

## A PREMILLENNIAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

(Chapter 28 of *The Greatness of the Kingdom* by Alva J. McClain)

Christianity is not a philosophy. But Christianity has a philosophy--the best and the brightest of all philosophies. In fact, it will be the *final* philosophy, not only because it is founded upon divine revelation but also because it does justice to all points of view which have any value. Most philosophies are very narrow, often based upon only one aspect of reality. In the very rich variety of the world, the average philosopher may select one segment of reality which seems most impressive to him, and then proceed to explain the universe in terms of that one thing, which then becomes the "type-phenomenon" of his system. Thus one man is impressed by the fact of mind and he becomes an idealist. Another is intrigued by the wonders of matter and he becomes a materialist. In Christian philosophy both mind and matter are recognized as worth-while realities, each being given its proper place and function in the Kingdom of God.

Hence, an adequate philosophy should have at least three marks: First, it should be able to give due recognition to every aspect of reality, excluding none. Second, it should fit into a rational scheme of thought; that is, it should make sense. Third, it should have beneficial practical effects here and now. I am not a pragmatist, but they have a point. Their great mistake was to exalt this point into a theory of truth. Things are not true because they work; they work because they are true.

Now the Bible divides all human existence into two stages or kinds: With respect to their *nature* the one is called "natural," the other "spiritual" (I Cor. 15:46). As to their *context* the first is called "earthly," the second "heavenly" (I Cor. 15:48). As to their *duration* the first is called "temporal," the second "eternal" (II Cor. 4:18). As to their *time relationship* the one is described as "the life that now is," and the other as "that which is to come" (I Tim. 4:8).

Toward this present life on earth, there have been two extreme attitudes: Some have wrongly regarded this life as the only thing worth-while, scoffing at the idea of anything higher and beyond. Thus, according to the consistent Marxians, there is no substance to the promise of "Pie in the sky, By and by." Others, also wrongly, have scorned the present life as of small or no account, even arguing that salvation consists in getting loose from it altogether. On this philosophic road, at various stages, were the Hindu religionists, the monastics of the middle ages; even Plato, and a few theologians who should have known better. Over against these one-sided emphases, the Bible, with its unerring philosophic balance, recognizes certain genuine values in both the present life and that which is to come. Life on the present earthly stage is, of course, not the best; *but it is "good"* (Gen. 1:31). The Bible writers are never hard put, as Plato was, to explain how the eternal world of spirit ever became entangled in the web of physical existence.

Now it should be obvious, of course, that history can deal only with the present life, that which is temporal. History can have nothing to do with the world to come, which is

eternal. Likewise, any genuine philosophy of history must be subject to the same limitations. Such a philosophy, if it lays claim to any truth, must give some rational account of the life which now is.

Let us inquire now very briefly into the answers on this point which appear in certain types of theology. Classical postmillenarianism had plenty of defects, but it did make a serious attempt to deal with human history. The same thing was true of the liberalism of the last generation. Both had a goal in human history, more or less clearly defined. God was making progress, slowly at times, but surely. Science also, although not too sure about God, had its own philosophy of progress toward a goal. This optimistic theory of human progress had much its own way for the half century ending in 1914. After that the foundations were badly shaken; prop after prop went down, until today the theory is under attack from every side. Devout postmillenarianism has but few champions. Liberalism is hard put to defend itself against new enemies. Some of the greatest names in science are feeling a pessimistic "guilt" which is almost pathological.

In the midst of this debacle a new and powerful school of theology has arisen, laying claim to some of the most brilliant minds of our generation. This is the "Theology of Crisis" of Barth and Brunner, to which the so-called "Christian Realism" of such men as John C. Bennett and Reinhold Niebuhr is closely related. Their ideas have been developed largely under the influence of the Danish Kierkegaard. To the great consternation of liberalism, these men and their followers are taking refuge in pessimism so far as human history is concerned. According to their expressed views, the Kingdom of God has little, if any, relation to the present world and human history. The Kingdom to them is wholly "eschatological." But by this term the theologians of crisis do not mean what is meant ordinarily. In the Bible, eschatological events are found *in* the end of human history. But the "eschatology" of Barth is both *above* and *beyond* history, having little or no vital relation to history. Dr. Berkhof has written a very valuable summary and critical evaluation of this new "eschatology."<sup>1</sup>

What Berkhof fails to see, it seems to me, is that his own amillennial school of thought is in some measure "tarred with the same brush," at least in its doctrine of the established Kingdom of God. According to this view, both good and evil continue in their development side by side through human history. Then will come catastrophe and the crisis of divine judgment, not for the purpose of setting up a divine kingdom in history, but after the close of history. Our only hope is in a new world which is beyond history. Thus history becomes the preparatory "vestibule" of eternity, and not a very rational vestibule at that. It is a narrow corridor, cramped and dark, a kind of "waiting room," leading nowhere *within* the historical process, but only fit to be abandoned at last for an ideal existence on another plane. Such a view of history seems unduly pessimistic, in the light of Biblical revelation. While we who are premillennial in theology cannot, of course, accept the liberal illusion of human progress and its "profound satisfaction with human goodness,"<sup>2</sup> we must nevertheless reject likewise the "historical" despair of the theology of crisis.

