

THE END IS HERE...AGAIN

PART 2



INTERVIEW WITH GREG ALBRECHT AND STEVEN SIZER

Part 2—an edited summary of a three-hour audio discussion with Greg Albrecht and Stephen Sizer.

Greg Albrecht: Welcome back to this second part of our discussion with Stephen Sizer. When we concluded Part 1 we promised to return to a discussion about the millennium. So let's start with this word "millennium"—the thousand years of Revelation 20, and what this word/term actually means. Stephen—can you comment, please?

Stephen Sizer: Well, I'll comment and then you can add to it. The book of Revelation refers to the millennium, a thousand years, but the perspective is from heaven. This isn't time on earth, this is time from a heavenly perspective. While many Christians have understood this word as a literal period of time, many others see it as a literal period of history or a symbol.

In my book, *Zion's Christian Soldiers*, I look at the four ways of understanding Revelation 20, in particular, is it literal or not? Of course, to be honest, we don't know, and we will one day find out.

Again, I want to be on the welcoming committee for Jesus' return, not the organizing committee. In terms of biblical prophecy, there are several perspectives Christians have of the millennium:

The *a-millennialist* says that the millennium is symbolic. Jesus will return, there'll be a resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. And he will reign with his saints in eternity. To some extent that's the simplest view of the future, and that's the one I start with. Anything else is a bonus. Anything else that the Lord chooses to do by his

sovereign grace he's going to do anyway, whether I believe him or not.

The *post-millennial* view sees Revelation 20 as symbolic. Those who believe in the post-millennial view see the gospel triumphing in our lifetimes. Many of our forebears genuinely believed, like the Pilgrim fathers, that they were creating heaven on earth. It's easy for us to judge them for their naivete, but boy, they went out to try and change the world, they built the hospitals, they built the schools, and they brought the gospel to much of the world today.

Now we should also mention preterism as a view of Bible prophecy. *Preterism* believes that the promises Jesus gave about his return were fulfilled in A.D. 70. As I mentioned earlier, the problem I have with being a full preterist is what do you do about Jesus saying the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky (Matthew 24:30)? But, again, I would call myself a partial preterist in the sense that I believe much of what Jesus predicted was fulfilled in A.D. 70, but we still await his final appearing.

The group whose conclusions I find most challenging would be the contemporary *pre-millennial dispensationalist*. The idea that the world is getting worse, worse, worse—Jesus will return, rule on earth for a thousand years in Jerusalem as the King of the Jews, and then we have the destruction of Satan, then we have the final judgment and then we enter eternity. It's quite a well-known and well-received theological framework. My issue is more with the dispensational end which polarizes the world between the church and Israel, and everyone else is on the other side. That actually turns the church, as has been said, into the concubine of Christ because Israel is the true bride of Christ.

If we completely follow the logical consequences of dispensationalism we become a parenthesis to God's continuing purposes on earth among the Jewish people. To me, that seems to be going back to the Old Testament—land, city, temple—rather than the way the New Testament teaches us to look to the whole world being embraced by the Good News of Jesus.

Corrie Ten Boom was once asked whether she was *a-millennial*, *pre-millennial*, or *post-millennial*. She said that's *a-pre-posterous* question. I like that. That's why I have sympathy for those who just want to be *pan-millennialist*—it's all going to pan out in the end.

GA: This might be a good time, as we have introduced the word "millennium" from Revelation 20 to talk a little more about the book of Revelation. Not only was the book of Revelation written from the perspective of heavenly time, we also need to understand that the book of Revelation is written in a literary style called *apocalyptic*.

