

Falconer, C & R Falconer 2021, 'The Eschatological Reign of Christ as an Objective for Missions', African Theological Journal for Church and Society, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 170-197

The Eschatological Reign of Christ as an Objective for Missions

Catherine Falconer and Dr Robert Falconer
South African Theological Seminary
robertf@sats.edu.za

Abstract

There has been much dispute about the millennial reign of Christ, yet Jesus spoke as if the kingdom of God was among his listeners and thus also among us, rather than in the distant future. If the kingdom reign of Christ is now in our world, what implications then should this have on missions? We examine the background and approach to missions in the various eschatological perspectives, namely, (1) postmillennialism, (2) premillennialism, and (3) amillennialism to discover how each of these views approaches the call to missions. A study of Luke 17:20-21 reveals the present reality of Christ's kingdom. This paper has three methodological steps, the first is an exploration of history and historical theology for three of the primary eschatological views, the second is a biblical study from Luke 17:20-21, and the third makes a proposal for the objective for missions, grounded in the findings of this research project, namely that mission has an eschatological focus, and more specifically that the amillennial view forms one of the best foundations to proclaim the kingdom of God, which is imperative for a full-bodied praxis for missions.

Introduction

To my knowledge there is little scholarship on eschatology from a Christian African perspective. I, Robert Falconer, ventured some contributions: (1) A section at the end of my doctoral dissertation under, "Africa's Socio-Renewal and Cosmic Harmony" (2013:255–269), and (2) my book chapter in "God and Creation", titled, "A Vision of Eschatological-Environmental Renewal:

Responding to an African Ecological Ethic” (2019:119–142). There is also a helpful chapter at the end of Prof. Samuel Kunhiyop’s (2012:209-247) book, “African Christian Theology”. While Kunhiyop was my supervisor, our eschatological perspectives and approaches are different. This journal article does not address African Christian eschatology specifically, but we consider it a response to some of the experiences we had while being missionaries in East Africa. The theme of Christ’s kingdom reign has a global relevance, including for Africa.

Eschatology has always been a vital component of the Christian faith, shaping our hope for the future and informing our praxis. This is especially true for missiology. With this in mind, we aim in this paper to determine the mission of the church in dialogue with the main eschatological views on the reign of Christ and his kingdom. Christianity has traditionally classified the different perspectives of the millennial reign of Christ in the following: (1) postmillennialism, (2) premillennialism, and (3) amillennialism (Waldron 2003:13-16). Each perspective also has its own set of variations which inevitably make the study of eschatology rather complicated. Historic premillennialism and amillennialism seem to be present in the church’s infancy. Naturally, adherence to both these perspectives has argued that their view first dominated early Christian theology¹. While some Christians still hold to historic premillennialism, this discussion will also include dispensational and progressive premillennialist perspectives, as well as postmillennialism and amillennialism. These discussions will offer an overview of the reign of Christ and are not intended to be exhaustive².

Catherine Falconer has been involved in missions in Africa, notably in South Sudan and Kenya, for many years and discovered that missionaries had little understanding of eschatology and the kingdom of God. We argue, along with

¹ For a detailed discussion on the early eschatological perspectives and its development, cf. Allison (2011:684-88); Horton (2011:923-25); Kelly (1968:459-74).

² For more on: historic premillennialism, cf. Blomberg (2009); dispensational premillennialism, cf. Blaising and Bock (2000); Ryrie (1966); Vlach (2017); amillennialism, cf. Storms (2013); Riddlebarger (2013); Waldron (2003); and for postmillennialism, cf. Boettner (1991); Mathison (1999); Wilson (2008).

Bosch (1980:121), that a better understanding of the salient points may have a greater impact on missions.

We have chosen to focus our Biblical study on Luke 17:20-21 in the fourth section of this paper because it defines the eschatological approach in the context of the kingdom of God and missions. Missions, eschatology, and the kingdom of God are woven throughout the Old and New Testaments, and some of these passages will be referred to throughout this paper. In the OT, mission begins with God being the first missionary with his eschatological objective to bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him (Bosch 1991:19). God made his first missional covenant with Abraham. He proclaimed that in Abraham's offspring all nations would be blessed (Gen 22:18). Later, God sent several prophets to foreign nations, for example, he sent Jonah to Nineveh, Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon (1 Kings 17:8-24), and Elisha to Naaman, a commander of a Syrian army (2 Kings 5), and not to mention the exilic prophets. The Synoptic Gospels begin with the family line of Jesus, which includes a hand full of Gentiles (e.g. Rahab and Ruth). God had a missional heart for Gentiles like Rahab and Ruth because they desired him above other gods. It is, therefore, clear that God's missional mandate was often cross-cultural long before Jesus gave the disciples the great commission. We concur with Wright (1996:243) when he said, "God is in the business of turning enemies into friends." Jew or Gentile, God desires that all may be saved.

In our last discussion, we will focus on Jesus's kingdom reign as an objective for missions. Missions exist because there is a present eschatological reality *and* a future hope, and so one might say, "*mission is eschatological action*".

