

The Church and Premillennialism: Part Two*

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Augustine

The final decisive factor against premillennialism was the powerful influence of Augustine, bishop of Hippo (d. 430), the most influential man in the church since the apostles. The influence of Tichonius on Augustine already has been indicated. The strength of that influence is reflected in the fact that in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine cites with enthusiastic approval the rules of interpretation advocated by Tichonius in his *Liber Regularum*. Influenced by Tichonius' "spiritual interpretation of the Revelation," and also by what he regarded as obvious implications of the Fall of Rome (410) and the survival and growth of the church (as we may infer from his thesis that the church is to replace Rome as the all-pervasive factor in human society), Augustine abandoned his earlier premillennialism (*De Civitate Dei* 20:7) and embodied the views of Tichonius in his great opus *The City of God*, published in 426.

In his *Horae Apocalypticae*, Elliott gives the following summary of Augustine's interpretation of Revelation, as taken from *The City of God*:

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The millennium of Satan's binding and the saints' reigning dates from Christ's ministry, when he beheld Satan fall like lightning from heaven, it being meant to signify his triumph over Satan in the hearts of true believers. The subsequent figuration of Gog and Magog indicates the coming of Antichrist at the end of the world, the 1,000 years being a figurative numeral, expressive of the whole period intervening. It supposes the [first] resurrection to be that of dead souls from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. The beast conquered by the saints means the wicked world, its image a hypocritical profession, the [first] resurrection being continuous till the end of time, when the universal [bodily] resurrection and final judgment will take place.¹

All facets in the above summary of Augustine's interpretation of Revelation 20 are considered elsewhere in this book.² Let us here observe three facets which illustrate so well the vagaries of the allegorical method of interpretation which totally ignores the definition of language and context.

First, contrary to Augustine's assumption, the binding of Satan is identified in the Scripture, not as the liberation of "the hearts of true believers" from the power of Satan, but rather as the confinement of Satan "that he should deceive *the nations* no more till the thousand years were ended" (20:3), after which he "will be loosed from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations again" (v. 7). Second, in the chronology of the complete literary episode of which Revelation 20 is an integral part (19:11—20:15), the binding of Satan (20:1-3) *follows* the destruction of Antichrist (19:20) instead of preceding it a thousand years, as Augustine imagined. Third, Augustine's identification of the beast as "the wicked world" and the image of the beast as "a hypocritical profession" violates the identification of the beast and his image which is explicitly established in Revelation 13:1-18; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2, 10, 13; 17:11-14; 19:19, 20; 20:10.

Augustine's unwarranted assumptions illustrate how easily good men indulge in baseless and fanciful conjectures when they ignore the philological, grammatical, and contextual definitions of categorical affirmations of Scripture and lightly trip through critical Bible passages

¹ Quoted by R. C. Shimeall, *A Reply to Shedd*, New York: Henry S. Goodspeed & Co., 1873, 81.

² This was discussed in Appendix E: Revelation Twenty of Shank's book *Until*.

wearing the magic glasses and waving the wand of the Alexandrian allegorical hermeneutic.

Although Augustine abandoned his earlier premillennialism and followed Tichonius in “spiritualizing” Revelation’s prophecy of the millennium, he did not altogether abandon realistic eschatology. He retained belief in the appearing of a personal Antichrist at the end of the age as the last great persecutor of the church: “Truly Jesus Himself shall extinguish by His presence that last persecution which is to be made by Antichrist, for so it is written, that ‘He shall slay him with the breath of His mouth, and empty him with the brightness of His presence’” (*DCD* 18:53).

Augustine recognized the church as the kingdom of Christ on earth in this age, but he also recognized that in its larger dimension the kingdom will come at the Second Advent:

His kingdom will come when the resurrection of the dead shall have taken place, for then He will come himself. And when the dead are raised, he will divide them, as he himself says, and he shall set some on the right hand and some on the left. To those who shall be on the right hand he will say, “Come ye blessed.” This is what we wish and pray for when we say “Thy Kingdom come,” that it may come to us. For if we shall be reprobate, that kingdom will come to others but not to us, but if we shall be of that number who belong to the members of his only begotten Son, his kingdom will come to us and will not tarry (*DCD* 20:14).

