whole being undermined. If one logically necessary subset fails, then the category that birthed the subset is flawed and untenable with respect to truth. Because a Biblical worldview purports to be grounded in *truth*, any single inconsistency within the system breaks down the whole system as untrustworthy. Hence, consistency is paramount in the development of this or any other system.

Comprehensive

In light of the global implications of *Weltanschauung*, a Biblical worldview must be comprehensive in that if it is derived from a source that claims to be sufficient for the adequacy and equipping of its believers for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17), it must, in fact, be sufficient to that end, lest it violate (1) the principle of internal cohesiveness or consistency and (2) its own foundational truth claim. Consequently, the jurisdiction of a Biblical worldview is unlimited, and there is no field of inquiry on which the Bible cannot shed at least some foundational light. It is

⁴ C. Vidal, (2008) Wat is een wereldbeeld? (What is a worldview?), in Van Belle, H. & Van der Veken, J., Editors, *Nieuwheid denken. De wetenschappen en het creatieve aspect van de werkelijkheid*, in press. Acco, Leuven; 3.

⁵ German: worldview.

⁶ Perhaps this is one reason dispensationalism has lacked historically in the development of worldview in favor of works on ecclesiology and eschatology.

in this sense that Ryrie suggests that the Scriptures provide a comprehensive philosophy of history. His comments to this effect are worth consideration here:

The Scriptures per se are not a philosophy of history, but they contain one. It is true that the Bible deals with ideas-but with ideas that are interpretations of historical events. This interpretation of the meaning of historical events is the task of theology, and it is a task that is not without its problems. The chief problem is that both covenant and dispensational theologies claim to represent the true philosophy of history as contained in the Scriptures. The problem is further complicated by the fact that, if a philosophy of history is defined as "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward ultimate meaning," then in a certain sense both systems of theology meet the basic requirements of the definition. However, the way in which the two systems meet these requirements affirms that dispensationalism is the more valid and helpful system. Notice that the definition centers on three things: (1) the recognition of "historical events and successions," or a proper concept of the progress of revelation in history; (2) the unifying principle; and (3) the ultimate goal of history. Let us examine both systems in relation to these three features.⁷

Notice Ryrie's (correct) perception that theology needs to be more broadly explanatory than simply offering commentary on a few religious issues, that it is closely related to philosophy, and that of the two major models (dispensationalism and covenant theology) which attempt to account for human experience, dispensationalism offers the best philosophy of history. Ryrie's thoughts here underscore the importance of a foundational, internally cohesive, and fully comprehensive model, and he asserts that dispensationalism is the best model in those regards.

Components and Grounding of a Biblical Worldview

Recognizing seven particular components is helpful for addressing the necessity for a worldview to be both foundational and comprehensive. In logical order of consideration from the perspective of the inquirer,⁸ we undertake these seven steps as they build successively on each other – each being grounded on the conclusions of the previous step. (1) Epistemology, as the study of knowledge and the first step in the worldview inquiry, helps us arrive at understanding how we can know with certainty the answers all the other steps. In short, epistemology considers the source of authority for all other inquiry. (2) Ontology builds on that foundation by appealing to the source of authority confirmed in the epistemological inquiry, and explains what is the reality around us. Ontology is the inquiry about

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, Revised and Expanded (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 16.

⁸ Or course, the perspective of the inquirer isn't always the best perspective. In this discussion we consider epistemology before metaphysical issues, because the epistemological question must be addressed first by the inquirer in order to understand the metaphysical question. However, the metaphysical reality exists with or without the inquirer's understanding, and thus comes first in reality. This issue is addressed in *Appendix I*.

what actually exists. (3) Teleology explains why that which exists does indeed exist. Teleology considers purpose, and relies wholly on the epistemological conclusions for its basis. (4) Eschatology is only possible insofar as the epistemological source of authority reveals what the future will hold, and is a necessary prerequisite to worldview components pertaining to human practice, because the concepts of reward and consequence are purely eschatological. (5) Axiology answers questions regarding value and the nature of good and evil, and is closely akin to teleology, as purpose determines function and makes obvious what is good and what is not. (6) Praxeology moves the inquirer from *is* to *ought* – from descriptive to prescriptive – and serves as the *therefore* in the worldview series of inquiry. The term praxeology, as employed here, refers to the behavior and ethics required of individuals by the axiological conclusions. (7) Sociopraxy extrapolates praxeological conclusions to the societal level: whereas praxiology considers ethics on an individual level, sociopraxy considers ethical obligations on a societal level.

