

James Burke

The Importance of Premillennialism

by Professor Ernest Pickering

Is premillennialism really important? Does it make any difference whether a person is premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial? Or was the seminary professor correct who, when asked his view on the millennial question, replied, "I'll be so glad when we can all fellowship together as brethren and forget these trivial questions"?

Is premillennialism a "trivial question"? Many theological conservatives today feel it is comparatively so. Some say that after all premillennialism is just a "theory." It is one of several theories concerning eschatology. One is at perfect liberty, they say, to be a premillennialist, but why make an issue over it? Being a rather unimportant dispute confined to the field of eschatology, why should it be magnified out of proportion?

Those who speak thus concerning premillennialism do not thoroughly understand it. A number of considerations combine to make premillennialism a very crucial matter.

I. Premillennialism as a System of Theology

There is great misunderstanding regarding the nature of premillennialism. It is far more than merely a problem in eschatology. It is an entire system of Biblical interpretation. Its roots are found in major areas of theology such as Bibliology and Ecclesiology. Still other divisions of theology are affected by it. David Brown, a strong opponent of premillennialism, nevertheless saw this clearly when he wrote, "Premillennialism is not a barren speculation—useless though true, innocuous though false. It is a school of Scripture interpretation; it impinges upon and affects some of the most commanding points of the Christian faith, and when

suffered to work its unimpeded way, it stops not till it has pervaded with its own genius the entire system of one's theology, and the whole tone of his spiritual character" (David Brown, "Christ's Second Coming: Will It Be Pre-Millennial?" pp. 6-7). Another writer in the same vein says, "Modern premillennialism...is a complete theological system. It is not one doctrine, but a whole outline of theology" (Harrison F. Rall, "Modern Premillennialism and the Christian Hope," p. 109).

It is significant to note that the foregoing testimonies are from men whole-heartedly opposed to premillennialism. One other observation should be cited. "Millenarianism is not a theory which can be confined within narrow limits but it is a principle that sends its roots under and its branches through all other doctrines of Christian faith and duty. It is a pervasive spirit that insinuates itself everywhere" (James Snowden, "The Coming of the Lord: Will It Be Premillennial?" p. 10).

Not only the opponents but also the proponents of premillennialism recognize it as a theological system. Walvoord states, "Premillennialism is rather a system of theology based on many Scriptures and with a distinctive theological context" (John F. Walvoord, "The Millennial Kingdom," p. 127).

In contrast to this amillennialism is not really a system of theology as such. It in no way compares to premillennialism in the examination of the entire field of Biblical revelation. Amillennialism originated as a protest against premillennialism, not as a unified theological system in itself. MacCorkle is accurate in saying, "Amillennialism cannot present a scientific system...At this hour no monumental work exists which sets forth a system known as amillennialism" (D. B. MacCorkle, "A Study of Amillennial Eschatology," unpublished thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, p. 48). Premillennialism is an interdependent system of theology; amillennialism is not.

To recognize its position as a unified system is to appreciate more fully the importance of premillennialism.

II. Premillennialism as Related to History

Premillennialists are often accused of being pessimists with regard to their philosophy of history. However, it is premillennialism which provides the most satisfactory answer to the problems of human history.

While premillennialists believe that in the age immediately prior to the return of the Lord men will deepen in their rebellion against God, it is premillennialism that points despairing humanity to a coming "Golden Age" during which many of their frustrated hopes and aspirations will find fruition.

Mankind has always dreamed of an age of peace, of universal security, happiness and prosperity. Premillennialism looks across the turbulent present to just such a hope at the return of the Sun of Righteousness. It avoids at once the anthropocentric optimism of the old liberalism and the utter helplessness of materialism and fatalism. The premillennial hope is most optimistic for it rests upon divine promise which demands a certain fulfillment. As one has written, "...why then should there not be an age where all wars will be stopped, all diseases cured, all the injustices of government rooted out, and a full measure of years added to human life? Why should there not be an age in which all such unrealized and worth-while dreams of humanity will at last come true on earth? If there be a God in heaven, if the life which He created on the earth is worth-while, and not something evil per se, then there ought to be in history some worthy consummation of its long and arduous course" (Alva McClain, "The Greatness of the Kingdom," p. 530).

Premillennialists say there should and there shall be such an age "according to his promise" (2 Pet. 3:13). Surely it can be said, "Apart from the perspective of premillennialism, history is a mystery or madness, or both" (V. Raymond Edman, "Why Premillennialism Makes Sense," THE STANDARD, 4/13/59, p. 13).

III. Premillennialism as Related to Hermeneutics

The distinctive of premillennialism is to be found in its hermeneutical principle. Of this there can be no doubt and the fact is recognized by friend and foe alike. Allis, a confirmed amillennialist, sees this and comments, "One of the most marked features of Premillennialism in all its forms is the emphasis which it places on the literal interpretation of Scripture.... The question of literal versus figurative interpretation is, therefore, one which has to be faced at the very outset" (Oswald Allis, "Prophecy and the Church," p. 17).

Amillennialism rests squarely upon the spiritualizing principle of hermeneutics. While theologians who hearken back to the Reformers claim to follow the grammatico-historical method of interpretation, they reject it when they move into the area of prophecy. It is their claim that prophecy is by its nature different from other areas of Scripture and demands a distinct hermeneutic. Thus Terry states, "It is principally those portions of the prophetic Scriptures which forecast the future that call for special hermeneutics" (Milton S. Terry, "Biblical Hermeneutics," p. 315). A full discussion of these claims cannot be made here, but the premillennialist rejects them as without warrant.

