

Premillennialism: Primary or Peripheral

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Though a Christian cannot agree with many of the writings of Voltaire, there is at least one statement with which we can heartily agree. He once said, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend your right to say it." This is especially sound advice in a day when everyone wants to express his own views but does not want the same privilege afforded to others who may look at things a little differently. Eschatology, or the doctrine of last things, has become a very prominent doctrine in a relatively short time. Not only are conservatives concerned about eschatology, but liberals are concerned about it, too. When there is a great deal of interest in a given subject, there is often a real difference of opinion among those who are interested in that subject. Conservatives find themselves in just such a situation today. Open discussion of some of these problems can only be beneficial. There are three topics around which this subject can be discussed: (1) The importance of the millennial question, (2) The importance of the tribulation question, and (3) The relative importance between the millennial question and the tribulation questions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MILLENNIAL QUESTION

Recently an individual asked why all this "fuss" was going on about premillennialism. It was stated that it was such an inconsequential matter that it was certainly a great waste of time to "argue" about such a minor detail. "We should be more interested in getting out the Gospel than worrying about these trivialities."

No doubt such terms as *inconsequential*, *unimportant*, and *minor* were labels which people hear some leaders and pastors use when referring to premillennialism. Is it right and Scriptural to use such terms to describe the millennial issue? We know that nothing revealed in the Word of God is unimportant and inconsequential. It would be a depreciation of the character and work of God to say that He decided something should be placed in the Bible which was inferior or inconsequential. In reality, this is not a problem for man to decide, since God has already answered it by giving to us His complete and final revelation. However, we do recognize that some things are more far-reaching in their implications than others. Does premillennialism come within this category? The answer is yes, because of the truths which are involved in this whole issue. Premil-

lennialism affects so many other areas of theology that it must be considered basic and fundamental to an understanding and appreciation of God's revelation. In fact, it can be justly said that it touches the very heart of theology, affecting not only eschatology (the doctrine of last things) but also other areas of theology as well. The inconsistent premillennialist restricts his premillennialism to the single doctrine of last things. By this contradiction of his system of theology, the inconsistent premillennialist aids the amillennialist in major areas of theology which are virtually influenced by this issue. These differences can be seen most clearly when premillennialism is compared with its only logical alternative, amillennialism.

First, *bibliology* (the doctrine of the Bible) is intimately related to the problem. The method by which the Bible is interpreted is really the issue at point. Amillennialism employs a different method of interpretation in the prophetic sections of God's Word than is normally used in interpreting the Bible. The genius of premillennialism is that it accepts at face value what the Bible says, which allows room, of course, for figures of speech and things of like nature. In the prophetic sections of the Word the amillennialists use a method which is often called spiritualizing or allegorizing. That is, they do not accept the literal meaning as indicated by the words of the inspired Scriptures. The basis on which they do this is found in a rule stated by one of the leading advocates of amillennialism, Floyd E. Hamilton. He believes a literal interpretation is to be followed unless it would produce a contradiction with truths of principles found in other books of a nonsymbolic character.¹ Since amillennialists do not believe in such things as an earthly reign of Christ in a millennial kingdom, they allegorize those passages in the Old Testament, and the New Testament which teach this idea, because they contradict their system of God's plan for the future. It is difficult to understand this view in the light of fulfilled prophecy, which has been fulfilled literally. To indicate how crucial this point is, note that Hamilton says in another work that if one applies a literal interpretation to Old Testament prophecies it would give us just such a picture of the millennium as the premillennialists teach.² The question resolves itself to this: Are we going to treat the prophetic sections of the Word in just the same manner as we treat the other portions of the Bible, or are we going to devise a special method, which is nowhere condoned in Scripture

1 Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith*, 53-54

2 Hamilton, *The Principle of Spiritualization in Hermeneutics*, 5.

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since it interprets its prophetic sections literally? This method would allow one to fit prophecy into a preconceived pattern. The one who fails to recognize the importance of premillennialism fails to understand this basic principle.

