

The Kingdom Through Progress or Crisis? Doing the Millennial Dance: Part One

JEFFREY FLETCHER

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate from the history of the Christian Church and from biblical theology that there is a dynamic tension between a pessimistic view of humanity's ability to bring about the will of God on earth, catastrophic millennialism, and an optimistic view of humanity's ability to bring about the will of God on earth, progressive millennialism. Further, the author proposes that, paradoxically, the mission of the Church is best fulfilled where both views come together in the teaching and ministry of the Church, in a kind of millennial dance.

One of the oldest creedal statements commonly accepted by the Church, outside of the Holy Scripture itself, is the Apostles' Creed. It is a concise statement of belief that in various forms is still in use today as a baptismal creed in many traditions.

Bettenson provides this version from the fourth century:

1. I believe in God almighty
2. And in Christ Jesus, his only son, our Lord
3. Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
4. Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried
5. And the third day rose from the dead
6. Who ascended into heaven
7. And sitteth on the right hand of the Father
8. Whence he cometh to judge the living and the dead
9. And in the Holy Ghost

10. The holy church
11. The remission of sins
12. The resurrection of the flesh
13. The life everlasting.¹

It is clear from this statement of faith that in the fourth century the Church had, as one of its foundational tenets, a belief that Jesus Christ will come “to judge the living and the dead” and that there would be a bodily resurrection leading to a life everlasting.

Eschatology is the study of “last things” which seeks to answer the question: “How will this end be brought about?” How will the Kingdom of God come into being?

Christians are taught to pray “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10, NRSV). We are told that we should “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). We anticipate a day when we will be able to sing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

It is natural for people of faith to want to know the details. Prior to Jesus’ ascension to heaven the apostles asked, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). It should be clear to any honest exegete of the Scriptures what was on the apostles’ minds here. As Buzzard notes:

The question posed by the disciples in Acts 1:6 about the restoration of the kingdom is proof positive of the messianic expectations instilled into them by their three and a half years’ instruction in the company of Jesus . . . The outlook of the Apostles is unmistakable. Their question about the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel showed that they fully expected the final establishment of the theocracy on earth. . . . this would mean the spiritual renovation of mankind “which had been the highest point of prophetic and apocalyptic expectation among the Jews.”²

¹ H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, 23-24.

² A.F. Buzzard, *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah, A Solution to the Riddle of the New Testament*, Restoration Fellowship, 1997, 51-52; quoted portion from *The Clarendon Bible, Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923, 132.

The small band of Jesus' followers maintained the predominant apocalyptic view held by the Jews of their day. Peters observes that:

It is universally admitted by writers of prominence . . . , whatever their respective views concerning the Kingdom itself, that the Jews, including the pious, held to a personal coming of the Messiah, the literal restoration of the Davidic throne and kingdom, the personal reign of Messiah on David's throne, the resultant exaltation of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, and the fulfillment of the Millennial descriptions in that reign . . . It is not denied by able Protestant or Romanist, Christian or Unbeliever that they regarded the prophecies and covenanted promises as literal; and, believing in their fulfillment, looked for such a restoration of the Davidic Kingdom under the Messiah, with an increased power and glory befitting the majesty of that predicted King; and also that the pious of former ages would be raised up from the dead to enjoy the same.³

It is now a widely accepted fact within the scholarly world that the early Christian Church maintained this Jewish-apocalyptic worldview for at least the first two centuries. Shank brings to our attention a statement made by one prominent Church historian: "The fathers expected anti-Christ to arise and reign and meet his overthrow at the personal coming of the Lord, after which the Kingdom of Christ for a thousand years would be established on the earth."⁴

Yet with all the apparent unanimity which was present in the first two centuries, it is obvious that the ensuing 1800 years has produced anything but a unified voice in its understanding of the Kingdom of God.

McClain has assembled the various interpretive ideas about the Kingdom and divided them into the following categories:

1. The National Kingdom Idea. — Associated with pre-Christian Judaism.
2. The Millennial Kingdom Idea. — Commonly known as chiliasm.
3. The Celestial Kingdom Idea. — The reign of God in heaven.
4. The Ecclesiastical Kingdom Idea. — Associated with Augustine and Roman Catholicism.

³ G.N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1884, Vol. 1, 183.

⁴ R. Shank, "The Church and Premillennialism: Part One," *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Vol. 7, no. 2, 37; referencing Sheldon's *Church History*, Volume 1, 145.

5. The Spiritual Kingdom Idea. “The kingdom of God is within you.”
6. The Moral Kingdom Idea. — Associated with Immanuel Kant.
7. The Liberal Social-Kingdom Idea. — Associated with Christian socialism of Ritschl and Rauschenbauch.
8. The Modern Eschatological-Kingdom Idea. — Associated with Weiss and Schweitzer.⁵

Each of these Kingdom ideas possesses its own nuances of meaning; there are overlapping areas, which make it nearly impossible to distinguish one idea from the other. I believe it is more helpful to see them as falling somewhere on a continuum between two ends of a spectrum. At each end of that spectrum is the proposed answer to the question: “Will the Kingdom of God come about as a result of crisis or progress in human history?”

To answer “crisis” is to have a pessimistic view of the future and humanity’s ability to bring about the purposes of God on the earth. To answer “progress” is to have an optimistic view of the future and humanity’s ability to bring about the purposes of God on the earth.