Apocalyptic, a literary style which was popular at that time, made incredible use of colors and symbols and numbers. Those used in Revelation include 7, 12, 1,000 and 144,000. Given the literary genre of apocalyptic, these were not meant to be literal blueprint kinds of numbers, but sym-

associated with times of great suffering. The apocalyptic style uses enigmatic language to reveal God's truth to his own children but conceal it from others. Symbols of Babylon in the book of Revelation are to be understood in terms of the Roman Empire that was moving from a position of neutrality as we saw with Pilate when he said that he found Jesus innocent, to the point where Christians were being actively persecuted under Nero. And so we must read into the book of Revelation the first century con-

word—it began life as a speculation in the writings of John Nelson Darby who was the founder, one of the founders of the Brethren Movement in the 1820s. He was building on the work of one or two other contemporary theologians, Edward Irving among them. Until that time Christians had understand a continuity between the Old and New Testament. I was thinking of Hebrews when you were talking about the temple and the reason it was destroyed in A.D. 70. But in Hebrews you've got this long list of saints who never saw or experienced God's plan for their lives. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.



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bolic numbers. They all had great symbolic meanings which actually held more weight and theological import than any specific color or symbol or number might have. The millennium spoken of in Revelation 20 (and by the way that's the only place in the Bible you're going to read that word) is another kind of a red flag. Is it a literal period of time, or is it an exaggeration for emphasis—a long, long time, longer than anybody's going to live? To answer my own question—I believe that the use of the word, within the context of the literary style or genre of apocalyptic and within the context of the book of Revelation clearly means to depict a long, undefined period of time.

SS: We must also remember specific times in history when the Lord inspired individuals to write prophecy, that kind of apocalyptic particularly

text, as we should with some of the other apocalyptic passages in Daniel, for example. As you've rightly said, we must distinguish the different genre of Scripture. Are we dealing with history, poetry, prose, prophecy, or apocalyptic?

GA: Let's return to this methodology called dispensationalism for a moment. It is, is it not, a system of interpreting the Bible? That is, dispensationalism itself is not simply a method of interpreting the future, but is a method of interpreting the entire Bible and of all eras of human time, is it not? At the beginning of the 20th century a man named Scofield presented dispensationalism in a "study Bible"—though it was not called a study Bible at the time. Let's talk a little more about dispensationalism.

SS: Dispensationalism is a long

They admitted they were aliens and strangers on earth. They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. The Old Testament saints were not looking for Palestine. They didn't see the real estate we know as Israel as their future hope.

They were looking for a better country, not a physical one. Notice how Chapter 11 ends. The author says (verse 39) these were all commended for their faith. The Old Testament saints were commended, yet none of them received what was promised. There's a continuity between the Old Testament saints and the New Testament saints. It's not that the church has superseded Israel, it's that Christ has fulfilled the role of Israel and his people are in continuity with his people in the Old Testament. One people of God, not two.

What dispensationalism does, in its views, is to fracture that continuity.

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Most Christians see the coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. Whereas the dispensationalists, and it started with Darby and his friends, saw a discontinuity. They somehow see the coming of Jesus as a postponement. So they believe that the promises of land, of a city, Jerusalem, the promises of a temple—those promises were not fulfilled literally. Darby argued that such promises will be fulfilled literally in the future.

Darby said that if something hasn't been fulfilled literally, to the letter, it will be. And so they began to park prophecies into the future that hadn't been fulfilled. They believed that the Jews would need to return, literally and physically, back to the land.

Dispensationalists believe that a physical temple has to be rebuilt before Jesus can come back. You find Christians actively assisting the Jews back to the land today, funding the temple mount, funding the settlement program.

GA: So ideas have consequences.

SS: Exactly.

GA: And given their theological perspective, when people are in a political position of power, they're going to ensure things happen according to their already-arrived-at conclusions. Theology can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Perhaps we can get back to that idea a little later—but for now perhaps we can talk a little more about Scofield and Darby.

SS: Scofield was a disciple of Darby. Scofield took Darby's theology, simplified it, codified it, and stuck it alongside the text of Scripture. And the Scofield Reference Bible became the most widely-used study Bible, at least until the middle of the 20th century.