The second area of theology affected by this question is *soteriology* (the doctrine of salvation). Amillennialism is dominated by Covenant Theology, which theology teaches that God has dealt with man since the Fall on the basis of a covenant of grace; that is, it is God's sole purpose to save the elect in every period of history. Is this God's basic purpose? The Bible in Ephesians 1:4-14 clearly indicates that salvation is not an end product. Rather it is a means to an end, that is, the glory of the Father. Therefore, those who say that the preaching of the gospel is the only thing that matters do not understand the uniform teaching of God's Word. They are reflecting the emphasis of Covenant Theology. They fail to recognize or admit that God has a special purpose for Israel, for the Gentiles, and for the church of God. Negatively it might be mentioned that if Covenant Theology is right, then God has no purpose for angelic beings, since God's purpose for them cannot be soteriological. Of necessity they must minimize or eliminate any distinctions between such things as the period of law and the period of grace. This, however, would not be consistent with the teachings of the Apostle Paul, as a simple reading of Romans and Galatians indicates. While premillennialists agree with conservative amillennialists on the plan of salvation, they cannot agree with their view that God's only purpose is a soteriological purpose. Nor should any consistent premillennialists fail to see this ramification of his system of theology.

The third area of theology points up very markedly that divergent views of amillennialism and premillennialism. The doctrine of the church, or *ecclesiology*, provides a crucial study in this issue. It is the contention of consistent premillennialists that the church, the body of Christ, is a distinct entity from Israel of the Old Testament. If it can be shown that the New Testament church is the subject of Old Testament teaching, and that the church is to fulfill Old Testament prophecies made concerning Israel, then amillennialism is right. However, it is yet to be demonstrated that the church is the explicit subject of Old Testament revelation. In fact, this view is clearly inconsistent with New Testament teaching. The writings of Paul indicate that the major elements which go to make up the revelation of the church were mysteries. Further, he defines a

mystery in Romans 16:25-26. It is something which was hidden in past ages but is now made manifest. It also follows that if the church fulfills the promises made to Israel, there is no longer any future dealings, on the part of God, with Israel (cf. Rom. 9-11). It must be admitted that there are some evident similarities between Israel of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament, but similarities do not mean that the two are identical. A horse and a cow have striking similarities, but no one would say that they are identical. Therefore, the only conclusion one can draw is that premillennialism is far-reaching in its consequences.

The last and probably the most obvious area in which premillennialism is a crucial issue is the doctrine of last things, or *eschatology*. However, on the basis of our discussion, it must be admitted that this is not the only significant area in which the millennial issue is involved. As noted previously, it is here that a different method of interpretation is used. But it is extremely significant to note that amillennialists interpret the Old Testament prophecies of Christ's incarnation literally, which they must do since they were fulfilled literally, while the unfulfilled prophecies concerning Christ's millennial reign are allegorized. The inconsistency is obvious. The premillennial view of eschatology is generally marked by a remarkable agreement among its adherents in spite of the fact that there are varieties of premillennialists. Amillennialism is remarkable for its disagreement on a positive plan of eschatology. They agree that premillennialism is wrong, but it is a difficult task for them to find something to take its place.

This discussion has not been entered into in order to prove that premillennialism is the correct system of interpretation, though certain arguments demonstrating this point have been presented for the purpose of illustration. The main object has been the attempt to show that premillennialism is important! It must never be considered as just a side issue in the study of God's Word. It is not inconsequential, because it touches the most vital issues which God has seen fit to reveal to men.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRIBULATION QUESTION

There is another problem which concerns only premillennialists. This is the tribulation question. There are four prominent views among premillennialists, but only two of them are of major importance. The four views are posttribulationism, pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and the partial-rapture theory.

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The first two, posttribulationism and pretribulationism, are the most significant, and the fourth, the partial-rapture view, is the most serious, since it strikes at the unity of the body of Christ. Is the disagreement between these positions important? Does it make any difference which view a person accepts?

A great deal of confusion exists today because of a misunderstanding about the Biblical teaching concerning the principle of tribulation in general and *the* teaching about the tribulation in particular. The two should be carefully distinguished. Christ said in His Upper Room Discourse: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). An old saint once said that "God gives to a dog a reasonable amount of fleas, and it is a good thing because it enables the dog to take his mind off the fact that he is a dog. God permits some of us to have troubles in order that we may get our minds and off other things and fasten them upon Him." However this truth is entirely different from what the Word teaches concerning a definite, future, literal period called *the tribulation*. It is clearly distinguished from all other periods or types of tribulation by the words that it will be a period "such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matt. 24:21). On the basis of this verse in its context, it seems correct to say that the term *great tribulation* relates to the last three and one half years of the tribulation period.

