

Dispensational and Historic Premillennialism as Popular Millennialist Movements

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America has always been fertile ground for millennialism. Given the American free market religious economy, people are free to believe what they want, organize as they please, and spread their ideas as best they can. Sometimes such efforts pay off nicely; but sometimes they do not. In a relatively few cases, millennialist ideas have actually generated large and hard-to-ignore movements. When that happens, millennialist ideas can even seep into the popular culture.

A 2002 *Time/CNN* poll reported that since 9/11 more than one-third of Americans have been thinking more seriously about how current events might be leading to the end of the world. Even though only 36% of those polled said they believe that the Bible is the Word of God, 59% of them thought that events predicted in Revelation were in the process of being fulfilled. Almost one in four Americans thought that 9/11 had been predicted in the Bible, and almost one in five expected to live long enough to see the end of the world. Finally, over one-third of those who expressed support for Israel said they based their views on the belief that the Jews must have their own country in the Holy Land for the Second Coming to occur.¹

One could credibly argue that the poll merely uncovered the views of many American evangelicals, who now comprise somewhere between one quarter and one third of the population, among whom Bible prophecy still resonates. But as historian Paul Boyer has argued, many other Americans who usually ignore the Bible are willing to listen to teachers of Bible prophecy when world events reach crisis levels.² We probably

all know biblically-illiterate and religiously-unaffiliated people who have somehow picked up rudimentary notions of the Rapture, the Antichrist, or Armageddon. It is clear, then, that one way or another *somebody's* millennialist beliefs have made their way into non-Evangelical territory. And we know who they are. From Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) to Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's the *Left Behind* series (1996+), dispensational premillennialists have made impressive forays into the popular culture, often combining their specific views of the future with well-organized right-wing and pro-Israel political action. No American millennialist group has received more attention or reached farther into mainstream culture than dispensationalism has. Despite its various successes, dispensationalism is not the only kind of premillennialism around.

How does *historic premillennialism*—the subject of this book—measure up as a popular millennialist movement, especially when compared to its biggest rival dispensationalism? As we shall see, comparisons are difficult because they are two very different kinds of movements. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two is interesting and revealing. This study will explain how and why.

The place to begin is to define what we mean by “popular.” When used to describe a millennialist movement, the word can have two quite different meanings. “Popular” can refer to the *size of its following*, to the extent of its acceptance. In this sense, then, a *popular* millennialist movement has a large clientele with recognizable leadership, supporting institutions and organizations, and a clear set of identifying beliefs. Thus “popular” refers to a movement's *popularity*.

The word “popular” can also refer to the *kind of following* a movement possesses. Does it appeal to common folks or to a more elite audience? Does it consciously position

itself over against the so-called “experts?” Where do its leaders come from, how do they make their case, and what is the nature of their appeal? Does it come across as a “high brow” or a “low brow” movement? In this sense of the word, “popular” can mean *populist* rather than elitist.

In a nutshell, this study will show that historic premillennialism does not qualify as a popular millennialist movement in either sense of the word, at least not yet.

Labeling Millennialist Movements

Christian eschatology includes a large number of “end-times issues”—death, the end of the world, divine judgment, and heaven and hell. Some Christians have paid special attention to the end of history and whether there will be a golden age of peace connected to Christ’s return. The key biblical passage for such speculation is Revelation 20 in which Christ returns to earth, defeats Satan, and sets up a thousand-year kingdom on the earth, a millennium (from the Latin *mille*, thousand). This passage in particular and the Book of Revelation in general have been interpreted in vastly different ways, which has led systematic theologians and historians to provide labels to identify various millennialist positions.

Most early Christians interpreted Revelation 20 quite literally and expected a millennial age following Christ’s return. Such views are called *premillennialist* because they place the Second Coming *before* the millennium. After the fifth century and Augustine’s enormously influential *City of God*, most Christians adopted a more figurative interpretation of Revelation 20. They concluded that the “millennium”—a spiritual kingdom characterized by Christ’s reign—actually began with Christ’s

resurrection and will continue to expand in both the church and in heaven until Christ's return. Because they do not expect a literal millennium on the earth, they are called *amillennialists* (literally, "no-millennialists"). A third, more recent group of Christians argues that the Second Coming will follow the world's conversion to Christ and the rise of a Christian golden age. Because they place Christ's return *after* this millennium, they are called *postmillennialists*.

Differences extend beyond the interpretation of Revelation 20. Interpreters have also disagreed about the way they approach Revelation as a whole. Most modern scholars choose between a *preterist* or *idealist* reading of Revelation. Preterists believe the book reflects late first- or early second-century conditions and was written to bring hope to persecuted believers at that time. Thus preterists understand Revelation more in political than prophetic terms. Idealists set aside all chronological or predictive issues in order to treat the book as an artistic exposition of the on-going battle between good and evil. In short, Revelation is a drama that speaks to the longings of the human heart.

Others (mainly those holding millennialist views) utilize either a *historicist* or *futurist* approach. Historicists believe that Revelation contains a prophetic overview of the entire church age. Thus they look for prophetic fulfillments in past, present, and future historical events. Futurists believe that Revelation's prophecies are scheduled to occur in the future, just before Christ's return, which leads them to develop elaborate future scenarios and look for current "signs of the times" that point ahead to expected events. Take a core sample of Christian thought almost any time in the last two thousand years and one can find advocates of these positions.³

While such labeling helps in distinguishing one group from another, many millennialist movements are difficult to classify. History is messy; and most prophetic movements do not consult with theologians before putting together their belief systems. Consequently, historians who trace these movements over time often find it very difficult to fit them into neat categories.⁴ Nevertheless, for the people within these movements, even small distinctions can have big consequences. For example, the premillennialist revival that began in Great Britain in the late 18th century and moved in waves to America in the 19th produced not only advocates of historicism and futurism, but fierce divisions within the ranks of the futurists, as our comparison between dispensationalists and historic premillennialists will show.

