

## Historical Overview of Eschatological Thought

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A brief summary of Chapter 2 in the book entitled,  
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by Jonathan Menn

William Everett Bell reminds us of the importance of historical study for sound hermeneutics and interpretation: “The importance of a study of the history of a doctrine as a preliminary step in arriving at a proper interpretation is a generally-accepted hermeneutical principal. As Ramm points out, it is the better part of wisdom not to ignore the exegetical labors of past generations. An interpretation that is quite apart from foregoing interpretations is not necessarily wrong, but it is at least suspect. It might be said that the burden of proof falls on the innovator.”<sup>1</sup>

**The seeds of what are now called “amillennialism” and “historic premillennialism” were both present in the writings of the early church fathers**

### **The early Christian writings**

There exists a fairly sizable amount of writing of the early church fathers concerning eschatology. Those that have come down to us tend to be fragmentary. Such patristic writings generally were not prepared as systematic theologies. Rather, the prospect of martyrdom, political factors, geographical influences, the inheritance of Jewish eschatology, and responses to Gnosticism all were influences on the early fathers’ eschatological writings.<sup>2</sup> Ken Klassen also notes that “the primary concern of the Apostolic Fathers was pastoral, rather than interpretive.”<sup>3</sup> Despite differences among the early Christian writers, they nevertheless hold much in common.

### **Proto-amillennialism and proto-historic premillennialism**

The seeds of both amillennialism and historic premillennialism were present early on. Some people maintain that some form of premillennialism “was probably the

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, “Critical Evaluation,” 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> Klassen, “Reexamination of the Nature,” 9-23; see also Boyd, “Dispensational Premillennial Analysis,” 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Klassen, “Reexamination of the Nature,” 25.

dominant millennial view during the early period of the church.”<sup>4</sup> However, that is not correct. Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), himself a premillennialist, wrote concerning premillennialism that “many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.”<sup>5</sup> D. H. Kromminga states, “The evidence is uniformly to the effect, that throughout the years from the beginning of the second century till the beginning of the fifth chiasm [i.e., premillennialism] . . . was extensively found within the Christian Church, but that it never was dominant, far less universal; that it was not without opponents, and that its representatives were conscious of being able to speak only for a party in the Church. It may be added, that chiasm never found creedal expression or approbation in the ancient Church.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, Alan Patrick Boyd’s comprehensive survey of the eschatological writings of the apostolic and post-apostolic fathers until the death of Justin Martyr in AD 165 demonstrates that “perhaps seminal amillennialism . . . ought to be seen in the eschatology of the period.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Summary of the eschatology of the apostolic and early post-apostolic fathers**

The major features of the eschatology of the apostolic and early post-apostolic fathers are as follows:

\* *The “last days” are present and would unfold with the occurrence of various events, which would bring about Christ’s second coming in the relatively near future: 1 Clement 23:1-5; 42:3; 2 Clement 11:1-12:1; 14:2; Ignatius, To the Ephesians 11:1 (“These are the last times”); To the Magnesians 6:1 (Christ “was with the Father and appeared at the end of time”); To Polycarp 3:2; Epistle of Barnabas 4:3-6, 9; Didache 10:6; 16:1-8; Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 2.2.5; 3.8.9; Parable 9.12.3;*<sup>8</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 32; 49;<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, *The Shows* 30 (“But what a spectacle is that fast-approaching advent of our Lord”).

\* *The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was the result of Israel’s rejection of Christ and fulfilled prophecy: Justin Martyr (First Apology 47), Tertullian (An Answer to the Jews 13; Against Marcion 3.23; Apology 26), and Irenaeus (Against Heresies 4.4.1-3) all saw the destruction of Jerusalem as the result of*

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<sup>4</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1215.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 80.

<sup>6</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Boyd, “Dispensational Premillennial Analysis,” 91. Boyd’s conclusion is credible since, when he wrote his thesis, he was a dispensational premillennialist who “undertook the thesis to bolster the system [dispensationalism] by patristic research, but the evidence of the original sources simply disallowed this.” *Ibid.*, 91n.2. See also Klassen, “Reexamination of the Nature,” 25 (“there is no ground for the assertion that *millennialism* was prevalent in the subapostolic period ending with the year 150 A.D.”).

<sup>8</sup> Hermas later allows for a delay to allow for repentance (*Parable* 9.14.2).

<sup>9</sup> The delay in the *parousia* is to allow people time to repent and to complete the number of the just (*First Apology* 28, 45).

