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404 - The Premillennial View

1. Introduction

As early as the late first century and early second century ideas about the future return of Christ were being circulated. These ideas proposed that Christ would return to Earth one day and establish a physical kingdom in which resurrected saints would rule with Christ for a thousand years before the final judgment took place. These doctrines had limited support from the 5th to the 16th centuries although small groups continued to hold to them. More recently this was brought back to life in the 19th century and is now a prominent component of the eschatology of some Christian denominations.

2. Roots of an idea

Religious historians record that a doctrine, known as chiliasm, after the Greek word for 1000, was part of the early church's belief system. Early church figures such as Irenaeus of Lyons and Justin Martyr in the second century as well as Tertullian of Carthage in the third century are said to have taught and promoted this idea. Clement of Alexandria, Origen and later Augustine in the fourth century are said to have opposed the teaching. Some believe the doctrine lost popularity during the reign of Constantine and waning persecution against Christians. Evidence shows these teachings may have been the result of Jewish teachings that had infiltrated the church. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession written in 1530 specifically refuted the ideas of the chiliasts as did John Calvin.

At the heart of the doctrine was the belief that the promises God made to Abraham hadn't been fulfilled at the time Christ died and later ascended to Heaven. Many believed the kingdom was to be restored to the Jews, the seed of Abraham, and would be ruled by the Messiah. Based on that the chiliasts taught that Christ would return to restore the kingdom to Israel, reign for 1000 years after which the final judgment would take place. Although some early figures in the church accepted some aspects of chiliasm they also saw the kingdom of Christ as being made up of spiritual Israel, the church.

The history of the doctrine and its development, opposition and later revival are complicated and confusing. To cloud the issue even more is the fact that the idea in its modern form is somewhat different to what the early chiliasts taught and believed. The modern version of this has come to be known as Premillennialism and is prevalent in many Christian denominations. In this lesson we'll examine:

- a. The birth of modern Premillennialism
- b. Premillennial interpretation of the end times
- c. Prophecies, prophets & fulfillment

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Let's take a look at each of these

3. The birth of modern Premillennialism

The history of modern Premillennialism is convoluted but most religious historians that I've read note that ideas central to the doctrine began with J.N. Darby described as an influential Anglo-Irish Bible teacher who translated the Bible and was instrumental in religious groups known as the Plymouth Brethren and later the founder of the Exclusive Brethren. He's also regarded as a proponent of Dispensationalism, which holds to literal interpretations of prophecy and biblical futurism.

In 1827 Darby began to view prophecies of a coming kingdom in the book of Isaiah and other prophets as not the same as the church. By 1830 he had begun to teach his belief in a rapture, an event in which God would remove the faithful from the Earth, prior to a great tribulation. Darby continued to teach this and incorporated the idea into his commentaries. Ideas that were eventually popularized by Cyrus Scofield in the Scofield Reference Bible.

Around the same time there were preachers in Scotland who emphasized the need for gifts of the Holy Spirit as an answer to the problems of the world. Around 1830 Margaret Macdonald, who reportedly had the gift of healing through the Holy Spirit gained an audience of those interested in seeing if the Holy Spirit was indeed working through her. Margaret began to have visions of the end times which included Christ's bride, the church, being taken from the world. Versions of these visions were published in 1840 and 1861 and to many convey an idea that the rapture was to take place following a great tribulation. Accusations were also made that J.N. Darby borrowed these ideas from Margaret MacDonald in some form. There's still a lot of debate on the origins and timing of Margaret MacDonald's rapture compared to that of Darby.

Over time the ideas grew, gained widespread acceptance and continue to influence believers. At the heart of the doctrine is the idea that Israel will be restored at some point and that the bride of Christ, the church, will triumph over evil through the Lord. The belief is based on literal interpretations of prophecy and the division of time into several dispensations. The number of proposed dispensations also appears to vary between groups. Examining the proposed Premillennial sequence of events signaling the end times and millennial kingdom of Christ in Jerusalem will give us an idea of what this doctrine teaches.