These seven components fit within four major categories of philosophical pursuit: epistemology, metaphysics (includes ontology, teleology, eschatology, and axiology), ethics (praxeology), and socio-political thought (sociopraxy). It is worth noting how much of our inquiry is in the realm of metaphysics, and that in order to answer questions pertaining to metaphysics, we must have tools that are capable of addressing the metaphysics questions. Thus, epistemology is the foundational first field of inquiry.

Epistemology

Before we can take the first step in constructing (or understanding) a meaningful worldview we must discern the basis for recognizing what is true and what is not true. Without such a basis, any further pursuit is devoid of meaning, and we are left with no means to answer questions. All meaningful answers, then, are necessarily rooted in the concept of authority, and the questions themselves invite us to consider what are the overarching principles that govern our human experience.

Historically there have been many attempts at deciphering those overarching principles, but a few stand out as particularly influential. Plato's dualism (as represented by his allegory of the cave and his divided-line theory from *The Republic*, Book VII) suggests that the realm of experience offers only cursory glances at truth, but that greater enlightenment through the gaining of knowledge is necessary for the discerning of more certain truth. Plato's epistemology prescribed philosophical learning and reasoning as the path to certainty. Rene Descartes' rationalism (as represented in his *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*) prescribes the guided (by Descartes' method) use of human reason as the means of determining truth. David Hume's empiricism (as discussed in his *Treatise on Human Nature*) relies on human experience interpreted by the senses for the discernment of truth. Hume makes no allowance for the supernatural or metaphysical, because he asserts we possess no tools to sense these things. Thus for Hume reality is grounded in the natural, in what we can sense. Nietzsche abandoned the cause of the discernment of truth as grounding for meaningful worldview. Instead he pursued his existentialist course

that the only thing of which we can be certain is that any true meaning is inaccessible to us and thus irrelevant.⁹ Consequently, we make our own meaning by being the best version of us we can be.

The epistemological conclusions of each of these thinkers share one thing in common: *unapologetic self-reliance for the determining of truth*. Plato relies on his understanding, Descartes on his reason, Hume on his senses, and Nietzsche on his will to power. In stark contrast, the Bible prescribes a model antithetical to the self-reliance prescribed in the aforementioned epistemological models.

The first epistemological statement in the Bible is actually made by the serpent in the Garden: “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). Satan prescribes knowledge through contradicting God’s design for knowledge. The fact that Satan chose epistemology as an early battleground underscores the strategic significance of epistemology in God’s design. In this context Satan challenges Eve to consider a different starting point than God had prescribed, and if she does, Satan promises, Eve will have a better outcome – that her knowledge will be more complete, even to the point of making her godlike. While the actions Satan prescribed did result in particular knowledge (Gen 3:22), it was a distortion of God’s design for knowledge and resulted in tragedy and not blessing.

These events invite the reader to inquire as to God’s ideal for human knowledge, and the answer is provided especially in the writings of Solomon, to whom it was granted to be exceedingly wise (1 Kin 3:12). In the book of Proverbs Solomon identifies the first epistemological step undergirding a Biblical worldview: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7); “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov 9:10); and again, “The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom” (Prov 15:33). The word for *fear* is the Hebrew *yirah*, and does not simply denote respect, but is the term normally used of *fear* – as in fear for one’s life.¹⁰ In context, the fear of the Lord involves the right perspective of and response to God.¹¹ Though Solomon uses a different word for *fear* in Proverbs 28:14, the contrast to appropriate fear is hardness of heart.¹² In short, the fear of the Lord involves the inner man’s responsiveness to God.

