

American Lutheran Views on Eschatology and How They Related to the American Protestants

By John M. Brenner

[An essay delivered at the 32nd Annual Bethany Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, on October 28-29, 1999]

Introduction

According to a recent publication there are more than 350 books on the apocalypse currently on the market. Most of these have been written within the last decade.¹ Some have become huge best sellers. John Walvoord's *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* has sold over a million copies capitalizing on the Arab oil embargo of the early 1970s and the tensions with Iraq nearly two decades later.² Hal Lindsey's books have sold millions more.³ The countdown to the new millennium has heightened interest in apocalyptic prophecy of both biblical and non-biblical sources.

Fascination with eschatology is nothing new in our country. Religion in America has been imbued with a millennial spirit from the time of the Puritans to the present. American civil religion has viewed our nation as "an elect people, a new Israel, providentially prepared for a redemptive historical role, bound in covenant with God faithfully to perform his will, and summoned to lead all the nations to a millennial fulfillment."⁴

Although Lutherans generally have not been in the forefront of millennial studies and the writing of apocalyptic literature, they have not been immune to the millennial impulse in America. The millennial hopes expressed by Lutherans in America have often had European roots, but these views have also often been expressed as a conscious or unconscious reaction to the American religious environment.

In this study we will briefly examine "American Lutheran Views on Eschatology: and How They Related to the American Protestants."⁵ First of all, we will survey the history of American Protestant millennial views. Secondly, we will briefly consider some of the sources of millennial thought coming from European Lutherans. Finally, we will give an overview of millennial views among Lutherans on this continent.

Defining Terms

It may be wise for us at the outset to define some terms. We may divide the various teachings concerning Jesus' return into three main groups: amillennial, postmillennial, and premillennial. Amillennialism views the 1000 -year period described in Revelation 20 as figurative and referring to the period of time between Christ's first and second coming. Amillennialism rejects the idea of a political reign of Christ on earth and teaches that his second coming will be on Judgment Day. He can return at any time. Most Lutherans have been amillennialists. Postmillennialism teaches that the church will enjoy a long indefinite period of peace and

¹ Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, Richard V. Pierard. *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) p. 71.

² John F. Walvoord. *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*. Revised edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990).

³ Lindsey claims that his *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) has sold more than 40 million copies. Lindsey has penned thirteen more books with a millennial theme since 1970 including *Planet Earth. The Final Chapter* in 1998. See Clouse, Hosack, Pierard, *op. cit.*, p. 124-130.

⁴ J.F. Maclear, "The Republic and the Millennium," in *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. by Elwyn A. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) p. 183. See also Ernest L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁵ Because of time constraints we will limit our study of eschatology to the subject of Jesus' second coming and the events surrounding his return. We will not be discussing views of death, heaven, hell or eternity.

prosperity as the gospel permeates the world before Christ returns. Christ's return is in the distant future because the prophecies of the church's prosperity have not yet been fulfilled, Premillennialism teaches that Christ will return to inaugurate a literal, political reign for 1000 years on earth. Premillennialists can be historicist or futurist. Historicist premillennialists believe that the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation describe the entire history of the Christian Church in symbolic language. Futurists believe that none of the prophecies of the last days have been fulfilled. Futurist premillennialists can be divided into pre-tribulation rapturists, mid-tribulation rapturists and posttribulation rapturists. Modern dispensationalists are pre-tribulation rapturists.⁶ They believe that believers will be secretly "raptured" before a seven-year period of tribulation. At the end of the tribulation period Christ will return visibly to begin his millennial reign. Millenarians can be either postmillennialists or premillennialists.

Chiliasm is usually used today as a synonym of premillennialism. Some Lutherans, however, have suggested a threefold division of chiliasm that includes both postmillennial and premillennial ideas: 1) grossest chiliasm, 2) gross chiliasm, and 3) subtle chiliasm.

The grossest chiliasm anticipates a full measure of not only spiritual, but also carnal delights and pleasures in a future millennial kingdom on earth. Gross chiliasm teaches a future golden age and era of peace for the Church on earth, in which the Church, after a universal conversion of the Jews and the fall of Antichrist, will reign over the world for a thousand years and control also secular affairs. This chiliasm teaches two future visible returns of Christ and a twofold resurrection of the dead with or without the "establishment of the kingdom of Christ on earth" in Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Subtle chiliasm omits a twofold return of Christ and two resurrections of the dead and confines itself to a "hope of better times" for the Church, to set in before the end of the world.⁷

Millennial Hopes among American Protestants⁸

The Puritans who migrated to America had a sense that European Protestants in general, and the Anglican Church in particular, had failed to build on the Reformation and carry it through to its God-pleasing conclusion. The Puritans, therefore, came to America to set up a new Zion. They believed they had a millennial mission to fulfill. Although there was often a blur-ring of the distinctions between postmillennialism and premillennialism in Puritan thought, there were notable premillennialists among them. Both Increase Mather (1639-1723) and his son, Cotton (1663-1728) believed Christ's return to be imminent and saw apocalyptic meaning in the conflicts and challenges of the American frontier. Cotton Mather was also a date-setter. He predicted the parousia for 1697, then 1736, and finally 1716. The New Jerusalem, he believed, would be located in New England.⁹

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was influential in making postmillennialism the dominant eschatological view among evangelicals up to the Civil War. Edwards summarized his millennial hopes in his "Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer" (1847).

It is evident from Scripture, that there is *yet remaining* a great advancement of the interest of religion and the kingdom of Christ in this world, by an abundant outpouring of the Spirit of God, far greater and more extensive than ever yet has been. 'Tis certain, that many things, which are

⁶ See Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) p. 9-12.

⁷ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953) vol. III, p. 520. Pieper notes that there are many varieties of chiliasm and that individual teachers will manifest various differences even in the fundamental ideas.

⁸ For a rather complete bibliography of millennial literature in America from 1798 to 1992 see Jon R. Stone, *A Guide to the End of the World: Popular Eschatology in America* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993).

