

## Preface to the Expanded Edition

No one is more surprised than I that *A Case for Amillennialism* (published in 2003) is still in print and now available in an updated edition. I am very grateful for the positive feedback I have received throughout the years. I am also thankful for those who have disagreed with my particular brand of Reformed amillennialism but who have found my efforts worthy of constructive engagement. Iron sharpens iron. I, for one, have found the engagement helpful in many ways.

This edition of *A Case for Amillennialism* includes two new chapters and a foreword from my friend and colleague Dr. Michael Horton. The two new chapters are “The Antichrist” and “Signs of the End.” The latter seeks to answer the question, How do we interpret the signs of the end? while the former is a summation of the material in my book *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth about the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). Since it may be said (facetiously) that a sound eschatology must be supported by good eschatology charts, I have also included a series of outstanding charts prepared by Mark Vander Pol. The reader should note that in the two new chapters I utilize the ESV, which was not available when the first edition was published in 2003.

Since Dr. Horton was very instrumental in encouraging me to submit *A Case for Amillennialism* for publication, as well as helping me to get it published, I am thrilled at his willingness to contribute a foreword to this edition. A hearty thanks must also go to the people at Baker who listened to Michael’s recommendation and gave my manuscript consideration, and especially to Chad Allen, my editor, who has since advanced through the ranks at Baker and encouraged me to consider preparing this edition.

Since the publication of the first edition of *A Case for Amillennialism*, two important eschatological controversies have arisen that readers may expect me to address in this edition. The first of these controversies is the case of date-setter Harold Camping, whose stubborn unwillingness to grasp the meaning of Matthew 24:36 (“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”) brought repeated embarrassment to himself and his followers. It was Camping’s contorted end-times calculations, and his misuse of the biblical signs of the end, that, in part, prompted the inclusion in this volume of a new chapter dealing with the signs of the end and the way in which we should seek to interpret them.

The other controversy that merits discussion is that raised by John MacArthur’s lecture “Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Is a Premillennialist,” given at the Shepherd’s Conference at Grace Community Church on March 7, 2007. In his lecture, MacArthur made the startling claim that dispensational premillennialism is the only eschatological position consistent with five-point Calvinism. Such a claim came as a surprise to many, since the framers and the current signatories of the Canons of the Synod of Dort (from which the five points come) are overwhelmingly amillennial. Although I chose not to include my response to MacArthur’s lecture in this revised volume, interested readers can find it in its entirety by consulting the notes.<sup>1</sup>

Several matters, however, should be addressed in this preface. Several dispensational writers have seized upon my admission that two leading pre-World War II Reformed theologians (Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof) dismissed dispensationalism on a number of grounds, one of which was the dispensational insistence that Israel would become a nation yet again (see chap. 18). That Bavinck and Berkhof got this wrong was all too evident in 1948, when Israel became a nation just as dispensationalists had expected.

This fact is taken by some as evidence of the inability of Reformed amillennarians to properly explain the role of Israel in biblical eschatology. MacArthur takes my admission as an illustration of the need for “those of a Reformed mindset to reconsider their eschatology in light of their commitment to literal hermeneutics and the doctrine of sovereign election.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that a number of Reformed theologians do indeed believe there will be a future conversion of Israel (e.g., Beza, Vos, Holwerda, Venema, Horton) is taken by dispensationalists as confirmation of the inconsistency supposedly inherent in amillennialism because of a conflict between a literal interpretation of passages about Israel and the spiritualizing and allegorical hermeneutic that amillennial Christians allegedly utilize elsewhere when interpreting prophecy.

There are several things to say in response to this charge. First, I ask the reader to carefully consider the interpretation of Romans 9–11 set forth in

chapter 15 of this volume and then ask whether or not this is a faithful and plausible interpretation of Paul’s discussion of Israel’s future role in redemptive history. While Reformed Christians disagree about the meaning of “all Israel” (in Rom. 11:26), all Reformed amillennarians do agree that in Romans 9–11—the one passage in which Paul does speak directly to the future of Israel—he fails to mention a single event that dispensationalists claim will come to pass for Israel based on their so-called literal hermeneutic. Paul makes no mention of Israel returning to the land. There is no mention of a rapture of Gentile Christians before the appearance of the Antichrist at the dawn of a seven-year tribulation. There is no mention of an earthly millennial kingdom. You would think that if these things were predicted for Israel throughout the Old Testament, the apostle Paul might think it important to mention them when he addresses Israel’s future (vis-à-vis the role of the Gentiles). He does not. While it is important to be willing to reconsider one’s viewpoint in light of new evidence to the contrary, I humbly ask that others be willing to do the same.

Second, all Christians interested in eschatology should learn the lesson Bavinck and Berkhof unwittingly teach us. Everyone who writes in the field of Bible prophecy and eschatology needs to ask themselves how someone reading our works a generation or two from now (barring the Lord’s return, of course) will react to our conclusions, expectations, and predictions. While the Bible does not err, none of us is infallible, and none of us knows the future. A certain amount of restraint and a willingness to admit error come with the eschatological turf. Even though Bavinck and Berkhof were wrong about Israel, their eschatological opinions have largely withstood the test of time. This assertion is supported by the fact that even their contemporary critics find it noteworthy that they were wrong about Israel, and this comes as a matter of some surprise! Of all the different schools of interpretation associated with Bible prophecy, dispensationalists should be especially careful not to make too much of Bavinck’s and Berkhof’s comments regarding Israel, given the well-known propensity of many popular dispensationalist writers to make eschatological predictions that do not come to pass.

