

What Modern Millennialism Has Really Left Behind

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Introduction

The term “millennialism,” or “chiliasm,” is the name for the ancient heresy according to which it is taught that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years. This millennium is dreamed of as a golden era of political peace, outward morality, social justice, earthly prosperity, and spiritual renewal under Jesus’ iron scepter. It may seem, at first glance, that millennialism is one of the “less harmful” heresies; that the poor, deluded souls who have been deceived into expecting a millennium will just be momentarily disappointed when Christ returns and they find out they were wrong.

However, when we think through the readings we have heard during the past weeks of the church year, we see just how devastating and menacing the millennialistic heresy really is. For instance, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, we heard the Gospel where the mother of Zebedee’s sons asked if Jesus would let James and John sit at His right and left in His kingdom. The millennialist would say that it was not wrong of them to look for a political kingdom of Christ. What was wrong was that they were looking for Christ’s political kingdom when He came the first time, instead of the second time.

On the Fifth Sunday in Lent, we heard the Gospel where Martha said that she knew her brother would rise again on the last day. Some millennialists would go so far as to say that her brother will rise again in the sixth of seven resurrections, and that the last day will in fact last one thousand seven years.

On Palm Sunday, we saw Zechariah’s prophecy fulfilled as the King rode into Jerusalem to earn peace for the nations by His suffering and death on the cross. Zechariah pictured that peace as the chariots being taken away from Ephraim, and the war horses from Jerusalem. The millennialist says that we must wait until the millennium for that peace Zechariah described.

On Maundy Thursday, we considered the Old Testament Passover, noting with gratitude that the old Passover and the old covenant as a whole has passed away, for Jesus has established the new covenant in His blood, the forgiveness of sins. Then on Good Friday, we were comforted to hear of how the veil was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment of our Savior’s death, for it proclaims that we have been reconciled to God. The millennialist awaits the day when the old Passover, along with all the old regulations of the old covenant will be reinstated. He looks forward to the day when that veil will be restored at a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

On Easter, we were glad with Job that our Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. So are the modern millennialists, but they are glad that Jesus will also stay standing here upon the earth for a thousand years. With Lazarus, Job will have to wait until the sixth of seven resurrections to see his Redeemer with his own eyes, while we Christians will get to see Him with our own eyes already in the third of the seven resurrections, also known as the rapture.

When we see and hear these words of God through millennialistic eyes and ears, we see that this is no harmless heresy. It is a threat to us and to our people. It thoroughly pervades American secular thinking and American Protestantism. Most painful of all, our people are exposed to it through “Christian” radio, television, and books. So may God comfort and strengthen us through this study of what we really look forward to in keeping with Jesus’ promise. May God help us to see what we need to warn our people against, yes, even be prepared to correct in our peoples’ thinking. May God also prepare us to give an answer to the poor, deluded souls who have been taught to cling to millennialistic fantasies, for they will very likely be among those who ask us to give the reason for the hope that we have. God help us to see, with sadness and alarm, just what it is that modern millennialism has left behind.

Definitions and History of the Heresy

A few definitions will give us a general overview of what millennialism is and the different forms it has taken in history. First, by *the millennium*, we mean that false expectation that there will be a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. So *amillennialism* is the belief there is going to be no thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The one little word that fells the millennialistic heresy entirely was spoken on Good Friday by Christ Himself: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). An example of an amillennialist statement of belief is our own Augsburg Confession:

They teach that at the consummation of the world Christ will appear for judgment, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joy, but ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end. . . . They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.¹

The Lutheran confessors called millennialistic expectations “Jewish opinions,” because that was what the majority of the Jews had come to expect from their Messiah. It was one of the opinions John the Baptist told the people to repent of as he prepared the way for the Lord. It was the opinion for which Simon the Zealot and the other disciples were zealous. It was an opinion the Savior just as zealously fought against every time He called Himself the Son of Man, every time He told His disciples to take up the cross, and every time He spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. This Jewish opinion was part of why the Jewish leaders were envious of Jesus and wanted Him dead. Jesus suffered and died under a placard by which Pilate wanted to mock and crush this Jewish opinion of a messianic kingdom. Even on Ascension Day, the disciples asked if Jesus was *now* going to restore the kingdom to Israel. After Pentecost, however, never again do we hear another word from the Apostles about an earthly kingdom.

Modern millennialists will often claim that the early church was millennialistic. It is true that some of the early church fathers held to *historical premillennialism*. Some were “influenced by the Jewish belief in an earthly Messianic Kingdom, while others embraced millenarianism as a reaction to the Gnostic antagonism toward the material realm.”² It went no farther than the expectation that Christ would return *before a millennium* (thus called *premillennialism*), and establish a reign of peace on earth. It was by no means the elaborate system modern millennialists have concocted. As Jewish influence and Gnosticism died away, historical premillennialism also died away.

