

# The "End Times"

## A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism

A Report of the  
Commission on Theology and Church Relations of  
The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod

September 1989

Part 1

### THE "END TIMES"

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#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

#### INTRODUCTION

#### I. CURRENT MILLENNIAL VIEWS

- A. Dispensational Premillennialism
- B. Historic Premillennialism
- C. Postmillennialism
- D. Amillennialism

#### **Excursus on Seventh-Day Adventism**

#### II. ESCHATOLOGY AND MILLENNIALISM

- A. Hermeneutical Considerations
- B. The Doctrine of Eschatology
  - 1. Inaugurated Eschatology
  - 2. Future Eschatology

#### **Excursus on Resurrection of the Body**

- C. Contested Texts: Romans 11 :25-27 and Revelation 20

#### **Excursus Regarding the Jews**

#### III. AN EVALUATION OF DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

#### CONCLUSION

#### APPENDIX I: Diagrams of Millennial Views

**APPENDIX II: Exegetical Review of Additional Texts** (Isaiah 11 and 65:17-25; Ezekiel 37-48; Daniel 2, 7, and 9:24-27)

**GLOSSARY**

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

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The last two decades of our century have witnessed a growing interest in various aspects of Biblical prophecy. Sociologist William Martin of Rice University once observed that "Judeo-Christian history has seen numerous outcroppings of interest in biblical prophecy, usually in times of social upheaval, but few, if any, have been as widespread and influential as that now flourishing in conservative Protestant circles."<sup>[1]</sup> Public awareness of such end-time topics as the millennium, rapture, and Armageddon has been heightened through the preaching of television evangelists and the publication of widely-read books such as those authored by Hal Lindsey. Few perhaps would have imagined that a book beginning with the words "This is a book about prophecy--Biblical prophecy" would sell 15 million copies and that its author would be named by **The New York Times** as the best-selling author of the decade of the 1970s!

These developments, however, have caused great concern among many Christians who regard some of the currently popular teachings on the end times as highly speculative and even contrary to the Scriptures and therefore injurious to faith. At the presuppositional level, serious questions have been raised regarding the principles of Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) employed by millennialist writers in their approach to and exposition of Biblical texts, particularly in those books commonly termed **apocalyptic** (e.g., Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation). Moreover, the failure to read these texts in the context of **all** that the Scriptures teach about the last things has led to confusion and doubt regarding the content of the Christian hope. The deficiency in, and most often the absence of, sacramental theology and teaching on the means of grace in general in millennialist preaching are especially obvious to those familiar with Lutheran confessional doctrine. Equally troublesome is the failure of millennialist preachers and writers to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel.

In the context of concerns such as these and in response to a specific request of the 1983 convention of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod that the Commission on

Theology and Church Relations "prepare a study of the end times (eschatology), including millennialism, for the guidance of the church," the CTCR has prepared this report on eschatology and millennialism (1983 Resolution 3-25 "To Request CTCR to Study 'End Times'"). In the first section of this study the Commission presents a brief summary of four current views of the "millennium." Section two discusses pertinent hermeneutical principles, the doctrine of eschatology and some key texts that form the basis for millennialist teachings. The third part of the document presents a summary evaluation of dispensational premillennialism.

## **I. Current Millennial Views**

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While there are numerous variations in millennialist teaching today, a fourfold categorization has been widely accepted: (1) dispensational premillennialism; (2) historic premillennialism; (3) postmillennialism; and (4) amillennialism.[2] Of the first three categories, all of which hold to a millennium or utopian age on this earth, the most commonly held view is dispensational premillennialism. In the interest of narrowing the discussion that follows to manageable proportions and of seeking to assist the members of the Synod in their evaluation of such teaching, the Commission has chosen to focus on this more well-known and prevalent premillennialist view. Before proceeding with a more detailed examination of the various elements of millennialist doctrine, we offer the following summary of the categories mentioned above.

### **A. Dispensational Premillennialism**

Dispensational premillennialism, or simply dispensationalism, is a theological system having its origin among the Plymouth Brethren in Ireland and England in the early 19th century. This system's originator was John Nelson Darby (1800-82), one of the chief founders of the Plymouth Brethren movement. Dispensationalism arose as a reaction against the Church of England and the widely held view of postmillennialism (see part C. below).

