

The Second Foundation: Premillennialism

by Thomas Ice

The second foundation stone supporting the pretribulational rapture of the church is the biblical doctrine known as premillennialism. Premillennialism teaches that the second advent will occur before Christ's thousand-year reign from Jerusalem upon earth. In the early church, premillennialism was called chiliasm, from the Greek term meaning 1,000 used six times in Revelation 20:2-7. Charles Ryrie cites essential features of premillennialism as follows: "Its duration will be 1,000 years; its location will be on this earth; its government will be theocratic with the personal presence of Christ reigning as King; and it will fulfill all the yet-unfulfilled promises about the earthly kingdom."1

Premillennialism is contrasted with the postmillennial teaching that Christ will return after He has reigned spiritually from His throne in heaven for a long period of time during the current age, through the church, and the similar amillennial view that also advocates a present, but pessimistic, spiritual reign of Christ. Biblical premillennialism is a necessary foundation for pretribulationism since it is impossible for either postmillennialism or amillennialism to support pretribulationism.

Historical Overview

Without question, premillennialism was the earliest and most widely held view of the earliest centuries of the church. The dean of church historians, Philip Schaff has said, "The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene Age [A.D. 100-325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, . . . a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papia, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius."2 German historian Adolph Harnack has said, "First in point of time came the faith in the nearness of Christ's second advent and the establishing of His reign of glory on the earth. Indeed it appears so early that it might be questioned as an essential part of the Christian religion. . . . it must be admitted that this expectation was a prominent feature in the earliest proclamation of the gospel, and materially contributed to its success. If the primitive churches had been under the necessity of framing a 'Confession of Faith,' it would certainly have embraced those pictures by means of which the near future was distinctly realized."3

Premillennialism began to die out in the established Catholic Church during the life of Augustine (A.D. 354-430). Ryrie summarizes this change: "With the union of church and state under Constantine, the hope of Christ's coming faded some. The Alexandrian school of interpretation attacked the literal hermeneutic on which premillennialism was based, and the influence of the teaching of Augustine reinterpreted the concept and time of the Millennium."4 Premillennialism has always survived, even when it has not been dominant or widely known. Chiliasm, though suppressed by the dominant Catholic Church, nevertheless survived through "underground" and "fringe" groups of Christians during the 1,000 year mediaeval period. During the Reformation, Anabaptists and Huguenots helped to revive premillennialism, until it was adopted on a wide scale by many Puritans during the Post-Reformation era.

The last 200 years have seen the greatest development and spread of premillennialism since the early church. Starting in the British Isles and spreading to America, consistent premillennialism, known as dispensational premillennialism, has come to dominate the Evangelical faith. This form of premillennialism has given rise to the most rigorous application of the literal hermeneutic which has led to the championing of pretribulational premillennialism in our own day.

Biblical Basis for Premillennialism

Even though the strongest support for premillennialism is found in the clear statement of Revelation 20:1-7, where six times Christ's kingdom is said to last 1,000 years, the Old Testament and the rest of the New Testament also support a premillennial understanding of God's plan for history. Jeffrey Townsend has given an excellent summary of the biblical evidence for premillennialism in the following material:

Developed from the Old Testament

"The OT covenants with Abraham and David established unconditional promises of an Israelite kingdom in the ancient land ruled by the ultimate Son of David. The OT prophets, from the earliest to the latest, looked forward to the establishment of this kingdom. Its principle features will include: regathering of the Jews from the nations to the ancient land, mass spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people, restoration of Jerusalem as the principal city and her Temple as the spiritual center of the world, the reign of David's ultimate Son over the twelve reunited tribes dwelling securely in the land as the pre-eminent nation of the world. Based on OT Scripture, a this-earthly, spiritual-geopolitical fulfillment of these promises is expected.