⁹ Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) p. 78-79.

spoken concerning a glorious time of the church's enlargement and prosperity in the latter days, have never yet been fulfilled. There has never yet been any propagation and prevailing of religion, in any wise, of that *extent* and *universality*, which the prophecies represent. It is often foretold and signified, in a great variety of strong expressions, that there should a time come, when all nations, through the whole habitable world, should embrace the true religion, and be brought into the church of God.¹⁰

Like many (if not most) Protestants of his day Edwards identified the Roman Papacy as the Antichrist and saw the fall of Antichrist as historically significant.¹¹ Edwards argued that the future advancement of the church would be brought on by the resolve of Christians in various towns and countries to join in visible agreement and resolve to seek this blessing of God through *extraordinary* prayer.¹² The church after Jesus' ascension was the instrument through which the plan of God is carried out. Though the church of Christ will suffer, it will increase and spread over the earth until Christ's kingdom is universal and his saints can be said to rule with him.¹³ For a time Edwards believed that the conversions and religious fervor of the Great Awakening (1740-1742) were signs of the coming millennium. He wrote, "'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which is in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind."¹⁴

Postmillennialism was in the ascendancy in our country from the Revolutionary War until the Civil War. Postmillennial ideas of gradual progress toward a time of unparalleled peace and prosperity fit well with American pragmatism and can-do spirit, the American sense of destiny, and Enlightenment optimism based on trust in science and technology. In addition, in the early nineteenth century Postmillennialists saw the success of revivals and mission efforts as signs of the approach of the millennium. They took note of the decline of the influence and power of the papacy and the threats of Islam. The Second Great Awakening (mid 1790s to c. 1840) spawned movements aimed at ridding society of various evils so that the millennium might be realized. They believed that "the golden age would see the culmination of current reform efforts to end slavery, oppression, and war."¹⁵ Social activism and political action were means by which Christians might bring about the realization of God's promises. The abolitionist movement, temperance movement, and women's movement flowed out of these postmillennial concerns.

Premillennialism, however, had not disappeared altogether in America. There continued to be areas of premillennial fervor, particularly in the area of Upstate New York known as the "Burned-Over District."¹⁶ Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844) and his Latter Day Saints, for instance, looked for a visible rule of Christ on earth.

The best known premillennialist of the time, however, was William Miller (1782-1849). Miller, a Baptist lay preacher, was converted from Deism in 1816. He soon began a systematic study of the Bible to answer the challenges of rationalism and Deism. By 1818 he had concluded on the basis of his study of Daniel 8:14 that Christ would return around 1843. He did not immediately make his conclusions public, but carefully restudied his calculations. In 1831 he began to present his ideas publicly. He gathered a following and published his lectures in 1836 under the title, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of*

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, "Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer." *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 5, *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. by John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) p. 329.

¹¹ Stephen J. Stein, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Introduction to Volume 5, p. 23. For a rather complete overview of Edwards' eschatology see Stein's entire introduction, p. 1-93.

¹² Edwards, "Humble Attempt..." *op. cit.*, p. 314.

¹³ Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) vol. 4, p. 353.

¹⁵ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 49.

¹⁶ See Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

Christ, About the Year 1843. Although Miller was somewhat reluctant to set specific dates, he finally said that Jesus would return some time during the period between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. When these dates passed without fulfillment some Millerites set October 22, 1844 (the Great Day of Atonement in the Jewish calendar) as the day for Jesus' return. Miller did not accept this date himself until the beginning of October 1844. The failure of this prediction has become known in American history as the Great Disappointment.¹⁷ Many left the Millerite movement after Jesus failed to return on the day appointed by Miller. Ellen White and others reinterpreted his predictions and founded the Seventh Day Adventist Church.¹⁸

By 1859 postmillennialism was the "commonly received doctrine" among American Protestants almost to the exclusion of premillennialism.¹⁹ The failure of the Millerite predictions had placed premillennialism in an unfavorable light. The optimism spawned by the conversions and fervor of the Second Great Awakening led many to believe that the millennium was almost at hand.

But the religious optimism of postmillennialism soon turned to pessimism. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery American society did not become more godly. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the various critical approaches to Scripture led to a loss of confidence in the reliability of the Bible and biblical prophecy. Things were not better; they were becoming worse in the eyes of many conservative Christians.

The old optimism of postmillennialism soon became secularized. Hope for the future became attached to technology, scientific investigation, and the social sciences rather than Christian preaching and prayer. The volunteer associations spawned by the Second Awakening for the purpose of removing social evils and inaugurating the millennium were co-opted by the religious liberals in American Protestantism and enlisted in the cause of the social gospel. The source of this new postmillennial optimism "was not the Scriptures but the merging of the eighteenth-century view of human goodness with the nineteenth century myth of progress."²⁰

As postmillennialism began to fade among more conservative Christians after the Civil War, a new kind of premillennialism called dispensationalism came to America from England. The rise of modern dispensationalism can be traced to John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and the Plymouth Brethren. Darby traveled and lectured in America between 1859 and 1872. The Niagara Bible Conferences beginning in 1875 and the American Bible and Prophetic Conferences beginning shortly thereafter helped to promote the new premillennial view.²¹ Probably because of contacts with Darby the famous American evangelist Dwight Moody (1837-1899) began preaching premillennialism and "nearly every evangelist after Moody followed in Darby's train."²²

Whereas William Miller's premillennialism had been historicist in approach to Revelation and the other prophetic books, dispensationalism was futurist in approach. Historicist premillennialism sees St. John's Revelation as describing various periods in the history of the church. This approach often makes date-setting a temptation. Dispensationalists see Revelation as describing events in the future. Dispensationalists look at the ninth chapter of Daniel and see a suspension of the chronology after Jesus' crucifixion in the 69th week (483rd year after Artaxerxes' decree). During this suspension of the chronology God has turned his attention to the Gentiles. When he takes up the chronology of Daniel 9 again the church will be removed from this earth by a secret return of Christ and the rapture of all believers before the tribulation. Then God will proceed with his final plans for the people of Israel. In dispensationalism Israel and the church are not equated. In this approach

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31-61.

¹⁸ For a Seventh Day Adventist defense of Miller and Adventism see Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of William Miller and the Millerites* (Takoma Park, Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1944).

¹⁹ James H. Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865-1925," *Modern American Protestantism and Its World*, vol. 4, *Theological Themes in the American Protestant World*, edited by Martin Marty (New York: K.G. Saur, 1992) p. 203.

²⁰ Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

²¹ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: The University Chicago Press, 1970) p. 132-161.

