

The Return of Christ

An Introduction of the
Christian and Missionary Alliance's
Belief on Second Coming of Jesus Christ

by

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CONTENTS

PART 1

THE C&MA POSITION ON THE RETURN OF CHRIST	5
1. INTRODUCTION	5
2. ARTICLE 11	5
3. IMMINENT	6
4. PERSONAL, VISIBLE	8
5. BEFORE THE MILLENNIUM (PREMILLENNIAL)	9
6. THE MILLENNIUM	10
7. THE BLESSED HOPE	14
CONCLUSION	15

PART 2

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM	16
1. INTRODUCTION	16
2. THE MEDIATORIAL KINGDOM	17
3. THE REJECTION OF THE MEDIATORIAL KINGDOM	19
4. THE CHURCH	19
5. THE GREAT TRIBULATION AND THE RAPTURE	20
6. THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM	21
HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM	22
1. INTRODUCTION	22
2. REVELATION 20:1-6	23
3. OTHER PASSAGES	23
4. PURPOSE	24
5. TRIBULATION	24

POSTMILLENNIALISM	25
1. INTRODUCTION	25
2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD	26
3. THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL	26
4. PROGRESS	27
5. THE MILLENNIUM	28
6. THE RETURN OF CHRIST	28
AMILLENNIALISM	29
1. INTRODUCTION	29
2. APPROACH TO PROPHECY	29
3. REVELATION 20	30
4. THE RETURN OF CHRIST	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY	34

PART 1

THE C&MA POSITION ON THE RETURN OF CHRIST

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to set out the C&MA's views on the return of Christ which forms the basis of Article 11 of the C&MA doctrinal statement. Then it seeks also provide some background material to the Alliance's position by looking at the four major view positions on the return of Christ namely premillennialism, both dispensational and historic, amillennialism and postmillennialism. Premillennialism is presented as the view that informs the C&MA's belief about the return of Christ while the other two are given by way of information regarding viewpoints that are or have been held by a large number of Christians.

While the Alliance understanding of the return of Christ is firmly premillennial it has not, as a denomination developed and elaborated upon this position in a manner comparable to dispensationalism. In other words the inquirer seeking to find out what the Alliance believes about the return of the Lord must content himself with what is found in Article 11 and the last sentence of Article 2. The C&MA has not, as a denomination, aligned itself with either dispensational premillennialism or historic premillennialism, even though proponents of these viewpoints will be found within the Alliance fellowship. Nor has the C&MA committed itself to a position on the nature of the millennium or whether the rapture of believers (1 Thess 4:16,17) will be before or after the Great Tribulation.

So the Alliance, within the framework of a belief in the premillennial return of Christ, leaves quite a number of the details of the Lord's return to the decision of the individual. Given that such details are issues over which Christians still continue to differ, it may be that there is more than a little wisdom in the position the C&MA has chosen to adopt.

While elaborating on Article 11 in what follows I have occasion to refer to opinions on some of the details about Christ's second coming not explicitly mentioned in the Article. These should be seen for what they are, namely the author's personal view on certain aspects of the Second Coming, and not the official position of the C&MA.

2. ARTICLE 11

With regard to the second coming of Jesus Christ, Article 11 of the C&MA Doctrinal Statement reads,

The second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is imminent and will be personal, visible, and premillennial. This is the believer's blessed hope and is a vital truth which is an incentive to holy living and faithful service.

3. IMMINENT

The meaning of 'imminent' as given in *Webster's third international dictionary* is, "ready to take place: near at hand: impending" (1971: 1130). To say that Christ's return is imminent is to say that it is ready to take place, that it is near at hand or impending. Those who have accepted the doctrine of imminency have generally fallen into two camps. There are those, dispensational premillennialists, who hold that Christ could come at any moment, right now even, and there are no signs to be fulfilled before he can return. Then there are those, for example, historic premillennialists, who believe the doctrine of imminency does not preclude the necessity for certain signs to be fulfilled before Christ can return, such as the preaching of the gospel to all peoples. These have understood imminency to mean Christ's return is "impending" understanding that term in a way that does not mean "at any moment".

It might be helpful at this stage to make a few comments about the way in which biblical eschatology or scriptural views about the end of history, are interpreted. Basically there are four approaches to interpreting biblical eschatology: the preterist, the historicist, the futurist and the idealist. The preterist sees the events of the last times occurring at approximately the same time as they were being written about. The historicist believes that while the events recorded in Scripture concerning the end of history were still future at the time when they were written, they have occurred within the history of the church. The futurist believes that no prophecy regarding the end times has yet been fulfilled so that, for example, the prophetic events depicted in Revelation are all to occur in the future. The end-time events are future to us as they were to those who originally wrote about them. The idealist approach understands biblical eschatology symbolically rather than referring to events that actually occur in history. The idealist in looking at, for example, the book of Revelation, does not see a portrayal of actual events that have occurred or will occur but rather the graphic portrayal of timeless truths, "truths about the nature of reality of human existence that either are continuously present or continually recur" (Erickson 1977: 30).

Albert Simpson, founder of the C&MA, held a view of imminency that allowed for some signs to be fulfilled before the Lord came back. Simpson was more of a historicist than anything else yet not completely so for he held there were still some prophetic events to be accomplished. He believed that most of the signs preceding Christ's return had been fulfilled and in fact there remained only two to be accomplished, namely the establishment of Israel as a nation and Matt. 24:14, the preaching of the gospel to the whole world (Pyles 1986,p.35). Although he used the word 'imminent' he did not believe the Lord would come at any moment. In an editorial in May,1894 he wrote:

We cannot truthfully say that we are expecting the instant return of the Lord Jesus, but rather, that we are looking for it as an imminent event, that is, as one impending and rapidly approaching (Pyles 1986,p.35)

So instead of understanding imminency as meaning 'at any moment' Simpson chose to see it as meaning 'impending', 'rapidly approaching'. In the May 1882 edition of *The word, the work and the world* he defined imminency as "an ever impending event" (Sawin 1986: 15). In *The fourfold gospel* (nd: 76) he wrote, "An event may be liable to occur at any moment for years, and yet be long retarded."

Even if we look at the parables of Matthew 24 and 25 where Jesus speaks about his return and exhorts his followers to "keep watch, because you do not know what day your Lord will come" (Matt. 24:42), words which those who believe in an "any moment" return take to vindicate their position, we find that Jesus' words cannot mean "any moment". This because in the parables of the wicked servant (Matt 24:45-51), the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), and the talents (Matt 25:14-30) there was a significant delay during which certain things happened. Imminency does not then have to mean at 'any moment' but can be understood in a way that allows some events still to take place. Christ's exhortations to watch for his coming simply mean "that the number, nature, and duration of the intervening events are unknown" (Erickson 1977: 141).

Simpson believed his historicist interpretation supported this understanding in that there were only two signs left to be fulfilled. Simpson was certain, in light of the return of Jews to Palestine that was then occurring, that Israel would soon emerge as an independent nation again. In this Simpson was correct except that it occurred later (i.e. 1948) than he anticipated. That left only Matt 24:14 to be fulfilled, hence his missionary urgency.

If Matt 24:14 is to have any reference to Christ's return then imminency must mean something other than 'at any moment' for there are still many people groups (ethne) to hear the gospel in a meaningful way. Simpson thought the number of language groups was relatively small but there are now estimated to be around 17,000 distinct people groups who have no Christian church. Further Simpson saw Matt 24:14 fulfilled when each ethne had 'a testimony established in every tribe and nation' (Pyles 1986: 36). Simpson (nd: 80-81) wrote,

the Holy Spirit has not undertaken to convert the world, but to call out of it the church of Christ and prepare a people for His name, and when this is done and all who will accept Jesus as Saviour have been called, converted and fully trained the time for the next stage will have come, and Jesus will come...a large majority of the missionaries now in foreign lands believe and rejoice in the blessed hope of the Lord's coming...and (are) cheered by the blessed thought that their task is not to convert the whole human race, but to evangelise the nations, and give every man a chance to be saved if he will.

