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Eschatological Events in New Testament Perspective

Walter A. Maier

Many concerns and speculations were expressed during the year preceding the supposed advent of the third millennium on January 1, 2000. These fueled widespread interest in what the Bible says about the world's end and events leading up thereto. The *Newsweek* of November 1, 1999 had a cover headlined "Prophecy." The issue featured an article by John Leland titled "Millennial Madness" and another by Kenneth Woodward entitled "The Way the World Ends," both describing popular beliefs about the end times. Leland reported that "thousands of Christians, many of them American, . . . have lately flocked to the city [Jerusalem] to be on hand for the prophesied return of Christ." He further stated:

For millions of Americans the prophecies found in Revelation . . . are a blueprint of the events to come – if not in 2000, then soon enough. According to a *Newsweek* poll about 18 percent of Americans expect the endtimes to come within their lifetime. This translates to roughly 36 million people – not just fringe extremists but your office mate, mail carrier, or soccer coach. Or your U.S. representative: House Majority Whip Tom Delay has a wood carving in his office that reads "This could be the Day," a phrase widely used to refer to the Rapture.¹

Kenneth Woodward similarly observed:

Millennial dreams and apocalyptic nightmares are never far below the surface of the American psyche – especially now, as the third millennium approaches The . . . interesting phenomenon is the enormous role prophecy has played in Western religions and popular culture. A *Newsweek* poll found that 40 percent of American adults do believe that the world will one day end, as Revelation describes, in the Battle of Armageddon In the 1970's the best selling book of the decade was Hal Lindsey's apocalyptic *The Late Great Planet Earth*, with 28 million copies sold by 1990. More

¹John Leland, "Millennial Madness," *Newsweek*, November 1, 1999, 70.

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recently, a series of *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins based on Christian prophecies, including two published this year, have sold more than 9 million copies. Among academics, studies of the apocalyptic traditions have produced dozens of new books. "Over the past 30 years," says Bernard McGinn, a medieval specialist at the University of Chicago Divinity School, "more scholarship has been devoted to apocalypticism than in the last 300."²

Christians in our country, while seeking answers in the Bible for questions concerning the last times and the second coming of Christ, differ in their understanding of what the Scriptures, especially the book of Revelation, teach regarding these matters. Many interpret the Bible as teaching millennialism—a literal thousand years of peace, prosperity, growth, and blessing for the church on earth, before the end of human history. In the belief of some, the so-called premillennialists, Christ will return visibly and in great glory prior to the thousand-year period and reign throughout this time with His saints on earth; according to others, the so-called postmillennialists, the thousand-year golden age will come first, and Christ will return at the end of this period. Still others, like most Lutherans, hold that the Bible teaches nothing at all about a golden age at the beginning of which, or after which, Christ will visibly reign with the church on the present earth. Those of this belief have been called amillennialists; they hold that the world will worsen until Christ returns for a final judgment of all mankind.

Against the background of the welter of notions voiced in our society today regarding the terminus of human history, and in view of the confusion in the Christian church itself concerning the end times, it is the purpose of this essay to note the principal and clear teachings of the New Testament pertaining to the end and then, in particular, to focus upon, examine, and refute various ideas enunciated by leading Christian teachers representative of differing millennialistic persuasions. The extravagant notions of sectarian groups and other extremists will not be treated.

²Kenneth Woodward, "The Way the World Ends," *Newsweek* (November 1, 1999): 68.

I. Biblical Eschatology

Missouri Synod Lutherans hold, on the basis of Scripture, the following to be valid and clear teaching of the New Testament pertaining to the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and events presaging, accompanying, and following that coming:

1. Jesus Christ Himself foretold various signs that would point to His second coming — some occurring in every generation of history (Matthew 24:3-14) and some appearing at the very end of time (Matthew 24:29-31). The signs occurring in every age — the upheavals in society such as the constant warring among nations, the cataclysms of nature, the rise of false teachers, and so on — are also treated in the symbolism of the book of Revelation. This is seen, for example, in the book's descriptions of the opening of the seven seals and the sounding of the seven trumpets, and of the destructive results of these acts. One bright sign is prophesied by Jesus, who says that gospel preaching will continue until the world's end, until its testimony has reached the entire inhabited world (Matthew 24:14).

2. Opposition to Christ and His church will continue and increase in the world until Christ returns in glory, and puts a summary end to the enemies of Him and His people on judgment day (1 Corinthians 15:24-26; Revelation 20:7-12; Matthew 24:3-13; 25:31-33; Jude 13-15).

3. At Christ's return all the dead will be resurrected (John 5:28-29; Mark 12:18-27; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). The last generation of persons living at Christ's return will not die, but be summoned alive before His judgment throne. The believers among them, gloriously transformed (1 Corinthians 15:51-52), will, together with believers resurrected from the dead, be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) on the way to judgment.