It wasn’t until the Reformation that millennialistic fervor returned among the forbearers of American Protestantism. For instance, “The Puritans . . . believed they had a millennial mission to fulfill.”³ Until the end of the 1800’s, American Protestants in general clung to the expectation that Christ would return *after a millennium* (thus called *postmillennialism*). Their idea of a millennium is a more or less figurative thousand years in which the world will see vast improvements socially and morally under Protestant principles. They expect that evil in its many forms will be “reduced to negligible proportions,”⁴ as the Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments become the law of the world.

Postmillennialism is based in large part on the Great Commission. Postmillennialists consider it a promise that must be fulfilled. To them, Christ’s “declared purpose is the Christianizing of the world during this present Church Age.”⁵ So Christ cannot come again until after the church sets up this golden era of a Christian world. The grim reality of the decline of civic righteousness in the Western world, the world wars, and general apostasy within visible Christendom have all combined to essentially put an end to postmillennialism.

¹ Augsburg Confession, Article XVII, 1-3 and 5.

² Carl Olson, *Will Catholics Be “Left Behind”?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 121.

³ Professor John Brenner, *American Lutheran Views on Eschatology and How They Related to the American Protestants*. (Mankato, MN: An essay delivered at the 32nd Annual Bethany Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College, October 28-29, 1999) p. 2.

⁴ Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1957), p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 409.

However, its influence on American thinking and its mark on American Protestantism is easily identifiable, yes, even undeniable.⁶

This brings us, both historically and logically, to *dispensational premillennialism*. It is the crassest form of millennialism. Again, it is called *premillennialism* because it holds that Christ will come *before* the millennium. Cyrus Scofield, in his 1909 notes to the King James Version, did more to popularize the notion of *dispensational* premillennialism than anyone else.

The premise of dispensationalism is based on a false understanding of St. Paul's encouragement to Timothy that he rightly divide the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). Scofield said, "The Word of Truth, then has right divisions, and it must be evident, that...any study of that Word which ignores those divisions must be in large measure profitless and confusing."⁷ However, the division of which Scofield was speaking was not that of the Law and Gospel. Instead, he divided world history into seven *dispensations*, during which God is supposed to have dealt with humanity in seven different ways.⁸ We are currently in the sixth dispensation, looking forward to the seventh dispensation: the millennium. A cornerstone of this opinion is that now "God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity."⁹ To be most accurate, modern millennialism almost exclusively, is *dispensational premillennialism*.

Dispensational premillennialists are further divided into three parts. All believe in a rapture, but some are *pre-tribulation rapturists*. They think Christ will take the Christians out of this world before the supposed seven years of the great tribulation. Others are *mid-tribulation rapturists*. They think Christ will take the Christians out of this world in the middle of the great tribulation. Finally there are *post-tribulation rapturists*. They think Christians will endure the seven years of tribulation, and then be raptured. Most modern millennialists are dispensational premillennialists of the pre-tribulation rapturist stripe. So we shall hereafter simply refer to that form as "modern millennialism." This is their scheme:

1. The seven eras of the Church Age (Revelation 2-3).
2. The Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)
3. The first judgment of the raptured saints in the air (2 Corinthians 5:8-10)
4. Three and a half years of the Tribulation (Revelation 4-9)
5. Three and a half years of the Great Tribulation (Revelation 15-16)
6. The Battle of Armageddon (Revelation 19)
7. The Second Coming (Matthew 24:27-31)
8. The mass conversion of the Jews by shock (Romans 11:26).
9. The resurrection of the martyred dead from the Tribulation (Revelation 20:4-6)
10. The resurrection of the Old Testament saints (Daniel 12:2)
11. The second judgment of the nations according to their treatment of Jesus' brothers, the Jews (Matthew 25:31ff)
12. Christ sets up His kingdom on earth and reigns with His saints for a thousand years (Revelation 20:1-3)
13. Satan released for the short while (Revelation 20:3, 7)
14. The Battle of Gog and Magog against Jesus' millennial kingdom (Revelation 20:7-10)
15. The resurrection of the wicked dead, also known as the unsaved (Revelation 20:11-12)

⁶ See Professor John Brenner, *op. cit.*.

⁷ Cyrus Scofield, as quoted by Carl Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁸ Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1999), p. 60. Scofield lists the following dispensations: Innocency (until the Fall), Conscience (until the Flood), Human Government (until Abraham) Promise (until Sinai), Mosaic (until Christ), Grace (until the Millennium), Kingdom (until the end of the world). Some dispensationalists have different numbers; some give them different names.

⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*. (Dallas, TX.: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1936) p. 107 as quoted by Olson, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

16. The Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:12-15)
17. The creation of the new heaven and earth (Revelation 21-22)

What one observes from looking through the definitions of millennialism in their historical order is that, like any heresy, this one too has become crasser and crasser. The threat looms larger and larger, and the devil has seen to it that more and more people are deceived by it. Now then, we are ready to consider just what it is that modern millennialism has left behind.

Sound Hermeneutics Are Left Behind

Modern millennialists claim that they interpret Scripture literally. They accuse amillennialists of interpreting the Scriptures non-literally, or spiritualizing the Scriptures. Charles Ryrie says:

The *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is the matter of historical-grammatical hermeneutics. The word *literal* is perhaps not as good as either the word *normal* or *plain*, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation does...Consistently literal, or plain, interpretation indicates a dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. And it is this very consistency – the strength of dispensational interpretation – that seems to irk the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.¹⁰

Another of their major proponents states, “The commonly held belief that prophecy is not literal and should be interpreted nonliterally *has no basis in scriptural revelation*. Undoubtedly, a nonliteral viewpoint is one of the major causes of confusion in prophetic interpretation.”¹¹ Permit one final quotation to show the way in which our position is characterized: “It seems fair to say that the principle reason for this spiritualization is that a literal interpretation of these portions appears to amillennialists as absurd. Christ just would not rule here on earth in a literal manner.”¹²

The so-called literal method of interpreting is really *literalistic* interpretation in which the Holy Spirit’s own interpretation is left behind. Their basic hermeneutical principle is: “The Church does not fulfill or take over any of Israel’s promises or purposes.”¹³ Consider two examples. In Acts 2, St. Peter quotes from Joel 2 and says that what happened on Pentecost was what was spoken by the Prophet Joel. Millennialists say it isn’t the complete fulfillment, because the Church fulfills no prophecy. This principle is even applied to Jeremiah’s words regarding the new covenant of the forgiveness of sins in 31:31-34, even though the Holy Spirit quotes Jeremiah in Hebrews and says that the first covenant “is obsolete” and “will soon disappear” (Hebrews 8:13), and even though Jesus speaks in the Words of Institution about the new covenant in His blood.

Observe how selective the millennialists are in their “consistent, literal, normal, and plain” method of interpretation of their supposed *sedes*, Revelation 20. St. John says in 20:1-2, “And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.” Even the millennialists admit that it is a figurative key to a figurative abyss, holding a figurative chain by which he binds a figurative dragon or ancient serpent. Yet they insist it is a literal thousand years.

The Great and Urgent Warning of Judgment Day Is Left Behind

The Left Behind series is the perfect illustration of this danger. It is about four people who were not raptured. One character says it: “The point now is, *you have another chance*. Don’t miss it. If you accept God’s

¹⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, as quoted by Carl Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹¹ John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy in the New Millennium: A Fresh Look at Future Events*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001) p. 11. Emphasis mine.

¹² Leon J. Wood, *The Bible and Future Events: An Introductory Survey of Last-Day Events*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) p. 23-24.

¹³ Keith Mathison, as quoted by Carl Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

message of salvation, his Holy Spirit will come in unto you and make you spiritually born anew.... You can become a child of God by praying to him right now as I lead you.”¹⁴ Isn’t that great for the flesh? If someone is impenitent, they can console themselves with the dream that if they are left behind they will have to go through the great tribulation, but at least they will have the second chance.

Gone is the Lord’s warning: “Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matthew 25:13). In fact, those left behind will know when to expect him, because it will be seven years from the day of the rapture! Not only do the foolish virgins have a second chance to buy more oil, but the bridegroom will even open the door to them a second time at a second judgment day! This judgment is seen as a day to determine “which Gentiles will be permitted to enter the millennial period. The criterion for judgment will be personal righteousness as believers in Christ, evidenced by the attitude of each shown during the great tribulation towards Christ’s ‘brethren,’ the Jews.”¹⁵ This is supposedly based on Matthew 25:40, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

So the millennialists offer the false hope of a second chance followed by a second judgment, despite the fact that Scripture speaks of *a day* on which Jesus will judge the world (Acts 17:31 [note the singular—ἔσθησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ μέλλει κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην]). He says He will appear a second time (Hebrews 9:28 [ἐκ δευτέρου]). What ends up happening in the millennialist system is that the urgent call to repentance is no longer quite so urgent. Now is the time of God’s favor, but so is the seven year period after the rapture. Now is the day of salvation, but so is the second chance when people are left behind.

The Great Joy of Living in the New Testament Era as a Member of Christ’s Kingdom and of the Holy Christian Church Is Left Behind

St. Paul describes us as those on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11). Through the means of grace, we enjoy the peace the angels sang about at the Lord’s birth, and the peace declared to the world on Easter. We live in Christ’s kingdom of grace, having righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). With all things already under the feet of the Prince of Peace, we trust that He rules over all things for the good of His Holy Christian Church.