Dispensationalism is based on two very simple principles. The first is that we must distinguish between Israel and the church. So, according to a dispensational perspective, parts of the Bible that apply to the old covenant people of Israel apply to the

nation of Israel today. Parts of the Scripture that apply to the church apply to the church today. Darby came out with some novel ideas. When God said to Abraham that he would bless him and make his descendants to be like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, Darby believed the stars in the sky are the heavenly people (the church) and the sand on the seashore are God's earthly people, the Jews. So you end up with the bride of Christ and the wife of the Lamb being separate peoples. So you split the Bible in two, half for the Jews and half for the church.

The second basic principle, and this is where the word "dispensation" comes from, is based on Darby's novel idea of splitting the Scriptures into seven dispensations. According to Darby we are now living in the fifth dispensation, which he calls the church age, with the sixth being Israel after the rapture, and then the final dispensation.

GA: Stephen, at this point, with the background we've covered, let's briefly discuss Christian Zionism and how its beliefs dovetail with dispensational "end-times" preaching. Let me briefly explain with a personal story. I've taken seven trips to Israel, but it was only on my last trip to Israel, aided by a study I had done before going, when I began to understand there's an entirely different group of people in Palestine, in Israel than I had really previously even thought of. I was humbled to think that before this last visit, I just passed over them. I had previously thought of two groups of people in the Middle East—the Jews and the Arabs.

It had never crossed my mind as to why I as a Christian for so many years had so unconditionally supported whatever the Israeli political view was, without question. And on the other hand I had absolutely denied and rejected the Arab political view on a particular given topic at any given time for decades of my life.

Now before we continue, and Stephen will no doubt insist on this perspective as well, as we talk about Christian Zionism, I want our listeners and readers to know we are not engaging in a political discussion. We're talking about a theological understanding and perspective that has political overflow and political outcome. For example, as a peacemaker, as a Christ follower, when you take a position of peace there will be people in this world whose political position will lead them to agree with you, whether they're agreeing with you for Christ-centered reasons or not. And there will be people whose political positions lead them to disagree with you.

So whether you agree or disagree with the political repercussions of this discussion is really not the issue. We're not appearing to you today as a member of the Labor or Conservative party of the United Kingdom or the Democratic or the Republican party of the United States. We're talking today about Christian Zionism as a theological and biblical construct that leads people to beliefs and understandings and ideas about the gospel of the kingdom of God.

SS: That's a good summary. Thank you, Greg. Christian Zionism is a modern theological position. Many people hold to it without recognizing its name or realizing that they are Christian Zionists. It came about particularly from the 1940s, but it was prevalent in Europe and to some extent in North America from the 1850s and 1860s. John Nelson Darby brought out this idea that the Jews remain God's chosen people and separate from the church, and that God has a purpose and a plan for the Jewish people separate from the church.

This idea took root politically in the

1870s and 1880s, because when Theodore Hertzl and his colleagues were lobbying for a national identity for the Jewish people, many other nation states were being formed. Think of the 1880s, 1890s and the early 20th century—much of the Middle East as the Ottoman Empire was retracting, the European Empires were losing ground, so you had many nation states being founded in the late 19th and early 20th century. The European powers drew most of the boundaries in Africa, Asia, South America, the Middle East. Those boundaries were artificial constructs as a consequence of either imperial occupation or withdrawal.

Now in the 1880s and 1890s, as I said, Theodore Hertzl and his colleagues were lobbying for a home for the Jewish people. But it wasn't until the 1940s that this aspiration came to bear fruit in the founding of the State of Israel. But it was largely Christians who were born and raised on Darby's ideas, Cyrus Scofield's Bible, who believed that the Bible mandated Christians to support the Jews back into the land that led to the founding of the State of Israel. But Christian Zionism and Zionism itself is much more than simply the belief that the Jews in some sense have a purpose in God's plans. Zionism is much more than that. And this is where it gets very controversial, because we tend to equate Zionism with Judaism or with Israel. And it's important that we distinguish between the terms. Judaism is a religious system. You can be Jewish and live anywhere in the world and be a good Jew.

In fact, most Jews in the world do not live in Israel. So we mustn't equate Judaism with Zionism.