So Many Millennialist Choices

Dispensationalism and historic (not historicist) premillennialism were relative latecomers to a religious culture already replete with millennialist successes and failures. In the first half of the 19th century, evangelical Protestantism was overwhelmingly postmillennial. Historians have called ante-bellum America an “evangelical empire” characterized by optimism, growth, and democratic ideals. Religious and political leaders alike viewed the new nation in millennial terms, as a “city upon a hill” with a special role to play in the world.

The dominance of postmillennialism actually came as a surprise. Most of the Protestants and Catholics who settled colonial America were overwhelmingly and “officially” amillennialists, though most Puritans who settled New England held historicist premillennial views which had grown popular in England in the early/mid-17th

century, especially among the radical Fifth Monarchy Men. Colonial Puritans believed they were in the Last Days, that the work of Antichrist was already evident all over the world, and that signs of the end were everywhere. Then the unexpected happened: the First Great Awakening of the 1740s generated thousands of conversions and hundreds of new churches. Jonathan Edwards, borrowing heavily from the prophetic writings of Daniel Whitby, concluded that God was using such ordinary means of grace to Christianize the world and bring in a golden millennial age *before* Christ's return. Though the results of the First Great Awakening faded fast, these postmillennial expectations were revived and validated by the even more impressive Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century. Popular commentaries by Matthew Henry, Thomas Scott, and Adam Clarke articulated a postmillennial understanding of the Bible which became deeply rooted in the evangelical churches.

Postmillennialism joined forces with the surge of democratic ideals to make American Protestantism boldly evangelical and activist. Operating with the certainty of prophetic promises, evangelicals built schools, churches, publishing houses, and missionary agencies in order to carry out God's plan to Christianize America and the world. Their strategy included both religion and politics. Evangelists like Charles Finney told his converts to apply Christian principles to social and political causes and predicted that if they did so, the millennium was just around the corner.

Existing along the margins of this culture-shaping postmillennial juggernaut was a number of other distinctive and often controversial millennialist movements. In the 1770s, an Englishwoman called Mother Ann Lee brought the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming to America. More popularly known as the Shakers for their

distinctive worship style, her followers believed that Mother Ann was a female incarnation of Christ who intended to bring in the millennium by forming distinctive communities. Eventually, the Shakers established nineteen such communities from Maine to Florida, where they attempted to reproduce primitive Christianity. Shakers adopted simple life-styles; husbands and wives lived apart and turned their children over to be raised by the community; and nobody ever had sex. On account of the latter restriction, the Shakers prospered only as long as the Second Great Awakening provided a stream of new converts or orphans found their way to the Shaker communities; but once the revival peaked, the Shaker communities started their slow decline. On their best day, Shakers never numbered more than five thousand.⁵

Another millennialist group was formed by John Humphrey Noyes, a Yale graduate and convert of Charles Finney. He taught that the Second Coming occurred in A.D. 70, but Christ decided not to establish his millennial kingdom because of the lack of Christian love among his followers. Noyes believed it was up to him to set things right. In 1838 he started a small Christian commune in Vermont, where he promoted his notion of sinless perfection and “complex marriage.” Under his careful supervision and control, community members were encouraged to have sex with each other’s spouses, which he thought would facilitate greater love within the community and counter the selfish tendencies of traditional marriage. Noyes said that such practices marked the arrival of the Kingdom of God; but outraged neighbors saw things differently. Fierce opposition forced Noyes to move the commune to Oneida, NY, where in time his followers tired of the unavoidable and disruptive complications of complex marriage and

Noyes' millennial schemes. Their numbers, which never exceeded three hundred, dwindled; but those who remained found a new calling in successful business ventures.⁶

In the 1830s, Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints after he discovered and translated the *Book of Mormon*. The Mormons believed that through them God was restoring the authentic apostolic gospel and re-establishing the Aaronic priesthood. As a modern-day prophet, Joseph called all Mormons to relocate (“gather”) to Jackson County, Missouri, to begin the work of establishing the New Jerusalem to which Christ would shortly return. When anxious and angry Missourians drove the Mormons out of the state in 1839, Smith led them across the Mississippi River to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he built a new temple, revealed new “endowments” (i.e., temple rituals), and began preaching the plurality of gods and wives. Following the prophet’s murder in 1844, Brigham Young led the Church to a temporary Zion in Utah. Unlike the Shakers and the Oneida Colony, the Mormons survived and prospered. In the 20th century Mormon leaders talked much less about Joseph Smith’s prophetic teachings; but faithful Mormons still await a new prophet’s call to move back to Missouri just before Christ returns.⁷

Reflecting more typical evangelical Protestant beliefs and practices were the followers of William Miller, a Baptist preacher from Vermont and up-state New York. Once a skeptical deist, Miller was converted after the War of 1812 and began reading the Bible with the critical eye of a former rationalist. Using a historicist and premillennialist approach to the study of Bible prophecy, he studied the numerology of Daniel and Revelation. Once he established past prophetic fulfillments as a starting point, he used “millennial arithmetic” and the so-called “year-day theory” (by which he converted days

to years in prophetic texts) to set a date for the Second Coming “in about 1843.” Though Miller claimed that he came to these conclusions on his own, as we shall see, they were nearly identical to those held by other historicist premillennialists in Great Britain at about the same time.

