

Lesson 2

THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR VARIOUS ESCHATOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

A study of the historical beginnings or development of a doctrine does not in any way prove whether the doctrine under consideration is right or wrong. Only a thorough study of the Bible will convince men of a particular doctrine.

However, a study of church history can show the beginnings and development of Christian doctrine. We can see the general beliefs of the church through history.

If a Christian in the 20th century holds to some doctrine that has never been heard of in the history of the church or is a recent development, he had better go slow before any deep commitment is made to this doctrine. The Holy Spirit has taught the church general, basic truths since the inception of the historic church.

HISTORICAL CLAIMS

Premillennialists

Premils make the bold claim that in the first and second centuries of the church there were no Amils and that premillennialism was the faith of the early fathers.

“Thus, concerning the ancient period we conclude that in the first and purest centuries, the church was premillennial in her belief” (C. C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the premillennial Faith*).

Amillennialists

Amils make even bolder claims, for many imply that amillennialism was the position of the ancient church and that premillennialism was a heresy.

“The claim that premillennialism was the universal belief of the early church is false” (J. Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*).

“Chiliasm found no favor with the best of the Apostolic Fathers . . .”(W. H. Rutgers, *premillennialism in America*).

“It (Amillennialism) had at least as many advocates as chiliasm among the church Fathers of the second and third centuries, which is supposed to have been the heyday of chiliasm” (L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*).

Loraine Boettner (Postmil), an ardent opponent of premillennialism, lists the various heresies of the first and second centuries (Docetism, Gnosticism, Montanism, Monarchianism, etc.) and says, “Add to these premillennialism and you have a roster of the principle errors of the early church.” (Boettner, *The Millennium*)

THE MILLENNIUM IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The Ancient Period

If amillennialism or premillennialism were taught in the early church, we would expect to find some trace of them. Many of the church fathers do not mention the earthly millennium one way or the other and cannot be shown to be premil or Amil. While it is true that only a few of the church fathers

say anything about the earthly millennial reign of Christ, those that do are clearly premil. An amil interpretation is not clearly defined until the late third and fourth centuries under Origen and Augustine.

There is much we do not know about the first centuries of the church for our sources are so fragmentary that we cannot really recreate the history of thought during the early years of church history. We find no trace of millennial teaching in Athenagoras, Theophilus, Tatian, Hegesippus, Dionysius of Corinth, Melito of Sardis or in Apollinaris. These men do not comment one way or the other so they cannot be put into either the Amil or premil camp. However, Justin Martyr, Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus were definitely premil.

“The best that the most ardent Amils can do in the first two centuries, then, is to claim the disputed Barnabas and hide behind the silence of many of the fathers! If Amillennialism was the prevailing view of the church during this period, we are left without sources or evidence” (John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*).

Second Century

Apparently the second century was the high point of premillennialism.

Papias (80-163)

“Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, said there will be a millennium after the resurrection of the dead ‘when the personal reign of Christ will be established’” (Fragment VI).

Justin Martyr (100-165):

“But I and whoever are on all points right-minded Christians know that there will be a resurrection of the dead and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and the others declare. . .”

“And, further, a certain man with us, named John, one of the Apostles of Christ, predicted by a revelation that was made to him that those who believed in our Christ would spend a thousand years in Jerusalem, and thereafter the general, or to speak briefly, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place” (Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*).

Irenaeus (120-202): Irenaeus was a famous Bible student and accepted a more literal interpretation of scripture. He was brought into contact with Christian teaching through Polycarp who was a disciple of the Apostle John.

“But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who followed him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that “many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. . .” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*).

Tertullian (150-225)

“But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem” (Schaff’s, *History of the Christian church*).

Dispensational premillennialists claimed to have found one statement they believe supports their position of premillennialism and the pretribulational rapture of the church.

“All the saints and elect of God are gathered together before the tribulation, which is to come, and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins” (Pseudo-Ephraim, Second Century, Bib-Sac).

The doctrine of the millennium was soon corrupted by carnal views of the kingdom on earth. This was especially true of the Montanists, which had many heretical teachings. This carnal view of an earthly kingdom caused some to question an earthly millennium. Also in the late second and early third centuries many *Christians* were influenced by Gnosticism, which denied the literal interpretation of spiritual realities. Irenaeus speaks of orthodox Christians who accepted Gnostic teaching and denied a literal resurrection of the dead (*Against Heresies*). Already a spiritualization of truth was taking place so why not also in the area of an earthly millennium?

