

AN INTRODUCTION

The text at the center of the millennium debate is Revelation 20:1-8:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such, the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea

(Rev. 20:1-8)

The standard millennial positions (each being a system of eschatology in its own right) may be summarized briefly as follows:

1. Premillennialism teaches that there will be a future, literal, earthly millennial kingdom, and that it will begin when Christ returns. The *pre-* indicates that Christ will return *before* the millennial kingdom is established.
2. Amillennialism teaches that there will be no literal millennial kingdom. The prefix *a-* indicates a simple negation.
3. Postmillennialism teaches that Christ will return *after* (post-) the millennial kingdom concludes.

These simple designations of *pre-*, *a-*, and *post-* help to establish the chronological relationship between the millennial kingdom and Christ's return. But in themselves they fail to capture the full measure of the alternate positions.

What is in view is not simply *chronology*, but the *nature* of the kingdom of God. These positions also differ in their understanding of history, whether it be optimistic or pessimistic, and in their views of the church's strategy in fulfilling her mission. Therefore, more detail regarding these various positions is necessary.

Amillennialism

Though Reformed theology is by no means monolithic regarding eschatological systems, the majority report among Reformed thinkers tends to be amillennialism. Anthony A. Hoekema describes the amillennial position:

Ⓚ Amillennialists interpret the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6 as describing the present reign of the souls of deceased believers with Christ. They understand the binding of Satan mentioned in the first three verses of this chapter as being in effect during the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ...

Amillennialists further hold that the kingdom of God is now present in the world as the victorious Christ is ruling His people by His Word and Spirit, though they also look forward to a future, glorious, and perfect kingdom on the new earth in the life to come...the kingdom of evil will continue to exist alongside of the kingdom of God until the end of the world...The so-called "signs of the times" have been present in the world from the time of Christ's first coming, but they will come to a more intensified, final manifestation just before His Second Coming. The amillennialist therefore expects the bringing of the gospel to all nations and the conversion of the fulness of Israel to be completed before Christ's return. He also looks for an intensified form of tribulation and apostasy as well as for the appearance of a personal antichrist before the Second Coming."

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. cites the following features of amillennialism:

1. The church age is the kingdom era prophesied in the Old Testament, as the New Testament church becomes the Israel of God.
2. Satan was bound during Jesus' earthly ministry, restraining him while the gospel is being preached in the world.
3. Insofar as Christ presently rules in the hearts of believers, they will have some influence on culture while living out their faith.
4. Toward the end, evil's growth will accelerate, culminating in the great tribulation and a personal antichrist. ?

5. “Christ will return to end history, resurrect and judge all men, and establish the eternal order. The eternal destiny of the redeemed may be either in heaven or in a totally renovated new earth.”

Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensationalism, a relatively recent eschatological system, first appeared in the early nineteenth century in England. It has swept across the modern world, due largely to the wide influence of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909. Dispensationalism has become in our day the majority report among evangelical Christians.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie gives the following synopsis of dispensational premillennialism:

“*Premillennialists* believe that theirs is the historic faith of the Church. Holding to a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, they believe that the promises made to Abraham and David are unconditional and have had or will have a literal fulfillment. In no sense have these promises made to Israel been abrogated or fulfilled by the Church, which is a distinct body in this age having promises and a destiny different from Israel’s. At the close of this age, premillennialists believe that Christ will return for His Church, meeting her in the air (this is not the Second Coming of Christ), which event, called the rapture or translation, will usher in a seven-year period of tribulation on the earth. After this, the Lord will return to the earth (this is the Second Coming of Christ) to establish His kingdom on the earth for a thousand years, during which time the promises to Israel will be fulfilled.”

Gentry summarizes the key tenets of dispensational premillennialism:

1. Christ offered to the Jews the Davidic kingdom in the first century. They rejected it, and it was postponed until the future.
2. The current church age is a “parenthesis” unknown to the Old Testament prophets.
3. God has separate programs for the church and Israel.
4. The church will ultimately lose influence in the world and become corrupted or apostate toward the end of the church age.
5. Christ will return secretly to rapture His saints before the great tribulation.
6. After the tribulation, Christ will return to earth to administer a Jewish political kingdom based in Jerusalem for one thousand

years. Satan will be bound, and the temple will be rebuilt and the sacrificial system reinstated.