The traditional theological categories are premillennialism and postmillennialism. Erickson provides an adequate summary of their basic tenets. Concerning premillennialism he writes:

The first major feature of the premillennial system is an earthly reign of Christ that is established by His second coming . . . this earthly millennium will not come into reality through a gradual process of progressive growth or development. Rather, it will be dramatically or cataclysmically inaugurated by the second coming. . . . Only believers are involved in the first resurrection . . . the rest of the human race, the non-Christians, are not resurrected until the end of the millennium . . . all believers will reign together with Christ during the millennium, those who are alive when Christ returns and those who have died in the faith.⁶

⁵ A. McLain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom, An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1959, 7-15.

⁶ M. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977, 91-93.

Concerning postmillennialism Erickson writes:

The kingdom of God is primarily a present reality . . . [It is] the rule of Christ in the hearts of men. Wherever men believe in Jesus Christ, commit themselves to Him, and obey Him, the kingdom is present. It is not something to be introduced cataclysmically at some future time The postmillennialist expects a conversion of all the nations prior to Christ's return. . . . Postmillennialism is the expectation of a long period of earthly peace termed the millennium [and a belief in] the gradual growth of the kingdom. The millennium will end with the personal, bodily return of Christ The Lord's return will be followed immediately by the resurrection of all — righteous and unrighteous.⁷

Both premillennialism and postmillennialism believe that the Gospel must be preached, but premillennialism is pessimistic about the success of the gospel to transform our world, whereas postmillennialism is optimistic about the success of the gospel to bring about God's will "on earth, as it is in heaven." Premillennialism teaches that the kingdom of God is a future event that must be preceded by cataclysm and the second coming of Christ. Postmillennialism believes that cataclysm is not necessary, but rather, the Kingdom of God is already present and will continue to grow gradually through the preaching of the gospel, and then will end with the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

Recent scholarship has come to recognize that the traditional categories premillennialism and postmillennialism are too obscure to communicate clearly. Wessinger makes the following proposal: "To communicate clearly, scholars need to abandon the obscure terms premillennialism and postmillennialism for terms whose meanings are more readily apparent. I suggest catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism."⁸

Throughout the remainder of this article the author will follow Wessinger's proposal and use the categories catastrophic and progressive when referring to the two extremes of millennial thought.⁹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55-58.

⁸ C. Wessinger, "Millennialism With and Without Mayhem," in T. Robbins and S. Palmer, *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem, Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, New York/London: Routledge, 1997, 48.

⁹ The reader may be wondering why no mention has yet been made of what for over 1000 years has been the predominant view held by the Church, that view which was originally popularized by St. Augustine, that of amillennialism or, following the lead of Jay

As we move forward, we will compare and contrast some of the essential elements of catastrophic and progressive millennialism and select several examples of each from history to show how these views have affected the mission and ministry of the Church. We will then explore the theological underpinnings of each, and attempt to draw some conclusions with regard to the teaching of the Bible. Finally, we will see how catastrophic and progressive millennialism paradoxically work together in a kind of millennial dance. We will see through the eyes of faith development how the embracing of paradox is essential to a growing faith and the accomplishment of the Christian mission.

II. ELEMENTS OF CATASTROPHIC MILLENNIALISM

Worldview — Apocalyptic

The first element of catastrophic millennialism we will consider is its worldview. Catastrophic millennialism has an apocalyptic worldview. Christian apocalyptic traces its roots to Jewish apocalyptic writings. The first of these is the book of Daniel, which is dated anywhere from the sixth century BC (conservative) to the second century BC (liberal). Set during the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon, Daniel's apocalypse provides a vision of hope for the Jewish people. As Russell has noted:

It is a great affirmation of faith in the overruling purpose of God which could not and would not be frustrated by the devices of evil men, however powerful and tyrannical they might be. The apocalyptic literature is an example of the adage that "man's extremity is God's opportunity." It is essentially a literature of the oppressed who saw no hope for the nation simply in terms of politics or on the plane of human history. The battle they were fighting was on a spiritual level; it was to be understood not in terms of politics and economics, but rather in terms of "spiritual powers in high places." And so they were compelled to look beyond history to the dramatic and miraculous intervention of God who would set to rights the injustices done to his people Israel. The very urgency of the situation emphasized the nearness of the hour. The expression of

Adams, "realized millennialism" (J. Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970, 7-11). The answer is, Amillennialism (literally "no millennium"), which teaches that the Church is presently the Kingdom of God, possesses a combination of optimism and pessimism and, consequently, does not fit neatly into either category. The reader will be left to draw his or her own conclusions in regard to how realized millennialism fits into the millennial dance.

this belief is at times fanciful and exaggerated; but book after book throbs with the passionate conviction that all that God had promised would surely come to pass . . . It is often said that apocalyptic is a literature of despair. But this at best is only half-truth. With equal appropriateness it can be described as a literature of hope; God would vindicate his people once and for all and bring to its consummation his purpose and plan for all the ages.¹⁰

Apocalyptic is a literature of the oppressed, providing hope for those who, apart from divine intervention it would seem, have little to hope for. For this reason, an apocalyptic worldview is firmly focused on a faith in God who will intervene directly to bring an end to the injustice of humanity. Rowley notes that:

The apocalyptists looked for the unique divine initiative at the end of history, when God would not use human freedom to achieve His purpose in an act which could be regarded from the human side as man's, but when He would Himself act in a way as sole His own as His act in creation had been. To this act there would be no human side, for it would not be the act of a man.¹¹

This worldview is not limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Meissner points out:

Generally speaking, faith in a savior who is to come at the end of time is by no means alien to many religious systems, whether primitive or more culturally evolved. Its origin and persistence must rest on powerful and persistent underlying psychological motives, as well as on a variety of external conditions involving social and economic forces, along with cultural determinants — especially the prevailing religious beliefs of a given culture or nation. The desire for perfection and unalloyed happiness is constantly threatened and denied by the forces of harsh reality, but this chronic disappointment can be balanced by a twofold illusion —

¹⁰ D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964, 16-18.