Israel's rejection of Christ in fulfillment of OT prophecy. Origen (*Against Celsus* 2.13), and Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.5-7), appear to be the first to explicitly set forth the view that the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy in the Olivet Discourse.

\* *Although the church was in the "last days" and the events of history were eschatologically relevant, the second coming would not be immediate, but the Roman Empire first would be broken, Antichrist would arise, and the church would have to pass through tribulation which would serve to purify it: Epistle of Barnabas 4:3-5; Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 2.2.6-8, 4.1.1-4.3.6; Didache 16:1-8; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 110; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5.25.1-26.1, 28.4, 30.4, 35.1; Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh 22, 24-25, 27, 41.*

\* *The second coming will be visible: 2 Clement 17:4-5; Didache 16:8; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 32; 64.*

\* *The second coming entails resurrection of the dead and the rapture of the living saints: 1 Clement 50:3-4; 2 Clement 9:1-6; 12:1; 17:4-5; Didache 16:6-7; Epistle of Barnabas 21:1-3; Polycarp, To the Philippians 2:1-2; 5:2 (Polycarp clearly implies that the second coming entails resurrection: "If we please him in this present world, we will receive the world to come as well, inasmuch as he promised to raise us from the dead"); Justin Martyr, First Apology 52; Dialogue with Trypho 52; Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh 24-25, 41.*

\* *The second coming brings with it the judgment of believers and unbelievers alike: 1 Clement 34:3; 2 Clement 16:3; 17:4-7; 18:2; Epistle of Barnabas 4:12; 5:7 ("after he has brought about the resurrection he will execute judgment"); 15:5; Polycarp, To the Philippians 2:1-2; Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 3.8.9; 3.9.5 (the second coming is implied since judgment comes when "the tower"—the church [Parable 9.12.1-13.2]—is completed); Parable 4.1-8 (the second coming is implied since judgment occurs in the age to come, which is "summer to the righteous, but winter to the sinners," when the fruit of "all people will be revealed"); Justin Martyr, First Apology 52; Dialogue with Trypho 32; 35; 45; 49; 117; 121; Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh 24.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Justin indicated that the second coming would inaugurate the eternal kingdom (*Dial.* 34; 36; 39; 113), and that the second coming entails the general resurrection of all men and the judgment of both the righteous and the wicked (*First Apology* 52). However, in *Dial.* 80-81 he alludes to Rev 20:4-5 and says that the general resurrection and judgment would take place after the "thousand years." He makes no attempt to reconcile the two positions. Little stress is made on the millennium, and it appears almost to merge into the eternal state. Similarly, Tertullian in *Against Marcion* 3.24 indicated that the *parousia* would result in bodily resurrection for a thousand years, after which the world would be destroyed and believers changed "into the substance of angels" and removed to heaven. However, in *Res.* 25 he indicates that the "first resurrection" of Rev 20:4-6 is "a spiritual resurrection at the commencement of a life of faith" which comes to "full completion" by "the final and universal [bodily] resurrection "at the very conclusion of all the periods" (i.e., "at the end of the world"). Again, he does not attempt to reconcile those two positions.

\* *The second coming will bring about the destruction or renewing and transformation of the earth: 2 Clement 16:3; Epistle of Barnabas 15.5; Papias, Fragment 14; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 81; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5.33.3-4.*

\* *The second coming ushers in the kingdom of God, which is a time of the world-wide rule of Christ, and rest, rule, and holiness of believers on or over the earth: 2 Clement 6:7; 11:7-12:1; 17:5; Epistle of Barnabas 6:17-19; 10:11; Polycarp, To the Philippians 2:1-2; 5:2 (Polycarp clearly implies that the second coming ushers in the kingdom: "If we please him in this present world, we will receive the world to come as well, inasmuch as he promised to raise us from the dead . . . [and] we will reign with him"); Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 34; 36; 39; 113.*

\* *The promises given to OT Israel are not taken "literally" as applying to the physical nation of Israel, but are applied to the church which has taken the place of Israel: 1 Clement 32:1-4; Epistle of Barnabas 2:4-10; 4:6-8; 6:1-19; 9:8; 10:1-12; 13:1-6; 14:4-5; 16:1-10; Didache 14:1-3; Shepherd of Hermas, Parable 9.16.1-7; 9.17.1-2; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 34; 44; 113; 119-20; 121; 123-25; 130-31; 135; 140; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5.32.1-2; Tertullian, Against Marcion 3.24; On the Resurrection of the Flesh 26.*

