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THE RELIGIOUS APPEAL OF PRE- MILLENNIALISM

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Millenarianism is a doctrine which attempts to premise the Kingdom of God on earth. It exercises a fascinating interest over the minds of those who accept it. Its religious appeal grows out of the fact that it presents a clear, concrete, and comprehensive program of the purposes of God respecting the past, present, and future; it enlists the imagination, stirs the emotions, and challenges the disciple to co-operate with this program of the divine will. To appreciate its religious appeal one must have some understanding of what may be called the philosophy of millenarianism. As a doctrine, it is not a vague, mystic hope, but a definite scheme of historic unfoldings. There are many Christians who read the Bible in a disjointed fashion and associate the "Return of the Lord" with hazy notions of the end of the world. They believe that Jesus will come again in bodily form to judge the living and the dead and assign them to their respective destinies. They may even regard this event as impending and be numbered with millenarians; but they are such only in a nebulous and ambiguous way. Real millenarians hold a distinctive philosophy which is only apprehended by those who "rightly divide the word of truth"—a cardinal Scripture text with them.

In this dissection and relocation of the Scriptures, certain dispensations are sharply differentiated from one another. Each dispensation is a distinctive régime in which God is dealing with the human race according to some peculiar

principle. In a general way these dispensations are as follows: First, the Edenic. Man was in a garden and innocent. He was tried under one prohibitory law, forbidding him the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Failing under the test, man was banished from this primitive paradise, but not until God had promised a "seed of the woman" which should bruise the serpent's head. All the subsequent unfoldments have been and are the issue of this promise. The closing of the garden under the guard of the cherubim ended the first dispensation.

Second, came the antediluvian world. The righteous seed, represented by Abel, Seth, Enoch, and others, was persecuted by Cain and his progeny who filled the earth with violence. The judgment of the flood swept the earth clean once more and gave the race a new start.

Third, we have a new world under patriarchal rule. The fathers are the priests in their families. Abraham is called to walk by faith and becomes the "Friend of God." His family is chosen to become an elect people. His seed is to be innumerable and inherit the world. New covenants are established between God and Abraham's children. Jacob becomes a "Prince of God," but his sons fail in their conduct toward Joseph, and they are brought to Egypt. The dispensation ends with Israel as slaves in the brickyards and the Patriarchs in their coffins.

Fourth, we have the Mosaic or legal dispensation. Moses achieves the emancipation of the chosen people and on Mount Sinai receives the decalogue, or covenant of the law. Israel's tenure of the promised land and the blessings of Jehovah are conditioned upon obedience to the statutes. Here there arise the prophets who announce the divine will, herald the "Day of the Lord" and the coming of the Messiah. But again the people fail, and are sold into bondage and become vassals to successive conquerors. These four distinctive periods are covered by the Old Testament Scriptures. Man proves a

failure in every dispensation. But God is not taken by surprise. He foreknows that man will continually fail and brings on a series of successions, changing the stage, in order to prove man a sinner and himself a God and Savior under any and all circumstances. The scenery ever changes, but the play is the same, viz., the tragedy of human sin and helplessness. Against this background God will demonstrate his faithfulness in the fulfilment of his promises, and manifest his glory in the sovereign establishment of his covenants.

Fifth, there comes the messianic dispensation, which reaches from the manger to the Cross. The Son of God, the seed of David, Abraham, and the woman, is in the world. Jesus offers himself to the nation as its Messiah and King. He fulfils certain characteristics predicted in the writings of Moses, the Psalms, and Prophets. But the people are blind and know not "the day of their visitation." They crucify the Son of God, the Prince of Glory, and push away the millennial kingdom. The disciples ask Jesus concerning this kingdom and he indicates that it is to be postponed. He vanishes behind a cloud and another régime passes away.

Sixth, we come to the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. We must be quite clear as to the sharp distinction between the purposes of God with respect to this age in which we now live, and the millennium which is immediately to follow. Here is the very crux of the millennial hope and passion. The expectation of Israel had been that the Jew and the Gentile would ever remain distinct. In the "acceptable year of the Lord," Israel is to be a crown of glory in the hands of Jehovah and the head of all nations of the earth. But now, under the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, a new purpose, not known in other ages, comes over the horizon. The Holy Spirit has broken down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile and is making an election out of every nation, kindred, tribe, and tongue of those who own Christ as a Savior. This new spiritual body is known as "the Church of God."

We cannot overemphasize the importance of recognizing, that from the millenarian point of view, God is not purposing to convert the world in this dispensation. He has not changed the nature of the kingdom from an outward manifestation of his glory, to a spiritual and gradual conquest of the earth. He is making an election; and the one business of the church is to preach the gospel and fulfil the chosen number. The true millenarian knows that he has no business trying to clean up the Augean stables of the world. Like every previous dispensation, this one also will end in judgment. Evil will increase with accelerated speed and power, and culminate in the advent of the antichrist. During his régime, apostasy and atheism will be rampant and bring on the "great tribulation." All this becomes the background of the millenarian's hope—the epiphany of the Lord who will overthrow antichrist and initiate his kingdom on earth.

