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Amillennialism

Examining its “Origens”

by Gary Vaterlaus

The early church fathers were very prolific in their writing. Many of these early documents have been preserved for us today. Their writings give us a picture of the beliefs, lifestyle and struggles of the early church.

While not all of the early church fathers wrote on the return of Christ and His subsequent kingdom to follow, those that did left us a clear picture of the eschatological hope of the early church. In reading the earliest fathers, one quickly learns that regarding the temporal kingdom of Christ, the fathers were chiliastic. *Chiliasm* (pronounced “kileeazem”) is the correct term for designating the theological position of the earliest fathers concerning the Lord’s temporal kingdom. Chiliasm comes from the Greek word that means a *thousand*. Therefore, to be chiliastic is to believe that Christ is going to establish a temporal kingdom on earth after His return, one thousand years in duration. Citing numerous sources and historical references, Larry V. Crutchfield, professor of Early Christian History & Culture at Columbia Evangelical Seminary, lists numerous church fathers and early church documents as proponents for chiliasm.¹

In contrast to this “great cloud of witnesses” for the chiliastic (one thousand year kingdom) view of the early church, there are virtually no early church documents prior to AD 325 which support a different view. In

fact, the writings of the early church are so overwhelmingly chiliastic, that it led the great church historian, Phillip Schaff, to write:

The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [before the council of Nicea] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment.²

The historical evidence indicates that chiliasm (*premillennialism*, as it is called today) was the predominant belief of the church of the first three centuries. “And to make few words of it,” as Thomas Burnet, royal chaplain to king William III of England, said, “we will lay down this conclusion, *that the Millennial kingdom of Christ was the general doctrine of the Primitive Church, from the times of the Apostles to the Nicene Council; inclusively.*”³

The Change to a Spiritualized Kingdom

After the Nicene Council (AD 325), we note a significant shift from the expectation of a millennial reign following the return of Christ to a spiritualized kingdom of unlimited duration before the Lord’s return. This view holds that “at the second coming of Christ the resurrection and judgment will take place, followed by the eternal order of things...”⁴ This view sees the current

church age as the millennium. There are two divergent views within this camp concerning the believers’ 1000-year reign with Christ spoken of in Revelation 20:4-6. One group sees this as speaking of the intermediate state of believers between death and resurrection. It refers to “the reign of the souls of the blessed dead with Christ in the intermediate state.”⁵ The second group holds that the entire church age, from the first coming of Christ until His second coming, is to be equated with the Millennium and that “the church militant on earth... is now reigning with Christ in the sense that we are now living in the midst of the millennium...”⁶

This shift to what came to be called *amillennialism* began slowly during the second and third centuries, and then picked up steam until by the middle of the sixth century there were only a few remaining pockets of belief in a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth. Indeed, as Earle E. Cairns, professor emeritus at Wheaton College, points out, “The absence of premillennialism in the Middle Ages is as prominent as the absence of postmillennialism in the ante-Nicene church.”⁷ The dominance of amillennialism continued up to and beyond the Reformation, and only in the 19th century was the view of a literal thousand-year reign upon the earth revived. Just why did this shift from a literal kingdom of 1000 years to a spiritualized kingdom of unlimited duration occur in the early church?

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The Tap Root: A Defective Hermeneutic Hermeneutics, as defined by Roy B. Zuck of Dallas Seminary, is “the science (principles) and art (task) by which the meaning of the biblical text is determined.”⁸ There are basically two methods of biblical interpretation. One has been called the *literal, face value, or historical-grammatical* method. This method involves taking the biblical text for what it says, and seeking to discover the author’s intended meaning. Words and phrases are taken in a literal fashion, while at the same time recognizing that there are figures of speech used in Scripture. The other hermeneutical method has been called, broadly speaking, the *allegorical* method. The allegorical method seeks a meaning beyond the literal reading of the text, seeking to discover the “deeper” sense of Scripture, and often interpreting words and phrases in other than their literal sense. An offshoot of the allegorical method is *spiritualizing* the text, whereby one attempts to see the highest or ultimate end as the intended meaning.⁹

It has been demonstrated that the prevailing method of biblical interpretation during Old Testament times and in the time of Christ was a literal method. Thomas Horne, former Professor of English and Art History at Brown University, writes:

The allegorical interpretation of the sacred Scriptures cannot be historically proved to have prevailed among the Jews from the time of the captivity, or to have been common with the Jews of Palestine at the time of Christ and his apostles.¹⁰

Jesus and the apostles themselves also practiced a literal hermeneutic. Whenever Jesus quoted the Old Testament he used it in a historical, factual manner, not in an allegorical fashion. The Old Testament citations by the writers of the New Testament also demonstrate a literal understanding of the text, though allegory and typology (pattern fulfillment) are practiced in a very limited sense.

The hermeneutic of the early apostolic fathers was greatly influenced by their environment and culture. We must realize the difficult situation that they faced.

Dwight Pentecost, of Dallas Seminary, summarizes:

They were without an established canon of either the Old or New Testaments. They were dependent upon a faulty translation of the Scriptures [The Septuagint]. They had known only the rules of interpretation laid down by the rabbinical schools and, thus, had to free themselves from the erroneous application of the principle of interpretation. They were surrounded by paganism, Judaism, and heresy of every kind.¹¹

By the third century, there were basically three schools of diverse hermeneutical positions which had arisen. F.W. Farrar, biblical scholar and an Anglican clergyman, explains:

The Fathers of the third and later centuries may be divided into three exegetical schools. Those schools are the *Literal* and *Realistic* as represented predominantly by Tertullian; the *Allegorical*, of which Origen is the foremost exponent; and the *Historical* and *Grammatical*, which flourished chiefly in Antioch, and of which Theodore of Mopsuestia was the acknowledged chief.¹²

Not surprisingly, we find that as the allegorical method of interpretation began to take hold, the view of an earthly millennial reign of Christ began to wane. It was the biblical school in Alexandria, Egypt that fostered and promoted the allegorical method of interpretation. It was the methods of this school that provided one reason for the eventual abandonment of a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth within the church.