The teachings of dispensational premillennialism on prophecy have spread widely in Canada and the United States, due especially to the influence of the 1909 **Scotfield Reference Bible** and its subsequent editions. Today, dispensationalism is by far the

most prominent form of millennialism. It is officially taught at the Moody Bible Institute (Chicago), Dallas Theological Seminary, and an estimated two hundred Bible institutes in the U.S.A. It has been promoted by television evangelists such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Kenneth Copeland, and Jack Van Impe, by independent ministries such as "Lamb and Lion" and "World Prophecy Ministry," and in dozens of paperbacks. Among the best known of these is Hal Lindsey's **The Late Great Planet Earth**, which has made its way into film.

Dispensationalists[3] usually divide God's dealings with humanity into seven distinct "dispensations": Innocence (Gen. 1:28-3:6), Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 4:1-8:14), Human Government (Gen. 8:15-11:32), Promise (Gen. 12:1-Ex. 18:27), The Law (Ex. 19:3-Acts 1:26), The Church (Acts 2:1-Revelation 19), and the Millennial Kingdom (Revelation 20). A **dispensation** is defined as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." [4] In each of these periods, a distinct revelation of God's will is dominant and tests mankind's obedience to God.

What, then, are the key elements in dispensationalist eschatology? The Old Testament, it is said, promises to the Jewish people an earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah. When Christ came, He offered this kingdom to the Jews. The Jews at that time, however, rejected Him and the kingdom. This kingdom, then, was postponed until some point in the future. In the meantime, Christ introduced the "mystery form" of the kingdom (Matthew 13) and established the church. This "parenthesis" of God's program will end at the "rapture" when all believers, exclusive of Old Testament saints, will go to heaven to celebrate with Christ "the marriage feast of the Lamb" for seven years. Then God's promised purpose for Israel resumes. During this seven-year period, a number of events will occur on earth (Revelation 6-19):

1. The "tribulation" begins, the latter half of which is called the "great tribulation."
2. The Antichrist begins his cruel reign and in the midst of the seven years he proscribes Jewish worship at the temple.
3. Terrible judgments fall on the earth.

4. A remnant of Israel (the 144,000 of Revelation 7) believes in Jesus as the Messiah and preaches the "Gospel of the Kingdom."
5. Through their witness a multitude of Gentiles is saved (Rev. 7:9).
6. Toward the end, a number of military battles take place leading up to the Battle of Armageddon.

At the end of this seven-year period, dispensationalists teach, Christ (together with the church) returns in glory and destroys His enemies. The vast majority of Israelites will be converted. Satan will be bound for 1000 years. Believers who die during the tribulation and Old Testament saints will be raised and join the church in heaven. Christ will judge the living **Gentiles** (Matt. 25:31-46). The "goats" will be cast into hell. The "sheep": and the believing Jews still living will enter the millennium in their natural bodies. They will marry, reproduce, and die. (The resurrected believers will live in the heavenly Jerusalem hovering above the earthly Jerusalem.) The millennium will be a golden age, a time of prosperity and peace, with worship centering around the rebuilt temple.

Though at the beginning of the millennium only believers will live on earth, some of their children and grandchildren will not believe in Christ. These unbelievers Satan will gather in one last revolt (Rev. 20:7-9). Toward the end, all believers who die during the millennium will be raised. After Satan's "little season," all the **unbelieving** dead will then be raised and judged (Rev. 20:11-15). The final stage will now be ushered in, during which period there will remain a distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

Three presuppositions are critical for the dispensationalist system. These basic premises may be summarized in the following way:

1. **The Distinction between Israel and the Church.** According to the dispensationalist view, throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to **earthly** goals and an earthly people, that is, the **Jewish people**; and the other related to **heavenly** goals and a heavenly people, that is, the **Christian church**. [5] The church was not foreseen in the Old Testament and therefore constitutes a "parenthesis" in God's predicted plan for Israel. In the future, the distinction between Jew and Gentile will be reestablished and will continue through- out all eternity.

**2. The Literal Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy.** The Old Testament, dispensationalist writers argue, contains many promises that God will establish an earthly kingdom involving Israel. These promises are to be fulfilled literally. The central promise to Abraham was that Abraham's physical descendants would be given the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. The Davidic covenant contains the promise that a descendant of David (the Messiah) would rule over Israel forever from David's throne, i.e., from Jerusalem. The new covenant of Jer. 31:31-34, though containing features which also apply to believers in the present "church age," is essentially a covenant for Israel. A great many passages in the Psalms and prophets are interpreted to mean that Israel will be regathered in the land of Canaan under the perfect rule of the Messiah. These promises will be fulfilled literally during Christ's millennial reign. Similarly, much of Daniel and Revelation awaits a literalistic fulfillment in the future millennium.

