Transmillenialism and The Churches of Christ

An examination of how a peculiar ecclesiology gave birth to a new theological system.

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North American Eschatology
Several years ago my wife and I led a community based Bible devotional out of a local coffee shop in North Carolina. The coffee shop eventually was unable to support its bills, and was sold to Elton Foster, a local man and first time business owner. Elton was in most ways like many of the other people in the community; he attended a local Christian and Missionary Alliance church, supported our work at the devotional and was in most ways a normative Christian. Some of his beliefs were always a bit radical, but never unorthodox. The coffee shop eventually changed ownership again, and Elton and his family moved to Virginia.

Elton contacted me about two years after he had left North Carolina with a dilemma. His new house was having its windows replaced, and the work would take two weeks. He thought it was a good time for a vacation, although they didn’t have much money, and he needed to be out of the house anyway, so he asked if he could spend a few weeks with my wife and me in North Carolina. We consented, and about a month later Elton arrived. Over a period of two weeks Elton introduced me to a new form of eschatology which he called Preterism, and a specific subset of preterism which he called Transmillennialism. His impetus was partially for intellectual discussion and partially a missionary one. It was clear that he believed Transmillennialism answered problems in scripture and was eager to convert me to his ideas. This paper is born in large part out of the conversations which ensued in that two week period, and an eventual estrangement that I felt towards someone who once seemed to be grounded in orthodoxy. At the time I was unfamiliar with issues in philosophy and theology but now I can properly reflect on my reactions and thoughts towards this new and (many believe) problematic theological trend.
The focus of this paper will be an investigation of a kind of preterism which is termed “covenantal” or “fulfilled” eschatology and a variety of millennialism which is called Transmillenialism. The belief system is fairly confined within the writings and work of Max King and his son Tim King, with some ancillary characters that also contributed to the formulation of the theological system. The paper is written in two parts, first an evaluation of the various historical, psychological and sociological issues which surround the Transmillenial movement; from inception to the present day. The second part will be a composition of the theological systematics and exegetical issues which make up the Transmillenial movement and then a critique of these issues where warranted.

This paper is designed for both opponents of and adherents to Transmillenialism. It is my hope that one coming from a different eschatological background will find it a helpful text. The paper ought to offer insights into the issues of Transmillenialism and be able to evoke thoughtful responses if readers find themselves in a similar situation as I did with Elton. For those who hold to a Transmillenial view of scripture, it is my desire to be fair, concise and responsive. It is not my intent to be polemical, nor do I wish to engage in an apologetic of a traditional approach to eschatology. My approach as well as my thesis is simple. The historical conditions of the broader cultural, theological and geopolitical climates of the mid 20th century and the particular theology and ecclesiology of the Churches of Christ shape Transmillennialism in its infancy. Without understanding this foundational concept, attempting to respond to Transmillennialism is difficult if not impossible.
As a last note, I think it is apropos to mention that “eschatologically” speaking, I am an Amillenialist. Hence my personal view of scripture and issues of eschatology reads much of the prophetic statements of the second coming as metaphor and simile. I am also writing from a fairly reformed (but not classically Calvinistic) perspective, which means that my responses to any issue of theology will keep in mind God’s sovereignty over all spheres of life. I mention these things as a concession to my audience; just so that all of my high value theological cards are on the table.

The function and thought of Transmillennialism

A brief survey of the general system of Transmillennialism is the place that we ought to begin. This sketch will be partial and general, but many aspects will be filled out within the corpus of the text.

The crux of the Transmillenial view is to see the entire church age, the fulfillment of the promises of Christ and his second coming, as being fulfilled at 70 CE when the 2nd Temple is destroyed. This event, for the Transmillenialist, is the basis of the prophecies of Christ. Understanding this idea is crucial for understanding the particular theology of the movement. The interesting thing is not so much how the evidences are established, but the conclusions that follow from the evidences.

The strongest evidences from scripture that the Parousia was connected to the destruction of the second temple are the various statements, set in an eschatological context, which give a temporal aspect to the end of time as being “near” or “at hand.” This plays such a strong role in Max King’s argument that his complete systematic text;
“The Cross and Parousia of Christ” begins with a chapter on the “problem of time.” This problem is the first level of argument which will be used for everything else which will follow.

There are several “time statements” within scripture which can easily be read to imply a first century fulfillment of the eschaton. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, records Jesus as placing the coming events of the eschaton in that specific generation.

So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ¹

This passage is particularly important for the Transmillennialist, because it begins with a statement about the destruction of the temple and seems to equate this to the Parousia. This is a foundational text because it connects the destruction of the temple, with the second coming and places both events within the framework of “this generation.” Opponents of the Transmillenial view often point out that the term “γενεα” may stand for a literal generation, but can also just mean a certain group of people, or a long age depending on how it is used. ² Yet the Transmillenialist insists that this is a literal generation, and specifically means the people alive at the time of Christ. This format does seem plausible given the context of Matthew 24, especially the opening verses connection of the temple destruction and the second coming. ³ These two proofs, together with a list of other “time specific” statements are used as to demonstrate that the event of the Parousia of Christ is best understood as having a first century fulfillment.