The catechetical school in Alexandria was founded by Pantaenus in the late second century, but its best known leaders were Clement of Alexandria and his pupil, Origen.

Dr. Thomas Cornman, a professor at Moody Bible Institute, describes the Alexandrian school:

It is the Alexandrian school and the leader of that school that shaped the thinking of Origen. This tradition cannot be seen as separate from the philosophical developments of the Alexandrian community but rather was an extension of them into the sphere of Christianity. The philosophical, cultural and geographic influence of the city and its people came to bear on the hermeneutical and theological systems of Clement and his pupil Origen. While this influence may be considered good or bad depending on one’s theological persuasion, it provides a new direction as viewed against the simplicity of an earlier age when the words of Scripture were sufficient as the canon of faith.¹³

Origen was raised in the city of Alexandria. The influence of the Alexandrian mindset was significant in the development of his theology and his approach to Scripture. As Schaff wrote:

Alexandria was full of Jews, the literary as well as commercial centre of the East, and the connecting link between the East and the West. There the largest libraries were collected; there the Jewish mind came into close contact with the Greek, and the religion of Moses with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. There Philo wrote, while Christ taught in

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Jerusalem and Galilee, and his works were destined to exert a great influence on Christian exegesis through the Alexandrian fathers.¹⁴

Philo was a Jewish philosopher who sought to reconcile Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato and the Stoics, with the Old Testament. Philo found the allegorical method of interpretation useful in his quest to show that the Jewish faith was not as barbarous as the Greeks might think. This influence of Greek philosophy and allegorical interpretation greatly influenced the thought and life of Origen. Karlfried Froehlich, former Professor of Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes:

Searching the biblical texts for clues to their higher spiritual meaning became the normative task of the Christian exegete, and with this task came the appropriation of the full arsenal of Hellenistic allegorical technique: the philological study of words and phrases, etymology, numerology, figuration, natural symbolism, etc.¹⁵

Though others in the Alexandrian school were well-known and significant forces in the church at that time, it was the brilliant Origen who was the first to develop a systematic hermeneutic and utilize that hermeneutic in the development of his doctrinal positions. Schaff notes:

Origen was the first to lay down, in connection with the allegorical method of the Jewish Platonist, Philo, a formal theory of interpretation, which he carried out in a long series of exegetical works remarkable for industry and ingenuity, but meager in solid results. He considered the Bible a living organism, consisting of three elements which answer to the body, soul, and spirit of man, after the Platonic psychology. Accordingly, he attributed to the

scriptures a threefold sense; (1) a somatic, literal, or historical sense, furnished immediately by the meaning of the words, but only serving as a veil for a higher idea; (2) a psychic or moral sense, animating the first, and serving for general edification; (3) a pneumatic or mystic, and ideal sense, for those who stand on the high ground of philosophical knowledge. In the application of this theory he shows the same tendency as Philo, to spiritualize away the letter of scripture, especially where the plain historical sense seems unworthy, as in the history of David's crimes; and instead of simply bringing out the sense of the Bible, he puts into it all sorts of foreign ideas and irrelevant fancies. But this allegorizing suited the taste of the age, and, with his fertile mind and imposing learning, Origen was the exegetical oracle of the early church, till his orthodoxy fell into disrepute.¹⁶

Indeed Origen's allegorical approach to Scripture led him into many doctrinal errors. His teachings, for which he eventually was declared a heretic, included a belief that the souls of men had existed in a previous state, a denial of the bodily resurrection, and a belief in universal salvation—that all men, even demons, will be finally restored through the mediation of Christ.

Origen's approach to hermeneutics also affected his eschatology. His rejection of a bodily resurrection led to a spiritualized eschatology. A.C. McGiffert, Washburn Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary, accurately summarizes Origen's eschatological system:

Origen had an elaborate eschatology. He believed in or at least hoped for the final restoration of all rational creatures, not only men but also demons, including even the archfiend himself. The pains of hell are disciplinary in purpose and will be tem-

porary only, not everlasting. When the present world has come to an end the material substance of which it is composed will be employed for the formation of another world in which the spirits of men not yet perfected will be still further disciplined and so it will go on until all have been redeemed when matter being unredeemable will finally be destroyed. The future life will be a life of the spirit; the flesh will have no part in it. The joys of heaven and the pains of hell will be mental not material.¹⁷

Origen's hermeneutics and the resulting spiritualized eschatology also affected those who would follow in his footsteps. The great church father Augustine, also from North Africa, was greatly influenced by the Alexandrian school and Origen's writings. Augustine identified the kingdom of God with the hierarchical church of his day. He argued against chiliasm which those, he said, "that are really and truly spiritual" oppose. He taught that the binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1-3) began with the spread of the church and that the church "now on earth" is the kingdom which will last for a thousand years. To Augustine, the First Resurrection represents the conversion of the soul.¹⁸ Cairns sums up Augustine's eschatological view and its impact on the future church:

It can readily be seen that Augustine looked for Christ's coming after the present millennial age in which the church was to become increasingly influential. While his view is not clear-cut, it seems to have more affinities with Roman Catholic and contemporary postmillennialism than with amillennialism. There was no place in his eschatology for the Jews or a future earthly kingdom. He can be credited with the final shattering of the premillennial system of the ante-Nicene church, and his views on eschatology became the accepted view until the Reformation and, in

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some respects, even after that great event.¹⁹

At the foundation of Augustine's eschatology is the principle of allegorizing Scripture which, as we have seen, developed in the Alexandrian school and was perfected by Origen. Dr. John Walvoord, of Dallas Seminary, is very pointed when he states:

It is clear that in arriving at his conclusion regarding the millennium Augustine used the principle of spiritualizing Scripture freely. While he did not use this principle in interpreting Scripture relating to predestination, hamartiology, salvation, or grace, he found it suitable for interpreting prophecy. A candid examination of his interpretation leaves the examiner with the impression that Augustine did not give a reasonable exegesis of Scripture involved.²⁰

The primary root that fed the growth of a spiritualized kingdom concept in the early church was the replacement of a literal hermeneutic with an allegorical one. However, there were four sub-roots that fed the need for a new hermeneutical approach to Scripture: (1) an anti-Jewish bias; (2) an overreaction to heresy; (3) a false view of the material world; and (4) the conversion of the Emperor to Christianity.

Feeder Root 1: An Anti-Jewish Bias

Composed primarily of Jewish believers, the apostolic church was in many ways considered a sect of Judaism. However, as the gospel spread to the reaches of the Roman Empire the church became more and more composed of non-Jews and the importance of the church's Jewish beginnings diminished significantly. In fact, as early as the second century, there was a notable anti-Jewish sentiment building within the church. Marvin Wilson, professor of Bible at Gordon College, sheds some light on this shift within the early church:

The Church was born in a Jewish cradle, but it rapidly became de-Judaized. By the middle of the second century an anti-Jewish polemic arose within the Church as men like

Marcion sought to rid Christianity of every trace of Judaism. Other Church fathers such as Justin Martyr, John Chrysostom and Ignatius spoke with great contempt against Jews and Judaism. With the eventual triumph of Christianity in the fourth century as the state religion, its indebtedness to Judaism had to a great extent been forgotten. Judaism was now thought to be obsolete. Because Jewish people had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, what need did believing Gentiles have to associate with or be indebted to those of a dead, legalistic religion? The Jewish roots of the Church had thus virtually been severed. A Gentile Church, largely Grecianized through the influence of Platonic thought, now stood in its place.²¹

Origen and others saw the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 as an indicator of God's rejection of the Jews for their crucifixion of Jesus. Origen wrote:

And we say with confidence that they will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind, in conspiring against the Savior of the human race in that city where they offered up to God a worship containing the symbols of mighty mysteries. It accordingly behooved that city where Jesus underwent these sufferings to perish utterly, and the Jewish nation to be overthrown, and the invitation to happiness offered them by God to pass to others—the Christians...²²

The Jews were looked on as the enemies of God, a rejected people, unworthy of any future in God's plans. Christianity was seen as the bona fide replacement of Judaism. A future earthly kingdom that focused on the restoration of the Jews was unthinkable.

Marcion was a leader in this "de-Judaizing" of Christianity. A businessman from Rome, he could see no parallel whatso-

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ever with the God of justice of the Old Testament and the God of goodness revealed in the New Testament. He sought to completely divorce the Old Testament from Christianity and adopted his own version of the canon. Though he was condemned as a heretic, the response to Marcion had very important consequences for the church's attitude toward the Jews. Froehlich writes:

Marcion (AD 144) rejected the Jewish Scriptures as the work of a wrathful, evil God who was opposed to the love of God proclaimed by Jesus and Paul. He reduced the acceptable Scriptures to ten Pauline epistles and the Gospel of Luke purged of Jewish contaminants. The Church condemned Marcion and his principles. But the decision against Marcion also had a disturbing consequence. By making the Jewish Scriptures resolutely a Christian book: the "Old Testament", which had only one legitimate continuation: the "New Testament", the emerging Christian movement defined itself once more in sharpest antitheses to the Jewish community. In fact, the tighter the grip of Christians on the Jewish Scriptures, the deeper the estrangement from the community of living Jews. For the patristic tradition after the triumph of Christianity, the Jews became the "people of witness" for God's wrath on unbelievers.²³

This anti-Jewish development in the early church greatly influenced its eschatological view. Since a view of a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth holds that there is still a future kingdom for the Jews, and that God has not rejected the nation of Israel and yet

will fulfill His covenants with them, this view came to be rejected in this growing anti-Jewish church culture. Amillennialism, on the other hand, fit nicely into the view that the church is the new Israel, and that Christ is now reigning from heaven with the new people of God, the church. Origen, Dionysius and others rejected chiliasm as being an overly “Jewish” interpretation of the Scriptures. Thus, the second root that supplied the nourishment for a spiritualized kingdom viewpoint was the anti-Jewish bias that developed in the early church.

