

Will the World be Won to Christ Before He Returns?

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Postmillennialists rationalize that the spread of the gospel will result in a sufficient number of people being converted to bring about the promised millennial kingdom, ultimately resulting in the return of Christ. From a strictly biblical perspective such a view has no support. In fact, Scripture has much to say that flatly contradicts such a scenario. Though believers are to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, since God uses the preaching of the gospel as the means of gathering in His elect, the Bible does not indicate that the world is going to be won, or even substantially won, to Christ. In fact, it unmistakably tells us the opposite—that only a few of those who hear will respond. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14,

(13) “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many of those who enter by it. (14) For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” [NASB]

Jesus’ statement certainly does not sound promising if one is looking for biblical support for a worldwide reception to the gospel. [For a detailed discussion of how the millennium will be populated, see, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, by the author, available online at www.biblicalreader.com.]

The Parables of Mathew 13

Covenantalists frequently interpret some of the parables of Matthew thirteen to teach that the kingdom will continue to expand until it fills the world earth. They appeal to the parable of the leaven in the meal (13:33) as support for the view that the gospel will progress until the whole world is “leavened” (or at least sufficiently so for the kingdom to be brought about). However, when seen within the broader context of the parables of this chapter, this is not the correct interpretation of this passage, even though many covenantal commentaries declare it to be so. The parables of this chapter are all about the same subject—the progress of the kingdom of Heaven until the end of the age when Messiah comes. [We have to be careful not to confuse the “kingdom of Heaven” with the millennial kingdom. As the parables are explained it will become apparent that these do not refer to the same thing. (The “kingdom of Heaven” as used in these parables represents the body of “professing Christians,” which at the present time the is the *visible* church.)]

In Matthew 13 there are seven parables that describe the course of the kingdom of Heaven. All of these parables teach the same truth—that the kingdom of Heaven (professing Christianity, which is composed of both true believers and unbelievers) will be diluted and corrupted as the age progresses toward its conclusion at the second coming of Christ—just the opposite idea as is commonly held by most covenantalists (and by all theologians). Let’s take a look at these seven parables and see how this idea is developed. The first parable is the parable of the sower (13:1-23).

(Matt. 13:1-23) That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. (2) And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. (3) And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, “Behold, the sower went out to sow; (4) and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. (5) Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. (6) But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. (7) Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. (8) And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. (9) He who has ears, let him hear.” (10) And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” (11) Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. (12) For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. (13) Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (14) In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; (15) FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.’ (16) But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. (17) For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (18) Hear then the parable of the sower. (19) When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. (20) The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; (21) yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. (22) And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (23) And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.” [NASB]

In this parable, only a portion of the seed represents true belief, the remainder yields no genuine faith (as is evidence by the fact that it produces no fruit—probably analogous to the “fruit” of the Spirit of Life), for it is always the case (as Jesus had already taught) that those who receive will always be a small number of those who hear (Matt. 7:13-14)—this was certainly the case in His own ministry. Jesus is here preparing his disciples for the reality that, for a variety of reasons, the sowing of the gospel will not

always result in faith on the part of those who hear. They were soon to discover this after His departure.

(Matt. 13:24-30) Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. (25) But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. (26) But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. (27) The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ (28) And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ (29) But he said, ‘No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. (30) Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.”’” [NASB]

In this parable (13:24-30) Jesus tells of a planter whose servants came to him with the news that tares were growing in his field. (Tares are fruitless weeds that in the developing stages look like wheat, but never bear fruit.) Since the planter had sown only good seed in the field he immediately recognized that this was the work of an enemy bent on damaging his crop. The servants asked if they should pull up the tares, but the planter said no—lest they uproot the wheat in the process. The planter’s instruction was to let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest and then they could be separated, with the tares being gathered and burned, and the wheat gathered into the barns. Thankfully, Jesus gives the meaning of this parable in verses 36-43. According to the Lord’s interpretation, the planter is the Son of Man (Christ), the field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom of Heaven (*i.e.*, those of the kingdom of Heaven who believe), the tares are the sons of the Evil One, and the enemy who sowed them is the Devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Jesus says in verses 40-43 that at the end of the age (at the second coming *cf.* Matt. 24:29-31) He will send forth His angels to gather up the tares and they will be cast into the furnace in that place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, but the righteous (the sons of the kingdom will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom). Jesus indicated the importance of a proper conception of the future, as taught in this parable, when He said in the latter part of verse 43, “*He who has ears, let him hear.*” It is important to note that in this prophetic parable the picture presented is not that the gospel (or belief in the gospel) will convert the world, rather the opposite—that the evil in the world will permeate the realm of belief and the kingdom of Heaven (professing Christianity) will be infiltrated with sons of the Evil One (impostors, who like their father, the Devil, are transformed into ministers of light).