Notice the critique of the atheist in Psalm 14:1: “The fool has said in his heart (Heb., *leb*) “There is no God.” The fool is unresponsive toward God, and sets his will against God, whereas the one who would possess wisdom acknowledges God and is responsive to Him. From whence comes the fear of the Lord? “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth comes wisdom and understanding” (Prov 2:6). If the first step or first principle of Biblical epistemology is to fear the Lord, the authoritative source for the data we need to do so is identified as Scripture itself – a revelation

⁹ E.g., as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

¹⁰ E.g., Gen 15:1, 32:11; Prov 3:25, etc.

¹¹ Discussions regarding the fear the Lord are found also in the NT in passages such as Romans 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:11, 7:1; Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:17; and Revelation 14:7.

¹² The Hebrew *leb*, translated here as *heart*, is generally used to reference the heart, mind, will, and/or inner man.

which presupposes the existence of the Biblical God, and makes no effort to defend that first and most vital principle.

As we read the Bible, we discover therein the limitations of human reasoning, and thus, the inadequacies of learning and rationalism (Gen 6:5; 1 Cor 2:14); we encounter the limited scope of human experience and of the uninformed arrogance of naturalistic empiricism (Job 38:4, 34-35, 39:26-27, 41:11, 42:5-6); and we are met with the reality that there is indeed discernable meaning and truth – noumenal reality, created and revealed by God, and relevant for everyday human life – even if God hasn't revealed its fullness (Ecc 3:11; Jn 20:31; Jam 3:17-18; 1 Jn 5:13).¹³ *A Biblical worldview starts with a Biblical epistemology, which identifies the Bible itself as the source of authority for all other inquiries, in contradistinction to any other proposed source of authority.*¹⁴

The Hermeneutic Requirement of a Biblical Epistemology

Interpretive method is an integral factor in applying a Biblical epistemology. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7), and if wisdom is knowable and discernible (Prov 1:2), then the fear of the Lord is knowable and discernible. If knowledge and understanding come from His mouth (Prov 2:6), and if knowledge and understanding are rooted in the fear of the Lord (Prov 9:10), then the fear of the Lord is discovered in His word. If these two syllogisms are valid and true, then the word of God (at least insofar as it considers the fear of the Lord) is knowable and discernible.

Even a cursory examination of Scripture gives us at least two major evidences that the Bible intends its readers to employ a particular hermeneutic method in discerning the meaning of the Bible. First, the Bible is written using three distinct human languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), each with its own distinctive grammatical structures and vocabulary. The simple fact that these languages are employed demands that the reader respect fundamental aspects of the languages and follow literal grammatical historical principles. In order to have knowable and discernible meaning, any written communication employing human language requires this.

Second, the first two thousand years of recorded history demonstrate that the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic was exclusively used. In the first

¹³ Much of the material from the previous four paragraphs is adapted from Christopher Cone, "Epistemological Foundations of a Biblical Theology, or Bob's Crazy Day With the Dandelions" presented to the Chafer Theological Seminary Conference, March 12, 2014, and later published online at <http://www.drcone.com/2014/03/13/epistemological-foundations-for-a-biblical-theology/>.

¹⁴ One critique of this epistemological first-principle (that the Bible is the authoritative source of truth) is that it amounts to fideism or circular reasoning. But that charge rings hollow when one recognizes that all epistemological first-principle claims (whether by Plato, Descartes, Hume, Nietzsche, or anyone else) are assumed to be self-authenticating and self-evident by those who make the claims. The very first step in any worldview system is necessarily understood to be self-evident (or else it would obviously be a second step, not a first), and its legitimacy as first-principle is generally tested by how well it corresponds to truth (correspondence theory), by the resulting worldview's internal cohesiveness and coherence (coherence theory), and for some, by how well the system actually works (pragmatic theory). I suggest that the Biblical worldview holds up well under the scrutiny of any of the three traditional theories of truth, and that the Biblical epistemological first-principle is no more circular in its reasoning than is the first-principle of any competing epistemological system.