4. The final judgment of all of humanity will take place in accord with the description given in Matthew 25:31-46 (see also Romans 2:5-16). This judgment will do nothing to change the eternal destiny of those who had been believers or who had been unbelievers on earth. It is required by God in order to reveal to all men and angels His righteousness (Romans 2:5) in dealing with men as He had throughout their lifetimes on earth and now on the day of judgment, saving some and condemning others. Every mouth will acclaim Him righteous and every tongue confess that

Jesus Christ is Lord (compare Philippians 2:9-11). For this reason the judgment is according to works of men.

5. Meanwhile, the first heavens and earth will be destroyed by fire, preparatory to their reconstitution (2 Peter 3:10-14; Romans 8:19-23; Revelation 21:1).

6. After the final judgment, the unbelieving wicked will be remanded to eternal damnation in hell and Christ will lead the saints to eternal life in heaven (Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). The heaven of God and a newly-created heaven and earth will actually be joined and become one. The heaven of God and His saints, descending to become one with the new heaven and earth, is called in Revelation 21:2 "the Holy City" and the "New Jerusalem." The union and communion of God with His people, as envisioned and prepared for by Him, will be consummated and last forever.

Before addressing various millennialistic views, it will be useful to 1) say a few words about the organization of the material in the book of Revelation, and 2) provide a translation of the Greek text of Revelation 20:1-6, in which a period of a thousand years is mentioned, and with reference to which numerous millennialistic notions are formulated.

The book of Revelation is comprised of seven visions concerning events contemporary with the apostle John, to whom the exalted Christ gave these visions while His disciple was exiled on Patmos, and events taking place in the future. Beginning with the second vision, the apostle is given information as to what shall transpire in the world and with reference to the church during the New Testament period, until the end of time—each vision bringing additional information and concluding with a reference to the world's end. Thus, the visions are easily demarcated and distinguished. The overriding theme of Revelation is "The Present Rule and Ultimate, Absolute Triumph of God and His Saints over All the Forces of Evil in the World."

The following is this author's translation of the Greek text of Revelation 20:1-6:

(1.) And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the abyss and a great chain on his hand. (2.) And he laid hold of the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is [the] devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, (3.) and threw him into the abyss

and locked and sealed [it] over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, till the thousand years were finished. After these things it is necessary that he be released for a little time.

(4.) And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And [I saw] the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God, and [I saw the souls of] such as did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive [his] mark on their forehead and on their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (5.) The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were finished. This [is] the first resurrection. (6.) Blessed and holy [is] the one having part in the first resurrection! Over these persons the second death does not have authority; on the contrary, they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with Him for the thousand years.³

A compressed summary of chief teachings of the several groups of millennialists follows, along with the present writer's short commentary on the various views.⁴ Premillennialist doctrines fall into one of two

³The Greek text translated is that of the 27th edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece*, edited by Barbara and Kurt Aland, and others (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

⁴This author's information on the various millennial systems presented in this paper has been gleaned in large measure from *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977). Clouse gathered essays from leading proponents of the four major millennial views. Each author sets forth the millennial position that he espouses. At the conclusion of each article, the other contributors respond from their particular viewpoints. George Eldon Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary presents Historic Premillennialism, Herman A. Hoyt of Grace Theological Seminary writes about Dispensational Premillennialism, Loraine Boettner discusses Postmillennialism, and Anthony A. Hoekema of Calvin Theological Seminary explains the amillennial position.

At the end of his book, Clouse adds a selected bibliography of millennialist literature; in the introduction he indicates the ages of the Christian era in which each millennial outlook has predominated. In the progression of his work Clouse mentions by name other leading biblical scholars who are exponents of the respective millennial positions.

Other works consulted include George E. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978); Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1957); Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969); and William E. Cox, *An*

categories, those that characterize "Historic Premillennialism" and those that characterize "Dispensational Premillennialism."

II. Historic Premillennialism

A. A Delineation of Historic Premillennialism

In a summary of distinctive Historic Premillennialist doctrines, George Eldon Ladd writes:

Revelation 19:11-16 pictures the Second Coming of Christ as a conqueror coming to destroy his enemies: the Antichrist, Satan and Death. Revelation 19:17-21 pictures first the destruction of Antichrist and the hosts which have supported him in opposition to the kingdom of God. Revelation 20 then relates the destruction of the evil power behind the Antichrist—"the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan" (Revelation 20:2). This occurs in two stages. First, Satan is bound and incarcerated in "the bottomless pit" (Revelation 20:1) for a thousand years "that he should deceive the nations no more" (Revelation 20:3) as he had done through Antichrist. At this time occurs the "first resurrection" (Revelation 20:5) of saints who share Christ's rule over the earth for the thousand years. After this Satan is loosed from his bonds, and in spite of the fact that Christ has reigned over the earth for a thousand years, he finds the hearts of unregenerated men still ready to rebel against God. The final eschatological war follows when the devil is thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone. Then occurs a second resurrection of those who had not been raised before the millennium. They appear before the judgment throne of God to be judged according to their works. "If any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). Then Death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire.