He arrived at these findings in 1818, but waited about fifteen years to go public. Thanks to new advertising and promotional techniques, his message generated a large following (estimates range from 30,000 to 100,000) drawn from the evangelical denominations, which is more or less where the Shakers, John Humphrey Noyes, and the Mormons got theirs. But the Millerites were different. They never questioned traditional marriage or practiced unconventional sex or altered the Church’s historic teachings about the Godhead. Miller never claimed to be a prophet, only a careful reader of Scripture who invited others to check his calculations and come to their own conclusions. In time, however, he grew tired of his critics and instructed his followers to separate from “Babylon,” by which he meant the dismissive evangelical denominations, in order to spread the word of the “Advent near.” As the predicted time approached, Miller felt pressure to be more precise about the date for Christ’s return. He eventually settled on October 22, 1844, which set him and the Millerites up for the Great Disappointment. Some Millerites returned to their former churches; but others established a number of new Adventist denominations. The largest was the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which made a few necessary adjustments to Miller’s historicist premillennialism, then became famous for other things like worshiping on Saturday, vegetarianism, medical care, and missions.⁸

In comparison to the other millennialist alternatives discussed above, the early Millerites were the most orthodox and traditional premillennialists before the Civil War. But their very public failure dealt a serious blow to the credibility of premillennialism and confirmed most evangelical Protestants in their postmillennialist ways. Nevertheless, postmillennialism's days were numbered. Instead of the coming millennium, America experienced a series of unprecedented social, political, intellectual, and religious crises in the second half of the 19th century. By almost any measure, the world was getting worse, not better; and demographic studies proved that Christianization was not keeping pace with world population growth. What did devoted postmillennialists do when events ran counter to their eschatological expectations?⁹ Some held on, convinced that the golden age was still coming, despite the temporary setbacks. Others dropped their postmillennial expectations for other forward-looking causes like the Social Gospel, the Progressive Movement, and later on, the New Deal. Still others traded one kind of millennialism for another, a new kind of premillennialism that eventually gained unprecedented success in the United States.

The Rise of a New Kind of Premillennialism

The premillennialism that gained a following in late-19th century America differed significantly from the teachings of William Miller. It was futurist, not historicist, which made it virtually incapable of date-setting, the Millerites' undoing. In addition, futurist premillennialism introduced a number of new elements into the millennialist mix and offered a much more realistic view of current conditions, about which postmillennialism seemed obviously mistaken.

This new prophetic option came out of a British revival of premillennialism which started in the late 18th century and reached its zenith in the 1830s and 40s. The French Revolution was the catalyst for this revival. Something so momentous had to fit into God's prophetic plans: but how? In the beginning, leadership in the movement came from clergy and lay leaders of the established churches (Anglican and Scots Presbyterian). At first interested persons found each other through Bible studies, new books and journals, and missionary groups; but eventually the revival took shape in three week-long study conferences at Henry Drummond's Albury Park estate in 1826, 1827, and 1828. Using a more-or-less literalistic hermeneutic, participants agreed on a number of bedrock convictions: the present age (or "dispensation") will end in cataclysmic judgment; the Jews must be restored to Palestine before this judgment takes place (something never taught by William Miller); divine judgment will begin with an apostate Christendom; the millennial age will follow God's judgment on the earth and the Second Coming of Christ; and the Second Coming is imminent, a view based on a particular way of connecting prophecies in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 to current events (which was strikingly like Miller's).¹⁰ In short, like the Millerites, these British millennialists believed they had cracked the prophetic code by using a historicist and premillennialist approach to the Bible.

Not all British millennialists were historicists, however. There was a small group of futurist premillennialists as well. Futurism did not originate in the British revival, but actually came from 16th century Roman Catholic scholars who tried to repudiate the common Protestant assertion that the present pope was the Antichrist. The Catholic futurists argued that since Revelation's prophecies were meant for the future, not the

present, the current pope could not possibly be the Man of Sin. In the 1820s and 30s, a number of premillennialists found in futurism a connection to early church teachings about the end times and began to promote it: S.R. Maitland, James H. Todd, and William Burgh. These futurists used the prophetic teachings of the early church to refute historicist premillennialism's approach to prophetic texts, especially the "year-day theory."¹¹

One early futurist leader was the charismatic Scot Edward Irving. Like most other British millennialists, he used a literalistic approach to prophetic interpretation, affirmed the restoration of the Jews, expected (and saw current evidence for) the apostasy of the churches, and preached the imminent return of Christ to establish his millennial kingdom in Jerusalem. He had read Catholic futurists and agreed with them: Revelation's prophecies pointed to the future, just before Christ's return. He preached futurist views after he accepted the pulpit of a London congregation and began attracting large crowds. But his standing among British evangelicals and premillennialists declined when his church experienced an outbreak of glossolalia and divine healing. Even though many evangelicals expected a restoration of apostolic gifts shortly before Christ's return, the actual experience in Irving's church proved to be extremely controversial. From there it was all down hill for Irving, who began preaching that Christ had a fallen nature. After the Scots Presbyterians defrocked Irving, he helped to establish the Catholic Apostolic Church as an alternative to the religious apostasy he saw in his former denomination.