¹¹ H.H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic, A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to the Revelation*, Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, Inc., 1944, 170.

that of a golden age somewhere in the distant past, and by a future-oriented hope for a return to that golden age or something like it.¹²

Those who subscribe to catastrophic millennialism are those who, for whatever social, psychological or spiritual reasons, find themselves identifying with the oppressed. They look for God to act in a direct way to reverse their lot in life by altering the world system in which they find themselves oppressed.

Attitude Toward Human Progress — Pessimistic

Those who subscribe to catastrophic millennialism have a pessimistic outlook with regard to humanity's ability to create a paradise on earth.

Peters provides us with a summary of the catastrophic millennialist view of progress: "Apocalyptic is very pessimistic about this world. History is on a downward spiral that cannot be stopped."¹³ He then gives some theological warnings against making progress a god:

The advance of secular thinking has dislodged God from the picture and replaced him with an abstract notion of progress. By losing God we also lose the ground for our hope. Even though we tend to take the doctrine of progress for granted, Rudolf Bultmann reminds us that "this belief in progress is not in accord with the Christian faith, indeed, it is opposed to it."¹⁴

Hanson gives an excellent summary of the pessimism that has led many to embrace catastrophic millennialism in the late 20th century:

To increasing numbers of observers it is becoming apparent that the dawn of a new apocalyptic era is upon us. Especially among those designated the "counter-culture," but not excluding many who continue overtly to live out their roles within the institutions of society, there is arising a profound disenchantment with the values and structures of our way of life. No longer does the optimism go unquestioned that ample education and hard work will be rewarded with all the benefits of a good life. *At the heart of the matter is the collapse of confidence in the god to which twentieth-century*

¹² W.W. Meissner, S. J., *Thy Kingdom Come, Psychoanalytic Perspectives on the Messiah and the Millennium*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995, 267.

¹³ T. Peters, *Futures Human and Divine*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 104.

Western man faithfully dedicated life and soul, Progress — a being infused with life by technology's discoveries and worshiped in anticipation of unlimited material return.

We now stand at a crossroads: a generation has lived out its life amidst the material affluence granted by Progress, and that generation has produced a group of children who look at the fruits of their parents' lifelong efforts and exclaim "vanity!"¹⁵

The pessimism to which Hanson refers is by no means a recent phenomenon. As Fuellenbach reminds us:

The apocalyptic writers display a strong pessimism about their age. The blessings of the Kingdom cannot be experienced in the present. This age is abandoned to evil and the righteous can only submit patiently to suffering in the hope of the new age to come. God remains the Lord of the world but seems to let it run its course without any intervention. The image of God becomes rather deistic. The solution to the problem of evil is relegated completely to the future coming of the Kingdom. The Fourth Book of Ezra, in particular, is shot through with a profound pessimism about the fate of humankind and creation. There is no hope for the present world or any solution to its troubles. There is a basic mistrust of human beings and their capabilities. Everything is expected from God. The all-pervasive dimension of evil led the apocalyptic writers to have little belief in God working with human beings. To that extent they seemed to believe only in God and not at all in humanity.¹⁶

Those who subscribe to a catastrophic millennialism see the world as only getting worse with the passage of time, and in fact, look for a period of human suffering beyond anything humanity has heretofore experienced. Rowley says: "They looked for the end of the world to be preceded by a time of unprecedented suffering, and by the domination of evil. For the righteous they predicted bitter persecution, and for the world at large widespread disasters, and all the suffering that human tyranny can bring."¹⁷

¹⁵ P. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic, The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, 1.

¹⁶ J. Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God, The Message of Jesus Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, 44-45.

¹⁷ *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, 171.

Swenson provides an adequate summary of this pessimism. He posits that even though we are progressing in many ways, our fallenness is progressing even more rapidly. He says:

Progress . . . can indeed make life better in thousands of ways. Economic growth and health care can alleviate much suffering. Education and social learning have proven value. International negotiations have kept us out of a world war for more than fifty years — an impressive record. But none of these things can negate the pervasive and malignant effects of fallenness. Even as they make life better, they simultaneously give fallenness thousands of new, faster, more powerful ways to express itself. None of these things can or ever will defeat fallenness. Only a power that transcends this fallen reality — only God himself can do that. Life under the tutelage of progress is getting better. The positive is growing at a rapid rate. But, at precisely the same time, fallenness is becoming more powerful: the negative is also growing at a rapid rate.¹⁸

Peters provides us with the following critique of the pessimism in catastrophic millennialism: “Pessimism leads to resignation; it ends in a nihilistic understanding of present existence. Such pessimism and nihilism destroy confidence and dampen enthusiasm. They lead to the renunciation of any responsibility on our part for the fate of the world’s course.”¹⁹

Stance Toward Culture — Hostile

Because they view the world as completely held in the grip of evil, those who view the future millennium catastrophically possess little tolerance for the culture. For them, the present world system must be opposed and ultimately defeated. Cohn speaks of this perspective toward the culture:

The world is dominated by an evil, tyrannous power of boundless destructiveness — a power moreover which is imagined not as simply human but as demonic. The tyranny of that power will become more and more outrageous, the sufferings of its victims more and more intolerable — until suddenly the hour will strike

¹⁸ M.D. Swenson and R. Swenson, *Hurting Toward Oblivion, A Logical Argument for the End of the Age*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999, 88-89.