But the influence of the church growth movement and the unreached peoples concept on missions strategy has given rise to the understanding that 'people are not truly having the gospel communicated to them until it is being communicated by a church indigenous to their culture' (Pyles 1986: 42). This however takes time and it is clear from the number of unreached people groups that much remains to be done. Thus any concept of imminency must take account of Matt. 24:14 and all that is involved in its fulfilment.

For those pre-millennialists who hold to a pre-tribulation position, imminency means 'at any moment' (Pyles 1986: 42). Such a one is Bailey (1981, pp.41,42) who wrote, 'The coming of the Lord Jesus for His people is imminent; that is simply, it could happen at any time. There are no signs to be fulfilled before Jesus comes to receive His own.' 'The imminence of the coming of Christ means that at any minute now the Lord may come!'

Simpson took a broader understanding of the meaning of imminency and so, I believe, must we. Imminency must be understood in a way that allows for some events to still take place. Further, as Pyles (1986: 42) points out,

any moment imminency cuts the nerve of missionary motivation as it should arise out of Matt.24:14, for it leaves the no relation between the church's obedience and Christ's appearing.

4. PERSONAL, VISIBLE

An important text in this regard is Acts 1:11 (others are: Matt 24:30; Mk 13:26; Lk 21:27; 1 Th 4:16; Rev 1:7). Christ will return to earth as he left it, a man. The man Jesus who walked the streets of Jerusalem and the hills of Galilee, who preached the good news of the kingdom of God, healed the sick, cast out demons, ate and drank with sinners, who was crucified and raised from the dead, this man will return again to earth. The principle difference will be in the nature of the body that he will return with. Prior to his resurrection his was a physical body, but after his resurrection it was a glorified resurrection body (cf 1Cor 15:35 ff). This is the body which Christ will return to earth with.

Thus his second coming is not a spiritual coming like such occurred on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the small group of believers (Acts 2) and as has occurred during times of revival since then. Nor can Christ's second coming be likened to his coming to reside in a new believer at the time of conversion. The man Christ Jesus will return in the same way that he left, personally, bodily.

Christ's second coming will be visible, that is he will be seen for who he is (cf Rev 1:7). He will be recognised as Jesus Christ, Son of God, the crucified and resurrected Messiah. As Jesus himself warned (Matt 24:5,24), we find today many false Christs. But sooner or later, despite their deception of some, they are seen for who they really are. There will be no mistaking Jesus when he returns. In fact so clearly will he be recognised for who he is that many, in terror, will call for the mountains to cover them and hide them from his awesome presence (cf Rev 6:16).

5. BEFORE THE MILLENNIUM (PREMILLENNIAL)

[a] Arguments For a Premillennial Return

Leaving aside dispensational eschatology and its views regarding the Old Testament covenants and the second coming, the main evidence for a premillennial return of Christ is to be found in Rev 20:1-6. These verses picture Christ returning to establish his kingdom of righteousness for thousand years, hence the (Latin) term millennium, meaning one thousand. While the word 'millennium' is not itself found in the NT, it is used to denote the thousand year (Gk: *chilia ete*) reign of Christ over earth (Rev 20:5). Rev 19:11-21 depicts Christ victoriously returning to earth and 20:1-6, the binding of Satan (v.3), followed by the first resurrection of Christians and their reigning with Christ for thousand years (v.4). Simpson, in commenting on Rev 20, said these verses provided,

the most obvious reason for believing that (Christ's return) precedes (the millennium)...there can be no question that here the coming of the Lord precedes and introduces the millennium. His coming is minutely depicted (in chapter 19) in the whole procession from heaven to earth. Then follows the conquest and punishment of His earthly foes, the binding of Satan, the resurrection of the saints, the reign of the risen ones and the thousand years. (Simpson nd: 75)

[b] Signs of Christ's Return

Simpson adopted the historicist view of the book of Revelation, that is the visions of that book had already occurred and could be identified in history. The futuristic school of thought, by way of contrast, held that the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 represented periods in church history and the events depicted in chapter four onwards were yet to be fulfilled.

As an example of his historicist thinking, Simpson identified the Anti-Christ, the little horn of Daniel 7 and the beast of Revelation 13, with the papacy. He calculated from the decrees of Emperor Phocas in AD 607-10 which established the supremacy of Rome, by adding 1260 years, the days of the beast (Rev 13:5), to arrive at 1867-70 when as a result of the Franco-Prussian war 'the Pope was virtually put under house arrest by Italian patriots' and so 'fell forever from his throne and the little horn, as a political system, ceased to exist' (Pyles 1986: 33). Hence for Simpson the Anti-Christ had already come. The rebellion had begun a long time ago 'and the man of sin has sat in God's temple already the full time of the prophetic cycle' (cf 1 Thess 2:3,4). 'The Papacy has fulfilled almost all the lineaments of its marvellous portrait' (Simpson nd: 84).

Simpson further believed that the little horn mentioned in Daniel 8:9-12 was Islam. In this regard the important dates for Simpson were AD 637, when after the capture of Jerusalem by Muslims, the Mosque of Omar was erected on the site of Solomon's temple and the 'Abomination of desolation' set up, and 1914-18, that is World War 1, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which signified the end of the little horn of the East (Pyles 1986: 33-34). With regard to the second date, Pyles (1986: 33) regarded Simpson's calculations as 'confusing'. Simpson observed that Muslim power had risen and then declined 'and the waters of this great spiritual Euphrates are being dried up every day to prepare the way of God's kingly people' (Simpson nd: 85)

Other signs which Simpson believed had been fulfilled included the ten-nation confederacy (the ten toes of Daniel's image [Dan.2:41,42; cf Rev. 13:1]), the little horn of the West and the great apostasy (Pyles 1986: 35), the Jews returning to Israel, the growth in intellectual knowledge and the movement of peoples (cf. Dan 12:4), the decline in morality and the lukewarm and worldly nature of the church of his day (Simpson nd: 85-86).

But Simpson refused to set specific dates preferring to allow some flexibility in case he had not properly understood God's calendar. He commented in 1910 in *The Christian and missionary alliance*, 'God does not count time by chronology but by spiritual conditions, and a single year may count as much for the Lord's appearing as a century' (Pyles 1986: 34).

Matthew 24:14

Matthew 24:14 was, for Simpson, the last sign to be fulfilled before Christ returned. This verse led Simpson to believe that Christians were not to sit passively waiting Christ's return but were, by strenuous missionary endeavour, to actively hasten it. Hence there was, for Simpson, an urgency to the task. The preaching of the this gospel in the light of Matt. 24:14, was for 'a witness, to utter the warning cry, to leave the nations without excuse, and "to gather out of them a people to His name' and complete 'the fullness of the Gentiles.'" Then shall the end come and the fulfilment cannot now be very far in the future' (Sawin quoting Simpson, 1986: 16).

With regard to Christ's return and the Great Tribulation, see the sections on Dispensational Premillennialism and Historic Premillennialism.

6. THE MILLENNIUM

[a] Literal

The millennium was to be a literal kingdom of thousand years with Christ personally reigning as king. It is to this kingdom that the last sentence of Article 2 of the C&MA Doctrinal Statement refers, 'He will come again to establish His kingdom of righteousness and peace'.

Bailey (1981: 137-138) argues that the early church believed in a literal thousand year reign of Christ and it was only with Augustine and his *City of God* that the idea of a spiritual reign and the millennium as the period between Christ's first and second advents, became popular. Augustine's work influenced both Roman Catholic and Protestant Theology, especially Reformed Theology. Under this view the resurrection of Rev 20:4 is spiritual, that is, it refers to the new birth. Likewise the binding of Satan is a spiritual event. It was not until the late Seventeenth century that premillennial views began to re-emerge.