Futurist premillennialism was also championed by another separatist group, the Plymouth Brethren, who had left apostate Anglicanism in order to meet regularly for Bible study, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper. At first the Plymouth Brethren lacked

direction and a clear identity, despite the emergence of two powerful leaders and teachers, Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby. During a series of study retreats first held at the estate of Lady Theodosia Powerscourt in 1831, the Brethren defined their eschatology: they took a futurist approach to Revelation, rejected the “year-day theory,” and declared the established churches already apostate. Here was another challenge to the dominant historicist perspective that closely followed Irving’s views.

The Plymouth Brethren received a shock at the third Powerscourt Conference in 1833 when Darby introduced his teachings on the pre-tribulation rapture of the church and the postponement theory, which argued for the “great parenthesis of prophetic time” between the 69th and 70th weeks of Daniel 9. Most Brethren as well as other futurists initially considered both ideas complete novelties. The ensuing argument drove a deep wedge between Darby and other Brethren leaders, especially Newton and Samuel P. Tregelles, another respected Bible teacher, and eventually split the Plymouth Brethren down the middle. Futurist premillennialism has never been the same.

Darby’s mind remained open on these new ideas for another decade, but by 1840 he had constructed an elaborate dispensational system that supported and explained them. Darby’s version of futurist premillennialism divided history into distinct eras or dispensations in order to keep track of God’s changing redemptive plan. But even more fundamental to his interpretation of the Bible was the conviction that God had two completely separate plans and peoples in the divine plan of redemption, one “earthly” (Israel) and one “heavenly” (the church). Thus “rightly dividing the word of truth” meant keeping the passages that applied to the two clearly delineated. This interpretive rule of thumb led Darby to his striking innovations. Because he believed that God could work

with only one of his peoples at a time, he insisted that Jesus must rapture the church before he can restart the prophetic clock and resume his dealings with the Jews. In practical terms, this required Darby to divide the Second Coming into two parts—Christ coming *for* his saints before the tribulation and *with* his saints after it, when he will defeat the Devil and the Antichrist and establish the millennial kingdom. Darby also taught that since the church, as God’s heavenly people, had no earthly prophecies of its own, there was no prophesied event between the present and the rapture of the church: thus it might occur at any time. In short, Darby’s view of the any-moment, pre-tribulation rapture allowed him to avoid “the pitfalls both of attempting to predict a time for Christ’s second advent and of trying to make sense out of the contemporary alarms of European politics with the Revelation as his guidebook.”¹² Darby was not deterred by the fact that before him no millennialist, British or otherwise, had taught anything like his view of the rapture.¹³ He continued to teach his version of futurist premillennialism in Britain, throughout Europe, and most significantly, in the United States, where it had its greatest success.¹⁴

The New Premillennialism Comes to America

John Nelson Darby made seven trips to North America between 1862 and 1877. At first he worked among Canadian Plymouth Brethren; but eventually he shifted his attention to non-Plymouth Brethren evangelicals in Chicago, Saint Louis, Boston, and New York. His initial forays into the American churches were disappointing. He was appalled by the worldliness of American Christians and their still overwhelmingly positive view of their denominations. Most American evangelicals found the separatist

views of the Plymouth Brethren too crabby and schismatic. Darby quickly discovered that while some American Christians were interested in his eschatology, the overwhelming majority rejected his ecclesiology.

Darby's reception in America was clearly mixed. Writers in a number of Protestant journals warned readers of the dangers of dispensationalism; but Darby's views found an outlet in the premillennialist *Prophetic Times*, which was edited by the Lutheran Joseph Seiss. Its leading contributors were denominationally diverse (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian [Old School and New School], Dutch Reformed, Moravian, and Baptist) and advocated both historicist and futurist positions. Without mentioning its origin among the Plymouth Brethren, which would have put most readers off, some writers promoted the pre-tribulation rapture, which the journal's "creed" was broad enough to allow. Another journal, James Inglis's *Waymarks in the Wilderness*, took an unapologetic pro-Darby stance. This journal's readership was a fraction of the *Prophetic Times*'s; but many of the people associated with Inglis's journal were influential in starting the Bible conference movement, which spread dispensationalism far and wide.

Inglis organized the Believers' Meeting for Bible Study in the late 1860s. After his death and a brief hiatus, the Meeting was re-started in 1875 and eventually located at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. The Niagara Conferences, which met for a week or two each summer, offered a packed schedule: two speakers in the morning, two in the afternoon, and one in the evening. For two decades the Niagara Conferences were led by James H. Brookes, for 39 years the pastor of the Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in Saint Louis, author of *Maranatha* (1878), and editor of *The Truth*. Niagara became a gathering place for traditional Protestants, an outpost against the spread of liberal

theology. Ironically, while Niagara stood fast in support of the old doctrines, it also welcomed advocates of the new premillennialism. Under Brookes, then, Niagara became a kind of boot camp for emerging premillennialist leaders and the launching pad for the dispensationalist movement in America.

