

PART ONE

The Premillennial View

Basic Definitions

It is always precarious to attempt a definition. There is always the possibility of excluding an essential or of including too much. This is true whether the area be politics, philosophy, religion or anything else. It is particularly true when the term to be defined has historic connections or has been a subject of controversy.

Yet definitions are necessary. For example, the whole world is agreed that democracy seems to be a good thing, but there is no general agreement on what democracy is. Something like this is true in millennial discussions. There must be some agreement, at least provisional agreement, as to what a millennium is before it can be decided whether it is not taught in Scripture (Amillennialism), or that Christ will come after it has run its course (Postmillennialism), or that Christ will come before it begins (Premillennialism).

But a difficulty arises--opinions of individuals within Premillennialism differ on details. Another difficulty follows--both the names and details of interpretation have changed over the centuries. At the present time there are some differences of thought within Premillennialism over reference to certain aspects of the doctrine. So one can hardly hope that even all Premillennialists will agree in all points of a definition.

An even greater difficulty is encountered because of the fact that in the last several generations the millennial issue has been woven into the expressions of two orthodox but distinct theological systems. I refer to what is sometimes called *dispensational theology* and to the so-called *covenant theology*. Dispensationalists frequently suppose that the Premillennial viewpoint is exclusively held by their own school; contrariwise, some covenant theologians appear to believe that Amillennialism is a necessary adjunct to their system. The writer has even met some who suppose that Calvinism is opposed to Premillennialism; and, at the opposite extreme, a fairly recent work (*Modern Premillennialism and the Christian Hope*, p. 112) by an Arminian opponent of Premillennialism contends that the Premillennial view is really Hyper-Calvinism! Some express themselves as if one's stand on the Millennium determines his views on Christian ethics, salvation, and the church. It is true that it often does, but that there is no *necessary* connection the contemporary situation manifests, for among most shades of Protestant theological opinion (Calvinism, Arminianism, Covenant Theology, Dispensational Theology, etc.), there are both strong Premillennialists and Amillennialists, and probably a few Postmillennialists.

Now, this writer is not inclined to shrug his shoulders at all theological differences among Christians--though I do believe that sometimes

they are overzealously championed. I do have strong convictions on all of these issues. But I do also most strongly affirm that the millennial issue, even though it may lead to differences in many areas, ought to be permitted to stand by itself for judgment. It ought not to be unnecessarily clouded by other issues. I insist that the question of the millennium in both the Bible and history of interpretation is essentially a question of eschatology, and that it ought to be permitted to remain so. It is true, to be sure, that some have interpreted the millennium as an aspect of the present age. But it will be the burden of this paper to show that view to be false--that the coming of the millennium is indeed an eschatological event.

I realize that it will not be easy to dissociate the millennial question from some of the theological bearings in which it is often placed. Theologians, like philosophers, are system makers. So it was to be expected that this Christian doctrine should become imbedded in a theological system. But, lo, the unexpected has happened, and it is embodied in various forms in several systems.

In view of this fact, the writer is inclined to take issue with a recent writer from the Premillennial school who speaks at length of "Amillennial Bibliology," "Amillennial Theology Proper," "Amillennial Angelology," "Amillennial Anthropology," "Amillennial Soteriology," "Amillennial Ecclesiology"--all in the same plane of what he calls "Amillennial Eschatology." I think it mars what is otherwise one of the most scholarly and acceptable discussions of the millennial problem and of dispensationalism to appear in many years. (See *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 107, Number 426, sixth in a series on the millennium by John F. Walvoord.) When Amillennialism has been championed by large sections of such theologically diverse bodies as the Roman Catholic Church, branches of the Lutheran Church, sections of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Methodists, Southern Baptists, and notably by the Church of God (Winebrennarian group) it is sheer folly to create the fiction of a distinctive "Amillennial system of theology." It would be equally foolish to attempt a definition of a "Premillennial system of theology."

