

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM IN REFORMED THEOLOGY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF J. O. BUSWELL TO THE MILLENNIAL DEBATE¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hear a Jewish proverb: “The nations of the world wish to irritate the Lord, but they can’t. What do they do? They vex Israel instead.” This seems to be the case, not just in the political, but also the theological arena, especially in the field of eschatology.

Covenantalism and dispensationalism are the two main systems of theology in evangelicalism today. Insofar as eschatology is concerned, amillennialism is the most prevalent view among covenant theologians. There are those who take a postmillennial view (e.g. the theonomists), and there are some who are premillennial. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, are always premillennial.

The millennial debate today focuses on these three main issues: (1) Is the millennial reign of Christ a physical or a spiritual reign? (2) Will it happen before or after the Second Coming of Christ? And (3) what is Israel’s place in the millennium? The debate is particularly controversial when the fate of the nation of Israel is addressed. Historic premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists believe that Israel has been replaced by the Church, and that prophecies relating to Israel must be interpreted in ecclesiastical and not Jewish terms. Dispensational premillennialists, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of the nation of Israel in the study of the end times, and how God will restore his chosen nation to greatness when Messiah returns.

As noted, there are two types of premillennialism: the historic and the dispensational. Historic premillennialism agrees with dispensational premillennialism that there will be a literal millennium of Christ’s rule on earth after his return. But apart from this, both offer somewhat opposite eschatological perspectives on how God will fulfill his redemptive plan. Most reformed scholars who take the premillennial view are historic premillennialists. However, there are those who are Reformed, and yet hold to the

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dispensational premillennial view of Israel and of the end times. This position is unfortunately much neglected in the perennial millennial debate. The late James Oliver Buswell (1895–1977) of Faith Theological Seminary² (Bible Presbyterian) is perhaps the most prominent Reformed scholar who took a dispensational premillennial view. My paper intends to revisit Buswell's *Systematic Theology*³ and demonstrate how dispensational premillennialism is compatible with covenant theology.

II. BUSWELL AND THE BIBLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Buswell graduated with a B.A. from the University of Minnesota, a B.D. from McCormick Theological Seminary, an M.A. from the University of Chicago, and a Ph.D. from New York University. In 1926, he was appointed third president of Wheaton College, a post he occupied with distinction until 1940, when he joined Carl McIntire's Twentieth Century Reformation Movement, and the new Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC). McIntire appointed him president of National Bible Institute (later Shelton College) in New York City. At the same time, he taught systematic theology at Faith Theological Seminary in Wilmington, Delaware.

Buswell's alignment with Carl McIntire and the BPC is significant, since they were like-minded in three ways: (1) both were Presbyterians and covenant theologians;⁴ (2) both were fundamentalists,⁵ and (3) both were premillennialists. It is well documented that one of the reasons why the BPC was formed was because the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) refused

² In 1956, Buswell left Faith to found Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

³ When Buswell taught systematic theology at Shelton College and Faith Theological Seminary, he sensed the need for a new Systematic Theology textbook that would reflect a Reformed and yet premillennial view. In 1949 he wrote, "I do not know of any great scholarly Systematic Theology which takes the premillennial view. This is a lack which must be supplied in the future" (J. O. Buswell, "Our Textbook in Systematic Theology," *The Bible Today* 42 [1949] 156). He eventually supplied it in a sizable two-volume work entitled, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, published by Zondervan in 1962. His section on eschatology is 283 pages long. (The book has been reprinted by Christian Life Publishers, Singapore, and is obtainable from FEBC Bookroom, email: febcbookroom@singnet.com.sg; or Covenant Seminary Bookstore, covsembk@swbell.net.)

⁴ Buswell and McIntire were both trained in PCUSA schools—McCormick and Princeton respectively. The latter, however, completed his studies at Westminster Theological Seminary after the secession.

⁵ Both took a militant stance against liberalism. Buswell admired Machen for his biblical scholarship and fundamentalism and influenced many Wheaton students to study at Westminster (and later Faith). See Edward L. Kellogg, "Wheaton College and the OPC," in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble; Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986) 445–47; Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 96; and George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 45–46. McIntire, on the other hand, was Machen's student. He battled faithfully with his mentor against the liberalism that was in the PCUSA and Princeton. See George M. Marsden, "The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism," in *Pressing Toward the Mark* 169–82. See also Blakely Baynes Hurst, "Confessionalism and Revivalism in the Singapore Bible Presbyterian Movement," *The Burning Bush* 3 (1997) 69–83.

to tolerate McIntire and Buswell's premillennial views.⁶ It must be noted that in the 1937 controversy, the OPC confessionalists were not averse to historic premillennialism but to dispensational premillennialism. Hart and Muether wrote, "The most important feature of fundamentalism that played havoc in the division of 1937 was dispensational premillennialism."⁷ Both McIntire and Buswell held to a premillennialism of the dispensational type. They saw no reason why dispensational premillennialism could not fit into Reformed theology. It is the soteriology of dispensationalism⁸ that contradicts Reformed theology, not its eschatology. The split was in part due to the OPC's failure to recognize this.

It is unfortunate that accounts written on the 1937 split have invariably portrayed the Bible Presbyterians as being less than Reformed for adopting a dispensational premillennial view in eschatology. To this day, we find Orthodox Presbyterians facetiously labeling Bible Presbyterians "dispensationalists."⁹ It must be said that McIntire and Buswell were not dispensationalists, neither did they favor dispensationalism as a theological system. They were clearly Presbyterian and hence covenantalists. Their commitment to covenant theology can be seen in their reaffirmation of "the system of doctrine set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms in the form in which they stood in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church" during the first Bible Presbyterian Synod meeting of June 4, 1937.¹⁰ However, the BPC, in an attempt to identify its distinctive eschatological position within the Reformed tradition, saw it necessary to add these words (in parenthesis) to chapter 23.1 of the *Confession*,

⁶ See David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville: Unusual Publications, 1986) 323–25.

⁷ D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995) 43.

⁸ Although dispensationalism today has largely departed from the Scofieldic and Chaferian view of law and grace, it nevertheless differs from covenant soteriology in its understanding of federal headship and its relation to the pre- and post-fall covenants, infant baptism, limited atonement, the active obedience of Christ, the indwelling ministry of the Spirit in the OT, and the content or substance of faith the OT saints had in how they "saw" Christ (cf. John 8:56).

⁹ For instance, Hart and Muether (*Fighting the Good Fight* 48–49) repeatedly referred to McIntire and Buswell in such a way. Marsden ("Introduction: Reformed and American," in *Reformed Theology in America* [ed. David F. Wells; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997] 9) inaccurately said that it was McIntire's "dispensationalism" that caused him to split from Machen (see also Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* 43–44). D. G. Hart, unfortunately, labeled McIntire and the Bible Presbyterian Church likewise in his book *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 163–65. That Hart is antagonistic towards both fundamentalism and dispensationalism may be telling of his interpretation of the events that happened in the OPC-BPC split of 1937.