twelve chapters of the Genesis narrative (a section of Scripture which covers roughly two thousand years), we find some thirty-one occurrences of the phrases “God said,” “the Lord God said,” and “the Lord said.” In all but possibly one instance the listener responds to God’s word as if understanding God in the natural, normative way the employed language describes. The light comes into existence, just as God commanded (1:3). Everything else during creation week employs the same hermeneutic. Even God Himself uses the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic: He describes how He will make man (1:26), and then He does exactly what He said (1:27). After the Fall, Adam and Eve still understand that God means exactly what He says, as they respond directly to His questions, understanding them through the same hermeneutic lens as before (3:9, 14). God gives Noah specific instruction, commanding him to build a precisely designed boat (6:14-21). Thankfully, Noah did not employ an allegorical or spiritualized hermeneutic as he took God’s words for what they were and did exactly what God had told him to do (6:22). Finally, God told Abram to go (12:1), and Abram did exactly as God told him (12:4).

The only recorded exception to the two thousand year rule is found in 3:1, where the serpent challenges what was God said. Even in this, the serpent doesn’t specifically employ a different hermeneutic method, but he does challenge the truth of what was said (3:4) and God’s motivation in saying it (3:5). In short the only one who is recorded to have questioned or challenged God’s meaning during the first two thousand years of history is the serpent. These chapters provide a clear indicator of how God intends to be understood, and underscore the difficulty encountered when the simple meaning of the communication is not followed. Based on at least these two evidences (linguistic and historical) the literal grammatical historical hermeneutic is *sine qua non* to a Biblical epistemology. Without simplicity and univocality in meaning, there can be no Biblical epistemology (at least not as Solomon describes it). Simply put, along with the other components of epistemology, the Bible prescribes a knowable and discernible hermeneutic method for its readers.¹⁵

Eschatological Implications of a Biblical Epistemology

Employing a Biblical epistemology, we can discern from Scripture a Biblical metaphysic. With respect to ontology, God the Father (Eph 4:6), God the Son (Jn 1:1, 1 Cor 8:6), and God the Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2, Jn 14:26) exist. Creation exists (Gen 1:1). Mankind exists (Gen 1:27). Angels exist (Gen 19:1). Satan exists (Rev 12:9). With respect to a Biblical teleology, all things are purposed simply for His glory (e.g., Num 14:21). With respect to axiology, ultimate value is not an intrinsic thing but rather an instrumental one, since it requires an Ultimate Valuer. Therefore God’s

¹⁵ While there may be some later instances in which the NT writer retasked an OT passage, those instances do not altar the initial meaning. In Matthew 2:15, for example, the event described in Hosea 11:1 is newly revealed as a foreshadowing of Christ, but the clear statement of Hosea 11:1 still stands, and Israel is still the referent. It is important to realize that in such instances the NT writers are generally *using* the text, not reinterpreting it. However, even if in some instances there *actually were* redefinition, it would seem the prerogative of a Divine author to handle things as He so desires, but He never extends that prerogative to the interpreter, instead there is a clear and normative precedent for grammatical-historical understanding throughout the Biblical revelation.

ultimate purpose has to be considered when trying to understand what is good. That which God declares is good, *is good*, and it seems He determines what is good based on how it contributes to His overall doxological purpose (e.g., Heb 13:21).

The questions of ontology, teleology, and axiology provide relatively simple answers, because, in the case of ontology things either exist or they don't; in the case of teleology, there is much Biblical data on the ultimate purpose of all things; and in the case of axiology, value is simply determined by the teleology: that which God declares is good, is good for accomplishing the purpose of His glory, and is therefore good to Him – the Ultimate Valuer.

Eschatology is a bit unique in comparison to ontology and teleology, however, as the eschatological data is so voluminous, and considers so many prophetic events, that the questions of eschatology are far more complex than those of ontology and teleology. Still, historically, eschatology has been distilled into three basic interpretive traditions: premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. Advocates of postmillennialism and amillennialism continue to readily admit that their views are supported by the occasional use of non-literal hermeneutics.¹⁶ Some, such as Kevin DeYoung, advocate for reading one's theological system into the text in order to support the views of that system. DeYoung questions rhetorically, "Without a systematic theology how can you begin to know what to do with the eschatology of Ezekiel or the sacramental language in John 6 or the psalmist's insistence that he is righteous and blameless?"¹⁷ Likewise, critics of premillennialism admit, along with Louis Berkhof, that dispensational premillennialism is only defensible if a literal grammatical historical hermeneutic is employed.¹⁸

