



# THE LAST DAYS

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RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

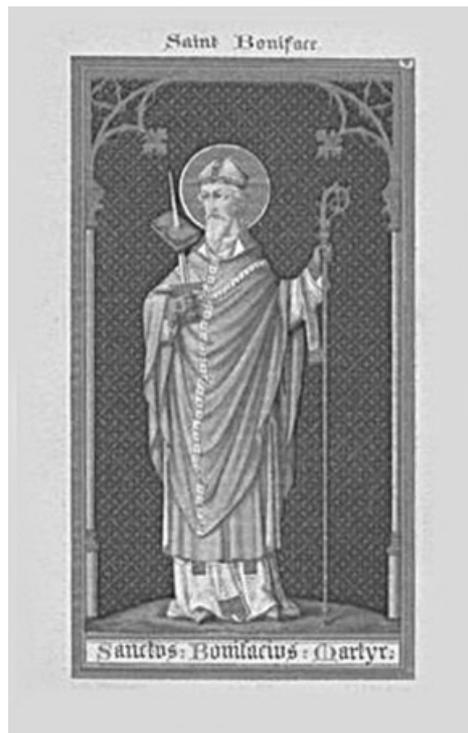
‘Eschatology’ is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological ‘system’ scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular “Left Behind” system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

## THE MILLENNIUM NOW

FROM ‘THE DAYS OF VENGEANCE’ BY DAVID CHILTON

What is the position of the historic, orthodox Church on the question of the Millennium? Can the doctrine of the Church be accurately described as either postmillennialist or amillennialist? In general, the difference between those traditionally called “amillennialists” and those traditionally called “postmillennialist” has been set in terms of their interpretations of the “thousand years” (in Latin, *the millennium*) of Revelation 20. “Amillennialists” have usually seen this text as a reference to the condition of the saints reigning in heaven, while “postmillennialists” have understood it as a description of the saints’ dominion on earth. As we shall see, however, this way of framing the question can actually obscure some very important facts about the Christian view of “the Millennium.” If we wish to gain an understanding of the orthodox position,

we must understand that the answer to this precise question cannot be determined *primarily* by the exegesis of particular texts. For example, “amillennialists” often disagree with each other about the precise nature of the resurrection(s) in Revelation 20 (to cite only one of several major points in dispute). And Benjamin Warfield, perhaps the leading “postmillennialist” scholar of the early part of this century, proposed an exegesis of Revelation 20 which most theologians would consider to be classically “amillennialist”!



Our framing of the question, therefore, should be broad enough to account for the diversity of approach among the various amillennialist and postmillennialist camps. In essence, the question of the Millennium centers on the mediatorial Kingdom of Christ: When did (or will) Christ’s Kingdom begin? And once we pose the question this way, something amazing happens — something almost unheard of in Christian circles: Unity! From the Day of Pentecost onward, orthodox Christians have recognized that Christ’s reign began at His Resurrection/Ascension and continues until all things have been thoroughly subdued under His feet, as St. Peter clearly declared (Acts 2:30-36). “The Millennium,” in these terms, is simply the Kingdom of Christ. It was inaugurated at Christ’s First Advent, has been in existence for almost two thousand years, and will go on until Christ’s

Second Advent at the Last Day. In “millennial” terminology, this means that the return of Christ and the resurrection of all men will take place *after* “the Millennium.” In this objective sense, therefore, *orthodox Christianity has always been post-millennialist*. That is to say, regardless of how “the Millennium” has been conceived (whether in a heavenly or an earthly sense) – i.e., regardless of the technical exegesis of certain points in Revelation 20 – orthodox Christians have always confessed that Jesus Christ will return after (“*post*”) the peri-

As the waters find their way into every cavern of its depths, so Christianity shall pervade every recess of the earth. **JFB**