Feeder Root 2: An Overreaction to Heresy

During the early years of Christianity, the church was overrun by sects advocating heretical doctrines. Indeed, many of the writings of the early church fathers were denunciations of these heresies. Among these non-orthodox groups were several that held to chiliastic views. According to Philip Schaff, these included the Ebionites, the Montanists, and the heretic Cerinthus. While much of the teaching of these heretics was rightly condemned, often their biblical eschatological views were condemned as well. It was only natural, however, to look with suspicion upon all of the teachings of those who were advocating non-orthodox views regarding such things as the trinity, the nature of Christ, the role of the law, etc. Montanus is noteworthy as one who developed a significant movement in the latter part of the second century, which continued in some parts until the sixth century. The basic tenets of Montanism conflicted with many of the practices of the churches of that day. According to Schaff, they included:

1. ...a forced continuance of the *miraculous gifts* of the apostolic church... It asserted, above all, the continuance of prophecy.
2. ...the assertion of the *universal priesthood* of Christians, even of females, against the special priesthood in the Catholic church.
3. ...a fanatical severity in *asceticism* and *church discipline*. It raised a zealous

protest against the growing looseness of the Catholic penitential discipline.

4. ...a visionary *millennarianism*, founded indeed on the Apocalypse and on the apostolic expectation of the speedy return of Christ, but giving it extravagant weight and a materialistic coloring... [They] proclaimed the near approach of the age of the Holy Spirit and of the millennial reign in Pepuza, a small village of Phrygia, upon which the New Jerusalem was to come down.²⁴

Concerning the church’s reaction to Montanism, D. Matthew Allen, of the Biblical Studies Foundation, notes:

Indeed, the Montanists’ fanatical excesses worked to discredit premillennialism among early church leaders, and opposition to premillennialism began in earnest as a result of the Montanist movement. Caius of Rome attacked millennialism specifically because it was linked to Montanism, and he attempted to trace the belief in a literal millennium to the heretic Cerinthus.²⁵

It is clear that the formal church’s denunciation and rejection of the Montanists, Ebionites and others included not only the rightful rejection of their heretical and fanatical beliefs, but also a misplaced opposition to their millennial position. Thus, the third root that fed the growth of a spiritualized kingdom concept in the early church was the unwarranted rejection of a literal thousand-year kingdom because of its association with heretical splinter groups.

Feeder Root 3: The View of the Material World

Platonism

As mentioned earlier, the fathers from the school of Alexandria were greatly influenced by the philosophy of the Greeks, particularly Plato. Platonic thought held that the spiritual was supreme over the material. This influence is noted by Schaff. He writes,

The Platonic philosophy offered many points of resemblance to

Christianity. It is spiritual and idealistic, maintaining the supremacy of the spirit over matter... From the time of Justin Martyr, the Platonic philosophy continued to exercise a direct and indirect influence upon Christian theology... We can trace it especially in Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and even in St. Augustine, who confessed that it kindled in him an incredible fire.²⁶

This abhorrence of the material led to many unhealthy and even heretical views. Among these were the denial of the physical aspect of the resurrection by Origen and an excessive asceticism as taught by the Ebionites and many other sects, including many of the Gnostics. In addition to these erroneous views, the elevation of the spiritual over the material led to the rejection of the material nature of the millennium. Augustine rejected the idea of a physical millennial kingdom when he wrote:

This opinion [a future literal millennium after the resurrection] might be allowed, if it proposed only spiritual delight unto the saints during this space (and we were once of the same opinion ourselves); but seeing the avouchers hereof affirm that the saints after this resurrection shall do nothing but revel in fleshly banquets, where the cheer shall exceed both modesty and measure, this is gross and fit for none but carnal men to believe. But they that are really and truly spiritual do call those of this opinion Chiliasts.²⁷

Premillennialists, while holding to an earthly millennium of 1000 years, do not teach a millennium of revelry and “fleshly banquets”, as Augustine mistakenly thought. Thus, Augustine rejected a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth in part due to a faulty understanding of the nature of an earthly millennium.

Gnosticism

The Gnostic heresy arose early in the history of the church. Gnosticism was taught by a variety of religious sects that professed sal-

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vation through secret knowledge, or gnosis. The movement reached its high point during the second century in the Roman and Alexandrian schools founded by Valentius. One of the tenets of Gnosticism, according to Schaff, was “Dualism; the assumption of an eternal antagonism between God and matter.”²⁸ The Gnostics saw the material world as evil and rejected the idea of a physical resurrection or physical nature of eternity. Schaff explains their view:

The material visible world is the abode of the principle of evil. This cannot proceed from God; else he were himself the author of evil. It must come from an opposite principle. This is Matter, which stands in eternal opposition to God and the ideal world.²⁹

Though condemned by the church fathers, Gnosticism nevertheless had a profound influence in the thought and theology of the church:

The number of the Gnostics is impossible to ascertain. We find them in almost all portions of the ancient church... They found most favor with the educated, and threatened to lead astray the teachers of the church.³⁰

The influence of Gnosticism in the early church has been linked to the development of asceticism and there is no doubt its abhorrence of the material world contributed to the rejection of an earthly Millennial kingdom, particularly in the influential Alexandrian school. Thus, the third root feeding the amillennial shift in the early church was the influence of Platonic and Gnostic thought, which viewed the physical as evil, and would thus preclude any sort of future physical kingdom on the earth.