Still, it is evident that premillennialism is not *the foundational issue* in a Biblical worldview, and is not even *the pivotal issue* in eschatology. Rather premillennialism is a metaphysics-category outworking of epistemology, ontology, teleology, and axiology. John Piper's optimistic premillennialism (similar to covenant premillennialism),¹⁹ for example, can still be classified as premillennialism, yet his sociopraxy includes a non-cessationist approach consistent with Daniel Fuller's revelational/non-revelational view on inerrancy,²⁰ and Wayne Grudem's more recent "middle ground"²¹ non-cessationist approach that suggests that the gift of prophecy does not always result in inerrant declarations, and that even Biblical prophecy can sometimes be "a bit wrong."²² Piper admits to being

¹⁶ E.g., Sam Storms, "Why I Changed My Mind on the Millennium" at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-i-changed-my-mind-about-the-millennium>.

¹⁷ Kevin DeYoung, "Your Theological System Should Tell You How to Exegete" at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2012/02/23/your-theological-system-should-tell-you-how-to-exegete/>.

¹⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th Revised and Enlarged Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 706-715.

¹⁹ Matt Perman, "What does John Piper believe about dispensationalism, covenant theology, and new covenant theology?" at <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-john-piper-believe-about-dispensationalism-covenant-theology-and-new-covenant-theology>.

²⁰ Daniel Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History" in *Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin*, Vol. II, No. 2, Spring 1968: 80.

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 79.

“significantly influenced” by Grudem’s view.²³ This aspect of (ecclesiological) sociopraxy is incompatible with the foundational epistemological principles of a Biblical worldview, in that this particular brand of non-cessationism alleges essentially that there are incorrect statements in Biblical prophecy. Notably, Piper advocates testing New Testament prophecy to determine if it is “good.”²⁴

The point here is that one can draw a basic premillennial conclusion without building it on the Biblical epistemological basis, and that resulting aspects of sociopraxy (as in Fuller’s, Grudem’s, and Piper’s case) will not necessarily be compatible with Biblical epistemological grounding. Consequently, premillennialism (or the lack thereof) is simply not the issue. *How premillennialism is arrived at is of central importance here.* Thus it is fair to say that a Biblically derived premillennialism is a necessary outworking of a Biblical epistemology and a necessary condition for a Biblical sociopraxy. In other words, Biblically derived premillennialism is simply one domino in a long sequence of dominoes in a Biblical worldview. If premillennialism is Biblically derived, it will carry with it key components unique to dispensational premillennialism that are foreign to covenant and other forms of dispensational premillennialism, including the complete distinction between Israel and the church and the absence of the church in the Old Testament. In short, Biblically derived premillennialism will cause other distinctive dominoes to fall.

Socio-Political Implications of a Biblically Derived Premillennialism

Having established a Biblical epistemology and the necessary connection between a Biblical epistemology and a Biblical metaphysic (including the elements of ontology, teleology, eschatology, and axiology), we have focused a bit more directly on premillennialism, as opposed to other eschatological principles. Moving from the *is*²⁵ category (including epistemology and metaphysics) to the *ought*²⁶ category (including praxeology or ethics, and sociopraxy or socio-political thought) we examine some of the implications of a Biblically derived premillennialism, as it pertains specifically to sociopraxy.

As mentioned at the outset, characterizations of dispensational premillennialism as a negative socio-political influence have included charges of pessimism and anti-semitism. There are of course many other indictments against dispensational premillennialism, but these two are answered here simply to demonstrate the internal cohesiveness of the Biblical worldview as it pertains to Biblically derived premillennialism.

Pessimism

It is certainly true that Biblical prophecy, literally understood, does not paint an optimistic picture for the future of the world: “...the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Pet 3:10b). Revelation adds that future events will include a third of

²³ John Piper “What is the Gift of Prophecy in the New Covenant” podcast, at <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/piper-on-prophecy-and-tongues>, 1:00.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:48.