¹⁰ *A Brief History of the Bible Presbyterian Church and Its Agencies* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.) 61. On page 10 of the same book, it is unequivocally stated, "The Bible Presbyterian Church is a confessional church, standing without apology and reservation for the historic Christian faith and for that great body of doctrine on which the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. stood consistently from its inception in colonial times until the destruction of the witness in 1936 by judicial decision. The Bible Presbyterian Church is prominently and pronouncedly a doctrinal church, and finds that doctrine most purely and adequately expressed in the great Confession of Faith issued by the Westminster Assembly of 1647."

God hath appointed a day (*which word in Scripture in reference to the last things may represent a period of time including the thousand years following the visible, personal and premillennial return of Christ*), wherein he will judge the world, in righteousness, by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given to the Father. . . .¹¹

Premillennialism is thus a theological distinctive of the BPC. Although the parenthetical statement does not state explicitly the type of premillennialism held, history attests to the fact that it is premillennialism of the dispensational kind.

In the OPC-BPC split of 1937, Buswell not only teamed up with McIntire, but also Allan MacRae, also a dispensational premillennialist.¹² "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). When the secession took place, MacRae knew he could no longer remain as professor at Westminster. He joined McIntire and Buswell and became the president of Faith Theological Seminary. MacRae's editorial work in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* (1967) clearly evinces his dispensational premillennial leanings. MacRae employed a literal hermeneutic towards OT prophecy¹³ and believed that "there is to be a great outpouring of God's wrath upon the earth between the rapture and coming of Christ with His saints to establish His kingdom."¹⁴ He also had strong views on Israel's place in God's plan of salvation.

McIntire, Buswell, and MacRae were covenantal in their theological system, but in the area of eschatology they had adopted the dispensational premillennial view. It must be said that all dispensationalists are premillennialists, but not all premillennialists (even dispensational or pro-Israel ones) are dispensationalists. There exists a group of covenant theologians who are distinctly dispensational-premillennial. Since it is Buswell who has written a Systematic Theology, he is perhaps the best source in any attempt to learn more about this neglected strand in Reformed theology.

¹¹ *The Constitution of the Bible Presbyterian Church* (n.p.: General Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church, 1989) 27, 29.

¹² See Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (3d ed.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987) 503–6.

¹³ This differs from historic premillennialists, who, like the amillennialists and postmillennialists, employ a "spiritualizing" hermeneutic. See MacRae's examination of postmillennial and amillennial objections to premillennialism in "A Glorious Future," in *Biblical Christianity: Letters from Professor Allan A. MacRae* (Singapore: Christian Life, 1994) 201–18; see also his OT commentaries, *The Prophecies of Daniel* (Singapore: Christian Life, 1991) and *Studies in Isaiah* (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1995). See also his other letters in *Biblical Christianity*, viz. "The Scofield Bible" 60–61; "The New Scofield Reference Bible" 61–63; "Prediction or Analogy in Hosea 11:1" 113; "Daniel's Seventy Weeks" 182–83; "More Comments on Daniel's Seventy Weeks" 184–88; "Isaiah 66:12–24 and the Millennium" 191–92; "Premillennialism and Ordination to the Christian Ministry" 193–94; "British Israelism" 263–64.

¹⁴ MacRae, "Pre-Tribulation Rapture," in *Biblical Christianity* 187. MacRae believed that ἀποστασία in 2 Thess 2:3 refers to "the departure of the Church, which I expect will take place before the revelation of the 'man of sin'" (*Apostasia* [Apostasy] in 2 Thessalonians 2:3," *Biblical Christianity* 136–37).

III. BUSWELL'S HERMENEUTICS

Buswell employed the classical method of Bible interpretation, namely, the analogy of Scripture. He wrote,

It is a principle of biblical interpretation that in setting forth any doctrine we must take into consideration all portions of Scripture bearing upon the subject. Generally speaking, no one passage of Scripture gives the whole of any doctrine with all its qualifications and ramifications.¹⁵

He believed that the Bible as the infallible and inerrant Word of God is its own best commentary.¹⁶ He emphasized the need to ascertain the meaning of words by how they have been used in Scripture and in history. Context, he stressed, must not be ignored when determining what a word means. The context involves not only the immediate context, but also the context of the book in which a text is found, and ultimately the context of the entire Bible.¹⁷ He also stressed the importance of paying attention to grammar and historical background in any attempt to understand what God intends to communicate in his Word.¹⁸

Buswell rejected any idea of a double sense or double fulfillment in Scripture. He wrote emphatically, "Sound hermeneutics must reject double fulfillment."¹⁹ For support, he quoted the *Westminster Confession*, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (*which is not manifold but one*) it may be searched and known by other places which speak more clearly."²⁰

Buswell's method of biblical interpretation may thus be classified as the historical-grammatical-canonical type. The analogy of Scripture as understood by him was not just that of antecedent but also of subsequent Scripture. Biblical revelation must be studied not only diachronically but also hyperchronically. Since God's mind transcends time and space, the fullness of the divine intent must take into consideration his subsequent revelation in the Scriptures.²¹

Buswell's single meaning *cum* fulfillment hermeneutic can be seen in his interpretation of Jesus' Olivet discourse (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13:1–37;

¹⁵ Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 1.388.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 1.24–25. Buswell wrote, ". . . the Bible interprets itself. Not only does each successive book in the time in which it was written presuppose the Biblical books which went before, but the earlier books in many passages were clearly intended to point forward to Scriptures which were to come later. The rule is then, give the Bible an opportunity, . . . to interpret itself."

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 1.25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 2.401

²⁰ *Ibid.* Buswell wrote, "I place emphasis on the words, 'which is not manifold but one.' The notion that so specific and definite a prediction as that given in Matthew 24:15 ff. and Mark 13:14 ff. could be of double meaning must be vigorously rejected."

²¹ Contra "the analogy of antecedent Scripture" by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 90, 134–40, 145, 161.

Luke 21:5–36). According to Buswell, the Olivet discourse predicts two destructions of Jerusalem: an immediate one which occurred in AD 70 by Titus (Luke 13:34–35; 19:43–44; 21:20), and a distant one which will usher in the *parousia* (cf. Zech 12:2; 14:1–9; Revelation 19).²² Buswell explained,

In distinguishing two destructions of Jerusalem, the one fulfilled in 70 A.D. and the other still in the future, we must carefully avoid double interpretation. It is true that the general statement that Jerusalem would be destroyed, such as is found in Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6, is capable of any number of fulfillments, but recognition of a general, non-specific prediction is not the same as accepting the method of “double fulfillment” exegesis. Luke’s statements that in connection with a particular future destruction of Jerusalem the enemy would surround it with armies (Luke 21:20) and would build a wall around it (Luke 19:43) were so very specifically fulfilled in the destruction of the city by Titus in A.D. 70 that double fulfillment is impossible.