(Matt. 13:31-32) He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; (32) and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES.” [NASB]

In this short parable the Lord likens the kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed planted in a field. The small seed grows into a large bush and is filled with birds that nest in its branches. The birds are not part of the tree—they merely perch in the tree. Though the Lord does not interpret this parable for us, in light of the previous parable it isn't difficult to unravel the meaning. The field is, as before, the world; the mustard bush represents those who believe, and the birds represent those who infiltrate the kingdom. The bush starts out small, but as it grows the birds continue (present tense) to come and nest in it. Thus as the kingdom of Heaven progresses toward the culmination of the age (the second coming) it will accrue more and more who profess Christ, but are not actually believers—just as the birds attach themselves to the bush but are not part of it. (2 Peter 2 has much to say on this topic.) Jesus next tells the parable of the leaven in the meal (13:33).

(Matt. 13:33) He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.” [NASB]

It is important to bear in mind that Jesus' listeners had been schooled in the Torah and understood leaven as symbolic of corruption—hence the removal of leaven entirely from the home during the feast of Passover. (See Paul's use of this same analogy in Galatians 5:7-9, where leaven in the lump of meal is used to illustrate that a small amount of corruption can result in the corruption of the entire lump of meal.) When interpreted in the light of the common Jewish symbology and in light of the other related parables, it is apparent that Jesus was saying that the kingdom of Heaven would be progressively corrupted throughout its course toward the end of the age. The leavening of the three pecks of meal is not, as covenantalists suggest, the winning of the world to Christ, but rather a prophetic statement that as the age progresses professing Christianity will grow more corrupted by the presence of evil and unbelief. The remaining four parables confirm this understanding.

(Matt. 13:44) “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” [NASB]

This fifth parable pictures a treasure hidden in a field, which a man finds and then goes and sells all he has to purchase the field. This parable is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that the man (a sinner) finds the treasure (salvation in Christ) and gives up all to possess salvation. However, such an interpretation is not consistent with the previous parables in this series, nor does it fit with the particulars of the analogy. [For example, if the parable is referring to a sinner selling all to obtain salvation that would imply salvation is not by grace. Furthermore, according to the analogy the man purchased the field itself, in order to acquire the pearl that he himself had hidden. The details simply do not fit the interpretation of a man giving up all to receive salvation.]

In this parable, as in the others, the field is again the world, the treasure is God's elect, and the man is Christ—who gave up His very life to purchase His treasure. (If something is worth what is paid for it, then believers are the most precious treasure in all creation!) How does this parable fit with the rest? Very simply, the field is not filled with treasure; rather a treasure is contained within the field. In fact, the field is so vast in comparison to the treasure that the treasure can be easily hidden from view until it is claimed. What is the Lord communicating in this parable? Simply that true belief is rare, and while it's going to grow as the age progresses, it will remain relatively rare, even obscure in the world of unbelief. The next parable teaches the same truth.

(Matt. 13:45) “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, (46) and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” [NASB]

This sixth parable is similar to the parable of the hidden treasure. In this parable the kingdom of Heaven is likened to a merchant seeking fine pearls, who when he finds one of great value sells all else and buys it. This may be one of the most misunderstood parables in the gospels and is often misinterpreted by covenantalists and dispensationalists alike. Its interpretation is the same as the preceding parable; these two short parables simply affirm the same truth, using similar analogies. The marketplace (unstated) is apparently the world, the pearl represents God's elect, and the merchant is Christ, who gave all to purchase His own. How does the story connect with the other parables? As before, it illustrates the rarity of belief in the world, right up to the end of the age.

(Matt. 13:47) Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; (48) and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. (49) So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, (50) and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” [NASB]

The seventh and final parable is that of the dragnet [13:47-50]. In this parable the kingdom of Heaven is likened to a dragnet, which having been cast into the sea gathers all kinds of fish. When the net is drawn to the beach the fishermen must separate out the bad (unprofitable) fish, which must be thrown away. Again, the Lord helps us to understand this parable by his explanation in verses 49-50, where He says that in like manner the angels will come at the end of the age and separate the wicked from the righteous and cast the wicked into the furnace of fire. The meaning of this parable is quite clear. The kingdom of Heaven will be composed of both believers fit for the kingdom and unbelievers unfit for the kingdom (remember, the kingdom of Heaven is composed of “professing Christianity,” of which only a portion are saved); these will coexist together until the end of the age when Christ will send forth His angels to separate out the unbelievers to exclude them from His kingdom (Matt. 24:29-25:46).

It should be apparent from these parables that the postmillennial concept of an ever-expanding belief in Christ serving as the basis for world renewal resulting in the millennial kingdom is simply not biblical. Christianity will grow as the age progresses, but it will also grow in corruption. Only Christ can purge the world of unbelief. He will do that not by the conversion of the world (or even a sufficient number to reform the world), but by both global judgments during the coming time of tribulation and personal judgment at his second coming (Matt. 24-25).

To the above we could also add the testimony of the Apostles, none of whom anywhere present the picture of the world being won to Christ. The Apostles do not lay out the course of the present age in detail; in fact they have little to say on the subject, but what they do say doesn't sound like they believed the world is going to be won to Christ.