¹⁹ *Futures Human and Divine*, 41.

when the Saints of God are able to rise up and overthrow it. Then the Saints themselves, the chosen, holy people who hitherto have groaned under the oppressors' heel, shall in their turn inherit dominion over the whole earth. This will be the culmination of history; the Kingdom of the Saints will not only surpass in glory all previous kingdoms, it will have no successors.²⁰

This hostility toward the culture has, at times, led some who view the millennium catastrophically to take up arms and commit acts of violence against the culture (see Thomas Muntzer below). At other times, they may choose to take action that is viewed with suspicion by the culture and invites violence against themselves (see the Branch Davidians at Waco). However, it is equally likely that they will respond by withdrawing from the culture by forming their own intentional counter-cultural community. The Essenes at Qumran would serve as an example of this approach. In some instances, if violence is called for, it is violence directed inward toward the community. The People's Temple of Jonestown attempted to escape from the world. They created their own community in the jungles of South America, but as the world began to close in on them, they turned their violence inward in a mass suicide. The Heaven's Gate cult is another example of this violence turned inward against the community. It is important to note, however, that these examples are the exception, not the rule. The average believer in catastrophic millennialism undoubtedly lives within the wider culture, and participates in its economic and social life to some degree, yet lives with a personal hope that someday God is going to intervene in this sin-sick society to create a better world.

Because those who subscribe to a catastrophic form of millennialism often are identified with the poor, powerless and marginalized members of the culture it is not surprising that often apocalyptic literature addresses the theme of liberation from oppressors. Collins observes that:

There are, of course, enormous differences between the view of the world advanced in the apocalypses and that of any modern liberationist. The apocalypses often address the issues of political and social liberation, but they conspicuously lack a program for effective action The visionaries were seldom revolutionaries.

²⁰ N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium, Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, New York: Oxford University Press, rev. 1970, 21.

Their strong sense that human affairs are controlled by higher powers usually limited the scope of human initiative. The apocalyptic revolution is a revolution in the imagination. It entails a challenge to view the world in a way that is radically different from the common perception. The revolutionary potential of such imagination should not be underestimated, as it can foster dissatisfaction with the present and generate visions of what might be. The legacy of the apocalypses includes a powerful rhetoric for denouncing the deficiencies of this world. It also includes the conviction that the world as now constituted is not the end. Most of all it entails an appreciation of the great resource that lies in the human imagination to construct a symbolic world where the integrity of values can be maintained in the face of social and political powerlessness and even of the threat of death.²¹

When we say that believers in catastrophic millennialism are pessimistic about humanity's ability to create a better future and that they are hostile to culture, we must be cautious to say that, in another sense, they are very optimistic about the future and very supportive of a culture, but it is a future that God will create without man's help, and it is a culture that operates under the theocratic dictums of an all-knowing creator.

Type of Religious Authorization — Prophetic

This issue deals with the question of religious power/authority. What is the primary source of power in the catastrophic millennial view? According to Bromley there are "two distinctive methods for building religious authorization, priestly and prophetic." These have to do with the relationship between the social world and the religious world, what he calls the "phenomenal world" and the "transcendent realm." What he has to say about the prophetic method of authorization is relevant to the catastrophic millennial view. He writes:

Through the [prophetic method] religion achieves power by creating discontinuity between the two domains [phenomenal and transcendent]. The incongruence between the two realms

²¹ J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination, An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*, New York: Crossroads, 1984, 215.

energizes and orients individuals and groups in the direction of contesting the legitimacy of the existing social order and distancing themselves from it.²²

Bromley continues by observing, “Apocalypticism is a radical form of organization that is most likely to be elected by groups in social locations experiencing crisis.”

In these circumstances, religious authority is granted to one who emphasizes the disparity between the social world and the religious world. Those individuals who find themselves identifying with the oppressed, those who are, for various reasons, whether psychological, social or economic, out of the mainstream of the culture, who are pessimistic about man’s ability to create the kind of society where there is justice and equality, where God’s will is done on earth, and those who are hostile to the culture, will naturally be drawn to and invest with religious authority those individuals who take a prophetic stance against the culture. Humanly speaking John the Baptist found his religious authority from the masses of Galilean and Judean peasants, not the political nobility or religious elite. It was Herod who had John’s head severed, not the populace.

Naturally, those who come speaking out against the predominant culture will find themselves reaching a far different type of follower than those who speak in terms that support the prevailing values and structures of society.

