

MILLENNIALISM

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Millennialism is the belief that there will be a period of peace and righteousness on the earth associated with the Second Coming of Christ. Such views are based on complex readings of numerous biblical texts, the most explicit of which is Revelation 20:1-10. Millennialism (Latin *mille*=thousand) has taken various forms and been embraced with varying degrees of intensity throughout the history of Christianity. Depending on how its devotees view their own times in relation to the coming golden age, millennialism can also have far-reaching social and political implications.

Interpretive Issues

Millennialists cite OT passages that describe a “peaceable kingdom” in which all God’s covenant promises are fulfilled, human society is transformed, and a new covenant is written on human hearts (e.g., Isaiah 2 and 11, Jeremiah 31-33, Ezekiel 36-37, Micah 4, etc.). Millennialists also rely heavily on apocalyptic (Greek *apokalypsis*=uncovering or unveiling) texts like Ezekiel, Daniel 7-12, Zechariah 1-6, Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and Revelation. These passages share both style and substance with the Jewish apocalyptic

literature that flourished between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100 (e.g., Enoch, IV Ezra, Assumption of Moses, Apocalypse of Baruch, etc.). In apocalyptic literature the world is completely under Satan's control; and the righteous remnant, which appears to be doomed to destruction, is rescued by a dramatic, supernatural intervention in which God settles old scores and then makes all things new.¹

Interpreting apocalyptic can be difficult, thanks to its extravagant use of symbols, numerology, and visions. The Book of Revelation contains both apocalyptic and prophetic elements, which complicates interpretation even more. Most early Christians struggled to make sense of it, as can be seen in the early church's difficulty in recognizing the book's canonical status. Over time four ways of interpreting Revelation emerged.

Preterism. This approach understands the book strictly in terms of its immediate historical context: Revelation described the plight of Christians in the late first century; and its apocalyptic symbols pointed directly to Rome as the church's persecutor (17:9, 18). The present situation looks hopeless; but Christians must persevere in light of God's ultimate victory. Most modern interpreters prefer this approach and insist that the book was never intended to predict conditions or events beyond the first century.

Historicism. This approach interprets Revelation as a prophetic overview of church history. Historicist interpreters locate themselves on the prophetic timeline so they can determine which prophecies have already been fulfilled and which are still to come. Many of the Protestant Reformers read Revelation in this way; but the heyday of the historicism was in the 18th and 19th centuries, though many interpreters today still find this alternative attractive.

Futurism. This approach argues that Revelation looks beyond the first century to the period immediately before the End-Times. Thus the book was not written for those who received it, but for those living much later. Jesuit scholars after the Reformation refined this approach to prove that current attempts to identify the pope as Antichrist could not possibly be true since the Antichrist will not be revealed until far into the future, just before the Parousia (Christ's second coming). Futurists view prophecy as "history before it happens" and so are able to predict a complex end-times scenario whose details are now in the process of being fulfilled.

Idealism. This approach lays aside all chronological or predictive concerns in order to treat the book as an artful exposition of the on-going battle between good and evil. Revelation is a drama that touches deeply the longings and fears of the human heart.²

Two Millennialist Models and the Persistent Alternative

Modern scholars identify two kinds of millennialism, depending on where adherents place the millennium in relation to the Second Coming: *premillennialism* and *postmillennialism*. These terms actually came into general usage quite late (18th and 19th centuries); but they are useful in understanding how millennialists in every age view the present and the future.

Premillennialism. Advocates believe that the Parousia will occur *before* the start of the millennium. At the end of the present age will be “signs of the times”—wars and rumors of wars, famines and natural disasters, the decline of morality, the prevalence of religious apostasy, the preaching of the gospel throughout the world, the rise of Antichrist, and the great tribulation. Christ’s coming will be dramatic and sudden: he will break out of the clouds with his warrior saints to defeat his enemies at the Battle of Armageddon, then establish his own kingdom, which will endure for 1000 years. Most modern premillennialists expect the Jews to regather in the Holy Land and convert to Christ. The millennium itself will be a golden age of peace, righteousness and justice. Premillennialists equate the millennium and the messianic kingdom predicted by the Jewish prophets.