od designated as “the thousand years” has ended. In this sense, all “amillennialists” are also “post-millennialist.” At the same time, *orthodox Christianity has always been amillennialist* (i.e., non-millennarian). The historic Church has always rejected the heresy of Millenarianism (in past centuries, this was called *chiliasm*, meaning *thousand-year-ism*). The notion that the reign of Christ is something wholly future, to be brought in by some great social cataclysm, is not a Christian doctrine. It is an unorthodox teaching, generally espoused by heretical sects on the fringes of the Christian Church.<sup>1</sup> Now, Millenarianism can take two general forms. It can be either *Pre-millennarianism* (with the Second Coming as the cataclysm that ushers in the Millennium), or *Postmillennarianism* (with the Social Revolution as the cataclysm). Examples of the first branch of Chiliasm would be, of course, the Ebionite movement of the Early Church period, and the modern Dispensational-ism of the Scofield-Ryrie school.<sup>2</sup> Examples of the Postmillennarian heresy would be easy to name as well: the Münster Revolt of 1534, Nazism, and Marxism (whether “Christian” or otherwise). Orthodox Christianity rejects both forms of the Millenarian heresy. Christianity opposes the notion of any new redemptive cataclysm occurring before the Last Judgment. Christianity is anti-revolutionary. Thus, while Christians have always looked forward to the salvation of the world, believing that Christ died and rose again for that purpose, they have also seen the Kingdom’s work as a leavening influence, gradually transforming the world into the image of God. *The definitive cataclysm has already taken place, in the finished work of Christ.* Depending on the specific question being asked, therefore, orthodox Christianity can be considered either amillennial or post-millennial – because, in reality, it is both.

One further point should be understood: In addition to being both “amillennialist” and “postmillennialist,” the orthodox Christian Church has been generally optimistic in her view of the power of the Gospel to convert the nations. In my book *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1985), I opened each chapter with a quotation from the great

St. Athanasius on the subject of the victory of the Gospel throughout the world and the inevitable conversion of all nations to Christianity. The point was not to single out St. Athanasius as such; numerous statements expressing the Hope of the Church for the worldwide triumph of the Gospel can be found throughout the writings of the great Fathers and teachers, in every age of Christianity. Even more significantly, the universal belief in the coming victory can be seen in the action of the Church in history. Christians never supposed that their high calling was to work for some sort of détente with the Enemy. “Pluralism” was never regarded by the orthodox as a worthy goal. The Church has always recognized that God sent His only begotten Son in order to redeem the world, and that He will be satisfied with nothing less than what He paid for. When the early missionaries from the East first ventured into the demonized lands of our pagan forefathers, they had not the slightest intention of developing peaceful coexistence with warlocks and their terrorizing deities. When St. Boniface came up against Thor’s sacred oak tree in his mission to the heathen Germans, he simply chopped it down and built a chapel out of the wood. Thousands of Thor-worshippers, seeing that their god had failed to strike St. Boniface with lightning, converted to Christianity on the spot. As for St. Boniface, he was unruffled by the incident. He knew that there was only one true God of thunder – the Triune Jehovah. **There is nothing strange about this. The attitude of Hope, the expectation of victory, is an absolutely fundamental characteristic of Christianity.**<sup>3</sup> The advance of the Church through the ages is inexplicable apart from it – just as it is also inexplicable apart from the fact that the Hope is *true*, the fact that Jesus Christ *has* defeated the powers and *shall* reign “from the River to the ends of the earth.” W. G. T. Shedd wrote: “Apart from the power and promise of God, the preaching of such a religion as Christianity, to such a population as that of paganism, is the sheerest Quixotism. It crosses all the inclinations, and condemns all the pleasures of guilty man. The preaching of the Gospel finds its justification, its wisdom, and its triumph, only in the attitude and relation which the infinite and almighty God sustains to

it. It is *His* religion, and therefore it must ultimately become a universal religion.”

This “generic” postmillennialism holds that Jesus Christ established His mediatorial Kingdom by His death, resurrection, and ascension to the heavenly Throne, and as the Second Adam rules over all creation until the end of the world, when He shall come again to judge the living and the dead; that He is conquering all nations by the Gospel, extending the fruits of His victory throughout the world, thereby fulfilling the dominion mandate originally given by God to Adam; that eventually, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9); and that the Biblical promises of abundant blessing, in every area of life, will be poured out by God upon the whole world, in covenantal response to the faithfulness of His people.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Premillennialism seems to have been originated by the Ebionite arch-heretic Cerinthus, a “false apostle” who was an opponent of both St. Paul and St. John. Cerinthus claimed that his doctrine of the Millennium had been revealed to him by angels; and it is interesting that St. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians – which is greatly concerned to refute the legalistic heresies of Cerinthus – begins with these words: “But even though we, *or an angel from heaven*, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8)! St. Irenaeus records that St. John ran out of a public bathhouse upon encountering Cerinthus, and cried: “Let us flee, lest even the bath-house fall, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within!” For an account of Cerinthus and his heresies, see St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, i.xxvi.1-2; iii.iii.4; cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii.xxviii.1-6; iv.xiv.6; vii.xxv.2-3. As Louis Bouyer points out in *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (Minneapolis: The Seabury Press, 1963, p. 173), some early Church Fathers (e.g. Justin Martyr) adopted premillennial liberalism because of their heathen background, to which the Biblical literary genres and imagery were unfamiliar. The orthodox, “Augustinian” view represents a more mature understanding of Scriptural symbolism and a more consistent Christian worldview.