This writer does not claim to be immune to system making. Theology ought to be systematic, that is, it ought to manifest harmony in its various parts. But systematic theology as a rigid framework in which every difficult verse must fit will cost us much in error and controversy. So, even though for many years I have had very definite opinions in the field of Christian theology, I have made a conscious effort in this treatise to be unbiased by the system, as such, to which I hold. I am not inclined now to say a great deal about it at this juncture. Rather, without taking a polemical partisan attitude, would I follow the lead of Edward Bickersteth, a noted Premillennial writer of over a century ago, who says in the preface to the sixth edition of his *Practical Guide to The Prophecies*: "The author commends the subject with affection and humility to the attention of the beloved brethren in the ministry, and fellow Christians of every denomination. He trusts that his mind is open to conviction on being *shown a more excellent way*" (cf. also Augustine, *City of God*, XX, 30).

The investigation represented by this work has not confirmed quite

everything I once accepted. Yet more and more it has become plain to me that the simple, literal, grammatical method of interpretation which led my teachers in my childhood and youth to the Premillennialist position will lead anyone to the same position, provided he leaves his biases behind. I am quite certain that I am a more convinced Premillennialist and have a better and more Biblical Premillennialism than ever before.

What is Premillennialism? The shortest, most concise definition by any scholar of note is probably that given by W. G. Moorehead (International Standard Bible Encyclopædia, art. "Millennium [Premillennial View]"). He first sets forth the proposition that the Millennium will be that time when "the kingdom of God shall have universal sway over the earth, and...righteousness and peace and the knowledge of the Lord shall everywhere prevail," then reduces the distinctive view of Premillennialism to the proposition that "the Millennium succeeds the second coming of Christ." This statement, it should be added, is that of an advocate of Premillennialism. Moorehead wrote before the Amillennial doctrine had been revived in its present vigorous form. His definition of the Millennium itself is entirely inadequate for the field of Millennial controversy today. In fact, his definition and doctrine are not too acceptable to Amillennialism.

Very near the same brevity is attained by S. H. Kellogg (Schaff-Herzog Ency. of Rel. Knowledge, art., "Premillennialism").

The most elaborate analysis and enumeration of the tenets of Premillennialism to be set forth recently comes from a Premillennialist converted, he says, to Amillennialism during his last year in seminary and twenty years of service on a foreign mission field. I refer to *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1942) by Floyd E. Hamilton. He first sets forth what he believes to be "The General Theory," then treats in turn, "Historic Premillennialism," "Pre-Tribulationists," and "Ultra-dispensationalists." His ten pages (21-30) do present a quite adequate survey of the situation. Yet his enumerations and formulations are intended to include all that which is, and has been, taught by most orthodox Premillennialists and not necessarily by the Bible itself. He has included the broadest latitude of opinion and hence mentions some views as distinctive to Premillennialism in general and to dispensational Premillennialism in particular which many of the best advocates do not hold. Further, they are stated in such a fashion that they may be most adaptable to refutation later in his book. For these reasons I cannot adopt his definition of the doctrine. I shall make no effort to state, defend, or refute any doctrine of eschatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, etc., held by any Premillennialian past or present except as it harmonizes with what may be derived from clear teaching of Scripture. Too long now we have been quoting authorities at one another to determine the "thus saith the Lord."¹

1 Enumerations of tenets of Premillennialism will also be found in *Schaff-Herzog Ency. of Religious Knowledge*, art., "Millennium," C.A. Semisch; *The Millennium in the Church*, D.H. Kromminga, 242, ff. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1945; *Millennial Studies*, G.L. Murray, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1948; and in *Prophecy and the Church*, O.T. Allis, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Philadelphia, 1945.