Moreover, these particulars are radically different from those given in Zechariah 14. Zechariah predicts that the Messiah will come and “His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north and half of it toward the south. And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains . . .” (vv. 4, 5). The prediction given by Zechariah in chapters 12 to 14 contains numerous other details, such as the fact that the Messiah will appear to Israel and “they shall look upon me whom they have pierced” (12:10; cf. Rev. 1:7). There will be mourning and repentance throughout the land of Israel (12:10–14). These data make it clear that the destruction of Jerusalem predicted in Luke 21:10 and 19:43, 44 is not the still future destruction predicted by Zechariah.²³

Buswell saw the prediction of the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem only in Luke, and not in Matthew and Mark. Jesus’ Olivet discourse was given in response to the disciples’ question concerning these three events (Matt 24:3; Mark 13:3; Luke 21:7): (1) “These things” refers back to Jesus’ prediction of the temple’s destruction (Luke 21:6 cf. 19:43–44); (2) “What shall be the sign of thy coming,” that is, the *parousia* or Second Coming of Christ; and (3) “What shall be the sign . . . of the end of the world,” which is clearly eschatological. Buswell said that (2) and (3) should be identified as “one complex of events” in the eschatological future.²⁴ Jesus, in answering the question of “these things,” expected the disciples “to distinguish between the destruction of the temple (which eventually took place in A.D. 70) and the still future eschatological complex.”²⁵ Buswell further argued that Luke’s reading, “And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies” (21:20), should not be equated with Matthew–Mark’s “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation . . .” Buswell’s reason for so saying is due to

²² Buswell called his approach the “double lens perspective” in contradistinction to the “double fulfillment” view (*Systematic Theology* 2.363).

²³ *Ibid.* 2.363–64.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 2.364.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 2.365.

the absence of the identifying clause, “the abomination of desolation as spoken of by Daniel the prophet” in Luke. Similarly, the Matthew–Mark version makes no reference to Jerusalem being surrounded with armies.²⁶ In light of this, Buswell concluded that “Luke 21:20–24 is a different section of the Olivet discourse from that which is given in Matthew 24:15–28 and Mark 13:14–23.”²⁷

As can be seen from his treatment of the Olivet discourse, Buswell viewed biblical prophecy from what he termed a “double lens” and “cosmic” perspective.²⁸ To Buswell, prophetic passages are complex, but not confused. The biblical writers did not see prophecy as a blurry whole. They understood the eschatological complex to be chronologically distinguishable. A single prophetic text or passage in its distinctive or respective parts or verses can depict both immediate and distant scenarios. Buswell said that the best example for such a “double lens perspective” is 1 John 2:18, “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” On this verse, Buswell commented, “John does not blur, but rather sharply distinguishes the present from the future. Just as there are now antichrists, so there will be that particular Antichrist of the future.”²⁹ Having a “double lens perspective” involves looking at prophecy from a “cosmic perspective.” By “cosmic perspective,” Buswell was speaking of the “foreshortening of the prophetic view.”³⁰ He explained,

There are many scriptural predictions in which details, known to be separated by long intervals, are spoken of in one scene of vast perspective. For example, when Ahaz refused to ask for a “sign,” Isaiah, as it were, presents a wide-lens view, not for Ahaz, but for the house of David as a whole (Isaiah 7:10–16). The messianic predictions of Isaiah 9:6, 7 and Isaiah 11:1–16 include a sweep of events from the birth of Christ to the time when He will destroy the kingdom of the Beast “with the rod of His mouth and with the breath of His lips” (Isaiah 11:4; Revelation 19:21).³¹

Matt 25:31–46 is another example of a prophetic scene that should be taken in cosmic perspective. Jesus’ prediction of the judgment of the nations,

²⁶ Buswell pointed out that Tatian’s Diatessaron placed Luke 21:20, 22 and Matt 24:15–28 in two separate paragraphs, one following the other, indicating that they are two separate, distinguishable events. Buswell also cited *The Scofield Reference Bible* for support. The note under Luke 21:20 in the Scofield Bible reads, “Verses 20 and 24 are not included in the report of the Olivet discourse as given by Matthew and Mark . . . Luke 21:20–24 refers to the siege by Titus, A.D. 70, when the city was taken, and verse 24 literally fulfilled. . . . In Luke the sign is the compassing of Jerusalem by armies (Luke 21:20); in Matthew (24:15) and Mark (13:14) the sign is the abomination in the holy place (II Thessalonians 2:4)” (ibid. 2.368).

²⁷ Ibid. 2.371.

²⁸ Ibid. 2.296, 409.

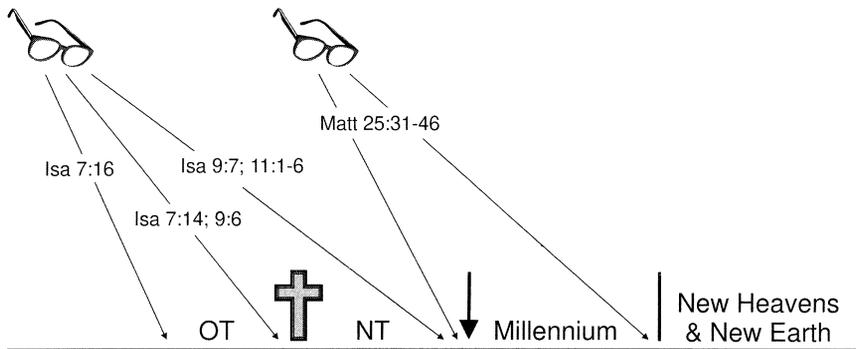
²⁹ Ibid. 2.296.

³⁰ Ibid. 2.409.

³¹ Ibid. It ought to be noted that Buswell rejected the double fulfillment view of Isa 7:14 so popular nowadays. He did not believe that there was any fulfillment of Isa 7:14 in the time of Isaiah. He saw that prophecy of the virgin birth to be strictly messianic, fulfilled only in Christ (ibid. 2.42–44, 518). See also my paper, “The Sign of the Virgin Birth,” *The Burning Bush* 1 (1995) 5–33.

or of the “sheep and the goats,” should be looked at from the viewpoint of a “wide lens” camera.³² According to Buswell, the events mentioned therein do not occur in a day but cover “the entire sweep of the eschatological complex from the ‘signs’ which immediately precede the rapture of the church, all the way through the millennial period to, and including, the final judgment of the Great White Throne as described in Rev 20.”³³ In other words, the separation begins at the rapture, when the “sheep” will be taken, and the goats finally judged at the Great White Throne at the end of the millennium. Between the separation of the sheep and the goats is a span of slightly over a thousand years.³⁴

The following chart illustrates Buswell’s “double lens” and “cosmic” perspective.³⁵



The “Double Lens” or “Cosmic” Perspective

Buswell’s hermeneutical consistency can be seen in his literal or plain sense interpretation of the two resurrections in Rev 20:4–6. Buswell believed that the two resurrections are distinct and separated by the millennium. The first resurrection precedes the thousand years and is the resurrection of the righteous (i.e. the saints who have already died, and those who are still alive) at the time of the rapture (1 Cor 15:23).³⁶ The second resurrection is often referred to as “the resurrection of the unrighteous dead.” Buswell considered such a designation erroneous. According to him, the second resurrection will

³² Buswell noted that “[e]vents which the New Testament clearly describes as separated by an extended interval of time are occasionally presented by the Old Testament prophets without any indication of such an interval” (*Systematic Theology* 2.417).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Buswell believed the rapture will occur at the middle of the great tribulation week (*ibid.* 2.450).