²² Kyle, *op. cit.*, p. 104-105.

prophecies about Israel cannot be applied to the church but must refer to the nation and people of Israel. After the tribulation Christ will return again, but this time publicly to set up his millennial rule.²³

One of the most significant promoters of dispensationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America was William Blackstone (1841-1935). His book *Jesus Is Coming* (1898) sold over a million copies and was translated into forty languages.²⁴ Since the Jewish people figured so prominently in his eschatological system, he became an early supporter of the Zionism and the establishment of the nation of Israel in Palestine. His efforts included drawing up a petition signed by 414 prominent Americans urging President Benjamin Harrison to seek international support for making Palestine a haven for persecuted Russian Jews.²⁵

Cyrus I. Scofield (1843-1921) was perhaps even more important than Blackstone in making dispensationalism the most popular form of millennialism in twentieth-century America. His major life's work was the *Scofield Reference Bible* published by Oxford University Press in 1909. Scofield divided all of human history into seven dispensations. In each dispensation God tested human beings in respect to obedience to some specific revelation of his will. According to Scofield the first dispensation was the dispensation of innocence (Genesis 1:28-3:13). The second was the dispensation of conscience (Genesis 3:23-7:23). The third was the dispensation of human government (Genesis 8:20-11:9). The fourth was the dispensation of promise (Genesis 12; Exodus 19:8). The fifth was the dispensation of law (Exodus 19:8-Matthew 27:35). We are currently in the sixth, the dispensation of grace. According to Scofield, at the conclusion of this dispensation the church will be raptured before the great tribulation. The seventh dispensation will be Christ's millennial kingdom in which God's plan for Jews, Gentiles and the church will be brought to fulfillment. Scofield's dispensational plan became the "standard theological framework for American Fundamentalism."²⁶ Probably most of today's best-known Evangelicals, including Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, have been influenced by Scofield's work in one way or another. Hal Lindsey has done more than anyone else to bring dispensationalist premillennialism to the "nonevangelical popular culture" with his string of best selling books.²⁷ Dallas Theological Seminary has been the "academic and ideological Vatican" of dispensational premillennialism ever since its founding in the 1920s.

Modern premillennialists have claimed a vindication of their approach in such events of recent history as the establishment of Israel as a nation in the Holy Land in 1948 and the Israeli capture of Jerusalem in 1967. They claim that these events have set the stage for the unfolding of the fulfillment of the Bible's prophecies of the last times. They believe that the rapture of the church is imminent. Events in the Middle East always hold a fascination for premillennialists, but the collapse of the Soviet Union has been problematic because Russia figured prominently in their last times scenario. Pat Robertson has replaced the communist world conspiracy with his understanding of the *new world order* and his predictions of the role of the United Nations will play in advances toward world government and the curtailing of individual rights, Christian evangelism, and the distinctive teachings of Christianity.²⁸

Postmillennialism, however, has not vanished from the American scene altogether. The Princeton Theology of men like Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield was postmillennial. Some of their students have followed in their footsteps. Perhaps the most convincing spokesman for postmillennialism in the mid-twentieth century was Loraine Boettner.²⁹ More recently some postmillennialists have aligned themselves with theonomy, the belief that world governments ought to be guided in their decisions by all the legislation of the Old Testament. Some believe that churches should pressure civil governments to carry out the death penalty for

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102-104.

²⁴ Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96-97.

²⁶ *Makers of Christian Theology in America*, ed. by Mark Toulouse and James Duke (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) p. 360-362.

²⁷ Kyle, *op. cit.*, p. 118-119.

²⁸ Clouse, Hosack, and Pierard, *op. cit.*, p. 130-137.

²⁹ Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957).

things like idolatry, witchcraft, the incorrigibility of children, homosexuality, and Sabbath breaking as provided for in the Old Testament.³⁰

Millennialistic Developments among Lutherans in Europe

Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), the father of Lutheran Pietism, believed that there would be a future era of prosperity for the church. In his classic work, *Pia Desideria* (1675), Spener contended that in the future “if not all, at least a perceptibly large number of Jews who have hitherto hardened their hearts will be converted to the Lord.” He asserted, “In the second place, we can expect a great fall in papal Rome. Although Rome was given a decided jolt by the blessed Martin Luther, its spiritual power is still too great to permit us to claim that the prophecy in Revelation 18 and 19 has been completely fulfilled.” Spener urged the reform of the church because “the true church must be in a holier state than now” if the church’s life was to be a means for the conversion of the Jews. He reasoned that “if the Jews are converted in a manner in which it is impossible for us to foresee,” such a mass conversion would “be followed by a remarkable change and improvement in our church.” Spener believed that these things had been promised by God and must therefore come to pass.³¹

Spener taught what might be called a mild form of postmillennialism. Significantly for Lutherans Spener’s eschatology turned attention from the expectation that Jesus could return in glory at any moment to a longing for a future glory of the church followed by Jesus’ return in a vaguely distant future.

The Wuerttemberg pietist and scholar, Johannes Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752), perhaps more than anyone else opened the door to chiliasm for Lutherans. Through his study of the Book of Revelation Bengel became convinced that the date of our Lord’s return could be accurately determined. Following a rather elaborate chronological scheme he set 1836 as the date of Christ’s Second Coming, the binding of Satan, and the beginning of the millennial reign.³² Bengel was an able linguist, careful scholar, and capable exegete. His reputation and academic stature gave premillennialism “scholarly standing in Germany” and paved the way for other academics to pursue millennial studies. Bengel’s influence was felt by the Erlangen school and can be seen in the Zahn commentary.³³ In the nineteenth century there was a resurgence of premillennialism among biblical scholars in Europe including the Lutheran exegete, Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890) and the Swiss Reformed exegete Frederic L. Godet (1812-1900).³⁴ A history of Christian doctrine produced in the nineteenth century also lists Karl Auberlen (1824-1864), Johann von Hofmann (1810-1877), Richard Rothe (1799-1867), and the Dutch Reformed theologian Johannes van Oosterzee (1817-1882) among European theologians who were advocating premillennialism.³⁵ Lindberg adds the names of Christoph Luthardt (1823-1902) and Franz Frank (1827-1894) to the list.³⁶ American Lutherans were aware of these European theologians. Some Lutherans emigrating to America brought these millennialistic views with them.

