

Sunday, November 6, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 44 Millenarianism: Forging a Narrative for Truth's Resurgence, Part 1

## Introduction

- As we trace the resurgence of Pauline Truth through time it is important to identify a larger narrative to organize our study around. This will help prevent our study from becoming muddled, random, or hard to follow. Clarity is what we are after.
- The Millenarian Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century provides the perfect storyline to chronicle the development of systematized dispensationalism. In fact, British Millenarianism of the early 1800s proved to be the seed bed for the resurgence of Pauline Truth. Consequently, we will use the history of the Millenarianism movement as a means of tracing major developments in dispensational theology.

## Review

- According to R.G. Clouse, author of the entry “Millennium, Views of the” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, the early church embraced the premillennial view of eschatology. “Expressed in a form that has been called historic premillennialism, this hope seems to have been the prevailing eschatology during the first three centuries of the Christian era, and is found in the works of Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Methodius, Commodianus, and Lactantius.” (Elwell, 771)
- *Chiliasm*, as it was known in the early church comes from the Latin word meaning one thousand and is therefore viewed as referring to the doctrine of the millennium, or kingdom age that is yet to be. Lewis Sperry Chafer references the entry in the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “the belief that Christ will return to reign for a thousand years . . .” “The distinctive feature of this doctrine is that He will return before the thousand years and therefore will characterize those years by His personal presence and by the exercise of His rightful authority, securing and sustaining all the blessings on the earth which are ascribed to that period. The term *Chiliasm* has been superseded by the designation *premillennialism*. . .” (Chafer, 264)
- J. Dwight Pentecost, author of *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, also has much to say about *Chiliasm* in the post Apostolic era. He states, “It is generally agreed that the view of the church for the centuries immediately following the Apostolic era was the premillennial view of the return of Christ.” (Pentecost, 373) Pentecost quotes Whitby, generally viewed as the founder of postmillennialism, to prove his point.
  - “The doctrine of the Millennium, or the reign of saints on earth for a thousand years, is now rejected by all Roman Catholics, and by the greatest part of Protestants; and yet it passed among the best Christians, for two hundred and fifty years, for a traditional apostolical; and, as such, is delivered by many Fathers of the second and third century, who speak of it as the tradition of our Lord and His apostles, and of all the ancients who lived before them; who tell us the very words in which it was delivered, the Scriptures which were then so interpreted; and say that it was held by all Christians that were exactly orthodox. It was received not only in the Eastern parts of the Church, by Papias (in Phrygia), Justin (in Palestine), but by Irenaeus (in Gaul), Nepos (in Egypt),

Apollinaris, Methodius (in the West and South), Cyprian, Victorinus (in Germany), by Tertullian (in Africa), Lactantius (in Italy), and Severus, and by the Council of Nice (about A.D. 323).” (quoted in Pentecost, 373-374)

- “That such concessions should be made by anti-premillenarians is only because history records the fact that such a premillennial belief was the universal belief of the church for two hundred and fifty years after the death of Christ.” (Pentecost, 374)
- Philip Schaff states the following regarding the eschatology of the early church: “The most striking point in the eschatology of the anti-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers. . .” (Schaff, 614)
- “Several forces worked to undermine the millennialism of the early church. . . Another influence which encouraged a change of eschatological views was the emphasis of Origen upon the manifestation of the kingdom within the soul of the believer rather than in the world. This resulted in a shift of attention away from the historical toward the spiritual or metaphysical. A final factor that led to a new millennial interpretation was the conversion of the Emperor Constantine the Great and the adoption of Christianity as the favored Imperial religion. In the new age brought in by the acceptance of Christianity as the main religion of the Roman Empire it was Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who articulated the amillennial view that dominated Western Christian thought during the Middle Ages. The millennium, according to his interpretation, referred to the church in which Christ reigned with his saints. The statements in the book of Revelation were interpreted allegorically by Augustine. . . Augustine’s allegorical interpretation became the official doctrine of the church during the medieval period.” (Clouse in Elwell, 773-774)
- “Four broad approaches have developed and taken turn in the limelight throughout church history: historic or classic premillennialism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, and dispensational premillennialism. . . Although representatives of all three millennial perspectives may be found in almost every era of church history, premillennialism appears to have commanded a majority of proponents in the first four centuries, amillennialism dominated from the time of Augustine’s major writings in the fifth century onward, and postmillennialism found its greatest support in the modern missionary movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” (Bloomberg and Chung, xii-xiii)