Paul's Testimony

In 1 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul says,

(1 Tim. 4:1-5) But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, (2) by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, (3) men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (4) For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; (5) for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer. [NASB]

He adds in 2 Timothy 3:1-9

(2 Tim. 3:1-9) But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. (2) For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, (3) unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, (4) treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, (5) holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. (6) For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, (7) always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (8) And just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith. (9) But they will not make further progress; for their folly will be obvious to all, just as Jannes's and Jambres's folly was also. [NASB]

Not only does Paul say nothing about a worldwide reception of the gospel, he paints a pretty bleak picture of a deteriorating moral condition (even of those within the professing church) as the present age progresses. (This is essentially the same message as the parables of Matthew 13.) He extends his description in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 to include a broad based doctrinal defection that will come over the church in the last days.

(2 Tim. 4:1-5) In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: (2) Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. (3) For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (4) They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (5) But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. [NASB]

Peter's Testimony

Although an incomplete picture from a purely prophetic standpoint, Peter too predicts a growing apostasy as the Church-age progresses—again, in line with the Lord's statements in Matthew 13.

(2 Peter 2:1-3) But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2) Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; (3) and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

Jude's Testimony

Jude also fails to paint a rosy picture of Christianity at the end of the age. It is interesting that he attributes this picture to the Apostles' own understanding of this subject (vv. 17-19), which is undoubtedly to be attributed to Christ's own teaching in the subject (Matt. 13).

(Jude 12-19) These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; (13) wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever. (14) It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, (15) to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." (16) These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage. (17) But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, (18) that they were saying to you, "In the last time there will be mockers,

following after their own ungodly lusts.” (19) These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit. [NASB]

John’s Testimony

John’s prophetic account of the return of Christ is extremely problematic for Theonomy. Not only does John provide a thoroughly premillennial picture of the second coming (*i.e.*, tribulation, second coming, millennium), but even if we were to allow theonomists to rearrange the biblical sequence of events into a postmillennial framework (tribulation, millennium, second coming) the description would still be highly problematic for theonomists. The reason is that John (as well as Zechariah 14) presents the picture of an unprecedented conflict at the time of the second coming. This conflict is between Satan and his Antichrist and the world powers and their armies on one side, and Christ on the other side; yet if the time frame is the close of the millennial kingdom (as theonomists maintain), how could it be that Satan and the world (*en bloc*) will oppose Christ at his return? If such were true, it would raise serious questions about the nature and description of the millennium itself. Note John’s description of the events in Revelation 19:11-20:4.

(Rev. 19:11-20:4) I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. (12) His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. (13) He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. (14) The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. (15) Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. (16) On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (17) And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God, (18) so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.” (19) Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. (20) But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. (21) The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. (20:1) And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. (2) He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. (3) He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. (4) I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who

had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. [NASB]

While this passage, as well as the remainder of Revelation, is filled with interpretive challenges, it is not difficult to see that the events described, even if allegorized, simply cannot be made to fit within a postmillennial framework. This is undoubtedly why Revelation was the first book to be challenged as the church began its trek away from premillennialism. John's picture of the end of the age is not a picture of the world receiving Christ with open arms as postmillennialists claim (and which Bill Gaither has popularized in the words of his song, *The King is Coming*), but a picture of Christ returning to take by force what belongs to Him and to rule over His kingdom with a rod of iron—strictly a premillennial description. [While some postmillennialists view the tribulation as occurring near the end of the millennium, this is not the sequence as presented in any of the three major passages which describe both events (Zech. 14:1-21; Matt. 24:4-25:46; Rev. 6:1-20:6); all of these passages clearly describe the tribulation period and its concluding event—the return of Christ—as the prelude to the millennium.]

While none of the Apostles gives a comprehensive picture of the progress of the present age (until the coming of Christ), it is possible to determine from their statements that they did not teach, nor did they expect that the world would be won to Christ. Indeed, they seemed very concerned about social, moral, spiritual and doctrinal deterioration as the age progresses closer to its conclusion.

Conclusions

The picture given by Scripture is not that the world will be ready to receive Christ at His second coming, but that it will grow in its immorality, hatred, and rejection and actually oppose Him at His return (Zech. 14:1-8; Matt. 24:37-39; Rev. 19:11-21). Not only will the moral condition of the world deteriorate as the age progresses toward its conclusion, but the condition of the church will also deteriorate. This is certainly not what we would expect to find if the New Testament teaches that the world is going to be largely won to Christ.

It might be objected that if we operate on the assumption that the world isn't going to be converted to Christ, that might stifle the effort at world evangelism. However, this objection overlooks the true motive for evangelism, which is obedience to Christ. We evangelize because Christ commanded that we do it, and because it is the means God has ordained for bringing about his sovereign purpose; and our faithfulness to this task is extremely important. In the process, God will bring His elect into His eternal kingdom.