Historically, premillennialists have used both historicist and futurist interpretations of Revelation, though today the futurist

approach dominates. Either way, their crucial text is Revelation 20, which includes two resurrections separated by one thousand years. Premillennialists take this passage literally and see it as the clearest evidence for an *interregnum* between Christ's Parousia and the Last Judgment. They also equate the first resurrection of Revelation 20 and the "rapture" of I Thessalonians 4:13-18. Thus all the "dead in Christ" and those alive at Christ's coming "will reign with him for a thousand years." At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released from bondage to lead one last rebellion against God. After his easy defeat, the second resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth will occur.³

Postmillennialism. This view places the Second Coming *after* a long period of gradual and incremental "gospel success" in which the vast majority of humanity is converted to Christ and human society is radically reformed. This transformation will occur through the Holy Spirit using the "ordinary means of grace." Thus this perspective is inherently optimistic about the course of history and the power of preaching, teaching, evangelism, and social reform to bring about permanent change. Adherents expect evil to be drastically reduced during the millennium, but not completely eliminated.

Postmillennialists refer to various biblical texts, including some premillennialist favorites (e.g., Isaiah 2 and Micah 4). The parables of

the mustard seed and yeast (Matthew 13) show the kingdom's gradual development and penetrative power. Likewise, Jesus' power over the demonic powers proved that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). After his resurrection, Jesus announced that he had been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18); and at his ascension he sat down at God's right hand as king (Acts 2:22-36).

Postmillennialists use both preterist and historicist approaches to apocalyptic passages. Concerning Revelation 20, they argue that "1000" is a figurative number that stands for the golden age that will be established by the power of the gospel over time. The binding of Satan occurred first in Jesus' ministry and will continue until the gospel transforms the present age. The "first resurrection" refers to spiritual regeneration. There will be a brief Satanic rebellion immediately before the Parousia, after which Jesus will raise those not included in the "first resurrection" so that they can experience final judgment and "the second death" (Rev. 20:6-15).⁴ This view has been especially popular among Reformed Christians.

Amillennialism. Since the fifth or sixth century most Christians have preferred this view over the two millennialist perspectives. Amillennialism ("no millennialism"—in Greek, putting an alpha [a] before a word negates it) rejects the idea of an earthly millennium at

any time. It believes OT prophecies about a future golden age were fulfilled in the coming of Christ and the Christian church or point ahead to the new heaven and earth created after the Last Judgment. Jesus declared the kingdom was present in his ministry, which was affirmed at his ascension and “coronation” in heaven (Acts 2:36; Eph. 1:20-23). Amillennialists use either a preterist or historicist approach to Revelation and interpret the “millennium” of Revelation 20 in figurative terms, as the reign of Christ and all the saints living and dead between the first and second comings. Unlike the postmillennialists who expect the kingdom of Christ to triumph progressively in the present age, amillennialists argue that the kingdom will exist alongside the kingdom of this world until the End (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). In other words, they are less optimistic than postmillennialists about the current age, but more optimistic than the premillennialists. Amillennialists claim that apart from Rev. 20, no other text describes a time gap between the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment or separates in time the resurrection of the just and the unjust.⁵

A theological pre-understanding that informs both amillennialism and postmillennialism (and early premillennialism) is “supersessionism,” the belief that with the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as Messiah, God created a New Israel, the Church, and transferred all OT prophecies to it. In practical terms, this means that supersessionists

see no future role for the Old Israel in God's program. Most modern premillennialists, on the other hand, though they disagree about the extent—or even whether—OT promises are fulfilled in the Church, think that God has unfinished business with Israel (Romans 9-11), which will finally be concluded at the Parousia and in the millennial kingdom.⁶

A History of Millennial Movements

History is messy; and theological systems rarely survive unscathed over time. Thus we should not be surprised that millennial movements are amazingly diverse and are often hard to classify.⁷

The early church. For the first three centuries, Christians experienced periodic but intense persecution by the Roman state and so found it easy to interpret their times in apocalyptic terms.

Apocalyptic millennialism was widespread in the first three centuries, thanks in large part to Papias, a second century bishop whose views influenced many others. Justin Martyr taught the rise of Antichrist, the great tribulation, the return of Christ, the first resurrection, a "thousand years in Jerusalem," then a second resurrection followed by the judgment (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 80-81, 110). Irenaeus taught a similar prophetic scenario, drawing heavily on prophetic and apocalyptic texts from both testaments (*Against*

Heresies, V, 25-36). Though a fierce opponent of anything he considered unorthodox, Tertullian combined common views about the Parousia, the first resurrection, and the 1000-year kingdom with the highly controversial “new prophecy” of Montanism, which predicted the imminent descent of the New Jerusalem in Asia Minor and the dawning of the age of the Spirit (*Against Marcion*, III, 25). Starting with the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Dialogue with Trypho*, most millennialists in the early church discounted the idea of a restored Israel and saw the church as the true Israel. There were exceptions to apocalyptic millennialism: In the early 3rd century, Origen of Alexandria rejected it as a useless holdover from discredited Judaism and offered instead an allegorical reading of Revelation. He argued that prophecies about the future kingdom were fulfilled spiritually in the human soul (*On First Principles*, II, 11).

