

# **A TOXIC VIEW OF THE KINGDOM**

*A Review of Empire of the Risen Son*

**By Nathan Battey**

## **Preface to the Second Edition**

After I published the first edition of *Toxic Kingdom*, Steve Gregg contacted me and complained about some of the labels I used when describing his beliefs. In particular, he did not like the labels of Postmillennialism (he prefers the term “Optimistic Amillennialism”), Total Depravity, Irresistible Grace (he advocates Resistible Graces wherein a direct operation of the Holy Spirit is necessary for conversion but can be resisted), and Once-Saved-Always-Saved. I have adjusted the labels as per his request within the review, and have also issued a critique of the Optimistic Amillennial label in my new article *Answering Gregg*.

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# A TOXIC VIEW OF THE KINGDOM

## A Review of *Empire of the Risen Son*

By Nathan Battey

### Why This Review?

In 2021, Steve Gregg authored *Empire of the Risen Son*, and about a year later his book started making its way into our brotherhood. *Empire of the Risen Son* is now being widely read by brethren and several are praising Gregg for his openness, honesty, clarity, and general ability to exposit Scripture. Over the past six months his book has been recommended to me by several brothers in the church and a preacher. Others have told me that they are reading it or want to read it soon based on similar recommendations. One brother called it a must read, and another went so far as to say that he had never understood the concept of the Kingdom until Gregg made it clear for them. One preacher told me Steve Gregg is now his favorite writer and recommended that I check out Gregg's YouTube videos to find other helpful materials. The same preacher told me that Gregg agreed with churches of Christ on the Kingdom and eschatology (matters pertaining to the end times) and that he was very close to us when it came to matters of soteriology (salvation). Regarding eschatology, I was told that Gregg is an Amillennialist and Partial-Preterist who viewed the prophecy and the Book of Revelation similar to myself and my father. Concerning salvation, Gregg was said to be opposed to Calvinism, and an advocate of free will and obedience. A different brother said that Gregg advocated baptism and appeared to be close to churches of Christ on the subject. All-in-all Gregg was described as being a rather remarkable guy with conservative views that were similar to those within churches of Christ.

After receiving so many glowing recommendations, I finally decided to sit down and see what all the fuss was about. Rather than forcing readers to read my entire review to get the gist of how I feel about Gregg's book (warning: It's long!), I will state my general assessment up front and flesh it out in the pages that will follow.

### General Assessment:

To quote Brother Ron Courter, "Every book has chicken and bones in it. The key is to find books with more chicken than bones." I have repeated that analogy a thousand times, but every rule has an exception, and *Empire of the Risen Son* is the exception. Reading Gregg was more akin to eating a sparrow than a chicken. It's not that there wasn't any meat; it's that the meat was impossible to enjoy due to all the bones.

*Empire of the Risen Son* is a truly awful book, that I would never recommend to anyone for the sake of learning more about God's Word. I am baffled that so many have found it helpful and are recommending it. As I read through the book I kept waiting for it to get better, but it only got worse. I had to force myself to finish the first volume and must confess that I cannot bring myself to read the second. The fact is, Steve Gregg does not understand the concept of the Kingdom, he is wrong about the end times, and he is not close to churches of Christ when it comes to matters of salvation. Since the book is about the Kingdom, it is significant that Gregg does not understand the concept of the Kingdom, how one enters the Kingdom, the role of the church within the Kingdom, how the Kingdom will be consummated when Christ returns, or the location of the Kingdom in eternity future.

Gregg frequently speaks out of both sides of his mouth, pens contradicting statements, abuses the contextual meaning of Scripture, and asserts both radical and imaginative conclusions. Gregg believes that there are saved people in all churches and that no single church represents God's true church on earth. He speaks disparagingly of all organized churches while advocating that God's relationship is exclusively with the universal church and the individual Christian. Beyond his misunderstandings about the church and the Kingdom, Gregg advocates the false doctrines of direct operation of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of mankind, the illumination of the Spirit, and the continuation of miraculous power throughout the Christian era. Gregg ties the rewards of Christianity to this earth telling people to quit dwelling on heaven and downplays the idea of future punishment by advocating annihilationism.

The only two areas where Gregg excels is when he writes against Premillennialism and the Social Justice movement (and in the case of the latter, there are still some hang-ups). Since Gregg is opposed to Premillennialism (and rightfully so), some brethren have latched onto his teachings on prophecy and Revelation labeling him as an Amillennialist and a Partial-Preterist. Gregg is certainly a Partial-Preterist, but he is a "Optimistic Amillennialist" rather than a traditional Amillennialist. Some, wanting to distance themselves from the title of Postmillennialism, have begun referring to themselves and Gregg as Optimistic Amillennialists<sup>1</sup>, but merely changing the name does not fully change the doctrine. Gregg asserts that the vast majority of the world will be converted to Christ prior to the second advent. Gregg does not advocate full Theonomy (the idea that we should change the world through government), but he does admit in an autobiographical statement that his eschatological views have been largely influenced by J. Stuart Russell, Marcellus Kik, David Chilton, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth Gentry (all of whom are Postmillennial Partial-Preterists).<sup>2</sup> If you want to know where some of the "Optimistic Amillennialism"/Postmillennialism that is being advocated by some of our brethren is coming from, look no further than Steve Gregg.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Riddlebarger. *Eschatology by Ethos: Why the "Optimism" vs. "Pessimism" Paradigm Doesn't Work*. Modern Reformation. Sep-Oct, 2011. p. 29-34.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Gregg. 2012. *The Biography of Steve Gregg*. The Narrow Path. March 10, 2023. <https://www.thenarrowpath.com/biography.php>

As far as Gregg’s views about Social Justice, though largely helpful, he does leave the door open for Christians to be involved in social reform movements, just not partisan politics. He refuses to be linked to a political party (for this I commend him), but his disdain for the local church concept leaves him in a position where he has to advocate for the transformation of society through the individual Christian exclusively. In so advocating he encourages Christians to get involved in social reform in a way that I believe detracts from the Christian’s involvement in the church.

If all of the concerns I have raised seem overly critical, unsubstantiated, a false representation, or mere fearmongering, I challenge you to continue reading this review where I will share abundant evidence that none of my claims are baseless or exaggeration. In what follows, I will provide analysis of Gregg’s views on the kingdom, church, Holy Spirit, salvation, heaven, hell, Optimistic Amillennialism, and more. But first, I want to share with you the worst quotes from the book:

<b>TOP #21</b>	<b>WORST QUOTES</b>
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**#1**

A common refrain in the Book of Judges reminds us that “In those days there was no king in Israel” – sometimes adding, “and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. In modern preaching, it is common to hear this described as a bad arrangement. “When everyone does what is right in his own eyes, there is moral chaos” – so goes the familiar commentary. This is true, when the thing that is “right” in a man’s eyes is contrary to what is “right” in God’s eyes. However, Israel had the Torah—God’s Law—to teach them what is right in God’s eyes. It seems that, for most of the period described in Judges, what is right in God’s sight was what was deemed right in the people’s eyes as well... s<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Steve Gregg, *Empire of the Risen Son*. Second edition. Xulon Press. Maitland, FL. 2021. p. 40

#2

The Church is indeed the people of the Kingdom of Christ, but the visible church is not that Kingdom?<sup>4</sup>

#3

Despite the widespread misconception to the contrary, the Kingdom of God is not a reference to heaven, nor to the afterlife. Heaven is God's abode. It is the place from which Christ descended to live among men, and it is where Christ, since His resurrection and ascension, currently sits enthroned, amid the angels, other spiritual beings, and spirits of the departed saints. It is where the spirits of His people go after they die, and where we expect to remain postmortem, until the resurrection of the Last Day. Heaven is the place from which we expect Christ to return—to earth, so that He will never again live in heaven, but forever among redeemed men upon a renewed earth. But the Kingdom of God is not identified with heaven in scripture. It is something else. The Kingdom of God is said to be on earth. Heaven is not on earth, and is regularly distinguished from it.<sup>5</sup>

#4

Christ unlike rulers of the Gentiles does not exercise force, but rather love, to persuade His enemies to repent and surrender to His grace, which means that He must be patient, as many are slow to be persuaded, and others have not yet even heard the name of the king... According to Paul, this present mode of Christ's reign from heaven will only last until this present mission is accomplished which, *"the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all."* The Kingdom of God, during this phase, is *"the kingdom of Christ,"* or the *"kingdom of the Son."* God has placed Christ in charge and given Him the assignment (if I may paraphrase): *"Rule here until you have recovered every last thing that was lost to us in the human rebellion. When you have done so, we shall move to the next phase."* Someday, Jesus, with the nations subdued, will turn over the finished project to His Father and say, *"I have a gift for you. Here is your world back, just as it was when you created it – no, better!"*<sup>6</sup>

#5

Some have now died and are gone to heaven, but they will return to earth when He does, (1 Thess. 4:14) to take their places among the glorified saints inhabiting the renewed earth. Heaven is no permanent home for mankind.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 31

<sup>5</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 31

<sup>6</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p.74

<sup>7</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p.77

#6

In Luke 19:10, Jesus told Zacchaeus, ““Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” Commenting on this text, Gregg states,

The thing that was lost was man’s original dominion over the world while in submission to Yahweh.<sup>8</sup>

#7

Paul distinguished between the coming of the Gospel to hearers “*in word only*,” on the one hand, and coming “*in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance*,” on the other. Our weapons are not merely “intellectual” or “mental” – they are *spiritual*—“*mighty through God*.” Any person can verbally inform another person about the good news of the Kingdom of God, or, perhaps, even win a debate with an unbeliever. However, for the message

to strike the heart *with power, assurance, and the Holy Spirit*, more is required than the mere transmission of information. It demands the power of the Holy Spirit operating through a Spirit-filled disciple of Jesus. It requires the work of the Spirit upon the hear of the hearers. And anyone can make another person *know* the truth of the gospel; only the Spirit of God can make one *care* about it.<sup>9</sup>

#8

Over the course of the past two-thousand years the trajectory of victory has been on the side of Christ’s movement—which began with 120 Jewish believers in Jerusalem and now commands the nominal loyalty of almost a third of the earth’s inhabitants. This is tremendous numerical growth, which is important, *though the depth of commitment in many who profess faith in Christ is open to question*.<sup>10</sup>

#9

The Bible does teach that the name of Christ and the authority of His Kingdom are now, in an important sense, entrusted to us for the advancement of the Kingdom. The success of this mission involves work that is supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church’s authority over Satan’s demonic minions. Because Satan’s kingdom also possesses its own inferior supernatural forces, Christ has given superior supernatural gifts to His people

to confront and counteract the devil’s works.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p.80

<sup>9</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p.99

<sup>10</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p.252

<sup>11</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p.121



**#10**

It is not enough to say, “I have authority over demons,” or “I have authority to heal.” It is necessary to include the caveat: “It is in my power to exorcise a demon if, in this case, it is what Christ wants to do through me,’ or “I can heal if, in this case, it is Christ’s will to heal this particular person through me.” Having Christ’s authority is not *carte blanche* to act independently of His direction. To assume that we automatically know what God wants is a great danger, when we are supposed to be servants at our Master’s feet awaiting instructions and then carrying them out.”<sup>12</sup>

**#11**

Gregg’s view of life on the refurbished earth:

Redeemed humanity will be managing an unfallen earth, as Adam and Eve did prior to their rebellion. Perhaps, there will be additional worlds to steward as well.<sup>13</sup>