²⁵ Or, descriptive.

²⁶ Or, prescriptive.

all trees and grass being destroyed (8:7), a third of all life in the sea dying (8:9), a third of all freshwaters becoming toxic (8:11), a third of the sun, moon, and stars being darkened (8:12). If the interpreter is working from a Biblical epistemology, which requires a literal grammatical historical hermeneutic, the interpreter must acknowledge that these things are coming at some point in the future.

But there is a tremendous distinction between an eschatologically pessimistic metaphysic regarding the present form of the heavens and earth and a pessimistic sociopraxy. The question at issue is whether or not a so-called pessimistic metaphysic must necessarily result in a pessimistic praxeology and/or sociopraxy. The Bible answers this question in the negative. In fact, the coming negative events are cited by Biblical writers for the express purpose of calling believers to optimistic action.

Peter, after describing coming cataclysms and the restoration to follow, exhorts believers to look for these things and in the meantime to “be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation...” (2 Pet 3:14-15a). Earlier in the context Peter explains that the Lord’s patience has to do with His “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Likewise, the book of Revelation is addressed to the churches (Rev 22:16), and includes multiple ethical and sociopractical exhortations (e.g., 2:5, 2:10, 2:16, 2:25, 3:3, 3:18-20). While Revelation does not provide any specific socio-political imperatives, Peter’s writings do.

Despite what some might call metaphysic pessimism, Peter mandates that believers keep their behavior excellent so that those who observe will glorify God (1 Pet 2:12). Peter calls on believers to be submissive to government and to treat all men with honor (1 Pet 2:12-17). Finally, Peter asserts that the prophesied future is a basis for godliness and goodness (e.g., 1 Pet 4). Paul considers similar themes in Romans 12-13 and 2 Timothy 3. Rather than being pessimistic in his own actions and those he prescribes of others, Paul has a vigorous sense of urgency to serve well, to be faithful, and to be a benefit to all around him for the sake of their eternal good (e.g., 1 Cor 9:14-23).

In short, the Biblical pessimism about the imminent future is a basis for believers’ selfless and beneficent conduct of life, as believers anticipate the ultimate eternal future. Consequently, the criticism of Biblically derived premillennialism as promoting pessimistic praxeology and sociopraxy falls in the straw-man category of fallacies, as such allegations confuse the *is* with the *ought*. To illustrate, the ontological reality that it is highly likely that your ice cream will melt soon is not grounds for your pessimism. In fact, it is quite the opposite. It provides you with an urgency based in truth, and grounding for doing the right thing with the ice cream while you have the opportunity.

Anti-semitism

Wilson’s critique of dispensational premillennialism is likewise a conflating of *is* and *ought*, as he assumes that the prophetic expectation of anti-semitism naturally leads to the sociopractical tolerance of anti-semitism. On the assertion that dispensationalism expects a future anti-semitism, Wilson is correct. Revelation 12:13, in context, describes a Satanic effort to destroy the Jews. Clearly if Satan is

leading that charge it would odd that anyone would think the church would be complicit in such efforts. Yet, history does not lie by connecting the historical organization of the “church” with anti-semitism. From Chrysostom’s Eight Homilies against the Jews to Luther’s *The Jews and Their Lies* to the comments of numerous popes, there is no shortage of historical material demonstrating the “church’s” displeasure with the Jewish people. But the grand irony here is that it is not dispensational premillennialism, but reformed and replacement theology that is historically guilty of anti-semitic tendencies.