In his sociological study of mass movements from Christianity to Communism, Hoffer makes the following observations:

The discarded and rejected are often the raw material of a nation’s [a religious movement’s] future. The stone the builders reject becomes the cornerstone of a new world. A nation without dregs and malcontents is orderly, decent, peaceful and pleasant, but perhaps without the seed of things to come Though the disaffected are found in all walks of life, they are most frequent in the following categories: the poor, misfits, outcasts, minorities, adolescent youth, the ambitious (whether facing insurmountable obstacles or unlimited opportunities), those in the grip of some

²² D. Bromley, “Constructing Apocalypticism, Social and Cultural Elements of Radical Organization,” in T. Robbins and S. Palmer, *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem, Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, 34.

vice or obsession, the impotent (in body or mind), the inordinately selfish, the bored, the sinners.²³

It does not take a very careful reading of the Gospels to recognize that those who responded to the prophetic calls to the Kingdom of God, first uttered by John the Baptizer and then by Jesus of Nazareth, fit quite neatly into Hoffer's categories. Little has changed over the past two thousand years.

Meissner, speaking as a Doctor of Psychiatry as well as a theologian, makes the following observations about certain types of catastrophic millennial communities:

The message and its sometimes fanatical expression are all too similar to clinically paranoid delusions. Such views inevitably run counter to the reality-oriented views of others. It is little wonder then that millenarian groups have been regarded as the product of mental disturbance, or have been labeled as politically subversive or religiously heretical. The response of the rest of the social organism to the initiatives of the cult is social ostracism and persecution. The cult is thus defined as socially marginal, as a form of suspect and rejected minority that is stigmatized on the basis of its beliefs. They are "cognitive minorities" that violate the moral norms and theological consensus of the dominant religious, and at times sociopolitical, environment.²⁴

The result of this should be clear. An individual or a community which feels marginalized and out of step with the dominant culture, and perhaps feeling isolated and powerless, is drawn to that type of religious authority who takes a prophetic stance against the predominant culture. The group forms a strong sense of community and sets itself against the culture. The culture responds by further isolating and marginalizing the group, causing the group to look to one another for support and meaning, thereby creating a greater polarity against the culture. Throw in a highly narcissistic and charismatic authority figure, and there is a recipe for another Waco or Jonestown — or even worse.

²³ E. Hoffer, *The True Believer, Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, New York: Harper and Row, 1951, 25.

²⁴ *Thy Kingdom Come*, 313-314.

Orientation Toward the Kingdom of God — Future

It should be self-evident that those who adopt a catastrophic millennial view are primarily oriented toward the future kingdom of God. Since they have abandoned any hope of progress toward achieving God's will on the earth within the boundaries of this "present evil age," they are oriented to the future. They find their hope best expressed in the Hebrew and Christian apocalypses: Daniel, Revelation, Jesus' apocalypse in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. They find it expressed in Paul's comforting words about the "dead in Christ rising first" in 1 Thessalonians 4, and in his teaching about the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Their hope is in the Parousia, at the revealing of Christ, when he comes to "gather together his elect from the four winds," when "the dead in Christ shall rise first," when we shall rule with Christ as a "kingdom and priests."

Catastrophic millennialists find strong biblical support for their views in places like Matthew 8:11: "I tell you, many will [future] come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." They are drawn to parables like the one found in Matthew 13:24 where someone sowed good seed, and then an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. The gathering of the wheat would not take place until the harvest. The catastrophic millennial view is hoping for the future, when God will humble those who are exalted and will exalt those who are humbled. They long for the day when those who in this "present evil age" are marginalized and powerless will be "seated with Christ in heavenly places."

Ultimate Goal — To Escape from This World

Because they are oriented to the future, those who espouse catastrophic millennialism aren't particularly interested in changing this world, because, according to their belief system, all of our efforts to bring about change won't be successful and won't matter. For them, the world is a time bomb, getting ready to self-destruct. Their desire is to escape before it goes "boom!" Their understanding of mission is to warn others about the upcoming evacuation and get them to make a reservation on the "train to glory." As one bumper sticker aptly states it, "In case of Rapture, this vehicle will be driverless."

This “escapism,” when it is shared by a community, can lead to some interesting group dynamics, as Meissner observes:

Millennarian movements are daring attempts at the creation of alternative realities and meaning systems. Millenarians claim to be in possession of a truer, more insightful understanding of the nature of reality than is available to those who acknowledge conventional reality. The millenarian says, in essence, “The rest of you are wrong; things are not what they appear to be. We have access to a source of truth (usually based on revelation of mysticism), which enables us to perceive the true nature of things. Others haven’t learned of this truth or as a consequence of ‘sin,’ ‘bias’ or accident of birth are not able to acknowledge this truth.” . . . It is important not to miss the narcissistic underpinnings of such group processes. The narcissistic need to contain all truth and purity in association with oneself demands a Manichean solution: all truth and good (the narcissistic ideal) is on my side, all error, falsehood, and evil on the other side. As Grunberger comments, “. . . we often find that the peculiar violence the narcissist projects on to his adversary is an expression of his serious but secret doubts as to the validity of his own system (as is the contempt he displays and the alienation he uses to maintain his contemptuous attitude).”²⁵

We now bring this brief overview of catastrophic millennialism to a close. Next, we turn our attention to that form of millennialism at the opposite end of the crisis-progress continuum: progressive millennialism.