**#12**

The choice to trust everything Christ says, and all that He claims to be, is the choice of a moment – the moment of conversion.<sup>14</sup>

**#13**

Being baptized is to salvation what wearing a wedding ring in western culture is to being married. A ring does not make the marriage real or valid. The vows and the life faithfully lived afterward do that. The ring publicly advertises that such vows have been made.<sup>15</sup>

**#14**

Here is a combo quote regarding the Holy Spirit and miracles: “Life in the Kingdom of God is life in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit’s presence and power are not optional.” And again, “Receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit is being “born of the Spirit” into the Kingdom of God. Our genuine repentance, faith and baptism qualify us to receive this miraculous aspect, for which we should ask the Father, according to Jesus.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 124

<sup>13</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 228

<sup>14</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 239

<sup>15</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 242

<sup>16</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 244-245

#15

Though the methods of conquest are not militaristic or political, such an advance of the influence of the King cannot fail to have social and political impact. In the Roman Empire the growth of Christianity eventually brought about even the conversion of the pagan emperor and the banishing of paganism from the corridors of socio-political power. The benign influence of the Kingdom has now successfully penetrated every nation on the planet through the valiant sacrifices of heroes and heroines who “*did not love their lives unto the death.*”<sup>17</sup>

#16

If the West had not become Christian... no one would have gotten woke.<sup>18</sup>

#17

Some poorly-informed Christians (usually in the service of some eschatological program) have been heard to insist that the world is today in worse condition than it has ever been before! The truth is almost exactly the opposite.<sup>19</sup>

#18

Commenting on the great rebellion of Revelation 20:

Notwithstanding this short season of final opposition, the lasting gains achieved through the centuries of social transformation and renewal are not to be discounted, even if there will be one final sifting of wheat and chaff to determine ultimate destinies. The Bible does not describe a world becoming steadily more rotten right up to the end—then suddenly made perfect by instantaneous metamorphosis at the moment of Jesus’ return. Removal of the final opposition can be expected to leave a sanctified and fully devoted remnant, who have faithfully carried out the commission given to them. Their numbers, as a result, will be vast beyond human ability to calculate.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 252

<sup>18</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 256

<sup>19</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 257

<sup>20</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 270

**#19**

However, the composition of the True Church has never been identical to that of the Institutional churches.<sup>21</sup>

**#20**

The coming of the Lord resembles a sunrise, in that its near approach will be heralded by the people of His Kingdom displaying greater and greater likeness to Him. This is the appearing of the *“full grain”* of the Kingdom *“in the head,”* and the transformation of the Body to *“a mature man.”* The world will see Christ’s image (that is, His *glory*) *in His people* as they increasingly surrender to His will, walking in justice, mercy, faithfulness and humility, and exhibiting the holiness and unity that is the fruit of *agape* love. Thus, the trajectory of the true colonies of the Kingdom will be *“like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.”*<sup>22</sup>

**#21**

Another reason for the Bible’s omission of detail about the Eternal State may be to prevent our becoming so distracted by the reward at the finish line that we do not concentrate on the running of the race itself.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 276

<sup>22</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 279

<sup>23</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 225

# The Review:

Rather than doing a chapter-by-chapter review of Gregg's book, I have decided to synthesize his material into a discussion of important topics. Throughout the review I will provide detailed footnotes so the points can be easily referenced and verified. The following chart indicates which chapters of *Empire of the Risen Son* have the highest concentration of material on a particular topic. Bold chapter numbers indicate a heavy saturation of material related to the topic.

<u>TOPICS:</u>	<u>CHAPTERS:</u>
The Kingdom / Church Concept	<b>1-3</b> , 10
Salvation	8-9, <b>12</b> , <b>18</b>
Holy Spirit + Miracles	<b>8</b> , <b>10</b> , <b>12</b> , 19
Hell	11, <b>15</b>
"Optimistic Amilennialism"	4, 6-7, <b>19</b> , 20
Refurbished Earth	6-8, <b>17</b>
Heaven	14, <b>17</b> , 20

## The Kingdom and the Church

### Defining "Kingdom"

Chapter 1 begins with an attempt to define the Kingdom of God. Gregg begins by attacking what he deems false views of the Kingdom rather than giving a straightforward definition of what it is or means. The "default view" is the first view he attacks:

The default view of many Christians is that the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven) of which Jesus spoke refers to the heavenly destiny of the believer, into which one enters at death. The assumption seems to be that Christ came primarily to provide a better option for life after death. Generally, this is the way many people view the purpose of religions. Such thinking appears to be oblivious to the purposes for which God created the earth, or humans in this earth. Taking this view requires that we almost completely ignore the contents of the parables describing the Kingdom, and the fact that it is always assumed (or stated outright<sup>24</sup>) that the Kingdom is to "come" or "appear" on earth. By way of correction, Jeremy Treat correctly observes: "The message of the kingdom of God is not an escape from earth to heaven but God's reign coming from heaven to earth."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 5-6

Gregg seems to conflate several different issues under one heading and ends up throwing out the baby with the bathwater. While I am sure many people in the world believe that the Kingdom of God is merely a promise of heaven, such is not the case within churches of Christ. We do not believe that the promise of the Kingdom is merely a promise of eternal life in heaven, though the majority of us do believe that when the Kingdom is consummated God's Kingdom will dwell with him in heaven. It is one thing to deny that that Kingdom of God = Heaven and another thing to advocate that the heavenly realm has nothing to do with the Kingdom.

Gregg goes on to claim that the purpose of humanity is to dwell forever on earth – not heaven – and seizes the opportunity to introduce his idea of the Refurbished Earth. Such claims must be proven rather than asserted. A curious question for Gregg would be: If Adam's purpose was to eternally dwell on earth, why did God appoint Jesus as the New Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22), the perfect image of God (Genesis 1:26; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:4), and then take the New Adam away to heaven in the same manner that he took Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11)? Why didn't the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5) dwell forever on the earth in order to accomplish what the first Adam was appointed and failed to do? If man was not meant to escape earth to heaven, why did the Ultimate Man escape earth to heaven?

Gregg correctly rejects definitions of the Kingdom that include a future millennial reign of Christ, the "interior state of human consciousness," and the understanding of the New Apostolic Reformation.<sup>25</sup> He concludes his critique of "false views" by criticizing the definition provided by George Eldon Ladd wherein Ladd equates the term Kingdom with the "Reign of God." Gregg's criticism of Ladd seems directed at what he views as inconsistency distinguishing between the abstract concept of God's reign and the concrete notion of a realm. Gregg disparages the abstract idea of a reign and opts for the concreteness of the realm. In Biblical usage, however, the Kingdom does indeed refer to both the concrete notion of realm (Joshua 13:21, 30-31; Esther 5:6; Mark 6:23) and the abstract idea of reign (Psalm 103:19; Daniel 4:31). Alexander Campbell frequently used the words reign and rule in the place of kingdom in his Living Oracles translation. The critique of Ladd seems somewhat unfounded and the alternative definitions that Gregg provides from N. T. Wright, John Bright, and Brian McLaren do not lend any clarity. Seemingly aware of the lack of clarity Gregg states:

If such a concept of the Kingdom is not altogether familiar to the reader, nor yet quite clear, it will be my task in the chapters that follow to elucidate this concept from every angle.<sup>26</sup>

The reader is left scratching their head wondering how he or she is supposed to define the concept. Having read the entirety of the first volume of Gregg's work, I can't help but feel the vagueness of his definition is intentional so that he can mold it into whatever he wants along the

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<sup>25</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 6-7

<sup>26</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 10-11

way. Much more helpful books that teach the true Kingdom concept are Jim McGuigan's book *The Reign of God* and Doug Edward's book *Drawing Water From the Wells of Salvation*.

### **Kingdom of God vs. Kingdom of Heaven**

Chapter 2 tries to explain why Matthew uses the term "Kingdom of Heaven" rather than "Kingdom of God," while also attempting to extract any notion of heaven from the kingdom concept. To the latter point, Gregg begins Chapter 2 with this statement:

Despite the widespread misconception to the contrary, the Kingdom of God is not a reference to heaven, nor to the afterlife... Heaven is the place from which we expect Christ to return—to earth, so that He will never again live in heaven, but forever among redeemed men upon a renewed earth. But the Kingdom of God is not identified with heaven in scripture. It is something else. The Kingdom of God is said to be on earth. Heaven is not on earth, and is regularly distinguished from it... The confusion of the Kingdom of God with heaven is a result of a common misapprehension among Christians that the main reason Jesus came to earth is to get as many of us as possible out of this world and into a happy sky palace for all eternity.<sup>27</sup>

Gregg doubles down on his refurbished earth and anti-heaven rhetoric from Chapter 1, and tries to draw a strong distinction between the Kingdom on earth and God in heaven. It is no wonder that brethren who have embraced Gregg's writings have become outspoken against heaven as the eternal abode of Christians.<sup>28</sup> Again, neither brethren nor I equate the Kingdom exclusively with heaven, though some of us still teach that the Kingdom includes the heavenly realm.

Gregg notes 2 Timothy 4:18, and acknowledges that "heavenly kingdom" in that passage may be a reference to "the fact that the Kingdom over which Christ reigns encompasses both heaven and earth," but he downplays that possibility by stating that Paul's usages of "heavenly" may signify "that which has its origins in heaven."<sup>29</sup> Perhaps that argument effectively convinces some that the consummated kingdom will exist on the refurbished earth through heavenly origin, but I remain unconvinced. The following passages seem to definitely teach the heavenly realm rather than heavenly origin of the Kingdom post-mortem:

And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen! (2 Timothy 4:18)

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. (1 Corinthians 15:50)

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<sup>27</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 14-15

<sup>28</sup> See: Nathan Battey. *Defending Heaven: A Critique of the Attack on the Traditional Interpretation of John 14:1-6*. April 11, 2023. <https://www.christianresearcher.com/articles/a-review-and-a-response>

<sup>29</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 15-17

But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:16)

I do not deny that “heavenly” can, and at times does mean heavenly origin, but context must determine how the term is used. Gregg makes a concerted effort to rid the bible of any hint of an afterlife spent in heaven to propagate his views of the Kingdom and Refurbished Earth.

Gregg’s attack continues against heaven as he introduces the circumlocution argument to explain why Mathew predominately uses the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” rather than “Kingdom of God.” The circumlocution argument asserts that the reason Matthew prefers “Kingdom of Heaven” over “Kingdom of God” is because Matthew, being a good Jew, has an aversion to utter the name of God. Jonathan Pennington rejects such a notion, stating:

The history of the reverential circumlocution idea is an example of an unsubstantiated suggestion becoming an unquestioned assumption through the magic of publication, repetition, and elapsed time... There is no doubt that Matthew often uses heaven to refer indirectly to “God”... but these are clearly cases of metonymy, where heaven refers directly to God, not a direct substitution out of avoidance of the divine name, but for a rhetorical and theological purpose: to contrast heaven (God’s realm) with earth (humanity’s realm).<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere Pennington warns:

This standard solution (the circumlocution argument) has in fact blinded our ability to see the much more elaborate scheme at work in Matthew’s use of heaven.<sup>31</sup>

Pennington’s assessment runs counter to Gregg’s view:

In truth, the attempt to distinguish between the terms *Kingdom of God* and *Kingdom of Heaven* is a vain errand. In scripture, the terms “*Kingdom of God*” and “*Kingdom of heaven*” are used interchangeably, and both refer to the same entity ***in every respect***.<sup>32</sup>

By ignoring Matthew’s distinct usage of heaven, and thereby equating “Kingdom of Heaven” to “Kingdom of God” in every respect, Gregg misses a significant aspect of the First Gospel.