The millennialist, however, does not see this era as the glorious thing it is. “The church is something distinct to this age and was hidden to Old Testament believers. *It is a parenthesis* that lies between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel 9:25. *No prophecy referring specifically to Israel has been fulfilled since Christ was on earth; the prophetic clock has not ticked since Pentecost.*”¹⁶ What happened, according to the millennialist fantasies, is that Jesus wanted to establish a millennialistic Jewish kingdom when He came the first time, but because of the unbelief of the Jews, He couldn’t. So He set up the Christian Church instead, which “is manifestly *an interruption of God’s program for Israel.*”¹⁷ We are not living in the fulfillment of the ages – we are merely in a parenthesis.

They think the real fulfillment of the ages will come in the millennium. People will be more receptive than ever to trusting Christ because of the great psychological shock of the tribulation and the visible nature of His kingdom. It will be a thousand years of Joel’s Pentecost prophecy being completely fulfilled. There will be peace on earth, because Israel will be a superpower with Jesus as king. The rulers of the Gentiles will report directly to Jesus. There will be liberty and social justice for all.¹⁸

In short, the millennialistic gospel is the good news about what Jesus *will* do, instead of what He *has* done. For instance, the millennialists believe that the binding of Satan described in Revelation 20:1-3 is a future event, something that will happen during the coming thousand years of Jesus’ reign on earth. St. John says in Revelation 20:1-3:

¹⁴ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1995) p. 156-157. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Leon J. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard, *op. cit.*, p. 61. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, as quoted by Carl Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 222. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ For a more full description of the millennium, see Leon J. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 163ff.

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”

Is this a future event? Jesus *has* destroyed the devil’s work (1 John 3:8). He who is alive again *holds* the keys of death and hell (Revelation 1:18). Jesus *has* descended into hell to proclaim His finished victory over the devil (1 Peter 3:19). Jesus *has* made a public spectacle of the devil (Colossians 2:15). The strong man has been bound (Mark 3:27). He is now *Gottes Teufel*.¹⁹ In these last days, there is indeed a final but futile attack of the devil. One little word still fells him. Professor Meyer reminds us:

As long as people cherish the redemption prepared for us by Jesus; as long as they live by the forgiveness of their sins as Jesus proclaims it in His Gospel; as long as they revere the Scriptures as the Word of God, so long Satan is bound and can harm them none. But when the Word of God is neglected, when it is no longer accepted and proclaimed as God’s Word; when people live no longer by faith in the forgiveness of sins alone by God’s grace for Christ’s sake: then the chain is broken which held Satan bound, then the prison doors are flung open wide to release him.²⁰

Continuing in Revelation 20:4:

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw *the souls* [τὰς ψυχὰς] of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They [the souls] had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They [the souls] came to life [thus NIV, actually ἐζήσαν, not ἀνεζήσαν, so better, “they lived”] and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

Where is Christ reigning on earth in this verse? Where is mention of a millennial state of Israel? There is none. Who are the priests of God and of Christ who reign with Him? St. John has already told us that Christ *has made us* a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father (1:6). What comfort is John then giving to his brothers and companions in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance? According to the millennialist, none at all! They think these words are about the martyrs of the great tribulation, not the early Christians and not us either. We’ll stick with St. John and say that these souls he sees are those who are in heaven. Yes, the souls St. John sees are our loved ones who have died in Christ, and unless Jesus comes first, our own souls. For as the Psalmist and St. Paul both remind us, “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” (Romans 8:36).

So then we also see what the thousand years are: the glorious New Testament era in which we live. Satan has been bound and can harm us none here on earth, for our Lord Jesus rules over everything so that nothing can separate us from the love of God. When we die, we go to heaven, where we live and reign with Jesus. Regarding the symbolism of the thousand years, Professor Gawrisch says: “The number ten represents completeness. We think of the ten plagues and the Ten Commandments, the ten virgins, ten minas, ten servants... A thousand, which is ten raised to the third degree, represents therefore the highest degree of completion.”²¹ That age of completion, bounded by Pentecost on the one hand and Judgment Day on the other, is the age in which we live. What could be more complete than when Jesus said, “I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), “The prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 16:11), and “Peace be with you” (John 20:19).

¹⁹ Martin Franzmann, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968) p. 131.

²⁰ J. P. Meyer, *Eternity: Christ’s Return, Chiliasm, Resurrection of the Dead, Judgment, Hell, Luther on Eternity, Heaven*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Lutheran, August 22, 1954: Vol. 41 # 17 to April 14, 1957: Vol. 44 # 8) p. 31.

²¹ Wilbert Gawrisch, *Our Great Heritage III: Eschatological Prophecies and Current Misinterpretations* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991) pp. 706-707.