Augustine anticipated the renovation of the earth, to be made the eternal dwelling place of the saints:

By the change of things the world will not entirely perish or be annihilated. Its form, or external appearance, will be changed, but not its substance. The figure of this world will pass away by the general conflagration. The qualities of the corruptible elements of which our world is composed, which were proportioned to our corruptible bodies, will be entirely destroyed by the fire, and the substance of those elements will acquire new qualities which will be suitable to our immortal bodies, and thus the world by becoming more perfect will be proportioned to the then improved state of the human body (*DCD* 20:16).

Augustine anticipated the coming of Elijah and the general conversion of the Jews in the last days before the Second Advent:

It is a familiar theme in the conversation and heart of the faithful that in the last days before the judgment the Jews shall believe in the true Christ, that is, our Christ, by means of this great and admirable prophet Elias who shall expound the law to them. For not without reason do we hope that before the coming of our Judge and Savior, Elias will come When therefore he is come, he shall give a spiritual explanation of the law which the Jews at present understand carnally (*DCD* 20:29).

Augustine's contemporary Jerome, another of the most influential men of the Western church, fully concurred with Augustine in his anticipation of the appearing of Antichrist at the end of the age, the coming of the Kingdom in its full dimension at the advent of Christ, the renovation of the earth to become the eternal dwelling place of God and His people, and the general conversion of the Jews just before the end of the age. All of these concerns are realistic.

With respect to the Jews, however, neither Augustine nor Jerome anticipated the national restoration of Israel to the Land, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, or the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Through allegorical interpretation, the many Bible prophecies predicating these things were "spiritualized" and transferred to the church. The sincerity of Augustine and Jerome and other great and godly men (including Origen) is not to be questioned. They were, however, completely mistaken in their "spiritual" interpretation of the prophecies concerning Israel and the Messianic kingdom and in their repudiation of the apostolic premillennialism of the early church.

Because of the power of Augustine's influence, the Augustinian eschatology became virtually universal among the churches soon after publication of *De Civitate Dei* (426). In 431 (one year after Augustine's death) the Council of Ephesus condemned belief in the millennium as superstition, and premillennialism thereafter was rapidly abandoned among the churches. Through succeeding centuries premillennialism was embraced only by occasional individuals and by certain small sects, in some cases without any well defined eschatology, and unfortunately, in certain cases attended by fanatical creations that were completely unscriptural and no part of the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church.

The sixteenth-century Reformers largely retained the Augustinian eschatology, though they gave great emphasis to the Second Advent and generally believed it was near at hand. But the sixteenth century also saw the beginning of the recovery of the premillennialism of the early church. The Reformers Piscator and Tycho Brahe were premillenarians, and the Catholic scholar Bertholdt advocated the doctrine in his *Onus Ecclesiae* (1524). In England Tyndale, Latimer, Ridley and Sandys were premillenarians, and premillennialism rapidly gathered strength. In a letter to a friend, Robert Baillie, an anti-chiliasm member of the Westminster Assembly of Divines convened by Parliament in 1543, complained that “the most of the chief divines here . . . are express chiliasts.”³ The illustrious Cambridge scholar Joseph Mede undertook to write a commentary on Revelation substantiating the Augustinian eschatology, but his study led him to premillennial understandings. His *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627) became a powerful influence for premillennialism. Lightfoot later complained that “very many” held premillennial views. On the continent the German Calvinist theologian Johann Alsted published his book *The Beloved City* (1627), which became extremely influential for premillennialism. Premillennialism continued to gather strength in the eighteenth century, both in England and elsewhere, notably Germany, and the trend continued through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Today premillennialism is widely held among conservative Bible scholars and expositors (never, of course, among liberals).

Postmillennialism

A third element entered into the controversy concerning the millennium with the publication of Daniel Whitby’s *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (1703) with his “new hypothesis” in which he proposed that the millennium is still future and will consist of a spiritual reign of Christ over the earth for a thousand years (or some extended period of time), brought about by the churches through the propagation of the gospel and the general conversion of the world to faith and obedience to Christ. The millennium will be followed by a brief apostasy and rebellion, which will be ended by the second advent of Christ and the general resurrection and judgment and the institution of the new heaven and earth. Vtringa embodied Whitby’s hypothesis in his commentary on

³ Shimeall, 89.