In contrast to amillennialism the premillennial system rests upon a literal interpretation of Scripture. This does not mean that the premillennialist refuses to recognize fig-

ures of speech and various language devices employed by the authors of Scripture. It simply means that he endeavors to apply established hermeneutical principles in the area of predictive prophecy as well as in other areas of Biblical interpretation. The Bible, if so interpreted, unquestionably yields a premillennial outline of truth. Hamilton, an amillennialist, writes, "Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies give us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures" (Floyd Hamilton, "The Basis of Millennial Faith, " p. 38).

The importance of premillennialism is further seen, therefore, in its effect upon the crucial area of Biblical interpretation.

IV. Premillennialism as Related to Ecclesiology

Nowhere do the distinctives of premillennialism appear more quickly than in relation to the doctrine of the church. The amillennialist holds that the church is simply a continuation of Israel; that prophecies in the Old Testament which were given to Israel are fulfilled in the church.

Premillennialists, following the grammatico-historical method of interpretation, believe that the word "Israel" applies to the literal nation by that name and to no other. The word "church" is not interchangeable with the word "Israel" else the accepted laws of language are hopelessly confused.

The nation Israel has a distinct purpose in the mind of God. That purpose will be fulfilled as God's program unfolds. The church also has a purpose, but quite different from Israel's. Premillennialists reject the reductive error of covenant theology (which historically has gone hand in hand with amillennialism) which says that all of God's purposes with men are simply outworkings of His one plan to redeem the elect.

Yes, premillennialism is important since it profoundly influences one's view of the church.

V. Premillennialism as Related to Eschatology

Amillennial theologians have an eschatology but it is largely confined to a few areas such as death, the resurrection, the general judgment, and the eternal state. An examination of amillennial works on theology will bear out this observation. Vast portions of prophetic Scripture are left unexplained. It seems fair to state that many of these portions remain a mystery unless related to a premillennial interpretation of God's program.

Who has ever witnessed an amillennial prophetic conference? Amillennialism has never contributed to the popular study of the prophetic Scriptures. Premillennialism with its emphasis upon the imminent return of Christ has been used of God to challenge His people toward holy living and fervent evangelism. Is not this a witness of its importance?

VI. Premillennialism as Related to Conservatism

Have you ever seen a liberal or neo-orthodox premillennialist? Chances are extremely small that you ever will. Premillennialism and theological skepticism do not mix. Premillennialism has always formed a great bulwark against the inroads of apostasy. No doubt this is largely because premillennialism is preeminently a Biblical theology which rests, not upon philosophy, psychology, or science, but upon the normal, literal interpretation of the Word of God.

Premillennialism tends to give one a certain acumen in theology whereas non-premillennialists are inclined toward fuzziness in some areas of theology. The great Baptist preacher, I. M. Haldeman, once wrote, "The fact remains that to find the deniers of the inspiration and revelation of the Bible, the deniers of the faith, or the Deity of our Lord and His most precious work on the cross, one must go to the camp of those who call dispensational truth, prophetic truth, a 'fabrication' and a 'concoction' and who sneer at these truths" (I. M. Haldeman, "A Review of Mr. Philip Mauro's Book, 'The Gospel of the Kingdom'" p. 14). In other words, there are liberal and neo-orthodox amillennialists, but none such in the premillennial camp. Departure from the faith will also mean departure from premillennialism.

Even Murray acknowledges that "in no school of Christian thought can one find less liberalism than among the premillennialists" (G. L. Murray, "Millennial Studies," p. 14). If this be true, and it can be historically proven, then premillennialism is certainly important in today's mortal combat between Biblical truth and religious unbelief. It stands like a fortress against the latter and for the former.

VII. Premillennialism as Related to Ecclesiasticism

Premillennialists feel that their primary loyalty is to the Word of God, not to denominational programs, creeds, and schemes. For this reason premillennialists have often resisted strongly the encroachments of official ecclesiasticism upon their liberty in Christ. This has not always contributed to their popularity in ecclesiastical organizations. Many denominations which place great emphasis on historic creeds have berated premillennialists for their failure to conform to them. Rutgers complains that premillennialism "breeds the spirit of separation and division" and that "it is

adverse to authoritative dogma" (W. H. Rutgers, "Premillennialism in America," p. 254). Masselink deplors the fact that the premillennialist "either totally disregards the doctrinal standards of the Church or places them in an entirely inferior position" (William Masselink, "Why Thousand Years?" p. 136).

In proportion to the measure in which premillennialists have propagated their doctrines they have often come into conflict with irate ecclesiastical powers. Peters quotes a seminary professor as advising premillennialists within his denomination that if they wish to "remain undisturbed in their ecclesiastical relations" they had better "stop their Bible and prophetic conferences" (G. N. H. Peters, "The Theocratic Kingdom," I, 481). "Premillennialism has tended to be more independent of human and ecclesiastical opinions and more inclined to exalt the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a basis for conduct. The modern tendency to exalt church programs often pursued in the energy of the flesh rather than in the power of the Spirit, and the trend to exalt submission to church authority rather than to the Holy Spirit have had no encouragement from premillennialism" (John F. Walvoord, "The Millennial Kingdom," p. 125). This does not mean that premillennialists despise cooperative programs which are sensible and Scriptural. It does mean that they as a whole have resisted the tendency to place loyalty to human organization above that of loyalty to the truth of God. What an important part premillennialism has played in so doing!

Conclusion

Premillennialism is not a theory of men. It is a system of interpretation that finds its principles in the Word of God. If loyalty to the Word of God is important, loyalty to premillennialism is important for the latter is based upon the former. Premillennialism sets forth a systematic presentation of truth, a victorious interpretation of history, an adequate hermeneutic, a clear ecclesiology, a full-orbed eschatology, a rock-ribbed fundamentalism, and a resistance to the octopus of ecclesiasticism.

Premillennialism IS important.

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