³⁵ *Ibid.* 2.409, with personal modifications.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 2.492–93.

include not just all the unregenerate, but also post-rapture believers. He believed this to be so because

the Scripture seems to indicate that Israel as a whole, and many mortals from among the Gentiles (Romans 11:2; Isaiah 66:20) will be saved after the resurrection of the righteous, after the rapture of the church; and some of these (Daniel 11:32–35) will die for their faith after the resurrection of the moment of the rapture, before the Antichrist is destroyed. . . . It follows, therefore, that among those raised from the dead who stand before the Great White Throne there will be both righteous and unrighteous.³⁷

Buswell was against the amillennial and postmillennial view that the first resurrection is something other than what it plainly connotes. He argued that the word ἀνάστασις (“resurrection”) “always means resurrection whenever it is found in the New Testament.”³⁸ Buswell employed Dr. Wilber B. Wallis’s argument in support of the plain meaning of Rev 20:4–6.

[M]y esteemed colleague, Dr. Wilber B. Wallis . . . calls attention to the fact that in verse 6 it is stated of those who have part in the first resurrection that “they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with Him the thousand years.”

The most common opinion among those who reject the plain meaning of this passage is that the millennial reign of the saints with Christ simply refers to the condition and functions of the blessed dead in heaven during the present age. Dr. Wallis points out that if the saints in heaven are “priests,” as those who reign with Christ are explicitly declared to be, then it is appropriate for us to seek to communicate with them. It is of the very essence of priesthood that the priest is in sympathetic fellowship with the people for whom he serves. (See Hebrews 4:15, 16; 5:1, 2). The doctrine of the priesthood of the saints in heaven would open the door for prayers to the dead, or at least communication with them, and requests for their intercessory prayer.

During this present age, believers in this world are all priests, intercessors. The priesthood of all believers on earth is a fundamental doctrine of Protestantism. It has been shown from the Scripture, however, that believers living in this world at the present time are not reigning with Christ. It is in the Millennium, after the Lord’s return, after the resurrection of the righteous, that we shall be both priests and kings in Christ’s earthly kingdom.³⁹

Buswell also quoted Alford who pointed out the absurdity of eisegetically spiritualizing what God had intended to be plain. Alford commented on Rev 20:5,

As regards the text itself, no legitimate treatment of it will extort what is known as the spiritual interpretation now in fashion. . . . —if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean spiritual rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from the grave; —then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything. If the first resurrection is spiritual, then so is the second, which

³⁷ Ibid. 2.509.

³⁸ Ibid. 2.494. Luke 2:34 may be the only exception, but, as Buswell had noted, the words “rising again of many” could mean a literal resurrection.

³⁹ Ibid. 2.494–95.

I suppose none will be hardy enough to maintain: but if the second is literal, then so is the first, which in common with the whole primitive Church . . . I do maintain, and receive as an article of faith and hope.⁴⁰

As a reformed scholar, Buswell's hermeneutic was in keeping with the *Westminster Confession* which states that Scripture is its own inspired commentary and that it has only one meaning. Buswell thus believed that Scripture should interpret Scripture in a consistent and uniform manner. His literal hermeneutic thus stood opposed to the spiritualizing method of historic premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists, especially with regard to biblical prophecies pertaining to Israel.⁴¹ Buswell would probably also object to the complementary hermeneutics of progressive dispensationalists. His exegesis of certain prophetic passages, as we have seen above and will see later, did not show him to believe that a single prophecy could contain a spiritual (already) as well as a literal (not yet) meaning.

IV. BUSWELL'S CONCEPT OF THE KINGDOM

Buswell defined the word "kingdom" generally as "the domain of a king" or "the sovereign rule of God."⁴² This domain "may designate *the territory* of a king with all the people in it, or it may designate *the government* of which the king is the head."⁴³ He saw the kingdom of Christ as one, but having two distinct phases, a present and a future one. Christ is presently King over (1) his universal kingdom (i.e. over all creation and creatures)⁴⁴ and (2) his spiritual kingdom (i.e. the Church militant on earth).⁴⁵ Thus the kingdom of God spoken of in such passages as John 3:3–5, Rom 14:17, and Col 1:13 refers to the present phase of God's kingdom which involves his salvific rule in the heart of regenerate people. But Buswell did not stop there as would amillennialists; he went on to state that there will be a future visible kingdom of Christ,⁴⁶ and that this future kingdom, contra historic premillennialists and postmillennialists, "is in a real sense Jewish and Davidic."⁴⁷ The triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, according to Buswell, was a manifestation of Christ's kingship, and that kingship was "stated as Israelitish

⁴⁰ Ibid. 2.495–96. Buswell then interacted with key amillennial and postmillennial scholars, viz. Hodge, Warfield, Allis, and Machen, and showed how they were simply agnostic over this whole passage.

⁴¹ Ibid. 2.424. Buswell qualified that literal exegesis "does not exclude the recognition and interpretation of figurative language." His antagonism towards a spiritualizing hermeneutic of anti-Israel millennialists is clearly seen in his review of Oswald T. Allis's *Prophecy and the Church* (see *The Bible Today* 39 [1945] 361–63).

⁴² Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 2.346, 367.

⁴³ Ibid. (italics mine).

⁴⁴ See his exposition of the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24–30; *ibid.* 2.349–50).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1.357.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 2.347. He cited the following OT prophecies as proof: Isa 9:6–7; 22:22–23; Jer 30:9; Ezek 37:24; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:11; Pss 89:3–4; 132:10–11.

and Davidic in specifically prophetic terms.” This kingship has yet to be realized for “Christ is *not now* exercising the governmental functions of an effective king here on the earth.”⁴⁸ In order to exercise his full governmental functions, Christ must sit on the throne of his father David and reign over the house of Jacob.⁴⁹

Buswell clearly consigned the physical reign of Christ over the nation of Israel and the whole world to a future time. He argued that the clause in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” refers to “an event in time” in the eschatological future (Rev 11:15).⁵⁰ He went on to clarify, “the fact of Christ’s present spiritual kingdom and the fact that He is eternally the King over the entire universe and that in a sense the world is now His kingdom, —these facts do not disprove the predictions of a kingdom of Christ’s which is to come in this world in the future.”⁵¹ When Christ returns to reign on earth (Rev 5:10), his saints will reign with him (Rev 20:6). All Christians are both priests and kings, but the exercise of those respective offices are *not simultaneous*. Buswell agreed that the priesthood of believers in this present life is clearly taught in the Scriptures. However, he contended that nowhere in Scripture is it taught that Christians are “kings” in this present age.⁵² As far as Buswell was concerned, “the reigning of believers with Christ is always to be regarded as a condition subsequent to His Second Coming.”⁵³

V. BUSWELL’S VIEW OF ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

In defining the Church, Buswell quoted the *Westminster Confession*, which states, “The visible church, which is also catholic or universal . . . consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”⁵⁴

Unlike dispensationalists who see the Church as beginning only in the NT, at Pentecost (Acts 2), Buswell saw the Church as having its roots in the OT. In the OT, the Church as a visible theocratic organization in the world manifested itself first in the nation of Israel. He saw in Israel the characteristics of a church. He thus concluded that it “is quite correct to refer to

⁴⁸ Ibid. 2.352.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Besides Luke 1:32–33, see also Matt 9:27; 21:9; 22:41–46; John 7:42; Acts 2:25–36; 13:22–23, 34, 36, 38; 15:16; Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 5:5; 22:16.