In 1878 Brookes composed a 14-point statement of faith to mark theological boundaries for speakers and attendees. The “Niagara Creed” was typically evangelical, but obviously Calvinist-leaning. It began with an article on biblical inerrancy and ended with a rather generic article on millennialism. The latter took no stand on futurism or Darby’s rapture doctrine, but it did affirm the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, the worsening of world conditions in the present age, and Christ’s personal and premillennial return to establish his earthly rule. With such wiggle-room in the creed, dispensationalists pushed their views hard. Given the make-up of evangelicalism at the time, many Niagara regulars objected to the Creed’s premillennial statement and complained that such prophetic views were getting far too much attention at the summer sessions. Wanting to keep their clientele happy, Niagara leaders decided to organize another series of Bible conferences that focused solely on prophecy.¹⁵

The first American Bible and Prophetic Conference was held in New York City in 1878. Six more followed: Chicago in 1886; Allegheny, PA, in 1895; Boston in 1901; Chicago again in 1914; and Philadelphia and New York in 1918. At the beginning, speakers and hearers represented a variety of premillennialist views; but over time these prophetic conferences came to be dominated by dispensationalists, who were figuring out fast how to get their message across.¹⁶

The same thing happened at Niagara. Once those in charge developed a clear preference for dispensationalism, they pushed to the forefront those who taught it. Rapidly the differences within the new premillennialism became apparent for all to see; and the ties that initially held futurist premillennialists together began to break. In 1897 the Niagara Conference was nearly torn apart over whether the rapture will occur before or after the tribulation. The arguments were repeated over and over in the decades to come. Dispensationalists insisted that by “rightly dividing the word of truth,” the pre-tribulation rapture became obvious. Dispensationalism was the key to understanding the whole Bible, not just prophecy; and it was a bulwark against liberalism and the guarantee of orthodoxy. All other approaches were seriously defective. The other premillennialists argued that Darby’s view of the rapture was not explicitly taught in the Bible and was merely an inference based on other mistaken notions. Dispensationalism was a theological novelty created by Darby out of thin air. In short, its claims were pretentious and unsubstantiated by either the Bible or the history of Christian theology. With so little room for compromise, no one was able to resolve the dispute; and Niagara closed down for good in 1900. In the story of Niagara’s demise we can see something of the future of American premillennialism.¹⁷

By the 20th century, then, futurist premillennialism had divided into two warring camps. Many of dispensationalism’s strongest critics were veterans of Niagara and the prophetic conferences. Some of them had even been dispensationalists themselves, early devotees who changed their minds later on. Nathaniel West, one of the founders of Niagara, wrote the highly regarded but non-dispensational *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments* (1880). A.J. Gordon was an early follower of Darby, but repudiated his

teachings in *Ecce Venit* (1889). Two men who are listed as contributing editors of the *Scofield Reference Bible* later repudiated dispensationalism: William J. Erdman and William G. Moorehead. Robert Cameron also disavowed his earlier dispensationalist convictions in *Scriptural Truth About the Lord's Return* (1922).¹⁸ These men appealed to a more venerable premillennialist tradition that was rooted in the early church's eschatology, which contained no reference to a pre-tribulation rapture.¹⁹

Such a list constitutes only some of the leading voices of the non-dispensationalist, futurist premillennialism in late 19th and early 20th century America. Others who need to be included are Charles Erdman, Philip Mauro, Rowland Bingham, G. Campbell Morgan and Oswald J. Smith (both leading dispensationalists at one time), and Harold John Ockenga, the Boston pastor who called for a New Evangelicalism after World War II.²⁰ Their views have often been called "historic premillennialism" because they claimed to be following the legacy of earlier premillennial perspectives stretching back to post-apostolic times. However, the term "historic" must be qualified since futurism in its present form is actually a post-Reformation perspective or at best a late medieval one. While it is certainly true that modern-day futurists can find similar views of prophetic chronology in the first three centuries, the eschatology of the early church is hard to fit into modern categories and contained features that futurists have never accepted. For example, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (15) and Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (V, 28) use a "days of creation" motif to understand the flow of history: just as God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, so the world will last six thousand years, then be followed by a millennium of peace ("for God a day is like a thousand years," 2 Peter 3:8). Interpreters in the 3rd and 4th centuries used this theory to predict

Christ's coming about three hundred years beyond their own time (Hippolytus' *Commentary on Daniel* and Lactantius' *The Divine Institutes*).²¹ Nevertheless, on the question of the rapture's timing, post-tribulational historic premillennialists have plenty of allies in the early centuries, while pre-tribulational dispensationalists have none.²²

Comparing Dispensational and Historic Premillennial Movements

By the end of World War I, dispensationalists had clearly eclipsed their rivals in terms of size and influence. How did this happen? How do dispensationalism and historic premillennialism compare as popular millennialist movements? In a nutshell, dispensationalism developed into a robust popular millennialist movement, while historic premillennialism never did. By the end of the 19th century dispensationalists were piling up supporters and institutions like speakers at the Niagara Conferences used to pile up Bible passages for a Bible Reading.