Thus Christ wins his victory over his three enemies: Antichrist, Satan and Death. Only then, when all hostile powers have been subdued,

is the scene ready for the eternal state—the coming of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1-4).⁵

Referring to Romans 11:26, “And so all Israel will be saved,” Ladd declares that “the New Testament clearly affirms the salvation of literal Israel,” but “does not give any details about the day of salvation It may well be that Israel’s conversion will take place in connection with the millennium. It may be that in the millennium, for the first time in human history, we will witness a truly Christian nation.”⁶

On the basis of his translation and interpretation of Revelation 20:4-5, Ladd holds to two physical resurrections from the dead—one occurring at the beginning of the thousand years, and this of believers who had died before the millenium’s inception, and thereafter reigned with Christ on earth during the millennium; and one of the rest of believers, later converted, and of unbelievers, occurring at the end of the thousand years. He translates, “they [the persons mentioned earlier in verse 4] *came to life*, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead *did not come to life* until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.”⁷

B. A Response to Historic Premillennialism

1. In assuming a literal thousand years of Christ’s supposed millennial reign on earth, Ladd, like other premillennialists, does not reckon with the symbolism in the numbers used in Revelation, as well as in other apocalyptic literature. Just as the “chain” mentioned in Revelation 20:1 has a symbolic significance, for in reality the devil, who is a spirit, cannot be bound with a material chain, so the number 1000 must be conceived of as symbolic. The number 10 is regarded as the number of minor completeness in Revelation; when 10 is multiplied by itself, and this product by 10 again to produce 1000, a period of major completeness is connoted, here an entire, prolonged period of time, whatever the exact number of years within it. To what period do the thousand years of Revelation 20 refer? We must consider when the thousand years begin. They begin with the binding of Satan (20:1-3), and that occurs at the time of Christ’s ascension and His enthroning at the right hand of the Father,

⁵Clouse, *Meaning*, 17-18.

⁶Clouse, *Meaning*, 28.

⁷Clouse, *Meaning*, 35 (Ladd’s brackets; emphasis added).

when the devil and his minions lose the war fought with Michael and his angels, as described in Revelation 12. When do the thousand years end? They end after the devil's release from his bonds, just before the Lord's return and the battle of Armageddon (the final judgment), which takes place at the world's end. Thus, "the thousand years" is the symbolic designation for the entire New Testament era.

2. Ladd refers to "Antichrist" in the citation above. The name "Antichrist" appears nowhere in the book of Revelation. The antichrist (the "man of sin" of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and following) is only one of the forces opposing Christ and His church in the New Testament era, the totality of the antagonistic power (including the antichrist) being symbolized by the first wild beast in Revelation (13:1).

3. Ladd does not recognize the cyclical arrangement of the visions in Revelation, when he regards Vision Seven, beginning with chapter 20, as following historically upon the last chapter (19) of Vision Six. Thus he derives his doctrine of *premillennialism*; he sees the thousand years of chapter 20 beginning after Christ's Second Coming as reported in chapter 19. In reality chapter 20 takes us back again to the beginning of Christ's rule at the Father's right hand following His ascension, and its consequences, the defeat of Satan reported already in chapter 12, which also results in his (Satan's) binding as Revelation 20:1-3 indicates.

4. Ladd erroneously sees Christ reigning with His resurrected saints on earth for the thousand years, whereas Revelation 20 says that His reign is conducted in and from heaven, with the participation of the souls of believers in heaven who had died on earth.

5. In holding to his position that Revelation 20:4-6 teaches two physical resurrections from the dead, Ladd does not adhere to fundamental hermeneutical principles. One of these is that any passage of God's word must be interpreted according to the analogy of Scripture, that is, in agreement with what the Scriptures teach elsewhere on the same subject; the Bible cannot contradict itself. Thus any exposition of a passage that does not agree with all its parallels is untenable. A companion principle is that the less clear passages of Scripture (like those containing figurative speech and symbolic expressions) must always be interpreted in the light of the clearer passages (the literal teachings), which method of procedure must never be reversed. Scripture interprets Scripture. Now the New Testament knows of only one resurrection of the dead and reveals that

this will occur for *all* men on judgment day (John 5:28-29; Hebrews 9:27). Therefore, another meaning for "the first resurrection" of Revelation 20:5-6 must be found, as well as for an implied second resurrection.

6. Contributing to his misunderstanding of Revelation 20 is Ladd's translation of the two occurrences of ἔζησαν in verses 4 and 5. While his translations "come to life" and "did not come to life" are possible as far as the lexicon and New Testament usage elsewhere are concerned, the context requires that these aorist verbs here be rendered "lived" and "did not live." The souls of the departed martyrs and other saints lived and reigned with Christ in heaven throughout the New Testament era, the apostle John states (verses 4-6), and denominates this "the first resurrection." In the symbolism of Revelation the first resurrection is the blessed passage of the souls of believers from earth to heaven at the time of physical death, to join Jesus in heavenly life and jointly rule with Him there. The implied second resurrection would be the passage of the body, too, to heavenly glory after the final resurrection on judgment day. Parenthetically, the apostle adds that the rest of the dead, unbelievers who had died, did not live throughout the millennium as did the souls of the saints in heaven (verse 5a). The implication is that the souls of unbelievers who had died were remanded in the intermediate state to hell, later referred to in chapter 20 as "the second death," "the lake of fire," into which the damned, in body and soul, will be cast after the final judgment. The implied first death of unbelievers (in Revelation) would be their physical death on earth.