Modern premillennialists recognize many of their own views in the early church; but they also find surprises. For example, many early interpreters believed that just as God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, there will be six thousand years of human history, followed by another 1000 years of “Sabbath rest” (for God a day is like a thousand years, 2 Peter 3:8). In the first half of the 2nd century, this view is found in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (15) and the works of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, V, 28). In the 3rd and 4th

centuries, interpreters used it to put distance between their time and the End. Hippolytus devised a new system for dating world history, the *Annus Mundi* (A.M.), and placed the incarnation in the year 5500. That meant that Christ should return about five hundred years later, or about three hundred years after Hippolytus' time (*Commentary on Daniel*). Lactantius made a similar calculation (*The Divine Institutes*, 14-27). The latter also bolstered his predictions of the End with extensive references to the Sibylline oracles, which were treated with respect and widely used by Christian writers from the second century to the Enlightenment.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, opposition to apocalyptic millennialism increased, due to the changing relationship between the church and the empire. To early Christians Rome was the enemy; but with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in the early 4th century, views of the empire changed. There was precedent for looking on Rome with favor: In the early 2nd century, Tertullian, who was as much a Roman as he was a Christian, urged fellow believers to pray for the empire since it was the "restraining force" (2 Thess. 2: 6-7) that held Antichrist at bay (*Apology*, 32). Anti-apocalyptic sentiment found its greatest champion in Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine's court theologian. He openly discredited apocalyptic millennialists and endorsed Origen's allegorical reading of Revelation, whose authenticity

he openly questioned. More than anyone else in his time, Eusebius linked together the futures and fortunes of Christianity and the Roman Empire, thus eliminating any need for rescue by the returning Christ (*History of the Christian Church*, X).

Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430) marks the turning point in Christian millennial thought; and most Christians since have appreciated his approach to prophetic and apocalyptic texts. A mild millennialist in his early days, Augustine eventually rejected both apocalyptic millennialism and Eusebius' view of church and empire, which was untenable after the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410. Instead of arguing that the Parousia ushers in a new kingdom, Augustine believed that the City of God and the City of Man coexist through time but remain completely separate. Earthly kingdoms come and go; but the City of God endures forever. In that way, Augustine countered the charge that Christianity had weakened the once invincible Roman Empire and thus caused its fall to more robust barbarians. He also argued that because the Christian's true citizenship is in God's City, the fall of Rome made little difference in the divine scheme of things. *The City of God* (XX, 7-20), then, developed a new way of understanding apocalyptic prophecies. While not disavowing the historical reality of the coming Antichrist and the chaos at the end of the age, Augustine made no attempt to find current fulfillments or

identify signs of the times. Apocalyptic texts were not just about historical events: they also described the Church's on-going struggle with good and evil and the spiritual battle that raged in the heart of every Christian. Thus, like Origen before him, Augustine understood Revelation allegorically. The millennium in chapter 20 refers to the time between Christ's first and second comings. He reigns now with his "resurrected" saints, both in heaven and in the City of God. Augustine believed that Christ had already bound the Devil for the church, but Satan's power in the earthly City was still strong. Augustine still expected the Second Coming, the final revolt and defeat of Satan, and the last judgment; but his allegorical approach to texts and his assertion that redemptive and secular history were not fundamentally related dealt a severe blow to the older reading of prophetic and apocalyptic texts.

The Middle Ages. Augustine's influence in the Middle Ages was extensive among the Church's elite; but among rank and file Christians, apocalyptic millennialism remained a popular option.⁸ Most modern historians doubt there was widespread millennialist hysteria around the year 1000 since not all people followed the same calendar. But there is some evidence that at least some people speculated about the year's significance for the Parousia.

The times invited prophetic speculation. Many believed that the rise and spread of Islam, the Viking and Magyar invasions, and the Muslim capture of Jerusalem meant that the End was near. In 950 a French monk named Adso wrote *Letter on the Origin and Life of Antichrist* in which he predicted that the Antichrist will suddenly appear during the reign of the "last emperor," the Christian Roman Empire's last and best ruler. Christ (or maybe the Archangel Michael) will kill him after a brief reign of terror, then, after some delay (how long Adso did not know) there will be the Last Judgment. Adso's prophecy of the Last Emperor caught on; and there were many eager aspirants for the job, including Emperor Frederick Barbarossa: he led the third crusade in 1190 but disqualified himself by drowning in a river on the way to Jerusalem.