4. Premillennial interpretation of the end times

I've spent years discussing events with Premillennialists that they believe will take place at the end of the world. I've read books written to support these ideas as well as commentaries and own study Bibles filled with notes supporting the doctrine. I had a friend in high school who

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was studying to be a preacher who believed in the Premillennial view and we had some interesting conversations. That was during the Vietnam war and some of the things that came up during that time were interesting to say the least.

There are several variations of the Premillennial view that I know of. The sequence of events varies slightly in each version but the ideas are roughly the same. I'll summarize what I know as the most common version of Premillennial theory but be aware that there are differences between what different groups believe and there are more differences between what some of the members of those groups believe. What I offer here is a general idea of what is taught.

Premillennialism proposes that at a certain point in time mankind will be drawn under the influence of Satan who seeks to control the governments of the world. A single charismatic individual will step forward as the leader of this movement creating a single world government. The time will seem to prosper as marvelous things will take place around the globe and a sense of security grows. A subtle undercurrent however is the suppression of the worship of God and Christ. Christians will be suppressed, then banned and finally rounded up and executed in a purge of the faithful. As these things begin God will take the faithful from the world as a sign to others of a coming judgment. The power of the one world government and its leader is revealed to be oppressive and evil as everyone is deprived of their freedoms and faith in God is punishable by death.

The events that take place will result in anger from the Lord and a tribulation lasting seven years will rise. Suffering, violence and evil grow until finally Christ returns to the Earth to set things right. On his return, Christ will fight with the armies of the world government, defeating them in Palestine in a final battle. Christ will then restore the kingdom of Israel to its rightful place recognizing the seed of Abraham and Christians both as the children of God. For one thousand years Christ will rule the world in peace. At the end of the thousand years Christ will render judgment on the living and the dead and the world will be refreshed as a new creation, resetting things to the way God intended from the beginning.

Another variation I'm familiar with is that at the end of the thousand years, judgment will be rendered but Christ and the faithful will go to be with God in Heaven. And, again, as with the new heavens and new Earth, I've heard some confusing speculation about what happens next. We can list these events as I've heard and seen them presented.

- a. People around the world embrace the idea of a one world government
- b. A charismatic leader, empowered by Satan rises to rule
- c. Christians are suppressed, banned and persecuted
- d. Faithful believers are taken, or raptured, from the Earth as a sign to those left behind
- e. Seven years of tribulation begin as God's judgment as evil continues to rise

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- f. Christ returns and defeats the army of the one world government
- g. Christ restores the kingdom of Israel and assumes the throne in Jerusalem
- h. At the end of 1000 years Christ judges the living and the dead
- I. The heavens and earth are restored as new as in the beginning
- j. Christ and the faithful go to Heaven with God

One major variant of this belief has to do with the timing of the rapture. Some believe the rapture will take place prior to the seven years of tribulation, while others think the rapture will take place at the end of the seven years. My experience has been that most of the folks I've talked to believe the rapture will take place before the tribulation and we'll talk about that more in another lesson. It appears that J.N. Darby believed in a pre-tribulation rapture while MacDonald's vision seems to support a post-tribulation rapture.

I'll summarize these events and that will also serve as an outline for upcoming lessons. The events signaling the last days will be

- a. Rise of a new world order or one world government
- b. Appearance of the Antichrist
- c. The Rapture
- d. The Great Tribulation
- e. The battle of Armageddon
- f. The thousand year reign
- g. New heavens & new earth

These ideas have spawned Bibles, books, video games, movies and have influenced mainstream thinking. Very few people would miss what's meant by the word Apocalypse which has been popularized by this doctrine and has come to mean the catastrophic end of all things. It's also resulted in a stream of predictions that have all failed. All of them. But that doesn't stop people from making new predictions. What are these predictions based on and where did these ideas come from?