The millennial reign of Christ: postmillennial perspective

The postmillennialist argues that the second coming of Christ occurs after the millennium, the one-thousand-year reign of Christ (Boettner 1991:14). It is said that the kingdom of God is currently being extended into the world through the preaching of the gospel together with the work of the Holy Spirit (Storms 2013:368; Ps 2:6-9, 22:27-28, 102:15, 138:4-5). The aim is to eventually Christianize the world. Once this Christianization has effectively taken place, Jesus Christ will return. This second coming will include a long period of righteousness and peace before the eternal state. Waldron (2003:16) explains

that postmillennialists propose that the millennium will be an age where the Church's mission will be to reach all nations and that as nations are converted there will be a "golden age of spiritual and material blessing." Wilson (2008:10) adds that as more people are converted to Christianity the 'Great Commission' will eventually be completed and then the end³ will come. Gentry (2020:1-2) defends postmillennialism as a historically optimistic view versus other eschatological schools of thought. Although all the eschatological schools are in agreement about the ultimate victory of God in eternity, the other views are somewhat pessimistic. Gentry (2020:5) argues that postmillennialism is the only eschatological view that maintains an optimistic hope for this current age before Christ returns. They teach that Jesus Christ established his kingdom in the first century as a spiritual redemptive reality. As the gospel is proclaimed and believed, Christianity will grow over time until it becomes a dominating influence. The fruit of the kingdom's growth will result in peace, righteousness, and prosperity.

Several historical events encouraged the flourishing of the postmillennial perspective. First, the amillennialism of the early church took on a triumphalist expression at the time of the Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great (AD 272-337), looking more like modern-day postmillennialism. Understandably, with Constantine's conversion to Christianity, it brought about a shift in eschatological focus from early amillennialism to postmillennialism (Horton 2011:923-24). Second, in the Middle Ages, the Crusades and its military response to Islamic threats enthused eschatological hopes, not to mention natural disasters, famines, and the bubonic plague which intensified eschatological expectations (Allison 2011:688-89). Third, the American revivalist preacher and philosopher, Jonathan Edwards, during the Great Awakening encouraged missions and the advancement of God's kingdom based upon his postmillennial theology. Edwards advocated the great advancement of God's kingdom in the world and the belief that, as the kingdom is extended through the world, there would be prosperity in the last days. Once the church had achieved its mission of extending God's kingdom,

³ By 'end' we do not mean 'the end of the world', or its annihilation, but the end of 'this present age', cf. Falconer (2019:119-42).

peace and prosperity would rule, and the world could finally be given to Christ (Edwards 1834b:2:285).⁴

Puritans, like Thomas Brightman, John Cotton, and John Owen embraced this postmillennialist view earlier than Edwards. They, together with Edwards, believed that as missionaries were sent out with the gospel, God's kingdom would expand; there would be peace and prosperity for a time and then Christ would return to judge the world after the millennium (Allison 2011:693).

Riddlebarger explained that during the post-reformation era, postmillennialism seemed right, especially considering the circumstances of Cromwell's commonwealth and then the technological growth and advancement in 1870-1915. Unfortunately, this set the stage for unrealistic hopes, placing the responsibility in the hands of the Church to bring peace for Christ to return. When the circumstances changed with World War I and the Great Depression, postmillennialism was no longer popular. Hope turned to pessimism and the stage was set for dispensational premillennialism in the modern era (Riddlebarger 2013:37-39).

For the postmillennialist, evangelism and missions are the church's effort and preparation for the second coming of Christ – so it seems.

The millennial reign of Christ: premillennial perspective

Papias of Hierapolis (c. 60 – c. 130 AD) was the first Apostolic Father to promote premillennialism (Allison 2011:685; Holmes 2007a:722-23). This was called chiliasm (millennialism) at that time and for centuries after.⁵ It is analogous to historic premillennialism. The understanding was that the millennium is a literal period in which Christ will reign on earth in a kind of a golden age before the final judgment. The response to Papias's ideas in *Fragments of Papias*, fragment 3, verses 11-13 (Papias 2007:739) are not complimentary. Neither is fragment 5, verse 4 (Papias 2007:743), which states that Papias is in "error regarding the millennium" and so was the Apostolic

⁴ For a sample of Edward's postmillennial eschatology, cf. Edwards (1834:278-315).

⁵ Cf. Augustine (2009:649).

Father, Irenaeus, who followed his teaching.⁶ According to Jenkins (2020) who has high regard for the writings of Papias, it is surprising that he was not “recalled as a pivotal Church Father.” He highlights that Papias envisioned Christ’s literal and material millennial kingdom and reign on earth. In addition Jenkins (2020) believes that based on Papias’s writings he may have been reflecting views widely held in the church at that time, and notes that Papias was labelled a heretic and by the fourth century, Eusebius dismissed him as “a bumbler of small intelligence”. Unlike dispensational⁷ premillennial theology, the distinction between Israel and the Church is absent in the historic premillennialism of the early church. For them the “Church is the true and New Israel”, and neither did it fathom the unusual secret rapture theory of latter dispensationalism (Blaising and Bock 2000:22-23; Storms 2013:173; Waldron 2003:14-15). Dispensational premillennial theology was a later development from historic premillennial theology⁸ (Blaising and Bock 2000:22).

There are primarily 3 forms of dispensational premillennial theology today. According to Blaising and Bock, they are (1) classical dispensationalism, (2) revised dispensationalism, and (3) progressive dispensationalism.⁹ Dispensational premillennial theology is diverse rather than monolithic (Blaising and Bock 2000:18, 30-32). Dispensationalism began in Britain in the early 1800s among the Plymouth Brethren. John Nelson Darby, an influential

⁶ καὶ Παπίας δὲ περὶ τὴ χιλιονταετηρίδα σφάλλεται, ἐξ οὗ καὶ ὁ Εἰρηναῖος (Frag. 5:4). I credit my colleague, David Woods, for pointing me to Eusebius’s *Church History*, ch. 39 where he discusses *The Writings of Papias* (Eusebius 2014). Here Eusebius seems to offer a more positive response to Papias.