**3. The Manifestation of God's Glory as the Purpose of History** While dispensationalists agree that human beings are reconciled to God by grace alone through the work of Christ in history, "the soteriological or saving program of God is not the only purpose but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself."**[6]** Thus, not salvation but the manifestation of God's glory is the main theme and broad purpose of His activity in human history in each of the dispensations.

### **B. Historic Premillennialism**

In contrast to dispensational premillennialism, those who hold the historic premillennialist view argue that Christ's second advent will be a one-stage event after the tribulation. Either at this time or before, the vast majority of Jews will be converted. Believers who have died will be raised, those alive will be transformed, and all believers will meet Christ in the air and then descend with Him to earth. Christ will then slay the Antichrist, bind Satan, and set up His millennial kingdom on earth. Christ and His redeemed, both Jews and Gentiles as one people of God, will reign visibly over the unbelieving nations still on earth. People in resurrected bodies and natural bodies will

live together on the earth. Sin and death will still exist, but external evil will be restrained. The 1000 years of the millennial kingdom will be a time of social, political, and economic justice and great prosperity. After these 1000 years, Satan will be loosed in order to deceive the unbelieving nations into making a final assault against the redeemed. Satan will be destroyed, and the resurrection of the dead **unbelievers** will occur. Then will come the judgment of all, both believers and unbelievers, and eternity.

### **C. Postmillennialism**

In contrast to the above, the less common postmillennial view places Christ's second advent **after** (post) the millennium. Only then will the rapture, the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the eternal states occur. The millennium is not understood to involve a visible reign of Christ in the form of an earthly monarchy, nor is the millennial period to be taken literally as necessarily 1000 years long. In these respects postmillennialism corresponds closely to the amillennialist position (see below). But the postmillennial view does posit a recognizable millennial period, a golden age of prosperity and peace among all at the end of which Christ will return. The millennium will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity, leading to the pervasive reduction of evil and to greatly improved conditions in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres. In fact, the entire world will eventually be Christianized to the point that the Christian belief and value system will become the accepted norm for all nations. Matthew 28:18-20 will become a reality.

**D. Amillennialism** An eschatology which does not teach a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Christ may be called "amillennialist" (sometimes called "realized millennialism" because the period spoken of in Revelation 20 is now in the process of realization). Although the detailed exegesis of the pertinent texts may vary somewhat among amillennialist Christians, those who adhere to this position agree that the "thousand-year" reference in Revelation 20 is a figurative expression for the present reign of Christ which began upon His ascension into heaven and will be fully manifested at His second coming. Christ's second coming will be one event at which time He will, in the words of Martin Luther, "raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers in

Christ eternal life" (Explanation to Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). The eschatology presented in The Lutheran Confessions is clearly amillennialist (AC XVII).

### **Excursus on Seventh-Day Adventism**

Central to Adventist eschatology is Christ's second advent.[7] According to Adventist teaching, Christ entered into the holy place of the heavenly temple on Good Friday and remained there for eighteen centuries to plead His blood on behalf of sinners. In 1844 (2,300 "prophetic days" or years after 457 B.C.--Dan. 8:14), Christ entered the heavenly holy of holies to begin investigating the conduct of believers an "investigative judgment" which will last until His second advent. When people die, they become non-existent in body and soul until this second coming. Just before Christ returns, those who were responsible for His trial and crucifixion (Rev. 1:7) and the faithful members of the Adventist denomination who died after 1844 (Rev. 14:13) will be raised to see Him come. At His return Christ will destroy the beast, the false prophet, and the wicked who made war against God and His people at Armageddon (Rev. 16:12-16; 19:11-21). Satan will have the sins of the world placed upon him as a "scapegoat" and will be consigned to a desolate earth for 1000 years (Rev. 20:1-3). At the same time, all believers who died before 1844 and all non- Adventist believers who died after 1844 will be raised (Rev. 20:4-6). All believers who are still alive will be transformed, and both groups will go to heaven to rule with Christ 1000 years. During this period, Christ and the believers will rule for the purpose of investigating the lives of the unbelievers and determining the amount of suffering they will have to experience. After the millennium the wicked will be raised, they will suffer in various degrees on earth, and they will be gathered by Satan for a final assault on the heavenly Jerusalem which has just descended (Rev. 20:7-9). Following this, God will annihilate Satan, his evil angels, and all the wicked. Christ and all believers will then live forever on the new earth.