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¹ Matthew 24:33-34 NASB
³ Matthew 24:1-2
From this point the Transmillenialist then proceeds to argue about what this means for the rest of the texts of scripture and eschatology. Other events, traditionally conceived as having a future context are now to be understood in light of the events of 70AD as having been fully fulfilled.

There are a few other evidential arguments that Max King adduces which differ slightly from the various time centered statements of scripture which should be explained briefly before moving on.

King argues that the importance of the destruction of the temple in the Jewish mindset (which certainly was a major event) cannot be understated. He believes that for the Jewish convert to Christianity, the apocalypse would be equated to the temple’s destruction and hence the cultural context of scripture establishes the first century context of apocalypse.  Without understanding the role this event would play in the lives of the early writers of scripture, one cannot understand their eschatological view.

He furthers this idea by arguing that the destruction of the temple is a significant event within all of prophecy, especially in the book of Daniel. He then calculates the end of the seventy weeks of Daniel to be precisely at the time of the destruction of the Herodian temple. The prophecy of Daniel then, although about the coming of Christ, is more directly about the destruction of the temple.

Max King also argues that the fall of the literal Jerusalem is what is spoken of as Babylon in Revelation and that the “new Jerusalem” in the book of Revelation is not a

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4 Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem…as long as Herod’s Temple stood, the symbols of the Old Covenant system stood intact…The heavenly Jerusalem would come down only after the earthly Jerusalem was taken out of the way – King, Max; *The Spirit of Prophecy* (p. 349)

5 “Seventy weeks are determined upon the people and the holy city, which means that Israel’s restoration and blessings could be expected at the end of that time. This would bring us to the time of the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.” – King, Max; *The Spirit of Prophecy* (p.98)
literal city, nor a future event, but a fulfillment of the resurrection in the corporate and ecclesiological body of the Church. 6

These four arguments and the time statements form the basis of King’s evidential claims. Two final points might be mentioned about the theory of Transmillenialism. King does claim that the elegance of the theory constitutes a sort of proof. 7 This is not unusual in theology or science, as internal consistency is often a hallmark of a good theory. King himself repeatedly points to the consistency of his ideas, in light of what he sees to be inconsistencies of other eschatologies and systematic views. It is important to note that for King, once he establishes his ideas of eschatology evidentially, the various doctrines which are connected to this event must then be reinterpreted in light of a complete fulfillment in the first century. This reinterpretation affects many of the historic doctrines of the Christian faith. One the dominos begin to topple, and the Second Coming is seen as temporally located in the 1st century, many of these changes are inevitable.

The doctrine of the Resurrection, for instance, which in normative Christianity is considered a future and literal event, is for the Transmillenialist an event which was fulfilled in the past and happened in corporate. 8 Transmillenial concepts of resurrection do not include a literal bodily resurrection, but happen in a corporate sense of one’s stance before God as deemed righteous. King frames this as a progressive “dying and

6 “Whatever this Babylon was, its fall opened the way for the marriage of the lamb. This suggests that Babylon was the wife of the Lord by a previous relationship, which had to be entirely dissolved before the second marriage could take place. The only city that could possibly fit this description is Jerusalem…” – King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 355)

7 “…the spiritual principle of interpretation is not only demanded in the scriptures, but it has a harmony and consistency that meets every demand of prophecy in relation to time, history, typology and manner of fulfillment. “ – King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 42)

8 “When we make the physicality the point of his resurrection and then parallel it to the type of resurrection we must have, we miss the spiritual realities of both. We believe that biblical resurrection is about one’s stance before God, not one’s substance.” – King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 313-314)
rising with Christ.” ⁹ We die to our sins, and rise to a more fulfilled life in Christ; and we do this daily, as “we die daily.” For King, the concept of resurrection is really a form of sanctification, in which we grow; not a once and for all future event where the physically dead rise from their grave.

The second coming of Christ, also an event which was fulfilled in 70 CE, is understood as being a coming of judgment on Jerusalem and the Temple. It is not meant to be interpreted as a literal visible return of the person of Christ, but a symbolic judgment he pours out on the temple. ¹⁰ This of course means that there simply is no future coming, but that all of the various things said about the Parousia were fulfilled in 70 CE at the temple destruction.

Not only did Christ come in Judgment then, but with him come the new heavens and the new earth and the casting of Satan into Hell, and the final judgment of the dead. Mr. King believes that everything has been fulfilled in the first century and he redefines the normative interpretation of Pauline concepts in light of fulfilled eschatology. ¹¹

There are various other redefinitions in the Transmillennial view, but the majority of them have been covered by the previous paragraphs. All of these doctrines have been changed significantly from what the larger body of the Christian church holds to be true. For many this seems to be an odd leap; an atheism towards the history of the Church and a skepticism towards her traditional interpretations. Within most churches this quantum leap would be impossible, but as we will see within the churches of Christ and the geopolitical climate of the day it fits perfectly.

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⁹ The concept of a progressive resurrection does not blend with the traditional view of resurrection from physical death…even so it is abundantly clear in the New Testament scriptures…” – King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 337)
¹⁰ King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 172)
¹¹ King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 346)
Origins of the Transmillenial Movement

To properly understand the latter developments of the Transmillenial Movement, it is important to understand its founding, and the unique psychology and sociology that drove the movement and continues to propel it forward. Max King’s eschatology, set in the larger cultural movement of fundamentalism and combined with the autonomous polity, theology and anti-confessionalism of the Churches of Christ helps to explain the beginnings of Transmillenialism.