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*. Baker. Grand Rapids, MI. 2009. p. 36

<sup>31</sup> Pennington, p. 35

<sup>32</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p.18

“Kingdom of Heaven” speaks to the heavenly origin (Matthew 13:31; 16:28), governance (Matthew 28:18), and consummation of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:30; 25:34).

Attempting to show that Kingdom is an exclusive reference to God’s reign over His people (rather than merely an abstract concept), Gregg writes,

The word “kingdom” refers to the reign and domain of a king, including two elements—a king and his subjects. Neither a society without a king, nor a king who has no subjects, can be called a “kingdom,” in the proper sense of the word. The existence of both a king and subjects are included in the word’s definition. A kingdom is properly defined as “a society governed by a king,” so that the simplest definition of the Kingdom of God is that it is a society governed by God (either directly, or through His appointed Regent). A society means *people*. This is why God’s Kingdom is, in scripture, identified as a unique people, and a holy nation.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, when we think of Kingdom ***we must always think of both the King and His subjects*** (people). The problem with this statement is that it recognizes only one aspect of the Kingdom concept in Scripture. Since Christ received authority over heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18), His reign includes more than just people (it includes all of heaven and creation). We must therefore understand that there are several layers to the Kingdom concept. Jim McGuiggan explains the different realms (layers) of the Kingdom with a helpful chart:



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McGuiggan explains:

We could have Number 1 to represent the invisible creation (angels, and the like, good or evil). Number 2 could represent the visible creation (the universe, all the elements and the animal world). Number 3 could stand for evil men and nations who while subject to God’s royal power choose to live outside his loving favor. And number 4 could stand for righteous who live in the sphere of God’s loving favor. These would include the ancient worthies like the patriarchs and prophets

<sup>33</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 28

<sup>34</sup> Jim McGuiggan. *Reign of God*. International Biblical Resources. 1979. P35.



who sit down in the kingdom of God with more modern disciples of God (see Matthew 8:11).<sup>35</sup>

McGuiggan is correct and his point must not be missed or lost. The full concept of the Kingdom cannot be equated with that of the church or Israel. Under the Old Testament, the physical nation of Israel was called the Kingdom of God, but Israel was not the exclusive realm of God's kingdom (see Psalms 95 & 96). In the same way, though the church is referred to as the Kingdom of God, we must understand that the church is only one aspect of God's ultimate rule over all realms. Scripture teaches a kingdom within a kingdom concept as illustrated in McGuiggan's chart.

Contrary to the full view of Scripture, Gregg adopts the view that the Kingdom = the Church as long as it is understood that the Church is a reference to the Universal Church made up of Christians in every denomination:

The confusion may lie in the defining of "the Church" in institutional terms—as in the organizations identified as "Catholic" or the "Protestant" churches. We may heartily agree that such institutions must never be confused with the Kingdom of God—but, scripturally, neither is any of them, in the fullest sense of the word, "the Church." In scripture, the Church is not identified with any such organizations that have mortals as their respective "heads." ***The global Church*** is comprised only of those who have Jesus as their Head, who possess His Spirit, and who follow Him. There is no significant distinction between referring to Christ as a "Head" or as a "King." Both suggest the twin concepts of sovereignty and subjection. All who have Christ as *Head* comprise the Church, and are the same people who embrace Him as their *King*. Thus, the true Church is certainly the Kingdom.

Thus, Ladd's statements may be regarded as true only if they are understood in the manner explained by John Bright: "The Church is indeed the people of the Kingdom of Christ, *but the visible church is not that Kingdom.*"<sup>36</sup>

Though Gregg is right that "the Church is not identified with any such organizations that have mortals as their respective "heads," he is wrong in rejecting the idea that the Kingdom does not exist within any visible church. The church of Christ was visible on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38), and remains visible to this day (Romans 16:16).

I am greatly concerned for brethren who claim to have never understood the concept of the Kingdom before reading Gregg, since Gregg himself does not understand the kingdom. I encourage brethren to read books on the Kingdom written by men like Jim McGuiggan and Doug Edwards who understand the concept of the Kingdom, rather than a preacher who rejects all institutional churches and embraces "believers" of every stripe as Christians. I can't help but

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<sup>35</sup> Jim McGuiggan, *Reign of God*. P. 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 31

begin to question the view some brethren hold of the Kingdom whenever they promote Gregg's book, and you should too.

Gregg closes the second chapter of his book with these statements:

It should be noted that the term *Kingdom of God* (whether referring to Israel or to the Church) is never, in scripture, applied to anything other than an entity with an earthly footprint. The Kingdom (indistinguishable from the true Church), is an alternative society on the earth—a global colony of King Jesus, who reigns over the personal and corporate lives of His citizens (or disciples)—having designs on the conquest of every soul until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God. Thus, we are not saved, primarily, for our own eternal enjoyment of happier conditions, nor to swell the ranks of some religious institution. We are saved to become serviceable members of a **global corporate Body**, loyalists to the rightful King in a world of rebels, and participants in His conquests over the hearts and minds of all the inhabitants of the world. Our prayers, our preaching, and our efforts, all have as their goal that God's Kingdom will "come"—that is, be fully realized as a victorious phenomenon in history among the people subject to Christ—and that the Father's will be done "*on earth as it is in heaven.*"<sup>37</sup>

There are two major problems with Gregg's statement: First, he limits the discussion of "Kingdom of God" to a word study of that particular phrase rather than a study of the concept. When Christ is given "all authority and heaven and on earth," it is clear that Christ's reign is extended over the realms of both heaven and earth (this implies that heaven is part of Christ's Kingdom). Furthermore, Peter states that all "angels, authorities, and powers have been subjected to Him" (1 Peter 3:22), and John depicts the heavenly realm as a kingdom centered around the throne of God and Christ (Revelation 4-5). Paul likewise states that every knee shall bow before the Messiah including those "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Philippians 2:10). The fact remains that Christ reigns over both the heavenly and earthly realms (Kingdoms); the Kingdom of Heaven on earth is simply the earthly depiction of a heavenly reality.

Second, Greg returns to the concept of the global body in chapter ten and misinterprets 1 Corinthians 12 to teach that God has delegated His authority to the disciple community "*collectively,*" by which he means the "global community" or universal church.<sup>38</sup> The picture he paints is one in which all the millions of men and women form the global body over which Christ is the head and remain loosed from the visible church in their community.

All religious institutions (including the church of Christ) are out, the inner-faith concept is in, and we wait for the Father's will to be accomplished on earth as it is in heaven (as if God's will is not currently being done by His people on earth in the same way that He would have it done in

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<sup>37</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 32

<sup>38</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 123

heaven). There's Gregg's view of the Kingdom. Anytime he speaks of the Kingdom, or church, it must be understood in terms of the "global corporate Body" – never a congregation of Christians with a local assembly (Hebrews 10:25).

Gregg takes the "global corporate Body" concept from Chapter 2 and goes wild with it at the beginning of Chapter 3:

It is often speculated whether there will ever be a single, one-world government. The biblical answer is: Most certainly! It has already begun, and it is destined to be glorious beyond all imagination. This was the hope that God placed in the hearts of faithful Israel in the Old Testament, and it is that which the New Testament describes as having been inaugurated by Christ when He was here among us.<sup>39</sup>

Gregg's aversion to the visible organized church concept forces him to make absurd conclusions and advocate that every man doing what was right in his own eyes during the days of Judges was an ideal state. Here is his overall assessment of Judges:

Freedom to follow one's own conscience in the fear of God is the highest biblical standard...This was precisely Yahweh's ideal when He set up and governed His Kingdom in Israel during the period of the judges. Through most of this period, it was quite acceptable, and things went smoothly. It was only on occasions when Israel disregarded God's Law and compromised with idolatry that things went bad.<sup>40</sup>

I do not recall ever reading a more ridiculous analysis of Scripture than Gregg's assessment of Judges. Any man who can declare that Civil War, repeated subjugation, rampant idolatry, and moral depravity form a picture of things going smoothly needs to have their sanity and agenda checked.<sup>41</sup> These are not the musings of a "genuine, honest, and thoughtful scholar" as Gregg has been described to me. If I were not so concerned with what else Gregg was teaching our brethren, I would have stopped reading him after this display of twistedness. I'm reminded of the prophet Isaiah's warning: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). Such are the extreme levels that Gregg is willing to reach in order to maintain his view of the universal kingdom of individual believers. If we would all just abandon our churches and live like a bunch of spiritual hippies, the world would be a better place and could soon be won to the Lord (more on his Optimistic Amillennial views later).

Gregg's hatred of the localized/visible church permeates his writing, but what drives it is more difficult to comprehend. I do not claim to know all the reasons he disparages the visible church

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<sup>39</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 33

<sup>40</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 40-41

<sup>41</sup> Never mind the fact that the idea of doing right in one's own eyes is a negative concept throughout Scripture – see Deut. 12:8; Prov. 3:7; 12:15; 16:2; 21:2; 26:12; 30:12; Is. 5:21.

(perhaps he and his illuminated thinking have not been received as warmly or appreciated as much as he feels he should), but some of his feelings seem to stem from his view of salvation. So, to better understand his view of the kingdom, let us turn to the topic of salvation.

## **Salvation and the Holy Spirit**

The bulk of Gregg's views on salvation are introduced in Chapter 9 and are fleshed out in Chapters 12 and 18 (chapter 18 being the clearest expression of his views).

Chapter 9 starts off good discussing the authority of Christ and proceeds to attack the Calvinistic depiction of God's sovereignty. To Gregg's credit, he advocates free will and denies the idea that God "micro-manages" every detail of the Christian's life; so far so good. He also harps on the necessity of obedience in the life of the Christian and makes statements about the relationship between faith and works that makes you think you are reading something written by one of our brethren. At one point he even seems to teach the Plan of Salvation as advocated by churches of Christ:

The preaching of the early Christians called their hearers to *repent, believe, and be baptized*. This was the means by which one becomes a disciple of Jesus. The *receiving of the Holy Spirit* was also anticipated in the transaction, though this seems to have often occurred almost spontaneously as a result of meeting the previous three conditions. Not every passage about salvation mentions all of these conditions, because an emphasis on one or another may better have suited an author's purpose in a given passage. The mention of one of them would have been regarded as a shorthand representation of the whole series of events, which typically occurred almost simultaneously. As far as the biblical record indicates all of those accepted into the early Church had first met these conditions and knew them well.<sup>42</sup>

In moments such as this, Gregg seems to get concepts of salvation correct, but let me assure you he does not. Allow me to demonstrate.

### **The Role of the Holy Spirit in Salvation**

Gregg views the direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of an unbeliever as essential for conversion. The reason for this view is that, though he is not a Calvinist (he appears to be an Armenian), he still teaches the necessity of a direct operation of the Spirit as necessary to transform a sinner's nature.

The uncompromised preaching of Jesus' lordship had a powerful impact upon the world of Paul's day, and whenever such is faithfully proclaimed today it

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<sup>42</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 232

continues to transform hearts and minds. It is not always the case that the gospel has the powerful impact of which it is capable. Paul distinguished between the coming of the gospel to hearers “*in word only*,” on the one hand, and coming “*in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance*,” on the other.