7. Near the end of the millennium, Satan will be released and Christ will be attacked at Jerusalem.
8. Christ will call down judgment from heaven and destroy His enemies. The (second) resurrection and the judgment of the wicked will occur, initiating the eternal order.

Historic Premillennialism

Perhaps the most noted advocate of *historic premillennialism* in our day has been George Eldon Ladd. Ladd has written extensively on the subject in such works as *A Theology of the New Testament*, "Historic Premillennialism," and *The Blessed Hope*. In the latter work, he provides an important critique of pretribulationism (Dispensationalism) and an historical perspective on differences between Dispensationalism and historic premillennialism.

"The idea of a pretribulation rapture was not seen in the Scriptures by the early church fathers," Ladd argues. "They were futurists and premillennialists but not pretribulationists. This of itself indicates that pretribulationism and premillennialism are not identical and that the Blessed Hope is not the hope of a rapture before the Tribulation. Pretribulationism was an unknown teaching until the rise of the Plymouth Brethren among whom the doctrine originated... The vocabulary of the Blessed Hope knows nothing of two aspects of Christ's coming, one secret and one glorious."

Ladd goes on to say:

"Finally, we concluded that the undue concern with the question of pretribulationism tends to cause neglect of more important and vital issues having to do with the Blessed Hope; that it is not necessary for the preservation of the purifying influence of the Blessed Hope; that it tends to misunderstand the most fundamental element in the purifying Hope; that it sacrifices one of the greatest incentives for world evangelization; that a Biblical attitude of expectancy is not identical with a belief in an any-moment coming of Christ; that it misrepresents the Blessed Hope by defining it in terms of escape from suffering rather than union with Christ and thus may be guilty of the positive danger of leaving the Church unprepared for tribulation when Antichrist appears; and that pretribulationism is not essential to a premillennial eschatology."

Gentry provides a seven-point summary of historic premillennialism:

1. The New Testament era Church is the initial phase of Christ's kingdom, as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets.

2. The New Testament Church may win occasional victories in history, but ultimately she will fail in her mission, lose influence, and become corrupted as worldwide evil increases toward the end of the Church Age.
3. The Church will pass through a future, worldwide, unprecedented time of travail. This era is known as the Great Tribulation, which will punctuate the end of contemporary history....
4. Christ will return at the end of the Tribulation to rapture the Church, resurrect deceased saints, and conduct the judgment of the righteous in the “twinkling of an eye.”
5. Christ will then descend to the earth with His glorified saints, fight the battle of Armageddon, bind Satan, and establish a worldwide, political kingdom, which will be personally administered by Him for 1,000 years from Jerusalem.
6. At the end of the millennial reign, Satan will be loosed and a massive rebellion against the kingdom and a fierce assault against Christ and His saints will occur.
7. God will intervene with fiery judgment to rescue Christ and the saints. The resurrection and the judgment of the wicked will occur and the eternal order will begin.

Postmillennialism

An advocate of contemporary postmillennialism, Gentry presents several features of this view. The first is that the messianic kingdom was founded on earth during the earthly ministry of Christ in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The New Testament church becomes the transformed Israel, the “Israel of God” of which Paul speaks in Galatians 6:16.

(The second feature is that the kingdom is essentially redemptive and spiritual rather than political and physical.)

The third feature is that the kingdom will exercise a transformational socio-cultural influence in history. Gentry quotes Greg L. Bahnsen: “The essential distinctive of post millennialism is its scripturally derived, sure expectation of gospel prosperity for the church during the present age.”

The fourth feature is that the kingdom of Christ will gradually expand in time and on earth. This will be accomplished not without Christ’s royal power as King but without His physical presence on earth.

The fifth feature is that the Great Commission will succeed. Gentry cites Bahnsen: “The thing that distinguishes the biblical postmillennialist, then, from amillennialists and premillennialists is his belief that the Scripture teaches the success of the great commission in this age of the church.” This expectation includes the virtual Christianization of the nations.

At this point in his summary, Gentry makes an important distinction between two types or groups of modern postmillennialist: pietistic postmillennialist and theonomic postmillennialist. The basic difference between the two has to do with the application of biblical law. “Pietistic postmillennialism (as found in Banner of Truth circles),” Gentry says, “denies that the post millennial advance of the kingdom involves the total transformation of culture through the application of biblical law. Theonomic postmillennialism affirms this.”

The seventh feature is that an extended period of spiritual prosperity may endure for millennia, after which history will be drawn to a close by the personal, visible, bodily return of Christ. His return will be accompanied by a literal resurrection and a general judgment, ushering in the final and eternal form of the kingdom.