Darby appealed to successful evangelical pastors with big churches, good reputations, and large followings. Such leaders used their pulpits and their sizable clergy networks to open doors for dispensational teachings. Other early adopters were the professional revivalists who found in the teaching of the any-moment rapture an important tool to shake sinners from their lethargy: Jesus may come at any time, even before I finish this sermon: are you ready? D.L Moody became an early, but not always consistent convert to dispensationalism; and virtually every major revivalist between him and Billy Graham has preached a gospel message anchored in premillennialism.²³

At a time when conservative evangelicals were building new coalitions to do battle against liberalism, dispensationalists often maintained a non-denominational and

sometimes even cooperative ethos. That was certainly true at places like Niagara and the prophetic conferences; but while everyone was welcome, not everybody came. Dispensationalism did not spread evenly through American Protestantism. Lutherans, Methodists, the German and Dutch Reformed, and Congregationalists seemed especially impervious to dispensational teaching. Of course there were exceptions: Joseph Seiss was a prominent Lutheran; L.W. Munhall, E. F. Stroeter, Arno C. Gaebelein, and W.E. Blackstone were Methodists; W.R. Gordon and George S. Bishop were Dutch Reformed; and Edward P. Goodwin, Reuben A. Torrey and C.I. Scofield were Congregationalists. But most pastors and lay people from such churches remained indifferent or opposed. Dispensationalism had the greatest success among the Baptists, the Reformed Episcopalians, and especially the Presbyterians. Even so, denominational arguments over eschatology could become fierce. For example, James H. Brookes often complained about how even fellow conservative Presbyterians made his life difficult: e.g., fellow biblical inerrantists A.A. Hodge, W.W. Warfield, and J.G. Machen were outspoken opponents of dispensationalism, which they considered close to heresy, even though they found much to admire among dispensationalists on other issues. Since dispensationalists saw themselves as thoroughly orthodox and fierce defenders of the Bible, such criticism hurt.²⁴

Though dispensationalism did not gain majority status in any of the existing mainline evangelical denominations, its impact on new churches was more pronounced. For example, many immigrant groups were deeply influenced by the revivalism of D.L. Moody. Some Scandinavians adopted both his style and his dispensationalism: what eventually became the Evangelical Free Church certainly did, but the Swedish Mission

Covenant (now Evangelical Covenant Church) did not. The new Pentecostal denominations adopted dispensationalism wholesale, though Pentecostals rejected the view held by most other dispensationalists that the apostolic gifts of tongues, divine healing, and prophecy ceased with the closing of the New Testament canon. Thousands of new independent and Bible Churches put dispensationalism in their statements of faith; and almost all the self-identified fundamentalists who left their old denominations to start new ones were dispensationalists too: e.g., the General Association of Regular Baptists, the Conservative Baptists (with exceptions), and the Bible Presbyterians. Though historical generalizations are often foolhardy, this one is not: by the end of World War I, dispensationalism was nearly synonymous with fundamentalism and Pentecostalism.²⁵

In the early days of the fundamentalist movement, it often seemed like dispensationalists had to force their way into the newly forming conservative coalitions. But once it became clear that fundamentalists were not going to regain control of the older evangelical denominations, dispensationalists were quite willing to go their own way. During the 1930s and 40s, they completed the construction of a large and sophisticated subculture that had been decades in the making. In many ways dispensationalists operated like a typical denomination: they developed a full complement of goods and services and founded numerous institutions to support and perpetuate their movement. The Bible institutes, which began in the 1880s with the founding of schools like the Moody Bible Institute, quickly fell into dispensationalist hands.²⁶ Some of these Bible institutes morphed into Bible colleges and then liberal arts colleges. Dispensationalists founded a few seminaries, starting with Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924, and gained control of a few others. They also founded a number of

“faith missions” (e.g., Central American Mission, the Sudan Interior Mission, and the African Inland Mission) which soon were taking the lead in the American foreign missionary movement, after mainline Protestant missions began cutting budgets and bringing their missionaries home during the Great Depression.²⁷ They had their own publishing houses: Zondervan, Baker, Eerdmans, Scripture Press, David C. Cook, and others were established to serve a dispensationalist clientele. In short, their networks of institutions were fully capable of sustaining and expanding their movement without help from anybody else.²⁸

For much of their history, dispensationalists kept their subculture hermetically sealed. Reflecting Darby’s view of the coming apostasy and the need to separate from unbelief, they kept their walls high and their contacts with the outside world few and far between. But as many historians have noticed, while condemning the world, they became masters of the world’s media. They knew how to write best sellers to spread the word beyond their boundaries. Their first was W.E. Blackstone’s *Jesus is Coming* (1878), which broke down the complicated dispensationalist system for the average reader and identified the “signs of the times.” It was followed by C.I. Scofield’s *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (1888) and the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), published by Oxford University Press, no less. *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* series (1996+) were simply more recent examples of this old dispensational tradition.

In addition to the printed word, dispensationalists also used music and films. With the rise of popular Christian music also came a number of “second coming songs:” who can forget Larry Norman’s “I Wish We’d All Been Ready” (1969)? Churches used “rapture movies” to attract outside audiences: “A Thief in the Night” (1972); “A Distant

Thunder” (1977); “Image of the Beast” (1981); and “Prodigal Planet” (1983). There has been a steady stream of such movies since then, including the four-film “Apocalypse” series (1998-2001) and the three “Left Behind” movies (2000-2005). One can hear and see dispensationalism being preached on cable TV 24/7; and it is a rare televangelist who does not keep his or her prophecy charts handy.

To some extent, at least, these efforts have been successful at getting the dispensational message out, even into the crevices of the popular culture. Why? The basic answer lies in dispensationalism’s ability to link prophecy with current events. With the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other, dispensationalist teachers have been able to make a case for their view of the world and what is going to happen next. No millennialist movement retains its audience for long unless it is able to do this consistently or else adjust its system when history takes an unexpected turn. Dispensationalism has always been able to do both.