Our weapons are not merely “intellectual” or “mental”—they are *spiritual*—“*mighty through God*.” Any person can verbally *inform* another person about the good news of the Kingdom of God, or, perhaps, even win a debate with an unbeliever. However, **for the message to strike the heart with power, assurance, and the Holy Spirit, more is required than the mere transmission of information.** It demands the power of the Holy Spirit operating through a Spirit-filled disciple of Jesus. **It requires the work of the Spirit upon the heart of the hearers.** Anyone can make another person *know* the truth of the gospel; **only the Spirit of God can make one care about it.**<sup>43</sup>

In order to create *hunger and thirst* for the Kingdom of God in the heart of the unbeliever, **there must be more than preaching.**<sup>44</sup>

The most we can say is that receiving the Holy Spirit is an essential part of the transaction of entering the Kingdom. Whether spontaneously or by the laying-on of hands the general rule was that the early Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit as an essential part of the conversion experience.<sup>45</sup>

And finally,

Life in the Kingdom of God is life in the Holy Spirit. ***The Holy Spirit’s presence and power are not optional.***<sup>46</sup>

What you have just read are clear expressions of the doctrine of Resistible Grace.<sup>47</sup> That should give you a clear background on where he is headed in Chapter 12 which is titled, “When Grace is Reigning.” The “grace that reigns” is defined as the direct operation of the Spirit upon Christians that empowers them to live the Christian life.

The demands of lifelong service to Christ are not *difficult* to fulfill. By human efforts, they are *impossible*. No one but God can perform and complete God’s work. However, “*it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good*

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<sup>43</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 98-99

<sup>44</sup> Italics his. Bold mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 99

<sup>45</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 243

<sup>46</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 244

<sup>47</sup> Resistible Grace is the doctrine that though the direct operation of the Holy Spirit can be resisted, such an operation is still necessary for the conversion and transformation of a sinner.

*pleasure.*"<sup>50</sup> The Spirit by which He lives in us is called the "*Spirit of grace*"<sup>51</sup> because His presence provides the constant supply of grace needed to make us sufficient for the task of serving the King.<sup>48</sup>

He backs this teaching up by abusing Philippians 2:13, Hebrews 10:29, 12:28, 2 Corinthians 3:5, 9:8, and 12:9, and then goes on a run where he misuses twelve passages in a row (and at least 17 in the chapter as a whole).<sup>49</sup>

Such passages speak of grace as a kind of sufficiency, or an enablement, to live the Christian life and to serve God acceptably... We might realize that we would need ***special divine assistance*** in order to do some of the more challenging or less-pleasant Christian duties, but most of the time we assume can handle the responsibilities of being as kind and patient as a Christian is supposed to be... It is our duty to be like Christ in all respects, and to continue and complete the work He was doing when He was here, ***in the same spirit and power*** in which He did so. Jesus did not live a life merely in the power of human energy and a naturally amiable temperament, ***and neither are we expected to do so.***<sup>50</sup>

Though Gregg is not a Calvinist, Calvinists would fully embrace his teaching on the Holy Spirit. How brethren can claim that Gregg believes similar to churches of Christ when it comes to matters of salvation is beyond my comprehension. Don't let anyone fool you: Gregg believes in Resistible Grace.

### **Repentance and Faith**

Like your average Baptist, Gregg believes that repentance and faith, prior to baptism, are what saves a person:

Repentance is a radical reassessment of priorities and a turning on one's heels toward the opposite direction. Once movement in the new direction begins, it will show itself in a certain change of choices and behaviors.

It is this readjustment of the orientation that saves, even before any behavior has resulted from it, as seen in the repentant publican in Christ's parable, and the believing thief on the cross.<sup>51</sup>

Later he states,

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<sup>48</sup> Emphasis his. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 144

<sup>49</sup> See footnotes 8-16. P. 144-145

<sup>50</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 144

<sup>51</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 234

The choice to trust everything Christ says, and all that He claims to be, is the choice of a moment—the moment of conversion.<sup>52</sup>

It must be remembered, that according to Gregg, repentance and faith are only made possible by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the believer.

Gregg embraces the Baptist view of the thief on the cross,<sup>53</sup> yet will neither fully embrace nor deny the legitimacy of the Sinner's Prayer.<sup>54</sup>

### **Baptism**

For those who believe that Gregg shares a similar view of baptism as the view traditionally held by churches of Christ, I share the following quotes:

If Peter sounded, in his first sermon, like he was saying that remission of sins comes specifically through baptism, he did not take the same position in his second sermon where he did not even mention baptism. Instead, he said, "*Repent therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out.*"<sup>55</sup>

And later:

Being baptized is to salvation what wearing a wedding ring in western culture is to being married. A ring does not make the marriage real or valid. The vows and the life faithfully lived afterward do that. The ring publicly advertises that such vows have been made.<sup>56</sup>

This is nothing other than the belief that baptism is an outward sign of an inward change, and is not the view of the Lord's church.

### **The "True Christian"**

Not only does Gregg share a Baptist view of the Holy Spirit, repentance, faith, and baptism, he also teaches what seems like a version of their Once-Saved-Always-Saved doctrine:

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<sup>52</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 239

<sup>53</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 13, footnote 45. See also p. 234

<sup>54</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 246-248

<sup>55</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 241. It should be noted that this statement is a clear contradiction of what Gregg states on page 232: "Not every passage about salvation mentions all of these conditions, because an emphasis on one or another may better have suited an author's purpose in a given passage. The mention of one of them would have been regarded as a shorthand representation of the whole series of events, which typically occurred almost simultaneously. As far as the biblical record indicates all of those accepted into the early Church had first met these conditions and knew them well."

<sup>56</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 242

If an imagined conversion brings no perceptible change in one's direction, habits and choices, then repentance has not actually taken place—nor has one passed from death into life or entered the Kingdom of God.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, if a person does not bear fruits of repentance after they are converted, but rather continues to sin, then their conversion was just imagined – i.e. they really weren't saved to begin with. This is classic Baptist doctrine.

In Chapter 9, Gregg grows so bold as to state:

Those who have not submitted to Christ as King are not simply inferior Christians but remain unconverted. They are rebels against the Crown.<sup>58</sup>

Later Gregg is forced to back off that statement, and even contradict it, in order to defend his view of Optimistic Amillennialism and claim that at least a third of the world has already been converted to Christ:

Over the course of the past two-thousand years the trajectory of victory has been on the side of Christ's movement—which began with 120 Jewish believers in Jerusalem and now commands the nominal loyalty of almost a third of the earth's inhabitants. This is tremendous numerical growth, which is important, ***though the depth of commitment in many who profess faith in Christ is open to question.***<sup>59</sup>

So which is it: Are those who do not fully commit minimal Christians or not Christians at all? With Gregg it all depends on whether he wants to preach on commitment or Optimistic Amillennialism; he can go either way. It's hard to take a man seriously who can flop so easily on such a critical doctrine.

What does Gregg do with passages such as Matthew 18:23-35 and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant? How can someone who has tasted the Father's grace be handed over to the torturers? Initially, Gregg tells us that "To spurn grace is to court outrage."<sup>60</sup> Yet he turns around and argues that the wicked servant who refused to demonstrate mercy toward his fellow servant was not placed back under his original debt by the master, but was instead forced to pay the debt that he would not forgive. In other words, since the unmerciful servant would not forgive a small debt, he had to pay off the small debt himself. According to Gregg, God is not allowed to inflict the original debt or consequences since He had already forgiven it. Gregg then concludes the parable by stating: "Does it seem out of place for the kindly Christ to speak of God's delivering His own forgiven ones over to "torturers"? What is meant by this imagery is not clear."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 112

<sup>58</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 112

<sup>59</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 252

<sup>60</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 135



You may think that Gregg’s assessment of Matthew 18:23-35 is a bit odd, dismiss it, and move on, but you shouldn’t. The reason Gregg takes such an odd view of Matthew 18:23-35 is because he struggles with how a saved Christian might act wickedly (even though he believes in free will). Since he views the original forgiveness granted to the wicked servant as a conversion moment, Gregg does not want the concept of eternal punishment to creep back into the picture. When the recipient of grace continues to act wickedly, Gregg is forced to shroud the concept of “torturers” in mystery, and argues for temporary suffering in the present life. If that explanation seems twisted, it’s because it is.

### **So What About Hell?**

Gregg’s aversion to hell in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant grows more pronounced in Chapter 15:

The Christian message of salvation has often been represented as salvation *from* something—generally, from hellfire. Salvation is certainly deliverance from *something*—from the bondage of sin<sup>61</sup> and from Satan’s power.<sup>62</sup> It is important, however, that we focus as does scripture not on what we are saved *from*, but what we are saved *for*.<sup>61</sup>

Many Christians seem to think of salvation primarily (or even exclusively) as a divine rescue of the sinner from hell, but the scriptures actually present salvation as God’s addressing a broader range of concerns. In scripture, salvation is not represented, primarily, as deliverance from hell in a future life, but, rather, from present conditions that are the result of the sinner’s alienation from God.<sup>62</sup>

The latter quote is actually an excerpt from another book Gregg has written on the topic of hell, wherein Gregg attacks the traditional view of hell in favor of Conditional Immortality (a fancy term for Annihilationism).<sup>63</sup> Rather than launching a full-fledged assault on hell in *Empire of the Risen Son*, Gregg chooses to cast doubt on hell by downplaying the idea of eternal punishment and upselling the thought of alienation. Notice how he does this:

Additionally, “salvation” is seen as a rescue from “the wrath to come” (e.g., Matt.3:7; Rom.5:9; 1 Thess.1:10; 5:9), though what form this wrath may take remains obscure. It need not refer to postmortem destinies (though it might). Though frequently mentioned in the Old Testament,<sup>673</sup> God’s “wrath” is never clearly identified there with circumstances of the next life, but with severe temporal judgments upon nations or individuals... While there is the possibility

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<sup>61</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 192

<sup>62</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 199

<sup>63</sup> Steve Gregg, *All You Want to Know About Hell*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013, p.55f

that this expression was seen as equivalent to postmortem “hell,” the biblical writers chose not to clarify this.<sup>64</sup>

When he speaks of the bodily resurrection he describes it as “salvation from environmental sin,”<sup>65</sup> meaning the difficulties that we face from living in a sin filled world. Chew that over and appreciate what Gregg is saying: glorification in the afterlife is not a matter of escaping hell to dwell with God eternally in heaven but a matter of being saved from “environmental sin” and dwelling on a refurbished earth.

Gregg even goes so far as to advocate that the phrase “eternal life” is not a reference to immortality, but means “enduring for an age.”<sup>66</sup> He claims that many scholars share his understanding of the word eternal, but fails to cite any lexicons or provide any evidence to prove his claim. You might think such a redefinition of “eternal life” is odd, but it is more than odd: it is pure evil. By redefining “eternal life” to mean “enduring for an age,” Gregg has deceptively changed “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:41, 46) into Conditional Immortality where the sinner suffers punishment that endures but for “an age.” Herein lies the greatest danger with denying the eternal nature of life in heaven: if heaven is not eternal (2 Corinthians 5:1), then neither is hell.