Other crusaders shared millennialist motivations. In one version of his 1095 sermon that led to the first crusade, Pope Urban II stated that an expedition to free Jerusalem would help the faith "flourish again in these last times, so that when Antichrist begins his reign there—as he shortly must—he will find enough Christians to fight."⁹ Peasants by the thousands joined the People's Crusade hoping to be in the Holy Land when Jesus established his kingdom. They also believed it was their duty to kill Jews along the way. Their justification: Antichrist will come from the tribe of Dan; and Jews will be among his

most devoted followers. Some crusaders thought they could hasten the Second Coming by forcing Jews to convert or killing those who refused. Such behavior proved that under the right circumstances millennialism could generate or justify violence to help prophecy be fulfilled.

The most seminal millennialist thinker in the Middle Ages was Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132-1202). His *Exposition on the Apocalypse* offered a real alternative to Augustine. Joachim divided time into three eras, that of the Father, Son, and Spirit. According to his calculations, the age of the Son should end in 1260, but not before a time of horrible conflict between two rival popes, one the evil Antichrist, the other a godly evangelist who recruits new religious orders to launch a mission to the Jews, Muslims, and pagans. After the mission is concluded, the Antichrist will be killed and the Devil bound; then the age of the Spirit will begin.

Joachim had an expansive vision for the final age and provided details of the transformation of Church and society. However, not everyone will experience the age's glory: distant tribes will continue their wicked ways and join the Devil's last rebellion before the Parousia and the Last Judgment. Joachim saw human progress in all three ages; and his view of the perfect society was Christian millennialism's first clearly articulated utopian vision.

Other millennialists adopted Joachim's outlook; and some used revolutionary means to speed the golden age's arrival. The Spiritual Franciscans read themselves into Joachim's prophecies and stayed in trouble with the popes by identifying them as the Antichrist. In 1303 one former Spiritual Franciscan, Fra Dolcino of Novara, declared himself the angel of the Church of Thyratira (Rev. 2:18) and predicted that the Last Emperor will soon kill the pope to prepare for the Parousia. He also taught the abolition of private property and maybe even marriage. In 1305 he and about 1,400 followers formed a commune north of Rome and made plans to take over the Church, by force if necessary. Instead, two years later the Church used force against them, killing about 400 and capturing Dolcino. Shortly before he was burned at the stake, he tried to have the last word: he prophesied that after Antichrist's defeat, he himself will return to lead a purified church.

The most violent millennialists in the Middle Ages were the Taborites, the 15th century followers of Jan Huss. He was a professor at the University of Prague, a hotbed of religious reform, ethnic conflict, and deep distrust of imperial power. Huss was a Czech nationalist and a follower of John Wycliffe, the Oxford professor who condemned clerical immorality and the mass and called the pope the Antichrist. When Huss was executed at the Council of Constance in

1415 for preaching Wycliffe's views, his followers revolted. Called Taborites because they gathered at Mount Tabor south of Prague, for fifteen years they battled the pope and the emperor over church reform and the exercise of political power.

The Taborites' motivations were complex; but it is clear that they were driven by their prophetic understandings: They were living in the last days; and Jesus wanted them to cleanse the world of sin prior to his arrival. So they killed as many of their enemies as possible. They did most of their killing in battles against papal and royal armies; but sometimes their killing was unorganized and indiscriminate. Their violence was tied to eschatological hope: when Christ returned, they and the resurrected saints will enjoy the blessings of the new kingdom. A few Taborites practiced unconventional sex and held all property in common; but most never went that far. Eventually they made peace with the emperor and the pope. But the memory of their violence lingered on well into the Reformation period and showed that millennialism and politics could be a lethal combination.

The Reformation. Militant millennialism did not end with the Protestant Reformation; if anything, the agitation for reform fanned the flames. Luther more or less followed Augustine view of the millennium. He even doubted the canonicity of Revelation; but he found its apocalyptic images indispensable for understanding his own

time and labeling his enemies. The pope was the Antichrist; the Roman Church was the great apostasy of the End-Times; and the Day of Judgment was at hand. In his analysis Luther leaned heavily on Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century mystic and reformer, who divided the time between the first and second comings into three distinct eras. In the first, the church suffered at the hands of outside persecutors; in the second, it defended itself against the heretics; and in the third, it will be corrupted from within by its own leaders. Thus Bernard expected the Antichrist to emerge from the Church. Once Luther decided that the pope was the Antichrist, he hunkered down for the Devil's final, but futile onslaught. Time was running out; and signs of the world's demise were everywhere. He rejected all date setting, but he was "certain from the Holy Scriptures that we have no more temporal things to expect. All is done and fulfilled."¹⁰

