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## **A Present or Future Millennium?**

By Kim Riddlebarger

Most American Evangelicals are firmly committed to the idea that an earthly millennial age will begin immediately after our Lord Jesus Christ's Second Advent. Since premillennialism is so dominant in American church circles, many who encounter historic Protestantism for the first time are quite surprised when they discover that all of the Protestant Reformers and the entire Reformed and Lutheran traditions are amillennial. Amillennialism is that understanding of eschatology which sees the millennium not as a future golden age as does premillennialism (the age of the church triumphant), but instead as the present course of history between the First and Second Advents of our Lord (the age of the church militant). Indeed, there are many readers who will express shock and disappointment upon learning of my own amillennial convictions. But I am convinced, however, that many readers simply do not understand the basic end-times scenario found in the New Testament.

Part of the problem is that dispensational premillennial writers have completely dominated Christian media and publishing. There are literally hundreds of books, churches, and parachurch ministries all devoted to taking premillennialism and the “pretribulation” rapture idea to the masses. And so, I can only lament the fact that my own tradition has done so little to produce popular books introducing and defending amillennialism. It is my guess that many who read this article will have never heard the case for the classical position held by the church regarding the return of Christ and the millennial age.

Another problem encountered when examining this subject is that discussions of it often generate a great deal of heat but not very much light. One local prophecy pundit has quipped that the people in heaven with the lowest IQs will be amillennial. Hal Lindsey goes so far as to label amillennialism as anti-Semitic, demonic and heretical.<sup>1</sup> It is not uncommon to hear prophecy teachers label amillennial Christians as “liberal” or to accuse them of not taking the Bible literally. The result of such diatribes is that American Christians cannot help but be prejudiced by such unfortunate comments, and many simply reject outright (without due consideration of the other side) the eschatology of the Reformers and classical Protestantism—an eschatology that is amazingly simple, biblical, and Christ centered. And so, if you should be in that camp, instead of simply turning me off at this point, please bear with me, hear my case, and then decide for yourself on the basis of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 30.

Unfortunately, it is all too fashionable to interpret the Bible in light of the morning newspaper and CNN. Yes, it is fun to read the Bible through the filter of every geopolitical crisis that arises in our modern world. This adds relevance to the Bible, we are told. It most assuredly sells thousands and thousands of books and provides for slick programs on Christian TV and radio documenting every move by the European Union, and every possible technological breakthrough that may prepare the way for the coming mark of the beast. These sensational end-times dramas heighten the sense of urgency regarding the coming of our Lord. They supposedly give the church missionary zeal. However fascinating these schemes may be, I do not believe that they accurately reflect the Biblical data.

There is, in addition, a quite serious side effect produced by this approach to Bible prophecy: The Bible no longer speaks for itself because it is twisted into a pretzel by each of its interpreters, who do their best to show that the upheaval of the nations described in the Book of Revelation has nothing whatsoever to do with the original reader in the first century struggling under Roman persecution, but is instead somehow related to the morning headlines. How many times can we tell our hearers that Jesus is coming back soon (No, we really mean it this time!) and then tie that message to a passing despot like Saddam Hussein or a tenuous political figure like Mikhail Gorbachev? How do we keep those who need to hear about Christ's Second Advent the most from becoming increasingly cynical about the message of his coming? But then again this too is a sign of the end, for scoffers will come and say "where is this 'coming' he promised?" (2 Pt 3:3-4). How tragic that prophecy speculators actually contribute to the very skepticism they themselves acknowledge as a key sign of the end. The classical Protestant tradition has helpful answers to these problems, as it does to many other crises facing the modern church that, by and large, have been forgotten by today's Evangelicals.

All of the Protestant Reformers, were they to come back to give us counsel in these areas, would insist that we must start with the notion that the Bible itself must be read with the *analogia fidei* (the analogy of faith), meaning that Holy Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture. In other words, we must inductively develop a biblical model of eschatology by utilizing all of the passages that relate to the return of Christ, the resurrection, the judgement, the millennium, and so on. We should never study eschatology merely by finding Bible verses (often out of context) that we think describe current events. And so, by utilizing the analogy of faith, we begin with the clear declarations of Scripture regarding the coming of our Lord and use them to shed light on passages that are less clear. Following this method, we can clear up many of the bizarre mysteries fabricated by modern prophecy devotees, who insist upon making unclear and difficult passages the standard by which we interpret clear and certain verses. If this basic hermeneutical principle is followed, we will soon find that we can no longer interpret all of the Bible by the Book of Revelation. Instead, we must read the Book of Revelation through the rest of the Bible. Historic Protestants would also insist, for example, that Revelation interprets the book of Daniel and not vice versa. The New Testament must be allowed to interpret the Old. There is nothing particularly difficult or profound in this, and following this basic principle of Bible study facilitates a clearer understanding of Bible prophecy.