⁷ The word, dispensation, refers to the special way in which God arranges his relationship with humanity. Identifying various dispensations in Scripture, for example, the dispensation of Israel with its laws and ceremonies, and the dispensation of the Christian church. This has been universally common in biblical interpretation (Blaising and Bock 2000:15).

⁸ Nevertheless, Ryrie is emphatic that evidence is available demonstrating that that dispensational concepts existed in the early church as well as throughout her history. He then goes on to provide examples (Ryrie 1966:90; cf. Walvoord 1983:6). For example, Justin Martyr (2014:ch. 80; cf. Kelly 1968:466).

⁹ Progressive dispensationalism is a contemporary form of dispensational theology which is said to be a biblical response to the emphases and concerns of classical dispensationalism, and offers numerous changes to both classical and revised dispensationalism, thus arguably bringing “dispensationalism closer to contemporary evangelical biblical interpretation.” (Blaising and Bock 2000:30-32; cf. Weber 2009).

leader from the Plymouth Brethren promoted and systematized dispensationalism (Ryrie 1966:99). His writings, along with others, enjoyed a wide readership and tremendous impact on evangelicalism, notably in the United States of America. The writings influenced the theology of D.L. Moody, C.I. Scofield,¹⁰ and others (Blaising and Bock 2000:14).¹¹

Dispensationalism has been taught in varying degrees in several reputable American seminaries, for example, Grace Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, Denver Seminary, The Master's Seminary, and Dallas Theological Seminary.

Despite dispensationalism in academia, dispensational premillennialism has also had a remarkable influence on pop culture, evident in works like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey 1970), and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind series* (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995).¹² These together with other literary works and films often synthesis "their views of the future with well-organized right-wing and pro-Israel political action" (Weber 2009:26).

Further, dispensationalists encouraged the founding of mission organizations and have also actively participated in them. They have founded the Central American Mission; founded by Scofield, Campus Crusade for Christ, the Navigators, Youth For Christ, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, not to

¹⁰ Scofield produced the famous *Scofield Reference Bible* loaded with expositional and theological annotations creating a system of biblical interpretation that promoted dispensationalism (Blaising and Bock 2000:15).

¹¹ Dissidents against dispensationalism argue that, "Dispensationalism was formulated by one of the nineteenth-century separatist movements, the Plymouth Brethren." They conclude that because dispensationalism is recent it is surely unorthodox. Further, since it was birthed out of a separatist movement it ought to be discredited. However, Ryrie reflects on these arguments and explains that dispensationalists do recognise that their system was primarily formulated by Darby, but they also recognise that dispensationalist concepts are to be found in Scripture and early Christianity (Ryrie 1966:88). While this may be true in part, in our view, it seems that the weight of Scripture and Christian tradition uphold a different eschatological perspective promoted later in this paper.

¹² For a critical response cf. Middleton (2014:302); Riddlebarger (2013:41, 133, 145, 169, 189 and 273-74); Storms (2013:9, 13, 48-49); Wright (2001).

mention the evangelistic endeavours of Billy Graham who held to dispensational views (Blaising and Bock 2000:16-18; cf. Storms 2013:48-49).

Dispensational premillennial theology is generally systemized by the following dispensations according to Ryrie: (1) Innocency (Gen 1:3-3:6), (2) Conscience (Gen 3:7-8:14), (3) Civil Government (Gen 8:15-11:9), (4) Patriarchal Rule (Gen 11:10-Ex 18:27), (5) Mosaic Law (Ex 19:1-Acts 1:26), (6) Grace (Acts 2:1-Rev 19:21), (7) Millennium (Rev 20:1-15)¹³ (Ryrie 1966:78). The last dispensation is most relevant for this study. Premillennialists place the second coming before the millennium – the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth – and take a literal interpretation of Revelation 20 (Ryrie 1966:78; Walvoord 1983:6). Contrary to the Fragments of Papias mentioned above, Weber (2009:27–28) argues that “Most early Christians interpreted Revelation 20 quite literally and expected a millennial age following Christ’s return.”

There is also the “clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church” in dispensationalism (Ryrie 1966:277). For pretribulation dispensationalism, this plays an important role, because a distinction between Israel and the church¹⁴ implies that the church will be removed from the earth before the tribulation. This concept is known as the rapture and is a dominant feature of classic dispensational premillennialism (Blaising and Bock 2000:27, 30; Ryrie 1966:78, 228).¹⁵

Practically, premillennialism has also influenced the faith missions movement and has “shaped the identity and missiological approach of evangelicalism” (Campos 2009:260). Mission sponsors and missionaries were convinced of the urgency to spread the gospel before Christ’s second coming (Blaising and Bock 2000:24; Campos 2009:261). Unfortunately, as Campos (2009:262)¹⁶ explains, in Latin America, between 1900 and 1930, this affected missiology and praxis whereby social concerns were avoided having become suspect. Such an attitude was informed by Matthew 24:14, “And this gospel of the kingdom will

¹³ There are a number of variations and Ryrie provides a number of other ‘representative dispensational schemes’ developed by others (Ryrie 1966:105).

¹⁴ Cf. Blaising and Bock (2000:383).