Before we move on, we need to briefly dispose of the major millennialistic concept of the “parenthesis,” the notion that the New Testament church is merely an interruption in God’s plans for Israel. Where would the millennialists ever find the concept of a “parenthesis,” especially when God promised Abraham already, “All nations on earth will be blessed through you”? Ryrie says:

If the Church is not a subject of Old Testament prophecy, then the church is not fulfilling Israel’s promises, but instead Israel herself must fulfill them and that in the future. In brief, Premillennialism with a dispensational view recognizes the church as a distinct entity, distinct from Israel in her beginning, in her relation to this age, and in her promises. If the church is not a distinct body, then the door opens wide for amillennialism to enter with its ideas that the church is some sort of full-bloomed development of Judaism and the fulfiller of Israel’s promises of blessing (but not of judgment). Thus Premillennialism and ecclesiology are inseparably joined.²²

In other words, if the Church fulfills God’s promises to Israel, then the premillennial dispensationalist system falls apart.²³ We’ll stick with St. Paul, who said, “Therefore, the promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. *As it is written*: “I have made you a father of many nations” (Romans 4:17). This leads us directly to the next concept.

The Comfort of Being the Children of Abraham by Faith and God’s Israel Is Left Behind

Perhaps you have seen the infomercials on the “Christian” stations telling us to give money to feed starving Jews in Russia, or even to pay for them to be flown Israel. Never do we hear a word about preaching Christ to them. This flows directly from the notion that the Church is a mere parenthesis in God’s plans for Israel as a political nation and as a separate earthly people.

Regarding the political state of Israel, they say, “The clearest sign of Christ’s return is the modern state of Israel.”²⁴ For proof, they refer to such passages as Isaiah 11. The prophet says in verses 9-12:

They will neither harm nor destroy *on all my holy mountain*, for *the earth* will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner *for the peoples*; *the nations will rally* to him, and *his place of rest* will be glorious. *In that day* the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He will raise a banner *for the nations* and *gather the exiles of Israel*; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.

The Holy Spirit has the author of Hebrews write *to the Hebrew Christians* in 12:22, “But you *have come* to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You *have come* to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” The believing remnant of the Jews and the believing Gentiles *have entered God’s rest* by faith, not by moving to the land of Israel. The author of Hebrews speaks of this also in Hebrews 4. By no means is Isaiah here foretelling the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948.

Another passage to which the millennialists will point is Amos 9:11-12, “*In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,*” declares the LORD, who will do these things.” The millennialists say that these days started in 1948. The Holy Spirit says through St. James: “Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. *The*

²² Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, as quoted by Carl Olson, p. 222.

²³ That the Church replaced Israel as God’s people is called “replacement theology.” Interestingly, there is a movement among dispensationalists who are admitting that some prophecies are being fulfilled in the New Testament. They are called *Progressive Dispensationalists*. See Tim Warner, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 101.

²⁴ Leon J. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages.’” (Acts 15:14-18). God says these days started 2000 years ago.

That millennialist notion that the Church is a mere parenthesis in God’s plans leads to another dangerous opinion: namely, that Israel according to the flesh is still God’s special, chosen people. They insist that, “It is very important in prophecy to distinguish sharply between God’s purposes for Israel and God’s purpose for the church.”²⁵ God’s purpose for physical Israel is to restore them to the land of Israel so that He then can bring Armageddon against them. That is why the “Christian” stations pay for Jews to return to Palestine. The sooner they get to Palestine, the sooner Armageddon. “The great catastrophic events which are to happen to this nation [Israel] during ‘the tribulation’ are primarily designed to shock the people into believing their true Messiah.”²⁶ Then the Jews will experience a mass conversion. That is why the “Christian” stations do not bother telling the Jews about Christ. They cite Romans 11:25b-27:

Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so [οὐτως] all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

The millennialists mistake the οὐτως for a temporal adverb, by which they mean that once the church age of the Gentiles is over, *then* all Israel will be terrified into salvation before the millennium. But if we go back to Romans 9:6b-8, the Apostle himself explains the οὐτως:

For *not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children.* On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is *not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise* who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.