The King family grew up serving in the strict traditionalist strain of the Churches of Christ. Max King began working in ministry in Ripley Virginia at the “Mud Run Church of Christ.” Tim King describes this as a small parish, with 20-25 members, and of such a nature that it couldn’t afford a full time pastor, so instead the men of the church took turns preaching from week to week. It would be here that Max King, the family’s patriarch, would get his first experience preaching and a chance to develop his theology before an audience. The family would move within 2 years of coming to Ripley. This began a process which would continue for most of their lives. The King family continued to move from place to place roughly every two years. From 1952-1954 they lived in Parkersburg, West Virginia. Max King began to pastor a larger parish there, according to his son, and began here to formally construct his theological ideas concerning eschatology. In Pennsboro, the would stay for three years (1954-1957), In Lewisburg West Virginia they stayed for less than a year (1957), in New Martinsville, WV the family actually stayed for a full five years (1957-1962), longer than any other
appointment to a Church. In 1962 they moved to Warren Ohio, where Max King would continue to work and write for several years.  

Tim King claims that “in those days, most ministers moved every year or two and it was natural for Max to pull up stakes and head elsewhere.”  

The claim seems odd, considering the historical factors of the day. In West Virginia in the 1950’s the socio-economic levels of most people would have confined them to a local area. It would have been strange to relocate as often as the family did, because this would have meant a considerable expense each time. The impetus for continued movement was most likely because of political friction caused by some of the odd notions of Max King. At this time there is not a fully formulated concept of Transmillennialism, but there almost certainly were hints of it which might have created political problems within the congregations King pastored.

Tim does relate one instance where the family moved because of political wrangling. This was the shortest stint in Lewisburg, which ends (according to Tim King) when Max King confronts the sinful behavior of one member of the church, who maintained a house for illicit contacts with a married woman. As Tim King relates the story, Max confronted the person, but the church was not willing to hear it, and so he packed up and moved on.  

It is indeed possible that Max King just found himself on the wrong side of a political debate involving infidelity in Lewisburg; and that the rest of his relocations were just coincidental, but the evidence suggests something else. The affair and Max’s confrontation of it may have precipitated his leaving, but the friction that the various

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12 King, Tim; *Give Me This Mountain* (p. 3-25)
13 King, Tim; *Give Me This Mountain* (p. 19)
14 King, Tim; *Give Me This Mountain* (p. 22)
congregations he pastored felt is more likely a result of his formulation of eschatology within the substructure of the Churches of Christ.

The Churches of Christ are highly political, in fact in some ways their structure builds in an overly political climate into which saying anything outside of the ordinary can bring a pastor under censure. Yet it was in the Churches of Christ that King eventually found a home. Understanding the particular nature of the churches of Christ helps to explain why King’s eschatological ideas would have ran into problems in many of his parishes. It also explains why King’s ideas eventually found root, and why there never was a formal challenge put to them until after he had published his first books on the subject.

The Churches of Christ have a strange admixture of unified theology and anti-confessionalism, which provide for the politically charged environment we mentioned above. There is a sense of a unified theological view within the sect; down to the musical style, the dispensational and Arminian contexts, women’s roles in ministry, and the lay centered nature of worship. Yet the Churches adamantly claim not to be a denomination, and are radically anti-confessional, holding a view often described as, “No Creed but the Bible.” Much of this stems from the fact that all churches of Christ (officially or otherwise) hold to a regulative principle of worship. The manner in which the regulative principle is formulated excludes the use of common confessions outside of those directly given in scripture. So the churches of Christ attempt to be both unified theologically, with little room for disagreement, univocal in their beliefs and at the same time anti-confessional and autonomous. This creates a perfect environment for political tension in which everyone “knows” (or attempts to know) what confessional theology is,

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15 Ferguson, Everett; The Church of Christ (p. 247)
but no one ever formulates a unified confession, so one is forever reinventing orthodoxy with each sermon, and each conversation he has. This would make an environment where any minor variation in eschatology that Max King might have suggested in passing could become a large political issue that would cause political dissention and censure.

Furthermore, the Churches of Christ do not consider themselves a denomination, but they all share a congregational form of polity, which allows for the community to make decisions by democratic vote. This gives each local parish a “congregational autonomy” which means that they act without direct oversight of a regional or national denominational head.  

Congregational autonomous polity works as a two edged sword. On one hand it allows for autonomy from bad decisions, made at a denominational level, which may not reflect the cultural milieu of an area. It also, however, allows for pastoral autonomy in teaching, something Churches of Christ generally value. It means that a pastor may say things and do things without alerting other churches immediately, since the removal of a pastor begins and ends on a parish level. It would have been easy for Max King to avoid too much scrutiny in the broader world of the Churches of Christ until eventually he found a receptive parish of a considerable size from which to begin his formal eschatological ministry.