¹⁵ Cf. Vlach (2017); Walvoord (1983).

¹⁶ Campos writes from a Latin American perspective, but we believe that his observations apply to other parts of the world too, where premillennialism is promoted.

be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (ESV). Evangelism and missions are, therefore, of urgent and prime importance to usher in the kingdom of God. Its establishment is dependent upon our gospel preaching as the church seeks to “transition from mission to kingdom.” (Campos 2009:265-66).

Speaking from the perspective of Latin America – but is no doubt evident in other parts of the world as experienced by ourselves while being missionaries in Kenya – Campos tells of how the emphasis on individual spirituality and transformation in dispensational evangelicalism has led to a disregard for social context and involvement.¹⁷ This missiological approach is, however, changing, but the focus of mission to “prepare for the coming of the Lord to establish his ‘future’ kingdom” is still very much evident (Campos 2009:267, 269-70). As Norberto Saracco (cited in Campos 2009:269) has said, dispensationalist theology has given us a gospel without a kingdom!

On the other hand, the more recent progressive dispensationalism has offered more holistic missiology (Blaising and Bock 2000:387; Campos 2009:279). Campos (2009:280) explains that in this system “an already inaugurated messianic kingdom” is accepted, and while it expects a millennial reign of Christ and the final consummation, it offers “a concept of holistic redemption and a similar understanding of the nature of the church and its mission, reflecting the present aspect of the messianic kingdom”.

The millennial reign of Christ: amillennial perspective

The term amillennialism was not recognized until recently. Before then, amillennialists would have called themselves postmillennial. Although they believed that Jesus would return after the millennial age, they were different from traditional postmillennialists because they did not hold to a literal 1000-year earthly reign of Christ to come (Riddlebarger 2013:39-40; cf. Storms 2013:549-52). Nevertheless, the amillennial eschatological perspective has been the predominant eschatological view of Christianity since Augustine (Riddlebarger 2013:40; Horton 2011:924), if not, before him, as we propose.

¹⁷ Obviously, there are always exceptions.

The “present millennial age manifests in the present reign of Jesus Christ in heaven,” according to amillennialism (Riddlebarger 2013:40). And “the promises made to Israel, David, and Abraham in the Old Testament are fulfilled by Jesus Christ and his church during this present age”¹⁸ (Riddlebarger 2013:40; cf. Storms 2013:553-54).

Amillennialists argue that the millennium is the age between the first and second advents of Christ, the 1000-years in Revelation 20 being symbolic of this entire age (Grudem 1994:1111-12). Christ triumphantly bound Satan at his death and resurrection; the effects of which are evident in the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel and kingdom of God. At present, Satan is not free to deceive all nations (Rev 20:3). John did not say that Satan is bound and is no longer able to persecute Christians, to the contrary, he is still a roaring lion (1 Peter. 5:8) devouring believing men and women and he continues to concoct schemes to disrupt church unity (2 Cor 2:11), but he can no longer deceive the nations. Jesus Christ currently reigns in heaven during this millennial age. At the end of this age, however, some amillennialists believe that Satan will be released bringing about great apostasy, leading up to the general resurrection, the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the renewal of creation, almost as one explosive event (Riddlebarger 2013:40; Storms 2013:451-66, 554-56; Waldron 2003:83-92, 101-5).

Contrary to the common understanding that amillennialists hold that there is no millennium, Storms makes it clear that they certainly do believe in a millennium. The millennial reign of Christ is currently present; it is the “age of the Church between the first and second comings of Christ” (Storms 2013:424). Riddlebarger (2013:40) calls amillennialism a “present or realized millennialism.” Similarly, Waldron (2003:15) affirms this idea interpreting Revelation 20:1-10 as a period for the Church between Christ’s first and Second Advent.

The early church held the view that the kingdom of God was inaugurated with Christ’s first advent and they waited in anticipation for its full consummation in the future; this is known as amillennialism today (Horton 2011:923). Considering again the Fragments of Papias, the author writes in fragment 3,

¹⁸ For further discussion, cf. Horton (2011:945-50); Storms (2013:chs. 6, 9-10).

verses 12, “Among other things he (Papias) says that after the resurrection of the dead there will be a period of a thousand years when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. These ideas, I suppose, he got through a misunderstanding of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that the things recorded in figurative language were spoken by them mystically” (Papias 2007:739).

This alludes to a strong possibility, we suggest, that a primordial form of amillennialism existed in the apostolic accounts and was likely the dominant eschatological view before Papias. Similarly, Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, expresses his disagreement with Nepos’s teaching that there will be a temporal earthly reign of Christ¹⁹ (Dionysius 2014, part 1, ch. 1). The Epistle of Barnabas 15:4a also seems to offer a figurative understanding of a thousand years as it relates to ‘the day of the Lord’ (Holmes 2007; cf. Augustine 2009:649; Kelly 1968:462-63, 465-66).

It was Saint Augustine, a Doctor of the Church, in his *City of God*, book 20, chapter 7, who developed and popularized the amillennial perspective. He tells us that the millennium may be understood as either, the sixth millennium correlating to the sixth day of creation followed by an endless Sabbath for the saints, or “as an equivalent for the whole duration of this world, employing the number of perfection to mark the fullness of time” (Augustine 2009:650). In chapter 9 he explains how from Christ’s first coming the devil has been bound and the saints’ reign with Christ during these 1000-years and argues that, “the church could not now be called His kingdom or the kingdom of heaven until His saints were even now reigning with Him”, quoting from Matthew 25:34, “Come, ye blessed of My Father, take position of the Kingdom prepared for you” (p. 654). Even now, Augustine says, the saints of Christ reign with him, citing Colossians 3:1-2 (p. 655). He continues to explain that the believers share in his kingdom reign with him, therefore, “the church, then, begins its reign with Christ now in the living and in the dead” (pp. 655-56).