From the early days of their movement, dispensationalist Bible teachers worked out an amazingly detailed scenario for the end times, then stuck to it: the decline of human civilization, the growing apostasy in the churches, the re-founding of the State of Israel in the Holy Land, the rapture of the church, growing pressure on Israel and the rise of a peace-promising Antichrist, the building of a third temple in Jerusalem, the revelation of the Antichrist as the Man of Sin, the Great Tribulation, the Battle of Armageddon, and the return of Jesus. Though they did not expect to be here to see those events take place, they did expect to witness history move in discernable directions. Since the mid-19th century, the Bible teachers have kept their story straight, but also stayed flexible enough to change their interpretations when necessary. Sometimes all that was

needed to keep the dispensationalist rank and file happy was a good 2nd edition. Dispensationalists have proven themselves to be quite willing to forgive and forget their teachers' mistakes and seem eager to accept new explanations.²⁹

Since the founding of Israel in 1948 and especially the Six Day War of 1967, dispensationalists have taken the lead in promoting U.S. support for the Jewish state. For most of their history they sounded and acted like people who had completely given up on the world, so they surprised nearly everyone by taking up politics and becoming major players in the New Christian Right. At one time dispensationalists believed their job was to teach the Bible and explain the end times; but by the 1980s they were becoming active in the political fray, evidently convinced that they could keep the Devil somewhat restrained until the rapture. They took up various causes, formed political action groups, and started lobbying Congress and the White House for Israel and a strong military. Given all this activity, they are hard to miss and evidently love being in the middle of things.

It is easy to conclude that no American millennialist group has ever been larger or more successful than the dispensationalists. By almost any measure, they are popular, though it is impossible to say with certainty just how many dispensationalists there are. While they would have everyone believe that their views are held by most American evangelicals; no serious observer believes it, even though there does not exist a scientific or reliable poll to settle the issue one way or the other. Probably the best guess is that no more than one-third of American evangelicals are dispensationalists. Or maybe it is two-fifths or one-quarter. Who knows for sure? Whichever fraction is correct, it still represents a very large number of dispensationalists: if there are 75 million evangelicals

in America, then there may be anywhere from 18 to 25 million dispensationalists. Darby would be both pleased and amazed.

So where does that leave historic premillennialists? They never developed anything like the dispensationalist network or numbers. As we have seen, it did not take long for dispensationalists to take charge. As people who lived along the margins of a larger movement, historic premillennialists had few options other than arguing for tolerance and maneuvering for a place at the table. But it was not easy. Once fundamentalists put dispensationalism on their list of orthodox non-negotiables, they essentially hung out a sign: “Non-dispensationalists need not apply.”³⁰

Dispensationalism maintained its hegemony as long as the fundamentalist movement stayed strong and united. But maintaining unity was never a fundamentalist strong-suit. By the 1940s many second generation fundamentalists started calling for reforms; and by the 1950s many openly advocated a New Evangelicalism that toned down some of fundamentalism’s less appealing features, such as its separatism, legalism, anti-intellectualism, and general bad manners.³¹ The New Evangelical adjustments frequently included the reconsideration of eschatology, which opened the door for people like George Eldon Ladd, probably the greatest historical premillennialist of them all. Raised a dispensationalist Northern Baptist in New England, Ladd graduated from Gordon College and Divinity School, earned a Ph.D. at Harvard, pastored for nearly 15 years, and joined the faculty of Fuller Seminary in 1950. Within six years he published *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* and *The Blessed Hope*, which started historic premillennialism’s come-back in American evangelicalism.³²

Ladd paid a price for his views; for the next three decades, his students at Fuller heard an endless recounting of the recriminations and condemnations sent his way by angry dispensationalists.³³ But Ladd's books had broken the ice; and other scholars found it easier to take dispensationalism on. Starting in the 1960s, a new generation of historic premillennialists published a number of scholarly books on eschatology that sought to make their case historically, biblically, and theologically.³⁴ Soon it became clear to dispensationalists that the rules of the game had changed. Starting in 1970s, a number of books were published that brought together representatives of various eschatological views to discuss them side by side, on what looked almost like a level playing field.³⁵

Despite this intellectual resurgence, historic premillennialism never came close to becoming a *popular* millennialist movement; and I am not aware of any reliable study that even estimates how many historic premillennialists there are. Part of the problem is that its advocates do not write best sellers (fiction or non-fiction), produce movies, or write songs. They do not organize politically or lobby Congress. They believe many of the same things about the future that dispensationalists do, but they do not spend their energy figuring out elaborate scenarios or creating prophetic charts or battle maps of future wars. They host not a single "Post-tribulational Prophecy and the News" program on Cable-TV; nor do they sell board or video games based on their view of the future. In comparison to dispensationalists, they do not seem to be trying very hard.

If historic premillennialism is not popular in the sense of having a large (or at least discernable) following, how does it measure up on the populist/elitist scale? One is tempted to say that historic premillennialism rates high as "elitist" because its leadership tends to be school-based. Most writing on historic premillennialism is not intended for

the masses; most of it is written by scholars for scholars. In contrast to most dispensationalist writing, it aims high and thus misses a more popular audience. Every successful millennialist movement has both high brow and low brow elements. Dispensationalism certainly has its share of smart and well-trained defenders who lack neither sophistication nor the ability to elaborate. It has schools and scholars who remain committed to research and high-level academic discourse. The new wave of “progressive dispensationalists” has Ph.D.s from Oxford and Cambridge and other impressive universities. Some of the more traditional dispensationalists do too, but most of them tended to stay close to home and take their degrees at “insider” schools. Nevertheless, even some of dispensationalism’s best scholars have been wary of high brow academic theology. Lewis Sperry Chafer, by far dispensationalism’s most influential mid-twentieth century theologian, left Oberlin College after three years to become a pastor. He saw his lack of formal academic study as a distinct advantage: “The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches.”³⁶ Such a populist statement plays well among common folks, not academic elites.