This is a much more likely situation to understanding why Max King may have had political friction with various churches. It also explains the transient nature of the family as Max King made a crossover from civil service to pastoral work. Tim King’s rendition of these events is part history, but also seems to be part apologetic; an understandable response in light of his familial relation to Max King. The source

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16 Ferguson, Everett; *The Church of Christ* (p. 345)
literature generated by Tim King about Transmillenialism is rife with apologetic content, down to the ancillary stories relating to the establishment of the ministry. Part of the reason for this undoubtedly stems from the previously mentioned climates of the Churches of Christ. Tim King grew up in an environment where you were expected to be radically biblical and fit within the theological schema of the church, but without a common confession or stated creeds. Any off statement could cause theological and political issues within a church, and watching one’s father go through some of these issues, debates and problems would have made one sensitive to criticism to say the least. Whatever the case of the early years it is certain that after the publication of Max King’s first book the schism with the broader Churches of Christ and the King family would begin in earnest.

The friction between the various Churches of Christ and Max King’s theology continued to intensify while he worked for the parish in Warren, Ohio. In 1971 Max King completed the first systematization of his theology, and later that year it was published under the title “The Spirit of Prophecy.” As publications often do, The Spirit of Prophecy brought intense scrutiny to Max King’s theological distinctives. By the middle of that year a debate had been set between Gus Nichols and max King on the topic of eschatology. Tim King, Max’s son, describes this debate as a digression of ad-hominem attacks and “verbal fist-fighting.” This of course was a natural digression when, in Tim King’s words “Gus previously had told someone that Max King had only a few scriptures he could appeal to, and we all knew he was in for a big surprise and that it wouldn’t take long before the focus was on personalities instead of passages. Gus did not disappoint.  

17 King, Tim; Give Me This Mountain (p.41-44)
Two years later another debate was scheduled between Jim McGuiggan, who is identified as a Bible Student at a local college and Max King. Tim King views this debate to have been conducted roughly akin to the previous one. Tim recalls that “…McGuiggan skirted important issues while trying to make a gourmet meal out of red herrings.” Tim King typifies the debate as “…just another wild ride with Max being declared guilty by spurious association with heretics and cults.”

The transcript of the debate, however, reveals a passionate and haphazard discussion on both sides. Both sides drew conclusions, but neither engaged in consistent red herrings. Both men occasionally seem to miss their opponent’s point, but the debate itself is in line with what one expects from lay level theological debates. This is neither a polemic against a gentle Max King, nor is it a theological railroading of his position. This debate was a litany of serious objections and responses to what McGuiggan viewed as a potentially dangerous and non-Christian view and a response of what King believed to be important theological issues.

McGuiggan certainly is less than cordial in much of what he says, and does. He at times degrades into ad-hominem attacks; but this is also true of King. One of King’s responses begins;

“Jim’s last negative left us wondering if our “wild Irish rose” was beginning to lose his cool! …It is interesting to watch Jim’s footwork when he is in the negative (which is most of the time). One could become so enthralled by such

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18 King, Tim; *Give Me This Mountain* (p. 47)
dazzling performance as to lose sight of his wildness and ineffectiveness relative to the real issue.”

It is clear that this debate was charged, but not that Max King was unfairly railroaded or attacked. It seems that both sides engaged in vitriol and it seems likely that throughout Max’s professional ministry similar collisions may have led to substantial disagreements between Max and his parishes. As previously stated, Tim King grew up in this charged environment, and relates multiple attacks, debates and confrontations from a fairly early age (he was twelve years old at the time of the Nichols Debate).

These interactions stay with Tim King and shape much of how Transmillennialism would respond to criticisms of it in the years which follow and specifically the direction that Tim King would lead the ministry in.

After the Nichols and McGuiggen debates, there was a distinct line in the sand drawn between what the churches of Christ “officially” taught and what King was teaching. Over time the nature and thrust of the ministry would mature and evolve from its fairly narrow roots. Through the latter years of the ministry, Tim King would move towards issues of social justice and political reunification in the Middle East. He began to see his theology as a unique opportunity to change the world around him. The actual effects of Transmillennialism on world events are negligible, but the movement does continue to grow and redefine itself theologically, making some inroads into denominations outside of the Churches of Christ. There is still a marked tension between Tim King and what he considers to be criticism of his father’s and his own position. His

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19 McGuiggen/King Debate (p. 216)
20 King, Tim Give Me This Mountain (p. 41)
impression of how people respond to his father’s theology remains fairly consistent throughout his writings. His apologetic style usually portrays those critical of the Transmillenial position as often being unfair and not based in scripture. Tim seems to see them as often vitriolic and steeped in traditions of men rather than in scriptural understanding. What is interesting is that Tim also seems to be genuinely interested in ecumenism and coming into fellowship with the larger body of Christ, even though he writes almost exclusively about those who have, in his opinion, been virulent towards his father’s ideas.

For Tim King, the vast majority of those who hold to a traditional eschatology and engage his Father’s eschatology in a polemical fashion are manifestly destructive. Many of these people, according to King, “preach another gospel” because they fail to draw people out of “end times fear.” These people and even groups have abandoned “any other ministry, except for proselytizing and promoting politics to accelerate the end.” It is unclear if Tim has in mind specifically militant versions of Premillennialism, or if he generally considers all theological systems or individuals which reject Transmillennialism as unorthodox as falling into this position.