Yes, dispensational premillennialism interprets literally passages like Matthew 23:31-36 (Jesus speaking), Acts 2:36 (Peter speaking), and 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 (Paul speaking) – passages which acknowledge that it was Jews who rejected Jesus and ultimately had Him crucified. But the point cannot be lost that during that same week when Jesus pronounced the Jews guilty, He died to pay for the sins of Israel and Judah under the terms of the New Covenant (Mt 26:28); it was Peter who encouraged those he indicted to change their minds about the Messiah, that they might be forgiven (Ac 2:28), and who later wrote to Jewish believers wishing them “grace and peace” in the fullest measure (1 Pet 1:3), and recounting Jesus’ sacrifice in terms similar to Isaiah 53 (1 Pet 2:21-25), and so appealed to Jesus as the Jewish Messiah; and it was Paul who wrote to the Thessalonian believers – a church he founded by his preaching of the gospel to the Jewish people (Ac 17:1-4), and who proclaimed to the Romans that the good news of God’s revealed righteousness was to the Jew first and then the Greek (Rom 1:16), and that consequences for evil (Rom 2:9), reward for doing good (Rom 2:10), and ultimately the good news of God’s revealed righteousness (Rom 1:16) was to the Jew first and then to the Greek. And of course, all three men were Jewish. A literal reading of the text (as is required by a Biblical epistemology, and which undergirds Biblical eschatology and sociopraxy) allows absolutely no room for anti-semitism, nor advocates for any tolerance of it.

Conclusion

If hermeneutics is understood to be an integral component of epistemology, and if there is a knowable and discernible Biblical epistemology, then there is a knowable and discernible Biblical hermeneutic. If that hermeneutic is literal grammatical historical, and if premillennialism is an eschatological principle required by the literal grammatical historical model, then premillennialism is an eschatological principle required by a Biblical epistemology. Finally, if a Biblical model for sociopraxy is grounded in a Biblical epistemology, and if a Biblical worldview demands internal cohesiveness from its individual components, then the Biblical socio-political model must not contradict the epistemological principles upon which it stands.

Historically, Reformed epistemology departs from the syllogistic sequence above at the very first point. Cornelius Van Til illustrates the Reformed methodology of perceiving hermeneutics as separate from the epistemological discussion,²⁷ and this is the maneuver that allows for the occasional employment of non-literal

²⁷ See Appendix II.

hermeneutics. This is the maneuver that undergirds both the postmillennial and amillennial perspectives, and this is the maneuver that grounds the resulting socio-political systems.

In order to justify premillennialism, for example, we must attend to the epistemological grounding that supports it. In order to understand the implications of premillennialism, we must likewise consider the socio-political applications of the eschatological principle. In short, we must recognize that if dispensationalism is to have any explanatory value at all it must be representative of *the* Biblical worldview. Consequently in our understanding of and development of dispensationalism, we cannot focus only on narrow categories out of sequence, but we must do the work required to discern a Biblical worldview which is Biblically derived, which is foundational in its sequence, which is internally cohesive, and which is comprehensive. Only then will the full weight of dispensationalism's explanatory value be felt.

APPENDIX I²⁸

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and seeks to answer the question of how we can have knowledge and certainty. Metaphysics is the study of reality and responds to questions regarding whether there is anything beyond the physical or natural. While I have often spoken of these two as interdependent, I have also been outspoken regarding the priority of epistemology over metaphysics in the context of fields of inquiry. Some might conclude from that prioritization that I am a foundationalist.

Foundationalism is a theory of epistemic justification (particularly espoused by Aristotle, and later, Descartes) that demands that beliefs must be warranted, or based on some foundation (in contrast to, for example, coherentism, which simply requires that a belief be coherent with a set of other coherently fitting beliefs in order to be justified). In prioritizing epistemology over metaphysics as a field of inquiry, I am not drawing a foundationalist conclusion, but I am carefully qualifying the context of that prioritization.

Clearly, if we are considering the realm of reality, or asking about what actually exists, then metaphysics comes first. Reality comes before the questioning of that reality. What exists, exists, and whether it is questioned or not has no bearing at all on its existence. So, in the realm of what actually is, metaphysics comes first. However, in the context of human inquiry, we are seeking to understand what actually is. Metaphysics cannot come first in this context, because we have to have a reason to prefer one explanation to another.

This is not to draw a foundationalist conclusion, for example, that the existence of God must be justified in order to be true. On the contrary. God's existence has nothing to do with whether or not He can be explained or whether or not His existence is warranted. He either exists or He doesn't. But human inquiry in this area is the pursuit of understanding what is true. Does He exist or doesn't He?