Not only is the very notion of a *mass conversion of all the Jews* contrary to St. Paul’s own words. The very notion of a *mass conversion* at all just prior to the second coming is contrary to the clear words of Christ and the Apostles foretelling mass apostasy (Mt 24:4-14, 2 Thess 2:3-15, 2 Tim 3:1-5). It is a sad delusion that God has two separate peoples. St. Paul calls all of us the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). St. Peter, speaking to all the Christians, says that we are God’s chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Pt 2:9, compare with Ex 19:6). Though Jesus died to destroy the barrier (Ephesians 2:14), our modern millennialists work to put it back up. In conclusion, let’s hear from Dr. Luther:

According to the old covenant I am no Israel, or Jew. But I claim now that I am the son of St. Paul, and an Israelite or Benjamite. For Paul is my father, not the old Paul but the new Paul. He is still the old Paul, but out of the old Paul there has arisen a new Paul in Christ; and he has begotten me in Christ by the gospel, so that I am in his likeness according to the new covenant. Thus all the Gentiles who are Christians are the true Israelites and new Jews, born of Christ, the noblest Jew. Everything, therefore, depends upon the new covenant, which the Messiah was to found, making all things new, as he has done.²⁷

The Real Danger of the Antichrist Is Left Behind

From the notion of a restored nation of Israel flows the millennialistic expectation of Antichrist. To them, he is just a political person that comes to power over one world government. Because of the clear connection in Daniel 7 and Revelation 17 between the Roman Empire and the Antichrist, they conceive of him as coming from a revived Roman Empire and from one of the Roman Empire nations. In the “Left Behind”

²⁵ John Walvoord, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁶ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972) p. 48.

²⁷ Martin Luther, *American Edition*, Vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960) p. 288.

series, he is portrayed as a Romanian who takes control of the United Nations. He is considered to be an atheist empowered by Satan. Here is a description of him and his danger:

His three biblical names are significant: “little horn” depicting him as a king, growing up among and displacing other kings; “beast” presenting him as possessing a ravaging, animal-like nature; and “man of sin” portraying him as given to, permitting, and advocating sin in the world, instead of exalting the finer virtues of life... He will be Satan’s false claimant to world rule prior to the appearance of God’s true Claimant, Jesus Christ.²⁸

Millennialist ideas about the Antichrist come especially from a false understanding of Daniel 9:27-28, “He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.” The millennialists make three insertions into this passage. First, they assume that the “he” is the Antichrist. Second, they think of the “covenant” as a political alliance, and the “many” with whom he makes it are the Jewish people. So of course, there must be a literal temple for him to sit in and desolate. Hal Lindsey pictures it this way:

Paul speaks of this person as one who “opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God...By this act, the Roman prince, who is also called the “the Lawless One” and “the Antichrist” breaks his covenant with the Jewish people and causes the Jewish temple worship, according to the law of Moses, to cease (Daniel 9:27).²⁹

That is why the millennialists expect that “There will be a reinstatement of the Jewish worship according to the Law of Moses with sacrifices and oblations in the general time of Christ’s return.”³⁰ They do not think that this contradicts what the author of Hebrews says about the abolition of the sacrifices, because these sacrifices will just be “symbols” like they think the Sacraments are now.³¹ What is the Antichrist’s great deception, if it is not a spiritual deception and delusion (2 Thess 2:10-12)? It is his explanation for what happened to the Christians in the rapture.³²

This is in fact a prime example of the great, sad deception that is modern millennialism: an emphasis on the political over the spiritual. Instead of the grave spiritual danger posed to souls by the true Antichrist in Rome, the millennialists warn against a still-to-come political Antichrist, of the new world order, and of the United Nations. In fact, Jack Van Impe, one of the major preachers of modern millennialism said, “We [Roman Catholics and he] agree on the great fundamentals of the faith...I’ve been reading the *Catholic Catechism*, 2,865 points, backed with 5,000 to 6,000 verses of Scripture. This is the Word of God. This thing blessed my heart.”³³

The Real Hope of the Resurrection Is Left Behind

St. Paul writes in Titus 2:13 that we are awaiting the “the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The modern millennialists think that the blessed hope and the glorious appearing are two different things (they would reject that the *καὶ* in Titus 2:13 is epexegetical). By the blessed hope, they understand the rapture. The rapture is “a thrilling painless journey to [Jesus’] side in heaven,”³⁴ by which Christians and those who have not attained the age of accountability are spared from having to go

²⁸ Leon J. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

²⁹ Hal Lindsey, *op. cit.*, p. 56-57.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 57.

³¹ Leon J. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

³² Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999) p. 117.

³³ Jack Van Impe, as quoted by Carl Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

³⁴ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

through the great tribulation.³⁵ The rapture is the third of seven resurrections (the first being Christ's, the second being the Good Friday saints who were later raptured).³⁶ The major "*sedes*" of the rapture is Thessalonians 4:15-17, where the Apostle says:

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left *will be caught up* together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

They think the Lord will come down from heaven, but only those raptured will see Him. Not even Job will see Jesus with his own eyes yet. He will come with a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet call of God, but only loud enough for the Christians to hear. They disappear, and the great tribulation begins for those left behind.

The millennialists are convinced that our blessed hope would be diminished if we had to endure the great tribulation. They cite St. Paul's words, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ," (1 Thess 5:9). They say that the wrath here spoken of is the great tribulation, not the wrath of God in eternal damnation. Therefore, they reason that the Christians must be raptured before the terrible times that are coming at the end of this age.