Feeder Root 4: The Conversion of the Emperor

The early Christian church suffered intense persecution from the Roman government. Believers who refused to bow down to Caesar suffered punishment, imprisonment and death as a result of their loyalty to Christ. All of this changed dramatically when

in AD 307 the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity. In 313 he issued the edict of Milan which proclaimed freedom of religion for all inhabitants of the Roman empire. Now, rather than being the persecuted, the church was the honored. This had a profound impact on the eschatological hope of these early believers. Rather than looking to the return of Christ to put down the Roman Empire (whom most identified as the Antichrist) and set up a righteous kingdom on earth, they were now enjoying the favoritism of the Empire and began to equate their new prosperity with the millennial kingdom. The focus of the church changed from looking for ultimate comfort in the world to come, to enjoying the comfort they now experienced in the present world. Cairns comments on this dramatic change:

The more prosperous circumstances of the church, ushered in by the freedom of religion granted by Constantine in the Edict of Milan in 313 and his favoritism to the church by state subsidies, exemption of the clergy from public duty and military service, and the legal setting of Sunday as a day of rest, caused many Christians to cease thinking of the Roman state as Antichrist or his forerunner and to expect that the social and territorial expansion of the church since Christ's First Advent was the kingdom. The church became at home in the world as members gained material possession and prominence, such as Eusebius enjoyed in being at the right hand of Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius wrote a laudatory biography of Constantine and in his Ecclesiastical History sought to present the story of the church from Christ's Ascension to her present rise to prominence. The earlier church fathers, such as Papias, who had held to a premillennial hope were castigated for their errors. Church and state were two arms of God to serve Him in His developing kingdom. Jerome insisted that the saints would not have an earthly premillennial kingdom and

wrote: “Then let the story of the thousand years cease” (Commentary on Daniel, on Dan 7:25).³¹

While the anti-Jewish bias of the early church and the reaction to heretical teachings both played an important role in the gradual shift from a literal thousand-year kingdom to a spiritualized kingdom of unlimited duration, it was the new-found acceptance and elevation of the church in the fourth century which proved to have the greatest impact. As Schaff writes:

But the crushing blow came from the great change in the social condition and prospects of the church in the Nicene age. After Christianity, contrary to all expectation, triumphed in the Roman empire, and was embraced by the Caesars themselves, the millennial reign, instead of being anxiously waited and prayed for, began to be dated either from the first appearance of Christ, or from the conversion of Constantine and the downfall of paganism, and to be regarded as realized in the glory of the dominant imperial state-church. Augustine, who himself had formerly entertained chiliastic hopes, framed the new theory which reflected the social change, and was generally

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accepted. The apocalyptic millennium he understood to be the present reign of Christ in the Catholic church, and the first resurrection, the translation of the martyrs and saints to heaven, where they participate in Christ's reign...

From the time of Constantine and Augustine chiliasm took its place among the heresies, and was rejected subsequently even by the Protestant reformers as a Jewish dream. But it was revived from time to time as an article of faith and hope by pious individuals and whole sects...³²

The fourth root, which completed the emergence of the view of a spiritualized and destroyed the idea of a future Messianic kingdom on earth, was the prosperity the church enjoyed as it was accepted into the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

In this article, we first examined the tap root that contributed to the rejection of a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth, the dominant view for the first two centuries of the church, in favor of a spiritualized kingdom unlimited in duration (amillennialism). The single factor: the adoption of an allegorical hermeneutic, which replaced the literal or face value hermeneutic of Jesus and the apostles. Four sub-roots fed this hermeneutical shift. First: the anti-Jewish bias of the early church developed as a result of a church dominated by gentile believers. Second: an overreaction to heresy, which included the condemnation not only of heretical doctrines, but chiliasm as well. Third: the adoption of Platonic and Gnostic teachings on the evil of the material world which led to a rejection of a material, earthly future kingdom. And fourth and finally: the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. The church no longer looked for the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom and rescue believers from persecution, but instead saw the newly-found freedom and prominence of the church as the fulfillment of the promises of a future kingdom.

The growth of what came to be called amillennialism was not a result of a careful study of the Scriptures, but rather a reaction to the social, political, and theological tensions of the age. While many of the early church fathers are to be commended for their bold witness for Christ in the midst of the threat of imprisonment and death and for their examples of perseverance and godliness, they were, nevertheless, fallible and capable of error, just as we are. They adopted a theology which they felt best fit the current events, rather than holding to the Scriptures as the only source of authority. A careful study of the Bible, taken at face value, will lead one to a belief in a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth (premillennialism, as it is now called). Floyd Hamilton, who attacks premillennialism, concedes:

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of a Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Old Testament.³³

There is simply no justification for discarding the promises of the Old Testament to the nation of Israel, allegorizing the teaching of Revelation 20, or discounting the beliefs of the apostolic age. Like the apostles and the earliest church fathers, we must continue to look for the appearing of Christ, who will put down all rebellion, and establish His Kingdom over all the earth.

ENDNOTES

1. Larry V. Crutchfield. *The Early Church fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism, Part I* (Posted on the Dispensational International Research Network website). He lists the following facts: Clement, bishop of Rome (flourished c.90-100); Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (died c.98/117); Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (c.70-155/160); Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (c.60-c.130/155); *The Didache* (composed before the end of the first century A.D.); the *Epistle of Barnabas* (comp. c.70/117-138); *The Shepherd of Hermas* (c.96/140-150); apologist Justin Martyr (c.100-165); Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (120-202); Hippolytus, bishop of Rome (d. c.236); Tertullian, apologist, moralist, and theologian (150-225); Pothinus, bishop of churches in Lyon and Vienne (c.87-177); Melito, bishop of Sardis (d. c.190);