The really big names in popular dispensationalism have never needed high brow academic credentials to get and keep a popular following. They know their stuff and are very good at communicating it to common people. It is very significant that the best selling dispensationalist books of all time are *fictionalized* accounts of the end-times scenario: no careful exegesis there, no laborious comparisons with other alternatives, just a ripping good story told well. That is exactly what one would expect in a *populist*

millennialist movement. In comparison to dispensationalism, historic premillennialism scores low in “low brow.”

Maybe in the end, what really separates the two versions of futurist premillennialism is that dispensationalists simply have a better story to tell. Laying all matters of truth aside, in a popularity contest the pre-tribulation rapture is always going to beat the post-tribulation rapture hands down. No matter what they do, historic premillennialists have a hard sell: going through the tribulation is not nearly as appealing as escaping from it. Years ago while teaching an adult Sunday school lesson on pre- and post-tribulation rapture positions, I was stopped cold in my pedagogical tracks by a class member who exclaimed, “But I really don’t *want* to go through the tribulation.” Case closed.

What does the future hold for these two versions of futurist premillennialism? Clearly dispensationalism is not what it used to be. “Progressives” have tweaked the system in ways that concede major points to historic premillennialists. While maintaining their insistence on a distinct future role for the Jews in God’s prophetic plan and the pre-tribulation timing of the rapture, they affirm, among other things, Ladd’s argument that the coming Kingdom is also present now and that there are hermeneutical dangers in overplaying one’s prophetic hand in interpreting current events.³⁷ Furthermore, dispensationalism’s hold on institutions has declined considerably. Old-line dispensationalists have detected slippage at places like Dallas Seminary and Moody Bible Institute, once bastions of dispensational truth; and many schools that once defined themselves in dispensational terms now recognize that their own survival depends on appealing to a broader kind of evangelicalism. As separatist fundamentalism has lost

ground to a more inclusive evangelicalism, so has dispensationalism to historic premillennialism. When once fervent dispensationalists tire of their movement's low brow excesses or can no longer accept its exegetical arguments, they move to historic premillennialism, which is the most logical fall back position for people who want another alternative. Increasingly many evangelicals are coming to the conclusion that dispensationalism is not the only way of being premillennialist.

¹ Nancy Gibbs, "Apocalypse Now," *Time*, 1 July 2002, 41-48.

² Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

³ Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views. A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson Reference, 1997).

⁴ Historical surveys of Christian millennialism include the following: Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Stephen Hunt, ed., *Christian Millennialism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁵ Stephen Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992),

⁶ Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

⁷ Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁸ Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan Butler, eds., *The Disappointed* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁹ James H. Moorhead, *World Without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of The Last Things, 1880-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 3-22.

¹¹ George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 35-40.

¹² Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 64.

¹³ The origins of Darby's rapture view remain cloudy. He claimed that it just came to him once he understood God's two peoples and plans. Other explanations—that the idea arose during a tongues-speaking outburst in Irving's church or that it came from a teenager named Margaret MacDonald in Scotland during another Pentecostal outbreak—seem far-fetched and unproven. See Darby, *Collected Works*, vol. 11, William Kelly, ed. (London: G. Morrish, 1967), 56; Samuel P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1864), 35; and David McPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up: The True Story of the Pre-Trib Rapture* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975).

¹⁴ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 59-80. H.A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1942). Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960). For Darby's views, see Darby, *Collected Works*, 34 vols.

¹⁵ Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 141-2; for the entire Niagara Creed, see pp. 273-77.

¹⁶ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875 to 1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 28-29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-61. William Trollinger, "Niagara Conferences," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 824-25.

¹⁸ His personal explanation of this shift is found in Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 278-81.

¹⁹ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 45-49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-60.

²¹ Timothy P. Weber, "Millennialism," *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, Jerry L. Walls, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). As the year 2000 approached, a few dispensationalists (e.g., Jack Van Impe) resurrected the "days of creation" approach. To make the six thousand years of human history work as a predictor of Christ's return around Y2K, they had to date the creation of the world in 4000 BC, which even many fundamentalists found difficult to accept.

²² Back in the days when I was teaching the History of Millennial Thought at Denver Seminary, I made my students read the eschatological writings of the early fathers; and they could not find the pre-tribulation rapture either!

²³ Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 13-28. See also William McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1959), 167-530.

²⁴ Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 29-31.

²⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of It All, 1893-1919*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 208-237. Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 251-65.

²⁶ Virginia L. Brereton, *Training God's Army: The American Bible School, 1880-1940* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

²⁷ Joel A. Carpenter, ed., *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880-1980* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

²⁸ Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁹ Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

³⁰ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 155-214.

³¹ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

³² George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*.

³³ People at Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary also paid a price. From its founding, the seminary allowed different premillennialist views on its faculty, which produced intense outside opposition for decades. Having a theologically mixed faculty also made things interesting on the inside. Well into the 1970s and 80s the faculty and students at Denver Seminary sometimes argued over the merits of dispensationalism and historic premillennialism.

³⁴ A short list: Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Millard Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

³⁵ Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977); Gleason Archer, ed., *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Darrell Bock, ed., *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

³⁶ L. S. Chafer, quoted in Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 59-60.

³⁷ Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint Books, 1993). Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).