Simpson attacked the postmillennialism of his day for it spoke of a kingdom without a king and virtually rendered meaningless Christ's exhortation to his followers to 'watch' for his appearing. If there was to be a millennium of peace and righteousness before Christ returned why should Jesus urge us to 'watch'? Simpson also criticised the view that Christ's coming referred to his coming to reign in the hearts of new believers as they responded to the gospel. He also rejected the Roman Catholic version of amillennialism which held that the Kingdom of God began with the ascension and is now active in the church (Pyles 1986: 38). This view, for Simpson, was deficient on three accounts. Firstly, it made the Kingdom of God of this world, in sharp contradistinction to Christ's own words when he said, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Secondly, it confused the kingdom with the church (see Matt 13). And thirdly, it spiritualised the reign of Christ which Simpson saw as historical with social implications.

[b] The Millennial Population

According to Bailey (1981: 140-143) the population of the Millennium will be made up of converted Jews, including one-third of Israel which will survive the Great Tribulation and turn to Christ [see Zech 13:7-9], Gentiles, among whom will be those who are converted during the Millennium, and the church that Christ brings with him after the Great Tribulation. It can be seen that Bailey adopts a pre-tribulational rapturist viewpoint.

From his understanding of Rev 20:4, Bailey (1981: 142) believes that there will be three different groups of Christians reigning during the millennium. Firstly, there will be those on thrones who will be involved in judgement (see 1 Cor 6:23, however the question arises as to whether this refers to the final judgement); secondly, martyrs; and finally, those who because they refused the mark of the beast consequently lost their lives. Bailey (1981: 142) thinks that this last group of Christians 'are a special group of martyrs from the last half of the tribulation'. However he offers no support for this contention and his distinction between martyrs and those who are killed because they reject the mark of the beast is strained and not borne out by this verse which is better understood as referring to two groups, those on the thrones and the tribulation martyrs.

[c] Millennial Conditions

Scripture does not give a lot of detail about the nature of Christ's millennial reign; in what follows the views of some Alliance writers about the characteristics of the millennium are presented.

(1) Justice The millennial reign of Christ will see a righting of wrongs, the correction of the injustice which is so prevalent in this present age at all levels of society and between nations, and the establishment of righteousness worldwide. Righteousness will characterise culture, government, business, industrial relations, education and daily life (Bailey 1981: 145-6). Bailey believed that Jesus would

bring about a total social revolution. There will be no poverty, no inequity, no race hatred during the millennium. There will be no unfairness between management and labor during the millennium. There will be proper relationships among people in business and education and every social affair because of the government of the Lord Jesus Christ over the earth (Bailey 1981: 146).

Simpson was very sensitive to the matter of economic oppression and spoke out against injustices experienced by working people and against 'modern business methods ... hoarding ... immense wealth, luxury' (Simpson quoted in Pyles 1986: 39). For Simpson only premillennialism offered any real hope for justice on earth. 'That day will bring the righting of wrongs. That day will pay us the long-deferred hire. That day will put us in our right place and displace the sons of pride' (Simpson, *The practical hope of the lord's coming, The christian and missionary alliance*, Aug. 27, 1910: 306, quoted in Pyles [1986: 39-40]).

Simpson did not think amillennialism with its spiritualization of the kingdom offered the same hope of justice as did premillennialism. And as for postmillennialism, he considered its expectation of worldwide evangelism leading to a period of righteousness as impractical. Simpson has been criticised here for a lack of faith in the sovereign ability of God to accomplish such a feat through a mighty working of his Holy Spirit in widespread revival across the world (Pyles 1986: 37).

Although Simpson's Gospel Tabernacle engaged in a wide variety of social ministries to the poor, over a period of time these declined till he was left 'with evangelism as the sole kingdom activity.' (Pyles 1986: 40). This turning away from philanthropy was due in part to the influence of other pre-millennialists and in part due to his reaction to the social gospel of liberalism.

(2) Evangelisation Prior to the millennium the task of evangelism is testimony so as to give everyone at least one chance to respond to the gospel and to see some from every people-group converted. Simpson saw this as achievable and believed that viewing evangelism in these terms would keep us from discouragement with the actual results of evangelism (Pyles 1986: 41).

But evangelism would not cease in the millennium, in fact it would be a time of unprecedented evangelism, particularly by Jews converted in that time (Pyles 1986: 41). Simpson (nd: 81) believed 'the coming of Christ is not going to suspend missions work. It will bring the most glorious and complete system of evangelization earth has ever seen. And under its benignant influence the heathen shall all be brought to Jesus; all nations shall be blessed in him'. Whatever else we may think of Simpson's view of this particular characteristic of the millennium it is instructive to note Isaiah's words, looking to a future time, 'for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Is 11:9b).

(3) Revival In referring to Zech 14:16-21 Bailey (1981: 150) wrote 'the kingdom age will begin with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit' far exceeding that of the day of Pentecost. Revival will sweep the whole earth and worship and holiness will become a characteristic of the millennial age. No longer would there be a split between the sacred and the secular (Bailey 1981: 51); all activities would be God-directed.

(4) Government According to Bailey (1981: 145-7), Christ will rule the earth during the millennium (Zech 14:9) and will do so from Jerusalem (see Zech 14:17,18; Jer 3:17,18; also note Deut 28:1,13; Is 14:1,2). In an intriguing commentary on Rev 21:16-27 he wrote (149):

the divinely constructed space colony fifteen hundred miles square is to be the residence of the church saints during Christ's reign ... from it they will have ready access to the earth. The New Jerusalem will hover over the earth and from it Christ will reign for the one thousand years.

[d] Purpose

Premillennialism has been criticised on the grounds that the literal millennium it believes in is superfluous, serving no real purpose in the plan of God. G E Ladd (1977: 39-40) sought to counter this argument stating that it had a definite part to play in God's purposes, namely the public demonstration of Christ's power and glory. While on earth, before his resurrection, Christ lived in a state of weakness, the ultimate example of this being his crucifixion at the hands of his enemies. He was the man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief, the lamb which before its slaughterers did not open its mouth. However during his millennial reign his power and his glory, veiled during his earthly life, will be clearly visible to all.

[e] Israel

Among premillennialists opinions vary as to the role that Israel will play in the millennium. Dispensationalists believe that Israel will again become a theocratic state and they look to the millennium for the fulfilment of many of the Old Testament prophecies not fulfilled at Christ's first coming, especially those relating to Israel. They expect that the old Temple worship with its priestly service will be restored including the offering of sacrifices. Jesus will rule the world from Jerusalem sitting upon the literal throne of David.

Historic premillennialists such as G E Ladd do not place as much emphasis on national Israel, arguing that the church has become the spiritual Israel and 'many of the prophecies and promises relating to Israel are now fulfilled in the church' (Erickson 1977: 103). As Christ's perfect sacrifice did away with the imperfect sacrifices under the old covenant there can be no thought of a restoration of the sacrificial system. There is however, still a place for national Israel within the purposes of God (see Rom 11:15-16) but its spiritual restoration will lie in turning to Christ.

7. THE BLESSED HOPE

This Second Coming of Christ 'is the believer's blessed hope ... which is an incentive to holy living and faithful service.' The Christian has a future full of hope. Humankind will not be cataclysmically blown away in a nuclear holocaust nor does the Christian expect the emergence of a 'brave new world' as depicted by Aldous Huxley in his book of the same name. Rather the Christian looks forward to Christ's second coming, to the establishment of His kingdom of peace and justice and to a time when the 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.'