7. As for Ladd's belief in a national Jewish conversion, perhaps during the millennium, it should be noted that in the whole of Revelation 20:1-7 (the only passage in the entire Scripture that mentions a thousand years) there is no reference at all to the Jews, much less to their conversion. This idea is, in fact, simply taught nowhere in Revelation or anywhere else in the Bible. In Romans 11:26, to which Ladd refers, the "Israel" there is spiritual or believing Israel, the whole number of elect among the Jews; and the context shows how a remnant of Jews will still be saved in every New Testament generation.

From all the preceding considerations, then, we see clearly that the New Testament teaches none of the distinctive doctrines of Historic Premillennialism.

III. Dispensational Premillennialism

A. A Delineation of Dispensational Premillennialism

Herman A. Hoyt sees the subject of the millennial kingdom presented in the Scriptures as one aspect of the larger theme of the kingdom of God. Whereas Historic Premillennialism derives its teaching concerning the millennium exclusively from the New Testament, Dispensational Premillennialism (hereafter referred to by the shortened term "Dispensationalism," its adherents being "dispensationalists") bases most of its teaching relating to the millennium on the Old Testament, the prophetic portions in particular. A cardinal hermeneutical principle of Dispensationalism is that all of the Old Testament, including its prophecies, must always be interpreted literally.⁸

According to Hoyt, Dispensationalism is centrally concerned with the teaching of Scripture regarding the kingdom of God, which, Hoyt says, may be broadly defined as the rule of God over His creatures. There are two aspects of this rule, one universal, describing the extent of the divine rule, the other "mediatorial," describing the method of God's rule. The universal aspect may be termed God's universal kingdom, which is everlasting, encompasses all creation, and is almost wholly providential, operating irrespective of the attitudes of the subjects. From the point of view of the Testament, whereas the universal kingdom always had been and always would be present, the full flourishing of the mediatorial was promised in the future. When God will have accomplished His purpose in the mediatorial kingdom, it will be merged with the universal kingdom, and there will be one throne.

The sphere of operation of the mediatorial kingdom was to be within the larger sphere of the universal. The former kingdom is denominated mediatorial, because God would conduct His rule in and over His people through a mediator, a chosen representative who would speak and act for God with the people on the one hand and, on the other, represent the people to God. Preparation for the inauguration of the mediatorial kingdom in history began at creation. God created man, endowed him

⁸Paraphrases and cursorily gathered citations of Hoyt's explanations without the use of quotation marks are interspersed in what follows, so as to communicate as clearly and accurately as possible Hoyt's digest of dispensational teaching (pages 64 and following in Clouse, *Meaning*).

with the potentialities for dominion, and commanded him to exercise this derived function in accordance with the divine will. But Adam and subsequent humanity sinned and introduced chaos and disorder on the earth. This brought about abandonment by God and the universal catastrophe of the flood.

Thereafter God turned in a new direction to accomplish His will. He sought to rule His people through the mediation of patriarchs. He called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees; through this man there were to come godly men who would serve in the capacity of mediators, exercising authority derived from God. Following Abraham in the line of succession were Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, the judges, Samuel, and then the kings, all discharging the responsibility of mediatorial control. Because of the wickedness of kings succeeding Solomon during the period of the divided kingdom, there was a gradual decline in the mediatorial function of the kings, so that the rule of God became more indirect. God brought prophets upon the scene, through whose proclamation He got His message to the people. But continuing apostasy and degeneration in Israel inevitably brought the disapproval of the Lord and the departure of His blessing from the nation. Since the people had forsaken God, God now forsook the people. Beginning with the Babylonian exile and for the centuries immediately following, there was an interruption of the mediatorial kingdom.

God was not utterly through with His people, however. Through His prophets He had promised them a deliverer, the Messiah, a perfect mediatorial king, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would discharge a saving ministry toward His subjects and be able to carry God's program for mankind through to complete success. The message of the Old Testament prophets centered upon this mediatorial king and the kingdom in which He would rule. What the prophets predicted must be understood literally. Thus, the coming mediatorial kingdom would be manifested in the establishment of an earthly kingdom, as real as the historical kingdom of Israel. That coming material kingdom, said the prophets, will have its central location in Jerusalem, with a real king sitting on a material throne from which He will govern the world. Nations of mankind will participate in the ministry of welfare and deliverance of this kingdom. The wicked kingdoms of this world will be brought to a sudden and catastrophic end at the second coming of Christ, and His kingdom will supplant them forever. The Lord will delegate the multiplied

responsibilities of government to a spiritual nobility of resurrected saints. The redeemed, living nation of Israel, regenerated and permanently regathered to her land, will be head over all the nations of the earth, exalted over the saved Gentile nations.