Augustine’s, *City of God*, offers a more nuanced approach to ancient amillennialism, discerning a “thread of Christ’s kingdom throughout redemptive history”, and “distinguished clearly the ‘two cities’ of this present

¹⁹ Likely referring to the literal 1000-year reign of Christ.

age – each with its own commission, purpose, destiny, and means” (Horton 2011:924; cf. Augustine 2009). Augustine’s amillennial interpretation became the dominant eschatological view up until the present. The three main branches of Christianity in the world today, are Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. The Catholics consist of 50.1% of the world population, the Eastern Orthodox (including Oriental) consist of 11.9%, the Protestant forms 36.7%, and all other Christian denominations are 1.3% (Pew Research Centre 2011). The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and most mainline Protestant denominations, namely, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and many Presbyterian churches, hold to the Amillennial view (Jarrett 2019; New World Encyclopedia 2020).

The reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin promoted amillennial eschatology. Allison explains that Luther denounced premillennialism and rejected the concept of a future golden age. He, nevertheless, emphasized our hope in the second coming of Christ. Likewise, Calvin was very critical of premillennialism (Allison 2011:690-91). These reformers “articulated the distinction between the heavenly and earthly kingdoms” but rejected “the ‘Christendom’ version of amillennialism” – seen in the Roman Catholic Church at the time – as well as “the millennial literalism of radical sects.” Both of these expressed an over-realized eschatology (Horton 2011:925). Calvin states that Christ in his ascension withdrew his bodily presence so that he might rule both heaven and earth more immediately by his power. He specifically focused on the historical narrative of Jesus Christ’s advent, ascension and future return and held that Jesus had already inaugurated his kingdom and poured out his Spirit. His reign is partially realized and will only be fully consummated on Christ’s return physically to earth (Calvin 2007:Book 2, ch. 16, sec. 14).

But let us not lose sight that this kingdom of God is already present and yet it is also a coming kingdom. As the South African missiologist, David Bosch (1980:236), has said, Mission is an eschatological event that “proceeds from the certainty that the Kingdom of God is not only a future reality but is already present in our midst”. It is hope-in-action, fulfilling Christianity’s “obligations to the world” (p. 237). According to Storms (2013:368), this view differs greatly from postmillennialism and premillennialism because it holds that the Great

Commission will ultimately be successful in the present age and the Church will grow and fill the earth.²⁰

As we live in the ‘now-and-not-yet’ of the kingdom, the time of the Holy Spirit, mission becomes the most vital part of the church’s activity (Bosch 1991:503).

Bosch²¹ is emphatic that “The reign of God has already come, is coming, and will come in fullness” and because he currently rules here and now, we are called to manifest his reign by being ambassadors of his Kingdom” (Bosch 1991:508-9). This is clear after Jesus set towards Jerusalem in Luke 9:51 and commissioned his disciples to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God (10:1-20). Jesus calls us to participate in his mission (Gladd and Harmon 2016:160, 163). Newbigin (1995:64-65) exclaims that “mission is nothing less than this: the Kingdom of God, the sovereign rule of the Father of Jesus of all humankind and over all creation”, and describes it this way,

It is the proclamation of the kingdom,²² the presence of the kingdom, and the prevenience of the kingdom. By proclaiming the reign of God over all things the church acts out its faith that the Father of Jesus is indeed ruler of all. The church, by inviting all humankind to share in the mystery of the presence of the kingdom hidden in its life through its union with the crucified and risen life of Jesus, acts out the love of Jesus that took him to the cross (Newbigin 1995:64-65).

Therefore, when we proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God in tangible ways, we give people a taste of what the kingdom now and the kingdom coming is like.²³ For the amillennialist, mission is eschatological to its very core (Gladd and Harmon 2016:168-69).

²⁰ Cf. Ps 2:6-9, 22:27-28, 102:15, 138:4-5.

²¹ As an aside, Bosch makes a critical observation regarding dispensational premillennialism, saying, “Christian eschatology, in particular, seems to lend itself to becoming a playground for fanatical curiosity, as the writings of Hal Lindsey and others witness” (Bosch 1991:504).

²² Cf. Gladd and Harmon (2016:168).

²³ Bosch (1980:238) talks of Christians exerting themselves for the erection of signs of the Kingdom here and now.

Although all the eschatological perspectives emphasize missions, the postmillennial approach seems to work towards establishing the kingdom of God by making the world a better place in preparation for the coming of Christ the king. The premillennial perspective²⁴ appears to involve themselves in missions to fulfil certain criteria, quickening the second coming of Christ and his kingdom. The amillennial perspective understands that Christ reigns on earth from heaven and that we are to proclaim and demonstrate this present kingdom in missions, and so on, and the hope that we have in its final consummation so that others might participate in it. A significant part of this eschatological discussion is the millennial reign of Christ in Revelation 20.²⁵ Amillennial scholars have addressed this topic thoroughly, and we think convincingly. We believe, however, that part of the answer is in Luke 17:20-30, whether “the kingdom of God is in your midst”, within us, or is yet to come.