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1 L. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-31.

2 J. Gresham Machen, quoted by Ned B. Stonehouse in *J. Gresham Machen, A Biographical Memoir*, p. 302.

What then can we learn from past history that we may be able to infer something reliable about what to expect in the future? Well, if there is anything crystal-clear in Biblical history, it is that the existence of our sinful race falls into periods of time (call them *eras*, *ages*, *dispensations*, or whatever you will), and that each age represents an advance over the preceding age, when looked at from the standpoint of what God is giving and doing for man. It is true that sinful man is always failing; but where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. Thus to the old question, "Is the world getting better or worse?" from one standpoint we might answer, "The *age* is getting worse, but the course of history by the grace of God is moving forward."

On the basis of this law of divine progress in ages past, therefore, we may legitimately argue that "the life which now is" should have some proper goal. It ought to go some place. And it should not be finally adjudicated and brought to an end until all its known possibilities have been fulfilled within the admitted limits imposed by that which is finite and sinful. Let me try to make this point very clear. Forgetting for the moment what has been accomplished in the natural world by those great intrusions of supernatural power in the course of history, and confining our attention wholly to what man under God has done, we know that *some* physical diseases have been conquered, *some* wars have been prevented, *some* hazards to life and safety have been eliminated, *some* years have been added to the brief span of human life, *some* social and political evils have been corrected. If this be so, why then should there not be an age when *all* wars will be stopped, *all* diseases cured, *all* the injustices of government rooted out, and a *full* measure of years added to human life? Why should there not be an age in which all such unrealized and worth-while dreams of humanity will at last come true on earth? If there be a God in heaven, if the life which He created on the earth is worth-while, and not something evil *per se*, then there ought to be in history some worthy consummation of its long and arduous course.

It is just there that we must part company with any theological school which dogmatically asserts that there will never be such a "Golden Age" upon earth in history, which argues that for the present we must be satisfied with a mere pittance of progress in such matters, that the world which now is must continue with its terrible needs, its tragic handicaps, struggles, and problems, to the very end. And then God will suddenly write a catastrophic *finis* to the whole of it, abolish human existence on its first and natural plane, and thrust us all, both saved and unsaved, out into the eternal state.

I am quite well aware of the peril of basing eschatology on philosophic considerations. The Word of God alone must be our base of authority. But where Biblical interpretation may be in question, surely the right view should display clearer marks of rationality than the wrong one. And such a philosophy of history, as I have been describing, seems to me to be utterly irrational. Remembering that history has only to do with the life that now is, such a philosophy of history has no proper goal. To borrow a figure once used by the late President E. Y. Mullins<sup>3</sup> in another connection, it is like a man building a great staircase. Step by step he sets it up, laboring wearily, often suffering painful reverses

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<sup>3</sup> *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 1924, p. 111.

because of tragic hazards and poor materials. And now at last it is finished. But lo, it is a stairway that goes no place! It is just a staircase, and nothing more. Or to vary the figure, history becomes a loaded gun which, when the trigger is pulled, fires a blank cartridge! Such a philosophy of history not only flies in the face of the clear statements of Scripture, but also runs contrary to the reason of man in his finest moments and aspirations.

The premillennial philosophy of history makes sense. It lays a Biblical and rational basis for a truly optimistic view of human history. Furthermore, rightly apprehended, it has practical effects. It says that life here and now, in spite of the tragedy of sin, is nevertheless something worth-while; and therefore all efforts to make it better are also worth-while. All the true values of human life will be preserved and carried over into the coming kingdom; nothing worth-while will be lost. Furthermore, we are encouraged in the midst of opposition and reverses by the assurance that help is on the way, help from above, supernatural help--"Give the king thy judgments, O God. . . . In his days shall the righteous flourish. . . . all nations shall call him blessed" (Ps. 72:1, 7, 17).

This brief discussion may well be closed with the impressive words of a great Jewish-Christian scholar:

Is not such a consummation of history a necessary postulate of our thought? Would we not expect such a transition period between the present and the ultimate everlasting condition? As we have seen in the past a succession of developments, of which *man* is the highest, is there not to be the reign of the *Son of man*, and a sphere in accordance with His character and glory? Is there to be always the contrast between heaven and earth, the ideal and the actual? Is the history of the world, which began with miracle, and a period of constant manifestation of the higher world unto the children of men, not to terminate in a similar age of heavenly influence and blessedness? Is earth simply a failure, abandoned by God to the power of the enemy, the scene of divine judgment, and not the scene of the vindication and triumph of righteousness? Is not Jesus the Son of Man, the Christ who shall reign on earth? We believe that He will come, and with Him the Kingdom, and with the Kingdom the fulfilment of the prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

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4 Adolph Saphir, *The Lord's Prayer*, pp. 207-208.