Samuel Simon Schmucker and “American Lutheranism”

Samuel S. Schmucker (1799-1873) was a prime mover behind the founding of the General Synod in 1820 and served as professor and first president of Gettysburg Seminary. Schmucker along with Benjamin

³⁰ Robert P. Lightner, *The Last Days Handbook* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990) p. 86-87.

³¹ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans., ed., and intro. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 76-78.

³² See Bengel’s comments on Revelation 12:6 in any edition of his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*. The English edition I consulted has abridged his remarks on chronology because it was translated after 1836 when it was obvious that Bengel’s calculations were wrong. In spite of the abridgement one can still follow his calculations. For more detail see Bengel’s *Erklaerte Offenbarung Johannis* (1740) or his *Ordo temporum* (1741) or *Cyclus sive de anno magno consideratio* (1745).

³³ D.H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1945) p. 214.

³⁴ Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

³⁵ Henry C. Sheldon, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1886) vol. II, p. 389.

³⁶ Conrad Emil Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics and Notes on the History of Dogma* (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1922) p. 537.

Kurtz (1795-1865) and Samuel Sprecher (1810-1906) were convinced that Lutherans must adapt their teachings to the American religious climate if Lutheranism were to have any hope of surviving, let alone prospering, in this country. Schmucker and Kurtz were proponents of the revivalistic techniques developed during the Second Great Awakening and opponents of Lutheran liturgical worship. In 1855 these “American Lutherans” sparked a controversy by issuing anonymously the Definite Synodical Platform which contained an American Recension of the Augsburg Confession. This recension removed from the Augsburg Confession the distinctive Lutheran doctrines that separated Lutherans from the generic sort of Protestantism that had developed in America. The “five errors” eliminated from the Augsburg Confession by these American Lutherans included (1) the approval of the ceremonies of the mass; (2) private confession and absolution; (3) denial of the divine obligation of the Sabbath; (4) baptismal regeneration; (5) the real presence of the body and blood of our Savior in the Lord’s Supper.³⁷

The rising tide of confessional Lutheranism in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century caused nearly every Lutheran Synod to reject the American Recension of the Augsburg Confession.³⁸ Nevertheless, Schmucker’s willingness to adapt and change Lutheran doctrine to fit the prevailing religious and social climate in America remained in the spirit of much of Eastern Lutheranism.

Schmucker was also a proponent of the postmillennialism commonly held by many of the Protestants of his day. Schmucker rejected the premillennial view that Jesus “would in the latter day personally appear on earth, and establish a theocracy not unlike that of the Old Testament.”³⁹ Like many American Protestants in the first half of the nineteenth century he taught that “the millennium will consist of an extraordinary and general diffusion of Christianity among all nations of the earth, effected through the increased application of the appointed means of grace in all their legitimate forms, by professing Christians, accompanied by effusions of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰

He believed that the millennium would be characterized by outward unity among the various denominations of the Christian Church. He predicted that “there will be an evergrowing unity of feeling and action, until Paul and Apollos and Cephas, and Luther and Calvin and Zuingle (sic) and Wesley are lost in the Redeemer, and Christ is all in all.”⁴¹

Although he recognized that the Word of God had not fixed a literal date for the beginning of the millennium, Schmucker offered his readers several possibilities some of which seem to be his own calculations and one suggested by another student of the Bible. The dates ranged from 1859 to 1866 to 1882 and 2014.⁴² While admitting that the precise date could not be determined, he saw many signs that the millennial dawn might be at hand. He noted the increased efforts in the cause of missions, the work of the various Bible Societies, the distributions of Christian tracts, and the establishment of Sabbath schools as signs that the millennium might be near.⁴³

Joseph Seiss and Premillennialism

Perhaps the best-known and most influential Lutheran premillennialist is Joseph A. Seiss (1823-1904). Seiss was a pastor in Philadelphia serving one of the largest Lutheran congregations in America. He was a prolific author writing books and articles on a variety of subjects. He served for a time as president of both the Pennsylvania Ministerium and the General Council. He also served as the president of the board of Philadelphia

³⁷ The text of the Definite Synodical Platform with the American Recension of the Augsburg Confession is included in Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) p. 100-104.

³⁸ See David A. Gustafson, *Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) and Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology* (New York: Century Co., 1927).

³⁹ S.S. Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834) p. 289.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 292-294.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

Theological Seminary from its founding in 1865 to his death. From 1867 to 1879 he was the editor of *The Lutheran*. He served as a co-editor of the *Lutheran Home Journal* and general editor of the *Lutheran and Missionary*.⁴⁴

In his preparation for the ministry at Gettysburg College (he did not attend Gettysburg Seminary) Seiss received no instruction in the Lutheran Confessions. He reports that he did not see a copy of the Book of Concord until he had served five years in the ministry. His study of the Confessions led him to a position which he describes as “the middle ground between the extremes of unionistic laxity and an arrogant and bigoted exclusiveness.”⁴⁵ He was an opponent of the “American” Lutherans and the Definite Synodical Platform,⁴⁶ but was no fan of the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference because Walther and others strongly opposed his premillennial views and unionism.⁴⁷

When he began his ministry Seiss was a postmillennialist, following that spirit of the times which had confidence in human progress and the gradual development of society into the promised millennium through missionary labors and Christian activities. When he examined the Millerite arguments and their use of Scripture he had difficulty refuting their teachings. A conversation with Pastor S. Sprecher, his predecessor at Shepherdstown, Virginia, made him a convinced premillennialist.⁴⁸

Seiss published several volumes explaining and defending his premillennial views. Some of these received scholarly acclaim and public praise.⁴⁹ Seiss was a frequent contributor to the British journal, *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*.⁵⁰ He was also involved with producing the *Prophetic Times*, a magazine which, according to the byline of the first issue, was “devoted to the exposition and inculcation of the doctrine of the speedy coming and reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵¹ For twelve years he served as the editor and chief contributor of this journal.⁵² Seiss’ work was well enough known in his day that a contemporary, Henry Sheldon, used the summary of the premillennial views contained in Seiss’ book *The Last Times* (1878) as an example of the premillennial scheme.