When Tim speaks about his father, he portrays him as being an iconic champion of truth, a warrior against a dead traditionalism. One story in particular, which Tim relates of his father, reaches a nearly apocryphal status. While it is certain that many of the particulars are true, the way in which the story is related demonstrates a mythical way in which Max King is painted as the founder of the movement.

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21 King, Tim Give Me This Mountain (p. 89-90)
22 King, Tim Give Me This Mountain (p. 65-66)
23 King, Tim Give Me This Mountain (p. 172)
24 King, Tim Give Me This Mountain (p. 178)
As the story goes, Robert Costa, an Australian national and chairman of the board at an Australian seminary, comes across Max’s magnum opus; “The Cross and the Parousia of Christ.” He begins not only reading it, but wrestling through the concepts, eventually completing the text three times over. (The text is just shy of eight-hundred pages and is erudite and obtuse.) He then attempts to contact Max King, via telephone, without success. So he boards a plane and flies across the world to Warren, Ohio from Australia on a pilgrimage in search of Max. After a while he finds the church where Max is pastor, and he sees an old man raking leaves, who he believes is a gardener. In some desperation, he begins to ask the gardener if Max King is still alive, secretly hoping that maybe he might have a few minutes with the profound Mr. King. The gardener doesn’t hear his question properly, so he repeats it again with more vigor this time “Is Max King still alive?” The answer comes back “I hope so, I am Max King.” If this story was a thousand years old, instead of thirty, it would be universally thought of as rhetorical device and myth. It has all the elements of myth; the rich respected man, finding a work which changes his life, forsakes his homeland and pilgrimages to a foreign land, and just when it seems his pilgrimage will be in vain, he finds a lowly gardener, who turns out to be the shrine he was seeking. This story, if nothing else, represents a certain mythos in which Max King seems to be held in the minds of many Transmillenialists; especially his son.  

The King family eventually found themselves estranged from the Churches of Christ, but the ministry continued to grow in Warren and eventually relocated to Colorado Springs, CO where it continues to this day to generate literature and hold annual conferences. We have explored the general history of the ministry and the

25 King, Tim; Give Me This Mountain (p.145-147)
particular ecclesiological structures of the Churches of Christ which charged the political environment that King was working and ministering in. The task remains to examine how the larger political structure of the world at that time, and the theological distinctives of the Churches of Christ made the radical shift away from theological orthodoxy not only plausible to Max King, but natural.

The Hermeneutics of covenant eschatology in light of their historical connections.

Transmillenial hermeneutics are difficult to speak about, because they must be discovered from the writings of Max and Tim King, and are not simply stated or addressed in the available literature on Transmillenialism. This section should be understood in light of what it is; an outsider looking into a system of thought and trying to discover its hermeneutical base. Work needs to be done by those adhering to this system to establish for themselves their hermeneutics. The topic cannot, however, be ignored because of the role hermeneutics plays in how all theology develops. It is the Transmillenialist’s hermeneutical base which sustains and drives much of the development of the movement. Without a proper understanding of their hermeneutics, and the external factors that they grew in, it is impossible to understand the conclusions that theology reaches. We will first examine the political climate of King’s day, and then turn to his hermeneutics and evaluate them in light of his identification with the Churches of Christ.

King writes “The Spirit of Prophecy” in 1971, but he seems to have been formulating these ideas for at least a decade beforehand. He is living in a time when
unrest in the Middle East is at a height. On November 29th, 1947, through an act of the United Nations, Israel officially received statehood, and was given the imprimatur to self govern. 26 Within six months violence would erupt for the first time in 1948 between Israel and her Arab neighbors. This violence would continue almost without cease for decades; eventually coming to a head in the six day war, and then again fermenting for a decade and boiling over on October 6, 1973 during the Yom Kippur War. 27

Of course, the formation of Israel as a state was a tremendous boon for those who held to a premillennial, futurist eschatology. It meant that prophecies were being fulfilled and Christ’s return was imminent. Lay theological writers began to capitalize on connecting events in the Middle East with premillennial eschatology. Hal Lindsey and others argued that American support ought to lie with Israel and that to do otherwise meant that one was of the spirit of the anti-Christ. 28 Because of this theological trend a new and increasingly vocal voting block (which would eventually become the religious right) began to form. Of course by supporting the state of Israel, based in no small part on religious conviction, bloodshed would continue for the foreseeable future in the Middle East. King’s response makes perfect sense in this setting. If one could change the eschatological mindset of the majority of Christian America, perhaps they would stop supporting a political situation that for at least a decade seemed to be heralding in a third world war. For King, living in the 20th century, it is perfectly reasonable to want to reinterpret prophecy based on the events of his day. Transmillenial eschatology is a

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27 Eban, Abba; Heritage: Civilization and the Jews (P. 331)
28 Lindsey, Hal; There’s a New World Coming (p. 170)
product of its time and the exegesis of King is driven as much by what he sees
surrounding him on a political scene, as what he sees in scripture.  