Third Through Fifth Centuries

In the next three centuries, chiliastic beliefs declined. There were several reasons for this. First, Constantine became emperor of Rome and made Christianity the religion of the state. This ended the persecution of the church so the church became self-satisfied and became more optimistic. Furthermore, the idea of an earthly King and kingdom by Jesus Christ would not set too well with Constantine. Second, there was the rise of the Alexandrian school, which specialized, in allegorical interpretation (going behind the literal meaning to get the deeper spiritual meaning). This school produced Origen and Dionysius of Alexandria who were both violently opposed to an earthly millennium. Third, Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa, took a spiritualizing approach to God’s kingdom and the millennium. He saw the kingdom as fulfilled in the church and in the hearts of men.

There were during this time some very strong premils such as Cyprian, Commodianus, Lactantius and Nepros. Nepros was an Alexandrian bishop and wrote a book *Refutation of the Allegorists* in which he defended the millennial kingdom. We do not have Nepros’s writing, but Dionysius, an allegorist, wrote about Nepros,

“For that this was the doctrine which he taught, that the kingdom of Christ would be on earth; and he dreamed that it would consist in those things which formed the object of his own desires (for he was a lover of the body and altogether carnal), in the full satisfaction of the belly and lower lusts, that is, in feasts and carousals and marriages, and . . . in festivals and sacrifices and slayings of victims.” (Eusebius, H.E., VII, xxv, iii)

It would not be fair to say that everyone in the second century was premil because Justin Martyr knew of “many who belong to the pure and pious faith and who are true Christians (who) think otherwise,” referring to those who believed differently than him on eschatology (Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*). However, it is fair to say that premillennialism was the prevalent view in the second and third centuries.

We are led to conclude that while there is evidence that not all Christians were millenarians, yet opposition was limited and the doctrine was very widespread. (Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*)

The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age 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. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers. (Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian church*)

It should be clearly stated that the premillennialism of the ancient church was historic premillennialism, not dispensational premillennialism. (See Addendum).

Middle Ages (590-1517)

Roman Catholic church

During the period of 590-1517 A.D., the Roman Catholic church was in control and doctrinal light and Biblical understanding were at a minimum. The Roman church accepted the theology of Augustine, except in the area of sovereign election and grace in salvation. Therefore, the church was totally Amil during this period. “The doctrine of the kingdom, as held by the early church, was almost exterminated under the teaching and power of the papacy” (C. C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*)

Waldensians

The Waldensians (free church) were a group of dedicated Christians outside the Roman church who lived in Northern Italy and Southern France. They believed in a more literal interpretation of scripture and were definitely premillennial. However, they did not have a well-defined eschatological system. They were terribly persecuted and fled to the high valleys in the Alps.

Reformation (1517-1600)

Reformers: The Reformers were almost entirely amillennial in their theology because they accepted the eschatology of the Roman Catholic church. The Reformers claimed to go back to Augustine and then to Paul of the New Testament. However, their interests did not lie in eschatology but in ecclesiology and soteriology. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, Knox and Wycliffe were all Amil. The Huguenots, who were in France, had some who were premil. However, they suffered terribly and their movement never had a great impact on the total Reformation.

Strong Reformed churches in the 20th Century (most Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Christian Reformed, Congregationalists, Lutherans, etc.) are all Amil in eschatology.

Anabaptists: The Anabaptists were the radicals of the Reformation who wanted a complete break with Rome and a return to New Testament Christianity. The Anabaptists were all premil and some were very radical and fanatical, giving the sane chiliasts a bad reputation. Most Baptists today follow the Anabaptists in eschatology.

English Reformers: It is believed that William Tyndale, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer were premil, but the church of England was predominately Amil because of Roman Catholic influence. J. C. Ryle was a premil, and today many evangelicals in the church of England are premil.

Post-Reformation (1700-1800)

George Whitefield: His basic theology was amil but his interests were not in eschatology.

John Wesley: Wesley was probably a premil but did not have much interest in this area.

Puritans: The Puritans were at first strongly influenced by amillennial theology but later began to lay the seeds for a postmillennial kind of eschatology because they felt the world experience great revival and become Christians and establish the earthly kingdom in the new world (cf. Ian Murray, *The Puritan Hope*).