The Kingdom of God in Luke 17:20-21

You have heard it said, “I am a ‘panmillennialist’; it will all pan out in the end”. The statement is a cop-out because (1) doctrine informs praxis, (2) our hope is shaped by the future, and (3) if the eschatological kingdom of God *is* currently present, then we have a specific responsibility to participate in Christ’s reign and his kingdom.

This discussion will explore the ‘kingdom of God’²⁶ in Luke 17:20-21. These verses are ambiguous: Is the gospel without the present kingdom of God, is it within you, or is it among you?²⁷ Luke narrates how the Pharisees questioned Jesus about when they could expect the kingdom of God²⁸ to come (v. 20). In

²⁴ We acknowledge as stated before, that the premillennial perspective has variations and the following observation might not apply fully to each of them.

²⁵ You might consider consulting Sam Storm’s (2013), *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*, and Kim Riddlebarger’s (2013), *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*.

²⁶ Sometimes called the Kingdom of heaven, keeping in line with respect for the divine name for Jewish readers.

²⁷ Sometimes rendered as ‘in the midst of you’.

²⁸ Elwell (1984:607) explains that out of all the Gospels, βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ is used the most in Luke’s Gospel. According to Verbrugge (2000:87–88), it conveys the essential idea that God rules as king.

the OT, especially in the Psalms, God is said to reign from the heavens upon the earth, and that he rules over the nations.²⁹ In the NT, however, Jesus is given the full right and title of king (Heb 1:1–3). This kingdom which Jesus heralds, he claims as his own (Luke 22:30, cf. John 18:36). And those who participate in it share in the kingdom of God as priests (1 Pet 2:9, Rev 1:6, 5:10).

Luke clarifies to his Gentile readers what he meant by, ‘the kingdom of God’ when he put it in an eschatological context rather than a nationalistic Judean one (Falconer, C. 2019:68). When Luke wrote of God’s kingdom (17:20-21) he was writing about the ‘already now’ aspect of God’s kingdom and that it had already been realized in the person of Jesus Christ. Luke continued and wrote about the second aspect of God’s kingdom, the ‘not yet’, the future of God’s kingdom (17:22-37), extending ultimately to its final consummation.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees question in verses 20b–21, *Οὐκ ἔρχεται ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ παρατηρήσεως, οὐδὲ ἐροῦσιν· Ἴδου ὧδε ἢ· Ἐκεῖ, ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἐντὸς ὑμῶν ἐστίν*³⁰. Rendered as, “The kingdom of God is not coming in such a way that can be observed, nor will they say, “See, here it is!”, or “There!” Because see, the kingdom of God is among you” (our translation). *ἐντὸς ὑμῶν ἐστίν* is ambiguous. While it could mean ‘among you’, or ‘in your midst’, it could also mean ‘within you’. The Greek lexicon, BDAG, prefers the sense of “among you, in your midst, either now or suddenly in the near future” (Bauer 2001:340). We concur, taking it to mean ‘is among you’. Hart’s commentary in his NT translation, however, takes this to be wrong, stating, “*Entos* really does properly mean ‘within’ or ‘inside of’, not ‘among’.” and Luke, in both his Gospel and the book of Acts, when meaning to say ‘among’ or ‘amid’, always uses either the phrase *ἐν μέσῳ* (*en mesōi*) or just an *ἐν* (*en*), followed by a dative plural; and his phrase for ‘in your midst’ is *ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν* (*en mesōi hymōn*), as in 22:27” (Hart 2017:167).

Nevertheless, Jesus was either responding directly to the Pharisees which would make the kingdom of God ‘within you’ improbable considering Jesus’s rebuke of the religious group in Luke 11:37-12:3 (Falconer, C. 2019:70). Or the pronoun, *ὑμῶν*, ‘you’, is a distributive, generic reference – not to the Pharisees

²⁹ Cf. Ps 22:28, 93:1-2a, 96:10a, 103:19, and 145:1-13.

³⁰ NA29.

as its intended antecedent but with the sense of all of you people – requiring a non-literal antecedent for ‘you’.³¹ The second option seems preferable. According to BDAG, Luke generally avoided “referring to God’s reign as a psychological reality” (Bauer 2001:341). This makes it likely that Jesus meant, “the kingdom of God is among you”. Further, some verses later, is Jesus’s statement about little children, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16b). Noticeably, the future aspect of God’s kingdom had not yet visibly arrived, hence the statement that the kingdom of God cannot simply be observed (Falconer, C. 2019:74).

Verbrugge has suggested that we ought to understand Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of God as being near, as we read in Mark 1:15 (ESV), “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” He says that this is a coming kingdom, it is future, at least according to verse 15 (Verbrugge 2000, 90). Jesus Christ opens a new age by his incarnation into this world. Now, Christ’s reign on the earth from heaven has been realized and has begun (p. 614). Although the Gospels make it explicit that the kingdom of God ‘is at hand’,³² breaking into this world through Jesus’s life and ministry (Storms 2013, 33). We are also told how imminent this is—it would be in the lifetime of his disciples.³³

An alternative would be that this kingdom of God is yet to come, but this conflicts with Jesus’s imminent description of his disciples standing in front of him, as well as the present notion of the kingdom of God already being among them (Luke 17:21).³⁴ It seems fair to say that the kingdom of God came in the person of Jesus Christ and has infiltrated and subverted our lives making us new creations (2 Cor 5:17). His resurrection, ascension and glorification bring in the kingdom of God, that same kingdom that was ‘at hand’. And yet, this

³¹ We attribute these ideas to Kevin Smith, principal of the South African Theological Seminary, during a conversation.