## **Amillennialism was the dominant eschatological position from Augustine until the Reformation**

### **Amillennial eschatology: virtually universal**

Augustine's essentially amillennial eschatology was predominant throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> The Middle Ages also became dominated by a "static" view of history. Consequently, relatively little attention was paid to eschatology since "eschatology was not really concerned with history" and "there was no sense of a dynamic movement in history."<sup>12</sup> The kingdom of God generally was seen as being "embedded in the permanent and unchangeable structure of the church."<sup>13</sup>

### **Premillennial eschatology: still alive**

Some mystical sects and reform-minded orders within the Roman Catholic Church revived or kept premillennial ideas alive. Perhaps the most important medieval eschatological writer was the founder of a monastic order, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132-1202). He rejuvenated the literal hermeneutic of Irenaeus and Hippolytus, against Jerome, Augustine, and Pope Gregory the Great (540-604). He historicized the book of Revelation, finding its symbols to refer to historical

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<sup>11</sup> Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 44; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1213.

<sup>12</sup> Holwerda, "Eschatology and History," 312.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

events implicating the whole history of the Church: past, present, and future. He also taught a literal one thousand year golden age to come after the defeat of the Antichrist.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Joachim implied that an evil pope would play the role of Antichrist, an idea that grew in the late Middle Ages and Reformation era, although such an idea had been voiced even in the late tenth century.<sup>15</sup>

### **Postmillennial eschatology: incipient**

Some Medieval ideas have certain commonalities with later postmillennialism.<sup>16</sup> The progress of the church would be gradual, but it would be sure. In fact, Erickson states, "It is likely that postmillennialism and amillennialism simply were not differentiated for much of the first nineteen centuries of the church."<sup>17</sup>

### **Amillennialism has continued to be the dominant eschatological position since the Reformation, but the Reformation era unleashed new ideas that led to the rise of other eschatological views**

During the Reformation the "magisterial reformers" (Lutherans and Reformed groups) generally followed Augustine with respect to eschatology. The "radical reformers" (Anabaptists) emphasized the expectation of Christ's earthly reign.<sup>18</sup> As a result of extremist actions by some Anabaptists, both Catholics and Protestants rejected millenarianism as heretical.<sup>19</sup> However, the Reformation set in motion events that would profoundly affect eschatological views in ironic ways long after the Reformation era itself was over.

### **The rise and decline of postmillennialism**

Even in the ancient church, some had views which contained "the germs for later fullfledged Postmillennialism."<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Gentry sees incipient postmillennialism in some of the writings of Origen (c. 185-254), Eusebius (c. 263-339), Athanasius (296-372), and Augustine (354-430).<sup>21</sup> In later centuries, the Roman Catholic Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132-1202) and others in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries held proto-postmillennial views.<sup>22</sup> Following the Reformation, John Calvin (1509-1564) held seemingly postmillennial views.<sup>23</sup> Although neither the

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<sup>14</sup> McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 137.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 100, 142-72.

<sup>16</sup> Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1219; see also at 1213-14.

<sup>18</sup> Erickson, *Contemporary Options*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Gentry, *Dominion*, 80-87.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89 see also Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 38-40; Bahnsen, *Victory*, 93-100. Calvin has never been particularly noted for his eschatology. The one NT book notable by its absence from his commentaries is Revelation. W. Gary Crampton says, "Calvin is claimed by advocates of both postmillennialism and amillennialism. . . . Some postmillennialists have called Calvin's millennial

Augsburg nor the Westminster Confessions (the basic creedal statements of the Lutheran and Reformed churches) includes an explicit statement concerning millennialism, the Savoy Declaration of 1658, which modified the Westminster Confession in accord with Congregational practice, does include an explicitly postmillennial provision.<sup>24</sup>

Postmillennialism “stepped confidence in progress, and specifically it reinforced the secular version of progress inherited from the Enlightenment.”<sup>25</sup> James Turner found that “Evangelicals expected that progress toward the millennial day would come through the same technical and scientific advances on which secular reformers pinned their hopes.”<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that postmillennialism therefore developed in a new, more secular, form—a new, just, social order—among liberals in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

Postmillennialism’s influence waned considerably, especially after the world wars and tragedies of the twentieth century showed that society, even in supposedly “Christian” countries, was in many respects not getting better. However, in recent years postmillennialism has experienced a renaissance and has largely been coupled with partial preterism in the writings of such scholars as J. Marcellus Kik, David Chilton, Kenneth Gentry, Keith Mathison, and Greg Bahnsen.