Other Differences

The differences displayed among the various millennial schools go far beyond their understanding of the millennium itself. The differences are systemic and extend to every aspect of eschatology. Some form of preterism could conceivably be incorporated into all of them. One possible exception is Dispensationalism, although with certain modifications it could fit in even there.

Partial preterism may be incorporated in both pietistic postmillennialism and theonomic postmillennialism. One need not be in the theonomic camp to embrace partial preterism. The term *theonomic* refers to a special school of thought within contemporary Calvinism, to a specific view of the Old Testament law and its application to contemporary culture. In a broad sense, all Calvinists are “theonomic,” and in an even broader sense, all Christians are theonomic.

Ⓟ The root meaning of *theonomy* is “rule by the law of God.” Every Christian must, in some sense, agree that God’s rule is supreme over creation. But by no means do all Christians agree with historic Calvinism that the Old Testament law has an ongoing function in the Christian life. Of Calvin’s famous three-fold use of the law, the third is still hotly disputed among evangelicals. In denying the “third use” of the law, the *tertius usus*, many evangelicals, especially those within the Dispensational camp, categorically deny theonomy.

The view that the Old Testament law is not binding on the believer in any sense, a view called antinomianism, is widely held. The problem of antinomianism is a serious threat to contemporary Christianity. Over against this view, all Calvinists stand together in asserting the on-going relevance and use

of the Old Testament's moral law. The debate over theonomy in its narrow sense is an intramural debate among Calvinists, who agree on more regarding the Old Testament law than they disagree on. But theonomy in the narrow sense is not, as Gentry has indicated, essential to postmillennialism.

Another major difference between millennial schools is their attitudes toward the future. Postmillennialism is the most optimistic concerning the gospel's impact on history and culture. When one surveys history at the end of the twentieth century, it may seem somewhat Pollyannaish to regard the church's influence in the world with much optimism. This is especially true in light of the frequent assertion by sociologists and historians that this is the "post-Christian era." The only post-Christian era known to Scripture is eternity, which may be "post" with respect to any specific era in church history, but will certainly not be Christian. The future belongs to the people of God and to the kingdom of Christ. Some Calvinists may be pessimistic with regard to the immediate future and even with regard to the gospel's impact on culture before Christ comes again, but one cannot be a Calvinist and a pessimist about the ultimate triumph of Christ and the gospel.

Conclusion

The purpose of *The Last Days according to Jesus* has been to examine and evaluate the various claims of preterism, both full and partial. The great service preterism performs is to focus attention on two major issues. The first is the time-frame references of the New Testament regarding eschatological prophecy. The preterist is a sentinel standing guard against frivolous and superficial attempts to downplay or explain away the force of these references.

The second major issue is the destruction of Jerusalem. This event certainly spelled the end of a crucial redemptive-historical epoch. It must be viewed as the end of some age. It also represents a significant visitation of the Lord in judgment and a vitally important "day of the Lord." Whether this was the *only* day of the Lord about which Scripture speaks remains a major point of controversy among preterists.

The great weakness of full preterism—and what I regard to be its fatal flaw—is its treatment of the final resurrection. If full preterism is to gain wide credibility in our time, it must overcome this obstacle.

With respect to partial preterism, Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. has done excellent work in forcing reconsideration of the date when the Book of Revelation was written. If he is correct in arguing for a date prior to A.D. 70, then sweeping revisions must be made in our understanding of this book's content and focus.

Debates over eschatology will probably continue until the Lord returns and we have the advantage of hindsight rather than the disadvantage of foresight. The divisions that exist within the Christian community are understandable,

considering that both the subject matter and the literary genre of future prophecy are exceedingly difficult. This does not mean that we may push the Bible aside or neglect its eschatological sections. On the contrary, the interpretative difficulties presented by eschatological matters simply call us to a greater diligence and persistence in seeking their solution.

¶ Concerns regarding the points in dispute is the authority of Scripture. As the inerrant Word of God, it precludes all efforts to ignore or downplay any aspect of its teaching. The evangelical world cannot afford to turn a deaf ear to the railing voices of skepticism that gut Scripture of its divine authority, that assault the credibility of the apostolic witness and even of Christ himself. We must take seriously the skeptics' critique of the time-frame references of New Testament prophecy, and we must answer them convincingly.