³² Cf. Matt 4:17, 9:35, 10:7; Luke 4:43, 8:1, 9:2, 10:9.

³³ Cf. Matt 16:28 and Mark 9:1.

³⁴ Jesus’s disciples were to pray ‘Your kingdom come’. But did Jesus have in mind the imminence of the kingdom when he crafted this prayer, or are we to pray the same prayer today? While it is hard to know, we argue that this may be a prayer for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God among us, as well as a prayer for its final consummation.

kingdom of Christ is also future and we anticipate its consummation at Jesus's second coming³⁵ (Falconer, C. 2019: 6; cf. Ladd 1990, 18).

If the kingdom of God is among us and the reign of Christ is now in our world, then surely he is our king and we live under "the kingdom of Christ" (Elwell 1984:607). Newbigin (1989:133) proclaimed that God's kingdom has come near to us through Jesus Christ entering our world (Matt 12:28) and thus is present.³⁶ Likewise, Ladd (1990:80) explained that "the kingdom of God is the sovereign rule of God, manifested in the person and work of Christ, creating a people over whom he reigns, and issuing in a realm or realms in which the power of his reign is realized."³⁷ A vital part of making the reign of God known to the world is our response to his eschatological call for missions.

Christ's Kingdom Reign: An Objective for Missions

The kingdom of God as a present reality and eschatological hope has a significant influence on the church's mission to proclaim and demonstrate Christ's kingdom.

The postmillennial perspective believes that its missional role is to Christianize the nations (Boettner 1991:29) to prepare for the second coming of Jesus. This implies that Jesus will only return after the church's concerted effort to transform our world.

From the premillennial perspective, especially in dispensationalism, it seems to promote an escapist approach to missions, "get saved so that you can go to heaven", or to be raptured out of this evil world and into an ethereal, disembodied existence, with little interest for contextual social concerns³⁸ (Wright 2008:118-21). We fear that this may harm missions encouraging people to believe Jesus is yet to reign as king and that he will rescue and remove us from tribulations (pp. 128-33). History and experience tell us that this is untrue. Some premillennialists regard their experience and news media

³⁵ Cf. Matt 5:3, 10, 20, 7:21; Luke 21:31, 22:15,16.

³⁶ Cf. Matt 21:4, 23:13; Mark 10:15; John 18:36, Acts 2:29-36.

³⁷ Cf. Wright (1996:469)

³⁸ Both Robert and Catherine Falconer have served in a mission organisation in Kenya which was largely dispensational (cf. Wright 2008:200).

as an indicator that Satan presently rules this world. Proclaiming the kingdom of God is merely hopeful in the expectation that is yet to come and demonstrating a kingdom that is yet to come is no doubt a challenge.

On the other hand, the amillennialist has a kingdom to proclaim because it already is a present reality even if it is yet to be consummated at the eschaton. Further, it has a kingdom to demonstrate to others, and “to be a sign and foretaste of what God wants to do for the entire cosmos” (Wright 2008:200). Bartholomew (2017:229) says it well when he wrote, “being a missionary involves representing Christ in our vocations and in all that we are involved in. There is room in mission for the most diverse activities.” The objective for missions then is not to establish God’s kingdom—Christ has already done that—but to proclaim the present and eschatological reign of Christ and to demonstrate his kingdom to the world.

Jesus viewed the kingdom of God as his kingdom (Matt 13:41, 16:28) and gives a share of this kingdom to his saints (Verbrugge 2000:88). Peter wrote, “you are a chosen race,³⁹ a royal priesthood...” so that “you may *proclaim* the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9, ESV; italics are ours). John the Revelator used the aorist tense, indicating that he has already “made⁴⁰ us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev 1:6). The same is true of Revelation 5:10, “and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” Although this certainly has an eschatological characteristic, the aorist and the present emphasis is undisputable. We are a kingdom, and we are priests unto God, and we are to proclaim⁴¹ and demonstrate the kingdom of God which Jesus has already established in our midst.

Yet, missions did not begin with Jesus sending out his disciples (Matt. 28: 16-20). It began with God being the first missionary with his eschatological work to bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship Him (Bosch 1991:19). God made

³⁹ Although most English translations render this in the present tense, the Greek, Ὑμεῖς δὲ γένος ἐκλεκτόν, “you are a chosen race” omits the verb or state of being, and therefore, any notion of tense is missing.

⁴⁰ ἐποίησεν, ‘he has made’, is in the aorist.

⁴¹ Cf. 1 Pet 2:9.

his first missional covenant with Abraham. He said that in Abraham's offspring all nations would be blessed (Gen 22:18), a covenant that was repeated to Isaac and then later to Jacob (Gen 26, 28). Kaiser (1996:3-7) affirms this, saying, "clearly God intended to use Abraham in such a way that he would be a means of blessing to all the nations of the world" and "an instrument of redemption." In addition to that, we argue that this is the primary objective of missions – to tell all nations that the kingdom of God is here and show them in part what this looks like. Yes, we need to tell people about salvation, this is vital. But proclaiming the kingdom of God is just as important, as Luke makes quite evident, reflecting on Paul's ministry in the very last verse in the Acts of the Apostles, that the Apostle proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus Christ with boldness (Acts 28:31).