## Miracles

Based on what we have already seen from Gregg, it should not surprise anyone that he believes the Spirit empowers Christians to work miracles. Gregg’s views could be easily confused with those of a Pentecostal and are given full expression in Chapters 8, 10, and 12.

Rather than sharing pages and pages of quotes, I will limit my selection to a few that capture his views on continuous revelation and gifts of healing.

### Continuous Revelation

The authority of the Kingdom is first of all an authority that we stand *under*. It is not a license to run around exercising unbridled power, at our own volition. Rather, it is Christ’s rule primarily *over our lives and conduct*. This means that we don’t simply go out and perform miracles, nor do any other such activity for God, without His instruction.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 200

<sup>65</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 200

<sup>66</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 201

<sup>67</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 122

Not every member has the same function—some speak to the believing community on behalf of Christ; some speak to the world about Christ.<sup>68</sup>

Having Christ's authority is not a *carte blanche* to act independently of His direction. To assume that we automatically know what God wants is a great danger, when we are supposed to be servants at our Master's feet awaiting instructions and then carrying them out.<sup>69</sup>

Whenever the question arises, "What should I do, or say?" the answer is always the same as that which Mary told the servants at the wedding: "*Whatever He says to you, do it.*"<sup>70</sup>

Later, in a footnote,<sup>71</sup> Gregg uses 1 Corinthians 2:10 to teach the false doctrine of the Illumination of the Spirit. His usage of 1 Corinthians 2:10 differs in no way from the teaching of Calvinists.

### **Miraculous Power Generally**

It may be that any member of the Body, under Christ's special direction, may serve in the emergency to heal, teach, serve, or cast out a demon, but it is not the case that every member is assigned to all of these activities as his or her regular or primary contribution to the whole work.<sup>72</sup>

Gregg takes the miraculous gifts referenced by Paul in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-10 and applies them universally to all Christians of every generation.<sup>73</sup> These gifts include prophecy, teaching, exhortation, healings, tongues, interpretation, and gifts of healing. In chapter twelve, he goes so far as to state that the Spirit will provide supernatural healing during moments of extreme grief (as he himself experienced when his wife died tragically).<sup>74</sup> I am glad that Gregg was not crushed with grief when his wife passed, but to promise supernatural comfort to those who have experienced loss is extremely dangerous and could ultimately cause some to lose their faith when such comfort is not provided.

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<sup>68</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 124

<sup>69</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 124

<sup>70</sup> Emphasis his. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 128

<sup>71</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 273, footnote 36

<sup>72</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 124

<sup>73</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 145

<sup>74</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 154-157

When Gregg's views of the miraculous are understood, it becomes quite troubling that some brethren have begun to follow Gregg's interpretation of John 14 wherein he universalizes the promise of the Holy Spirit to the apostles.<sup>75</sup>

## **“Optimistic Amillennial” View of the End Times**

The main reason I read Gregg's book was because it received rave reviews for his presentation of Optimistic Amillennialism. I expected to find his eschatological views as a central point of discussion throughout the book, but encountered only partial teachings scattered here and there until the floodgates opened in the final two chapters. I believe the trickle effect is intentional so that people can warm up to the concept little by little rather than being hit with its full force from the get-go. To appreciate and understand Gregg's optimistic view, we must follow the bread crumbs and see where they lead.

### **Three Kingdom Parables**

Gregg first introduces the parables of the Wheat and the Tares, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven in Chapter 2 to attack the concept of heaven and advocate his view of the refurbished earth. Having used these three parables to shift reader's attention from heaven to earth, Gregg picks two of them back up in Chapter 4 (the parable of the Wheat and the Tares and the parable of the Leaven) to teach an anticipated “future development of the kingdom,”<sup>76</sup> or what Sam Waldron would label the “Two-Age” view of postmillennialism,<sup>77</sup> wherein a period of tribulation is followed by a Golden Age.<sup>78</sup>

When Gregg presents his full optimistic view in Chapter 19, the parables of the Wheat and Tares and the Leaven surfaces once more to teach the “ultimate quantitative growth and qualitative influence” of the kingdom on the world, which includes the conversion of the majority of humanity and moral transformation of societies.<sup>79</sup> Unless one is willing to accept Gregg's views of salvation whereby he counts a third of the world's population as Christians, it would seem

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<sup>75</sup> Nathan Battey. *Defending Heaven: A Critique of the Attack on the Traditional Interpretation of John 14:1-6*. April 11, 2023. <https://www.christianresearcher.com/articles/a-review-and-a-response>

<sup>76</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 54

<sup>77</sup> Samuel Waldron. *The Postmillennial Doctrine of Bifurcation—Two ages in the Gospel Age?* March 24, 2021. <https://cbtseminary.org/datpostmil-3-the-postmillennial-doctrine-of-bifurcation-two-ages-in-the-gospel-age/>.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander Campbell was a Postmillennialist and believed that he was ushering in the “Golden Age” through his preaching and therefore labeled his paper the Millennial Harbinger. It appears that in the latter years of his life his Postmillennial views greatly influenced his views on fellowship.

<sup>79</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 259

Gregg's interpretation of the parables must at best await future fulfillment<sup>80</sup> and at worst be deemed false.

Maybe Gregg should heed his own warning about being dogmatic with parables:

Again, details are lacking, and we should not draw very dogmatic conclusions from the images found in parables or in apocalyptic visions, which can be highly symbolic.<sup>81</sup>

## **Daniel 2**

Gregg seems to understand the prophecy of Daniel 2 correctly at times, but he ultimately has to twist it to fit his optimistic view. For example: In chapter 4, when Gregg refutes premillennialism, he correctly interprets Daniel 2:34-36 as anticipating the establishment of the church during the days of the Roman empire.<sup>82</sup> Yet he later uses Daniel 2 in connection with Psalm 110 (and some other passages) to advocate his view of a Christianized world prior to the Lord's return.<sup>83</sup> At the conclusion of Chapter 4 he states:

This Messianic Kingdom would ultimately bring about the downfall and final disappearance of every rival kingdom and power.

The Kingdom of God, itself, would be the fifth, and final, World Empire. ***It would differ from others in that it would encompass the entire planet.*** It would never be conquered or replaced by any successor empire, but would continue eternally. This description corresponds, in every detail, to the Kingdom that was announced and inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth, and which has continued and expanded globally ever since His time. This correspondence must be regarded as more than coincidental.<sup>84</sup>

Gregg admits that the four kingdoms pictured in Nebuchadnezzar's dream did not literally envelope the entire planet, but he asserts that the Kingdom of God will do so. The problem with Gregg's interpretation is that he arbitrarily interprets Daniel 2:34-36 literally and Daniel 2:37-38 figuratively. Daniel 2:37-38 describes Nebuchadnezzar as ruling over every dwelling of man, every beast of the field, and every bird of the air. If every man, beast, and bird is not meant to be taken literally in Daniel 2:37-38, why must "the whole earth" of Daniel 2:34-36 be taken literally?

If Gregg is correct about Daniel 2:34-36, how are we to understand Isaiah 2:2 where the mountain of the Lord is said to be the "highest of the mountains" rather than the only mountain on earth? Isaiah 2 does not predict that all of the nations of the earth will be Christianized by the church

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<sup>80</sup> In which case he still has to deal with Sam Waldron's arguments about the Two-Age concept.

<sup>81</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 227

<sup>82</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 51

<sup>83</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 78, 251

<sup>84</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 56

but that the church would grow up surrounded by earthly kingdoms (as does the parable of the Wheat and the Tares in Matthew 13).

Daniel 2 predicts three things:

1. The church would be established in the days of the Roman Empire – (verse 44).
2. The church would be a world empire – (verse 36).<sup>85</sup>
3. The church would never be destroyed - (verse 44).

To claim that Daniel 2:34-36 promises a Christianized world is to assert more than the passage entails.

### **Revelation 11:15**

In connection with his teaching on Daniel 2, Gregg repeatedly references Revelation 11:15 and asserts that the kingdom will continue to expand until it has encompassed all nations.<sup>86</sup>

Gregg's optimism takes full reign when he declares:

Of course, there is no predetermined limitation that would necessarily preclude everyone eventually becoming part of this society, so that *"the kingdoms of this world"* through the Church's efforts should *"become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ."*<sup>87</sup>

In other words, since it cannot be proven that all men will not be converted, we must assume they will. There are two problems with this argument: First, it contradicts the clear teaching of Jesus about the narrow gate (Matthew 7:14) and the few who find it.<sup>88</sup> Second, it contradicts Greg's own statement regarding Revelation 20:

However, at the time of Christ's coming, not all will have been converted, and many will have to be subdued involuntarily.<sup>89</sup>

As he builds up steam towards his full presentation of Optimistic Amillennialism in Chapter 19, he uses Revelation 11:15 in conjunction with Revelation 5:9-10 to teach that all nations shall be

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<sup>85</sup> "World Empire" might be best understood as an international empire. See Isaiah 2:2.

<sup>86</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 36, 222, 262

<sup>87</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 189

<sup>88</sup> I am told that Gregg's answer to Matthew 7:14 is that the verse applies to the Jews only. Such an explanation fits within his Preterist perspective, but does not properly deal with the text. Ironically, Greg's website is titled The Narrow Path.

<sup>89</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 226

won to the Lord and reign with Him on earth during “the present phase of His kingdom.”<sup>90</sup> Yet this conclusion cannot be reconciled with what he wrote in Chapter 10:

The question here we must ask is, “When is the proper time for the believer’s exaltation to privilege and rulership with Christ?” It is when the Master returns and rewards His faithful servants, saying “Well done, faithful slave, you have been faithful...rule over five cities...” (Matthew 24:45-47)

Gregg goes on to quote 1 Corinthians 4:8 and says:

Paul sardonically rebuked their carnality:

*You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we might reign with you!*

Paul acknowledged that the time will come for Christians to reign with Christ, and he looked forward to that time when all believers, including himself, will reign together. The Corinthians were jumping the gun, and getting ahead of the program! They thought they were supposed to reign now!<sup>91</sup>

So, which version of Gregg’s teaching should we believe? Do we reign on earth now (Revelation 11:15; 5:9-10)? Or could it be that the reign promised in Matthew 24:45-47 in 1 Corinthians 4:8 is yet future and has nothing to do with earth?

How should we understand Revelation 5:9-10, since the passage seems to indicate that at some point we reign with God on earth?

George Battey provides a helpful explanation:

"On the earth" is best understood as "over the earth." The preposition "upon" (ἐπί) may mean "over" in reference to authority. See Murray J. Harris' discussion.<sup>92</sup> The examples given by Harris where ἐπί can be translated as "over" include: Luke 12:14 ("Man, who made me a judge or a divider *over* (ἐπί) you?"); 12:42 ("his lord shall make ruler *over* (ἐπί) his household"); 12:44 ("he will make him ruler *over* (ἐπί) all that he hath"). Friberg also gives Romans 9:5 as an example of "over" in passages discussing authority. The millennial reign described in 20:4 is a reign of those who have died. They are reigning with the Lord in a disembodied

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<sup>90</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 222

<sup>91</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 120

<sup>92</sup> Murry J Harris. *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource For Exegesis*. Zondervan Academic. 2021. p. 137.

state. They are reigning from heaven. Every mention of a good throne is always in heaven—unless this present verse is the one exception.<sup>93</sup>

Since Revelation 5:9-10 is a “reference to authority,” it seems best to understand John as speaking of disembodied saints who currently reign with Christ over the earth rather than a reference to the current reign of Christians on the earth.