Luther knew that not all end-time chaos came from Catholics. When laypeople started reading the Bible for themselves, many came to shocking conclusions. Luther feared that the millennialism of the Anabaptists could easily lead to violence. A case in point was Thomas Muntzer, once Luther's student and ally, who adopted radical views in the early 1520s. Muntzer saw himself as the last prophet before the Parousia and believed that the Holy Spirit was already separating the wheat from the weeds prior to restoring the Apostolic Church.

Embedded in his prophetic views were a deep hatred of the nobility and a desire for their overthrow. Muntzer commanded the saints to eliminate the godless to make way for Christ's kingdom, so when the Peasant Revolt broke out, Muntzer egged the peasants on. So zealous was he for violence that he signed his letters, "with the sword of Gideon." Ironically, after he was captured in 1525, one of the godless cut off his head. Thousands who took up the sword at his command met similar fates.

Not all millennialists were so bloodthirsty. While preaching the Lutheran gospel in Estonia, Melchior Hoffman concluded that the Holy Spirit had made him Elijah, one of the prophets of the Last Days. After crisscrossing Germany as a wandering preacher, in 1529 he settled in Strasbourg, which he identified as the site of the New Jerusalem. He predicted Christ's return in 1533 and told fellow Anabaptists to avoid violence for the time being so they could spread the gospel and re-baptize true believers, but they also must be ready to take control of Strasbourg and other cities and battle against the forces of Antichrist. Again, prophecy could not leave politics alone. Such talk got him expelled from Strasbourg; but in 1533 Hoffman came back to await the arrival of Jesus. As it turned out, he did his waiting in jail, where he remained until his death in 1543.

The worst case of millennialist violence occurred in the Anabaptist-controlled city of Munster in the mid-1530s. Once in charge, they declared Munster the New Jerusalem, invited in anyone who wanted to escape the coming judgment, and exiled all who refused re-baptism or resisted the new order. One new arrival, Jan Matthys, used his special status as the prophet Enoch to take over. He set a date for Christ's return, instituted a community of goods, burned all books but the Bible, and put to death those who defied him. He told the people to fight against the armies of Antichrist that were laying siege to the city. When Matthys was killed leading an attack, his successor Jan Bokelson put the city under OT law and mandated polygamous marriage. He then declared that he would rule as king of the world until Jesus personally came to take David's scepter from his hand. He did not last long either. Shortly after his first anniversary on the throne, besieging armies breached the walls and massacred his constituency. They captured King Jan and tortured him to death. His killers wanted no one to miss the point: they put his body in a cage then hung it from the cathedral tower, where it stayed for three centuries. Understandably, later Anabaptists preferred the gentle ways of Menno Simons.

After Munster, most Protestants abhorred millennialism. Calvin wrote commentaries on most of the Bible, but not Revelation. Like

Luther, he followed Augustine's amillennialism, identified the pope as Antichrist, and believed the Reformation pointed to the end of the age. When he wrote about millennialists, which was seldom, he tended to distort their views so that, one suspects, he could easily dispense with them. Overall, Calvin had almost no interest in deciphering the signs of the times; and he never worried about how much time he had left.

When Protestants published their own creeds, they affirmed the return of Christ and Last Judgment; but they knew nothing of an earthly reign of Christ after the Parousia. The Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* (17) of 1530, for example, condemned such notions as "Jewish opinions;" and the *Second Helvetic Confession* (11) of 1566 called them "Jewish dreams."

Millennialism made a comeback among the English Puritans,¹¹ who wanted to purge the Anglican Church of the "residues of Romanism." To outsiders Puritanism might look like a single thing; but insiders knew it was deeply divided over strategy and goals. Presbyterians, Independents, and Separatists had radically different solutions to Anglicanism's problems and could fight as hard against each other as they did the Anglicans and Catholics.

Queen Elizabeth wanted the Anglican Church to walk a middle line between Catholic and Protestant extremes, so she resisted all Puritan remedies. So did her successor James I, though under him

tensions dramatically increased. When his successor Charles I tried to impose Anglicanism on the Church of Scotland in 1637, the Puritans fought back. The Presbyterians soon controlled the parliament and the Independents the New Model Army, which in 1642 went to war against the King. Under Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan army overwhelmed the royalists and captured Charles in 1646. The Puritan parliament then convicted the king of treason and executed him three years later.