If we begin with clear passages of Scripture, we can construct a very simple, basic model to help

us with the weirder, tougher passages. One such approach is known as the “two-age” model. Both Jesus and Paul, for example, speak of “this age” and the “age to come” as distinct eschatological periods of time (Mt 12:32; Lk 18:30; 20:34-35; Eph 1:21). For both our Lord and the apostle, there are two contrasting ages in view. The first age (spoken of as “this age” in the New Testament) is the present period of time before the Second Coming of Christ. The second age, a distinctly future period of time, is referred to as “the age to come.” When these two ages (“this age” and “the age to come”) are placed in contrast with each other, we are able us to look at the qualities ascribed by the biblical writers to each in such a way that we can answer questions about the timing of the return of Christ and the nature and timing of the millennium.

When we look at the qualities ascribed to “this age” by the biblical writers, we find that the following are mentioned: “homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields—and with them persecutions” (Mk 10:30); “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage” (Lk 20:34); the scholar, philosopher and such wisdom are of “this age” (1 Cor 1:20); secular and religious rulers dominate (1 Cor 2:6-8); “the god of this age [Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor 4:4); this age is explicitly called “the present evil age” (Gal 1:4); ungodliness and worldly passions are typical of it (Ti 2:12). All of these qualities are temporal, and are certainly destined to pass away with the return of our Lord. “This age” is the age in which we live, and is the age in which we struggle as we long for the coming of Christ and the better things of the age to come.

By marked contrast however, “the age to come” has an entirely different set of qualities ascribed to it: There will be no forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:32); it is preceded by signs (Mt 24:3); it is characterized by eternal life (Mk 10:30; Lk 18:30); is also denoted as a time when there is no marriage or giving in marriage (Lk 20:35); and it is which is characterized by “life that is truly life” (I Tm 6:19). These qualities are all eternal, and are indicative of the state of affairs and quality of life after the return of Christ. In other words, these two ages, the present (“this age”) and the future (the “age to come”) stand in diametrical opposition to one another. One age is temporal; the other is eternal. One age is characterized by unbelief and ends in judgement; the other is the age of the faithful and is home to the redeemed. It is this conception of biblical history that dominates the New Testament.

It is also imperative to see that the same contrasts which Jesus and Paul make between these two ages are in turn related to the one event that forever divides them, the return of Christ. This line of demarcation is expressly stated in Scripture. “The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. . . This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous” (Mt. 13:39-49). These statements are the type of clear and unambiguous texts mentioned earlier. Notice that according to this text judgement occurs immediately at Christ's return, not after a one-thousand year millennium (as in the premillennial scheme). This is not the only line of Biblical evidence, however, for in addition to this we can find other such statements about the coming of Christ that fit very clearly into the two-age model.

According to Scripture, the resurrection of both the just and the unjust occurs simultaneously. Jesus expressly states that he will raise believers up on the “last day” (Jn 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24).

Thus we told quite clearly that the resurrection of the just occurs on the last day, at the end of this age. In addition, Jesus also proclaims that “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day” (John 12:48). Notice that the very same event is also said to be the time of judgment for those who reject Christ. Add to these important passages those additional verses that, relate the trumpet of God to the “last day” and to the return of Christ. The return of Christ will occur “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Co. 15:52; cf. 1 Thes 4:16). Notice that there are no gaps of time indicated between the resurrection and the judgement. These texts collectively speak of the resurrection, the judgment, and the return of Christ as distinct aspects of but one event, occurring at precisely the same time (cf. Mt 25:31-46). Premillennialists, who often chide amillennialists for not taking the Bible “literally” and who champion what they call the “literal” interpretation of Scripture, must now insert a thousand-year gap between the Second Coming of Christ (and the resurrection) and the Final Judgment to make room for the supposed future millennial reign of Christ! And this, ironically, when the clear declarations of Scripture do not allow for such gaps.

Thus, we can conclude that “this age”—the period of time Peter calls the “last days” (Acts 2:17), and which Jesus characterizes as a period of birth pains of wars, earthquakes, famine, and distress (Mt 24, Mk 13)—ends with the return of Christ, the resurrection and the judgement on the “last day.” An event that, by the way, Peter describes like the “day of the Lord [which] will come as a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (2 Pt 3:10). It is only after this that the age to come will be a present and visible reality. Notice that the focus is not upon a half-way kingdom and somewhat improved temporal age on the earth (i.e., a future millennium). Instead, the biblical focus is upon the consummation and the summing up of all things with the creation of the new heavens and the new earth! The return of Jesus Christ is the key event in biblical prophecy. For when our Lord Jesus Christ returns, the end of the age, the resurrection, the judgment, and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth are at hand!