1. That Jesus Christ, our adorable Redeemer, is to return to the world in great power and glory, as really and literally as he ascended up from it.
2. That this advent of the Messiah will occur before the general conversion of the world, while the man of sin still continues his abomination, while the earth is full of tyranny, war, infidelity, and blasphemy, and consequently before what is called the millennium.
3. That this coming of the Lord Jesus will not be to depopulate and annihilate the earth, but to judge, subdue, renew, and bless it.
4. That in the period of this coming He will raise the holy from among the dead, transform the living that are waiting for Him, judge them according to their works, receive them up to Himself in the clouds, and establish them in a glorious heavenly kingdom.
5. That Christ will then also break down and destroy all present systems of government in Church and State, bum up the great centres and powers of wickedness and usurpation, shake the whole earth with terrific visitation for sins, and subdue it to His own personal and eternal rule.

⁴⁴ For a listing of the various positions Seiss held see his autobiographical work, *Notes of My Life*, transcribed by Henry E. Horn and William M. Horn (Huntington, Pennsylvania: Church Management Service, Inc., 1982) p. 267-270. His publications are listed on pages 254-266.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274-275.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40-41.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 255, 257.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁵¹ Sandeen, *op. cit.* p. 94-95.

⁵² Seiss, *op. cit.*, 254.

6. That during these great and destructive commotions the Jewish race shall be marvelously restored to the land of their fathers, brought to embrace Jesus as their Messiah and King, delivered from their enemies, placed at the head of the nations, and made the agents of unspeakable blessings to the world.
7. That Christ will then re-establish the throne of His father David, exalt it in heavenly glory, make Mount Zion the seat of His divine empire, and, with the glorified saints associated with Him in His dominion, reign over the house of Jacob and over the world in a visible, sublime, and heavenly Christocracy for the period of “the thousand years.”
8. That during this millennial reign, in which mankind are brought under a new dispensation, Satan is to be bound and the world enjoy its long-expected sabbatic rest.
9. That at the end of this millennial sabbath the last rebellion will be quashed, the wicked dead, who shall continue in Hades until that time, shall be raised and judged, and Satan, Death, Hades, and all antagonism to good, delivered over to eternal destruction.
10. That, under these wonderful administrations, the earth is to be entirely recovered from the effects of the fall, the excellence of God’s righteous providence vindicated, the whole curse repealed, death swallowed up, and all the inhabitants of the world thenceforward forever restored to more than the full happiness, purity, and glory which Adam forfeited in Eden.⁵³

Seiss believed that his views were not contrary to Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession. He insisted that the Augustan rejected only postmillennialism and the gross or carnal millennialism of the Anabaptists.⁵⁴

George N.H. Peters and Premillennialism

George N.H. Peters (1825-1909) studied under Samuel Sprecher at Wittenberg College in Ohio. He was not as well known in his day as Seiss, but penned a massive three-volume work entitled, *The Theocratic Kingdom* in 1884. This work has been valued enough by twentieth century premillennialists that it has been reprinted by Kregel Publications in 1952, 1957, 1972, and 1978. Wilbur M. Smith in his preface to the 1952 edition writes,

While this work, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, may be called the most exhaustive, thoroughly annotated and logically arranged study of Biblical prophecy that appeared in our country during the nineteenth century, its author lived and worked in an oblivion that seems almost mysterious, and experienced so little recognition at the time of the publication of the work that one must almost believe that there was an organized determination to ignore its appearance.⁵⁵

Peters’ premillennialism was similar to that of Seiss, but he offers no convenient summary of his own views. An analysis of the argumentation in the more than 2,000 pages of *The Theocratic Kingdom* is beyond the scope of this study.⁵⁶ Let it suffice to say that Peters and Seiss are the preeminent premillennialists among Lutherans in America. No others even begin to match them in their literary efforts or influence.

The General Council and the Four Points

⁵³ Quoted by Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 389-390.

⁵⁴ Francis W. Monseth, *Millennialism in American Lutheranism in Light of Augsburg Confession, Article XVII*. ThD Dissertation, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (1986) p. 63-65. Monseth offers perhaps the best overview available of millennialism among Lutherans in America.

⁵⁵ Wilbur M. Smith, Preface to George N.J. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978) vol. I, no page number.

⁵⁶ A very brief analysis of a few of the major themes in Peters’ work can be found in Monseth, *op. cit.*, p. 67-74.

The General Council was founded in 1867 by those who wanted a stronger commitment to the Lutheran Confessions than that offered by the General Synod. Eleven Lutheran synods became full participants in the General Council at its first convention in 1867. The Norwegian Synod and the Missouri Synod were not represented. The Ohio and Iowa Synods accepted the right to debate but not to vote.

The Ohio Synod was not willing to join without clarification as to where the General Council stood on four points: chiliasm, altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, and secret societies. No doubt the presence of Joseph Seiss as a prominent member of the delegation from the Pennsylvania Ministerium caused Ohio's concern about chiliasm. The answer of the General Council on this point in 1868 affirmed the doctrine of the Lord's coming as set forth in the General Creeds and the Augsburg Confession and rejected fellowship with any synod tolerating the "Jewish opinions" or "Chilastic opinions" condemned in Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession. The reply, however, left open investigation of the points on which the Augsburg Confession had not been explicit.⁵⁷

Because the Council's replies left the type of premillennialism espoused by Seiss and others as an open question and were not satisfactory in regard to pulpit and altar fellowship, Ohio did not join. The Wisconsin Synod officially withdrew from the Council in 1869, Minnesota and Illinois withdrew in 1871. The Michigan Synod finally withdrew in 1888 over doctrine and practice related to the "Four Points."

There were other General Council theologians beside Seiss who adopted premillennialism. Emil Lindberg (1852-1930), professor at Augustana Theological Seminary in Rock Island, Illinois, in his *Christian Dogmatics* offers eight arguments against the view that the millennium will precede the second coming of Christ. His seventh reason states, "The only chapter in the Bible which expressly presents the millennium places this period after events which specifically are connected with the second coming of our Lord." His eighth reason is that "The general view in the Apostolic Church was premillenarian."⁵⁸ Lindberg's approach to premillennialism, however, is quite cautious compared with Seiss.