It was Johann Albrecht Bengel of Germany (1687-1751) who gave Premillennialism respectability in scholarly and ecclesiastical circles in the modern era by adopting an energetic Premillennialism himself and advocating it in his writings (cf. evaluation of Bengel in *The Prophecies of Daniel and The Revelations of St. John*, Carl August Auberlen, Eng. trans. Adolph Saphir, pp. 365-379). Contemporary writers have a way of supposing that Premillennialism in modern forms roots in the Plymouth Brethren movement. Such is not the case. Bickersteth (*op.cit.*), whose date is 1839, lists hundreds of books on eschatology, most of them favorable to the Premillenarian view, and almost all coming before the rise of the Plymouth Brethren but after Bengel. Yet, as Auberlen points out, Bengel was in error in many of his views of eschatology (for instance he believed in two eschatological millennia and set the date for the beginning of the first Millennium in the year 1836). But he was right in insisting on the central truth of the Premillennial doctrine. Yet how dreadful would have been the results to Christianity since Bengel if preachers and scholars had felt that all the view of Bengel had to be defended. Our twentieth century has in fifty years produced some sound expositors of Premillennial doctrine. Yet how few of them have fully avoided Bengel's error of date-setting. How few of them have written no words which will appear foolish a generation hence. Eschatology is especially susceptible to wild speculation. The eschatological portions of Scripture are most susceptible to fanciful exegesis. Would that expositors might stick to the task of exposition and application and not attempt to add to revelations of Almighty God by intuition and speculation.

So, in enumerating what I believe to be the teachings of Scripture concerning the Millennium, I shall try to avoid making any affirmation which is not derived from the "thus saith the Lord" of Bible revelation.

My procedure shall be first to state the doctrine and then to present the Biblical evidence.

The essentials of the teachings of the Scriptures on the Millennium may be summarized in three propositions:

I. The Millennium is specifically (1) the period of time between the resurrection of the just and of the unjust, and (2) the period of Satan's imprisonment.

II. The Millennium is further qualified as (1) an initial stage of the everlasting kingdom of Christ, (2) a period begun by the visible return of Christ in glory to judge and rule the nations, (3) a period closed by the final eradication of all evil from God's universe at the final judgment of the wicked, and (4) a period during which the saints of the first resurrection will be associated with Christ in His reign.

III. In connection with the inauguration of the Millennium it is revealed that (1) the closing days of the present age shall witness the restoration of Israel to the land and the conversion of the nation, to be followed in the Millennium by the fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant promises distinctive to that nation, (2) a final personal Antichrist shall

appear near the close of this present age who will become master of the world and will be destroyed by Christ at His coming, and (3) a period of great tribulation for Israel is to transpire under Antichrist's oppression, from which deliverance will be provided by Christ at His coming.

Some will question why certain particular teachings often emphasized by some Premillennialists are not included in the list. The explanation is the limitation of purpose. It is my intention to present only the essentials of doctrine for a consistent and Biblical premillennial eschatology--to list the *essentials* of the premillennial view which would be accepted by the majority of orthodox² Premillennialists.

Some Premillennialists will, of course, disagree as to the list of essentials. If so, I can say only that I think them mistaken. The Premillennialist brethren who feel that Antichrist is the Pope, for instance, will not agree with the second and third parts of III above. The brethren who think of the Millennium and the Kingdom as precise equivalents will disagree with most of II.

Some Premillennialists will think I have not included enough as essential. The pre-tribulationist who some years ago refused to sit on a Bible conference platform with a speaker who advocated the doctrine of a post-tribulation rapture would, no doubt, want the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture included. However, I have no doubt that reasonable and informed Premillennialists will all agree that some of the details of doctrine in this area must be based on inferences from passages rather than plain statements of "thus saith the Lord." Also some of the passages which concern questions of a secret or public rapture, the precise relation of the saints of the Old Testament to the saints of the New in the coming Kingdom, are capable of variant interpretation. There ought to be room for legitimate difference of opinion among the Premillennial brethren on these points.³

It is my sincere prayer that those who read the pages to follow will be convinced that these propositions are true. They are now presented with the most important Biblical evidence. I cannot present all of it, for even Augustine (*City of God*, XX, 30), after several times cutting short his arguments on eschatology, as he said, lest he should be "unduly prolix," finally adds, "There are many passages of Scripture bearing on the last judgment of God,--so many, indeed, that to cite them all would swell this book to an unpardonable size."

2 *Contra Russellites*, Latter Day Saints, *et al.*

3 Cf. English, "Rethinking the Rapture," art. no. 6, *Our Hope*, Dec. 1949.