5. Prophecies, prophets & fulfillment

Since the beginning of the first series of lessons I produced, I've consistently stated that context is crucial, has to be identified, understood and preserved. When that isn't done, the result is misinterpretation and error. Biblical prophecy is a subject I've spoken about throughout these lessons and I dedicated three lessons previously examining biblical prophecy's characteristics in depth. I also placed emphasis on understanding the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the time constraints on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. There are some common misconceptions that fuel almost every error that exists. They're not new, but in our day and time

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have taken on a new life and created new layers of misunderstanding.

Why am I bringing this up before looking at the foundations of Premillennial ideas? Simple. Premillennialism, as with other mistaken ideas, are the byproduct of a failure to understand the basic structure, contexts and limits that are identifiable in the scriptures. I'll go over those relevant to our study here.

An idea that has created problems for people since Christ was on the Earth is the state of the kingdom of Israel. Many today still look for God to restore the kingdom in Palestine as he promised long ago. We'll talk about this in an upcoming lesson, but the bottom line is that this is never going to happen. The kingdom was destroyed, a remnant allowed to return to bring the Messiah into the world and once that was done the physical kingdom had fulfilled it's purpose. I'll go into more detail on this later but the fact is that the Davidic kingdom is gone and won't be coming back on Earth.

Another misconception that fuels these ideas is the belief that promises made to Abraham haven't been fulfilled. The land promise in particular is a point of contention. Once again as we progress through these lessons I'll provide more detail on this although I've covered it in previous lessons.

One of the biggest obstacles for believers is the relationship between the Law of Moses and the Gospel. Many reject the idea that the New Testament is a law and insist on keeping certain aspects of the Law such as the Sabbath and dietary regulations. Some are willing to compromise and regard the Mosaic law as God's will for the seed of Abraham and the New Testament as the law by which Christians, primarily gentiles, are to live. As with other ideas about the Bible there are endless variations of this. There are even groups who question the identity of the true Israelites or descendants of Abraham. This was a problem in the first century and remains one of the most confusing aspects of biblical doctrine today. The Bible however is clear on this point and the New Testament in particular provides ample evidence to support the fact that the Law was fulfilled and is no longer binding.

These three areas are a seedbed for misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the scriptures and that brings us back to the source for Premillennialist doctrine. Premillennialist ideas about the end times are primarily based on prophecies and statements from

- a. Revelation
- b. Daniel
- c. Ezekiel
- d. Isaiah
- e. Matthew

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- f. 1st Thessalonians
- g. 1st John

The difficulty lies in the fact that many of the statements in these books used to support Premillennialism are symbolic in nature. The futurists and dispensationalists believed that all prophetic statements are to be interpreted literally. The literal interpretation of prophecies that are symbolic creates a problem when we try to understand their fulfillment and application. Some of these prophecies are taken completely out of context, applied to time periods they're not speaking of and applied in ways that create conflicts with other scriptures. The Bible is like any other system of knowledge that demands discipline in how we approach and handle it. Errors in one area lead to misunderstanding in other areas. The trend with theologians has always been to make other scriptures fit their interpretation instead of altering their perspective to fit what the scriptures actually teach. When we don't let the scriptures speak for themselves and change our mind to fit what they say, we create nothing but confusion.

Premillennialism is a system of belief that begins with a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Law of Moses and the Gospel. The confusion deepens as the idea that God failed to fulfill his promises to Abraham is held onto. Still more confusion arises as the idea that Israel has to be preserved for the sake of restoring a physical kingdom that was destroyed and taken away centuries ago. Compounding all of this is a fundamental lack of understanding of biblical prophecy, relative contexts and limits on the time periods referenced. To sort this out we've got a long way to go.

6. Next

Are things in the world going to get so bad that God will take the faithful from the Earth to spare them from His judgment coming on the world? We'll examine that dilemma in the next lesson as we ask **Will There Be A Rapture?**