

The Premillennial Error

(or the Rapture and the Revelation)

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How one views the events which surround the return of Jesus Christ in glory is determined largely by the interpretation given to the term millennium (thousand years - see Rev. 20:1-7). As was pointed out in the previous article, there are three such interpretations: post-, pre-, and a-millennialism. We have seen that post-millennialism is that optimistic view which holds that Christ shall return after the millennium (a long period of time, not necessarily an exact thousand years), and find the world thoroughly Christianized with only a few vestiges of sin remaining. It will be a golden age of righteousness and peace, the majority of mankind shall be saved, and war shall have disappeared from the face of the earth. It was shown that such a conception cannot be harmonized with many portions of the Holy Scriptures, and therefore must be rejected.

Considering premillennialism, the first clue one receives that this view cannot be the teaching of the Word of God is the astounding lack of agreement between the premillennialists themselves. If Scripture presented the last things as this view insists, should there not be unanimity on all but a few minor points perhaps? But this is not the case. The definition which we offer is, therefore, not representative of all premillennialists, but is general enough to cover most: historic premillennialism is the view of the last things which holds that the second coming of Christ will be followed by a period of peace (an exact one thousand years) during which time Christ will reign on this earth in an earthly kingdom; then shall come the end. A more radical form of this view is dispensationalism. The dispensationalist divides the history of mankind into seven distinct periods or dispensations, and teaches that God deals with the human race during each period according to a different principle: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, kingdom. Also, this view insists that the Church will be removed from the earth before the great tribulation (see Matt. 24:29). This latter view, espoused by John N. Darby in England about 1830, and disseminated widely in this country by the Scofield Reference Bible, is really the unique phenomenon called American Premillennialism. It is not taught in the Bible but in the Scofield Reference Bible. Do not confuse the two. The Bible is the infallible Word of God; the Scofield Reference Bible is a deceiving commentary that contains "explanatory notes" on the same page with the text of Scripture. Premillennialism has never been incorporated into any of the creeds, but is the private interpretations of individuals with many denominations. It has never been maintained by outstanding theologians not taught in seminaries where scholarship and exegesis are prominent, but by various Pentecostal and Holiness groups, and Bible institutes. Today this seems to be changing a bit. Premillennialism seems to be making little inroads also into the Reformed community. It is to counteract this trend, and to afford God's people some Scriptural guidelines for judgment that we briefly examine this erroneous view.

Let us get it clearly in mind. Its main tenants are: 1. The Jews are God's originally intended people, they are His Kingdom people. To them God spoke the entire Old Testament and to them He promised the Messiah. 2. When Christ came, He was not recognized nor believed on by the majority of the Jews. This contingency was not foreseen by the prophets, nor was it in the original plan of God. However, since Israel, the twelve tribes, rejected the Christ, as an expedient He resorts to the Gentiles, which people constitute the Church in distinction from the Kingdom. Thus the Church is a parenthesis in history. It began at the cross and shall end at the beginning of the millennium. Also, this implies that Scripture has been written for two distinct recipients. Part is for the Jews - the entire Old Testament, most of the gospels and especially the Sermon on the Mount, and parts of Revelation. The epistles plus other parts of the book of Revelation are for the Church. 3. At any moment, without signs or announcement, there shall be a Rapture. See I Thess. 4:13-17, Matt. 24:40-41, and Matt. 25:13. By the rapture is meant the sudden and secret coming of Christ to take to Himself in the air the bodies of the resurrected and living saints. The wicked dead remain in the grave. This is Christ's coming for His saints and is known as the first resurrection. 4. Next is a seven year period called the Tribulation (the seventh week of Dan. 9:24-27). During this time all the events of Rev. 4:9 and Matt. 24 take place. The Church, however, is not under tribulation but is with her Lord in the air. 5. Then Christ comes with His saints to this earth again in the Revelation. At this time there is a second resurrection of those saints who died during the tribulation. The second coming of Christ ushers in the Millennium. 6. With the advent of the Millennium, prophetic time resumes, for God returns to His favored people,

the Jews. Christ comes to this earth and reigns in an earthly kingdom of peace and prosperity, a kingdom which has its center in Jerusalem. The Jews are restored to Palestine, and at the sight of Messiah are turned to Him in a great national conversion. At the beginning of this period Satan is bound, and Christ destroys the Antichrist in the battle of Armageddon. The curse is removed from nature: deserts bloom and wild animals are tame. Great numbers of Gentiles are also converted and incorporated into this Kingdom. 7. At the end of the Millennium Satan is loosed for a short time. 8. Then is the third resurrection, that of the wicked at the end of the world. They are judged with the Devil and his angels, found wanting and assigned forever to feel the sting of hell. 9. Finally, the eternal state with all the fullness of heaven and emptiness of hell is ushered in. Some say all the redeemed mingle in a new heaven and a new earth. Others keep the Kingdom and the Church separate forever, the one in earthly Palestine, the other in heaven.