Realising this Christians should be:

- motivated to 'holy living' knowing that they will have to give an account of their lives to Christ; and
- stirred to "faithful service" realising that according to Matt 24:14 there is a link between the spreading of the gospel and Christ's return.

Thus the Christian does not sit passively waiting for Jesus to come again. He or she is actively cultivating a Christ-like life, seeking that holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Further, the Christian is actively promoting the gospel of the kingdom of God in all its fullness realising that the kingdom is both a present reality and a future event, the timing of which is linked by God to the proclamation of the gospel.

CONCLUSION

In bringing this first part to an end we can sum up by saying that while the Alliance has taken a premillennial stance on the return of Christ it has not at a denominational level developed this position along dispensational or historic Premillennial lines. In part this reflects the nature of the C&MA, namely a missionary movement that has become a missionary denomination that stills remains committed to the missionary vision of its founder, A B Simpson. When asked once when he thought Christ would return Simpson drew the questioner's attention to Matt 24:14, 'And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.' It cannot be said that the Alliance is not interested in theology for it holds that what we believe affects what we do. However its energies have been directed not so much to the systematic and extensive development of a theology of Christ's return but to the outworking of the implications of that return for missions and Christian living, centred on some basic beliefs it holds regarding the coming of the Lord.

PART 2

In this second part I plan to briefly survey the major views on the return of Christ and the millennium namely dispensational premillennialism, historic premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism. The aim here is to provide the reader with some background against which he or she may better understand the C&MA's premillennial position, positively in terms of those views which influence it and negatively, with regard to those beliefs which run counter to it.

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

1. INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics

Dispensational premillennialism claims as one of its notable features is its approach to interpreting the Scriptures or its hermeneutical principle. It seeks to interpret Scripture literally except where the result would be ludicrous. The words and statements of Scripture are to be understood in their normal, customary sense while allowing for the use of figurative language. This literal hermeneutic is also to be applied to prophecy which should be expected to be fulfilled literally. Dispensationalists argue that if the prophecies concerning Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally we can expect that the prophecies regarding his second coming will likewise be fulfilled literally (Enns 1989: 389). Statements in Scripture about Israel, especially in the New Testament, are also to be understood literally, as referring to national Israel and not to be spiritualised to refer to the church.

The dispensational approach to hermeneutics is to be understood against the background of the higher criticism of the last century with its rationalistic presuppositions which denied, amongst other things, the possibility of the supernatural. The so-called higher criticism was gaining influence when dispensationalism arose and in this context it sought to interpret the Bible in a way that allowed it to speak for itself on its own terms without the enervating influence of rationalism.

This method of interpretation followed by dispensationalists, for the evangelical, seems to be entirely acceptable and in fact adherents of the four major millennial views would support it. The issue is not really that dispensationalists are literalists and therefore good and the rest are non-literalists and therefore bad. All views subscribe to a hermeneutic that seeks to interpret Scripture in their literal and normal sense while allowing for figurative expressions. What distinguishes the four viewpoints is the decision as to what should be interpreted literally and what should not. For example in Rev 20:1-6 should the thousand years of verses 3 and 4 be understood as thousand calendar years as with dispensationalism, or figurative of a long indeterminate period of time as with amillennialism? How should we look at the chain that is used to bind Satan (v.1)? So the issue is one of degree rather than absolute divisions.

Dispensationalism tends to be more literalistic than the other millennial positions. But it is far from consistent in this matter as is seen in its typological approach to various sections of Scripture such as the Song of Solomon which is seen by many dispensationalists as a picture of the relationship of Christ and his church (Erickson 1977: 116).

Israel and the Church

Another feature of dispensational premillennialism is that Israel is always to be distinguished from the church. Dispensationalists regard this distinction as essential for a correct understanding of Scripture. 'The term Israel always refers to the physical posterity of Jacob; nowhere does it refer to the church' (Enns 1989: 389). In the New Testament there are, after the church has been established, references to Israel as a nation [see Acts 3:12; 4:8,10; 5:21,31,35; 21:28; Rom 10:1]. Further, the New Testament makes a distinction between the church and the Jewish people [see Rom 9:3,4,4; 1 Cor 10:21]. Finally God has made some unconditional promises with Israel which because they are unconditional he will fulfil for Israel as a nation.

Dispensations

Dispensationalism divides the history of God's dealings with men and women into dispensations or periods of time characterised by some aspect of the purpose of God for humankind. Generally seven dispensations are distinguished: Innocency (before Adam); Conscience (Adam to Noah); Promise (Abraham to Moses); Mosaic Law (Moses to Christ); Grace (Pentecost to the rapture); and the Millennium (Rowdon 1988: 200).

2. THE MEDIATORIAL KINGDOM

Dispensationalism understands the kingdom of God not to refer to a particular geographic location such as Israel but to the rule or reign of God over his creatures (Hoyt 1977: 72). However a distinction is made between the universal kingdom which refers to the extent of God's rule and the mediatorial kingdom which refers to the method of God's rule, that is through a mediator. Within Scripture the kingdom of God may refer to the universal kingdom [Psalm 103:19], the mediatorial kingdom [Dan 2:44] and it may even refer to the church, 'which partakes of certain characteristics of the universal kingdom, and the mediatorial kingdom.' (Hoyt 1977: 73-74). So Paul can refer to Christians as those who have been 'rescued ... from the dominion of darkness and brought ... into the kingdom of the Son ...' [Col 1:13]. The church participates also in the future mediatorial kingdom as it rules and reigns with Christ in this kingdom. (Hoyt 1977: 73-74).

The mediatorial kingdom began with Moses at Mount Sinai and the enactment of the covenant between God and his people after he had delivered them out of Egypt. God ruled his people through his servant Moses who acted as mediator between God and his people, representing God to the people [Deut 9:24-29] and the people to God [Num. 14:1-19]. The mediatorial kingdom was, after Moses and Joshua, ruled by prophet-judges until Samuel and the establishment of the monarchy. It reached its peak with David and Solomon and thereafter went into a long period of decline resulting in first of all, the northern kingdom Israel being taken into captivity by the Assyrians [2 Kings 17] and then later, the southern kingdom, Judah suffering deportation at the hands of the Nebuchadnezzar [2 Kings 24,25].

But this is not to be considered the end of the mediatorial kingdom for it will be restored with the return of Jesus Christ [see Acts 1:6]. However the restored mediatorial kingdom will not have the imperfections of the former kingdom for its ruler will be Christ and most of its inhabitants will have been born again [Ezek 11:17-20] and as a consequence will readily obey their divine king.

Dispensational premillennialism believes that many Old Testament prophecies speak about this restored mediatorial kingdom. Hoyt (1977: 77-78) argues that the prophets had a dual focus in their prophecies which encompassed both the near and distant future, both Israel as it then existed and the long off, from when the prophecy was first given, mediatorial kingdom. The fulfilment of the nearer aspect of the prophecy was a confirmation that the latter aspect would likewise be fulfilled. For example, the prophecy of Nathan concerning king David [1 Sam 7:1-16; 1 Chron 17:1-14] exhibits this dual focus with David being the near focus and Christ, who is the descendant of David and in whom it is said is the complete fulfilment of the prophecy, being the far focus.

Old Testament prophecy regarding the restored mediatorial kingdom indicates that it will be a literal kingdom with its centre in Jerusalem [Obad 12-21] and ruled by a real king [Is 33:17]. This king will be both human [Is 32:1-2 AV; 11:1; Dan 7:13] and divine [Psalm 2:7; Is. 9:6; 40:9,10]. The 'kingdom will be a revival and continuation of the historic Davidic kingdom [Amos 9:11, see Acts 15:16-18]' built around a 'faithful and regenerated remnant of Israel' (Hoyt 1977: 78-79).