It is fairly certain that two Puritans (Increase and Cotton Mather) were premil. Cotton Mather said,

It is well known, that in the earliest of the primitive times the faithful did, in a literal sense, believe the ‘second coming’ of the Lord Jesus Christ and the rising and the reigning of the saints with Him, a thousand years before, the rest of the dead live again . . . The doctrine of the Millennium is truth. (Quoted by Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*)

Daniel Whitby: Whitby is given the credit for putting together a system of postmillennial theology, even though the roots of it go back into Puritan thinking. Postmillennialism became a prominent view around 1750-1800.

This was a period in history when the world looked as though it was going to experience a great transformation. There was the industrial revolution, the rise of science, sound governments and brilliant minds, and it looked as though wars might be controlled if not stopped. This was an optimistic era in the western world, and postmillennialism became very popular.

Others: Scholarly men such as J. A. Bengal and Joseph Made were premil but this was not the predominate view of the day.

Modern Period (1800-1900)

This was a period when men became interested in the return of Jesus Christ and this spurred a revived interest in the premil interpretation of scripture. Prophetic conferences became very popular in England and in America. Those who were particularly interested in prophecy from a premillennial viewpoint were the Plymouth Brethren in England. Famous men such as John Nelson Darby, B. W. Newton, S. P. Tregelles and George Mueller were teaching the premillennial return of Christ. Lady Powerscourt at Powerscourt House sponsored many prophetic conferences around 1827.

It was around 1830 that John Darby, an Irish clergyman, claimed to have discovered the new truth of a pretribulational rapture of the church (second coming in two stages). Darby claimed he made the discovery from a study of the Bible, namely First and Second Thessalonians. William Kelly, Darby’s faithful disciple, also propagated this view

There is some evidence that this new doctrine came through a vision given to a woman who was part of the Irvingite sect. During a tongues meeting at a Catholic Apostolic church, a woman named Margaret Macdonald had this new vision of a pretrib rapture.

In the preceding pages we have seen that a young Scottish lassie named Margaret Macdonald had a private revelation in Port Glasgow, Scotland, in the early part of 1830 that a select group of Christians would be caught up to meet Christ in the air before the days of Antichrist.

An eye-and-ear witness, Robert Norton, M.D., preserved her handwritten account of her pretrib rapture revelation in two of his books, and said it was the first time anyone ever split the second coming into two distinct parts, or stages. His writings, along with much other Catholic Apostolic church literature, have been hidden many decades from the mainstream of evangelical thought and only recently have surfaced. Margaret’s views were well known to those visiting her home, which included John Darby of the Brethren. Within a few months her distinctive prophetic outlook was mirrored in the September, 1830, issue of the *Morning Watch* and the early Brethren assembly at Plymouth often called it a “new doctrine”. Setting dates for Christ’s return was a common practice at that time. (Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin*)

While it cannot be definitely proven how the pretrib rapture theory got started, it can be proven that it began around 1830, and from that theory has developed the dispensational premil view of eschatology. Modern day dispensationalists say their system is merely a refinement of Historic premillennialism, and that as we move on down towards the end time more truth about Christ's coming will come to light.

When Darby came out with his new theory of pretribulationism, he was opposed violently by many of his premil colleagues. Tregalles, Mueller and Newton spoke against Darby's new doctrine, but the new teaching spread like wildfire because it gave an imminent return of Christ to the premil system. Charles Spurgeon a Historic premil opposed Darby and the Plymouth Brethren for this new doctrine.

The pretrib rapture theory spread to the United States. This stimulated interest in the coming of Christ. Prophetic conferences sprang up and famous speakers such as James A. Brooks, Nathaniel West, A. J. Gordon, W. J. Erdman, George C. Needham, Hudson Taylor, W. G. Moorehead, A. T. Pierson, etc. became very popular.

This was the time when C. I. Scofield, a converted lawyer, put together his own dispensational notes and put them as footnotes to make up the very popular Scofield Reference Bible. The Scofield Bible has done more to propagate dispensational premillennialism than any other factor. D. L. Moody, the evangelist, also embraced the pretribulation rapture.