Revelation, in which he followed the historical interpretation through chapter 19 and interpreted 20:1-6 as the future reign of Christ from heaven over the nations on earth through the church. The new Whitby-Vitringa interpretation, known as postmillennialism, became immensely popular, especially in Britain and America. Among its ablest exponents was David Brown, whose book *Christ's Second Coming: Will It Be Premillennial?* (1849) is a comprehensive apologetic for postmillennialism and a vigorous polemic against premillennialism, still cited today by antimillenarians. Postmillennialism flourished in the climate of optimism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in the face of the harsh realities and bleak prospect of the present century many have abandoned it, most often to embrace amillennialism (which, like postmillennialism, leans heavily on allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures and is nearer the stance of postmillennialism than is premillennialism).

Despite the temporary popularity of postmillennialism, apostolic premillennialism has continued to gather strength since its revival. In recent centuries many of the most illustrious exegetes and expositors have been premillenarian, including such men as Spener, Cocceius, Bengel, Van Oosterzee, Mede, Isaac Newton, Brooks, Bickersteth, Whiston, Cunninghame, Birks, Elliott, Alford, Todd, Maitland, Burgh, Isaac Williams, Craven, Tregelles, Hoare, Nathaniel West, Fremantle, Auberlen, Bleek, Christlieb, Delitzsch, De Wette, Dusterdieck, Martensen, Ebrard, Ewald, Godet, Von Hofmann, Lange, Luthardt, Koch, Orelli, Gausson, Rothe, Volck, Jurieu, Zahn, Comenius, Stier, Burnet, Trench, Poiret, Andrews, Daubuz, H. Bonar, A. Bonar, Ellicott, Ryle, Saphir, Priestly, Stifler, Baron, Thomas Newton, Guinness, A.J. Gordon, Samuel Rutherford, Jeremiah Jones, Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, Henry, Lord, Beverly, Oetinger, Leutwein, Sander, Bertholdt, Ribera, Lacunza, Lambert, Horsley, Heber, Gill, Toplady, Molyneux, Lavater, Gilfillan, Riggerbach, Jamieson, Fausset, Cumming, Breckenridge, Seiss, Auriol, Pierson, Chapman, Weston, and others.

To be sure, there are many illustrious names among antimillenarians of all centuries past since the time of Origen, and the validity of any system of doctrine is not to be established simply by appealing to the names and reputations of men. There have been great and godly men on both sides of the long-debated question of the millennium from Origen until now. Our concern is not "who believes what?" but rather "what saith the Scripture?" We who labor in the Word and doctrine will each give

account in that Day, not for Origen nor for Irenaeus, not for good men past or present, but for our own stewardship of holy truth as made available to us through the word of the Scriptures. For this we are accountable to God, and it is an awesome responsibility. Our only peril is insincerity in our approach to the Scriptures and in our construction and propagation of doctrine, for insincerity must always be fatal to true faith. No man more concerned for the defense of his theology than for the testimony of the Scriptures is a citizen of the Kingdom or a serious candidate, no matter how comfortable and respectable his religion and “faith.” Luthardt rightly warns us against allowing exegesis to be corrupted by dogmatics. The man who does so is a dishonest scholar, an apologist for prejudice, and a traitor to holy truth. There will be no awards in that Day merely for diligence in defending theological positions and party labels. Men may in good conscience be sincerely mistaken in their doctrinal constructions, but no man not sincerely concerned for “what saith the Scripture” will see the Kingdom.

Antimillenarian Arguments

Antimillenarians endeavor to embarrass premillennialism by giving it a “bad press” at every opportunity. Many have presumed to discredit premillennialism by citing the fact that the doctrine has been embraced by various heretical sects from the time of Montanus to the present day. The association they make is factual, but the inference they draw is invalid. First, premillennialism as advocated by heretical sects and cults usually differs radically from the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church, involving perversions and accretions that make it a “distinct” article of the “exclusive” faith peculiar to “the only true church” (as cults and heretical sects usually style themselves). The heretical “premillennialism” of false sects and cults constitutes no more discredit to apostolic premillennialism than does counterfeit money to legitimate currency. True doctrines are not invalidated by the perversions of heretics. Furthermore, were cults and heretical sects to embrace premillennialism in the apostolic definition, their advocacy of the doctrine would not thereby invalidate it. To reject any truth merely because it is advocated by some who are in other respects heretical is completely absurd. To endeavor to establish “guilt by association” and to bring any doctrine into disrepute on the ground of “who believes it?” and “what else do they believe?” is theological humbug totally repugnant to anyone

sincerely committed to the authority of holy truth and an evidence of motives that are less than candid. Truth is truth, no matter who believes it or does not believe it, and no matter what else men may believe.