## **Psalm 110**

Gregg seems to be in conflict over what to do with Psalm 110, for on one hand he will use it to advocate conversion of the masses through the gospel,<sup>94</sup> and on other occasions he admits that not every person will be converted due to the presence of free will (though the unrepentant will be only a few).<sup>95</sup> He is also back and forth about how the Lord will subdue all of His enemies and place them under His feet. In Chapter 6 he says,

Christ (unlike the rulers of the Gentiles<sup>96</sup>) does not exercise force, but rather love, to persuade His enemies to repent<sup>97</sup> and surrender to His grace, which means that He must be patient, as many are slow to be persuaded, and others have not yet even heard the name of the King.<sup>98</sup>

Here it sounds like the “rod of iron” in Psalm 110:1 is the persuading force of the gospel that cannot be destroyed, rather than an instrument that forces submission (see Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:27; 19:15). Yet even Gregg must concede that Revelation 20 requires a use of force to end the Great Rebellion. He admits:

It may sound as if such passages (Psalm 110:1) predict the conversion of the whole world. This is not necessarily so. Christ will continue to reign from His present throne in heaven until all of His enemies are conquered, but this does not mean that all will be conquered in the same manner. For example, the last enemy to be conquered will be death.<sup>99</sup> This does not mean that death will be converted and become a follower Christ. In fact, we are informed that death will be cast into the lake of fire.<sup>100</sup> It is God’s desire that the nations be saved and disciplined.<sup>101</sup> The numbers of those who surrender willingly to the King, having been mercifully conquered by His Spirit and His Word, will increasingly swell the ranks of His Kingdom.

However, at the time of Christ’s coming, not all will have been converted, and many will have to be subdued involuntarily. There are prophecies of massive

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<sup>93</sup> George Battey shared this thought with me in a letter he wrote me while I was preparing this article.

<sup>94</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 49

<sup>95</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 188

<sup>96</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 73. See also his comments on p. 78-79.



resistance remaining to be defeated at the second coming of the King. Those who cannot be persuaded to submit will still be removed and judged.<sup>97</sup>

Whenever I first read this statement it blew my mind, and I still cannot get over it. How can a man teach that “Christ does not exercise force, but rather love, to persuade His enemies to repent,”<sup>98</sup> and then later state the complete opposite: “However, at the time of Christ’s coming, not all will have been converted, and many will have to be subdued involuntarily.”<sup>99</sup>

What this tells me is that Optimistic Amillennialists (like Postmillennialists) have a major challenge to overcome when harmonizing their teaching with Revelation 20. We will look more at that difficulty in a moment, but first we need to appreciate Gregg’s full view of the end times.

### **Full Optimistic Amillennial View:**

At different points along the way Gregg gives summary statements of his optimistic view, such as this one from Chapter 6:

*God has placed Christ in charge and given Him the assignment (if I may paraphrase): “Rule here until you have recovered every last thing that was lost to us in the human rebellion. When you have done so, we shall move to the next phase.” Someday, Jesus, with the nations subdued, will turn over the finished project to His Father and say, “I have a gift for you. Here is your world back, just as it was when you created it—no, better!”<sup>100</sup>*

As clear an expression of Gregg’s Optimistic Amillennialism as that quote is, it pales in comparison to Gregg’s use of the “Blob” to illustrate the nature of the promised kingdom in Daniel 2.<sup>101</sup> *The Blob* is an old sci-fi horror film in which a substance – the “Blob”- feeds on human flesh and continues to grow, threatening to consume all humans on earth, until it is finally stopped by the hero of the film.

By the end of the movie it is clear that, were the thing never to be defeated, it would eventually have grown as large as the world, having consumed ***every last inhabitant.***<sup>102</sup>

Reflecting on this film from his childhood, Gregg states:

It was not until I learned about the Kingdom of God in scripture that I began to wonder whether the movie (which actually was written and directed by

<sup>97</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 226

<sup>98</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 73

<sup>99</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 266

<sup>100</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 74

<sup>101</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son.* p. 250-251

<sup>102</sup> Emphasis mine. P. 250

Christians, and produced by a Christian film company!) might not have been deliberately inspired by Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2.<sup>103</sup>

In a footnote, Gregg further clarifies:

*The Blob* would have been a closer parallel to the Kingdom of God had the writers included the ideas that the earth was already infected with a universal, incurably deadly plague, and that the Blob had come down on purpose to rescue the doomed race! On this alternative plot line, those consumed by the Blob actually would not have not died, but, unperceived by outsiders, had entered a new world, a realm within its expanding membrane where all were cured, free and secure and lived good and fulfilling lives.<sup>104</sup>

In moments like these, Gregg gets wound up and depicts the all-consuming nature of the kingdom in grander terms than even he himself believes,<sup>105</sup> but if the reader is not careful, he or she can get swept up into Gregg's fantasy and lose touch with reality. His illustration from *The Blob* is one instance of many where Gregg speaks out of both sides of his mouth. He absolutely leaves the impression that everyone will be converted by the Spirit empowered gospel, and that none shall escape its consumption once it picks up a full head of steam.

Gregg switches from comparing the Kingdom to the "Blob" and begins comparing it with Communism. It just so happens that shortly before reading Gregg's Kingdom/Communism comparison I had read an article that attacked the Postmillennial view by comparing it with Communism.<sup>106</sup> When I read the article I didn't know if the author was being fair with his comparison or not, but then what do you know, Gregg's Optimistic Amillennial view fully embraces the comparison with one exception:

Like Communism during the Cold War (and a little like the *Blob*), the Kingdom of God is a *movement* that absorbs human beings into itself. Both movements advance through the dissemination of their respective messages, inspiring their adherents with a vision of a future order in which peace and justice prevail. Both demand the full allegiance of their workers and of those subject to them. ***The main difference is that Communism is based upon an enslaving lie, whereas the Kingdom of Christ is founded upon liberating Truth.*** Once the Kingdom of God and its objectives are understood, it is tempting to suspect that Satan stole the

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<sup>103</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 250-251

<sup>104</sup> Footnote 2. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 251

<sup>105</sup> Gregg later admits, as we have already noted, that not every human will be converted – see *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 226

<sup>106</sup> David Q. Santos. Postmillennial Thought and Marxism: Theology of False Optimism. *Journal of Dispensational Theology*. 15:46. Dec. 2011.

Kingdom paradigm so as to create a counterfeit in the movement of World Communism.<sup>107</sup>

Gregg's comparison between Communism and the Kingdom is nothing short of a promise of utopic paradise on earth, this side of eternity, to be realized through the church! Gregg goes on to state:

Over the course of the past two-thousand years the trajectory of victory has been on the side of Christ's movement—which began with 120 Jewish believers in Jerusalem and now commands the nominal loyalty of almost a third of the earth's inhabitants. This is **tremendous numerical growth**, which is important, though the depth of commitment in many who profess faith in Christ is open to question.<sup>108</sup>

"Tremendous numerical growth" is an essential and "important" element of the Gregg's optimistic view. Proponents of Gregg's view within the church share his vision of numerical growth, but when pressed on the issue are forced to interpret the growth of the Kingdom in other ways since they cannot fully embrace Gregg's current assessment that one third of the world's population as Christians. Be that as it may, visible numerical growth is an essential part of the optimistic view and requires either a broadening of the Kingdom concept or a future Golden Age that yet awaits.<sup>109</sup>

How will the utopic state of a politically and socially transformed society be accomplished? Through the power of the Holy Spirit of course!

We may easily underestimate what the power of the Holy Spirit working mightily through the gospel of the Kingdom is capable of accomplishing in transforming societies.<sup>110</sup>

If the expansion of the Kingdom and transformation of society are dependent on the unassailable power of the Spirit, why has the world not already been transformed? Why has it taken the Holy Spirit 2,000 years to convert merely a third of the world? Why was Jesus, while empowered by the same Spirit, rejected by the majority of people who ever encountered Him? And why were only 3,000 people added to the Kingdom on the Day of Pentecost if the gospel message is totally dependent on the power of the Spirit?

Gregg has an entirely different vision of the Kingdom than is taught in Scripture and it can only be maintained through a false conception of the Kingdom and a rather blasphemous view of the

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<sup>107</sup> Emphasis mine. P. 251-252

<sup>108</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 252

<sup>109</sup> Samuel Waldron. *The Postmillennial Doctrine of Bifurcation—Two ages in the Gospel Age?* March 24,, 2021. <https://cbtseminary.org/datpostmil-3-the-postmillennial-doctrine-of-bifurcation-two-ages-in-the-gospel-age/>

<sup>110</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 253

Holy Spirit. A blasphemous view of the Spirit? Really? I don't know what else to call a view that makes salvation wholly dependent on the Spirit's supernatural work, yet views Him as incapable of accomplishing His task or maintaining His progress.

This brings us to Gregg's interpretation of Revelation 20.

### **Problems With Revelation 20**

The final chapter begins with a statement that will have to be retracted within a few pages:

Since the influence of the Kingdom upon the world is not accomplished by use of force, but of persuasion, it is understandable that the process occupies a longer period of time than it would if it simply involved God's unleashing twelve legions of angels upon the defenseless world.<sup>111</sup>

Gregg pities a "defenseless world" that stands in rebellion to God and comforts himself with the idea that God has chosen to save with the gospel rather than crushing man's rebellion. Gregg admits that the Kingdom fluctuates over time, passing through peaks and valleys, yet maintains that the trajectory is ever increasing.<sup>112</sup> Yet in the end, he asserts that the devil will be "driven back by a surge of the Holy Spirit's in-flooding and, globally, the devil's ground is found to be diminished in the end."<sup>113</sup>

Why the peaks and valleys? Why victory mixed with defeat? If the Kingdom is empowered by the Spirit, why can't the Spirit maintain that which He has won? Not only is the Spirit viewed as a failure in terms of fully conquering and maintaining His hard fought victories, but His ultimate failure is put on display just prior to the Lord's return when the Great Rebellion occurs.

In every system (premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial), however, the thousand-year period is followed by a brief period of Satan's release from prison, and his instigating a global, but abortive, rebellion against the Church. **Therefore, no matter how optimistic one may be about the success of the gospel in the end of the age, all must accommodate a short period of serious rebellion at the very end**, before the new cosmos is introduced. Not all will have been converted at the conclusion of the age.

In Revelation 20, the final satanic resistance is futile and short-lived, but it is nonetheless a significant resistance movement occurring at the very end of this present world. It is not a small uprising, because those participating in it are numerous "*as the sand of the sea*"<sup>111</sup> and the revolt encompasses "*the breadth of the earth.*" **Therefore, regardless of one's eschatological leanings, it is**

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<sup>111</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 264

<sup>112</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 265-266.