The dispensational Premillennialists furthered their exegetical concepts by the
formation Israel as a state. The Transmillenialists are just as guilty of conforming their
eschatology to match their modern day concerns, but only in reverse. Where the
Premillennialists used theology to drive their politics, the Transmillenialist used politics
to inform their theology. It is generally a bad idea to interpret scripture based on one’s
own historical viewpoint; whenever possible one should try to be objective when looking
at scripture and systematizing theology. However, every systematician has been guilty of
allowing a concept to jade their exegesis. The Westminster Confession of Faith identified
the Pope as being the Antichrist, because it made sense from within their eschatology and
their historical era. (Footnote) In the same way King’s ideas make sense within his own
theological background on this and a number of other points; especially coming from the
Churches of Christ. The breeding ground for this radicalizing hermeneutic is the cultural
situation of unrest in the Middle East and the specific theological situation of the
Churches of Christ.

The political background is one facet in understanding how King’s ideas could
have been radicalized. The other factor is his denominational background. The Church of
Christ provided King with a method of interpretation that allows for most of his ideas to

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29 King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 10) – “The Israeli occupation of the West Bank has generated
nothing but bloodshed, and many Palestinians, many Christian Palestinians, have lived in refugee camps for
a half-century, oppressed by a public policy endorsed by many American Christians”
30 Westminster Confession of Faith; Chapter 25:6 – “There is no other head of the Church but the Lord
Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof: but is that Antichrist, that man of sin
and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God.”
be plausible. Without taking this factor into account, along with the geo-political climate of his day, it is impossible to understand how King’s theology progressed.

Very little literature is available which looks specifically at the hermeneutics which Max King employs for his work. The lone text appears to be a Masters Thesis done by a Richard A. White in 1986 through Trinity Theological Seminary. Mr. White sets out to redeem the general presentation of preterism in King’s work and to exorcise the unorthodox conclusions that his preterism led him to. He writes that;

...The theological focus intends to serve an irenic function by challenging King’s unorthodox conclusions precisely in terms of King’s own premises...  

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The problem is that what follows fails to take into account King’s own premise as per the specific theological foundations of the Churches of Christ. Mr. White attempts to evaluate King as a preterist, who constructs his theology in a more broadly reformed way, and just goes too far. 32 His arguments are inconsistent with the Churches of Christ, because they fail to recognize the particular theology that this denomination holds. King is neither a preterist nor a normative member of the Churches of Christ, but he is an amalgamation of the two. Holding these two things simultaneously means that both beliefs affect each other and the end result is foreign to the ingredients which produced it. Without properly understanding this context White cannot understand the “why” even if he follows the basic theological system. Simply put, Mr. White is operating from an

31 White, Richard A.; Preterism and the Orthodox Doctrine of Christ’s Parousia: A Constructive Critique of M.R. King. (p. 7)
32 White, Richard A.; Preterism and the Orthodox Doctrine of Christ’s Parousia: A Constructive Critique of M.R. King. (p. 93)
entirely different presupposition than Mr. King is when he systematically constructs his ideas. Mr. White therefore rereads Mr. King in a way that is unnatural by removing Mr. King from his theological context. To properly respond to Mr. King, one needs to understand his own presuppositions. A comparison of the theology of the Churches of Christ with the hermeneutics of Max King reveals several obvious connections which help to clarify the particular hyper-preterist direction that Transmillennialism took. Two of these we will now examine in detail.

The primary hermeneutical assumption for Transmillennialism is that prophecy and eschatology drive interpretation. Normally eschatology is a derived systematic which follows from a list of other prolegomena which are considered foundational before beginning work on eschatology. For the Transmillennialist, covenant eschatology (or fulfilled eschatology) is the primary lens from which other doctrines are to be derived and understood. Max King holds that to miss the chronological coming of the eschaton in the first century invariably distorts scripture. 33 King’s eschatology plays the central role in his systematic formulation. Without a correct eschatology a proper exegesis of scripture is impossible and every secondary doctrine which follows is wrongly devised, according to King.

It is not unusual for theologians to have a driving hermeneutical consideration in their formulation of systematics. Reformed theologians, for instance, generally use soteriology as their prolegomena for evaluating other theological ideas. The broader Reformed faith evaluates a foreign theology based on how it meshes with scripture and

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33 King, Max; *The Cross and The Parousia of Christ* (p. 672) “When the Last things pertaining to Israel’s consummation are shifted to an alleged end of the Christian age, they take on a reverse meaning and function. Instead of ministering to, they detract from the completeness and permanency of the New Covenant age…there is a resulting malformation of the New Testament age…”
with their belief that scripture teaches primarily a justification by faith. Roman Catholics, to the contrary, let their ecclesiology drive much of their doctrinal stances. New doctrines are evaluated in the light of church dogma, of which scripture is a subset. For the Transmillenialist, the primary hermeneutic of evaluation is fulfilled eschatology. All traditional and new doctrines stand or fall based on a first century Parousia. Viewing systematics in this way makes for a dramatically different theological construct. Doctrines such as the second coming, eternal punishment and reward, the bodily resurrection and even the scope of what redemptive history accomplishes must be significantly altered for the Transmillenialist. Understanding the historical and cultural backdrop which Max King is responding to helps to demonstrate the reason why King felt justified in using eschatology as a first level hermeneutic. It also explains how King can change historical understandings of various big ticket theological items so easily and readily.