A favorite ploy of antimillenarians, intended to discredit premillennialism by indicating the “extremism” of the millenarian tenet, is to quote Papias’ statement about the fabulous grapes, grains, and fruits and the idyllic conditions that will prevail in the millennium:

The days will come in which vines shall grow, having each ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each twig ten thousand shoots, and in every one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give twenty-five metretes of wine . . . In like manner he said that a grain of wheat would produce ten thousand ears, and that every ear would have ten thousand grains, and every grain would yield ten pounds of clear, pure, fine flour; and that apples and seeds and grass would produce in similar proportions; and that all animals, feeding then only on the productions of the earth, would become peaceable and harmonious and be in perfect subjection to man (Book IV).

The statement is a quotation from the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (29:5), but Irenaeus (*Adv. Her.* 5:33:3) quotes it from Papias’ *Interpretations of the Sayings of the Lord* (Book 4), a collection of quotations attributed to Christ and the apostles and received through oral tradition, in which it is attributed to Jesus. Perhaps Papias or one of his informants was confused about the source of the statement. It is possible, of course, that Jesus may have made passing reference to some such saying current among faithful Jews in his day whose hopes were fixed on the coming of the Messianic kingdom. In any case, the statement is legitimate hyperbole representing the fertility of the earth, the abundant productivity of crops, and the docility of animals, as portrayed in some of the OT prophecies of the Messianic kingdom. The quotation is often cited by antimillenarians as “an example of the gross literalism of premillennialism.” Such a citation proves nothing but the inanity of those who assume that any candid auditor, either in the first or twentieth century, would mistake obvious hyperbole for reality. The rationale of the saying is lost to many. Full-bellied critics might not be so amused by “Papias’ fabulous grapes” if ever they were to experience the deprivation known by so many of the faithful poor . . . including a Galilean carpenter who, hungry, sought figs

from a wayside tree, whose companions plucked grain from a field for a simple meal as they journeyed.

Antimillenarians often cite William Miller as representative of the “extremism of premillennialists.” A godly Baptist minister and farmer with limited preparation for the ministry, Miller announced in 1818 that “in about twenty-five years” the second advent of Christ would occur. After two years of intensive study of Bible prophecies, particularly Daniel and Revelation, Miller concluded that Christ would return sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. The year passed without the Advent, and Miller and his followers were disappointed. Then, influenced by the arguments of some who taught that Christ must return on the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar, Miller announced that Christ would return on October 22, 1844. The day passed without the Advent, and Miller and his followers were keenly disappointed and embarrassed. Totally in error in his assumption that the day of the Second Advent can be forecast (despite our Lord’s declaration to the contrary, Mt. 24:36), Miller was nevertheless a devout and honorable man, honestly mistaken in his assumptions. Throughout the five remaining years of his life, he frankly acknowledged his error, advised against any further attempt to predict the date of the advent, and continued to watch expectantly for the Lord’s return.

Often cited by antimillenarians deploring “the errors of premillennialism,” Miller was not a premillennialist. He was instead an amillennialist. He expected Christ to return and summon all the dead from their graves in a general resurrection to issue in a universal judgment, to be followed immediately by the conflagration (2 Peter 3) and the establishment of the new heavens and earth and the beginning of the Eternal Age. Miller’s unfortunate date-setting proceeded from his adherence to the *historical* interpretation of Revelation (as against premillennialism’s *futurist* interpretation, which militates totally against such date-setting⁴) and his conviction that the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14 represent 2300 years, extending from the time of the command of Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25), which occurred in 457 B.C., to the time of the coming of Christ to “cleanse the sanctuary” — the earth (as he assumed), to be cleansed in the judgment, conflagration, and renewal.

⁴ Editor’s note: Some premillennialists, in fact, hold to the historical view of prophecy.

William Miller was only one of many devout men in the United States and Europe (including reputable Bible scholars) who, caught up in the Advent Movement which swept through Europe and America in the first half of the nineteenth century, embraced the novel assumption that the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14 represent 2300 years that would elapse from the command to rebuild Jerusalem to the second advent of Christ, and that the Advent would occur in 1843 or 1844. Because Miller and his followers were so outspoken, and because they set a precise date and organized themselves publicly to watch for the appearing of Christ, they suffered acute embarrassment from which some others were spared. The attempts of Miller and others to forecast the date of Christ's Second Advent have nothing whatever to do with premillennialism.