<sup>113</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 266

**difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite the enormous general success of the gospel, there will be those who either continually resist conversion, or whose commitment to Jesus is shallow enough to ultimately be toppled by the deceiver.**<sup>114</sup>

“No matter how optimistic one may be” about the power of the Holy Spirit to convert the entire world (that would certainly describe Gregg), it has to be admitted by Optimistic Amillennialists that Satan will undue almost everything they claim that the Spirit accomplishes. The revolt is no small revolt but covers the “breadth of the earth” (a similar expression Daniel 2:36 uses to describe the expanse of the Kingdom). The persecution of the righteous envisioned in Revelation 20 and admitted by Gregg will be intense and global:

This passage describes the final, and most intense time of trial for the Church, because for the first (and last) time in history, the persecution appears to be global in extent. There have been many terrible persecutions throughout the present age, but they have always been restricted to certain sectors of the globe leaving the Church in other areas unmolested. At the end of the age Satan will pull out all the stops and bring the worst that he has against the entire “beloved city” (the Church).<sup>115</sup>

Gregg admits that when the Lord returns:

...not all will have been converted and many will have to be subdued voluntarily. There are prophecies of massive resistance remaining to be defeated at the second coming.<sup>116</sup>

Yet, notwithstanding the rebellion that covers the earth and massive resistance awaiting the Lord’s return, Gregg still maintains:

Notwithstanding this short season of final opposition, the lasting gains achieved through the centuries of social transformation and renewal are not to be discounted, even if there will be one final sifting of wheat and chaff to determine ultimate destinies. The Bible does not describe a world becoming steadily more rotten right up to the end—then suddenly made perfect by instantaneous metamorphosis at the moment of Jesus’ return. Removal of the final opposition can be expected to leave a sanctified and fully devoted remnant, who have faithfully carried out the commission given to them. Their numbers, as a result, will be vast beyond human ability to calculate.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Bold emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 268-269

<sup>115</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 269

<sup>116</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 267

<sup>117</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 270

What Gregg fails to recognize, is that the scene that follows the great rebellion of Revelation 20:1-10 is not a depiction of the righteous that yet remain on earth when the Lord returns, but is a picture of the resurrected saints standing before the throne of God at the Final Judgement (see Matthew 25:31-46). There will indeed be an innumerable gathering of God's people before His throne, but such a vision does not require Gregg's Optimistic Amillennial view.

To put it a different way, Revelation 20 does not depict an innumerable multitude of God's people surviving the onslaught of Satan to welcome the Lord back to the earth at His second coming. It rather depicts the faithful as few in number, surround by the hordes of Satan, about to be completely annihilated, only to be saved by the Lord's return and judgement of Satan. Those who remain alive when the Lord returns will be joined by the resurrected saints, and will rise to meet the Lord in the air, and dwell with Him eternally in heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 2 Corinthians 5:1).

In the final assessment, the Gregg's optimism receives a fatal blow at the end of the world due to what is predicted in Revelation 20. From both an earthly and theological perspective, Optimistic Amillennialism is not grounded in reality and proves to be nothing more than another utopic dream.

## **The Refurbished Earth Theory**

### **A Literal Approach to Prophetic Passages**

One of the major problems with Gregg's exposition of prophetic passages is that he essentially argues for a literal view like a Premillennialist, rather than interpreting prophecy in light of its figurative language. I suspect that his difficulty interpreting prophecy is a result of some carry-over baggage from his upbringing in the Premillennial camp. Though Gregg is no longer a Premillennialist, his views of prophecy still bear the marks and are sufficiently lacking.

An example of his literalistic interpretive approach can be seen when he references passages like Daniel 2:36 that speak of the Kingdom filling the earth. Gregg reads that passage and then argues that the kingdom must restore "every last inch" of earth back to God.<sup>118</sup>

Gregg later quotes Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth," and interprets it the same way a Premillennialist would: one day we shall inherit the literal earth. Simply quoting Matthew 5:5 and labeling it as a promise of a refurbished earth is no more convincing than saying that it promises a Premillennial reign on earth.

The promise of land to the meek (Matthew 5:5) is a repetition of the blessing promised by God in Psalm 37:11 (verse 11 is one of four promises of land inheritance in Psalm 37). Since the land in Psalm 37 is not the entire earth, but a portion of land or the land of Canaan generally, is it fair

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<sup>118</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 101

to ignore the meaning of the original promise of Psalm 37:11 when we read Matthew 5:5? It seems that if we are going to interpret the land of Matthew 5:5 in the literal sense, we must understand it as either a promise of individual security, or the premillennial sense (restoration of Canaan to the Jews during the literal 1,000 year earthly reign of Christ). If understood individually, Psalm 37:9-11 promises the faithful security in the land rather than being cut off with the wicked in punishment (it is not a promise that they will inherit the entire earth). Matthew's usage of Psalm 37 would then extend the same promise of earthly security to Christians, while warning that the wicked will face punishment under the reign of Christ.

Isaiah 57:13 extends the promise of possessing the land to include inheriting God's "holy mountain" (see also Is. 11:9; 65:11, 25). The "holy mountain" is a messianic reference to the church. By equating the promise of land with the inheritance of the "holy mountain", Isaiah introduces a metaphorical usage to the concept of inheriting the land. Could it be that Matthew uses Psalm 37 in the same way Isaiah used it to promise the inheritance of the Kingdom (see also Matthew 5:3, 10)?

The Hebrew writer provides another figurative understanding of a land promise when he writes of the Abrahamic land promise. In Hebrews 11:16 the writer states that Abraham never personally inherited the land, but understood there was a heavenly country awaiting him. The fulfillment of the land promise to Abraham's descendants must therefore be understood as a type of the inheritance granted to their father. In the same sense, when Joshua conquered the land of Canaan, the rest he provided was merely typical of the eternal rest that yet awaits God's people in heaven (Hebrews 4:8-10).

Since both Isaiah and Hebrews speak of a figurative inheritance of land, it is reasonable to interpret Matthew 5:5 in light of those passages and understand the land promise as a promise of the Kingdom (like in 5:3, 10) that will one day be consummated in heaven (Matthew 5:12). The Beatitudes speak of both the inauguration of consummation of the Kingdom and do not necessitate the literalistic view of both the Premillennial and Steve Gregg.

### **Unwarranted Assertions**

Another problem with Gregg is that he often makes unwarranted and unprovable assertions (as we have noted several times throughout this review). Rather than giving a long list of unproven claims that he makes about the Refurbished Earth, I will share two:

"The New Jerusalem... is described, in the end, as descending *from heaven* to the New Earth – so that which is "heavenly" may find its manifestation "*on earth as it is in heaven.*"<sup>119</sup>

In one short sentence, Gregg makes three big assumptions: First, he assumes that the New Jerusalem is distinct from the New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation 21:1-2, but such is

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<sup>119</sup> Emphasis his. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 16

unwarranted based on Isaiah 65:17-18. Second, he assumes that the New Jerusalem comes down to the New Earth, but how can this be if the New Heaven and New Earth are one and the same as the New Jerusalem? Lastly, Gregg asserts that God's will being done "one earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10) will not be accomplished until the arrival of the Refurbished Earth. His repeated misunderstanding of Matthew 6:10 does not take into account Matthew 12:50; 16:19; 26:42; 28:18-20.

Gregg's abuse of Revelation 21:1-2 is not near as outlandish as his fantasies about life on the Refurbished Earth:

Perhaps, we should visualize life in the new order as not very different from much of the activities of the present life—only absent the effects of the fall. Redeemed humanity will be managing an unfallen earth, as Adam and Eve did prior to their rebellion. ***Perhaps, there will be additional worlds to steward as well.*** Only God knows. It is ours to find out at that time.<sup>120</sup>

And if that's not enough, he seems to imply that in this new universe we will also get to make up the rules.<sup>121</sup> I guess maybe I should start referring to Gregg's position as the doctrine of the Refurbished Universe in light of this new revelation. Mind you, those are the thoughts of an illumined expositor. How enlightening.

### **Ignoring the Context**

When Gregg is not making assertions, he likes to rip passages out of context. His abuse of Psalm 2:7-9 is quite impressive and deserves special attention:

Notice that the earth is Christ's inheritance, which the Father bequeaths to Him. He is to reign, not over heaven, but over earth: "*He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.*"<sup>122</sup>

Gregg ignores the fact that Psalm 2:7-9 is fulfilled in the ascension of Christ (Daniel 7:14) and His current reign (Hebrews 1:5; 5:5), wherein the Father has given Him authority to reign over all things in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18).

As bad as Gregg's handling of Psalm 2:7-9 is, it may not be as bad as what he does with Luke 19:10. There he ludicrously claims "that which was lost" refers to the Creation Mandate lost in Adam and restored in Christ. Such reasoning is beyond imaginative and ignores Zacchaeus as the recipient of the message. While Zacchaeus is clearly identified as one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel that Jesus went seeking to find and to save (Matthew 10:6; Luke 15:4-7), Gregg would rather ignore that fact and shoehorn in his beloved Refurbished Earth.

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<sup>120</sup> Emphasis mine. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 228

<sup>121</sup> I say this based on his "I would then make the house rules" statement. See *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 221.

<sup>122</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 222



## **Psalm 115:16**

But why choose to just rip a passage out of context or just make an assertion when you can do both at the same time! Welcome to Gregg's interpretation of Psalm 115:16:

God's ideal was that humans would be loyal children in His household and would appreciate the privilege of being entrusted with so great a stewardship. If they had remained faithful and obedient to their Creator, there is every reason to believe that this perfect planet would have been their home without interruption and without death—and our venerable first parents would still be living among us today! God never intended that mankind would live in heaven with the angels. The heavens are the Lord's, "*but the earth He has given to the sons of men.*"<sup>123</sup>

Gregg begins with the unfounded and unprovable assertion that if man had not sinned he would have lived forever on earth. McGuiggan pushes back and rightly declares,

Questions such as: "What if Man had not sinned?" are as insoluble as they are profitless. The Bible is written in view of God's knowing that Man would sin, Man did in fact choose to sin and the Bible is written in light of those two truths. Additionally, to say that God's intentions went no further than physical paradise is to say more than the Bible warrants.<sup>124</sup>

The unfounded assertion is followed up with a misuse of Psalm 115:16. I note Gregg's abuse of this particular Psalm because it becomes a proof-text in Chapters 6<sup>125</sup> and 7<sup>126</sup> and because it is a favorite proof-text of his followers.

The question is not whether God gave man dominion over the earth; clearly, He did (Genesis 1:26-28). The question is whether Psalm 115:16 necessitates understanding earth as the eternal possession of mankind.

The latter question places Gregg in conflict with his interpretation of Psalm 115:16 because he elsewhere states,

What will it look like to inherit the Kingdom? It is surprising that there is not more said about such things in scripture. We are so accustomed to appealing to potential converts by promising (or threatening) post-mortem circumstances that we might not even have noticed how little attention is given to such things in the scriptures themselves. No part of the Old Testament focuses on the afterlife, and

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<sup>123</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 81

<sup>124</sup> McGuiggan, *Reign of God, Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 14.

<sup>125</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 77

<sup>126</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 81

a very small portion of the material in the New Testament seems concerned with the matter.<sup>127</sup>

How can Gregg simultaneously argue that Psalm 115:16 implies earth will be the eternal reward of God's people, and that "no part of the Old Testament focuses on the afterlife" (a statement that contextually refers to inheriting the kingdom post-mortem)?

Though I do not agree with Gregg's assertion that "no part of the Old Testament focuses on the afterlife" (which seems to be essentially what the Sadducees argued in Matthew 22:23-33), I do not believe that Psalm 115:16 is a statement about the afterlife.