- Hegesippus, church historian (second century); Apollinaris, bishop of Hierapolis (c.175); Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (c.200-258); Commodian, Christian Latin poet in North Africa (c.200-c.275); Lactantius, Latin Rhetorician, Christian apologist and historian (c.240-c.320); Victorinus of Petau, bishop of Petau near Vienne (d. c.304); Methodius, bishop of Olympus (d. 311); Julius Africanus, Christian writer and chronographer (d. c.240); Nepos, an Egyptian bishop (c.230-250), and his successor, Coracion (c.230-280).
2. Phillip Schaff. *The History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1884), p. 482
 3. Thomas Burnet. *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London: J. McGowan, 1681), p. 346 (italics his)
 4. Dr. J.G. Vos. *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, Jan.-Mar., 1951
 5. Loraine Boettner. *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), p. 117
 6. William H. Rutgers. *Premillennialism in America* (Goes, Holland: Oostervaan & Le Cointre, 1930) p. 71
 7. Earl E. Cairns. *Eschatology and Church History* (Wheaton College Faculty Bulletin, June, 1957)
 8. Roy B. Zuck. *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1991), p. 19
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 21. Marvin R. Wilson. *An Evangelical View Of The Current State Of Evangelical-Jewish Relations* (Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, June 1982), p. 149
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 23. Froehlich, ed. *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, p. 11
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 25. D. Matthew Allen. *Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology* (Posted on the Dispensational International Research Network website)
 26. Schaff. *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2*, p. 567
 27. Augustine. *City of God, XX*, p. 7
 28. Schaff. *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2*, p. 355.
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 30. *ibid.*, p. 353.
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 32. Schaff. *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2*, p. 484-5
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Prophecy Under Fire • Critics & Critiques

by Charles Cooper

Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum offers at the conclusion of his review of *The Prewrath Rapture of the Church* by Marvin Rosenthal the following summation:

[T]his reviewer will venture a prophecy of his own. This work (*The Prewrath Rapture of the Church*) will have its day for a short season, and it will attract many if only because it is novel; novel ideas, no matter how wild, always attract a following initially... But it (the prewrath position) will not become the major view of the church...¹

Perhaps one of these days, Fruchtenbaum can enlighten us as to whether he thinks pretribulationism is “the major view of the church.” After one hundred plus years, “the church” certainly has not adopted pretribulationism universally. Similarly, Tim LaHaye writes in 1998,

In the eight years since its (*The Prewrath Rapture of the Church* by Marvin Rosenthal) publication, I know of no one (prophecy scholars) who has adopted it, but I have read several damaging critiques. I doubt the author will live long enough to find pre-Wrath rapture the recognized position... Despite its initial success due to originality and marketing hype, its major flaws will drop it in the sea of oblivion long before it becomes a major position.²

These comments are recorded in LaHaye’s book, *Rapture Under Attack*. This author continues to be amazed that the distinguished publishing company known as Multnomah would allow a book to be published with so clearly a misleading title. LaHaye does not offer one shred of evidence to support his titular claim that the

Rapture is under attack. Clearly, the man confuses the doctrine of the Rapture of the church with pretribulationism. We would agree that the pretrib Rapture position is under a major attack. However, among those who hold to the Rapture of the church (discounting disagreements about timing) the belief is unabated.

After ten years of on-going criticism, we think its time to check our critics. In this and following issues of our newsletter, we shall put contemporary prophets under fire. In light of prophetic forecasts of the demise of the prewrath position, how is the prewrath position doing on the world-stage? Are the prophets of doom correct? Are their criticisms legit? We hope you will enjoy this new feature called **Prophecy Under Fire**.

Showers’ Forecast Is All Wet

Marvin Rosenthal and Robert Van Kampen, as architects of the prewrath position, have received on-going criticism from pretribulationists. In reading the critics, we posit that Pretribbers are consistent in their argumentation against the prewrath position, for the most part. In light of this fact, Renald E. Showers’ critique of the prewrath position in a *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* will serve as our focus.

We are grateful that Showers correctly summarized the heart of the prewrath position in his article, which demonstrates his familiarity with Rosenthal and Van Kampen’s writings; something we are unable to say about most critics of the position. Naturally, we part company regarding Showers’ objections to the position. Under the heading *Problems with the View, Concerning the Great Multitude*, Showers writes,

The prewrath view asserts that the great multitude from all nations, kindreds, people, and tongues is the church, which has just been raptured in conjunction with the second coming of Christ during the time

between the sixth and seventh seals. There are two problems with that identification.

1. One of the twenty-four elders indicated that the people who make up the great multitude come out of the Great Tribulation (Rev. 7:13-14). This means that all the people who make up the great multitude will be on earth during the Great Tribulation, making this a partial rapture of the church. It would include only those church saints living on earth during the Great Tribulation. It would not include all the church saints who live and die before the Great Tribulation, and who, therefore, will never be in it. By contrast, the Bible indicates that all church saints will be raptured together as one body at the same time (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

2. The Greek present tense of the main verb in the elder’s statement indicates that the people who make up the great multitude do not come out of the Great Tribulation as one group at the same time, but one by one, continuously, through out the course of the Great Tribulation, apparently through death. This again contrasts with the manner in which the church will be raptured from the earth.³

Showers states that his first problem concerns the composition of the universally innumerable multitude. The reader should notice the absence of an explicit quote from Scripture. Showers could have easily ended this debate by giving a simple scriptural quote. Rather, what is given are assumptions without explicit scriptural support.

First, we offer a correction to Showers’ summation: the prewrath position would argue that the universally innumerable multitude *contains* the church, but is not lim-

ited to the church. That is, believers of all the ages are present at this great gathering. There is no direct explicit New Testament text that requires the resurrection of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob be separate from the resurrection of the apostle Paul, Martin Luther or my grandmother. This is an unnecessary presupposition of pretribulationism that does not have explicit biblical support. Pretribbers argue that since Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:16b that “the dead in Christ shall rise first” this effectively limits the Rapture to those who have died after the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. For in their thinking, only “church age believers” are “dead in Christ.”