Others in the General Council were opposed to premillennialism. Henry Eyster Jacobs (1844-1932), professor at Pennsylvania (Gettysburg) College, Gettysburg Seminary, and Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, opposed certain aspects of the premillennial system on the basis of Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession. He wrote, "While it is true that this article was directed against the gross Chiliasm of the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, it clearly disclaims all responsibility for any teaching that separates between a resurrection for the godly and a resurrection for the ungodly by any long period of time, and which affirms that there are two comings of Christ in the future."⁵⁹

Jacobs, however, looked for a time when the "hostility of the Jewish race as such to Christ would cease" and it will be a Christian nation or race... within which there will be large numbers of truly believing spiritually-minded people."⁶⁰ Jacobs was also cautious about identifying the Antichrist too closely with the Roman Papacy. He contended that "it cannot be shown that everything is to be found in the Pope that is contained in the warnings against Antichrist... Antichrist may yet arise out of the Papacy, when all these premises are carried to their conclusions and embodied in some monster of wickedness."⁶¹

It is perhaps worth noting that the *Lutheran Cyclopedia* of which Jacobs was co-editor contained two articles on chiliasm. Joseph Seiss was the author of the first article. August Graebner (1849-1904), who taught at the Wisconsin Synod's Seminary in Milwaukee and also at Missouri's St. Louis Seminary, was the author of the second. Seiss presented most of the details of premillennialism as open questions which the church has never fully examined or formally decided. He suggested that these things were worthy of careful study. Graebner presented premillennialism as incompatible with clear Scripture and Article XVII of the Augsburg

⁵⁷ The text of the reply can be found in Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 162. The General Council's replies to the questions concerning pulpit and altar fellowship and secret societies can be found on pages 163-165.

⁵⁸ Lindberg, *op. cit.*, p. 531.

⁵⁹ Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1919) p. 515. See p. 515-517.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 514. See p. 511-514.

Confession. Graebner, however suggested that “Spener’s hope for better times in the Church, while also without foundation in Scripture and dangerous, is not heretical and only imperfectly called Chiliasm.”⁶²

The Synodical Conference

The Synodical Conference, founded in 1872, was the leading voice of Confessional Lutheranism in the United States for nearly 100 years. The various synods of the Synodical Conference were historically amillennial and opposed to most forms of millennialism as unscriptural.

The Missouri Synod in the first decade of her history had to wrestle with the doctrine because of controversy that arose in her midst. Georg A. Schieferdecker (1815-1891) was a founding member of the Missouri Synod and was elected president of Missouri’s Western District in 1854. Schieferdecker had caused a stir in his congregation by espousing chiliastic views in a sermon on Isaiah 60 and in private conversations. Two questions concerning chiliasm were formulated by Schieferdecker with his congregation’s consent and placed before the 1856 Convention of Missouri’s Western District.

1. What stand does the synod take with reference to Christ’s second coming in regard to the universal conversion of the Jews, Christ ruling over all people and kingdoms, the millennium, and other similar subjects?
2. Does Synod consider holding such views divisive of fellowship?⁶³

Schieferdecker was convinced that chiliasm was taught in the Bible.⁶⁴ He held the opinion that Christ’s church would be victorious over her enemies in the last times. He held out the possibility of a double resurrection of the dead and a double return of Christ. The matter was taken up by the Missouri Synod in convention in 1857. After lengthy discussion it was decided Schieferdecker did not stand in the same faith as the Missouri Synod. The Missouri Synod consequently severed fellowship with him.⁶⁵ Schieferdecker joined the Iowa Synod⁶⁶ but renounced chiliasm in 1875 and rejoined the Missouri Synod in 1876.⁶⁷

The Wisconsin Synod had to wrestle with chiliasm in the 1860s. As the synod moved toward an inevitable break with the unionistic mission societies in Europe, it began to establish relations with confessional Lutheran synods in this country. These efforts led Wisconsin into and out of the General Council and finally into fellowship with the Missouri Synod and charter membership in the Synodical Conference. For a time Wisconsin also had some discussions with the Iowa Synod. Prof. Adolph Hoenecke (1835-1908) of the Wisconsin Synod’s seminary had been present for a colloquy between Missouri and Iowa in Milwaukee in 1867. He and others in the synod were in agreement with Walther and the Missouri Synod in the rejection of Iowa’s position on open questions. At the Wisconsin Synod convention in 1867 representatives of the Iowa Synod were present for a discussion of their concept of open questions, including the teaching of chiliasm.

According to the proceedings there was a division in the synod over the issues, but only two pastors are personally mentioned as favoring Iowa’s opinion that chiliasm was an open question.⁶⁸ One of these two was the founder and first president of the Wisconsin Synod, John Muehlhaeuser (1804-1867). Muehlhaeuser was a product of the German mission societies and early in his ministry was willing to serve both Lutherans and

⁶² *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, edited by Henry Eyster Jacobs and John A.W. Haas (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899) p. 87-88.

⁶³ Quoted by August R. Suelflow, *Georg Albert Schieferdecker and His Relation to Chiliasm in the Iowa Synod*. A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Concordia Seminary Department of Historical Theology, May 1946. p. 30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69-71.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶⁷ *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, edited by Erwin L. Lueker (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975) p. 699.

⁶⁸ For a brief account of this meeting see J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minnesota: The Protes’tant Conference, 1970) p. 109-110.

German Reformed. To his credit he did not stand in the way of the trend toward a greater confessionalism in the synod he founded. His pietistic background can be seen in his response to statements on chiliasm by the Iowa representatives. The minutes record that “he cited a saying of Bengel – You chiliasts can subscribe to the confessions with a good conscience. The 1000 year reign is not in the Augustana, but it is in the Bible.”⁶⁹ Within the year Muelhaeuser passed away and the Wisconsin Synod left the General Council in part because of the Council’s attitude toward chiliasm. Wisconsin also moved away from closer relations with Iowa.

Hoenecke’s dogmatics, published posthumously, rejects both postmillennialism and premillennialism. Analyzing Revelation 20:4-8, Hoenecke’s arguments include that there is nothing in the chapter to show that events occur on earth. Nothing is said of the bodily resurrection of the martyrs, but only their souls are referred to. The Greek text does not say that they came to life, but that they lived. All Scripture teaches not a visible kingdom of glory on earth, but “ruling elsewhere” describes the heavenly glory of the elect (2 Timothy 2:12, compare verses 11 and 12 with verse 10).⁷⁰

The Iowa Synod

The Iowa Synod was founded in 1853 by pastors sent to this country by Wilhelm Loehe (1808-1872) of Neuendettelsau. Men sent to this country by Loehe had been instrumental in founding the Missouri Synod, but Loehe had begun to question the Missouri Synod’s democratic or congregational church polity. When the disagreement between Loehe and Missouri could not be settled, those who held to Loehe’s position left Michigan, moved to Iowa, and there founded a new synod.