Some men who had embraced dispensationalism began to question the pretrib rapture. Upon further reflection men such as Nathaniel West, A. J. Gordon, W. J. Erdman, Robert Cameron, W. G. Moorehead and others went back to a type of Historic premillennialism.

Present Period (1800-2003)

Historic premillennialism

Historic premillennialism took somewhat of a back seat to dispensational premillennialism in America, but in England and other parts of the world the dispensational approach to scripture is very minimal among premillennialists. Today many young dispensationalists are questioning the pretrib rapture and are on their way to accepting Historic premillennialism.

Historic premils can be found in every denomination although they are few in number. Famous historic premils are men such as Alexander Reese, Dean Alford, J. C. Kyle and Nathaniel West. Other well-known Historic premils are George E. Ladd and the deceased Francis Schaeffer.

Historic premils can be found in almost every denomination and seminary in America. The seminary that was once the stronghold for Historic premils was Covenant Theological Seminary, but today that emphasis has been significantly diminished. Also Fuller Theological Seminary leans this way. A few Bible schools are Historic premils such as Columbia Bible College but the great majority of Bible schools are dispensational. However, many Christian liberal arts colleges tend towards a Historic premil position - Wheaton College, Westmont College, etc. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School is strongly premil, but a mixture of Historic premils and dispensational premils.

Amillennialism

Amillennialism is the most widely held view of eschatology in Christendom as a whole and is held by many evangelicals. However, many liberals are amil or postmil. Amillennialism is on the rise in America.

Amils are predominate in most denominations—Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics, Dutch Reformed, Christian Reformed, some Baptists and some Independents.

Some famous Amils are Louis Berkof, Geerhardus Vos, Albertus Pieters, Floyd Hamilton, Abraham Kyper, William Hendriksen, etc.

The leading seminaries in America, which are predominately amil, are Westminster Theological Seminary and Reformed Seminary. Gordon Conwell Seminary is divided between amils and historic premils, as is Covenant Seminary.

Postmillennialism

Postmils took a terrible blow after two world wars, although many reputable scholars such as B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, W.G.T. Shedd, Robert Dabney, Augustus Strong, etc have held it. Some modern Postmils are R. Rushdooney, Marcellus Kik and Loraine Boettner. Some of the living and vocal Postmils today are R.C. Sproul, Douglas Wilson, Kenneth Gentry and David Chilton.

Postmils are not found in great numbers among the denominations and there are no seminaries that could be called strongholds of postmillennialism, except possibly Greenville Theological Seminary. However, during the evangelical highpoint of Princeton Theological Seminary, it was postmil.

Dispensational premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialism is very popular among evangelicals and world crisis has added to its popularity among the general public.

Some of the more famous dispensationalists are John Darby, William Blackstone, Arno C. Gaebeline, Harry Ironside, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles Fuller, Donald Barnhouse, etc. Living dispensationalists are Charles Feinberg, Wilbur-Smith, John F. Walvoord, C. C. Ryrie, Earl Radmacher, J. Dwight Pentecost, etc. The one man who has done much to popularize dispensational eschatology is Hal Lindsey in the book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Almost all holiness groups are dispensational.

Most Bible schools are adamantly dispensational - Moody Bible Institute, Dallas Bible College, Florida Bible College, etc. Bob Jones University is strongly dispensational.

The leading dispensational seminary in America is Dallas Theological Seminary with Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Grace Seminary, and Talbot Theological Seminary running a close second.

Dispensationalism is under tremendous attack and a few are leaving this school of interpretation for historic premillennialism or other systems of eschatology. Dispensationalists are found in almost every denomination except the Christian Reformed, Dutch Reformed, and orthodox Presbyterian churches because dispensationalism is considered a heresy. Only the Independent Fundamental churches of America and a few small Baptist groups require a belief in the pretrib rapture for membership in their local churches.

Progressive dispensationalism

Since the early 1990's, a new form of dispensationalism has arisen. It is called progressive dispensationalism. This school of thought seeks a much closer relationship between Israel and the church, even calling the church spiritual Israel. They are, however, still premil and pretrib. Some of those holding this view are Darrel Bock and Tim Warner of Dallas Theological Seminary.

Cults

Most of the major cults (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gardner Ted Armstrong,) are believers in a premillennial return of Christ, and this, of course, makes it hard for true Christians who are premil. Also the Seventh Day Adventists are premil.