

COMMENTS ON THE SEVEN STEPS OF SLIDESHOW ON THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

SLIDE 1. There is no End Time Theology whatsoever that is above all criticism. Nevertheless, it may be necessary to compare each in its strengths and weaknesses and to examine it in order to see to what degree it corresponds to what the biblical texts say. We need to understand why on the basis of the same text it is possible to arrive at completely different conclusions.

All end time theologies show one thing in common: God's perfect lordship in heaven after the final judgment. They are furthermore distinguishable by two variables: the lordship of Christ in his Church between his first and second coming and his lordship on earth between the second coming and the final judgment.⁵ The early apologists and theologians held the so-called Historic Pre-Millennialism. Under the influence of Platonism in the School of Alexandria the hope that Israel had for a messianic kingdom was transferred to the Church. That was the beginning of Replacement Theology that characterizes particularly the later Church, the one under the Church Fathers. The theologies on slide 1 are starting points that were at times modified in the course of Church history. Walvoord refers to the term 'Dispensationalist Premillennialism.' The Early Church held a historic Premillennialism.

Ignoring the various variations and their definitions we may state that today the chief opponents are called Premillennialism and Amillennialism with their completely opposite understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church.

SLIDE 2 The meaning of a word or a text always depends on its closer or wider context. Given certain conditions a combination of texts with their interpretations will lead to a system that is called a theology. Texts concerning the end time lead to end time theologies. A theology has the effect of lenses through which we seek to understand other texts. The result is a process of interpretation, a circle or a spiral called hermeneutical because the interpreter turns from text to interpretation and from interpretation to text. The various factors that affect this process will help us to understand why the same text or combination of texts may lead to different theological convictions.

SLIDE 3 The very milieu in which this process takes place, its widest context comparable to the very air that we breathe, is the worldview of the interpreter. The Greek philosophical worldview supplanted the original Hebrew worldview. This led to a heavy emphasis on figurative or allegorical interpretation in place of the literal one. Under this shift of perspective even the biblical understanding of the history of salvation (salvific history or 'Heilsgeschichte') was affected. Its symbol is the literal messianic kingdom of a thousand years (Rev. 20). Whatever precedes it belongs to the Pre-Millennium. The symbolic understanding of the Millennium led to its very disappearance, hence the term A-millennium. The two concepts, Premillennialism and Amillennialism are at the extreme opposite ends of the spectrum.

⁵ Ronald E. Diprose, Israel in the development of Christian thought. IBEI: Rom, 2000, S. 153

SLIDE 4 The consequences that followed the different interpretations – literal versus figurative - under these two opposite theologies were enormous in two respects. On the one hand they lead to a completely different understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church and on the other hand they lead to politically different perspectives on the Middle East conflict. Those views determine the role in which we see the Jews and the way in which we see Israel's place in world history. For the Premillennialists Israel is different from all other nations. For the Amillennialists it is a nation like all other nations.

SLIDE 5 The consequence of the symbolic or allegorical understanding of Scripture is the emergence of Replacement Theology. It takes the Church to be Israel in a figurative meaning. The modern State of Israel and the Jews have no longer any prophetic role to play. The Church has taken their place. Christian Zionism in this view makes no sense. The year 1948 has no significance in terms of the History of Salvation. The separation of Palestine into two States is merely a matter of economics and politics. The problem of peace can be solved without the Messiah having to return first.

SLIDE 6 Theologies are not born in a vacuum. The process under which the history oriented end time theology emerged - the way in which theology looks at history – is largely dependent on the worldview of its time. Worldviews are made up of various factors, each of which has a history of its own. In philosophy we analyze the concept of history itself. In some systems of thought, history is linear, cyclical or circular, repeating itself over and over again. The history of culture and thinking, of arts and science, in one way or another influences the formation of theology. The time when theology used to be the queen of the academic faculties is over.

SLIDE 7 The concept of History in the theological sense and the method of interpretation are predominant in this whole process. Interpretation may be affected by one's pre-understanding, which in itself may be part of one's worldview, yet it is subject to a number of principles and rules like the one that meaning is determined by context. Our method of interpretation is linked to our view of Scripture (which again is linked to the History of Salvation), in other words it is linked to the question as to what extent one recognizes the authority of Scripture, in how far one accepts it as the product of Divine inspiration. God's Spirit may or may not influence what is called our pre-understanding.

Once we have analyzed this complex process, it is easier to question each one of these components and to find out in how far it corresponds to God's purpose that we recognize in His word. This is unavoidable circular reasoning. It is part of the 'hermeneutical circle or spiral' of how we arrive at understanding, theological, cultural or otherwise. Even in science it has been said that facts do not speak for themselves. They must be read in the light of theory – theory that was derived from facts.