This kingdom will not be introduced gradually but suddenly, supernaturally and cataclysmically amidst cosmic upheaval (Hoyt 1977: 79). Christ will rule over the whole earth through resurrected saints comprising the church [1 Cor 6:2; Rev 3:21; 20:6], Old Testament saints [Ezek 37:24-25; Dan 7:18,22,27] and martyrs from the Great Tribulation [Rev 20:4]. Israel will as a nation turn back to God and will be pre-eminent among the nations of the earth [Deut 28:1,18; Is 41:8-16] (Hoyt 1977: 81). The temple will be re-established in Jerusalem and the blood sacrifices restored along with the Levitical priesthood or at least the descendants of the Levite Zadok (Pentecost 1958: 517 ff).

It can be seen from the above discussion that the dispensational premillennial view of the millennium does not rest on Rev 20:4-6 as it does with historic premillennialism. Quite the contrary, for the dispensationalist looks to the Old Testament, particularly the covenants and the prophecies regarding Israel, for information regarding the millennium. It is in the Old Testament that the Dispensationalist believes God had recorded for us much of what he is going to do in restoring the kingdom to Israel [Acts 1:6].

3. THE REJECTION OF THE MEDIATORIAL KINGDOM

Dispensationalists believe that Christ offered the mediatorial kingdom to the Jews while he was on earth but they rejected it. The kingdom that Jesus preached about was the mediatorial kingdom of Old Testament prophecy; he certainly gave no indication that his understanding of the kingdom was in any way different from that prophesied in the Old Testament (Hoyt 1977: 85). The prophet Isaiah spoke of Christ's coming [Is 40:3 see Matt 3:3] as well as saying that Christ was the light of this kingdom [Is 91,2 see Matt 4:12-17] and the angel Gabriel declared to Mary, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" [Luke 2:32] (Hoyt 1977: 85).

However despite his teaching, Christ and his kingdom were rejected and in fact the king was put to death on a cross. As a result of this rejection the mediatorial kingdom was put aside for a time and Christ, to continue his purposes established the church. Thus the mediatorial kingdom took on a 'mystery' form and will continue to do so throughout the period of Israel's rejection until Christ comes to re-establish it.

4. THE CHURCH

It is through the church that Christ continues to work out his purposes after Israel rejected his offer of the kingdom. The church is a 'parenthesis' between the sixty ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel [Dan 9:25-27] and during this time no prophecy has been or will be fulfilled. It is a mystery being completely unforeseen or mentioned in the Old Testament (Erickson 1977: 120). In addition to its being a mystery only revealed after Israel rejected the kingdom, it is also distinguished from anything else that God has done by being built upon Christ's resurrection and ascension and brought into being by the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

5. THE GREAT TRIBULATION AND THE RAPTURE

Prior to Christ's second coming to establish the mediatorial kingdom there will be a period of intense turmoil and suffering worldwide which has been called the Great Tribulation. This is a time of the outpouring of God's wrath upon the earth in a way not known before and is identified by dispensationalists as the seventieth week of Daniel [Dan 9:27]. Calculating from 444 BC when the prophecy was thought to be given and taking one week to equal seven years, so Daniel 9:24 is understood, 69 weeks or 483 years brings us to the death of Christ in AD 33. In an interesting insight into how dispensationalists can be inconsistent in their application of a literal hermeneutic, it is suggested, without any support from the text of Daniel, that there is a gap between the sixty ninth and seventieth weeks which corresponds to the church age (Enns 1977: 391).

The Great Tribulation is a time of the judgement of God in which his wrath is poured out on an unbelieving world, a time of unprecedented trouble, destruction and desolation (Enns 1977: 392). This is vividly portrayed for us in Revelation 6 to 19 which according to dispensationalists refers to the Great Tribulation. It is a time for Israel [Dan 9:24], because of this severe discipline to turn back to its Creator and look to the King it had previously rejected. At the end of the Tribulation Old Testament saints and Tribulation martyrs will be resurrected and, along with Christians, will rule with Christ during the millennium.

The church will not go through the Great Tribulation for how could it suffer the wrath of God if it is, as Scripture declares, the bride of Christ and the object of his love? The judgement of unbelievers and the repentance of Israel has nothing to do with the church which is already "in Christ" and has consequently passed out of judgement [John 3:18]. The appearance of believers before the judgement seat of Christ that Paul speaks about [2 Cor 4:10] has to do with rewards rather than punishment. Rather than go through the Great Tribulation the church will be raptured. This is described for us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. There Paul says that those Christians who have died, the 'dead in Christ' will be resurrected and along with those Christians who are alive at the time, 'will be caught up together...to meet the Lord in the air' [v.17]. These Christians are then taken by Christ to be with him while the Great Tribulation unfolds on earth.

Dispensationalism believes in two comings of Christ, a secret coming FOR his church, the rapture, and a very visible coming WITH his church to establish the millennial kingdom.

The rapture will come suddenly, without any warning. Thus there are no signs that forewarn of the rapture, it could occur at any time. The signs depicted in such passages of Scripture as Matthew 24 and parallels, are not for the church but for Israel and refer to the second coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. It is in this way that dispensational premillennialists hold to an 'any moment' doctrine of imminency.

6. THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

At his second coming Christ will establish the millennial kingdom with himself as ruler in Jerusalem sitting upon the throne of David [Luke 1:32,33] and with David as his regent (Enns 1977: 393). It is in the millennial or mediatorial kingdom that the unconditional covenants will find their fulfilment.

The Abrahamic covenant promised Israel a land, a posterity and a ruler, and a spiritual blessing [Gen 12:1-3]; the Palestinian covenant promised Israel a restoration to the land and occupation of the land [Deut 30:1-10]; the Davidic covenant promised a ruler for the throne of David [2 Sam 7:16]; the New Covenant promised Israel forgiveness - the means by which the nation could be blessed [Jer 31:31-34] (Enns 1977: 393).

Dispensationalists differ over the relationship of the New Covenant to the church and Israel. J N Darby (1800-1882), one of the early developers of dispensational theology (Erickson 1977: 112) taught that the new covenant applied only to national Israel and not the church. C. I. Scofield, author of the Scofield Reference Bible, on the other hand, held that the new covenant had a two-fold application, to Israel in the future and to the church in the present (Pentecost 1958: 121,123).

The millennial kingdom will be characterised by peace, the absence of poverty, personal well-being and joy. As the curse [Gen 3:17-19] will be removed there will be a perfect physical environment with dramatic increases in the productivity of the land and physical wholeness as sickness is cured (Pentecost 1958: 489). According to Pentecost (1958: 3 ff.) only saved people will enter the millennial kingdom. Israel will be saved as will Gentiles living at the time of Christ's return; Gentiles will become Israel's servants during the millennial age (Pentecost 1958: 508). Because its inhabitants are all saved, righteousness, truth, justice and obedience to the divine will be the features of that age.

At the end of the millennium Satan will be released [Rev 20:7] and lead a brief but fierce rebellion against Christ. Nations will be deceived revealing that although their inhabitants were saved they were not perfected (Pentecost 1958,p.549). An army will be formed and march on Jerusalem but they are destroyed by fire from heaven [Rev 20:9]. Satan is overthrown and cast into the lake of fire [v.10]. Then 'the unsaved dead of all ages are resurrected and judged at the great white throne' (Enns 1977: 394). They too are cast into the lake of fire which is their final and eternal destiny [Rev 20:15].

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM

1. INTRODUCTION

Historic premillennialism stands theologically between dispensationalism and amillennialism. While rejecting much of dispensationalism it still argues for a literal millenium to be established by Christ after his return.
Hermeneutics.