⁵⁰ At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the heavenly voices declare, “The kingdom of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.” Buswell viewed the word “become” (ἐγένοντο) as designating “an event in time” (*Systematic Theology* 2.351).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. 2.352–53. Buswell preferred the textual reading of βασιλείαν (kingdom) rather than βασιλεῖς (kings) in Rev 1:6 and 5:10.

⁵³ See Buswell’s exegetical arguments in *Systematic Theology* 2.353–61.

⁵⁴ Chap. 25.2. Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 1.418.

the visible people of God, as organized in national Israel, as *the Jewish church*.⁵⁵ Like the NT Church, Israel was a “separated” group, a “chosen” people, a “called out” congregation.⁵⁶ Another ecclesial feature of the nation of Israel was its provision for the *excommunication* of unbelievers within the nation (Gen 17:14; Exod 12:15, 19 cf. 1 Cor 5:2–5).⁵⁷

Buswell further stressed that Israel was and still is a “national entity,” and thus should not be confused with what is commonly known as “church” today.⁵⁸ When talking about the church, he clearly made a distinction between the “church of Israel” and the “church as organized from the day of Pentecost onward.”⁵⁹ Against non-dispensational millennialists who argue that the Church has replaced Israel especially from 1 Pet 2:9 where the Church is described as “a royal priesthood” which reigns with the greater David who sits enthroned in heaven as her great High Priest, Buswell wrote,

The phrase, “a royal priesthood,” . . . does not prove that we are kings in this present life any more than such phrases as “the royal navy,” “the royal guard,” prove that the members of these services are “kings.” The priesthood of believers in this present life is clearly taught, *but the reigning of believers with Christ is always to be regarded as a condition subsequent to His Second Coming*.⁶⁰

To Buswell, the “church today is not a nation in any literal sense of the word, but it was a nation prior to the time of Christ.”⁶¹

How did Buswell understand Rom 11:25–32? Did he consider the term “Israel” there to mean the “Church?” Did he see “Israel” to mean simply and only the Jewish race as distinguished from the Gentiles so that when Paul spoke of “Israel” he meant only *Jewish* Christians without any thought of it as God’s chosen “*nation*”? Buswell evidently saw a distinction between Israel and the Church when he wrote,

Paul declares very positively that Israel as a whole, that is, as a nation, will be saved “after the fulness of the Gentiles comes in’ (Romans 11:25–32). . . . “the fulness of the Gentiles” means the conclusion of the “times of the Gentiles” referred to by Christ as recorded in Luke 21:24, and that this period also includes the completion of what we sometimes call “the Gentile church,” that is, the church as constituted in this present age. . . . or, in other words, to the rapture of the true church.⁶²

⁵⁵ Ibid. 2.489.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 1.420. That was why Stephen could refer to Israel as “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). Buswell also brought up the point that the author of Hebrews translated *ἐκκλησία*, “congregation,” with the word *ἐκκλησία*, “church,” “in the midst of the *church* I will sing hymns to thee” (Heb 2:12, quoting Ps 22:22).

⁵⁷ Ibid. Buswell explained, “The person cut off from the people was in a spiritual and ecclesiastical condition directly analogous to the condition of one who is suspended or excommunicated from the role of communicants.”

⁵⁸ Ibid. 1.419.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 2.353.

⁶¹ Ibid. 1.420.

⁶² Ibid. 2.463, 516

Buswell did not take the salvation of “all Israel” purely in the spiritual or ecclesiastical sense. The term “Israel” here should not be taken to mean simply “spiritual Israel” (i.e. Church), or “elect Israel” (i.e. Jewish believers), but ethnic, national Israel. This can be readily seen in this commentary of his:

The transition from Jewish church to Gentile church is clearly discussed in Romans 11 and in Galatians 3 and 4. The outstanding points which Paul makes are these: (1) There is a definite continuity between the two in that a “remnant” of Jews, including Paul himself, are in the church of this age (Romans 11:1–5). (2) Israel as a whole, *apart from this remnant*, is blinded and cut off from the Abrahamic promises of grace, but they will be grafted in again into their Abrahamic tree, after “the fullness of the Gentiles be come in” (Romans 11, especially vv. 25, 26). (3) Gentile Christians have their position in grace as being grafted into the Abrahamic tree (Romans 11, *passim*). “If ye [Gentiles] be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise [which was made to Abraham]” (Galatians 3:29, see vv. 7, 8). Paul constantly refers to himself as the apostle to the Gentiles.⁶³

The Gentile church will be raptured prior to the salvation of Israel. But the repentance and restoration of national Israel will occur only at, and after, the Messiah’s glorious appearing.⁶⁴ Israel as a nation will be “born in one day” (Isa 66:8). This prophetic promise, according to Buswell, “is a reference to the turning of Israel as a whole unto the Lord, after the rapture of the church, as Paul predicts in Romans 11:26.”⁶⁵ The ethnic, land, throne, and temple prophecies and promises God made to Israel will find fulfillment in Israel when Christ returns.

Therefore, as regards Israel and the Church, we find Buswell differing from dispensationalists by acknowledging the presence of the Church in the OT. We also find him disagreeing with anti-Israel millennialists who see no place for the nation of Israel in God’s salvific plan and who explain all the prophecies of Israel in terms of the Church. Consistent with covenant theology, which stresses the covenant faithfulness of God to his covenant promises, Buswell saw a continuity in God’s covenant dealings with his Church visible, first in the nation of Israel (the Jewish Church which also includes Gentiles), and then in the NT body of saints (i.e. the Gentile Church which includes Jews). As such, it ought to be noted that he is a true covenantalist *vis-à-vis* the amillennialists, postmillennialists, and historic premillennialists who claim that God has withdrawn his covenant promises from Israel

⁶³ Ibid. 2.487–88.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 2.463.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 2.502. Anti-Israel millennialists argue that the “nation” must refer to the “church” in light of Isa 66:19–20, which speaks of the “nation’s” extensive missionary activity among the Gentiles (cf. Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). Buswell, on the other hand, disagreed: “Isaiah 66:19, 20 refers not so much to the present missionary age, although these statements can be so implied, but . . . directly and literally to the early years of the millennial reign of Christ during which people in isolated places, who had not accepted the mark of the Beast nor yet accepted Christ, will be evangelized.”

and transferred them to the Church. Did not the covenant-faithful God say the covenant he made with David and with Israel was valid for all time (Ps 89:3–4, 34–36)? Is not the faithfulness of God one of the distinctive emphases of Reformed theology?