### **Overview of Historic Premillennialism**

- As alluded to in the previous point, Bloomberg and Chung identify a difference between *historic* and *dispensational* premillennialism.
- Within premillennialism there are essentially two views: 1) *historicist* which believes that Revelation contains a prophetic overview of the entire church age. Thus they look for prophetic fulfillments in past, present, and future historical events. 2) *futurist* which maintains that Revelation’s prophecies are scheduled to occur in the future, just before Christ’s return. (Bloomberg and Chung, 4)

- Simply stated *historicists* believe that we are currently living within the book of revelation. In other words, the prophecies of Revelation have been being fulfilled for the past 2,000 years. In contrast, *futurists* believe that Revelation 4-22 await a future a fulfillment.
- “Martin Luther was one of the first commentators to see Revelation from chapter 4 onwards as a prophetic survey of church history. The particulars of John Calvin’s interpretation are not known, since Revelation is the only New Testament book upon which he did not produce a commentary. However, Luther’s general approach to Revelation was followed by virtually all the Reformers and by Protestants well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.” (Gregg, 31)
- In our time, *historicism* is clearly not in vogue. Modern commentaries presenting this approach are rare, though an abbreviated list of luminaries of the past who took this view would have included John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, Sir Isaac Newton, Jan Huss, John Foxe, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, C.H. Spurgeon, and many more. (Gregg, 34)
- “Those who teach this view believe that God revealed the entire church age in advance through the symbolic visions of the Apocalypse. For example, the breaking of the seven seals (ch. 6-7) is often said to be the barbarian invasion that sacked the western Roman Empire. The scorpion/locusts that came out of the bottomless pit (ch. 9) are the Arab hordes attacking the eastern Roman Empire, followed by the Turks, represented as the horses with serpents for tails and flame-throwers for mouths. The beast (ch. 13) represents the Roman papacy.” (Gregg, 34)
- “A unique characteristic of this line of interpretation is its advocacy of what is called the ‘year-for-a-day principle’ (Bloomberg and Chung called it the day age theory) when dealing with designations of time in Revelation. It is believed that God revealed literal and exact time periods, but cast them in a symbolism that represents a year as a day. On this principle, five months (150 days) is taken to designate 150 years. The significant period of 1260 days is interpreted as the same number of years. ‘An hour, and a day, and a month, and a year’ becomes (depending whether a year is 360 or 365 days) 391 years and 15 days, or 396 years and 106 days. In support of this procedure, appeal is made to Ezekiel 4:4-6, in which the prophet was required to lie on his left side for 390 days, and upon his right side for 40 days, representing the same number of years decreed upon Israel and Judah respectively. This principle is then extrapolated to apply to ‘prophetic time’ in all plausible cases in Daniel and Revelation.” (Gregg, 34-35)
- “One of the weaknesses of the *historicist* approach is seen in the inability of its advocates to agree upon the specific fulfillments of the prophecies. . . For example, while most *historicists* see the seven trumpets as pertaining to the Islamic forces attacking the eastern Roman Empire, they disagree among themselves about the preceding section (the seven seals) as to whether they refer to the defeat of the western Roman Empire by the Huns and Vandals, or to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.” (Gregg, 36-37)