G.E. Ladd, one of the chief proponents of historic premillennialism rejects the literal hermeneutic as understood by the dispensationalists arguing that it is not borne out by Scripture. Even the New Testament interprets Old Testament prophecies regarding Christ spiritually, for example Hos 11:1 and Matt 2:15; Isaiah 53 is understood messianically in the New Testament, for example Acts 8:30-35, but in its Old Testament setting it is not messianic at all. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is never called the Messiah or David. Thus Ladd believes the Old Testament should be interpreted by the New and not the other way around as with dispensationalism, for the Old Testament did not always 'clearly foresee how its prophecies were to be fulfilled' (Ladd 1977: 27).

Israel and the Church

Ladd does not see the distinction between Israel and the church as dispensationalists do. For him the church is spiritual Israel. In many places in the New Testament we find Old Testament passages being used with reference to the church such as in Rom. 9:25-26 [see Hos 1:9,10]; Abraham is called the father of all who believe [Rom 4:11,16; Gal 3:17,19] and if Gentiles are sons of Abraham then they are part of spiritual Israel; the author of Hebrews in his letter to Jewish Christians quotes Jer 33:33-34 as prophesying the new covenant, a covenant God made with his people, the church (Ladd 1977: 26).

However historic premillennialism still allows a place for the nation of Israel in the future purposes of God. This is largely on the basis of Rom 11:26, 'And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob."' Israel as a nation will be saved but on the same basis as the Gentiles, that is through faith in Christ as 'their crucified Messiah' (Ladd 1977: 28).

2. REVELATION 20:1-6

Historic premillennialism bases its argument for a premillennial return of Christ on Rev 20:1-6, the only place in the Scriptures that explicitly mentions a thousand years. Chapter 19 detail the events leading up to the millennium; there is the announcement of the marriage of the Lamb [6-10] that is the union of Christ with his bride, the church [see 21:2; Matt 22:10-14; 25:1-13; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-33]; then there is there the actual second coming when Christ returns as conqueror [11-16]; and then we have portrayed Christ's victory over the beast and the false prophet. Thus the stage is set for the binding of Satan and the inauguration of the millennium.

Central to one's understanding of verses 1-6 is the interpretation of 'they came to life' [Gk: *exesan*] in verses 4 and 5. 'The entire interpretation of the passage hinges upon the question of whether the first *exesan* and the *exesan* of the rest of the dead mean the same thing, that is bodily resurrection' (Ladd 1977: 35). The second *exesan* is a bodily resurrection but is the first? Ladd argues that it is for there is no contextual reason to interpret it otherwise. *Exesan* is also used in Rev 2:8 with reference to Christ's resurrection.

This first resurrection is a bodily resurrection of the saints of all ages. Thus historic premillennialism rejects the dispensational argument that there will a separate resurrection of church age saints before the Great Tribulation and of the Old Testament saints at the end of the Tribulation (Enns 1977: 388).

3. OTHER PASSAGES

Historic premillennialism has been criticised on the grounds that its doctrine of the millennium is found only in one passage of Scripture. If this millennial reign of Christ for a thousand years is so important, the critics argue, why is it not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible?

Ladd (1977: 38-39) sought to answer these critics by suggesting that in 1 Cor 15:23-26 there is the suggestion of 'an interim kingdom if not the millennium'. These verses indicate three key points in time, firstly Christ's resurrection, then that of those who belong to him and then, finally, the end [Gk: *telos*]. In between there are two periods of unspecified length in time, firstly, between Christ's resurrection and his second coming, and then, between his second coming and the 'end' [*telos*] when Christ completes his victory over his enemies (Ladd 1977: 39). It is this second interval which may refer to the millennium.

4. PURPOSE

Another criticism levelled at premillennialism is that there is no purpose given for the millennium in Scripture. What purpose does the millennial reign of Christ serve? While acknowledging that there are no explicit purposes given, Ladd (1977: 39-40) has suggested that three implied purposes can be seen. Firstly, the millennium will see Christ visibly triumphant over his enemies [1 Cor 15:25]. Secondly, the millennium will provide an opportunity for an open display of Christ's sovereignty; Christ now rules but he does so secretly and his reign is discernible only to the eye of faith. In the millennium what is now being done invisibly will be done visibly and Christ the king will be seen by all. Finally the millennium will uphold the justice of God in the final judgement, for at the end of the millennium there will be a brief rebellion led by Satan and joined in by those who have enjoyed the blessings of the millennial age. Thus the true nature of men's hearts will be revealed and their condemnation at the Throne of judgement deemed just.

5. TRIBULATION

Regarding the church and the Great Tribulation, generally historic premillennialists hold that the church will go through the Tribulation and that Christ will return after that time of great distress for his church. They reject the idea held by dispensationalists of a secret coming of Christ for his church at the Rapture and a visible return of Jesus at the end of the Tribulation with his church.

Although the church is on the earth during the Great Tribulation [see Rev 7:14], and will experience suffering and trial, it will not suffer the wrath of God which is reserved for unbelievers. God will deliver his people out of the turmoil of this time (Erickson 1977: 54) and preserve them safe until the end. Thus the blessed hope of the church is not a pretribulation rapture as dispensationalists hold but the second coming of Christ.

POSTMILLENNIALISM

1. INTRODUCTION

Boettner (1984: 14), a postmillennialist, defined postmillennialism as '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 in the hearts of individuals, that the world is to be eventually 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"'. A notable feature of postmillennialism is its optimism. In contrast to premillennialism and amillennialism which see things getting worse before Christ returns, postmillennialism looks to a gradual improvement in the world over time entering a golden age of peace and prosperity prior to the return of the Lord. Instead of a defensive church in survival mode it sees a church triumphant, bringing about this age by the Christianization of the world through the preaching of the gospel (Enns 1977: 384). This view combats that pessimism and fatalism that can so easily infect Christians and which arises out of a belief that as things are bound to get worse before the end, there is not much we can do about it (Erickson 1977: 70-71).

History

~~For the first two or three centuries the church believed in a literal millenium which~~ would in all likelihood begin with the return of Christ (Erickson 1977: 58). It was the African Donatist, Tyconius (d: 390?) who challenged the idea that the millenium was in the future and argued that it referred to the present age over which Christ now rules. This millennium was not a literal thousand years but an extended period of time of unknown length (to men and women). He further contended that the first resurrection of Rev. 20:4 was not bodily but spiritual and was to be identified with the occurrence of the new birth through baptism (Erickson 1977: 58-59).

Augustine (354-430) although initially holding to a literal millennium later rejected this in favour of Tyconius' view. Augustine believed the church was already in the millennium which referred to the present age. He also identified the Catholic church with the kingdom of God. Through Augustine these views on the millenium gained wide credence and became the accepted doctrine of the church throughout the Middle Ages. The identification of the church age with the millennium found its way into protestantism in the Reformation when this understanding of the millennial kingdom was accepted by the reformers and incorporated into the Westminster and Augsburg Confessions.

Postmillennialism as such was very popular in the nineteenth century when it was held by such prominent Reformed theologians as Charles Hodge, William T G Shedd, B B Warfield, A A Hodge and A H Strong. It was widely accepted at a time when the progress in science and improvements in the standard of living was giving rise to a general feeling of optimism. Two world wars in the twentieth century seriously eroded its influence and many of its adherents, unable to accept premillennialism, turned to amillennialism. While it is still early to say anything definite, postmillennialism may be undergoing something of a revival (see John Jefferson Davis, *Christ's victorious kingdom: postmillennialism reconsidered*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The kingdom of God is a present reality, the rule of Christ in the hearts of men. It is not something to be introduced cataclysmically at some future time (Erickson 1977: 55). Not only is it here now but it is growing albeit at times very slowly, indeed almost unnoticeably. In fact growth is a feature of the kingdom as one can see from the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13. The growth pictured there is both intensive [the sower and the mustard seed] and extensive [leaven], as well as being mixed [weeds and the fishing net]. This growth while now slow will accelerate, much like a snowball which gathers pace as it rolls down the mountain side. If one is discouraged by the current slowness of growth one should keep in mind the kingdom of God is still really in its early phase of development. 'God does not rush matters...Just as God took millions and perhaps billions of years to prepare the earth for human habitation, so He will take a long time to complete His redemptive plan' (Erickson 1977: 68).