III. ELEMENTS OF PROGRESSIVE MILLENNIALISM

Worldview — Utopian

In 1516 St. Thomas More wrote a now classic story of an island civilization that was unlike any place on earth. It was an orderly, structured society where everyone in the community was provided for. There were ample workers who devoted themselves to agriculture. There were skilled craftsmen who plied their trade. But there was always ample time for rest and leisure. Never did anyone work in excess of six hours per day. Everyone received adequate medical care. Families lived together in orderly and harmonious ways. No single household had more than 16 nor less than 10 occupants. Those families that naturally exceeded 16 transferred excess

²⁵ *Ibid*, 312-313.

members to smaller households so that all were balanced. Young people were taught that strict morality and sexual purity had to be maintained prior to marriage, lest one forfeit their right to marry at all. More had a name for his fictional civilization: Utopia.

In his introduction to More's *Utopia*, Surtz writes:

If Utopia is the best form of commonwealth, it must necessarily look to the well-being of all its citizens, and for the latter the height of well-being is pleasure. In this renewed emphasis on the joys of mortal life and the delights of earth, the Utopians are typical Renaissance men, who juggle the philosophies of apparently classical Epicureanism and of so-called medieval Christianity until, a happy reconciliation and balance being achieved, they can have the best of both worlds. The individual Utopians pursue personal pleasure until it conflicts with social or religious duties, that is, with the just claims of God or fellow citizens.²⁶

Following the fall of Rome in the sixth century, the church of Rome grew in ascendancy and political power throughout Europe for the next millennium. Following the lead of Augustine, most viewed the church of Rome as the natural successor to the city of Rome as the seat of worldly power as well as heavenly power. It was during this time that the Kingdom of God came to be considered as one and the same with the church of Rome.

But then came a time of Renaissance, a time of change. With the emergence of the Protestant Reformation, the Church would never be the same. It was during this time that new ideas began to flourish. There was a sense of hope and progress. And there began to emerge a vision of man creating a truly Christian world. More's work reflects this hope, and others shared it. As the Renaissance grew into times of enlightenment in the 18th century, this Utopian vision continued to grow, on into the 19th century, into the new world.

²⁶ T. More, *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz, S. J., New Haven/London: Yale University Press, first pub. 1516, xiv.

According to Boettner:

[Progressive millennialism] is that view of the last things which holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the holy spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the millennium This is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is to last an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand years. The changed character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind.²⁷

Whereas cataclysmic millennialism springs from an apocalyptic worldview, which has its origins in those who are on the margins and fringes of the culture, progressive millennialism emerges from the standpoint of humanity's perceived empowerment. It must be noted that the source of this empowerment is not man, but God. The progressive millennialist does not consciously start with the humanistic assumption that "man is the measure of all things" and build a worldview based on human potential. Rather, he sees God as being the author of humanity's hope. However, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus did significantly influence the thinking and attitudes toward human potential for development and progress. Progressive millennialism had existed for many years in various places and in various forms; however, it wasn't until this period that it arose and eventually became the predominant eschatology of the post-Reformation Church.

Attitude Toward Human Progress — Optimistic

In our examination of catastrophic millennialism we observed along with Meissner that:

[the catastrophic millennial] view usually reflects a degree of pessimism about the potentiality of human efforts to achieve meaningful change, and implies the necessity for cataclysmic upheaval in order to attain social transformation. . . . In contrast

²⁷ G. Ladd, H. Hoyt, L. Boettner, A. Hoekema, *The Meaning of the Millennium, Four Views*, ed. R. Clouse, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977, 117.

[progressive] millennial thinking tends to see the coming of the millennium as the fruit of Christian forces now at work in the world, and that the second coming of Christ will take place when this process has reached its fulfillment.²⁸

The kingdom of God, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, does not require some cataclysmic crisis introduced from outside into the world by God at some future date. The kingdom of God is a process that was begun with the first advent of Christ and will continue to grow and flourish throughout all time, until finally Christ will come to reward the faithful and punish the wicked.

Both catastrophic and progressive millennialists believe that the great commission commands us to "preach the gospel to all nations." However, they do so with different ends in mind. Catastrophic millennialists believe that their responsibility is to warn men and women to "flee the wrath to come," because we live in a deterministic universe where God has already decided when and how He plans to destroy this present earth and create a new one.

Progressive millennialists understand their mission differently. Speaking as a representative for this movement Boettner explains:

We believe that the Great Commission includes not merely the formal and external announcement of the gospel preached as a "witness" to the nations, as the premillennialists and amillennialists hold, but the true and effectual evangelization of all the nations so that the hearts and lives of the people are transformed by it. That seems quite clear from the fact that all authority in heaven and on earth and an endless sweep or conquest has been given to Christ, and through him to his disciples specifically for that purpose. They were commanded not merely to preach but to make disciples of all the nations. It was no doubtful experiment to which they were called, but to a sure triumph. The preaching of the gospel under the direction of the Holy Spirit during this dispensation is, therefore, the all-sufficient means for accomplishing that purpose.²⁹

²⁸ *Thy Kingdom Come*, 311.

²⁹ *The Meaning of the Millennium, Four Views*, 118.

It should be noted here that progressive millennialists are by no means monolithic in their understanding of the role of progress and who originates the possibility of progress.