In all of history, the greatest flurry of date-setting for the Second Advent occurred in the latter years of the tenth century and early years of the eleventh century. The Augustinian amillennial eschatology, almost universal among the churches, implied that the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 (if a precise period) would end at the beginning of A.D. 1000 (if dated from the birth of Christ) or in 1033 (if dated from the date of Pentecost). The flurry of date-setting at the beginning of the eleventh century proceeded, not from premillennialism, but from Augustinian amillennialism. The Montanist, Munster, and Fifth Monarchy instances in which the Second Advent was forecast for the immediate future were occasioned, not by adherence to the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church, but by fantastic perversions of the apostolic doctrine. The charge that premillennialism is "responsible" for all historical instances of date-setting for the Second Advent is theological humbug.

It is often urged by antimillenarians that the writings of some of the fathers in the second century contain no traces of premillennialism. Such argument is an attempt to launch a kite without a string. The material we have from second-century fathers is only a minute fraction of all that was written, and no one speaks to everything in every monograph. The argument from the "silence" of some of the second-century fathers is without foundation. Shedd makes such argument in his *History of Christian Doctrine*. But he acknowledges (p. 394) that Caius of Rome was the first in the church to attack premillennialism (c. A.D. 210), insofar as historians know. If premillennialism was heretical, as Shedd alleges, why do numerous second-century sources espouse it (we have cited seven in this excursus) and no sources oppose it until the beginning of the third century (as Shedd acknowledges)? The fact that no evidence

of premillennialism is found in the writings of *some* second-century sources is without significance in view of the fact that explicit evidences are found in the writings of numerous second-century sources and that nothing is found in second-century sources against it. Contrary to Shedd's naive assumption, the evidence indicates categorically that premillennialism was securely established in the apostolic faith of the church in the second century.

Shedd's theological myopia is apparent, not only from the above considerations, but also from his assertion that "Irenaeus and Tertullian, in their writings against heretics, present brief synoptical statements of the authorized faith of the church, but in none of them do we find the millenarian tenet" (p. 394). but the absence of reference to the millenium implies that antimillenarianism was not yet an established heresy against which they found it necessary to contend. Shedd's contention that the absence of the millenarian tenet in their brief statements implies that neither Irenaeus nor Tertullian were premillenarian is totally negated by the fact that premillennialism is explicit elsewhere in the writings of both men. His whole contention is radically contrary to the consensus of virtually all eminent church historians that premillennialism was the faith of the apostolic church, virtually universal in the church in the second century, not seriously challenged until the third century, generally abandoned in the Greek Church in the fourth century, but predominant in the Latin Church until after the death of Augustine in the fifth century. Antimillenarians who argue from the "silence" of some of the early Church Fathers in the scant material available to us are snapping the trigger of an unloaded gun.

Opponents of premillennialism, who deny the restoration of Israel to the Land and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel and support their denial by "spiritualizing" the many pertinent OT prophecies, often protest that if such things were intended to be understood literally, they would have been specifically reiterated in the NT (as if Acts 1:6, 7; 3:19-21; 15:16, 17; Lk. 1:32, 33; 21:24; and Mt. 23:37-39 are not sufficiently categorical), and that the "absence" of such declarations in the NT proves that such prophecies will not be fulfilled literally. Such protest betrays a gross lack of understanding of the place the OT had in the thought, faith, life, and work of the apostles and the primitive church.

For many years the only "Bible" the church had was the OT, and it was the OT from which the apostles preached and which they expounded to the churches. Only John lived to see the last of the 27 writings which

eventually came to be known among the churches as the “New Covenant Scriptures,” and neither John nor any of the apostles had knowledge of (or perhaps even anticipated) “the New Testament” as such. Circulation and use among the churches of the various apostolic writings which eventually comprised the NT was for a long time only partial and in no way uniform, and the consensus of the churches concerning the canon of authentic apostolic monographs was a long time developing. Many writings, for a time regarded by some of the churches as apostolic, eventually were rejected. Several books eventually included in the canon of the NT won acceptance only after long dispute. By the middle of the second century lists of monographs regarded as authentic apostolic writings began to be compiled by individuals and churches, but the lists varied, and only with the passing of time became more approximate. The first precise list of the 27 books eventually included in the canon of the NT is found in the Easter letter of Athanasius, A.D. 367. In 397 the Council of Carthage declared the canon of the NT to be the 27 books now included. In all of this God was at work, not only in the writing of the apostolic monographs, but in the preservation and inclusion of 27 particular writings in the canon of the NT and the loss or exclusion of many others.