This growth while gradual has its points of crisis. We find these in Scripture: the call of Abraham; the exodus; the captivity and the return from exile; the coming of Christ, his death and resurrection; Pentecost, and so on. Finally Christ will return after the gospel has been preached to all nations and they have been disciplined and baptised (Erickson 1977: 69).

3. THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel will be spread to all nations prior to Christ's return resulting in their conversion. Postmillennialists do not mean that everyone without exception will be converted but rather significant numbers in each nation will turn to Christ and be saved. The world will thus be christianized through individual conversion. Postmillennialists see Rev 19:11-21 as depicting the increasing victory of the Son of God over the world between his first and second advents (Enns 1989: 385).

Charles Hodge (1797-1878) believed that Scripture supported this view of the widespread and successful proclamation throughout the whole world. Various prophetic passages in the Old Testament seemed to indicate that large numbers would be converted: Num 14:21; Is 45:22-25; 49:6; Hos 2:23; Psalms 2:8; 47:2-8; 72:7-11; 86:9; 110:1; Zech 9:10. Further Jesus himself said that the gospel would be preached in the whole world prior to his second coming: 'And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come' [Matt 24:14]. Premillennialists see this preaching as a witness to win some from every nation that all nations may be represented in heaven.

Postmillennialists reject the idea that the preaching of the gospel will only have a token effect. The gospel is more powerful than that and when preached in the power of God's Spirit will reap a rich harvest around the world. Finally, the church has been commanded to 'go and make disciples of all nations' [Matt 28:19-20], a command that comes with all the authority of the risen Lord. Can we not expect that he who said 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me...I am with you always even to the end of the age' will so work through his church that he will enable it to do what he has commanded, that is make disciples of all nations? (Erickson 1977: 62-64).

4. PROGRESS

Postmillennialists believe that this is indeed happening. The gospel is spreading, slowly at times but nonetheless making a widening impact and people are being redeemed. And as people are being redeemed, so is the world. That the gospel is achieving success is seen in the improvement in the world. Before one points to the latest international or local crisis to dispute this point it must be remembered that the postmillennialist is here not absorbed with the present situation but is taking a much longer term view.

He, in defence of his claim that the world is getting better as the gospel spreads points to the fact that slavery and polygamy have all but been done away with in the world community, there has been an improvement in social and economic conditions for the bulk of humankind, there is now more cooperation between nations seen for example in such areas as foreign aid. There have been rapid advances in science, technology, medicine and education which are being enjoyed by an increasing proportion of the peoples of the world. The Bible is now available to more people groups than it has ever been, there is now more Christian radio and the number of Bible colleges and seminaries continues to grow (Erickson 1977: 65). True there have been setbacks due to wars and other crises, but the overall trend in the history of humankind has been one of improvement.

5. THE MILLENNIUM

The millennium that postmillennialists expect is not a literal period of 1000 years but a long period of earthly peace and prosperity. It does not come upon the world suddenly, cataclysmically but gradually as more and more people become Christians and live as Christians. This millennium is different from the present age in degree only, it is the same but only much better with many of the destructive influences of sin progressively removed as the gospel spreads and transforms lives.

The thousand years of Rev 20:4 are symbolic and not to be understood literally. They are symbolic of a long, indefinite period of time. Regarding the first resurrection mentioned in verse 5, one postmillennial view is that it refers to 'the reanimating of the spirit of those who were martyred in the early history of the church' (Erickson 1977: 69). Another view holds that the first resurrection refers to the ascension to heaven of martyrs who now reign with Christ in an intermediate state (Erickson 1977: 69). This difference is of not great concern to postmillennialists as their millennial position does not rest on Rev 20:1-6 but is rather built upon all of Scripture.

6. THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Christ will return at the end of the millennium. Prior to his return there will be a time of rebellion and resurgence of evil to proportions unknown during the millennium due to the coming of the Antichrist (Erickson 1977: 57). Boettner (1984: 19) believes that this rebellion serves to show men and women the perversity of sin and just how much it deserves to be judged. However, he later (1984: 74) retreated from this position adopting the position that there would be no final large scale apostasy.

Christ's return will be personal and bodily, a view held by all the other millennial positions. However postmillennialists believe it will be a single event in contrast to the dispensationalist's twofold coming of Jesus, once for his church and once, after the Great Tribulation, with his church.

Immediately after Christ's return there will be a resurrection of all people, righteous and unrighteous alike. They, along with those who are living, will be then judged and their eternal destinies allocated. There will no intervening period between Christ's second coming and the final judgement such as a millennium.

AMILLENNIALISM

1. INTRODUCTION

Amillennialism, like postmillennialism, believes that the thousand years of Rev. 20 are symbolic of the current church age and do not refer to a future, earthly reign of Christ. The expression 'realized millennium' is preferred to describe their position on the millennium as it emphasises that the millennium is being fulfilled now rather than at some time in the future.

Augustine (354-430) with his views on the nature of the millennium has influenced both amillennial as well as postmillennial thought. Both amillennialists and postmillennialists can reasonably claim him for their understanding of the millennium (Erickson 1977: 76). Augustine argued that the millennium is not to be thought of as future period of time in the history of humankind but is rather symbolic of the present church age.

When, because of the impact of the international crises and consequent decline in optimism regarding the future, postmillennialism declined in the twentieth century, many postmillennialists turned to amillennialism. For these people premillennialism did not represent a viable alternative. Today it would be true to say that as historic premillennialism does not command a large following the major millennial views are those of amillennialism and dispensationalism.

2. APPROACH TO PROPHECY

Amillennialism takes a less literal approach to the interpretation of Scripture than does dispensational premillennialism. It should be noted that amillennialism agrees with the dispensational hermeneutical principle that Scripture should be interpreted literally except where the result would be ludicrous. The issue is which Scripture should be interpreted literally and which should not.

With regard to Old Testament prophecies amillennialism is less inclined than dispensationalism to understand them in a literal fashion and therefore sees them being fulfilled either not long after they were given or in the church age, or even in the new heavens and new earth (Erickson 1977: 74,84), but not in an earthly millennium. An interesting example of these different hermeneutics at work can be seen in the alternative approaches taken to the prophecy of Isaiah [11:6-9]. Premillennialism sees these verses as referring to the millennial age but they can with equal validity be regarded as pertaining to 'life on the new earth' (Hoekema 1977: 174) mentioned in Rev 21:1. The New Scofield Bible editors take verses 17-25 of Isaiah 65 as describing the renewed earth during the millennium despite verse 17 which reads 'Behold, I will create new heavens and new earth.'

Does not this verse indicate that Isaiah was prophesying not about an earthly millennium but the final and eternal conditions that the redeemed will enjoy?

3. REVELATION 20

Amillennialists generally view the book of Revelation as made up of seven sections each of which covers the same period of time, namely that between Christ's first and second comings. These sections are chapters 1-3; 4-7; 8-11; 12-14; 15,6; 17-19; and 20-22. This particular approach to Revelation is called 'progressive parallelism' (Hoekema 1977: 156) because not only is the same period of time generally covered but there is some "eschatological progress", for example the last section goes further into the future than other sections (Hoekema 1977: 158).

One's view of the nature of the book of Revelation as a whole will determine the way in which the parts are understood. Hoekema (1977: 155) freely admits that if Revelation is interpreted futuristically and chronologically then Christ's thousand year reign must come after Christ's return which is portrayed in Rev 19:11-16. But if one adopts the amillennial progressive parallelism approach then Rev 20 is not a description of future end-time events but of circumstances that occur during the present church age.

