



Conducted by
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“As a newcomer to the Church of Christ I wonder if you could help me with the following question: “Which is the true biblical teaching – that the Lord Jesus Christ is to reign on earth as a King, or that the world is to be burned up by fire when He returns?”

ON the face of it this question seems fairly straightforward to the uninitiated, but in fact it emphasises the question of Historic Pre-Millennialism which teaches that Christ's coming will be 'pre' or 'before' the thousand years reign on earth which pre-millennialists teach. This view has been taught in some form since the second century A.D. and has become crystallised in the more modern doctrine of 'Dispensationalism'. The doctrine of dispensationalism is a form of millennialism usually attributed to a man named J.N.Darby and is widely accepted today. It divides the Bible into seven dispensations, lays stress on the difference between Israel and the Church, and insists on a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies. Therefore, we must make a more detailed study in order to say something meaningful about the question, and we can perhaps accomplish this by looking at what some teach about a future reign on earth of Christ, and then to investigate what the Bible really teaches about the subject.

Historic Premillennialism

This doctrine teaches that the book of Revelation is a prophecy of future events, and is to be interpreted literally along with certain O.T. prophecies. Furthermore, it is taught that there is a distinct difference between the Church and the Kingdom. The millennium (simply, a thousand years) is the period of time between the resurrection of the just and the unjust, and also signifies the period of Satan's imprisonment. The same doctrine asserts that there will be a visible return of Christ to judge and rule the nations, and that the saints of the first resurrection will share in His reign; this period of time will close with the final judgment of the wicked. The closing days of this present age will see Israel returning to Palestine and this will be followed by the millennium and the fulfillment of the O.T. covenant promises. Near the close of the present age Antichrist shall appear but will be destroyed by Christ at His coming. These, briefly, are the important points of the doctrine.

We need now to look at the Bible texts used to support these views. Rev. 20:2-7 is the foundation text; without this text it is difficult to see how this doctrine could have arisen; it is insisted that this scripture is to be interpreted literally, especially the thousand year reign. Concerning O.T. prophecy it is taught that God promised David that his throne would be established forever (2 Sam. 7:12-17), and that the promise is to be taken literally (Ps. 89; Jer. 23: 3-5; Ezek. 37; Micah 4:1-8). It is also said that 'the regeneration' (Matt. 19-27ff) is a parallel to Acts 3:21, and that both these scriptures refer to a future time. The N.T. closes with the Kingdom (the earthly throne of David) not established; it is still in the future (Matt. 6:10; 26:29; Luke 23:42; 2 Thess. 1:4,5; 2 Pet. 1:10ff; Rev 2:25-28). The teaching says that the Bible reveals two resurrections and that the millennium falls between the two (Rev. 20:1-10; 1 Cor. 15:23ff; John 5:28ff); during the millennium Christ will literally come to earth and literally remain here for a thousand years (1 Thess. 4:13-17). Thereafter, there will be a new heaven, a new earth, and eternal kingdom of God.

The major criticisms of the millennial teaching are obvious when one consults the Bible with an open mind. The book of Revelation opens by referring to 'things which must shortly come to pass' (Rev. 1:1), indeed, if the Revelation was all futuristic then it could have had little relevance for the early church. Furthermore, the rigid literalism which millennialists insist on twists obviously symbolic passages; it is interesting to note that the same sort of literalism caused the Jews to reject Jesus. It is also evident that David on his throne ruling over Israel is a type of Christ's rule (Ezek. 37:24), because if David were to reign then literal David would have to be resurrected, but it is antitypical David (Christ) and not literal David who rules. It is also true, according to 2 Sam. 7:12ff, that if this referred to the millennium then the millennium would have no end (see v16). Furthermore, if literal interpretations are to be insisted on, then the problems associated with Revelation 20 are obvious.