In this new state of affairs there will be a restoration of perfect social relations. War will be completely eliminated. Religious purification will take place: a central sanctuary will be established in Jerusalem for the use of the people of all nations, and the Shekinah Glory will again take up its rightful place in the temple. The original intention of God for Israel will be accomplished by this people becoming the leaders and teachers of religious truths. People in all nations will be under the complete influence of the Holy Spirit; they will all experience forgiveness and the full knowledge of God; they will be righteous and live righteously. Of benefit to men will be the fact that the earth will undergo physical transformation: geological and climatic changes, increased fertility of the soil, and changes in animal nature. There will be healing of physical ills and the blessing of eternal life.

All the conditions just described will prevail, according to dispensational thought, in the millennium, inaugurated by the second coming of Christ. Dispensationalism simply pontificates that Revelation 20:1-6 teaches a literal millennium. However, what leads up to this period, and what follows it?

When Christ was born and conducted His ministry in Palestine, He offered this coming millennial kingdom to His Jewish countrymen. Despite the powerful teaching and preaching of Jesus, the King, they wanted nothing to do with Him, and the mediatorial kingdom in its (then) present stage was rejected. Knowing of this outcome ahead of time, Christ prophesied the tragic Jewish rejection and made plans with His apostles to found the church, a new society of believers that would now include many Gentile Christians. He began to instruct His disciples more clearly concerning the necessity of His death and resurrection, but assured them that He would return in glory to establish His mediatorial kingdom in its final grand phase (for the millennium). The mediatorial kingdom, Hoyt avers, was placed in a position of "abeyance" or "suspension" during the period extending from Pentecost to Christ's return. But converts would steadily be brought into the kingdom.

Prior to the second coming of Christ, there will be a period of seven years, or slightly more, according to Hoyt, which will be marked by

tribulation for end-time converts to Christianity, but also by providential judgments that will expel the wicked from the earth. Then Christ will return to earth with His "church saints," whom He had caught away into heaven (raptured) before this awful period began. His millennial rule will begin. At the conclusion of the tribulation, the great company of tribulation martyrs will be raised in close proximity with the Old Testament saints, and the long-awaited mediatorial kingdom will then be realized in the fulness of all its predicted aspects and millennial magnificence. The mediatorial kingdom will be merged with the universal kingdom, and this will usher in the eternal state. Then there will be one throne forever.

B. A Response to Dispensational Premillennialism

1. Since this Dispensationalism is Premillennial, it is subject to the same strictures directed against Historic Premillennialism above, and these will not be repeated here.

2. The fundamental hermeneutical principle of Dispensationalism, that all of the Old Testament (as well as the New), including its prophecies, must always be interpreted literally, is patently erroneous. The New Testament itself rejects this principle. The prophet Amos records these words in which God speaks of the New Testament era (9:11-12): "On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name" (NKJV; the verses cited below are also from this version). At the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, the account of which is given in Acts 15, James, after hearing from Peter of Gentile conversions he had witnessed, and from Paul and Barnabas their reports of genuine Gentile conversions on their first missionary journey, commented (verses 14-19): "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins, and will set it up, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord.'" James adds: "Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God." The fulfillment of Amos' words obviously consists not in a literal reconstruction of a material tabernacle, but in the entrance of believing Gentiles into the one church, the rising spiritual temple of

God. We may also compare Isaiah 9:1-2 and Matthew 4:12-17, Malachi 4:5 and Matthew 11:11-14, and numerous other passages.

3. Purporting to find his information in the Old Testament and its prophecies, Hoyt makes much of a future centrality of a converted physical Israelite nation. He speaks of the restoration of land and prosperity to the Jewish people, and the reintroduction of ancient religious rites and usages among them. Neither the Old nor the New Testament makes such predictions. We may consider these points:

a. In His Old Testament covenant with the nation of Israel God made certain promises concerning her possession of her land, or her restoration to it. But, it must be remembered, He always made these pledges contingent on obedience to the Lord; He warned the people of the revocation of the promises if they proved disobedient. One may consult, for example, Deuteronomy 28:15, 63-65, 68; Jeremiah 18:9-12. Because of Israel's disobedience to the Lord, she lost her land.⁹ When Christ came, and the majority with the leadership rejected Him, He told the chief priests, elders, and Pharisees in the temple: "The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Matthew 21:43). In crucifying their Messiah and persistently opposing His church thereafter, the Jews brought upon themselves the condition in which, as Paul says, "wrath has come upon them to the uttermost" (1 Thessalonians 2:16). This assertion leaves no room for a future national conversion or

⁹Commenting on this matter, Loraine Boettner writes in his response to Hoyt's Dispensationalist views: "Numerous . . . warnings might be cited . . . to show that no promise will be fulfilled to a disobedient and rebellious people. . . . [All] of the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament either were fulfilled or they have been forfeited through disobedience." He goes on to observe: "Incidentally, regarding what is generally considered the most important promise that God made to Israel, namely, that they should possess all the land of Palestine, that promise was fulfilled once. It was given to Israel through Joshua's conquests. They lost it only because of their disobedience. Hence there is no reason why it should be given to them a second time. In Joshua 21:43, 45 we read, 'Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled . . . there. Not one of all the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.' And again we are told, 'Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life' (1 Kings 4:21). Actually God did mercifully give them a second chance, when the captives came back from Babylon. But again they lost it through disobedience." Clouse, *Meaning*, 100-101.