Various epistemological models justify their conclusions in different ways. Humean empiricism says He doesn't exist because He has not been (and presumably cannot be) sensed. Cartesian rationalism reasons to His existence from the first assumption that He doesn't exist. But the Biblical model describes the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7, 9:10). Consequently, the Biblical epistemology assumes the Biblical God's existence at the outset and works from that premise. That He exists comes first – that is the metaphysical actuality.

Metaphysically speaking, that I understand He exists comes after. But how I come to understand He exists is the epistemological question that I must first answer before I can support the metaphysical supposition and know whether or not that supposition is certain or correct. Metaphysics (the reality) comes first in actuality, but epistemology (how we can answer the question of what is reality) comes first in inquiry. Before I can derive answers in any field of inquiry, I must have some basis for preferring some answers to others. That is the epistemological question. My preferring some answers to others has no bearing on the actual

²⁸ Adapted from <http://www.drcone.com/2014/04/02/which-comes-first-metaphysics-or-epistemology/>.

legitimacy of those answers, but is an important reflection on the source of authority upon which I rely.

For a Biblicist, that source of authority is the Bible. According to the Bible, that God exists is the metaphysical reality (Gen 1:1) – and that comes first in the realm of actuality. At the same time, the Bible also asserts epistemic truth regarding how we can have knowledge and certainty – by the fear of (right perspective of and response to) the Lord (Prov 1:7, 9:10). The epistemic proposition is simply that knowledge begins with the acknowledgment of Him. For the purposes of our inquiry, we are given, as first principle, the means whereby we can have certainty of knowledge. In other words, in the realm of the human pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, the epistemic question comes first (how can we have wisdom and knowledge?), and is answered with metaphysical reality (by the fear of the Lord).

APPENDIX II²⁹

Cornelius Van Til is brilliant on what I would call the first three pillars of Biblical epistemology (#1: Biblical God exists, #2: He has revealed himself authoritatively, #3: Natural man's incapacity to receive), but his epistemology falls short in that he does not account for hermeneutics (Pillar #4) within his epistemology. In fact, in his Th.M thesis, "Reformed Epistemology," he never once even discusses Biblical interpretation. Much of his critique of other thinkers, like Kant, includes considerable discussion of their deficiencies in the interpretation of experience, but not a word about interpretation of Scripture. Not one.

How can Van Til build such an outstanding foundational framework on special revelation and then totally ignore the centrality of hermeneutic method for understanding that revelation? You see, it all has to do with where one places hermeneutics: Biblical hermeneutics is as an absolutely necessary component of epistemology. Hermeneutics falls within the realm of epistemology. Van Til does not seem to share that conviction, even though he critiques the hermeneutics of others' bases of authority (i.e., experience) within an epistemological context.

Still, while not considering hermeneutics an integral part of epistemology, he does give hermeneutics attention elsewhere. In his *The New Hermeneutic*, for example, Van Til concludes, with these words, "...we would appeal to the Cahier's men, to Wiersinga and to others, to build their hermeneutical procedures on the theology of Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, etc., (emphasis mine) and then in terms of it to challenge all men to repentance and faith in the self-identifying Christ of Scripture instead of making compromise with unbelief" (pp. 180). Notice his prescribed hermeneutical procedures are grounded in historical theology, rather than literal grammatical-historical.

In short, Van Til is marvelously consistent in his epistemological method until he arrives at the hermeneutic component. At that point his writing shows, in my estimation, two deficiencies: (1) he does not grant hermeneutics its proper and necessary place in epistemology, and (2) when he does consider hermeneutics, he prescribes historical theology as the orthodox hermeneutic, rather than literal grammatical-historical – an unfortunate contradiction of his own expertly stated first principles. The Biblical epistemological model does not share these two deficiencies, and leads me to consider that while Van Til is outstanding up to a point, we cannot simply adopt his reformed epistemology without ourselves walking more consistently down the reformed path. Premillennialism (and especially the dispensational form of premillennialism) demands its own epistemology, and one that includes hermeneutic method.

²⁹ Adapted from <http://www.drcone.com/2014/04/28/two-deficiencies-of-reformed-epistemology-a-brief-commendation-and-critique-of-cornelius-van-tils-epistemology/>.