The apostles and teachers and preachers in the early generations of the church preached the great truths embodied in the NT, but they did not “preach from the NT” in the early days of the church. Their Bible was the OT, the Tenach of Israel, and there was nothing passé about it. The continuing relevance of the OT during the years of the formation of the NT is apparent in the fact that more than 1500 sentences and phrases from the OT are embodied in the NT, as cited by Westcott and Hort in their edition of the Greek NT. The continuing relevance of the OT is apparent also from the historical circumstance of the genesis and formation of the NT. Those who imagine that the NT has somehow supplanted the OT and that the OT is now passe are ignorant both of the Scriptures, of church history with respect to the use and attitude of the primitive church toward the OT, and of the total spectrum of the purposes of God in human history as the milieu for the evolution of His Kingdom in its ultimate and eternal dimension, as disclosed in the Scriptures. For the total definition of His Kingdom purpose, God has given us His word in the Scriptures of both the OT and NT, and neither canon is independent or complete or fully understandable apart from the other. The OT anticipates the NT, and the NT complements and is inextricably involved with the OT, which will

never lose its relevance. The OT and NT unite and correspond perfectly in the prophetic testimony concerning the future Messianic age and kingdom and in the total divine eschatological disclosure.

There was no need that the many OT prophecies of the restoration of Israel to the Land and the restoration of the Davidic kingdom to Israel should be repeated in the writings of the apostles, for the apostolic church already possessed the prophecies in their Bible, the Tenach of Israel. The expectation of the apostles and the primitive church was that, just as all the prophecies of the Tenach pertaining to the first advent of Messiah had found specific fulfillment in real events in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, so also the prophecies pertaining to the second advent of Messiah and all the attendant circumstances, including the restoration of Israel and the Davidic kingdom, will be specifically fulfilled in real events. Wherever the apostolic writings touch on OT prophecies concerning Messiah and the Messianic kingdom which remain to be fulfilled, they are totally consonant with the OT. While the church is in the foreground in the apostolic writings, the Messianic kingdom as defined and foretold in the Tenach is everywhere recognized and anticipated. Antimillenarians who urge the “absence” in the NT (as they suppose) of corroborations of OT prophecies of the literal restoration of Israel and the Davidic kingdom have not done their homework.

The realistic Messianic expectations of the apostolic church, held in common with contemporaneous Judaism, are precisely reflected in the NT and must be apparent to all serious Bible scholars not afflicted with the Alexandrian syndrome. Shedd, of course, with his penchant for allegory as against realism, asserts in his *History of Christian Doctrine* (p. 391) that “the testimony of history goes to show that the literal and materializing interpretation [which millenarians] put upon the teachings of Isaiah and St. John concerning the second coming of Christ was not the most authoritative one,” which is to be found instead in “the Alexandrian school, under the lead of Clement and Origen” (p. 395).

Shedd was wrong. “The testimony of history” is that the “literal and materializing” *realistic* eschatology of the primitive church, virtually universal through the first two centuries and overwhelmingly preponderant among the churches through the fourth century (as attested by virtually all eminent church historians, contrary to Shedd) was the *apostolic* eschatology and therefore the authoritative one. Shedd’s assertion that the testimony of history is that the Alexandrian eschatology is “the most authoritative one” is in total contradiction of the actual

testimony of history. As a student of church history and the history of Christian doctrine, at this point Shedd was either incredibly superficial in his survey of historical sources, or completely lacking in candor. Virtually en masse, the most eminent church historians — antimillenarians as well as millenarians — unite in rejecting Shedd's thesis. All too often "the wish is father to the thought" and men "find what they look for." An apologist for the *popular* eschatology, Shedd found *what he sought* in his survey of historical sources, though what he found is in total contradiction of the actual testimony of church history. Shedd's unfounded assumption and irresponsible assertion evidently derived merely from the fact that after Augustine the Alexandrian eschatology (modified somewhat by Augustine) supplanted the realistic premillennial eschatology of the primitive church and thus (in Shedd's opinion) proved to be "the most authoritative one." Contrary to Shedd's absurd assumption, historical development by no means constitutes a valid criterion of authenticity. Pragmatism has no place in theology for those who sincerely believe that there is indeed an apostolic "faith once for all delivered to the saints" and made known to the church in the days of the apostles, to which the church is called to be faithful "until He comes."