One strand of thinking with regard to progress has its origins in evolutionary theory. As a species we will continue to evolve as we learn new ways to apply science and technology. One of the chief proponents of this theory is the French paleontologist-priest, Teilhard de Chardin. His marriage of some form of Christian faith to Darwinian science has helped to create a generation of scientists who are attempting to find new ways of bringing together faith and science. This makes for some fascinating speculation. Consider the possibilities suggested by Matt:

How will the universe end? It depends if it is closed or open. If it is open, the universe will expand forever — and die a slow, cold death. Eventually, all the stars will go out, one by one. Black holes will merge with one another, swallowing everything in their path. Or, the universe might turn out very differently, if it contains enough matter: If the average density is at least one hydrogen atom per ten cubic feet, then the universe is closed. This means that the mutual gravitational attraction of all the matter will be strong enough to halt the expansion of the universe and cause it to begin to contract . . . All matter and energy will contract to an infinitely dense point in what is known as the “big crunch.” If we live in what cosmologists call an oscillating universe, then the singularity of the big crunch could give birth to another big bang . . . Life will not necessarily come to an end. . . . Even if all matter disappears into energy, consciousness may be transferable to a different medium, perhaps resolving itself into light.³⁰

Keith Ward, in a similar vein, offers four possible scenarios for the future:

1. We will destroy ourselves or be destroyed in the near future. Nuclear war, a comet striking the earth, are just some of the possibilities. If that happens, a Christian view would be that God will create a new form of existence, a resurrection world, in which all who have lived on earth will enter into a fuller world of

³⁰ D. Matt, *God and the Big Bang, Discovering Harmony Between Science and Spirituality*, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996, 168-169.

existence. This is an example of catastrophic millennialism.

2. We might devise some form of genetic engineering that will enable humans to evolve into a higher life form. This would be a realization of Chardin's thought that humanity will evolve into a higher form of existence — what he called a “noosphere” — and eventually realize the kingdom somewhere in this universe. Clearly a case of progressive millennialism.

3. Machines will supersede humans, by artificial intelligence and true consciousness. The human species would die out and be replaced by other forms of consciousness (a scenario considered in the movie, *The Matrix*). This is another example of progressive millennialism.

4. Human beings may make contact with aliens from some other planet. Perhaps a loving God has a greater purpose for humanity beyond this world; maybe there are other worlds to be evangelized. Yet another example of progressive millennialism.³¹

For those who have a non-evolutionary worldview these scientific hypotheses sound more like the imaginative speculations of science fiction than legitimate possibilities for the future. Yet, for those whose approach to progress is within the context of evolution, these are certainly options.

There is a second strand of progressive millennialism, which is much more rooted in traditional, conservative theology and is not necessarily dependent upon an evolutionary worldview. While optimistic about human progress, its optimism is firmly rooted in God's activity through the Church in the proclamation of the gospel and the ministry of the Church. This strand of progressive millennialism believes that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church, that the Church is fully empowered, not only to preach the gospel, but also to make disciples. This type of progressive millennialism was in its heyday in the 19th century (see below). However, after two world wars in the early 20th century and with the development of the atomic bomb and man's ability to destroy himself and the planet, some of that optimism began to wane. C. S. Lewis makes the following observations about the possibility of progress:

Progress means movement in a desired direction, and we do not all desire the same things for our species . . . I care far more how

³¹ K. Ward, *God, Faith and the New Millennium, Christian Belief in an Age of Science*, Oxford: OneWorld, 1998, 208-210.

humanity lives than how long. Progress, for me, means increasing goodness and happiness of individual lives. For the species, as for each man, mere longevity seems to me a contemptible ideal . . . As a means to an end [science] is neutral. We shall grow able to cure, and to produce, more diseases — bacterial war, not bombs, might ring down the curtain — to alleviate, and to inflict, more pains, to husband, or to waste the resources of the planet more extensively. We can become either more beneficent or more mischievous. My guess is we shall do both; mending one thing and marring another, removing old miseries and producing new ones, safeguarding ourselves here and endangering ourselves there.³²

As we noted above, Bultmann was a critic of faith in progress. He has the following to say:

The faith in progress which in the 19th century became a universal world-view, replacing the Christian faith in large measure, is the faith in progress without limits. This progress takes place as though of itself through the development of science and technology and by the progressive mastery over nature rendered possible by them. Its meaning is the bringing about of ever-increasing welfare. This belief in progress is not in accord with the Christian faith, indeed, it is opposed to it.³³

Yet, as we shall see below, the optimism of progressive millennialism continues to find ways of renewing itself. It is playing itself out in both liberal and conservative extremes of the Church in Dominionism and Liberation Theology.

Stance Toward culture — Cooperative

Progressive millennialism has a much more cooperative attitude toward culture than does catastrophic millennialism. Whereas catastrophic millennialists seek to withdraw from this evil world system in which they live; making them more passive with regard to culture, progressive millennialists take a much more cooperative stance toward culture. They are about the business of spreading the Kingdom of God throughout all levels of

³² C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock, Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958, 311-312.

³³ R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, New York: Harper and Row, 1957, 70.

society. Consequently, they will take a more active role in areas like education and the arts. The catastrophic millennialists' slogan would be "come out from among them and be ye separate" while the progressive millennialists would be "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

Progressive millennialists are far more likely to be involved in the political process. They see themselves not as marginalized victims, but rather as empowered to work with and through the system. Catastrophic millennialists see the world as very temporal; society will not last, and it can be destroyed without a moment's notice, "in the twinkling of an eye." Progressive millennialists are looking at growing a kingdom that will endure for "a thousand years."