Max King’s reinterpetations via his eschatology have little or no historical precedent in the early church. Mr. White, in his dissertation, argues that since the eschatology of Transmillenialism was universally unknown to the church for the majority of its history it ought to be suspect and likely abandoned.  

In another age, and another political construct, Mr. White has a point. This eschatology doesn’t seem to make any sense. It certainly does not follow an interpretation from antiquity, least of all in the 1st and 2nd century where Christians are still anticipating a coming return of Christ and a Resurrection of the dead. (Jeffers Footnote Here) The church never seems to write about herself as if the resurrection and the Parousia had

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34 White, Richard A.; *Preterism and the Orthodox Doctrine of Christ’s Parousia: A Constructive Critique of M.R. King*. (p.51-52)
already passed. So if the early Church held to a futuristic eschatology, and until the late 1950’s everyone seemed to have agreed, how can Transmillenialists abandon the interpretations of two millennia not only on the issue of eschatology but on all the doctrinal issues which Transmillenialism touches on? Mr. White’s contention (while a valid one) again fails to understand the historic stressors of the Transmillenial movement. Abandonment of historical precedent is not a big issue for Mr. King, because the Churches of Christ had already abandoned arguments from Church history outside of the apostolic age. As part of the “Restoration Movement” the Churches of Christ universally hold that the church left its apostolic roots. The Churches of Christ see themselves as a return to an apostolic faith, grounded in the writings of the first apostles, not in any successive church age, including the first or second century. 35 This denomination holds that the historic Church very early on began to be apostate, apostasy then led to schism, and schism to confusion, and this remained the state of the church until the beginning of the churches “restoration” in the 19th century. The Churches of Christ believe that they are radically distinct from the historic Church, a restoration of the apostolic faith.

Without this departure from the history of the church found in the Transmillenialist view argument would be impossible. Their radical anti-traditionalist nature was the perfect environment to question eschatological assumptions and to redefine orthodox theology. It is a perfect breeding ground for Max King’s ideas and one imagines that Mr. King might simply respond to Mr. White with “sola scriptura!” While this might seem off to those of

35 Churches of Christ Homepage: http://church-of-christ.org/who.html#plea - “Members of the church of Christ do not conceive of themselves as a new church started near the beginning of the 19th century. Rather, the whole movement is designed to reproduce in contemporary times the church originally established on Pentecost, A.D. 30. The strength of the appeal lies in the restoration of Christ's original church.”
us from a different background, it is a small step to take if one holds theological identity with the Restoration Movement. It is often the case that our backgrounds drive our interpretations.

Even compared to full preterists from other traditions, specifically the reformed ones, it becomes clear how the different environment of the Churches of Christ fueled Mr. King’s exegesis. Sam Frost is a PhD candidate in Biblical Languages at Whitfield Seminary, and he holds a Master of Arts in Christian Studies and a Master of Arts in Religion also from Whitefield. He is a close acquaintance of both of Max King and Sam King, and has spoken at their annual conferences multiple times. He also receives mention in Tim King’s book, “Give me this Mountain.” He identifies his eschatology as being very similar to the Kings’ and even credits their ideas with moving him towards a less radical view of ecclesiology; from exclusivism towards ecumenism. (Reference Interview) Mr. Frost confirms that the Church of Christ’s theological context did make it easier to accept that the otherwise difficult theological ideas of a fulfilled eschatology. Mr. Frost, coming from a reformed perspective, mentioned that he struggled for a long time over the implications of Max King’s book and historical exegesis. In an online interview conducted on Dec 3, 2007 Mr. Frost outlined many of these struggles and how he overcame them. Specifically, for Mr. Frost, the church’s history of interpretation was a hurdle that he had a very hard time overcoming, and even wrote a book entitled “Misplaced Hope” which attempted to explain this problem for him, and how he eventually realized a conclusion.  

This illustration underscores the thesis of this paper. King’s writings must be understood in light of his background. With this firmly

36 Internet Voice Interview, Frost, Sam M. – December 3rd, 2007
If the first level hermeneutic for Transmillennialism is that “eschatology drives interpretation,” then the second tier is the dualistic view of prophecy. Transmillennialism teaches that some prophecies have a literal fulfillment, but others have a strictly “spiritual” fulfillment, and that unless the reader properly separates these two dynamics of scripture it is impossible to understand the text. 37 Most readers of eschatology also have a similar twofold use of symbolic and literal concepts. Symbolic things may be metaphor, simile, hyperbole or anywhere in a range of literary devices. There is always a question of how one knows if a given statement is literal or metaphorical, but things like genre identification, idioms from other texts, and exegetical study help to determine this for the most part. What is assigned to the realm of symbolism and what is considered literalistic does somewhat differ between theologians, but some things are generally agreed on. One example is the bodily resurrection, which is considered to have a literal fulfillment by almost the entire Christian church. By examining beliefs on the resurrection, the way in which a Transmillenialist uses his dualistic hermeneutic will be brought into focus.