Contemporaries of Origen did not share Shedd's enthusiasm for the Alexandrian hermeneutic and Hellenistic antimillenarian eschatology with which Origen, the first effective opponent of apostolic premillennialism in the church, labored to infect the church. Eusebius tells how Origen (whom he greatly admired), "now more than sixty years of age" and very near the end of his life, endeavored to establish his orthodoxy in the face of the contrary opinion of his contemporaries: "he also wrote to Fabianus, bishop of Rome, and to many others of the bishops of churches, respecting his orthodoxy" (6:36). The vast majority of Origen's contemporaries, still faithful to the realistic apostolic eschatology, did not share Shedd's naive assumption that the Alexandrian allegorical eschatology is "the most authoritative one." The only "authority" for Origen's novel and ingenious Wizard-of-Oz hermeneutic and mystical Hellenistic eschatology was Origen, Clemens, Pantaenus, and Plato. Though Origen had his disciples in his day and their number grew in succeeding generations (especially after Constantine), his wildly speculative hermeneutic, with its total disregard (even contempt) for the philological, grammatical, and contextual literary definitions of the Scriptures, was long widely and vigorously opposed as a theological novelty totally inimical to the apostolic realistic literary hermeneutic

which had prevailed in the church from the beginning. Adamant opponents of Origen's neology included men of renown such as Nepos, Methodius, Apollinarius, Jerome, Epiphanius, and many others. Despite the repudiation of the apostolic premillennialism of the primitive church by the Council of Ephesus in 431 (under the influence of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*), as late as 553 several of "Origen's heresies" were condemned by the fifth ecumenical council of Constantinople. In the face of the testimony of history, Shedd's assertion that Origen's free-wheeling "tri-level" mystical hermeneutic and Hellenistic pneumatic eschatology, in radical contradiction of the apostolic "what saith the scripture?" hermeneutic and realistic eschatology of the primitive church, is "the most authoritative one" is without basis in fact and totally absurd. Shedd was wrong.

Virtually all eminent church historians, candid and objective as historians, faithfully attest the original premillennialism of the primitive church. Antimillenarian historians, however, assume that the church properly "outgrew" its original premillennialism and that such evolution constituted "progress" in doctrine — an assumption they find confirmed in their survey of the Scriptures. Their antimillenarian persuasion is "confirmed" by the Scriptures, however, only because they come to the Bible already committed to the Augustinian (or in some cases Whitbyan) hypothesis. In the study of the Scriptures, a priori assumptions firmly embraced condition men so completely as to ensure that they will find whatever they expect to find.

In the case of Origen, his enthusiasm for the philosophical system of Plato created within him the intention to find a correspondence between Platonic Hellenism and the Scriptures and to achieve a synthesis of Hellenism and Christian theology. Adapting Pantaenus' "scientific" method of interpreting Scripture and Clemen's new "allegorical" mode, Origen developed an "exegetical" hermeneutic that was totally independent of the actual literary disclosure of the Scriptures and allowed for the synthesis he sought. With his new hermeneutic he found in the Scriptures what he looked for, and in his new theology, with its Hellenistic eschatology, the apostolic premillennialism of the church had no place. His disciples brought to the Bible their Origenistic assumptions and hermeneutic mode and found what Origen had found. Following the "triumph" of the church in the Edicts of Constantine, men in growing numbers laid aside the apostolic eschatology and looked into the Scriptures to find a new eschatology that would complement what Eusebius

called “the splendor of our affairs,” and of course they found it. Since publication of *De Civitate Dei*, men have gone to the Bible to find the Augustinian eschatology, and of course they have found it. The blithe optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made it easy for men to find the Whitby-Vitringa eschatology in the Bible. It is never difficult for men to find what they look for in the Bible, for a priori assumptions afflict men with theological tunnel-vision that obscures everything except the “truth” they expect to find.

Conclusion

Are correct understandings of Bible eschatology important? To ask the question is to answer it. A correct understanding of an area of holy truth which occupies so large a portion of the total biblical disclosure cannot be unimportant.