In 1858 Iowa addressed the question of millennialism because of Missouri’s protest over Iowa’s acceptance of Schieferdecker and another pastor whom Missouri had suspended because of their teaching of chiliasm. The Iowa Synod contended that Article XVII of the Augsburg Confession condemned “wild” millennialism, but left open further “theological elaboration” of the doctrine of the last things. The convention decided “that the eventual conversion of the Jews, a future personal Antichrist, the return of Christ to subdue Antichrist, the first resurrection (of believers), and a thousand year reign of Christ are correct elaborations on the theology of the Confessions.”⁷¹ The convention argued that these doctrines did not contradict the biblical concept of the nature of the kingdom of God, because the millennial reign would be part of the life of the church militant and not a kingdom of glory and perfection.⁷² Iowa later made clear that these matters were “Open Questions,” doctrines concerning which Lutherans might have different opinions without being divisive of fellowship.⁷³

In 1873 the Iowa Synod issued the *Davenport Theses* to show the areas of disagreement with Missouri. In those theses Iowa rejected “every doctrine of a millennium which would rob the spiritual kingdom of our Lord of its character of spiritual kingdom of grace and the cross, and convert it into an outward, earthly and worldly kingdom,” but declared that “the Church may tolerate the idea that the reign of Christ and His Saints for a thousand years, as prophesied in the twentieth chapter of the Revelation of St. John is still a matter of fulfillment in the future and that this opinion is not an error necessitating exclusion from our church fellowship.”⁷⁴ No other Lutheran synods came to Iowa’s support in this matter after the theses were issued.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1867*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1909) p. 286-287. See also Hoenecke’s “Theses on the Last Time,” *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1887*, p. 17-67.

⁷¹ Fred W. Meuser, *The Formation of the American Lutheran Church* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1958) p. 57.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.

⁷⁴ *Davenport Theses*, Art. XI-XII, in Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁷⁵ Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

Throughout its history Iowa remained consistent in its teaching that chiliasm, the conversion of Israel, the identification of the Antichrist, etc., were open questions.⁷⁶ The most notable Iowa Synod premillennialist was J. Michael Reu (1869-1943). Reu taught at Wartburg Seminary and is best known for his scholarly work on the Augsburg Confession, homiletics, and catechetics. He also taught Lutheran dogmatics. His unpublished lectures include the following theses under the heading “The Preliminary Perfection of the Kingdom of God.”

1. Before the kingdom of God will be consummated, the gospel must be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all nations.
2. The proclamation of the gospel among all nations is followed by the conversion of Israel.
3. Other events which according to the Scriptures shall take place during the final period are the general apostasy within Christendom and the appearance of the Antichrist.
4. Antichrist will be vanquished by Christ who will also cause the first resurrection.
5. The overthrow of Antichrist and the first resurrection are followed by the preliminary consummation of the kingdom of God, the millennial reign of the saints with Christ.
6. The millennium is followed by the final crisis, through which the church passes to actual perfection.⁷⁷

The Twentieth Century

The modernist/fundamentalist controversy and the increased use of the various critical approaches to Scripture undoubtedly made the premillennialism of men like Seiss and Peters with their emphasis on the literal fulfillment of biblical prophecy less intellectually attractive to Lutherans on the left. Nevertheless millennial views remained in scholarly circles. Some expressed a millennial hope for the improvement of society through spiritual renewal. T. A. Kantonen writes,

Whether the duration of this final triumphant phase is literally a thousand years and whether the temporal sequences of the events involved can be plotted out in detail are matters of secondary importance. Nor does this final triumphant phase of the reign of Christ in history mean an “outwardly victorious” earthly kingdom in the sense that he will then resort to physical coercion and political domination, methods which are entirely foreign to his lordship. It is a victory for the way in which he has always established his rule in the hearts of men, the reconciling love. Bengel and Beck regard the millennial period as one of strong missionary activity during which the gospel is brought to all nations of the earth before the coming of the end.⁷⁸

During the twentieth century doctrinal differences became less important for many Lutherans. By 1930 the Ohio Synod’s previous opposition to considering chiliasm an open question was overcome by an ecumenical spirit desiring closer relations with other Lutherans. Ohio merged with the Iowa and Buffalo Synods in 1930 to form the American Lutheran Church. The American Lutheran Church listed millennialism among the doctrines in which there might be a “wholesome latitude of theological opinion.” The “Sandusky Declaration of the American Lutheran Church” (1938) reaffirmed the old Iowa position that differences in teaching concerning a double resurrection, the conversion of Israel, and a future millennium were not divisive of fellowship.⁷⁹ The

⁷⁶ See S. Fritschel, “The German Iowa Synod,” in the *Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1914) p.77-82.

⁷⁷ Reu’s *Lutheran Dogmatics* was printed in two volumes for classroom use at Wartburg Seminary. His lectures on The Preliminary Perfection of the Kingdom of God were printed in *The Confessional Lutheran*, vol. III, #11 (November 1942) p. 113-120.

⁷⁸ T. A. Kantonen, *The Christian Hope* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication for the United Lutheran Church in America, 1954) p.68.

⁷⁹ Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 396-398.

ALC Declaration caused concern for some members of the Synodical Conference when the Missouri Synod accepted it together with the “Brief Statement” (1932) as the basis for future church fellowship.⁸⁰

During the twentieth century some Lutherans who were opposed to premillennialism were willing to back away from the confessional declaration that the pope is the very Antichrist. Joseph Stump (1866-1935), president of Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary, rejected chiliasm by declaring,

The New Testament knows only the present age and the age to come – the temporal era of grace in which the Church is commanded to evangelize the world through the means of grace committed to her, and the eternal era inaugurated by the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the administration of eternal awards and punishments, and the passing away of the old cosmic order to make way for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.⁸¹

At the same time Stump looked for a massive conversion of the Jews in the future and a future Antichrist, arguing that Scripture’s description of the Antichrist does not fit the papacy.⁸²

The synods of the Synodical Conference, both before and after the demise of the Conference, generally continued to express opposition to premillennial schemes. Though these synods were not preoccupied with eschatology, they produced some commentaries on Scripture, doctrinal essays, and even a couple of books analyzing and opposing premillennialism. We mention only a few.