land possession. The new relationship (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13) established with His church and supplanting the old made with the Jews, has no promise of this kind in it.

b. With the establishment of the New Testament as the instrument by which God deals with His people, the ceremonial law was abrogated. No central sanctuary, like the temple in Jerusalem, and no sacrificial system were necessary (John 4:20-24; Hebrews 8:1-10:18). No Scripture predicts that these features of Israelite worship will be inaugurated again at the second coming of Christ or that they will obtain during a supposed visible millennial reign of the Savior.

c. As for a distinction between a supposedly restored Israelite nation and the church, and a presumed superiority in position and functioning of Israel during the millennium, again the Scriptures know nothing. Amillennialist Anthony Hoekema, commenting on this dispensational idea, says:

There is [in Dispensational thought] a sharp separation between Israel and the church in God's redemptive program, so that Israel is said to have a future quite distinct from the future of the church. But the New Testament clearly shows that the middle wall of partition between believing Gentiles and believing Jews has been broken down (Eph. 2:14), that God has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles unto himself "in one body" (Eph. 2:16), and that therefore believing Gentiles now belong to the same household of God to which believing Jews belong (Eph. 2:19). Similarly in Romans 11, where Paul describes incorporation into the fellowship of God's people in terms of being grafted into a tree, that fellowship is pictured not in terms of two trees (one Jewish and one Gentile) but of one olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24). And Peter, in words which are an obvious echo of Exodus 19:5-6, applies words to the New Testament church (consisting of both Jews and Gentiles) which were originally spoken to Israel: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Pet. 2:9). This indicates that the New Testament church is now indeed the spiritual Israel, the people of God's possession. If the church is now indeed God's

holy nation, what room is left for the emergence of another holy nation, distinct from the church?¹⁰

d. Numerous passages of the Old Testament (such as Isaiah 2:2-4, 11:6-9; Joel 2:23-26, 3:18; Micah 4:1-4; and Zechariah 9:9-10) figuratively describe the glory of the New Testament church in its earthly state or in eternity in material terms. Francis Pieper helpfully comments on this matter in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

Chiliasm [another name for millennialism] has no basis in Scripture, for Scripture itself explains passages to which chiliasm appeals as speaking of the spiritual glory of the New Testament Church

Is. 2:2-3 indeed clearly teaches that all nations will come to Mount Zion: "All nations shall flow unto it, and many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us His ways." This prophecy of the congregating of the nations on Mount Zion, at Jerusalem, etc., runs through the entire Old Testament. Scripture, however, does not place the *fulfillment* of this prophecy in a future millennial kingdom, but says of all believers who, without leaving home, have come to faith in the Gospel during the New Testament era (Heb. 12:22): "But ye are come . . . unto Mount Sion and unto the city of the living God."

Again, Is. 2:4 definitely prophesies that on Mount Zion abundance of peace will reign: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb," etc. . . .

Do not forget that the *Gloria in Excelsis* of the angels sounds forth its glad message, "Peace on earth," not in some future millennial kingdom, but at the birth of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel at that event, and that Christ says not of the citizens of a future millennial kingdom, but of all who believe the Gospel: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you" (John 14:27) . . . "These things I have spoke unto you that in Me

¹⁰Clouse, *Meaning*, 109.

ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33) . . . In other words, what these Old Testament texts prophesy of a future peace in the world is realized in its "full, actual value" not in a still future millennium, but in the appearance of the Son of God in the flesh, in the reconciliation of the world to God, in the proclamation of this news in the world, and in the sending of the Holy Spirit, who through this message works faith in people's hearts, thus creating children of peace in the whole world and among all nations. By faith in the Gospel the Christian Church on earth possesses a peerless state of peace.¹¹

- e. A comment on the meaning of "the kingdom of God" about which Jesus chiefly preached and taught is provided below.¹²

¹¹Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:520-521. These additional words of this Lutheran scholar may be considered (522): "Scripture expressly forbids us to refer these Old Testament passages to a worldly or external peace. Matt. 20:34: 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword.' Thus the New Testament interprets these texts. But even the Old Testament texts themselves connect the peace they predict with the coming of Christ in the flesh and with the New Testament preaching of the Gospel; they represent it as an immediate consequence and effect of these events. The declaration of peace in Is. 9:2-5 has as its cause: 'For unto us a Child is born; unto us a Son is given,' etc. The state of peace described in Is. 11:6-9 ('The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,' etc.) is immediately preceded by its *causa efficiens*: 'And there shall come forth a Rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.'"