With regard to social action progressive millennialists are much more motivated to be involved in ministries to the whole person: health care, community development, housing ministries like Habitat for Humanity. Progressive millennialists are far more likely to build hospitals for the sick and houses for the poor. This is not to suggest that catastrophic millennialists do not ever do these types of ministries; they do, but for different reasons. A catastrophic millennialist will feed a hungry person, in order that he might gain an opportunity to save his soul from the coming day of wrath. A progressive millennialist is much more likely to be motivated to feed a hungry person in order to spread the life of the Kingdom of God.

Type of Religious Authorization — Priestly

What is the primary source of power in the progressive millennial view? According to Bromley:

[Priestly] religion attains its power by creating continuity between the transcendent realm and the phenomenal world. Positing fundamental congruence between the two domains creates authorization for the existing structure of social relations, thereby energizing and orienting groups and individuals by aligning them closely with the ultimate ordering of the cosmos.³⁴

Those individuals who are most apt to be drawn into a progressive millennial community will be particularly responsive to religious authority that seeks to help them find spiritual values within the present world. They will value those priestly leaders who provide them with resources to find

³⁴"Constructing Apocalypticism," 34.

meaning in this realm. They want to see how the spirit of God is operative within this world and how their gifts and resources can be used to promote the spread of the kingdom. They want to cooperate with God's unfolding plan to make His will be done "on earth, as it is in heaven."

Leadership within this community will be actively engaged with the culture. The proclamation of the word in these communities will have a strong social content. Their leaders will challenge them to be active participants in the community.

Those who are oriented toward progressive millennialism will have difficulty understanding and appreciating apocalyptic language. They will not be very responsive to messages of catastrophic millennialism unless they can see how those texts and images can be integrated into their existing belief systems.

Orientation Toward the Kingdom of God — Present

Progressive millennialists have a strong sense of the present-day rule of Christ. They find support for their views of the kingdom in the parable of the mustard seed. Although it begins small, almost imperceptibly small, it grows and becomes not just a shrub but rather a tree, providing a place of shelter for the birds. The kingdom begins small and grows larger. Likewise, in the parable of the flour and leaven, the kingdom begins small, but grows larger, doubling, tripling in size — growing exponentially. They hear Jesus saying "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15) and they believe it. They hear Jesus commissioning his disciples to go out and say to the people "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9).

When progressive millennialists are confronted by apocalyptic texts that seem to speak of a future kingdom of God, they are likely to understand those texts as mythical or metaphorical. Beasley-Murray says:

Are not the concepts of the coming of God, the Day of the Lord, the kingdom of God, and the parousia all mythical symbols that have to be translated into a wholly different key for us moderns who no longer think in terms of myth? Bultmann believed so and offered a solution in existentialist categories. Norman Perrin agreed with this approach and sought to fortify it by contributing literary researches into the nature of symbolism. He draws attention to Philip Wheelwright's distinction between "steno-symbols" and "tensive" symbols. Wheelwright explains that "steno-language" is

closed language, consisting of static terms with one to one meanings — the language of science and logic; it arises by habit and prescription. Tensive language, on the other hand, is open language, the language of poetry and liturgy, reflecting the struggle that belongs to organic life. Perrin proposes that apocalyptic language be classified as steno-language on the grounds that its symbols are “hard,” bearing fixed meanings. He argues that Jesus used the concept “kingdom of God” as a tensive symbol, but his followers replaced it by apocalyptic steno-symbols that misinterpreted his intention. It is therefore a mistake, in Perrin’s opinion, to assume that the proclamation of the kingdom of God by Jesus refers to a single event experienced universally at one and the same time; it is instead a proclamation that claims to mediate ‘an experience of God as king, an experience of such an order that it brings the world to an end.’ The transformation of this proclamation into instruction on the cataclysmic coming of the Kingdom of God such as we find in . . . the eschatological discourse of Mark 13 entails a transformation of the living symbolism of Jesus to an apocalyptic symbolism, says Perrin, and this is a distortion of Jesus’ message.³⁵

Operating out of a hermeneutic that views apocalyptic language as primarily symbolic, they have no difficulty dismissing those passages that give their more literal-minded, catastrophic millennialist brothers and sisters reason for preparing now for the end.

Ultimate Goal — The Transformation of the World

What is the ultimate goal of the progressive millennialist? It is to bring about a transformation of this world. The great commission is to “go and make disciples of all nations,” and progressive millennialists believe that in making disciples, they are making communities of the kingdom that slowly and steadily will transform this age into the kingdom of God. Christ is ruling now as king over his kingdom. His kingdom began very small, as a mere mustard seed with a few apostles and a handful of other disciples. But the influence of that little group has spread throughout the world and continues to spread into all the nations. And with the proclamation of the Word of God, the ethics of the kingdom are being spread as well. Little by little in the lives

³⁵G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 339.

of believers, churches, communities and nations, God's will is being done "on earth as it is in heaven."

The gospel will continue to transform this world wherever it is preached and wherever God's people use their gifts to touch human need, to provide adequate health care, education, housing, community development, art and music, government. This golden age of God's kingdom on the earth will continue to spread until "this good news of the kingdom [is] proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come." At the end, when we have done the work God has assigned to us, Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead, to separate the "sheep from the goats," and then the people of God will experience life everlasting.