Buswell went on to explain in the light of Isaiah 65–66 just how God is going to save Israel. In Isa 65:1–7, God will chastise Israel for her rebelliousness and will use the Gentiles to provoke Israel to jealousy (cf. Deut 32:21). This describes Israel's condition "at the then present time and to the sending of the Gospel to the Gentiles (Romans 10:19–22)."⁶⁶ In Isa 65:8–10, God promises Israel that despite her unfaithfulness, he "will not forsake His covenant but that He will confirm it in the preservation of a remnant."⁶⁷ Buswell explained,

that God has promised to preserve His covenant by preserving a faithful remnant is the basis of Paul's extended argument in the 11th chapter of Romans. The restoration to which Paul refers is eschatological from the New Testament point of view. It will not take place, he says, "until the fullness of the Gentiles comes" (Romans 11:25, 26). . . . the phrase, "the fullness of the Gentiles," refers to the completion of the church as constituted for this present age, or in other words, to the rapture of the true church. . . . Jahweh will be faithful and Israel will ultimately be restored in a permanent way.⁶⁸

Isa 65:11–16 consists of admonition, denunciation of sins, and a brief word of encouragement. It is significant to note that Buswell identified the "servants" of vv. 13–15 not with Israel, but the Church. He wrote, "The reference to 'my servants' in contrast with Israel . . . contributes, of course, a general truth but might be particularly applied to the age of the church in which 'the Jews' as a whole and in general are in a state of 'blindness' (Romans 11:25), . . ."⁶⁹

Isa 65:17–25 speaks of the creation of "the new heavens and the new earth" and the restoration of national Israel in the eschatological future. When God said that "the former troubles are forgotten" (65:16), he was not saying that it will be his gracious covenant with Israel that will be forgotten, but rather Israel's "bad name" (65:15). There will also come a time when there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain. The former experiences of a sin-cursed world will be completely wiped out (Rev 21:4). This will be fulfilled, not in the millennium, but in the new heavens and the new earth. However, vv. 20–25 that follow describe not the new heavens and the new earth, but the millennium that precedes it. Buswell wrote,

My suggestion is that verses 20–25 are a distinct sub-paragraph within the section in which Isaiah, having mentioned the new heavens and new earth, hastens to reassure his people that God will not at any time forget Jerusalem. His point is that sins will be forgotten but that God's covenant with His people and with Jerusalem will not be forgotten. Verses 17–19 may be abbreviated and

⁶⁶ Ibid. 2.515.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 2.516.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

paraphrased, "I will make new heavens and a new earth in which the former troubles are forgotten, but Jerusalem will not be forgotten. The Jerusalem of the new heavens and the new earth will be completely free from blemish."

The essence of verses 20–25, according to my interpretation, would be, "Jerusalem will also enjoy a period of blessedness under a perfect government on this earth."

In other words, from my point of view, endeavoring to understand the New Testament doctrine of eschatology, and such data as is given on the order of events, I suggest that the Jerusalem of Isaiah 65:17–19 is the new Jerusalem of the new heaven and the new earth, while the Jerusalem of Isaiah 65:20–25 is the Jerusalem of the millennial kingdom of Christ. . . .

Some have argued that such an interpretation of Isaiah's material does violence to the unity of the passage. I would reply that this is not the case, but, on the contrary, it is quite consistent with Isaiah's method of shortening the prophetic view and presenting different incidents, widely separated in time, in a broad cosmic perspective for the purpose of spiritual admonition.⁷⁰

. . . I would urge that we are strictly in harmony with correct principles of exegesis if we understand Isaiah 65:17–25 as homiletically unified, eschatological material for the encouragement of Isaiah's people, but we are quite justified in saying that in the light of other Scriptures which do give some information in regard to future eschatology, Isaiah 65:17–19 refers to the new heavens and the new earth, whereas Isaiah 65:20–25 refers to the Millennium.⁷¹

Isa 66:7–9 refers to the birth of a nation. What nation is it? Buswell commented that in light of Zechariah 12–14 and Romans 11,

we may apply these words of Isaiah's to the turning of Israel to the Lord after what Paul calls "the fulness of the Gentiles," and, . . . I understand these words, particularly the words of Zechariah 12:10–13:1 and Romans 11:24–27, to refer to the future time, subsequent to the rapture of the church when Israel as a whole and as a nation will accept Christ as their Messiah.

Isaiah 66:10–14 is an eschatological passage in the sense that it predicts restoration, peace, and blessedness for Israel. Isaiah does not state at what time these predictions will come to pass, but they may well be accomplished during the millennial reign of Christ.⁷²

In summary, Buswell's belief that God had not cast away his people rests on these two reasons as found in Romans 11:

(1) There remains "a remnant according to the election of grace" and therefore there is a continuity. (2) There is to be a future restoration of literal national Israel as a whole; the branches now cut off will be grafted in again.⁷³

Evidently, Buswell saw a future for Israel as a nation on the basis of God's covenant promises to her in the OT. The Gentile Church currently fulfills the duty of an evangelist, a duty the Jewish Church had before performed until her failure in the rejection and crucifixion of Christ. For her spiritual failure, Israel temporarily suffers "blindness" until "the fullness of the Gentiles

⁷⁰ Ibid. 2.518.

⁷¹ Ibid. 2.518–19.

⁷² Ibid. 2.519–20.

⁷³ J. O. Buswell, "Book Reviews," *The Bible Today* 39 (1945) 363.

be come in" (Rom 11:25). In the eschatological future, Israel, as God's chosen, will be restored spiritually and nationally (Rom 11:26).⁷⁴

VI. BUSWELL'S APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Buswell insisted that the book of Revelation must be interpreted like the other books of inspired Scripture. The same laws of hermeneutics employed in other portions of Scripture apply also to the last book of the Bible. In opposition to those who propose a special hermeneutic for the Apocalypse, Buswell wrote,

In grammatico-historical hermeneutics, every book and every section of every book must be recognized for what it is, and what it intends to say. . . . [T]here is one science of hermeneutics and that within this grammatico-historical science each particular writing must be recognized for what it claims to be, or what it proves to be when carefully examined. In other words, I would vigorously deny that we need any special hermeneutics for prophecy or for figurative language, other than what is included in the grammatico-historical method.⁷⁵

The apocalyptic hermeneutic that we find increasingly popular today in both liberal and evangelical circles would thus have found no place in Buswell's approach to the book of Revelation. Buswell's view finds similar expression in Robert L. Thomas, who said that the only objective and legitimate approach to Revelation is the grammatical-historical method.⁷⁶ Buswell was against allegorical exegesis and speculative theology. He said that the exegete of Revelation must endeavor to find the "plain meaning" of its contents on the basis of the historical-grammatical method.⁷⁷

Buswell adopted the futurist approach to the book of Revelation. The Apocalypse is "a revelation *about* Jesus Christ, but it refers to a *future time* in which Christ will appear."⁷⁸ Insofar as authorial intent is concerned, Buswell said that the Apostle John clearly "intended the title of his book (i.e. Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) to be understood as signifying the visible glorious Second Coming of Christ to this earth."⁷⁹ The Second Coming will be preceded by a literal seven-year tribulation period that consists of two

⁷⁴ Insofar as the temple of Ezekiel 40–48 is concerned, Buswell believed it to be eschatological. He suggested that it might be a description of the new heavens and new earth, but qualified that such a view is by no means essential to premillennialism (*Systematic Theology* 2.537). He also said that there is no inconsistency whatsoever in the dispensational premillennial view that Ezekiel's temple will be a literal feature of the millennium. I personally believe that Ezekiel 40–48 describes a literal temple in the millennium (cf. Zech 14:16–18); see Timothy Tow, *Prophescope on Israel* (Singapore: Christian Life, 1992) 132–34.

⁷⁵ Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 2.426–27.