As for tying the dispensational view of Israel’s role in redemptive history to the doctrine of election, it should be made clear that MacArthur distances himself from the way the Reformed tradition has historically framed the doctrine of election when he treats the election of national Israel in isolation from those covenants of works and grace that serve as the means through which God sends Jesus Christ to save his elect. At this point, we see the inseparable connection between Reformed varieties of amillennialism and covenant theology—an important connection for readers of this volume to make.<sup>3</sup>

To summarize briefly, the Reformed doctrine of election holds that God chooses those individuals whom he intends to save based on his own good pleasure and purpose and not because of anything good God foresees in the sinner. In his incarnation, Jesus came to earth to accomplish those things necessary to save those whom God has chosen (to die for their sins and fulfill the righteous requirements of the law). The Holy Spirit calls those whom God has chosen and for whom Jesus has accomplished his redemptive work. Those called by the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel exercise faith in Jesus Christ, are justified, and begin the lifelong process of sanctification. Presumably, MacArthur would agree with all of these points.

God has also chosen the nation of Israel to fulfill specific redemptive purposes—to bring forth the Word of God and the Messiah. But God also deals with his people (including Israel) through a series of covenants.<sup>4</sup> In the covenant of works, God created Adam to be the biological and federal head of the entire human race. The basis for acceptance before God under the terms of this covenant was perfect obedience (in thought, word, and deed) to all the commandments of God. When Adam fell into sin, the entire human race sinned in and with Adam and came under the curse (death). This is why no one can save themselves (because we are dead in sin), and this is why God must graciously choose to save particular individuals—those chosen amount to a multitude that cannot be counted—if any are to be saved.

God has promised to redeem all those whom he has chosen to save through a gracious covenant. Under the terms of the covenant of grace, the covenant mediator (Jesus Christ) will fulfill all the terms of the covenant of works and then impute his own obedience, as well as turn aside the wrath of God from those whom God has chosen but who cannot save themselves because they stand condemned under a covenant of works. This gracious covenant was promised to Adam, was formally ratified with Abraham, and was then renewed with David. According to the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah), this covenant pointed ahead to a new covenant (the final fulfillment of God's gracious promises) fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The new covenant, then, is this same gracious covenant promised to Adam now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In the case of Israel, God established his covenant with the nation at Mount Sinai. While this covenant was based on the works principle established under the original covenant of works (blessing promised for perfect obedience and curse threatened for any disobedience), this covenant was administered to Israel as part of the covenant of grace. This can be seen in the fact that God gave to Israel a priesthood, animal sacrifices, and a tabernacle (and then a temple) to relieve their guilt of sin and to instruct them about the coming Messiah and the nature of his saving work. This

explains the typology present through the Sinai covenant and its temple, priesthood, etc.

When the nation of Israel comes under God's covenant curses because of their repeated disobedience and lack of repentance, and the nation is first cast from the land during the Babylonian captivity and then again after the events of AD 70, this has no bearing whatsoever on the fact that God has his elect believers among the Israelites (and who are, under the terms of the covenant of grace, saved by grace through faith in the promised Messiah), even though the nation of which they were citizens (Israel) came under God's covenant curse threatened in the covenant sanctions established at Sinai. Israel's possession of the land of promise, therefore, was part of a national covenant and was conditioned upon national obedience. The New Testament writers are clear (much to the dispensationalist's dismay) that the everlasting land promise God made to Abraham is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is the true Israel. This becomes clear when Paul universalizes the Abrahamic promise of a land in Palestine now extending to the ends of the earth (Rom. 4:13). Abraham is now depicted as heir of the world.

Therefore, to tie God's choice of Israel to serve a critical role in redemptive history (as recipients of the Sinai covenant) to God's choice of those particular individuals whom he chooses to save ("sovereign election," to use MacArthur's phrase) is to overlook a very important distinction made throughout the whole of the Bible. One might be part of the visible people of God yet not be a true believer, nor numbered among God's elect. This is the classical distinction between the visible and the invisible church. To paraphrase Paul in Romans 9:6, "Not all Israel is Israel." Yet, says Paul, within national Israel (which receives and possesses the land based on obedience—Josh. 21:43), there is an elect remnant according to grace (Rom. 11:5–6) whom God will indeed save through the merits of Jesus Christ received through faith alone.

So to argue as MacArthur and other dispensationalists do—that the Reformed view of the election of Israel to be God's covenant nation is directly tied to God's decree of those particular individuals whom he will save through faith in Jesus—does not reflect the historic Reformed position. The basis for MacArthur's claim is the unfortunate conflation of Israel's divinely ordained role in redemptive history with God's sovereign choice of those individuals whom he intends to save. This reflects the dispensationalist's rejection of covenant theology as expressed throughout the Reformed tradition and confessions and illustrates an unfortunate willingness to discuss sovereign election in the abstract—apart from the biblical means and redemptive-historical context in which God saves his elect sinners (i.e., the covenants of works and grace) as these covenants unfold in biblical history.

Unless and until these hermeneutical differences between covenant theologians and dispensationalists are resolved, Reformed amillenarians and dispensationalists are not going to agree about Israel's role in redemptive history, nor will we agree about the way in which the New Testament reinterprets the Old in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ and the dawn of the messianic age.

This is why I hope the debate will continue and why I ask you, the reader, to weigh these matters with both an open mind and a well-worn Bible. It is my prayer that this expanded edition of *A Case for Amillennialism* will help you do exactly that.