This is patently fallacious. The lack of New Testament terminology in the Old Testament cannot be used as a basis for what is or what is not true in the Old Testament. To demand New Testament terminology in the Old Testament is foolish. This faulty reasoning led C. I. Scofield to conclude that Old Testament saints were not saved by faith, which Charles C. Ryrie declares that Scofield wrote in an unguarded moment.⁴ Rather, Ryrie goes to great length to show that dispensationalists teach, “that salvation is always through God’s grace.”⁵ To escape the charge that dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation, Ryrie and others are quick to insist that “[t]he *basis* of salvation in every age is the death of Christ...”⁶ Therefore, according to pretribbers, Old Testament saints are saved by the “death of Christ,” but they are not “dead in Christ.”

Yet, the apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:8,

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations shall be blessed in you.”

Notice, please, Paul’s connection between “the gospel” and the phrase “All the nations shall be blessed in you.” The Old Testament saints preached the same message with different words, but the outcome is the same. The same can be said about the resurrection. Old Testament saints died in faith, believing that God would raise them from the dead.

In fact, the Lord Jesus states in John 6:39, “And this is the will of Him who sent Me,

that of *all* that He has given Me I lose *nothing*, but raise *it* upon the last day” (emphasis added). In the sixth chapter of John, the Lord states four times, “I will raise it (him) up on the last day.” The point is this: all the righteous dead (who have died up to that point in time) will be raised at the same time. Closer examination of John 6:39 bears this out.

The emphasis is on the “all.” The Father gave *all*. The Son keeps *all*, and the Son raises *all*. In each case, the *all* happens at the same time. What Jesus meant is confirmed by Martha in John 11:24. Martha states, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” The use of “the” before the term *resurrection* indicates that Martha understood the Lord’s words to refer to the final general resurrection at the end of the age. The apostle Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 15:24 that the next phase of the resurrection will occur at the Parousia of Christ (the Rapture). The reader should notice that Paul offers no clue to a possible separation of the resurrection of Old and New Testament saints. In a chapter specifically dedicated to delineating the order (groups) of the first resurrection, it is unimaginable that Paul would not say one word about the Old Testament dead. This in and of itself does not prove our point, but it is compelling.

Pretribulationists’ insistence that the resurrection of Old Testament saints will occur at the Second Coming of Christ in close proximity to Armageddon is based on a theological presupposition that does not have explicit biblical support. To the contrary, Daniel 12:1-2 specifically indicates that the general resurrection of the dead will follow the unparalleled future distress, which Jesus calls “a great tribulation.” This accords with both Matthew 24 and 1 Corinthians 15. Matthew 24 places the Lord’s Parousia (coming) after the unparalleled future distress is cut short and 1 Corinthians 15 places the resurrection at the Parousia (coming) of Christ.

Is this in fact what the Elder meant? He does state that the universally innumerable multitude “are the ones who come out of the great tribulation.” However, it is an *assumption* on Showers’ part to conclude, “all the people who make up the great multitude will be on the earth during the Great

Tribulation.” Nothing in the text necessitates this conclusion. Again, this is an assumption on Showers’ part that is necessary to support his conclusion.

The use of the definite article *the* with “great tribulation” suggests that John’s readers were familiar with the concept and the period of time it represents. The phrase is used in Matthew 24:21, but it does not have the definite article. Since the apostle John is the only apostle to receive both the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:3) and the Revelation of Jesus, we have a basis upon which to draw the conclusion that he is referring to the same event depicted by the Lord in Matthew 24.

It is without debate that the Lord in Matthew 24:21 is referring to the same event Daniel 12:1-2 describes as an unparalleled time of distress. A time Daniel depicts to last three and a half years, which the Lord says, will be cut short. Therefore, John’s depiction that the universally innumerable multitude “come up out of the great tribulation” is correct. The phrase *out of* is a translation of the Greek preposition $\epsilon\kappa$. This is the same word hotly debated in Revelation 3:10. The context of Revelation 7:13-14 makes John’s meaning here clear. In Revelation 7:13, one of the twenty-four elders asked John two questions: “who are they, and from where have they come?” Please notice that the question states, “from where have they come.” It does not say, “from where are they coming.” The importance of this point will be seen later.

The answers to the Elder’s questions are given in reverse order. First, the *where* question is answered, then the *who* question follows. Now one would expect a *where* question to be answered with a certain place—the locality, but the Greek can also refer to origin—the source. The Great Tribulation is not a place, but an interval of time. This interval of time is the source of the universally innumerable multitude.

Therefore, there is no basis on the part of Showers to say that the universally innumerable multitude consists of only those on the earth at the time of the Great Tribulation. Rather, Revelation 5:9 states that Christ purchased for God the Father a universally innumerable multitude. Notice, “Worthy art Thou... for Thou... didst purchase for God

BY CHARLES COOPER

with Thy blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” The verb *did purchase* indicates a once-for-all purchase. In other words, there was one transaction. Every individual ever saved or yet to be saved was purchased at the same time. Since the death of Christ is the basis of all who are saved, the universally innumerable multitude referenced in Revelation 5:9 must include the saints of all the ages. This is most likely the referent of “a number which no one could count.”