Certainly millennial persuasions are not an index of the sincerity of a man’s faith and discipleship. The Alexandrians, though horribly mistaken in some of their assumptions and theological constructions, were nonetheless sincere followers of Christ. Origen was a man of great piety and devotion to Christ. In the persecution under Decius (250-252) he was imprisoned and tortured for his faith. He prayed to die a martyr, but was instead released and died soon afterward from his injuries (and so a martyr in reality). He suffered much for Christ. Who can question the sincerity of his faith? Who can question the faith and devotion of Augustine? David Brown, the most vigorous opponent of premillennialism in the nineteenth century, though sometimes guilty of preposterous assumptions and in the heat of theological contention often incredibly arbitrary and less than candid in his polemical constructions, was a godly man, zealous for the truth as he understood it. Eschatological understandings do not determine the sincerity of faith and discipleship and are not a legitimate test of fellowship in the household of faith, in which the rule must ever be Comenius’ dictum, “In essentials unity, in opinions liberty, in all things charity.” All men of sincere faith who “love his appearing” are brothers in the family and household of God.

But the *intention* of correct understandings of the eschatological disclosure of Scripture is an essential aspect of true faith. Unconcern for the whole area of biblical eschatology and for correct understanding implies the absence of true faith and a saving relationship with God who has “declared the end from the beginning” in the word of the Scriptures (Isa. 46:10). Men who are persuaded that God has spoken dare not be

casual about the meaning of what He said. They must press the search for true understanding, and truth discovered must be accepted. Winston Churchill said of a contemporary that “occasionally he stumbled across truth, but he always picked himself up and hurried along as though nothing had happened.” What a devastating commentary! Jesus told a parable about a man who discovered buried treasure in a field and carefully covered it over and went his way, leaving it concealed until he could buy the field. For any who “stumble across” holy truth (in any area) and “hurry along as though nothing had happened” because the truth is not compatible with their accustomed theological stance, for any who discover truth in the Scriptures and bury it again and carefully cover it over and go their way because of other considerations, the prospect can only be bleak in that Day. To play false to holy truth must always be fatal to faith. Men of sincere faith must press the search for true understandings of the eschatological disclosure of the Scriptures, and truth discovered must be accepted and proclaimed. Men of true faith, honest toward God, must live and labor in the spirit of the ancient prayer:

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,
From the laziness that is content with half-truth,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of truth, deliver us.

In a large segment of the contemporary “Church” there is no more concern for biblical eschatology than for any other facet of the faith once delivered to the saints: little, or none. With respect to the whole question of eschatology, the theological stance of many is summed up in the sneer, “Where is the promise of his coming?” “Deliberate ignorance” is Peter’s description of the stance of last-days scoffers, “religious” and secular (2 Peter 3:3ff). They are themselves part of the fulfillment of prophecy concerning the last days.

But in the Household of God — all the faithful, the church within the “Church” — there is an increasing sense of expectancy and urgency concerning the promised Advent and a corresponding concern for true definitions of biblical eschatology. The recovery of the premillennial faith of the primitive church, beginning in the sixteenth century and steadily gaining momentum, continues to spread throughout the church at an accelerating pace in these last days of the age.

Recovery of the realistic eschatology and premillennial faith and hope of the apostolic church enables the faithful to recognize the signs of the times in the total world scene and to know that the coming of Jesus and the Messianic kingdom is at hand. To the informed faithful, passing events and the shaping of the world scene make the prophetic word ever more sure, to which we do well to take heed in our hearts as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the Day dawns and the Morning Star appears (2 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 22:16; 2:25-28). More and more, the unfolding of events will confirm the prophetic word and testimony of the Scriptures, and the consummation of the age and Day of the Lord will come with a rush of prophetic fulfillments.

Soon Messiah will come, bringing judgment and justice to the earth. Soon the destroyers of the earth will be destroyed. Soon Israel's long night of exile and affliction will be ended. Soon the nations will become the possession of God's Son the King, Israel's great Son of David and Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Soon the church will enter into the triumph of her Lord to share his righteous rule over the nations. Soon the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. Soon the nations will be gathered into the kingdom of our Lord the Messiah. Soon "he that shall come will come, and will not tarry." This is the unfailing hope of the faithful, a hope that shines ever brighter in the deepening twilight of the age and against the gathering storm clouds of the accelerating clash of ideologies, nations, and blocs in the rush to Armageddon and judgment at the coming of Messiah. Our Lord's word to the faithful is "Watch!"

Harnack suggested that premillennialism "can exist only with the unsophisticated faith of the early Christians." Is there a better faith? Did not our Savior urge upon us an "unsophisticated faith," the faith of little children? (not an uninstructed faith, but a faith free of the sophistries, doubts, and conceits of the "wise"). Is there a better faith by which to live in these last days as those who "look for him" and "love his appearing"? Is there a better faith with which to meet the King at his triumphant Advent? I know of none.