Again the question has often been asked, Is this period and its relationship to the coming of the Lord an important issue? Is it just a fine point in the understanding of eschatology with which we should not be unduly concerned? It can be established that the coming of Christ in its relationship to the tribulation *is* an important issue. Three important reasons establish this fact.

First, this question involves serious *interpretive problems*. An important segment of the Bible relates to the coming tribulation, sections in both the Old and the New Testaments. All the books in the Major Prophets and the majority in the Minor Prophets make some statement about this period. Some of the Old Testament historical books also have references to this time. In the New Testament one book is outstanding because it deals with this period, that is, the book of Revelation. Almost two-thirds of this book relates to the coming tribulation. In the Gospels and the epistles of Paul there are clear references to this particular time of trouble. If one assumes an attitude of deferred decision, he is

clearly handicapped in his exegetical and expositional work. The areas in the Bible mentioned above must remain more or less closed to his understanding because he cannot answer such questions as these: When will this period of trouble take place? What is its relationship to other events? Who is involved in this period? What does this time of testing mean to us? Why will it take place? and other similar questions. All of these problems are intimately involved with the topic of the relationship between the coming of the Lord and the tribulation. Such difficulties must be seriously considered by the expositor of God's Word before he allows himself to state that the tribulation question is unimportant.

Second, it involves important *theological problems*. An individual's theological position can many times be determined by his views on the relative relationship of the rapture to the tribulation. The relationship between these two events, therefore, represents an integral part of one's whole theological position. For example, Louis Berkhof, an outstanding amillennialist, believes that the tribulation will take place just before the coming of the Lord and the final judgment and the final resurrection. He also believes that the description of the tribulation found in the Olivet Discourse has a partial fulfillment in the days before Jerusalem's destruction, but that it will have a further fulfillment in the future.³ Though this sounds somewhat like posttribulationism, references to the end of the world at this coming of Christ after the tribulation clearly mark it as an amillennial position. As with many other positions of prophecy, the character of the tribulation, according to the amillennialist, is not to be taken quite as literally as the Bible pictures it, therefore, there is some difference among amillennialists in their description of this period. The postmillennial view teaches that the tribulation will precede the second coming of Christ. Although A. H. Strong does not mention the tribulation specifically, this seems to be his approach.⁴ After the tribulation and coming of Christ, the general judgment and the general resurrection take place.

The premillennial approach, on the other hand, is clearly differentiated from both the amillennial and postmillennial views in relationship to the coming of Christ and the tribulation. All true premillennialists believe in Christ's coming before the millennium, and they believe that during the millennium there will be a literal reign of Christ on earth. That there is a definite

3 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 700.

4 A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1008-10.

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continuation of history centering on the earth after the coming of Christ sets premillennialists apart from others. Premillennialists generally view the tribulation in much more literal manner than those who advocate different viewpoints. This, too, is a significant characteristic of premillennialism.

These few observations indicate the important relationship which exists between one's theological position and the coming of Christ and the tribulation. They should cause anyone to reconsider a position which rests on an attitude such as, "No one can determine which position is right, therefore, what difference does it make?"

Third, it involves significant practical problems. It makes a great deal of difference to one's practical view of things if he is to pass through a time of "great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matt. 24:21). From the literature written on this subject those holding a posttribulation view tend to minimize the literality of the tribulation, while those who hold to a pretribulation position make the period as literal as the Bible teaches. There may be some overly zealous advocates who add a few details of their own, but this does not change the issue.

It also makes a great difference whether or not one believes in the imminent return of Christ. The word imminent means "threatening to occur immediately; impending." It seems obvious that only a pretribulation position can fulfill the many passages of Scripture which present an any-moment coming of Christ. Objection has often been taken to such a statement, but, nevertheless, no convincing arguments have been presented to refute the immanency of Christ's return as is normally understood. However, the main point is that the time of the coming of Christ and the tribulation have great practical bearing on the lives of Christians living in this age. If one is going to be able to instruct his flock in the area of practical living in the light of the coming of Christ, it seems imperative that some conclusion should be reached on the point of its relationship to other events.