- *Historic Premillennialism* and *Dispensational Premillennialism* disagree on the role Israel will play in God's eschatological program and in anticipating a Rapture of Christians to heaven before the beginning of the Tribulation. (Gregg, 27)
- Craig L. Blomberg is the author of an essay titled "The Posttribulationism of the New Testament: Leaving "Left Behind" Behind," which can be found in *A Case for Historical Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology*. As the title of this chapter (4) implies, Blomberg offers a lengthy discussion of how *Historic* and *Dispensational* Premillennialism have approached the subject of the rapture.
- Blomberg sees that rapture debate as an intramural discussion between premillennialists. Please consider some of his comments:
  - "... the debate over the timing of the rapture is largely limited to evangelical Christian circles. It is limited even more because it is predominately an intramural debate among those who subscribe to premillennialism. . . A moment's thought will disclose why only premillennialists typically debate the temporal relationship between the tribulation and the rapture. For amillennialism, just as there is no discrete millennial period separate from the rest of history, so no unique period of tribulation occurs. Depending on one's perspective and particular experiences, there is a great physical tribulation and/or great spiritual victory for God's people in every age of human history. It makes no sense within amillennialism to take any perspective other than posttribulationism, because there is no period prior to the parousia when one may speak of the absence of great tribulation, even if there is an intensification of it just before Christ's return. For the same reason, postmillennialists likewise would have no need to separate the rapture from Christ's public return. For them also, the only tribulation that occurs is through the entirety of the church age, particularly in AD 70, and up to but not including the millennium with which that age culminates." (Blomberg and Chung, 65-66)
- "Throughout the centuries, what alternatives have Christians held to a pretribulation rapture? Historically, the most common belief by far has been that of a posttribulation rapture: Christ returns after the tribulation to gather his people together, and indeed, this return is one and the same as his parousia, ushering in judgment day." (Blomberg and Chung, 64)
- According to Blomberg, "In first-century Judaism, particularly in apocalyptic literature, the belief often arose that part of the purpose for the precise time of the Messiah's coming would be to intervene and save his people from unprecedented distress in this world." (Blomberg and Chung, 62)
- Space will not permit a detailed discussion of Blomberg's entire explanation of the relevant passages; however, he states the following regarding I Thessalonians 4:17, "this imagery, then, virtually requires that the rapture be the catching up of believers from earth into the air to meet the Lord descending in the clouds and to escort him back to earth in triumph—imagery that is consistent only with a posttribulation rapture. . . The upshot of our survey, then, is that without exception every relevant Scripture supports posttribulationism over pretribulationism." (Blomberg and Chung, 79-83)

- “Classic or historic premillennialism (i.e., posttribulational premillennialism) does best justice both to the awful suffering that God’s people have already had to endure through the ages, by not offering them potentially unrealistic hopes about escaping the worst, and the vindication of God’s intentions for this earth and this cosmos (not just a new heavens and earth), which he created perfectly good for humanity’s sanctified enjoyment. And God’s purposes are never ultimately thwarted. The suffering will not prove pointless, for it will lead to God many who may not come any other way than by seeing that Christians can suffer and even die differently than all other people – a form of evangelism already well documented in the history of Christian missions.” (Blomberg and Chung, 86-87)
- The writings of Tertullian confirm that posttribulationalism was the view held by some in the early church; however, as we have already seen, just because something is old that does not make it right.
  - “I will then see whether it will be women thus decked out whom the angels carry up to meet Christ in the air! If these things are now good, and of God, they will then also present themselves to the rising bodies.”
  - “In the crisis of the last moment, and from their instantaneous death while encountering the oppression of the Antichrist, these persons will also undergo a change. They obtain thereby, not so much a divestiture of the body, as a clothing superimposed upon it with the garment that is from heaven. These persons will put on this heavenly garment over their bodies.”
  - “He says that those who remain unto the coming of Christ, along with the dead in Christ, shall rise first, being “caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.” . . . By the mouth of Isaiah, it was said long ago: “Who are these that fly as clouds unto me, as doves with their young ones?”
  - “How, indeed, will the soul mount up to heaven, . . . when as yet those whom the coming of the Lord is to find on the earth have not yet been caught up into the air to meet Him at His coming? For they will be in company with the dead in Christ, who will be the first to rise.”
  - “Before we put off this garment of the flesh, we wish to be clothed with the celestial glory of immortality. Now, the privilege of this favor awaits those who are found in the flesh at the coming of the Lord. These—owing to the oppression of the times of the Antichrist—deserve by an instantaneous death (which is accomplished by a sudden change) to become qualified to join the rising saints. Paul writes of this to the Thessalonians.” (Bercot, 551-552)
- Irenaeus stated the following regarding the rapture, “When in the end the church will suddenly be caught up from this, it is said, “There will be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, nor will be.” For this is the last contest of the righteous. When they overcome in this contest, they are crowned with incorruption.” (Bercot, 551)
- In summation, *historic* premillennialism views the book of Revelation as prophetic of the entire church age, teaches that we are currently living within the time period predicted in Revelation, and that the Rapture is posttribulational in nature.

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