The Puritans understood their quarrel with the king in prophetic terms: they were God's army fighting against the army of the papal Antichrist and his ally, the English king. Such views reflected a surge of millennialism in 17th century England. In 1627 Joseph Mede of Cambridge University published *Clavis Apocalyptica*, a careful Latin treatise on the symbols and numerology in the Book of Revelation. Mede read Revelation in historicist terms and leapfrogged over Augustine to the apocalyptic millennialism of the early church. He calculated the Parousia in 1736, after which Christ will establish his 1000-year kingdom on earth. Mede's works became wildly popular when they were translated into English in 1642. Thus Puritans went into battle believing they were paving the way for a new king and kingdom. Not surprisingly, such beliefs turned English politics upside down.

After the king's execution, Puritans argued over the nature of political authority and what kind of government was needed until the Parousia. The Levelers wanted to expand the franchise; and the Diggers advocated eliminating private property and restoring the early church's community of goods. Another group, the Fifth Monarchy Men,¹² wanted a government of the saints. They took their name from Daniel 7, which described the world's four great empires. With the fall of the last empire's final king, "the sovereignty, power, and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High" (Daniel 7:27). This Fifth Monarchy is the government that will be in place when Jesus comes. In 1649 a number of high-ranking army officers petitioned the parliament and Cromwell for such a government. Cromwell convened an assembly in 1653 to explore the possibilities. The proposals of the Fifth Monarchy Men were radical: they wanted the legal system reformed, taxes reduced, church tithes used to finance the state church eliminated, a Parliament made up only of saints, and a twelve-member executive council staffed by Christian men of unimpeachable character. This was anything but anarchy; it was a serious attempt to create a Christian commonwealth.

Cromwell rejected their demands as too extreme and established the Protectorate instead. When he named himself Lord Protector, the

Fifth Monarchy Men damned him as the Beast of Daniel for usurping the place reserved for King Jesus. In 1657 a number of them were arrested, then hanged for plotting armed rebellion, as were a number of others over the next decade. Finally, like the Anabaptists before them, the survivors decided it was better to wait quietly and peacefully for Christ's return.

After Cromwell's death in 1658, the Protectorate fell apart. With no Parousia in sight, the parliament asked the beheaded king's son, Charles II, to resume the throne. Millennialism failed to discern the signs of the times; but it kept a small following, thanks to people like Isaac Newton in England and Johann Albrecht Bengel in Germany.

Modern period. In the 18th and 19th centuries, there were two millennialist success stories: the rise of an aggressive and adaptive postmillennialism and a new kind of premillennialism, both of which had far reaching social and political consequences.

There were inklings of postmillennialism among a few Puritan divines; but Daniel Whitby was probably the first to offer a systematic presentation of the doctrine in early 18th century England. Even so, it did not catch on until Jonathan Edwards espoused it in New England a few decades later. Before Edwards most New England Puritans believed that they were in the last days and that Antichrist was on the rampage almost everywhere. But in the 1730s there was a massive

and completely unexpected revival in the American colonies.

Thousands were converted; and hundreds of new congregations were established. To Edwards the Great Awakening marked the beginning of a new age in which God intended to use the saints to establish the kingdom throughout the world. Edwards believed that the Devil will mount one last revolt before Christ's return; but now there was indisputable proof that the millennium will occur *before*, not after the Parousia. Some of Edwards' theological heirs got even more specific: Joseph Bellamy figured that by the millennium's end the ratio of saved to lost people will be 17,000 to 1; and Samuel Hopkins predicted incredible advances in industry and agriculture to accommodate the exploding population of new believers. The Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century added fuel to the postmillennial fire.

The impact of these ideas was enormous. American Protestantism became evangelical and activist, pulled forward by the divine promise of success. Christians conducted revivals, started new schools, churches, and publishing houses, and organized missionary societies to jumpstart Christianization overseas. Postmillennial views also connected easily with the strong democratic impulse in America. Thus revivalism and social reform embraced. Postmillennialists became the driving force to make America Christian. Evangelist Charles Grandison Finney told his converts that it was their duty to apply the

principles of Jesus to all of life. By the 1830s and 40s leaders of the expanding “evangelical empire” predicted that the millennium was just around the corner. Non-believers often shared this contagious optimism, summed up well by Thomas Paine’s assessment: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”¹³