⁷⁶ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 35.

⁷⁷ Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 2.425.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 2.427. Buswell considered the letters to the seven churches as primarily historical, written to the actual churches named. The many timeless admonitions in those letters are nevertheless still applicable to the churches today. He considered Scofield's notion that the seven letters were seven stages of church history "fanciful and speculative" (*ibid.* 2.428).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* (parenthesis mine).

halves of three and a half years each.⁸⁰ The seventieth week will commence at the signing of a peace covenant engineered by the Antichrist between Israel and her enemies (Dan 9:27).⁸¹

Buswell was certain about the seals, trumpets, and vials of Revelation being chronologically sequential, and not synchronically repetitious.⁸² He believed that the seals and trumpets will occur prior to the resurrection of the saints at the middle of the tribulation week.⁸³ He believed the seals represent a picture of a stage in the history of the redemption of the church, and the sixth seal refers to the major cosmic disturbances Jesus spoke of in his Olivet discourse (Matt 24:6–7; Mark 13:7–8; Luke 21:9–12).⁸⁴ He also suggested that the six trumpets fall on the first half of the tribulation week, and that the seventh will occur at the mid-point of the week.⁸⁵ Buswell was, however, unable to ascertain the actual time in which the seals and trumpets will start taking place. As to the vials, he saw them as the wrath of God poured out at the final half of the tribulation week.⁸⁶

Buswell took the mid-tribulation view of the rapture of the church. According to him the “last trump” of 1 Cor 15:52 is to be identified with the seventh and last trumpet of Rev 11:15. The Church Age (“the times of the Gentiles,” Luke 21:24) ends at this moment. The two witnesses, having prophesied for 1,260 days (i.e. the first three and a half years), will be killed by the antichrist at this juncture. Their resurrection three and a half days later will also see the rapture of the Church taking place (1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16–17).⁸⁷ The wrath of God is poured out only after the Church is raptured.⁸⁸

The outpouring of God’s wrath in his vial judgments at the sounding of the seventh trumpet inaugurates the earthly kingdom of Christ. The Lord begins his reign by destroying his enemies—the Beast, the False Prophet, and their armies (cf. Matt 13:30).⁸⁹ This will take three and a half years, culminating in a final battle where Christ will wipe them all out by divine fiat. Satan, the mastermind behind the whole rebellion, will be bound with a great chain and cast into the abyss for a thousand years. As opposed to amillennialists, Buswell saw the binding of Satan as described in Rev 20:1–3 not as a present reality but as a future event.⁹⁰ During the millennium, the nation of Israel as an earthly people will, for the first time since her

⁸⁰ Ibid. 2.452–53.

⁸¹ Ibid. 2.378–83, 452–53.

⁸² Ibid. 2.430. His reasons for so stating are found on pages 431–34.

⁸³ Ibid. 2.434.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 2.435–36.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 2.442.

⁸⁶ Buswell wrote, “the vials of wrath are poured out within this three and one half year period, the latter half of the ‘seven.’” In another place, he wrote, “in a special sense ‘the Wrath of God’ begins with the sounding of the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11:18)” (ibid. 2.431, 436).

⁸⁷ Ibid. 2.390–91, 456.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 2.457.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 2.471.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 2.486. From pages 486–90, he refuted the arguments offered by amillennialists concerning how Satan is currently bound.

regathering (Isa 11:11–12), dwell securely in the promised land under the protection of Christ her Messiah. Christ will sit on the throne of David with Jerusalem as his capital, ruling over the whole world with the assistance of the resurrected saints.

Is Christ sitting on the throne of David right now in the Church Age? According to Buswell, Christ's reign on the throne of David is still future, and not fulfilled yet. He said, "Christ is not now exercising the governmental functions of an effective king here on the earth. He is not enforcing the moral law of God or administering the affairs of the nations of the world as a king administers the affairs of a realm in which he actively rules."⁹¹

Buswell was also convinced that the earthly kingdom of Christ on David's throne was not only future, but also strictly "Jewish and Davidic."⁹² He did not think of Jesus sitting right now at the Father's right hand to be a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:12–14). Buswell thought of Christ's sitting at the Father's right hand as the resumption of his royal omnipotence which he temporarily gave up (but always possessed) at the time of the incarnation.⁹³ Christ's enthronement together with his apostles to judge the twelve tribes of Israel, according to Buswell, is an event of the eschatological future.⁹⁴ Buswell would thus differ from progressive dispensationalists, who see Christ as sitting on the throne of David at this present age, albeit in a spiritual sense, their acknowledgment of Christ's future literal reign on the throne of David in the millennium notwithstanding.

VII. BUSWELL A REFORMED THEOLOGIAN

Buswell's system of theology belonged to that of the reformed school. As a true and consistent reformed scholar, he was a five-point (TULIP) Calvinist as compared to a Calvinistic dispensationalist who is a four-pointer (TUIP), having rejected the third, namely, Limited Atonement.⁹⁵ He also rejected the doubly limited (TULLIP) version of the hyper-Calvinist who denies common grace, rejects the genuine offer of the gospel, and teaches that the atonement is sufficient and efficient only for the elect. Buswell taught that the atonement is limited only in its design and intention; it is not limited, however, in its sufficiency and applicability.⁹⁶

Buswell also explained the biblical history of redemption in terms of covenant theology which basically limits the biblical dispensations to two—the period before and after the Fall—the covenant of works and the covenant of

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 2.352.

⁹² *Ibid.* 2.347. Buswell also pointed out that the "Davidic kingship of Christ is not a matter of favoritism to one people above another, but 'they were entrusted with the oracles of God' (Romans 3:2). Just so the future kingdom of Christ is to have historical continuity with the chief channel of revelation (see Romans 9:6; Rom 11:25–36)" (*ibid.* 2.348; he went on to elaborate on this from pp. 348–61).

⁹³ *Ibid.* 2.348.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 2.353–54.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 2.136–47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 2.141–44.

grace respectively (Rom 5:12–21).⁹⁷ In his exposition of covenant theology, he followed quite closely the two-covenant grid of the Westminster Standards, and so did not see any need for what has been called “the covenant of redemption.”⁹⁸ He strongly believed that the key to understanding “the biblical system of doctrine concerning man the sinner” is covenant and not dispensational theology.⁹⁹ He opposed the classical dispensational idea that salvation in the OT is obtained by legal obedience.¹⁰⁰ Buswell affirmed that justification by faith is “God’s only way of dealing with sinners in any dispensation.”¹⁰¹ Buswell thus saw the unity and continuity of God’s unfolding plan of redemption under the covenant of grace. “By grace through faith in Christ alone” is the unbroken soteriological theme throughout the Scriptures. Revised and progressive dispensationalists may not share the view of their classical forebears that the dispensations are ways of salvation, but their generally discontinuous soteriological system is still evinced by their statement that the dispensations are not “different methods of administering the so-called Covenant of Grace.”¹⁰² By this definition, Buswell, though dispensational premillennial, was neither “dispensational” nor a “dispensationalist.” Unlike dispensationalists, Buswell agreed with D. H. Kromminga that “a literal Millennium in the Scripture does *not* contradict the many Scriptural references to the covenants of God; and that it does *not* contradict the Biblical unity of the covenant of grace.”¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Quoting Webster’s dictionary, Buswell defined covenant theology as, “The theological system which rests upon the conception that before the fall, man was under a covenant of works, wherein God promised him (through Adam, the federal head of the race) eternal blessedness if he perfectly kept the law; and that since the fall man is under a covenant of grace, wherein God, of His free grace, promises the same blessings to all who believe in Christ (the federal head of the church)” (ibid. 1.307).