Israel is a nation with a democratic political system with numerous different small political parties, but you have at least two million Arab Israelis. So again, we mustn't equate Israel with Judaism. But Zionism does. Zionism says Israel is a Jewish state. Israel exists for the Jewish people. And God's will is that all Jews everywhere return to the land. And so Christian Zionism is a movement that believes it is God's will that Jews need to be returned to the land and then Jesus can return.

GA: Before you go on, let me ask a question about that. Zionism, not

Christian Zionism, but Zionism itself holds that all Jews everywhere should return to Israel?

SS: Yes.

GA: But of course many of them in Beverly Hills and New York and London are not doing that.

SS: They don't want to go live in Israel, and I sympathize with them.

GA: So most Jews in this world are not bowing to the dictates of Zionism.

SS: No, but it's important as we begin this conversation to say that I respect Judaism, I repudiate anti-Semitism, and I defend Israel's right to exist within recognized borders, but that doesn't mean I have to agree with Zionism as practiced in Israel today. I know many people in Israel as much as in America would be highly critical of what's happening in Gaza and the West Bank and the Golan, but that doesn't make them anti-Semitic any more than you and I.

Christian Zionism really came to the fore through the 1940s and '50s as Christians began to be taught by some leaders that the Bible is "coming true." They pointed to the return of the Jews to the land, the capture of Jerusalem in '67, as being like the victory of little David over the Goliath of the Arab states. All of these things were seen as evidence of God's blessing and sovereign work in the life of Israel. And so promises in the Old Testament about chosen-ness, about the land, about Jerusalem, about the temple, and about the future began to be looked at in a fresh way with renewed enthusiasm in the belief that we were living in the last generation.

So today you'll find churches in America and in Europe supporting the settlement program, funding settlers to take land away from Palestinians and build exclusive homes for Jewish people and keep the Palestinians off their own land. Now for Christians to actually fund that, it's funding a form of racism. Within a North American context, it would be similar to taking the land away from the blacks and giving it to the whites.

GA: When I go back and think of

my own views of biblical prophecy, heavily influenced by dispensationalism, I can only shake my head about how opposed to basic Christianity they were. I unquestionably identified with Israel politically. I had a completely one-sided view, as if the nation of Israel was my team and the other guys were the other team. But John 3:16 says that Jesus died for the whole world. The whole world. We've got Scriptures like Ephesians 2 where we're told that the whole middle wall, a partition, has been broken down and that we're all now one in Christ. In Galatians 3:28 it says there's neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, male or female, we're all one in Christ.

Where was my head? Where was my heart? Well, I was being held captive to the interpretive method which had been preached to me, which I had learned and which I believed, and that's essentially how I interpreted the Bible.

SS: Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 that Christians no longer regard people from a worldly point of view. Well, what is a worldly point of view? How did we used to regard people? Well, are they rich, are they poor? Are they black, are they white? Are they one of us or one of them? The Jews put down the Gentiles, the Romans put down the pagans, Americans might do it to the Mexicans—we all need someone to put down.

But Paul says we mustn't think like that any more. He says we no longer regard people from a worldly point of view for if we are in Christ we are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. God has entrusted to us a ministry of reconciliation. What does that mean? It means we should be praying for reconciliation between Jews and Arabs. Peacemaking is the mandate for the church, not widow-making. That's our priority. Christian Zionism, in a blunt way, is polarizing the world between us and them. It's saying, we're on God's side—the Arabs, the Iranians and the Communists are on the other side and therefore it's okay to set up this polarization and militarization.

GA: Let's talk briefly about "the land." The land is a problem today in

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the Middle East. Real estate has always been a problem wherever human beings have lived. But it's interesting that you don't find the land being talked about a lot in the new covenant. But in the old covenant, the land is talked about a great deal.

Now one of the things that Christian Zionists will do in justifying the possession of real estate in the Middle East is the Scripture back in Genesis having to do with the promise that was given to Abraham. So would you talk about the land—this is a key, I

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believe, for many people to understand that a dispensational view often leapfrogs over the cross of Christ, and ignores the significance of the cross of Christ. It's a huge question and topic, what can you share with us?