Wright (2008:208) offers us a glimpse of what it might look like, as examples, to demonstrate the kingdom, although he is approaching this from a slightly different eschatological angle. He lists the following:

Every act of love, gratitude and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings, and for that matter one's fellow non-human creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed which spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness (Wright 2008:208).

Throughout this paper, we have discussed that missions have an eschatological focus, and more specifically that the amillennialism view forms one of the best foundations to proclaim the reign of Christ and his kingdom reign in our world. Amillennialism emphasizes the proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God for the sake of missions. Having a theology of Christ's kingdom reign – both present and in its consummation – is imperative for a full-bodied praxis for missions, providing the church and believing Christians an objective for missions.

Practical missiological implications of Amillennialism have been discussed by theologians and pastors like Richard Lovelace, Charles Colson and Timothy Keller. Lovelace⁴² directly links the results of renewal movements and revival concern for missions, Christian literature, Christian educational institutions, social reform and social justice to churches that hold an Amillennial perspective (Keylock 1984).

Chuck Colson was the founder of the prison ministry, *Prison Fellowship*. Lovelace mentored Chuck (Gordan Conwell Theological Seminary 2020). The fruits of this ministry began in 1997 in Texas and brought in social reform and justice. The ministry program focuses on the restructuring of values, developing life skills, education, work, and fostering one-on-one mentoring. A study conducted to measure the success of the training found that those who graduated from the training were 17 percent less likely to be rearrested than those who did not attend the training. It became so successful that Prison Fellowship spread to prisons in 27 states and 89 prisons (Pope 2021).

Lovelace also had a profound influence on the ministry of Timothy Keller. Keller (2015) believed the only way to substantially and sustainably grow the body of Christ in a city, was through church plants. He explained the gospel in a way that uses both a 'kingdom' and an 'eternal life'. Keller (2008) finds that "many young people are struggling to make choices in a world of consumer options and are confused about their own identities in a culture of self-creation and self-promotion". Therefore, he uses the "kingdom Gospel", where more liberal people hear and understand the kingdom of God to restore the world, it opens them up to Christ's kingship in their lives (Keller 2008). Summarizing Herman Bavinck, Keller, said, if the eschatological element is left out, Christians develop the impression that nothing in this world matters. However, if they grasp the full outline then this should make Christians interested in both the evangelistic conversions together with service to their neighbour and working towards peace and justice in the world (Keller 2008). The Amillennial perspective is not without practical missiological implications.

⁴² Richard Lovelace served at the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary for decades as the professor of church history.

Conclusion

This paper explored the millennial reign of Christ and its implications for the mission's objective. We began by examining the background and approach to missions of (1) postmillennialism, (2) premillennialism, and its variations; historical premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism; and progressive premillennialism, (3) amillennialism. A study of Luke 17:20–21 provided a context for an eschatological approach to the kingdom of God and missions. Lastly, we argued that missions exist because there is a present eschatological reality of Jesus's kingly reign, and therefore, Jesus's kingdom reign is the primary objective for missions.

Postmillennialism seemed to place the responsibility in the hands of the Church to bring peace: evangelism and missions being the church's effort and preparation for the second coming of Christ. However, this set the stage for unrealistic hopes which eventually led to pessimism especially after World War I and the Great Depression. Many Christians became disillusioned with the postmillennialism perspective and hope turned to pessimism and the stage was set for the development of dispensational premillennialism.

It was argued that dispensational evangelicalism has traditionally emphasized individual spirituality and transformation with little interest in a social context. Dispensationalist theology, it appears, offers us a gospel without a kingdom, evident in their missiological approach where the focus of mission has been to prepare for the coming of the Lord to establish his 'future' kingdom. Their objective in missions is to preach the gospel so that people can avoid hell when they die and enjoy God forever. This is by no means erroneous, but it limits the kingdom of God to a distant future hope. This of course was the concern of the Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Maathai (2009:40), that "as Christianity became embedded in Africa, so did the idea that it was the afterlife that was the proper focus of a devotee, rather than this one—a legacy that continues to affect development ... Putting so much emphasis on the delights of heaven and making it the ultimate destination devalues life in the present". Thankfully, this is changing in the more recent development of progressive dispensationalism which offers more holistic missiology. It promotes the idea of an already inaugurated messianic kingdom, holistic redemption, and an understanding of the church and its mission which reflects the present

messianic kingdom of Christ. Yet, we feel that this is still very much a concern in African Christianity.

We are not arguing that other eschatological views yield no objectives for missions. Rather, we are proposing that the amillennial perspective understands that Christ reigns on earth from heaven now and that we are to proclaim and demonstrate this present kingdom in missions so that others might joyfully participate in it. Yet, we also have the hope of the kingdom's final consummation, and thus we wish to avoid any association with 'Kingdom Now Theology'. When we proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God, we give people a foretaste of what the kingdom now and the kingdom coming is like. Mission is eschatological in its essence for amillennialism.

We have argued that Luke 17:21 proclaims that the kingdom of God is among us and the reign of Christ is *now* in our world. The kingdom of God being the sovereign rule of God, manifested in Jesus Christ and his work. He has created a people over whom he reigns and who respond by making the reign of God known to the world. This is the eschatological call for missions. Amillennialism emphasizes the proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God. We, therefore, proposed that a theology of Christ's kingdom reign is vital for a full-bodied praxis for missions, especially in Africa, providing the church and Christians an objective for missions.

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