Revelation is full of symbols and figurative expressions. For example we are not expected to take literally the portrayal of Christ set forth in 1:13-16. There is no reason to believe that the great chain that is used to bind Satan with [Rev. 20:1] is an actual metal chain (Erickson 1977: 83). Rather what we have in verse 20:1 is a symbolic account of the curbing of Satan's power so that it is no longer effective in "deceiving the nations" [v.3] which is no less truthful for being expressed in symbolic terms. There are some references in the gospels which seem to indicate that this binding of Satan took place during Christ's first coming, for example, Matt 12:29, Luke 10:17-18 and John 12:31-32.

It is not unreasonable therefore, amillennialists argue, to see the 1000 years of 20:1,4 as symbolic of an indeterminate length of time. The Reformed theologian Benjamin Warfield argued in a book published in 1929 (*Biblical Doctrines*) that the thousand symbolised 'holy perfection' it being made up of the two sacred numbers 3 and 7 added together and cubed. This perfection when applied to verses 1 and 4 speaks of the perfect victory of Christ over Satan and of the 'completeness of the present glory and bliss of the redeemed in heaven' (Erickson 1977: 84). Hoekema (1977: 161) wrote 'the book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers. Obviously the number 'thousand' which is used here must not be interpreted in a literal sense' Why it was obvious he did not say. He went on that as 'the number ten signifies completeness, and since a thousand is ten to the third power, we may think of the expression 'a thousand years' as standing for a complete period, a very long period of indeterminate length' extending from Christ's first to his second coming.

And if the millennium is symbolic, what of the those who reign with Christ mentioned in verses 4 to 6? Amillennialists contend that this reigning with Christ is not done on earth in some future millennium but is occurring now in some intermediate state (Erickson 1977: 84). That is, verses 4-6 allude to the reign of the souls of deceased believers which is actually happening now (Enns 1989: 380).

If the thousand years is not to be taken literally what are we then to make of the two resurrections of verses 4 to 6? Premillennialists argue strongly that they are both bodily resurrections and that the first 'they came to life' [Gk:exesan] must mean the same as the second, and the second refers to physical resurrection. Amillennialists reject the idea that both are physical preferring rather to see the first as spiritual and the second as physical. It is true that the Greek word used, *exesan*, does refer elsewhere in the New Testament to physical resurrection [see Matt 9:18; Rom 14:9; 2 Cor 13:4; Rev 2:8] but it does not do so here. Hoekema (1977: 167-171) argues that as Scripture only teaches one bodily resurrection [Jn 5:28-29; Acts 24:15] and this is referred to later in verses 11-13, the 'first resurrection' cannot be physical. Rather the words 'they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years' mean in effect that those who experience the first resurrection live and reign with Christ in heaven now.

That the circumstances of these verses [4-6] is situated in heaven is further suggested by the reference to 'thrones' [Gk:thronous], a word which is used 47 times in Revelation, 44 of which refer to heaven (Hoekema 1977,p.165). There are, according to Hoekema (1977: 167), two types of believers who sit on these thrones, firstly, martyrs, and secondly, those 'who had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands', that is 'all Christians who had remained true to Christ and had resisted anti-Christian powers'. That they are 'given authority to judge' implies they exercise a governing function with Christ.

'The rest of the dead did not come to life [Gk:exesan] until the thousand years were ended.' These people do not come to life and reign with Christ in heaven. At the conclusion of the millenium they do come to life and suffer the second death which is depicted in verse 14.

The expression 'This is the first resurrection' then refers to what happens to the believing dead, that is they experience a transition from physical death to a life with Christ in heaven. Hoekema (1977: 171) admits that this is an unusual use of the word 'resurrection' [Gk: anastasis] but it is 'perfectly understandable against the background of the preceding context'. Context then becomes the determining factor for Hoekema in his 'unusual' understanding of the nature of the first resurrection. By 'preceding context' we should probably include his view of Revelation being composed of seven sections which cover the same period of time. Certainly the premillennialist can with equal justification argue that on the basis of context the two *exesan's* should be understood in the same way, that is referring to a bodily resurrection.

The 'first resurrection' implies a second for the believing dead and this second resurrection will be a bodily one. At this time along with the believing dead, all the rest of the dead will be raised bodily [see v.13] in preparation for judgement [vv.11-15]. It is said that the 'second death' has no power over those who participate in the first resurrection, that is they are not liable to the 'lake of fire' [vv.14-15]. This fact Hoekema (1977: 171) believes confirms that the first resurrection is spiritual. If the believing dead had been raised with glorified bodies it would have been superfluous to mention that the second death has no power over them.

All this having been said there still much force in the contention by premillennialists that the two *exesans* of verses 4 and 5 are best understood in the same way. As the second occurrence refers to a physical resurrection there is no compelling reason to suppose the first does not also. James A Hughes recognised the force of this argument and attempted to show that both resurrections are spiritual. His case is set forth in some detail in Erickson (1977: 79-83). That the first resurrection is spiritual, Hughes said, is seen from the fact that it involves disembodied souls. It is true that 'soul' [Gk: psuche] can refer to a whole person. It is, however, better understood here as referring to souls without bodies. Verse 4 contains only one group, not two or three, and their disembodied souls sit on judgement thrones reigning with Christ (79).

Exesan is better translated as a simple aorist, that is 'they lived', than, as with the NIV, an ingressive aorist, 'they came to life'. Translating *exesan* this way would then make it parallel to the way in which the next verb 'reigned' is also translated, that is as a simple aorist. The expressions 'they came to life' [v.4] and the 'first resurrection' [v.5] refer to the entrance of the soul into heaven. Hughes acknowledges that this is not the usual understanding of 'resurrection' but in defence points to Luke 20:27-40, 1 Cor 15 and Heb 11:35 where the word 'resurrection' seems to refer to the next life (81).

The second resurrection, which although not mentioned is implied by the first, is also spiritual and refers to the ascension of the soul of the believer to heaven. However it is virtually hypothetical in nature. At first glance the words 'the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended' would seem to imply that when the thousand years were ended the rest of the dead did come to life. However Hughes argues that the word 'until' [Gk: achri] need not imply a subsequent change and points to its use in Rom. 5:13a where it in fact does not, for sin continued not only until the law was given but after it (p.83). The upshot of all this is that not only does the second death have power over those who do not experience the first resurrection during the 'thousand years' but it continues to have power over them after the millennium. Thus the second resurrection, according to Hughes, is for all intents and purposes, hypothetical.

4. THE RETURN OF CHRIST

The return of Christ will personal, bodily and visible. It will be a single event, not as with dispensationalism a twofold occurrence, a secret coming for the church and, after the Great Tribulation, a manifest coming. And his return will be at the end of the millennium, that indefinite period of time we are now in known as the church age.

The exact time is thus unknown and it cannot be regarded as being imminent, in the sense of likely to occur at any moment. There are certain signs that have yet to be fulfilled such as the evangelisation of the Gentiles [Matt 24:14]; the conversion of Israel [Rom 11:26], not national Israel but the elect of Israel; the great apostasy and Great Tribulation and the appearance of the Antichrist (Enns, 1977: 381).

At his return there will be a general resurrection of believers and unbelievers, then all will be judged and assigned to their eternal state. 'Not only in the book of Revelation but elsewhere in the New Testament, the final judgement is associated with the Second Coming of Christ' (Hoekema 1977: 160) [see Rev 22:12; Matt 15:27; 25:31-32; Jude 14-15; 2 Thess 1:7-10]. At the conclusion of judgement there will be the inauguration of the new heavens and the new earth [Rev 21:1].

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