Developed from the New Testament

The NT writers do not reinterpret the OT kingdom promises and apply them to the church. Instead the church participates now in the universal, spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants without negating the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises to Israel. The NT authors affirm rather than deny the ancient kingdom hope of Israel. Matthew, Luke, and Paul all teach a future for national Israel. Specifically, Acts 1 with Acts 3 establishes that the restoration of the kingdom to Israel takes place at the second coming of Jesus Christ. Romans 11 confirms that at the time of the second advent, Israel will have all her unconditional covenants fulfilled to her. First Corinthians 15 speaks of an interim kingdom following Christ's return but prior to the eternal kingdom of God during which Christ will rule and vanquish all His enemies. Finally, Revelation 20 gives the chronology of events and length of Christ's kingdom on this earth prior to the eternal state.

In sum, the case for premillennialism rests on the fact that the OT promises of an earthly kingdom are not denied or redefined but confirmed by the NT. The basis of premillennialism is not the reference to the thousand years in Revelation 20. That is merely a detail, albeit an important one, in the broad pattern of Scripture. The basis of premillennialism is the covenant-keeping nature of our God, affirmed over and over again in the pages of Scripture. God will do what He has said He will do, for His own glory among the nations. And what He has said He will do is fulfill the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants to a regathered, regenerated, restored nation of Israel at the second coming of Jesus Christ, and for a thousand years thereafter, prior to the eternal kingdom of God."5

Conclusion

Premillennialism is merely the result of interpreting the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation, in the most natural way -- literally. Many of the critics admit that if the literal approach is applied consistently to the whole of Scripture, then premillennialism is the natural result. If the Old Testament promises are ever going to be fulfilled literally for Israel as a nation, then they are yet in the future. This is also supportive of premillennialism. Premillennialism also provides a satisfactory and victorious end to history in time as man through Christ satisfactorily fulfills his creation mandate to rule over the world.

Premillennialism is a necessary biblical prerequisite needed to build the later biblical doctrine of the

rapture of the church before the seven-year tribulation.

Endnotes

1 Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide To Understanding Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1986), p. 450.

2 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1884), Vol. 2, p. 614.

3 Adolph Harnack, "Millennium," *The Encyclopedia Britannica, Ninth Edition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), XVI, pp. 314-15. Cited in Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is A Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990), p. 117.

4 Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 452.

5 Jeffrey L. Townsend, "Premillennialism Summarized: Conclusion" in Edited by Donald K. Campbell & Jeffrey L. Townsend, *A Case For Premillennialism: A New Consensus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 270-71.

3. objections to premillennialism. In the discussion of the second advent the premillennial view of it was already subjected to special scrutiny and criticism, and the succeeding chapters on the resurrection and the final judgment will offer further occasion for a critical consideration of the premillennial construction of these events.Â d. There is no positive Scriptural foundation whatsoever for the Premillennial view of a double, or even a three- or fourfold resurrection, as their theory requires, nor for spreading the last judgment over a period of a thousand years by dividing it into three judgments. It is, to say the least, very dubious that the words, "This is the first resurrection" in Rev. Premillennialism attempts to take the Bible literally concerning the details of the second coming of Christ. Premillennialism is the view that Christ's second coming will occur prior to his Millennial Kingdom, and that the Millennial Kingdom is a literal 1,000-year reign. The "establishment of the millennial kingdom" is to occur after 7 years of Tribulation during which time the Antichrist persecutes believers, followed by "the outpouring of God's wrath on mankind.". Why did premillennialism become such an important doctrine for the early fundamentalists? The importance of premillennialism spoke to the clearness of Scripture and the issue of the miraculous, which is why it eventually displaced miracles as the fifth point of the fundamentals of the faith. Early dispensationalists believed strongly in the essential clarity of Scripture. God, who created human language, could and did reveal Himself clearly in Scripture.Â This would mean that premillennialism was front-and-center in such a struggle. Belief in premillennialism meant that one took the Bible literally when it referred to God's foreordained plan for history. The second foundation stone supporting the pretribulational rapture of the church is the biblical doctrine known as premillennialism. Premillennialism teaches that the second advent will occur before Christ's thousand-year reign from Jerusalem upon earth. In the early church, premillennialism was called chiliasm, from the Greek term meaning 1,000 used six times in Revelation 20:2-7. Charles Ryrie cites essential features of premillennialism as follows: "Its duration will be 1,000 years; its location will be on this earth; its government will be theocratic with the personal presence of Christ reigning as King; and it will fulfill all the yet-unfulfilled promises about the earthly kingdom."