¹²The Kingdom of God about which Jesus preached and taught (as did John the Baptist before Him, and the apostles after Him) is, broadly stated, the specialized rule of God in His church. In the New Testament, the "kingdom" does not signify a geographical territory, covering so many square miles. Nor, in first instance, does it refer to the populace of a kingdom, or to the church. Jesus illumines the concept when He says, "The Kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21 NKJV). The Kingdom of God is the rule or reign of God in the believer's being. This reign begins the moment that he is brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, brought to obedience to the first "command" issued by the King to every person, namely that he repent and believe the gospel. When a person is enabled by the Holy Spirit to say, "Yes Lord, I believe in You," then he has entered into the sphere of God's rule; he has entered into the Kingdom of God. It may also be said that the rule of God has entered the believer; the Kingdom of God is within him. Both expressions convey the same blessed reality.

The Kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah belong together, for He is the King who rules, and where He is, there is His Kingdom. Thus John the Baptist,

From all the preceding points, then, we see clearly that the New Testament teaches none of the distinctive doctrines of Dispensational Premillennialism.

IV. Postmillennialism

A. A Delineation of Postmillennialism

The distinctive eschatological teachings of Postmillennialism are concisely summarized by Loraine Boettner as follows:

Postmillennialism is that view of the last things which holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the millennium. It should be added that on postmillennial principles the Second Coming of Christ will be followed immediately by the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the introduction of heaven and hell in their fullness.¹³

The millennium to which the postmillennialist looks forward is thus a golden age of spiritual prosperity during this present era, the age of the church. The golden age is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is to last an indefinite period of time, perhaps much longer than a thousand years. The changed character of individuals will

referring to Christ, preached, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." John's requirements for entry were the same as Christ's: repentance, forgiveness of sins, and baptism.

Lutheran doctrine speaks of a threefold Kingdom of God – the kingdom of power, the kingdom of grace, and the kingdom of glory. The bulk of the discussion so far has been about the kingdom of grace, God's gracious rule in believers, begun and preserved through the means of grace, the gospel and the sacraments. The kingdom of power refers to God's irresistible rule in the realm of nature, and over men and nations in the course of history. God exercises His rule in the kingdom of power in the interest of the church in every generation, so that its purposes and divinely prescribed programs may be carried out. He sets the boundaries beyond which the devil may not pass and insures that the gates of hell never prevail against the church. One may consult Ephesians 1:18-23, and many other passages. The kingdom of glory may be viewed as God's Kingdom in heavenly glory, in which He will exercise His rule in and over the glorified saints forever and ever.

¹³Clouse, *Meaning*, 117.

be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political, and cultural life of mankind. The world at large will then enjoy a state of righteousness which, up until now, has been seen only in relatively small and isolated groups: for example, some families, and some local ecclesiastical groups and kindred organizations. Boettner continues:

This does not mean that there will be a time on this earth when every person will be a Christian or that all sin will be abolished. But it does mean that evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world.

Postmillennialism further holds that the universal proclamation of the gospel and the ultimate conversion of the large majority of men in all nations during the present dispensation was the express command, meaning and promise of the Great Commission given by Christ himself when he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:18-20).

We believe that the Great Commission includes not merely the formal and external announcement of the gospel preached as a "witness" to the nations, as the premillennialists and amillennialists hold, but the true and effectual evangelization of all the nations so that the hearts and lives of the people are transformed by it.¹⁴

Boettner acknowledges that the Christian church in past centuries has been greatly negligent in her duty; he cites J. Marcellus Kik: "That there is still a remnant of paganism and papalism in the world is chiefly the fault of the Church."¹⁵ The need in our day, Boettner goes on to explain, is that the church take its task of world evangelization seriously and enter upon a campaign of world conquest with the gospel, as, he holds, occurred in the early history of the church and at the time of the Reformation. This effort God will surely bless, and the great majority of

¹⁴Clouse, *Meaning*, 117-118.

¹⁵Clouse, *Meaning*, 119.

mankind will be converted to the faith. The saved will far outnumber the lost, as judgment day will reveal, claims Boettner.

In his version of history, however, Boettner sees real progress toward millennial goals as already made in the past, though the process has been a slow one. He devotes many pages to discussing the "spiritual advances" of humanity in the centuries since the first coming of Christ. He mentions as among such advances: Christian principles accepted as standards in many nations; the practical disappearance of slavery and polygamy; the improvement of the status of women and children; evidences of international good will (settlement of disputes by arbitration, not war and billions appropriated in foreign aid); more wealth consecrated to the service of the church; heightened evangelistic and missionary activity; the availability of the Bible in whole or in part in the native language of ninety-eight percent of the people of the world; the broadcast of the Christian message by radio in all of the principal languages of the world; evangelical radio programs with nationwide or worldwide coverage, the number of theological seminaries and institutes and Christian colleges growing faster than the population; numerous Christian magazines and books having a wide circulation; growing general material prosperity; proper management of the earth; the revolution in transportation and communication; and other marvels of the present age. All these developments are harbingers of even greater wonders in the millennial period to come. In answer to the question as to when the millennium will arrive, Boettner replies: "Trying to pinpoint the date on which the millennium begins is like trying to distinguish the day or year when medieval history ended and modern history began . . . [As] one . . . age blends into another so slowly and imperceptibly that no change is recognizable at the time . . . [so] it is with the coming of the millennium."¹⁶ The passage of history in the future will, presumably, make the dawn of the millennial age clear.