SS: You're right. In the Old Testament, the land has a very important part to play in God's promises. First to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Joseph being called out of slavery, out of Egypt, into the promised land. There's the promise in Genesis 12 when God tells Abraham he would make of him a great nation. Later in Genesis the covenant is ratified and the promised land becomes central to the hope and aspirations of God's people. We're given the geographic location, the boundaries from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates. (Genesis 15:18).

But notice two things. One is the conditions that were also attached to residence in the land. I would affirm the right of Jewish people to live in the land, particularly those who were born there. I believe we have a right to live where we are born, where our roots are. I would question the right, say for me, to have the right to come live in America and displace Americans who have lived for generations in America. I think that kind of politi-

cal agenda is not acceptable in today's world.

But the right to live in the place where one was born I think is an inalienable right. But I wouldn't go back 3,000 or 4,000 years and say that this land was given to my descendant, to my ancestors, and therefore it's mine today.

God did indeed give that land to the Jews, but he gave it as a conditional inheritance, not an unconditional one. In the law of Moses we're told the people of God are described as aliens and tenants. The land is mine,

says the Lord. You are but aliens and tenants, he says in Leviticus. Conditions are attached to residence in the land. You get this in Deuteronomy 28. If you obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands the Lord will grant you victory over your enemies and all the peoples on earth will call you blessed. But then there are warnings of disobedience, curses for disobedience.

Now how should we understand faith and obedience in the light of Christ? How should we interpret those promises and warnings? Well clearly it should be understood in the terms of Jesus. The 19th century Christians who encouraged the Jews back to the land did so out of the belief that they would go back as a Christian nation, repent and return.

That was the sequence in the Old Testament. Repent and return. Not return and repent. Repentance was conditional on enjoying God's blessing. The warnings of disobedience led to cursing and judgment and exile from the land. And so the aspiration in the 19th century as Christians got behind the restorationist movement was the belief that the Jews would come to faith in Jesus and as a consequence be returned to the land before

Christ returned. When it didn't happen some Christians said "well, they're returning to the land, this must surely be God's blessing, then they will come to faith in Jesus. That is our hope and our prayer from Romans 9-11."

But there is a silence about the land in the New Testament. How should we understand this? Well, we should understand it in the light of the passage you quoted from Ephesians 2, for example, that God is bringing out of the nations a people for himself who recognize Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The kingdom of heaven is not



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geographically located. We are not all going to live in the promised land together. The world becomes the location for God's people. Jesus sent his disciples into the world. He didn't tell the disciples to come back to Jerusalem when they were finished proclaiming the gospel. He said go into all the world and make disciples.

There's no need for anyone, when they come to Christ, to be returned to any physical property, possession, real estate, or whatever. That's completely apart from our life in Christ. So the premise was flawed to begin with.

The New Testament talks in terms about the land that clearly shows God intends his people to be scattered throughout the world. The inheritance, as we saw earlier from Hebrews 11, isn't Palestine, it's a heavenly Jerusalem, it's the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. That is what we look forward to. A new heaven and a new earth. Not a bit of real estate in the Middle East.

GA: One of the most powerful passages to address this topic is in Galatians 4 where Paul takes the story of

Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac, and he does something very unusual with it. You've got this well known story, dear to the Jewish community of God's calling. What's the context? Well, Paul is writing to Christians in Galatia who are Jews and Gentiles, they are being hassled by legalists coming down from Jerusalem saying "Paul has only shared half the gospel with you, you need to be circumcised, keep the law, then you'll be good Jews and good Christians."