The above is a highly condensed, greatly streamlined presentation of the matter. Some authors list as many as 22 separate events. Many premillennialist preachers must resort to a complicated chart spread across the front of the church building to make sure they are being followed. A brief catalog of the important premillennial points is as follows: seven dispensations, eight covenants, two second comings, three or four resurrections, and at least four judgments. It is difficult to conceive this as the teaching of the Bible, which was written in simple language for the simple, yea for babes. To the refreshing, uncomplicated, clear Word of God we now turn for light on these matters.

Underlying all Premillennial thought is the separation made between Old dispensation Israel and the New dispensation Church. The question is, is Israel God's Kingdom people and are the Gentiles His Church? Or is Israel a spiritual concept, so that Israel is the Church and the Church is Israel? If the basic unity of the covenant of grace can be established; if Abraham, for example, and the New Testament Gentiles are one in the eyes of God; if God deals with His people in every age according to the same principle - faith, then Premillennialism falls, and can only be called an ingenious misuse of Scripture. With that man of faith Abraham, to whom all Jews proudly traced their ancestry, God established His everlasting covenant of grace. Gen. 17:7. That covenant was established also with Abraham's progeny. Gen. 22:17. The Lord makes clear that in His seed (Christ) all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. Gen. 22:18. In the book of Galatians, Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) takes up the example of Abraham as he rebukes the foolish Galatians for their attempted work of righteousness. In making clear that God accounts faith in Christ for righteousness, the apostle speaks these amazing words: "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." Gal. 3:7. Later he writes "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ." He concludes this chapter with the words: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Can anyone miss the unity of God's work of redemption? Abraham's seed, true spiritual Israel, is composed of all those who have been given faith in His dear Son. In close connection with the above is the fact that Paul also stresses the unity of the Church of all ages in such passages as Rom. 9:6-9, Eph. 2:19-22, Eph. 4:4-6, and Col. 1:16-20. Jesus Himself as the Good Shepherd was intensely conscious of the unity of those given Him of God to redeem; He said to the Jews on Solomon's porch: "And other sheep have I which are not of this fold; them also I must bring and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd." John 10:16.

Secondly, the text most referred to by the Premillennialists, I Thess. 4:13-17, simply does not prove a sudden, silent "rapture", and a separate resurrection of the righteous and wicked. Rather it teaches: a visible, noticeable (shout, voice, trump) return of Christ; the resurrection of the bodies of dead saints followed immediately by the translation of those saints who are alive at Christ's coming, without saying anything about the wicked; that the saints shall forever remain with their Lord, suggesting not that they return to this mundane earth again in their glorified, spiritual, incorruptible bodies, but that they remain with Christ in heavenly glory! Further, Christ Himself makes clear there is but one resurrection: "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation" John 5:28,29. The Scriptures reveal one second coming of Christ, one resurrection at His coming, and one judgment.

At fault is the method of interpretation followed by adherents of this system. A sound rule is that difficult passages of the Word, which Rev. 20 certainly is, must be explained in the light of simpler texts. One cannot escape the feeling, however, that with this view a preconceived theory is brought to Scripture, difficult passages are appealed to

as proof, and then the attempt is made to bring many simpler passages into line with the theory. The result is a violent splitting asunder of the Word, and thus of the redemptive work of God! But God is one. His Word is one (presented in two testaments, prophecy and fulfillment), and redemption is Jesus Christ is one!

Positively, we live near the end of what Rev. 20 calls the “thousand years”. This millennium began at Pentecost and will end when time and history end. Christ shall return personally and visibly, shall call forth the dead from the graves and the seas, shall judge all men according to their works, and shall bring His sheep into one fold, the heavenly house of many mansions! Let the Reformed truth continue to be sounded “that the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to Himself by His Spirit and Word out of the whole human race, a Church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day XXI). Blessed are all those who are living members thereof!