The second objection Showers has with the prewrath identification of the universally innumerable multitude containing the believers of all ages up to the Rapture concerns the rate of removal. This issue concerns the important phrase, “the ones who come” (οἱ ἐρχόμενοι). This is the relationship of the universally innumerable multitude to the Great Tribulation. They come out of it. Pretribulationists are fond to translate this critical phrase: “those who are coming,” thereby insisting and emphasizing that this universally innumerable multitude

come one by one over an interval of time.

Robert L. Thomas attempts to defend this conclusion by arguing that a “contextual warrant exists” to emphasize the durative or on-going nature of this phrase.⁷ However, in reality, it is Thomas’ theological bias that “warrants” his conclusion. There is no grammatical basis to insist on the translation “those who are coming.” “The comers,” “the ones who came” or as indicated in the NASB, “the ones who come” reflect the best sense of the text. Revelation 7:15 states, “For this reason, they (the whole group) are before the throne of God...” Notice, “they are before the throne,” not “they are coming before the throne.”

The universally innumerable multitude is not coming one by one. Equally, there is nothing in Revelation 7:9-17 to warrant the conclusion that this great number consists of martyrs. These are conclusions forced on the text from an improper interpretation of the context. It defies logic that such a great number of individuals could be saved and killed within a three-and-a-half year period

that would not even be considered the Great Tribulation.

Therefore, we have shown that Showers’ criticism of the prewrath position lacks teeth. He, like so many others, offers only dogmatic statements that are assumed to be true but woefully lack any sort of explicit scriptural foundation. Only those who want to be pretribulationist in their eschatology could ever be happy with such poor scriptural support.

ENDNOTES

1. A.G. Fruchtenbaum, *A Review of The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries) 73.
2. Tim LaHaye, *Rapture* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1998) 102.
3. R.E. Showers, “The Prewrath Rapture,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996) 356-357.
4. C.C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) 112.
5. *Ibid.* 113.
6. *Ibid.* 123.
7. R.L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) 495.

Meet a Berean • Pastor Randy Umberger

As members of our staff travel around the country, we meet many people who tell us their wonderful stories of conversion to the prewrath position. We thought you might like to read some of them. In the next several issues of *Parousia*, we would like to introduce you to some of these remarkable people. *Remarkable* because they demonstrate that spirit the apostle Paul found in the ancient city of Berea (Acts 17:10-11). One such “Berean” is Randy Umberger, Pastor of Blue Springs Community Church in Marianna, Florida. Here is his story:

“You do not want to be here when all of this begins to happen.” I said those words before I knelt down and led a friend to Christ. The year was 1973. I was twelve years old. Not just any twelve-year-old either. I was a card carrying, dyed-in-the-wool pretribbler. My copy of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* was completely worn

out. I had read it several times and had much of its contents memorized. The church that I grew up in was very evangelistic and placed great emphasis on end-time events. Of course the view they proclaimed was the premillennial, pretribulationist one. We always had several conferences a year focusing on prophecy. So, needless to say, I was indoctrinated at a very early age.

I began preaching at the age of sixteen. I traveled throughout North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland doing “revivals” (I have since learned that revival must be sovereignly sent down and not worked up). Everywhere I went I always preached at least one message on the Second Coming. It always got people “to the front.” I never questioned the pretribulationist position until...

The year was 1984. I was a student at Luther Rice Seminary. I was taking a New Testament class from a very dear man who had a passion for God’s Word. The subject



of end-time events came up one day in class. I listened as the professor began to ask some very probing questions that challenged the pretribulationist view. I quickly realized that he did not believe that view and backed up his position with Scripture. He challenged me with one very honest and simple question, “Why do you believe in a pretribulation

continued on back

Meet a Berean • continued from inside

Rapture of the church?” Of course I could have replied, “Because that is what the Bible teaches.” Yet, I knew in my heart, that the reason I believed it was not because “I” had searched the Scriptures and found it to be so. The reality was that I believed it for three very simple reasons. The first was because I grew up in a church that taught it, so I accepted it as fact. The second was because it was the popular and predominant view of the time. Honestly, to have believed and preached anything different would have seriously thinned out my opportunities to preach. The third reason was because Hal

Lindsey said so, and he could never be wrong!

That day, I started a study that changed my life. I searched the Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture. I did word studies on the different Rapture passages. I read church history and consulted every commentary I could find on the subject. When it was all said and done, I was firmly convinced that I had been wrong all along. There were still a few loose ends that I still did not have figured out, but in the end I was... I was a...? Hmmm. What was I? I was not pretrib, midtrib, or posttrib. I wasn't sure what I was.

It was not until 1993 when I purchased a copy of *The Sign* that I knew what I was. I was prewrath! Robert Van Kampen's book, along with Marv Rosenthal's *Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, tied up the loose ends for me. When it all became clear to me, I realized that even when I warned people as a pretribber to repent before He returned, I warned them of the wrath of God that was coming. I started with Revelation 8 and moved forward. I still do so. Only now, I call believers to prepare for the wrath of the Anti-Messiah.

Continued study, especially in the area of the Feasts of Israel,

has only enhanced and planted me more firmly in the prewrath position. My walk with Christ has been approached with a greater seriousness. This should be the result of a proper view of end-time events as taught in 1 Thessalonians 5:6-9 and 2 Peter 3:11-12. I lost some relationships over my shift, but I also gained some. You may wonder what I did with my worn out copy of *The Late Great Planet Earth*? I can only say that it must have been “secretly” raptured at a time when I least expected it. It has not been seen or heard from since 1984.

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