Of course, not everyone agreed. The world was wide; and there were big problems if one knew where to look. Progress was obviously in the eye of the beholder. Maybe things were actually heading in the opposite direction. The Millerites challenged the prophetic status quo. In 1818 William Miller, a Baptist preacher with a keen interest in the numerology in Daniel, used “millennial arithmetic” to predict Christ’s return in about 1843. He waited until the 1830s to go public and soon had an enthusiastic following. Miller had no interest in politics; and there was no time to do anything but evangelize and announce the “advent near.” Under some duress, Miller finally settled on a precise date, October 22, 1844, which set the Millerites up for their Great Disappointment. Some Millerites got over it and moved on to other things; but others organized new Adventist denominations, including the Seventh-day Adventists. Despite their failures, the Millerites proved there was still a market for premillennialism.¹⁴

In fact, America was fertile ground for millennialist movements. In 1774 Mother Ann Lee organized the United Society of Believers in

Christ's Second Coming, better known as the Shakers. They believed that Mother Ann was the female incarnation of Christ. To get a head start on the coming millennium, they formed new communities in which men and women lived simply, mostly apart, and never had sex.¹⁵

A Yale graduate and convert of Charles Finney, John Humphrey Noyes taught that Christ returned in A.D. 70 but decided not to set up his kingdom because the church lacked Christian love. To address that problem, Noyes started a commune near Putney, Vermont, in 1838, where he hoped to perfect his idea of "complex marriage," whereby community members could have sex with each other's spouses under his close supervision. Such behavior outraged the neighbors and prompted the commune's move to Oneida, NY. The community eventually tired of Noyes' sexual politics and millennial schemes and turned its attention to business.¹⁶

Much more successful in the long run were the Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. In the 1820s and 30's Joseph Smith claimed to discover and translate the *Book of Mormon* and subsequently undertook the restoration of the true gospel. The prophet preached Christ's imminent return and even produced a plat for the New Jerusalem in Jackson County, Missouri. He called on all Mormons to gather there and begin the work of the new millennium,

which Jesus will continue and complete at his coming. When fearful Missourians drove them out, Smith led the Mormons to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he built a new temple and began teaching the plurality of gods and wives. Unlike Miller, Smith was very interested in politics. He organized the Nauvoo Legion, announced his candidacy for President of the United States, and envisioned a large Mormon empire. But in 1844 the prophet was murdered before he could achieve his political goals. Under their new leader Brigham Young, the Mormons relocated to Utah, where they still await the prophet's order to move back to their Zion in Missouri just before Christ returns.¹⁷

These movements posed no immediate challenge to postmillennialism's hegemony; but time was not on its side. By the late 19th century many people believed that the world was getting worse, not better. Signs of decline multiplied: the Civil War, insurmountable social problems, disturbing new ideas like Darwinism, and early evidence that orthodoxy was slipping in the churches. Confidence in the approaching millennium was fading fast.

Consequently, many people found premillennialism more realistic. In 1870s Charles Taze Russell organized his "Bible Students" into a movement that eventually was called Jehovah's Witnesses. He taught that Christ made an invisible return to earth in 1874 and planned to establish an earthly kingdom in 1914. Thus, "millions now

living will never die." His successor, Joseph F. Rutherford, set new dates in 1918 and 1925. To prepare for Christ's return, he ordered the Witnesses to separate themselves from Babylon, the world's political, social, and religious system, and enter a new "theocracy." The Jehovah's Witnesses were thus apolitical, though they often ended up in the headlines and the courts over their refusal to take blood transfusions or salute the American flag.¹⁸

Also in the 1870s, dispensationalism came to America from Great Britain, where a revival of premillennialism had been underway since the late 18th century. By the 1820s Edward Irving, the controversial London preacher, was an important leader in the movement. He was a futurist who believed in a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy, the restoration of the Jews, the growing apostasy of the church, and the imminent return of Jesus to establish his kingdom. Annual conferences at Albury Park spread his views; and among his early supporters were the Plymouth Brethren, who had separated from apostate Anglicanism in order to meet regularly for Bible study, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper. In the 1830s John Nelson Darby, a Brethren Bible teacher, added new elements to Irving's prophetic system. Darby organized history into eras or dispensations to keep track of the changes in God's unfolding redemptive plan. He believed that God had two separate peoples and plans in history, Israel and the

Church and therefore divided the Parousia into two phases: just before the tribulation, Jesus will come *for* his saints; and at its end he will come *with* them. The pre-tribulation rapture of the church quickly became dispensationalism's most distinctive and controversial doctrine.