### **The rise and decline of dispensational premillennialism**

Historic, futuristic premillennialism began to gain increasing numbers of advocates and adherents beginning in the late 1700s.<sup>28</sup> A completely new and different system of futurism—dispensationalism—began in the 1830s. Dispensationalism usually traces its origins to the Plymouth Brethren movement in England. Dispensationalism embraced futurist premillennialism, a focus on Israel, and the “pretribulational rapture” of the church, as the hallmarks of its eschatology. Dispensationalism grew rapidly in popularity, especially among American fundamentalist churches. The birth of the modern state of Israel in 1948 was instrumental in the acceptance of dispensationalism.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s, even dispensationalists have recognized that various aspects of traditional dispensationalism are biblically indefensible. This has led to the rise of what is known as “progressive dispensationalism,” led by such men as Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Robert Saucy. Progressive dispensationalists have endeavored to bring dispensationalism closer to historical Christianity while, at the same time, not abandoning such dispensational *sine qua non* as the sharp

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view ‘incipient postmillennialism.’ Others refer to him as an ‘optimistic’ amillennialist.” Crampton, *What Calvin Says*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> *Savoy Declaration*, ch. 26, sec. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Turner, *Without God*, 87.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Berkhof, *Christian Doctrines*, 264; Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 131; Turner, *Without God*, 88-89.

<sup>28</sup> Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 130-39; Turner, *Without God*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> See Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 62; McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 255-56; Boyer, *When Time*, 187-95.

Israel-church distinction and the pretribulational rapture. Others have seen that effort as an attempt to “square the circle” and have left dispensationalism entirely. Grenz observes that “the dominance of this viewpoint—at least in its classical expression—may be on the wane, just as the fate of other eschatological systems in previous eras.”<sup>30</sup>

Part of the reason for the decline of dispensational premillennialism may lie in dispensationalists’ “remarkable ingenuity in adapting their message to current historical fears, especially since the 1960s.”<sup>31</sup> The Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, the Soviet Union after World War II, the founding of modern Israel in 1948, the rise of the European Common Market and European Community, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of radical Islam, Saddam Hussein and Babylon, “Y2K,” and other political and economic actors and events, all have been seen by dispensationalists as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the malevolent harbingers of the “end times.”<sup>32</sup>

However, typically when one such candidate of prophetic fulfillment passes from the scene and a new one takes its place, dispensationalists never admit (or even mention) their error in having found prophetic significance in the no-longer viable candidate. In his study of the premillenarian response to Russia and Israel since 1917, Dwight Wilson concludes, “The premillenarians’ credibility is at a low ebb because they succumbed to the temptation to exploit every conceivably possible prophetic fulfillment. . . . It is not likely that the situation will change greatly.”<sup>33</sup> One can only “cry wolf” so many times before people start questioning not only one’s conclusions but also one’s underlying theological presuppositions and methodology.

### **The contemporary situation**

The amillennial position has continued to be the major eschatological position among Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox since the post-Reformation era. Premillennialism, divided into its dispensational and historic varieties, remains the dominant eschatological view among Baptists, Pentecostals, and other Evangelicals, although Evangelicals are now looking much more favorably on amillennialism than in the past.<sup>34</sup> Postmillennialism is held primarily in the Reformed camp. Full preterism received its first systematic expression by J. Stewart Russell in his book *The Parousia*, first published in 1878. It is believed by a relatively small number but is

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<sup>30</sup> Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 63; see also Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 241-42; Gentry, *Dominion*, 38-41.

<sup>31</sup> McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 257; see also Oropeza, *99 Reasons*, 87-89 for examples of how dispensationalist date-setters are “flexible” in their calculations.

<sup>32</sup> See McGinn, *Anti-Christ*, 257-60; Gentry, *Dominion*, 39-41; Wilson, *Armageddon Now*, 216; Oropeza, *99 Reasons*, 72-112, 148-66.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, *Armageddon Now*, 218.

<sup>34</sup> See Grenz, *Millennial Maze*, 150.

being actively promoted by several authors including Don Preston, Max King, John Noe, Ed Stevens, and Gene Fadeley. Partial-preterism has been systematized by several scholars (see above regarding the coupling of partial preterism and postmillennialism), and finds acceptance among many amillennialists and postmillennialists.

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