2. Perhaps the most basic argument against premillennialism is simply that the Bible never speaks of a thousand-year reign of the saints – outside of Revelation 20, a highly symbolic and complex passage in the most highly symbolic and complex book of the Bible! Graeme Goldsworthy observes in *The Lamb and the Lion: The Gospel in Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984): “It is highly unlikely, to say the least, that something so dramatically significant as a thousand year reign of a reappeared Christ on earth before this age ends should nowhere else be mentioned in the New Testament” (p. 127). Some works that refute premillennialism, from various perspectives, are: Jay Adams, *The Time Is at Hand* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., [1966] 1970); Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945, 1947); Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., revised ed., 1984); David Brown, *Christ’s Second Coming: Will It Be Premillennial?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, [1876] 1983); W. J. Grier, *The Momentous Event: A Discussion of Scripture Teaching on the Second Advent* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, [1945] 1970); Arthur H. Lewis, *The Dark Side of the Millennium: The Problem of Evil in Rev. 20:1-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980); Rousas John Rushdoony, *God’s Plan for Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism* (Tyler, TX: Thoburn Press, 1977); Ralph Woodrow, *His Truth Is Marching On: Advanced Studies on Prophecy in the Light of History* (Riverside, CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1977).

3. Consider the fact that the compilers of *The Book of Common Prayer* provided “Tables for Finding Holy Days” all the way to A.D. 8400! Clearly, they were digging in for the “long haul: and did not expect an imminent “rapture” of the Church.

# Looking For New Heavens and a New Earth

(PART ONE)

BY DAVID H. CHILTON, M.Div., Ph.D.

A basic principle of the Reformation was the priesthood of all believers. Not only could sinners receive the merits of Jesus Christ directly, but they also were given the high and holy privilege to study the Bible directly. Private interpretation does not mean interpretive autonomy. Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. Nowhere is this principle more vividly illustrated than in a study of 2 Peter 3 and its language of a “new heaven and a new earth.”

According to St. Peter’s second epistle, Christ and the apostles had warned that apostasy would accelerate toward the end of the “last days” (2 Pet. 3:2-4; cf. Jude 17-19)—the forty-year period between Christ’s ascension and the destruction of the Old Covenant Temple in A.D. 70. [1] He makes it clear that these latter-day “mockers” were Covenant apostates: familiar with Old Testament history and prophecy, they were Jews who had abandoned the Abrahamic Covenant by rejecting Christ. As Jesus had repeatedly warned (cf. Matt. 12:38-45; 16:1-4; 23:29-39), upon this evil and perverse generation would come the great “Day of Judgment” foretold in the prophets, a “destruction of ungodly men” like that suffered by the wicked of Noah’s day (2 Pet. 3:5-7).

Throughout His ministry Jesus drew this analogy (see Matthew 24:37-39 and Luke 17:26-27). Just as God destroyed the “world” of the antediluvian era by the Flood, so would the “world” of first-century Israel be destroyed by fire in the fall of Jerusalem.

St. Peter describes this judgment as the destruction of “the present heavens and earth” (v. 7), making way for “new heavens and a new earth” (v. 10). Because of what may be called the “collapsing-universe” terminology used in this passage, many have mistakenly assumed that St. Peter is speaking of the final end of the physical heaven and earth, rather than the dissolution of the Old Covenant world order. The great seventeenth-century Puritan theologian John Owen answered this view by referring to the Bible’s very characteristic metaphorical usage of the term *heavens* and *earth*, as in Isaiah’s description of the Mosaic Covenant:

But I am the LORD thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The LORD of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people (Isa. 51:15 -16).