The fourth resurrection is the two witnesses in Revelation 11; the fifth comes in Revelation 20:4:

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw *the souls* of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life [thus the NIV; actually ἐζήσαν, not ἀνεζήσαν, so the better translation is that they lived] and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

According to the millennialistic fantasy, many do make a decision for Jesus during the great tribulation. The great psychological shock of the rapture puts them in a proper state of mind for making this decision. Those who do so are called the tribulation saints.³⁷ These *souls* did not fall prey to the political Antichrist and receive his literal mark on their literal foreheads. Unlike the Antichrist, they were nice to Jesus' brothers, the Jews, so they are permitted to inherit the millennial kingdom after all (Mt 25:31-46). The problem with this atomistic interpretation is that St. John does not say that they the people he here sees were raised from the dead bodily. He sees souls.

Now comes the sixth resurrection of the Old Testament saints, supposedly based on Daniel 12:2. But Daniel says, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). He does not distinguish between Old Testament Jews and others. He mentions believers and unbelievers.

The seventh resurrection is that of the wicked dead, also known as the unsaved or unredeemed, at the end of the millennium (along with the fourth judgment), described in Revelation 20:12-15:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁶ See John Walvoord, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-72.

Again, there is one judgment (see above), which follows all coming out of their graves on *the last day* (John 6:40 [τῆ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ] and John 5:28-29). So why does St. John speak of the first and second resurrection in Revelation 20:5-6? Let's consider it briefly:

The rest of the dead did not live [ἐξῆσαν] until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection [ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη]. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection [ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει τῆ πρώτῃ]. On them the second death [ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος] has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him a thousand years.³⁸

The same holy writer quotes Jesus, "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live [ζήσουσιν]" (John 5:25). The first death is our spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1). So the first resurrection is conversion. The second death is interpreted for us by St. John in Revelation 20:14: "The lake of fire is the second death." The second death is everlasting hell. So the second resurrection is that of the body to everlasting life. We who have been raised with Christ through Baptism look forward to the real hope of the resurrection of the body!

The Real Danger of the Great, Ongoing Spiritual Battle Is Left Behind

The strife is not o'er, and the battle is not done according to our millennialists. They dream of two great wars that Jesus has yet to fight. The first is the battle of Armageddon. Instead of men fainting from terror when He comes again (Luke 21:26), whole nations will go to war against Jesus. Once He literally defeats these literal nations with a literal sword that figuratively comes out of his literal mouth (Revelation 19:15), He will be able to set up his literal millennial kingdom.

The millennialists dream that when the thousand years are over, the devil is let loose and Jesus has to fight another literal war. Now the attack of Gog and Magog against Jesus' millennial kingdom takes place. The millennialists here make much ado about Ezekiel 38:2-3, where the prophet says, "Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal." By literalistic sophistry, derivations go from Meshech to Moscow, and from the chief prince to Rosh to Russia.³⁹ Russia is to form an alliance with Persia (Iran), Cush and Put (Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt) against Jesus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, some millennialists are envisioning the Islamic states that used to be part of the Soviet Union as the real Gog and Magog, especially since the terrorist attacks.⁴⁰ Then the great battle against Jesus' millennial kingdom and Jerusalem begins, supposedly described by St. John in Revelation 20:7-10:

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out *to deceive the nations* in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – *to gather them for battle*. In number *they are like the sand on the seashore*. They marched *across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves*. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil *who deceived them*, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Suffice it to say that St. Paul spoke of this same battle in Ephesians 6:12ff:

Our struggle is *not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, *with the belt of truth* buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from *the gospel of peace*. In addition to all this, take up the *shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all*

³⁸ Author's own translation.

³⁹ Hal Lindsey, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁴⁰ John Walvoord, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Professor Becker called this, “The great battle for the hearts and minds of men.”⁴¹ Far more is at stake in this battle than in the millennialists’ version of it. Not an earthly city in earthly Israel, but peoples’ souls are at stake. So terrible are the deceptions of the devil, his Antichrist, and his false teachers, that God pictures it as a great and terrible war. No physical sword can fight this terrible battle. Only the Sword of the Spirit will fight that great army Jesus warned us against when He said, “Many false prophets will appear.” Many of them are our modern millennialists who “deceive many people,” many of which are those deceived by the modern millennialists (Mt 24:11). They are part of Gog and Magog.