Darby came to North America seven times after the Civil War and won over a number of leading evangelical pastors and teachers. Dispensationalism spread through Bible and prophecy conferences, the Bible institutes, and an impressive outlay of periodicals and books, including the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909).¹⁹ Dispensationalist Bible teachers developed a detailed scenario of the Last Days that included the restoration of a Jewish state in Palestine, the pre-tribulation rapture, the rise of Antichrist, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, the great tribulation, and the Battle of Armageddon. Such views were widely accepted in fundamentalist and Pentecostal circles by World War I.²⁰

Postmillennialism did not completely disappear; but it did assume new forms.²¹ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the early adopters of biblical criticism questioned whether prophetic or apocalyptic texts could be used to predict the future. The Bible's apocalyptic passages were Jewish holdovers that had little or no relevance for the modern church.²² Liberal theologians like Albrecht

Ritschl defined the kingdom of God in ethical, rather than eschatological or apocalyptic terms. By adopting Ritschl's view of the kingdom, American Social Gospellers retained much of the postmillennial agenda for a Christian America without having to use millennialist categories. In the 20th century, one could see postmillennialism's legacy in the Progressive movement, the New Deal, and the struggle for civil rights.²³ In the 1970s a more explicit form of postmillennialism called Christian Reconstructionism became popular among some conservative Christians in the U.S. Its agenda for establishing God's kingdom on earth, which included the adoption of OT law ("theonomy"), got a hearing in the New Christian Right.²⁴

By the 1930s most American dispensationalists were religiously separatistic and politically disengaged. They were the righteous remnant of the last days and could do nothing about civilization's coming collapse except watch for signs of the times and update their prophetic scenario. But dispensationalists developed a political voice after the founding of Israel in 1948 and the Six-Day War of 1967, which they considered major prophetic fulfillments. They aggressively engaged the popular culture with best-sellers like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* novel series (1995+) and joined the ranks of the New Christian Right. Though they sometimes sounded like Reconstructionists, dispensationalists knew

that only Jesus could bring in the kingdom; nevertheless, many of them saw politics as a stop gap measure until the rapture. Much of their political involvement centered on their support for Israel. They formed grass-roots organizations to petition Congress, pressured the White House, offered direct support to Jewish settlers on the West Bank, and opposed any plan to force Israel to trade land for peace. Dispensationalists often allied themselves with Israel's religious and political extreme right because they supported the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Accordingly, their critics have complained that dispensationalism has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.²⁵ At the same time, some self-critical dispensationalists have questioned some of their movement's key issues and repudiated some excesses.²⁶

Conclusion

In the 21st century, most Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants do not think about the future in millennialist terms. Traditionalists in all three groups retain belief in a historical Antichrist, the Parousia, the resurrection of the dead, and the Last Judgment within some version of Augustinian amillennialism. Following the Enlightenment more progressive Christians have reinterpreted these biblical concepts in other ways. In the mid-20th century, R. Bultmann argued it was necessary to "demythologize" apocalyptic texts so they

could be appropriated in existentialist, rather than cosmological or historical, terms. Another popular option was C.H. Dodd's "realized eschatology," which shifted focus on the present, not the future, since Jesus had already established the kingdom of God. In more recent decades J. Moltmann and W. Pannenberg promoted a "theology of hope," which revived notions of "realistic eschatology" by considering the historical Parousia and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth without resorting to apocalyptic excesses.²⁷

In practical terms, though, this reassessment has often led preachers and teachers to ignore such texts, which renders them inaccessible to lay people. What are serious Bible readers to do with such passages? What do apocalyptic symbols actually symbolize? Are not the church's historic creeds based on these parts of the Bible? When times turn apocalyptic, does the Bible have anything to say about what might happen next? If progressive Christians are unable or unwilling to provide answers to such questions, it is not surprising that people turn to other teachers who can explain these texts in great detail. Here at least is a partial answer to why millennialism persists²⁸ and why some non-millennialist Christians are now producing their own popular interpretations of Bible prophecy and point-by-point rebuttals to millennialist arguments.²⁹

Millennialism remains strong in certain circles. Many, but not all, evangelicals still enjoy arguing about such issues.³⁰ Dispensationalists make up only one-third of American evangelicals but have extended their influence through their mastery of the media and their ability to “read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”

Even a brief historical survey shows that millennialism can be either quietistic or activist, political or apolitical, gentle or violent, and that millennialists still know how to kill and be killed, as the deaths of 80 Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1993, and the suicides of 39 members of Heaven’s Gate in San Diego in 1997 illustrate. Dispensationalism’s high-stakes support for Israel and its eagerness to identify God’s friends and enemies in the coming great tribulation show that millennialism still has powerful political applications. If the history of millennialism teaches anything, it is certain that the end is not yet.

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