⁹⁸ “[T]here is no ground whatever for a distinct and separate covenant of redemption in the *Larger Catechism*, and certainly there is none in the *Confession* or the *Shorter Catechism*” (ibid. 2.123).

⁹⁹ Ibid. 1.308.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 1.314–15. See also Timothy Tow, *The Law of Moses and of Jesus* (Singapore: Christian Life, 1986). Buswell also mentioned the *inadvertent* mistake of covenantalists who at times spoke as if they were “dispensationalists” in saying that perfect obedience to the law was the condition of salvation in the OT. See his discussion under the heading “‘Dispensationalism’ in Hodge and Calvin,” *Systematic Theology* 1.316–19. He wrote irenically, “We who adhere to ‘covenant theology’ or ‘reformed theology,’ we who strongly emphasize the unity of the covenant of grace should approach our brethren who teach, ‘dispensationally,’ that there was an age of divinely ordained meritorious soteriology before Christ, and that ‘legal obedience’ was ever ‘the condition of salvation’—we should approach them with greater persuasiveness if we humbly remembered that this ‘dispensational’ idea of eternal life offered by means of legal obedience is inadvertently found in the writings of some of our greatest reformed theologians” (ibid. 1.318–19 cf. 2.110–13 on the active obedience of Christ). Indeed in covenant theology, legal obedience for salvation was valid only under the covenant of works when man was still morally perfect. Classical dispensationalists would have done well if they had not extended their concept of legal obedience beyond the Fall.

¹⁰¹ Buswell, *Systematic Theology* 1.316.

¹⁰² Doctrinal Statement of Dallas Theological Seminary, Article V, “The Dispensations.”

¹⁰³ See Buswell’s review of Kromminga’s *The Millennium: Its Nature, Function, and Relation to the Consummation of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) in *The Bible Today* 42 (1948) 30–31. However, he faulted Kromminga for failing “to distinguish the coming of Christ for His saints in the rapture before the outpouring of the Wrath of God upon the world.”

VIII. CONCLUSION

A reformed view of redemptive history that takes seriously the faithfulness of God in fulfilling his covenant promises requires one to understand that God meant what he said, and that he intends to fulfill his promises to Israel literally. Reformed ecclesiology defines the church as having two distinct parts: (1) the *church universal*, which comprises all the elect (both Jews and Gentiles) since the Fall; and (2) the *church local* (a mixed multitude of Jews and Gentiles as found in Israel in the OT and in the church in the NT), which comprises both genuine and false believers. Although national Israel possesses certain ecclesial characteristics of the church local, it is not the NT church. Israel is still very much a nation, and God continues to deal with her in that way. The very existence of Israel today in Palestine attests to that fact. Thus the OT ethnic/land/throne/temple prophecies and promises God made to Israel must find fulfillment in strictly Jewish and Davidic terms, not in this present age, but in the age to come.

The dispensational premillennial view of the end times is unfortunately rarely found in Reformed circles. J. O. Buswell is probably the only Reformed scholar who has articulated such a position in a Systematic Theology. Some might mistake Buswell for a historic premillennialist, but he certainly does not fit into that category, because he did not replace Israel with the Church and did not hold to a post-tribulational view of the rapture (contra Ladd).

Neither can Buswell be classified as a progressive dispensationalist. Although, as a covenant theologian, he saw more continuity than discontinuity in God's redemptive plan, his hermeneutical approach to biblical prophecy was much closer to the literal approach of revised or normative dispensationalism than to progressive dispensationalism. He also did not see Jesus fulfilling his earthly office as King on the throne of David presently, which he averred was yet future.

It is interesting to note that Buswell played a significant part in the "dispensational" history of Dallas Seminary. John F. Walvoord is arguably the greatest dispensationalist Dallas has ever produced. However, if it were not for Buswell, Walvoord might never have gone to Dallas, and Dallas might not have risen to such prominence without Walvoord's leadership in his many years as president. Walvoord shared how a talk with Buswell led him to decide on Dallas as the place to go for his theological studies:

Upon my graduation from Wheaton, the choice of seminary was before me. In the East a prestigious seminary with a long history, large faculty, and a great reputation was open, but I had heard about a new school in Dallas, later to be called Dallas Theological Seminary. It was obviously evangelical and had sixty-five students and only a few faculty members, none of them with earned doctor's degrees. In my confusion I went to Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, president of Wheaton College, for guidance. He listened to my story and said quietly, "I think you'll get a good education at Dallas." This settled the matter for me.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ John F. Walvoord, "God is Faithful," (<http://www.ccci.org/gl-men/stories/walvoord.html> [accessed July 14, 2000]).

Buswell's recommendation of Dallas Seminary reveals the respect he had for the dispensational premillennial school. Generally speaking, he fit the *sine qua non* of dispensational premillennialism as defined by Ryrie.¹⁰⁵ Buswell saw a distinction between Israel and the Church, employed a literal hermeneutic towards biblical prophecy, and as a Reformed theologian believed that God's redemptive plan would ultimately redound to his glory.¹⁰⁶

As a covenant theologian and yet adopting a dispensational premillennial view of the end times, Buswell offers a significantly different perspective that has unfortunately been, by and large, ignored or neglected by scholars from both ends of the dispensational-covenantal continuum.¹⁰⁷ Mal Couch rightly proposed that dispensationalists should begin to pay more attention to the soteriological strength of covenant theology, and that covenantalists, on the other hand, should start looking at the great tribulation and millennial reign of Christ literally, which is indeed the forte of dispensationalism.¹⁰⁸ I believe Buswell's *Systematic Theology* could serve as a bridge for such a meeting of the minds.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 38–41.

¹⁰⁶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, "God . . . [works] all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory" (chap. 2.1).

¹⁰⁷ For instance, Buswell is conspicuously absent in Stanley Grenz's synopsis and analysis of the millennial debate, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992). The index of Mal Couch's *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) contains no entry for Buswell either. Neither did the contributors of an earlier work edited by Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), cite Buswell. Millard J. Erickson in his book, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), interacts with Buswell's rapture position, but in his discussion on premillennialism, he focuses on Ladd who is the chief representative of the reformed-premillennial view. He does not, however, interact with Buswell's hermeneutical and eschatological scheme. It appears that Erickson, too, did not seem to think that there could be a Reformed school that might be deemed dispensational premillennial.

¹⁰⁸ Mal Couch, "Premillennialism and the Jewish Connection," a paper presented at the 51st Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 17–19, 1999, Danvers, MA.

¹⁰⁹ As a Bible-Presbyterian minister, I am Reformed and hold to the covenant system of theology. In the area of eschatology, I hold to a premillennial view that sees a distinction between Israel as God's chosen nation and the Church as the spiritual body of Christ. As regards the rapture, I take the pretribulation view.