The Real Nature of Christ’s Kingdom Is Left Behind

While the millennialists look for a future political kingdom of glory, they lose sight of the real nature of Christ’s kingdom. Christ’s kingdom is an invisible, spiritual kingdom. Jesus did not come to win a political kingdom on earth, but to win our souls from sin, death, and the power of the devil, purchasing us with His blood. Jesus did not suffer and die so that we can have political peace on earth some day, but to give us the peace of the forgiveness of sins today as we live under Him in His spiritual, real kingdom of grace. Professor Meyer reminded the previous generation of our Synod in the Northwestern Lutheran:

All forms of Chiliasm, even the most refined, violate the doctrine of Scripture that Christ’s kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. Chiliasts expect outward splendor of some kind. It is outward progress, an outward peace, an outward spread of wisdom and understanding, an outward splendor of numbers, or organization, or finances. But the kingdom of Christ is a spiritual kingdom.⁴²

Christ’s kingdom is also a kingdom hidden under a cross. When Peter objected to Christ’s suffering and death because essentially it did not fit with his own millennial visions, Christ told him to deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him. When James and John asked for thrones, Jesus asked them if they could drink the cup He would drink. When the Jews were hailing Christ as the Son of David on Palm Sunday, Christ wept. When the disciples expressed their amazement over the splendor of the temple during Holy Week, Jesus told them that not one stone would be left upon another. When the disciples argued on Maundy Thursday about who was the greatest, Jesus washed their feet and later said, “Now is your time of grief,” and, “In this world you will have trouble.” When the disciples asked Jesus on Ascension Day if he was now going to restore the kingdom to Israel, Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” He, their Comforter, would lead them into all truth, including the truth of the true nature of the kingdom of God as hidden under a cross.

The early church presented in the rest of the book of Acts for our reading, learning, and taking to heart, is by no means a triumphal church, but a persecuted church. The same Apostles, who never again spoke of millennialistic hopes after Ascension, learned for themselves and preached the lesson every Christian learns from God’s Word first and then from daily experience, that through much tribulation we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Franzmann asks the searching question:

Those who cherish and foster the millennial hope (and these have from of old included great and good men) need to ask themselves whether the desire to have and enjoy a visible victory before the final victory of the Crucified is not a subtle and unconscious form of objection to the Crucified who unseals the scroll taken from the hand of God; He in His wisdom and power keeps the church hidden under the cross, and He has promised to be with His church, under the cross, “to the close of the age.” (Matt. 28:20).⁴³

Concluding Thoughts

⁴¹ Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: the Distant Triumph Song*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985) p. 244.

⁴² J. P. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁴³ Franzmann, *op. cit.* p. 133.

As the Pharisees spent their lives studying the Old Testament and missed Christ, so our modern millennialists spend their lives searching the Scriptures, pondering eschatological matters, but somehow in it all, it is finally Christ who is left behind. There is not one word of pure, unconditional Gospel in the entire book, “Left Behind.” So it should not surprise us that such books make it to the New York Times Best-Seller list, as did “Left Behind.” There is nothing in it to offend the flesh. The modern millennialist gospel is centered on the future instead of what Jesus did when He lived and died and rose for us. It is centered on fear instead of comfort; the visible instead of the spiritual; carnal hopes instead of Christ crucified. Lacking the means of grace, they use fear as a means to rescue people from an earthly tribulation;⁴⁴ from their notion of the coming wrath.⁴⁵ The millennialists insist, “Our appointment is a period of grace, and their appointment is a period of suffering, tribulation, and affliction.”⁴⁶

What Dr. Luther wrote about the Jews applies very well to the modern millennialists: “Therefore the Jews do themselves wrong and injury when they desire through the Messiah not the new kingdom but the former, old, transitory kingdom, where they will possess silver, gold, riches, power, honor, pleasure, and joy according to the mortal flesh, all of which count before God as very minor things, indeed, as nothing at all. For if God had willed to promise such a kingdom, he would not have called it a new, different, and better kingdom.”⁴⁷

That is not to say that millennialists are Jews, but they certainly do themselves wrong, and their heresy does them much injury. To our shame, our own flesh is millennialistic, that is, always clinging to what it can see on earth instead of to the One we do not see. Only in Christ do we have the full joy of escaping the coming wrath. We aren’t going to hell because Christ suffered our hell and died for every sin of every sinner on the cross. He assured this to us when descended into hell to proclaim His victory and our victory, and was raised on account of our justification! Though we are not escaping the great tribulation, the afflictions of our consciences are quieted thanks to the grace of God and the infinite merit of Christ! And Christ even gives us great joy in knowing that we are still brothers and companions in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, until Jesus finally replaces our daily cross with the eternal crown of life. So may Jesus guard us and our people from this heresy entirely – in its crassest forms and in its most subtle forms. May He grant us to always find our joy and peace in the unsearchable riches of Christ which are fully ours already now – and may He help the millennialists do the same. May Jesus do this until we are before the throne of God and in front of the Lamb, crying: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

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⁴⁴ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁶ John Walvoord, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ *American Edition*, Vol. 35, p. 290.

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