In summary, because of the interpretive, theological and practical problems involved, it is necessary that the individual study the Word of God under the direction of the Spirit of God in order to ascertain the mind of God in this important area of interpretation. No longer should one hide under such reasoning that this concept is unimportant or minor.

Now one can approach intelligently the practical problem of relating these two questions to our own situation.

THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE BETWEEN THE MILLENNIAL AND TRIBULATIONAL QUESTIONS.

It should be borne in mind very clearly at the outset of this section that since both issues are treated in God's Word they are important. However it is also clear that one of these questions circumscribes a larger area than the other. In the light of such statements, should one or both of these questions, or neither of these questions be made a test of fellowship; that is, should one exclude from fellowship in a given group those who do not agree with what the group believes to be the Scriptural teaching on these points? We are not speaking as to whether or not an individual can have fellowship with another individual who is not in agreement on these points. The same principle is involved in the question as to whether or not a Baptist can have fellowship with one who does not believe in immersion, yet who agrees in many other areas of theology. By the very nature of things, this position would exclude him from a Baptist denominational aspect of fellowship without affecting his personal, brotherly fellowship.

We should look at these two questions separately and review some of the implications involved. As was previously noted, premillennialism is a system of interpretation reaching far beyond the confines of eschatology. It directly affects bibliology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. In the area of bibliology this issue strikes ultimately to the heart of one's doctrine of inspiration. If an individual believes that the Holy Spirit inspired every word of the Bible, how can he then turn right around and say that in the field of prophecy this is what the Holy Spirit said, but He really did not mean that but meant something else. Though some amillennialists may say they believe in plenary verbal inspiration, their position points in another direction. This viewpoint leaves the door wide open for unscriptural views to creep into a give theological system. For instance, the fact that both a Roman Catholic priest and a conservative theologian like Louis Berkhof can be classed as amillennialists is a demonstration of this statement. It is granted that no doubt their theologies greatly differ, but it illustrates the truth that there is a tremendous amount of latitude within this system, and this is unquestionably accounted for in part by the looseness of their bibliology. Lest anyone should point to the history of Christian doctrine and say that a state-

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ment of the like nature could be made concerning the premillennialists, let it be noted that a consistent premillennialism demands a conservative theology. There may be some who hold to one facet of premillennialism while lacking orthodoxy in theology, but they are premillennialists in name only.

In the realm of soteriology the Bible certainly does not condone the blurring of the lines between such things as law and grace. The Apostle Paul felt so strongly about it that he wrote at least two letters, Romans and Galatians, which have as a predominant theme the proposition that we are no longer bound to the letter of the law of the Old Testament. This is not antinomianism or lawlessness as some amillennialists like to tell us.⁵

In the field of ecclesiology the difference between the two positions is clearly defined. The view of amillennialism in this area of theology coupled with its views in the other areas makes its position objectionable to a premillennialist.

The divergence in eschatology is simply an outgrowth of divergence in other departments. With these facts in mind it is obvious that it would militate against cooperation in a group atmosphere with such individuals. If there is a lack of agreement on such basic and fundamental things as are involved in the term premillennialism, then group fellowship as such would seem impossible.

The second question revolves around the problem as to whether or not the tribulation question should be made a test of fellowship. The answer here again should be quite clear on the basis of this discussion. In the vital areas mentioned above, (viz. bibliology, soteriology, and ecclesiology, with the exception of eschatology) there is more or less basic agreement among premillennialists. Even though posttribulationists evince no clear-cut distinctions between Israel and the church as do pretribulationists, there is, however, agreement on the view that the two are different.⁶ Basically the disagreement centers on the order of events which are to transpire in the future, more particularly, in the area of the relationship between Christ's coming and the tribulation. There may be outstanding exceptions to this last statement, but it still must be faced that there is a great deal of common ground between the two views. Consequently, there should be no question about a sincere spiritual fellowship, whether on a group basis or on an individual basis.

⁵ Cf. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, 614

⁶ *Eternity*, May, 1957, 45.

Let it be stated again that the major purpose of this discussion is an effort to counteract the prevalent view that the questions regarding the millennial issue and the tribulation issue are minor and unimportant. The fact that such ideas are so widespread among lay people and among ministers of the gospel makes it necessary that the implications of these issues be stated clearly and their relationship clearly understood.