Without giving a full exposition of the entire 115<sup>th</sup> Psalm, there are some contextual points that must be understood in order to properly interpret verse 16. Psalm 115 is written during a time when God's people were surrounded by threatening enemies (verse 2), and so they cry out to the Lord and appeal to God's glory (verse 1) that He might act in order to defend His own name.<sup>128</sup> Though the enemies mock (verse 2), Israel responds, "Our God is in heaven" (unlike your gods), and "He does whatever He pleases." Verse 3 is meant to capture God's sovereign, universal rule over all of creation and provide the Israelites with comfort during a moment of distress. God is unlike the dead and worthless idols of Israel's enemies (verses 4-7), and those who worship them shall become just as dead and worthless (verse 8). God is Israel's shield in battle (verses 9-11), and He will remember His covenant with her and bless her (verses 12-14). The God who made all of creation (verse 15), and reigns from heaven (verse 16a), will maintain Israel in the land that He has given her (verse 16b). Verses 17-18 can be taken in two different ways, and it is difficult to know which way to choose. Either the final two verses teach that God will not allow Israel to die because He would then be robbed of praise (see Psalm 6:5; 30:9; 88:10-12; Isaiah 38:18-19), or else the dead are the enemies of the Lord who have fallen like their gods (verse 8) and are silenced by the grave (see Psalm 31:17-18). Either way, God's people survive and will not cease to praise Him (verse 18).

There is absolutely nothing in the passage that remotely hints at an eternal inhabitation of the earth by man. To put it another way, there is no proof for Gregg's position in this alleged proof text. Brethren need to be more careful when reading Gregg and repeating what he has taught without checking to see if it is true.

### **1 Thessalonians 4:17**

The ultimate expression of Gregg's ability to multi-task while destroying the meaning of a passage is on display in his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

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<sup>127</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 226

<sup>128</sup> The point of verse 1 parallels the points of Numbers 14:15; Isaiah 48:9-11; Ezekiel 36:22; Exodus 9:16; Daniel 9:18-19.

The phrase, “to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) employs the Greek verb *apantesis* (to meet), found only twice elsewhere in scripture (Acts 28:15; Matthew 25:1). In every occurrence it speaks of a welcoming delegation going out to greet a visitor as he approaches, in<sup>129</sup> order to accompany him for the remainder of his journey.<sup>130</sup>

The problems with this assertion are many. First, rather than providing evidence from linguistic authorities, Gregg chooses to make a wild assertion. Second, Gregg apparently can’t count, because there are four usages of the word, not three (Matthew 25:1, 6; Acts 28:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:17). Third, Gregg’s counting and word study does not include usages of the word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint – LXX). Since Gregg on other occasions references the LXX when it suits him,<sup>131</sup> I can only assume that his failure to consult it on this occasion is due to laziness or deceit. Fourth, Gregg commits a version of what he calls the “Law of Exegetical Constancy” fallacy.

We are told that there is a “law of exegetical constancy,” which is a hermeneutical principle guiding us in the interpretation of scripture. This alleged “law” states that a symbol that is used a certain way in one passage must have the same meaning whenever it is used in other passages. It’s a good thing they told us. One would never have noticed it from reading scripture alone.<sup>132</sup>

If you replace the “symbol” with “word,” Gregg shoots himself once more with his own argument. It is wrong to take a word and force it to mean the same thing in every passage. As Jim McGuiggan notes:

The discussion of the ‘meaning’ of words is worth a book itself. If we restrict ourselves to gifted and technically competent speakers and writers, it’s obviously true that a word (in any given text) ‘means’ what a writer intends it to mean! If he uses the word in several different ways, then the word has several legitimate ‘meanings.’ And, listen, it doesn’t make a bit of sense to say that the ‘real’ meaning of the word is the one which appears most often! If he uses a word to mean something only three times and uses the same word to meaning something else thirty three times, we are not to conclude that the ‘real’ meaning of the word is embodied in the thirty three. No! the ‘real’ meaning of a word is any meaning which a gifted and competent writer (or a community for that matter) gives to it.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> There was originally a mistake in this Scripture list that included Matthew 27:32 instead of Matthew 25:1.

<sup>130</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 225

<sup>131</sup> See footnote 60. *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 29.

<sup>132</sup> *Empire of the Risen Son*. p. 260

<sup>133</sup> Jim McGuiggan, *Reign of God*. p. 18

The fact is, according to Strongs,<sup>134</sup> Thayer,<sup>135</sup> Bullinger,<sup>136</sup> Louw and Nida,<sup>137</sup> and BDAG<sup>138</sup> the word means “a meeting” and “in a number of languages it is necessary to specify clearly by the choice of terms whether the meeting is friendly or hostile.”<sup>139</sup> Collin Brown<sup>140</sup> notes that *synantēsis* is a synonymous noun sharing the same root as *apantesis* and is used in Matthew 8:34 of an angry crowd that went out to meet Jesus and drive him away. The Septuagint usage of *apantesis* clearly denotes meetings of hostility in Judges 14:5, 15:14, 20:25, 20:31 while Judges 6:35, 2 Kings 4:1, speak of a meeting and departure to a different location.<sup>141</sup>

As a warning from personal experience, when Gregg makes a claim about the meaning and usage of a word, it is important to check up on him to make sure he is accurately using and defining the word. On several occasions I have found his research to come up lacking.

Not only are there lexical problems with Gregg’s explanation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, there is also a major contextual issue. A few verses earlier, Paul states:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

The question is not *if* Christ brings those who have fallen asleep with Him, but *where* does he bring them? Gregg assumes (as do others who hold his position) that verse 14 speaks of Jesus coming to earth accompanied by the saints who are with Him in the intermediate state. The problem with this logic is that at the second coming of Christ, those who die in the Lord must rise from the grave, not descend from heaven!

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

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<sup>134</sup> James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), p. 13.

<sup>135</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI. 1977. Fourth edition. p. 54.

<sup>136</sup> E. W. Bullinger. *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*. Samuel Bagster and Sons. London. Tenth edition. 1971. p. 493.

<sup>137</sup> Johannesburg P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New Your: United Bible Societies, 1996), p. 191.

<sup>138</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>139</sup> Louw and Nida, p. 191.

<sup>140</sup> Collin Brown. *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, MI. 1986. Vol. 1. p. 324

<sup>141</sup> All these references were drawn from Edwin Hatch, Henry A Redpath. *A Concordance to the Septuagint and Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)*. Clarendon Press.1906. Vol. 1. p. 117.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

(1 Thessalonians 4:15-16)

We must therefore understand 1 Thessalonians to teach that just as the coming of the Lord in His Kingdom in Matthew 16:28 is a reference to the Lord's ascension to be with God after His resurrection (Daniel 7:14), so in like manner, when we are raised, He will bring us to the Father! And so we will always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17)!

In the end, Gregg's argument from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is nothing more than the argument Foy E. Wallace refuted in his debate with Premillennialist Charles M. Neal, only this time it is marshalled by a Optimistic Amillennialists to speak of the reign of Christ throughout eternity, not merely a 1,000 year period.<sup>142</sup> Neither Neal, nor Gregg, nor any other Premillennialist, Postmillennialist, or optimist have ever been able to come up with a passage that speaks of Jesus setting foot on the earth when he returns. Some of the questions Brother Wallace posed during the debate are highly relevant to our current discussion:

Why bring Christ back to the earth? Did he not finish his work here? He qualified himself for man's high priest in heaven. He qualified himself to rule in our hearts as king. He completed the plan of human redemption, and sealed it with the offering of his own blood "once at the end of the ages." (Heb. 9:26. ) Has he not done all for saint and sinner that needs to be done, without dwelling again on this earth? Why deprive heaven of his presence again?<sup>143</sup>

Maybe if brethren would start out reading books by the likes of Foy E. Wallace Jr., Jim McGuiggan, and Doug Edwards, rather than Steve Gregg, some of the issues we are facing would not exist.

### **The Greatest Problem**

The greatest challenge to the doctrine of a Refurbished Earth (and the problem that Gregg failed to address) is that it fails to account for the temporary nature of earth (2 Corinthians 4:18), the eternal nature of heaven (2 Corinthians 5:1), and the fact that the heavens and earth that now are will be annihilated (2 Peter 3:10-12). That which is temporary and passing cannot be the eternal dwelling of the saved.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Foy E. Wallace. *The Neal-Wallace Discussion on the Thousand Years Reign of Christ*. Foy E. Wallace Jr. Publications. Oklahoma City, OK. 1933. P. 319, 327, 343.

<sup>143</sup> Foy E. Wallace. *Neal-Wallace Discussion*. p. 327

<sup>144</sup> Keith Mosher. *Will Heaven Be On A Renovated Earth?* YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixvq1LOVg7U&t=7486s>

# A Word About Heaven

Before concluding the review, I want to say a couple of things in response to Gregg's relentless attack of heaven.<sup>145</sup>

I want to begin by talking about what scholars refer to as The Great Condescension. When the fullness of time arrived, the Son of God descended from heaven to earth (Philippians 2:7), took on the form of a slave by becoming a man (Philippians 2:7), and then further humbled Himself to the point of death, "even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8). Yet the condescension was only half of the story, for God has "highly exalted Him, and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Paul wants us to understand the three realms of reality and their ranking in relation to the mission of Christ. When Jesus descended from heaven, he went from the glorious realm of heaven to the humble realm of earth, only to enter the humiliating realm of death. When God exalted His Son, Jesus left the grave and ascended back to heaven and was seated at God's right hand (Daniel 7:14) crowned with supreme honor and authority (Matthew 28:18). Jesus did not die so that He could return to life on a humble earth; He died so that we too might be exalted (1 Peter 5:6) to incorruptible glory (Matthew 6:19-20; 1 Corinthians 15:50) and dwell in God's presence (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The Kingdom of Heaven is not heaven, but it is most certainly tied to heaven.<sup>146</sup> Just as the King is not of this earth, neither is His Kingdom (John 8:23; 18:36). Just as the King returned to His Father, one day His Kingdom will follow (John 13:36; Hebrews 6:20). Those who do not have their sights set on heaven will not reach it.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you. (Colossians 3:1-5a)

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<sup>145</sup> See also: Nathan Battey. *Defending Heaven: A Critique of the Attack on the Traditional Interpretation of John 14:1-6*. April 11, 2023. <https://www.christianresearcher.com/articles/a-review-and-a-response>

<sup>146</sup> For more discussion of John 8:23 and John 13:36 see: Nathan Battey. *Defending Heaven: A Critique of the Attack on the Traditional Interpretation of John 14:1-6*. April 11, 2023. <https://www.christianresearcher.com/articles/a-review-and-a-response>

# Conclusion

Much more could be said (believe it or not), but hopefully what has been written will raise awareness to some of the dangers presented within the toxic pages of *Empire of the Risen Son*. I am deeply troubled that some brethren think so highly of Steve Gregg and are embracing so much of his teaching. I pray that those who have bought into Gregg's viewpoint will reconsider and stop recommending his material.

Steve Gregg simply does not understand the concept of the Kingdom as is taught in Scripture, and his teaching of salvation, miracles, and eschatology (end times) are equally problematic and dangerous. His false view of the Spirit corrupts every aspect of his teaching and ultimately insults the Third Person of the Godhead. Without the power of the Spirit, a false gospel of salvation, and a denominational mindset, Gregg's Optimistic Amillennial view of the Kingdom is impossible; even with them it encounters insurmountable difficulties in Revelation 20. A preacher who repeatedly contradicts himself and engages in such sloppy exegesis is either incompetent or dishonest. Either way, such a man should not be trusted or followed.

May God bless His church, and may His children heed His words:

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. (1 Timothy 6:3-5)