Thus the two-age model is very simple in its structure and is based on texts that can only be described as clear and straightforward. This enables us to make the following conclusions about the nature of the New Testament’s teaching regarding the return of Christ and the timing of the millennial age.

First, the “last days” began with the coming of Christ and will continue until Christ returns (Acts 2:17; Heb 1:2). This period of time, “this age,” is destined to pass away, and is characterized by war, famine, environmental distress, persecution and even the martyrdom of God’s people (Rv 20:4-6). While there is every likelihood that this distress will increase in the period immediately before the return of Christ, no one knows the day or the hour of our Lord’s return. Further, Jesus’ birth pain imagery most likely means that we should expect alternating periods of peace and intensifying evil that will cause many to unduly speculate about the immanent return of Christ. These are sharp, stabbing birth pains, but not they are not the birth itself. Therefore, our preoccupation should not be with signs of the end, but instead we must be consumed with the

task assigned to the church in the last days: the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom.

Second, the return of Christ clearly marks an end to the temporal nature of life as we know it—"this present evil age." At his return, Jesus will raise the believing dead, judge all men, and send the wicked into the fires of Hell. The elements of this Earth burn up and the new heavens and earth will be established. This scenario completely destroys much of contemporary evangelical prophetic speculation, which advocates a secret coming of Christ and the rapture of believers (and what text can be adduced to argue that Jesus comes back secretly?) a full seven years before the final judgement at Christ's bodily return. Does Jesus come back once or twice, with one of them being secret? Such speculation is nonsense when viewed in light of the clear gospel texts cited above, which universally describe the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of believers and unbelievers as parts of one event. This scenario also destroys the idea of a future earthly millennial reign of Christ after he returns in judgment. Since this supposed thousand-year reign occurs after the eternal destiny of all men and women is forever settled in the judgment, the very thought of Jesus ruling over a world wherein there are still men and women in natural bodies repopulating the Earth is simply not supported by clear texts (remember the one about no marriage?).

If the millennial reign described in Revelation 20 is actually referring to a future period of time, another even more significant problem arises. At the end of the one thousand years, John tells us that there is a great apostasy (a second fall if you will) while Jesus is ruling the nations with the rod of iron (Rv 20:7-10). This sounds much more like something that would happen in this age, and when viewed against (2 Thes 2:1-12) an often overlooked parallel passage where a great apostasy occurs before the man of sin is revealed (v. 3), the case for a present millennial age becomes even stronger. Since there can be no people on earth in natural bodies after the judgement (which occurs when Christ comes back according to the clear texts we have seen above), these apostates can only be those same believers that Jesus raised from the dead at his return. In other words, if premillennialism is correct, then it is glorified saints follow Satan and revolt against Christ! But are we really to believe that evil is not finally conquered at Christ's return—even where Jesus is physically reigning and judgement has already occurred? Of course not, and this is self-evidently refuted by the analogy of faith, which expressly tells us that Jesus will destroy all of his enemies and hand the kingdoms of the world over to his Father (1 Cor 15:24) at his second coming. On closer investigation, we see that the events in Revelation 20 do not take place on the Earth at all, for the thrones described in that passage are in heaven, and not on the Earth. Furthermore, in a book such as Revelation, where numbers are always used symbolically, it makes much more sense to argue that the one thousand years are symbolic of the period of time between the first and second comings of Christ, rather than see them as a literal future period with a second fall during Jesus' kingly rule after the judgment. Thus the existence of evil and the supposed apostasy of glorified believers in a future millennial age poses a very difficult problem for all forms of premillennialism.

Third, and most importantly, the two-age model places its entire focus upon Jesus Christ and his second coming and not on idle speculation regarding world events. In the classical Protestant model, the next event on the prophetic calendar is the return of Jesus Christ to Earth. In fact,

Jesus may even return before you finish reading this article! The eschatological cry of Protestant orthodoxy has always been, “Maranatha; Come quickly Lord Jesus!” As with many other things in life the simplest approach may be the best. The two-age model is clear, biblical, and Christ-centered. It refuses to allow undue speculation about current events to overturn the clear teaching of Scripture. It is a shame that it has been lost to so many Christians.

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