Prof. Theodore Graebner (1876-1950) of the Missouri Synod wrote a little book in 1918 entitled, *Prophecy and War*. The book was written to analyze the claims of millennialists who were trying to connect the events of World War I with Old and New Testament prophecy. He revised the work in 1941 as a reply to premillennial claims connected with the outbreak of World War II. As Graebner explains in the introduction, “I shall endeavor to show that World War II as little as its predecessor has any specific relation to the prophecies whose fulfillment is so confidently asserted by most Fundamentalists today.”⁸³

Among the topics Graebner addressed are the return of Israel, the Antichrist, the Millennium, and how to read prophecy. He maintained the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine which seemed a probable outcome of the war was not a fulfillment of prophecy. He contended that “Israel will remain hardened to the end, during the New Testament age only a remnant shall be saved, and the race will be scattered among the Gentiles until Christ returns unto Judgment. That ‘Israel’ of which Rom. 12:16 (*sic* – read Rom 11:26) speaks is the total number of elect out of the Jewish race.”⁸⁴ Graebner argued that the Pope has been revealed as the Antichrist and that the persecutions of the saints during the Reformation and Middle Ages was a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Antichrist making war upon the confessors of truth.⁸⁵

His study is as useful today in helping one understand the underlying errors of those who see the direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy in current events in the Middle East as it was in exposing similar errors in 1941.

In response to the stir caused by popular writings of Hal Lindsey and others in the 1970s, Concordia Publishing House published a popular study of the last times by Aaron Plueger. The book includes a brief historical overview of millennialism, a critique of Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, an exposition of Revelation 20, a discussion of the conversion of Israel and other topics associated with premillennialism. In the final chapter Plueger offers these “safeguards” for understanding the last times.

⁸⁰ See Edward Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992) p. 198ff.

⁸¹ Joseph Stump, *The Christian Faith: A System of Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942) p. 398-399.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 396-397.

⁸³ Theodore Graebner, *War in the Light of Prophecy—“Was it Foretold”—A Reply to Modern Chiliasm*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941) p. IV-V.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

It is bad to teach that he must come now. It is worse to teach that He cannot come yet. It is worst of all to teach that He will not be coming back. The following facts should keep one safe from the first danger named above (dispensationalism):

1. No salvation after Christ's return.
2. The rapture and the end are simultaneous.
3. The binding of Satan is not future.
4. Christ is reigning now.
5. An earthly millennium contradicts Christ, creeds, and all the Bible.
6. Supposedly millennial Old Testament passages speak of "forever" conditions.
7. Old Testament Israel has been replaced.⁸⁶

In 1989 the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued a study on eschatology and millennialism. The study offers a reasoned examination and refutation of the basic tenets of premillennialism.⁸⁷ In 1972 Prof. Bjarne Teigen of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod provided much valuable information and insight in an essay read to the Doctrinal Committee of the ELS. Teigen's essay includes an evaluation of the doctrinal statements of certain Lutheran Synods in the twentieth century.⁸⁸ Prof. Wilbert Gawrisch delivered a series of Pastors Institute lectures at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1974 entitled, "Eschatological Prophecies and Current Misinterpretations." Gawrisch examined the key eschatological prophecies of Scripture, gave an historical overview of millennial teaching, and considered some of the current claims of men like Hal Lindsey and Salem Kirban.⁸⁹ Commentaries on the book of Revelation by Martin Franzmann,⁹⁰ Siegbert Becker,⁹¹ Luther Poellot,⁹² and Wayne Mueller⁹³ oppose a premillennial understanding of prophecy on the basis of careful exegesis. Franzmann suggests a question that Lutherans inclined to a post or premillennial view might ask themselves. The question addresses a basic confessional Lutheran understanding of Christian hope that trusts divine providence in this life under the cross and looks for glory in eternity.

Those who cherish and foster the millennial hope (and these have 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)⁹⁴

Conclusion

Lutherans in America have been influenced by and have reacted to the eschatological views of Protestant America. Those from a background of Lutheran pietism seem to have been more open to millennial

⁸⁶ Aaron L. Plueger, *Things to Come for Planet Earth: What the Bible Says about the Last Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977) p. 94-95.

⁸⁷ *The "End Times" – A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism*. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, September 1989.

⁸⁸ B. W. Teigen, "Some Background Material for Understanding the Problem of Millennialism among Lutherans," *The Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, vol. XII, #2 (Winter 1971-72) p. 1-47.

⁸⁹ These Pastors Institute lectures were published in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* in 1987 and 1988. See vol. 84 #2 p. 125-140; vol. 84 #3 p. 201-216; vol. 84 #4 p. 278-297; vol. 85 #2 p. 109-126; vol. 85 #3 p. 197-219.

⁹⁰ Martin Franzmann, *The Revelation to John* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976).

⁹¹ Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985).

⁹² Luther Poellot, *Revelation: The Last Book in the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962). The commentary was reprinted by Northwestern Publishing House in 1976.

⁹³ Wayne Mueller, *Revelation*, People's Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996).

⁹⁴ Franzmann, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

views than others. Noteworthy among those who were influenced by the eschatological views and speculations of their day were the nineteenth century theologians, Schmucker, Seiss, and Peters. Only the latter two men are noted as significant in the cause of millennialism by those outside of Lutheran circles. As confessionalism gained strength in the mid-nineteenth century through the immigration of confessionally minded Lutherans from Germany and the Scandinavian countries reaction against post and premillennialism set in.

Lutherans in the General Synod, General Council, and Iowa Synod were willing to tolerate millennial views as not divisive of church fellowship. That attitude was carried over into the American Lutheran Church. In the twentieth century some who reject premillennialism have softened or rejected the confessional identification of the Roman Papacy as the Antichrist. As attitudes toward Scripture have been undermined by negative criticism, attitudes toward biblical prophecy have also changed. Doctrinal differences in the opinion of many Lutherans in America are less and less important.

The synods which at one time made up the Synodical Conference historically have opposed both post and premillennialism as contrary to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. As the new millennium approaches they will do well to continue to point people to that glorious day when Christ will return, not to begin a reign on this earth, but to take us to rule with him forever in paradise.