

It Is Written

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF PREMILLENNIALISM

By J.W. Saunders (1936)

Advocates of the premillennial theory are continually urging us to keep our minds receptive to new truth. They are apparently unaware that there is nothing new in the premillennial theory. On the contrary, it is one of the most ancient speculations in the history of Christendom.

During the postapostolic period of the church's history there is abundant evidence of its existence. It was, for instance, a cardinal tenet of Montanism. Montanism found by Montanus in the second century, was condemned as a heresy by the bishops of Asia Minor, A.D. 160. Origen in the early part of the third century also raised his voice against premillennialism, and a century later Augustine became one of its most determined opponents. He attacked it so energetically and so successfully that for centuries afterwards it was virtually ignored.

During the mediaeval and modern periods of church history it has continued to thrust itself, more or less spasmodically, into the foreground of Christian thinking. The year 1000 A.D. was specially marked by a revival of interest in premillennial speculation. It was a popular notion that the thousand-year period mentioned in the book of Revelation had been fulfilled, and that the end of the world was at hand.

As the centuries passed, speculation increased in intensity. Militz, a Bohemian theologian and a forerunner John Huss, declared that the end of all things was at hand that the present order would come to its end between 1365 and 1367. In the seventeenth century, Alsted, a German theologian, set 1694 as the date for the beginning the millennium. In the same century we have what is known as "The Fifth Monarchy Movement" in England. In the eighteenth century an obscure sect, headed by woman, fixed 1730 as the date for the second advent of Christ. The period following the French Revolution especially abounded in prophetic speculation of every type. Everywhere there was the conviction that "we are living in the last days." Things just could not get any worse than they were, and there was no hope that they would get any better.

The following is a list of the various dates set by "prophets" of the nineteenth century for the second coming of Christ and the inauguration of the millennial period. They are as follows: 1835, 1838, 1839, 1843, 1844, 1866, 1867, 1870, 1873. All of these dates were determined by the same ingenious manipulation of symbolic days, weeks, months, and years that characterize our modern interpreters of the signs of the times. Mistaken calculations seem to possess no power to halt the follies and speculations of their modern successors.

The premillennial theory has been the basis for the founding of a number of various sects and cults. One of the earliest is the Shakers, founded by Ann Lee, who came to America from England in 1774. They believe that the second coming of Christ has already taken place, that they are the only group that are aware of it, and consequently believe that they, and they alone, constitute the true church. They have virtually died out in our own day, their adherents being confined to isolated groups and individuals scattered here and there.

The Plymouth Brethren, originating in England about 1827, with four distinct branches in this country, were also founded mainly for the purpose of propagating premillennialism. They make the imminent, premillennial coming of the Lord a test of fellowship.

William Miller, who began to lecture in New York State in 1831, set the date for the advent of

Christ as 1843 His followers, known as “Millerites,” gave themselves up to the wildest kind of fanaticism, selling their property and purchasing white robes in order to be ready for the great event. When Jesus failed to appear, Miller acknowledged his error and set the date for the following year. In a letter written at this time he stated that “if Christ did not appear then, he would feel twice the disappointment he had already felt.” He died disappointed and so did his deluded followers. Out of this original group came the present-day Adventist movement, with its various branches, some designating themselves “First-Day Adventists,” others “Seventh-Day Adventists,” and all equally astray on the question of prophetic speculation.

Space forbids the enumeration of the numerous present-day cults who are victims of this error. It is perhaps sufficient to mention the fact that the Mormons are advocates of it, and that the late Pastor Russell founded a very successful financial enterprise by propagating it, selecting the date for the end of all things as 1914. Incidentally, the bombastic Judge Rutherford, with his “Millions Now Living Will Never Die” program, is carrying on Russell’s work very satisfactorily – financially.

The World War proved to be a veritable Godsend to the present-day crop of premillennialists. The capture of Jerusalem by General Allenby, the freedom of the Holy Land from the domination of the Turks, the Zionist Movement with its propaganda, all contributed toward the stimulation of their slightly jaded prophetic imagination. All of these things had been prophesied, we were told; but just where, no sane student of the Bible has ever been able to discover. As an indication as to what lengths otherwise intelligent men and women will go when they are once inoculated with the “serum” of premillennialism, we offer the following statement, issued in 1917 to the churches of England and bearing the signatures of such well-known “expositors” as G. Campbell Morgan, James Stuart Holden, F. B. Meyer, and others. It appeared under the caption, “The Significance of the Hour.”

We, the undersigned, under a profound impression of the momentous nature of the present crisis, issue the accompanying statement:

1. That the present crisis points toward the close of the times of the Gentiles.
2. That the revelation of our Lord may be expected at any moment when he will be as evidently manifested to his disciples as on the evening of the resurrection.
3. That the completed church will be translated to be “forever with the Lord.”
4. That Israel will be restored to its own land in unbelief and be afterwards converted by the appearance of Christ on its behalf.
5. That all human schemes of reconstruction must be subsidiary to the second coming of our Lord, because then all nations will be subject to his rule.
6. That under the reign of Christ there will be a further great effusion of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh.
7. That the truths embodied in this statement are of the utmost practical value in determining Christian character and action with reference to the pressing problems of the hour.

This, then, is the theology of premillennialism. This is the creed of premillennialists, whether they are honest enough to acknowledge it or not. In a preceding article it was said that “premillennialism has no foundation in Scripture; it was born of sectarianism and fostered by fanaticism.” This brief outline of its history and disclosure of its tenets justifies our declaration. No man dedicated to the cause of the restoration of primitive Christianity dare waste his time propagating it, either publicly or privately. “The things that thou hast heard of me . . . the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2: 2.) Paul never heard of premillennialism. No inspired man ever mentioned the subject. Why should those who profess to be following in their footsteps insist in forcing it upon the church? Why? Why?