John Owen writes:

The time when the work here mentioned, of planting the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth, was performed by God, was when he “divided the sea” (Isa. 51:15), and gave the law (v. 16), and said to Zion, “Thou art my people”—that is, when he took the children of Israel out of Egypt, and formed them in the wilderness into a church and state. Then he planted the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth—made the new world; that is, brought forth order, and government, and beauty, from the confusion wherein before they were. This is the planting of the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth in the world. And hence it is, that when mention is made of the destruction of a state and government, it is in that language that seems to set forth the end of the world. So Isaiah 34:4; which is yet but the destruction of the state of Edom. The like is also affirmed of the Roman empire, Revelation 6:14; which the Jews constantly affirmed to be intended by Edom in the prophets. And in our Saviour Christ’s prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew 24, he sets it out by expressions of the same importance. It is evident then, that, in the prophetic idiom and manner of speech, by “heavens” and “earth,” the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood. So were the heavens and earth that world which was then destroyed by the flood. [2]

Another Old Testament text, among many that could be mentioned, is Jeremiah 4:23-31, which speaks of the imminent fall of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) in similar language of decreation:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was formless and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light...For thus says the LORD, the whole land shall be a desolation [referring to the curse of Lev. 26:31-33; see its fulfillment in Matt. 24:15!], yet I will not execute a complete destruction. For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark....

## *New Creation Language*

From the very beginning, God’s covenant with Israel had been expressed in terms of a new creation: Moses described Israel’s salvation in the wilderness in terms of the Spirit of God hovering over a waste, just as in the original creation of heaven and earth (Deut. 32:10-11; cf. Gen. 1:2).[3] In the Exodus, as at the original creation, God divided light and darkness (Ex. 14:20), divided the waters from the waters to bring forth the dry land (Ex. 14:21-22), and planted His people in His holy mountain (Ex. 15:17). God’s miraculous formation of Israel was thus an image of Creation, a redemptive recapitulation of the making of heaven and earth. The Old Covenant order, in which the entire world was organized around the central sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple, could quite appropriately be described, before its final dissolution, as “the present heavens and earth.”

## *The Mosaic Economy*

The 19th-century expositor John Brown wrote:

A person at all familiar with the phraseology of the Old Testament scriptures knows that the dissolution of the Mosaic economy, and the establishment of the Christian, is often spoken of as the removing of the old earth and heavens, and the creation of a new earth and heavens...The period of the close of the one dispensation, and the commencement of the other, is spoken of as ‘the last days’ and ‘the end of the world’; and is described as such a shaking of the earth and heavens, as should lead to the removal of the things which were shaken (Hag. 2:6; Heb. 12:26-27).[4]

Therefore, says Owen,

On this foundation I affirm that the heavens and earth here intended in this prophecy of Peter, the coming of the Lord, the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men, mentioned in the destruction of that heaven and earth, do all of them relate, not to the last and final judgment of the world, but to that utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state—i.e., the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. [5]

This interpretation is confirmed by St.

Peter's further information: In this imminent "Day of the Lord" which was about to come upon the first-century world "like a thief" (cf. Matt. 24:42-43; I Thess. 5:2; Rev.3:3), "the elements will be destroyed with intense heat" (v. 10; cf. v. 12).

Elementary principles. What are these elements? So-called "literalists" lightly and carelessly assume that the apostle is speaking about physics, using the term to mean atoms (or perhaps subatomic particles), the actual physical components of the universe. What these "literalists" fail to recognize is that although the word elements (*stoicheia*) is used several times in the New Testament, it is never used in connection with the physical universe! (In this respect, the very misleading comments of the New Geneva Study Bible on this passage [inserted below] violate its own interpretive dictum that "Scripture interprets Scripture." For possible meanings of this term, it cites pagan Greek philosophers and astrologers—but never the Bible's own use of the term!) Kittel's Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words observes that while in pagan literature the Greek word *stoicheia* is used in a number of different ways (referring to the "four elements" of the physical world, or to the "notes" on a musical scale, or to the "principles" of geometry or logic), the New Testament writers use the term "in a new way, describing the *stoicheia* as weak and beggarly. In a transferred sense, the *stoicheia* are the things on which pre-Christian existence rests, especially in pre-Christian religion. These things are impotent; they bring bondage instead of freedom." [6]

Study notes for II Peter 3:10 from the New Geneva Study Bible; and MacArthur Study Bible:

NGSB (p.1983) elements. Greek *stoicheia*, a term used for (a) the elements making up the world (according to the philosophers these were earth, air, fire, and water)...