Modern Dispensationalism

Dispensationalists speak of a 'Rapture' when the saints will be caught up to meet Christ in the air (1 Thess. 4:13-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53); it is thought by some to be secret and sudden. After this there will be a period of unequalled tribulation on earth (DAN. 12:1; Matt. 24:21; Rev. 7:14). The saints (church) are taken from the earth (1 Thess. 4:13ff), and God deals with Israel again, restoring them to their own land. The tribulation lasts for 7 years (70th week of Daniel's prophecy, Dan 9:24-27) and is divided into two parts (3½ years each). During the first part the Jews return to Palestine, rebuild the temple and reinstate sacrifices and rituals, and make a covenant with Antichrist. In the middle of the week Antichrist breaks the covenant, enters temple (2 Thess. 2), abolishes sacrifices and terribly persecutes the Jews (Rev. 13; 14; 15). There is then a 'Revelation' when Christ comes to end the tribulation; He comes 'with' His saints to rule. A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God. The dispensationalists teach that there are seven dispensations: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and the kingdom. All dispensationalists are pre-millennialists but not all pre-millenn-

ialists are dispensationalists. There are certain other distinctions between Historic Pre-millennialism and Dispensationalism but space does not permit to go into these at this time.

A key point in the view is that Judaism must run a predicted course-giving way only temporarily to the church-and will finally literally be restored according to the O.T. However, our reading of the N.T. tells us that the O.T. prophecies foretold clearly the death and suffering of the Messiah; His blood was shed 'before the foundation of the world' for the church (1 Pet. 1:17ff; cf. Matt. 25:34; Luke 11:50,51; Eph. 1:4 to 3:11). From these scriptures we may deduce that if it was the purpose of Jesus to restore the literal royal rule of David to Israel, then why did He not say so? The plain fact is that the Kingdom is present on earth now in the form of the church; Jesus is a King with a throne. The church is anticipated in O.T. prophecy (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21; Amos 9:11,12; Acts 15:13-18. See also Acts 3:24ff; 1 Pet. 1:9-12; Rom. 1:1,2; and many others). Dispensationalists take a pessimistic view of the gospel and the church, but the gospel is God's power unto salvation (Rom. 1:16) and Christ died for the church, and in the church His fulness dwells. (Eph. 1:22,23; Coll. 1:18ff). With its emphasis on the literal restoration of Judaism, dispensationalism is plainly incompatible with Christ's spiritual teaching, His sacrifice, and the teaching of the letter to the Hebrews particularly. The new covenant is everlasting (Heb. 13:20) and Christians are repeatedly warned against returning to and trusting in the ordinances of the Law.

The Day of the Lord

The earliest use of this statement is found in Amos 5:18-20. It would seem to indicate the occasion when God would intervene to punish the climax of sin in the world. In the N.T. the Day of the Lord refers to the Second Coming of Christ. It will be unexpected (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10), and there will be physical effects on the world which will accompany it (2 Pet. 3:12 ff).

There will be certain events related to His coming. Angels will accompany Him (Matt. 25:31) and He will come with His saints (1 Thess. 3:13); it is not clear if the 'holy ones' of the Matthew passage are the saints of the Thessalonian passage. The dead Christians will be raised first (1 Thess. 4:16) and this will be on the 'last day' (John 6:40,44,54). The reader will notice that in 1 Thess. 4:14-17 there is nothing mentioned about two 'comings' of Christ, nor that the Lord will come to the earth; Paul says, "so shall we ever be with the Lord".

It would appear that judgment will be held on the last day (Matt. 25:31ff; John 12:48). Also, the destruction of the world will take place on the last day (2 Pet. 3:1-13). Therefore, it seems very clear to me that the Second Coming of the Lord will be the 'Last Day', and as Peter says, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10).

Conclusion

So now we are in a position to answer our questioner. The Lord is not coming for a millennial reign on earth; He has a Kingdom now, the church, which He purchased with His own blood. Jew and Gentile have a common means of entry into the Kingdom, obedience to the gospel; there is no other way, nor is there going to be. The Lord will only appear once more, at His second Coming; at that time the world will be burned up, the elements will melt with fervent heat, the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. Christians should comfort each other with these thoughts and not be disturbed by the apostate around them.

I have only touched on this very great subject as the reader will understand. There are many in the church who say "just keep faith with Jesus and God and don't worry too much about events to follow"; that is good and as it should be. But we must never forget that the great truths are put into the Bible for our understanding and we should endeavour to understand them for our eternal benefit.

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