The resurrection of the dead is held by the Amillennialist, the Postmillennialist, The Orthodox Preterist and the Premillennialist to have a literal and futuristic fulfillment. It is universally considered an event coming in the future in all four camps. The primary issue for these events is not, however, future or past, but literal or symbolic. If literal, than it must be the case that it is future, since we have not seen a literal resurrection of all the dead and it must be a definite event. If this event is symbolic it might have a

37 King, Max; The Spirit of Prophecy (p. 80-81)
fulfillment either in the future or the past, and it and any prophecy can be symbolically spun to be fulfilled by any event. Take, for example, Jehovah’s witnesses; who claim a “spiritual” fulfillment of the second coming in 1914. They cannot claim a literal one, however, since this would mean literally seeing Jesus coming in the clouds with glory. It is Max King’s symbolic interpretation of much of the prophetic concepts in scripture which allows him to interpret the Resurrection of the dead as a past event. Without this it would be impossible, since statements like “the elements will melt away.” Or “every knee will bow and every tongue will confess,” would be nonsensical.  

It follows then to ask how King determines that the Resurrection is not literally fulfilled, but symbolic. The answer lies both in what he does take to be literal and in his first presupposition. Matthew 24: 1-2 connects the physical destruction of the temple with the end of the world. King then argues that since this is a literal event (the temple destruction) and since it is connected with concepts of the end of the world, he argues that the end of the world must take place during this temple destruction. If taken as being the same event, this would place the second coming and the end of the world in the first century. Now we apply Mr. King’s first hermeneutical principle, that eschatology drives interpretation. Since we now know when the eschaton occurs, Mr. King concludes that all other points of dogma must be understood in light of this revelation on the timing of the Parousia. This is of course a radical dualism, a spiritualization of much of traditional interpretation, which stacks the symbolic side of prophecy and with few exceptions empties out the literal side. What is literal is what happened historically forty years after the death of Christ and everything else is symbolic for Mr. King. Once again we will see

38 2 Peter 3:12 and Romans 11:14 - NASB
how his context, adopted from the Churches of Christ, lends credence to his odd interpretive concept.

The theology of the Churches of Christ creates a radical Dispensationalism, concluding in a two fold dispensation of Old and New Covenants. The Old covenant is helpful only for historical information and as a record of how God acted in the past. It cannot be used for doctrinal formation. This is illustrated in Ferguson’s argument about the use of instruments in worship 39 and in his discussion about the obsolescence of the Old Testament. 40 The theological concept of the Churches of Christ sees a definitive ending of the Old Covenant, with no crossover. The Old Testament conclusively ended with the bringing of the New Covenant and it totally ceased to have relevance to our lives. If this is the case it would not be too much of a stretch to see how the New Covenant age could end definitively in the first century, without a future fulfillment.

From Mr. King’s perspective, to conclude that the bodily resurrection would not be a future and literal event is not a far stretch from what he already believed about the hard line between the Old and New Covenants. If the resurrection was part of the New Covenant, and if one holds this to be fulfilled, then there are no residual effects of that Covenant. For Mr. King the resurrection is much like circumcision, which once the Messiah came, had no effect on righteousness in the New Covenant. Although King’s Theology does not fit within the normative orthodoxy of the historic church, it does fit very nicely into the theological construct of the Churches of Christ, and from this view is entirely understandable. These are only a few of what undoubtedly are numerous

39 Ferguson, Everett; The Church of Christ (p. 272)
40 Ferguson, Everett; The Church of Christ (p. 14) – “The Old Testament as a system of religion does not regulate the activities of the church, that is, the people of Christ.”
connections between the peculiar theology of the Churches of Christ and the even more peculiar theology of Mr. Max King.

King’s understanding of theology is informed by and driven through his early connections with the Churches of Christ, and their peculiar theological landscape. These concepts work together to create a particular niche where King’s ideas not only seem plausible but are only modifications of what already existed. Into this cultural framework is interjected the founding of Israel, and the theological concepts of this event by the various dispensational and futurist camps of eschatology. Now the stage is set where Max King can begin to publish his ideas, but he seems to very early on meet with some opposition. Even if this is not the case, before long he does run into problems within the Churches of Christ, but this separation solidifies his position instead of repudiating it. If we understand King in his historic context, the movements that he makes theologically make perfect sense and even seem plausible, but in many ways without this context it would be hard to see the Transmillenial concepts.

Any attempt to define Max King’s theology as being strictly exegetical fails for the same reason that seeing Luther out of his historical context fails. In his day the pressures of Tetzel, the Magisterium and Luther’s own background contribute heavily to how he reads scripture. This in no way invalidates Luther’s reading of scripture; it only correctly identifies the external factors which emboldened his thesis. In the same way this paper does not level a charge of heresy, nor extend a hand of fellowship to the theological ideas of Max King. My goal has only been to understand this system of eschatology in its unique theological, political, sociological and psychological contexts. For those wishing to engage Mr. King in polemics, it is essential that they do so with these things in mind.
What seems like a great leap of doctrine in Transmillennial theology is but a short jump if one begins with the prolegomena of the Churches of Christ, the psychological pressures on Max King’s son Tim King and the cultural milieu of the Premillennial takeover of American Christianity. In short the conditions were ripe for the making of a new eschatological viewpoint that radically differed from all previous methods of interpretation.

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