MacArthur Study Bible (p.1959) the heavens will pass away with a great noise. The "heavens" refer to the physical universe. The "great noise" connotes whistling or a crackling sound as of objects being consumed by flames. God will incinerate the universe, probably in an atomic reaction that disintegrates all matter as we know it (vv.7, 11, 12, 13). The elements will melt with fervent heat. The "elements" are the atomic components into which matter is ultimately divisible, which make up the composition of all the created matter. Peter means that the atoms, neutrons, protons, and electrons are all going to disintegrate (v.11).

Throughout the New Testament, the word "elements" (*stoicheia*) is always used in connection with the Old Covenant order. St. Paul used the term

in his stinging rebuke to the Galatian Christians who were tempted to forsake the freedom of the New Covenant for an Old Covenant-style legalism. Describing Old Covenant rituals and ceremonies, he says "we were in bondage under the elements (*stoicheia*) of this world.... How is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements (*stoicheia*), to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years..." (Gal. 4:3, 9-10). He warns the Colossians: "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of the world, and not according to Christ.... Therefore, if you died with Christ to the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—"Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (Col. 2:8,20-21).

The writer to the Hebrews chided them: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elements (*stoicheia*) of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Heb. 5:12). In context, the writer to the Hebrews is clearly speaking of Old Covenant truths particularly since he connects it with the term oracles of God, an expression used elsewhere in the New Testament for the provisional, Old Covenant revelation (see Acts 7:38; Rom.3:2). These citations from Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews comprise all the other occurrences in the New Testament of that word "elements" (*stoicheia*). Not one refers to the "elements" of the physical world or universe; all are speaking of the "elements" of the Old Covenant system, which, as the apostles wrote just before the approaching destruction of the Old Covenant Temple in A.D. 70, was "becoming obsolete and growing old" and "ready to vanish away" (Heb.8:13).

St. Peter uses the same term in exactly the same way. Throughout the Greek New Testament, the word elements (*stoicheia*) always means ethics, not physics; the foundational "elements" of a religious system that was doomed to pass away in a fiery judgment.

### *The Time Factor*

In fact, St. Peter was quite specific about the fact that he was not referring to an event thousands of years in their future, but to something that was

already taking place:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements (*stoicheia*) will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things are being dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements (*stoicheia*) are being melted with fervent heat? (2 Pet. 3:10-12)

Contrary to the misleading renderings of translators blinded by their presuppositions, St. Peter insists that the dissolution of "the present heaven and earth"—the Old Covenant system with its obligatory rituals and bloody sacrifices—was already beginning to occur: the "universe" of the Old Covenant was coming apart, never to be revived:

When did prophet and vision cease from Israel? Was it not when Christ came, the Holy one of holies? It is, in fact, a sign and notable proof of the coming of the Word that Jerusalem no longer stands, neither is prophet raised up, nor vision revealed among them. And it is natural that it should be so, for when He that was signified had come, what need was there any longer of any to signify Him? And when the Truth had come, what further need was there of the shadow?... And the kingdom of Jerusalem ceased at the same time, kings were to be anointed among them only until the Holy of holies had been anointed. [7]

St. Peter's message, John Owen argues, is that:

...the heavens and earth that God himself planted—the sun, moon, and stars of the judaical polity and church—the whole old world of worship and worshippers, that stand out in their obstinacy against the Lord Christ—shall be sensibly dissolved and destroyed. [8]

#### Notes

1. For a defense of this position, see my *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1985), 112-22. The fact is that every time Scripture uses the term "last days" (and similar expressions) it means, not the end of the physical universe, but the period from AD 30 to AD 70 - the period during which the Apostles were preaching and writing, the "last days" of Old Covenant Israel before it was forever destroyed in the destruction of the Temple (and consequently the annihilation of the Old Covenant sacrificial system). See Acts 2:16-21; I Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; Hebrews 1:1-2; 8:13; 9:26; James 5:7-9; I Peter 1:20:4:7; I John 2:18; Jude 17-19. See also Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: The Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1993).
2. John Owen, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," in William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965-68), 9:134.
3. See Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 59.
4. John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, [1852] 1990), 1:171-72.
5. Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:171-72.
6. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged in one volume), Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1088.
7. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), [40] 61-62.8. Owen, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9: 135.
8. Owen, "Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9: 135.