Paul says, "Hang on a minute. Let's go back to the story of Sarah and Isaac." He takes the physical line, which was Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jews, and instead of saying Jews of his day are the descendants of the Jews of Abraham's day, and over here we've got Ishmael and the Arabs, he crosses the line. Paul says that Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus are the heirs, the children of Sarah. So he reverses the blessing. Okay, he says it's an analogy, it's an allegory, but notice how it ends. He takes the warning that God gave through Sarah—*get rid of the slave woman, she can have nothing to do with the promise, nothing to do with the inheritance*—and he applies it to the legalists who've rejected Jesus. He said *get rid of legalism, you cannot mix law with grace. You cannot add circumcision to the cross.*

SS: So the idea of the land in the New Testament is not so much that the New Testament is silent and therefore the Old Testament promises apply today—it's that those promises are fulfilled in and through God's people in the New Testament era, Jews and Gentiles, and the concept of the kingdom isn't nationalistic in the sense of back to the land, the king returns and he rules over the people.

He's the king of the land, he's the king of the universe, and the whole cosmos is being transformed by the gospel. So it becomes a universal kingdom, not a nationalistic one.

GA: This issue of the land, raised by Christian Zionism, is answered if one has a Christ-centered focus of the kingdom of God. Just what is the kingdom of God? How is it being proclaimed? Is it within you even now? Is it already but not yet? The kingdom of God becomes a foil from which we can answer this land issue of Christian Zionism.

SS: Yes, you're right. 1 Peter, just a couple of verses, is an example of this. 1 Peter 1:3-4. "Praise be to God and Father, the Lord Jesus Christ who in his great mercy has given us new birth into the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." Again, the land is not the inheritance we are given.

GA: And it is kept in heaven for you. It's not a piece of real estate.

SS: God's purposes are being fulfilled in and through the living stones. Again, 1 Peter 2. You've come to him, the living stone. Not that you've come back to the land. Rejected by men but chosen by God, precious to him. You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

You know, one passage that really motivates me in this entire discussion is the story of the parable of the good Samaritan, and it's probably the most well known story that Jesus told. But it's probably the one that's least understood.

We think we know the story and we fall into the trap of the man who asked the question that preceded Jesus telling the story: Who is my neighbor? The guy was a lawyer, he wanted Jesus to draw a line in the

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sand and say, here is the line. On this side are your neighbors, on that side are your enemies. "Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. The good guys and the bad guys—them and us.

Jesus tells the story. In the middle of this story we all know so well, he inserts a hook, a dilemma, and we see the dilemma played out in the answer the man gives when Jesus throws the question back and asks which of the three was the neighbor. The lawyer can't bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." He says "the one who had mercy on him." And Jesus says go and do the same. And the reason it was such a dilemma for the man whom Jesus told the story to is hidden in the story.

Jesus says, in the middle of the

story, the man was stripped of his clothes, they beat him and left him half dead. That created the dilemma because everyone who came down that road subsequently was encountering someone who was unconscious and naked. They could not tell who he was, because in the Middle East then as now, what you wear says a lot about where you're from. Do you wear a *kafir*, or do you wear a *kaper*? Are you Jewish or are you an Arab? Your dress says a lot about you. And you could tell from 100 yards if the person was a Samaritan or a Jew by their clothing. Those who passed him lying in the road couldn't tell if he was a Samaritan or a Jew by his accent either, because he was unconscious.

So Jesus was setting up a story that they could relate to. His original readers had experienced tragedy on that very road—people being beaten up and killed. Jesus describes the man who was beaten as a human being. Who's going to stop for him? And who stops? One of our enemies stops, Jesus says. Which of the three was a neighbor? The one who had mercy on him. And Jesus told his audience to go and do the same.

So Jesus was challenging each one of us to be a good neighbor to everyone we meet, irrespective of their race or their religion. And that ironically is the primary way in which we will be

fruitful in our gospel witness. Because people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. And that's why often, certainly in the Middle East, compassionate service is a prerequisite to earn the right to share the good news of Jesus. Because what we do speaks so much more loudly than what we say.

GA: Stephen Sizer is a servant of Jesus Christ, and I'm proud to say, a good personal friend. He is a peacemaker, an author whose books include *Zion's Christian Soldiers*, and *Christian Zionism, Roadmap to Armageddon*? Stephen's books are available through Inter-Varsity in England, Europe, the United States and Canada, and on amazon.com. □