B. A Response to Postmillennialism

In response to Boettner's exposition of Postmillennialism, the following points are worthy of consideration.

1. Boettner does not endeavor to derive his position from biblical passages. He does not adduce any Scripture supporting the view that

¹⁶Clouse, *Meaning*, 133.

there will be an earthly millennium at the end of time, a golden age preceding Christ's second coming. He gives no exegesis of Revelation 20:1-6, the only Scripture that speaks of a thousand-year period. This passage, of course, does not speak of an *earthly* reign of Christ, but rather of a heavenly reign. Whence, then, does Boettner derive his information of a future millennium? It is pure conjecture. As indicated previously, the Bible nowhere predicts an earthly reign of Christ at some time in history.

2. Boettner's claim that the world is getting better can be countered with an abundance of evidence that the world is getting worse. That author notes only the favorable aspects of world history while ignoring unfavorable aspects; the latter could be listed at great length. Boettner, furthermore, when he comments favorably on modern inventions of all sorts, and speaks of their benefits to the church and society, ought also note that those same things have been used for purposes that are evil. As the kingdom of God advances, so correspondingly does the kingdom of evil.

3. As for the teaching of Postmillennialism that the world will be Christianized and that things will become better on earth as time goes by, the Scriptures teach the reverse. We may consider the parable of the ever-present tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). Widespread apostasy was to eventuate in the coming of "the man of sin" or "lawless one" (the antichrist) predicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12. The opposition of the world to believers is to continue until the end of time, according to our Lord in Matthew 24. A variety of judgments on the wicked "dwellers upon the earth" are depicted in Revelation—particularly with the opening of the seals, the blasting of the trumpets, the overturning of the bowls, and the gathering together at Armageddon of all the enemies of Christ and His people—as coming just before His return. Jesus asks the question in Luke 18:8: "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"—such faith, in the context, as would importune Him with persistent prayer. With regard to Boettner's contention that the saved will greatly outnumber the lost on judgment day, it disagrees with the Savior's words in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

4. The only passage to which Boettner points as supporting his view that the whole world will be Christianized is the Great Commission, in which Jesus asks His followers to make disciples of all nations. His argument that the all-powerful Lord who issued this assignment would surely enable His people to carry it out fully is a non-sequitur. In Mark's version of the Great Commission (assuming the long ending of the gospel) Jesus speaks of negative, as well as positive, reactions to the future discipling activity of His church: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." The reality in every age, as Jesus puts it elsewhere, is this:

God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:17-19)

The Bible nowhere teaches universalism, and we know that only God's elect will be saved out of the total human populace in every generation of the New Testament, including the last.¹⁷

On the basis of the preceding observations, we see definitely that the New Testament teaches none of the distinctive doctrines of Postmillennialism.

¹⁷Who, specifically, are the "all nations" referred to in the Great Commission? The Savior certainly cannot be regarded as expecting His followers to serve as His instruments in the conversion and discipling of every person in every nation on earth. If such were the case, the eternal salvation of all members of the human race since that time would result. Such an occurrence is neither the teaching of Scripture, nor has it happened, nor could it happen. Many, indeed the majority, in each generation, rather than becoming disciples, follow the broad path of wickedness that leads to destruction, and die in the unbelief that leads to damnation.

Jesus is here employing synecdoche, the figure of speech in which (in this case) the whole is mentioned for the part. The Lord asks His disciples to proceed with making disciples of the persons in every nation whom He will give them to disciple successfully under the blessing of His Spirit. The point of synecdoche is to emphasize that the followers are to forge forth into the whole world with the gospel and diligently endeavor to proclaim it to all persons in all nations of every age.

V. Conclusion

Millennial beliefs, such as those discussed above, will, no doubt, be proclaimed and accepted by many far into the third millennium. This state of affairs is regrettable, since millennialism perverts the teaching of Scripture regarding the last times. It centers Christian hope on a worldly happiness in an earthly millennial period that will feature external peace. It diverts the hope of believers from the rest and glory in heaven actually promised by God. This diversion can only affect the people of God adversely. To the question, "What is the effect of chiliasm on the spiritual life of Christians?" Pieper answers

Chiliasm's misdirection of the Christian hope is extremely harmful and dangerous. Where chiliasm is taken seriously, that is, where it controls the heart, it turns heart and mind away from the invisible spiritual glory of the Christian life, which consists in the assurance of the remission of sins and of the future heavenly heritage, and supplants it with the expectation of an outward and mundane greatness. It depreciates such mighty and glorious words as these: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27). . . . Chiliasm is not content with "Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), but would have the Kingdom of God come with outward display so that one might say: "Lo, there it is!" In short, Scripture does not teach chiliasm, but warns against it.¹⁸

Millennialism, therefore, is an unscriptural belief to be shunned and resisted by the people of God. They are instead to set their minds on things above. The fervent hope of believers is entrance into heaven, first according to the spirit at the moment of physical death and, finally, also according to the glorified body, as word of God promises.

¹⁸Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:526-527.