Seventh, comes the millennial reign of Christ. The cardinal event ushering in that age will be the Second Coming of Christ. That is the goal of the present age and becomes the hope of the church. Just what the characteristics of the millennium will be, or what details may focus in the imagination, need not detain us. It is the hope and prospect of that triumphant coming of Christ which creates a religious appeal for the millenarian. It must be apparent that to those who sincerely accept this outworking of such a divine program the premillennial coming of the Lord must be aflame with appeal and enthusiasm. Of course I have in mind those to whom this hope is a vital reality and not an academic question. For here as everywhere, it is possible to accept some a priori assumptions and then rationalize certain academic conclusions. Any interest thus derived is only an intellectual fancy and not religious passion. But for one who holds the hope as a vital certainty it is a living hope, stimulating personal virtue, inspiring evangelistic zeal and missionary enterprise. The religious appeal grows out of indirect con-

firmations of the faith, and direct urgings to holy living and diligent work.

For the devout millenarian the Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God. He is unconcerned about its historic backgrounds, the study of which he regards with suspicion, and he is indifferent to the many discrepancies found within the book itself. To him it is a divine book, above human wisdom, and sometimes too profound for human understanding. Hence he can dismiss these infelicitous difficulties without impairing his faith. The Bible is a revelation in which are unfolded the maturing purposes of God. It is not the result of man feeling after God. He only gropes in blindness, touches the torso of a stone, and calls it God. God knows the end from the beginning and it is plainly written in the word. The promises and prophecies can never fail. They may be drawn out, postponed, or discover larger horizons, but "the Scriptures cannot be broken." They are the source of all light, the one and final canon of appeal concerning all matters of faith, hope, duty, and destiny. They never abrogate the promise of the kingdom but with growing emphasis confirm it. According to both the Old Testament and the New Testament, that kingdom is to be ushered in and established by the returning Lord. This canon of authority has a deep religious value for the believer in that it certifies his hopes and keeps his anchors from dragging amid all the vagrant currents of speculation, criticism, doubt, and agnosticism. All things can be referred to the law and the testimony.

Since the Bible is the word of God, inspired by the one and selfsame Spirit, it is equally trustworthy in every part; and all the passages that can be allocated around this subject can be used to formulate a doctrine. It can be shown that Jesus spoke of his return; that his apostles wrote clearly concerning his imminent and speedy coming, and that the early church expected his sudden advent for their redemption and glory. Later and modern disciples have not been privileged to see

Jesus in the flesh, but like Paul, they know him in spirit and can affirm, "Whom having not seen I love." Love craves to see the object of its affection and longs to see him that is altogether lovely. When any loved one is expected home, the passing hours are fraught with interest and preparation. So the heart that "loves his appearing" turns longingly toward the day. It rejoices in the tokens of his favor, but more earnestly desires the presence of the lover himself.

The bride eyes not her garments,
 But her dear Bridegroom's face;
 I will not gaze on glory,
 But on my king of grace.

The desire for the speedy advent of Jesus is deepened into a consuming passion when it is conceived as the one great event in which all the comforting and triumphant issues of the gospel are converged. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the mortal life will be swallowed up in immortality. The generation that remains to his coming will, like Elijah, outride the grasp of death and cheat the grave of its spoil. The dead in Christ, who bivouac in God's acre, will hear the sounding of the reveille and rise every man in his regiment and join the triumphal procession. The painful struggle with temptation may tomorrow be swallowed up in conquest. The laborious effort to be decent and imitate Christ will instantly be changed and the Christ image flash forth in an abiding transfiguration. All the long-drawn hopes of the ages will be realized and the far-off interest of tears and sorrows be gathered. All that heaven has meant to the imagination and affections will become an immediate possession.

The Lord shall come to be admired in all his saints. The judgments of the Lord will have fallen upon all ungodly souls and unrighteous acts and the Christian's faith, hope, and patience will be vindicated before an assembled universe. Every disciple who kept his face toward the morning and watched in faith; every missionary who stood on the far-flung

battle line of service; every martyr that perished amid fire and persecution; and all the dear and holy dead who fell asleep in Christ will be gathered about the glorified Lord. Then will the Cross prove to be the foundation of the throne; the crown of thorns exchanged for the diadem; the reed laid aside for the scepter of universal authority. Then will the eternal God say to his Son the Savior, "Thy throne O God is forever and ever." No reverent soul can honestly contemplate such an imminent dénouement of the present crisis without feeling a burning heart and realizing a strong religious appeal.

This appeal is emphasized in the divine urge which this expectation lays upon believers. Millenarians insist, and rightly so, that in the Scriptures every admonition to fidelity and every stressing of duty is linked up with the thought of his imminent appearing. They can cite verse after verse in proof thereof. This is just the logic of the position. Who would not wish to be at his best, be able to render a good account of his stewardship, and be found about the Master's business when he comes? His acceptance with the Lord and his position and reward in the kingdom will depend upon his loyalty to duty and service while waiting.

Moreover the crisis of his coming may be hastened by faithful co-operation with him. By living soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age the watchers are preparing a highway for the King. By evangelizing all nations and gathering the elect they are making the Bride ready against the day of nuptials. For these and other reasons, together with many allied associations and interests—the very naming of which would carry us far afield—the believer in the pre-millennial coming of Christ must experience a strong religious appeal.

So far I have indicated the matrix and nature of the religious appeal in millenarianism from the premillennialist's point of view. This appeal may become anaemic, vitiated, or may completely lapse. The theory gets such strong possession of

some minds that it cancels the motives of sympathy and brotherhood, and becomes harsh and intolerant. Such a premillenarian stands on the side lines with the program of events in his hands and watches the procession of the divine purposes go by. To him it is all so clear that any man who sees it in any different form or perspective is blind and working at a useless task. He judges his fellow-Christians as disloyal and apostate, deluded by Satan, who transforms himself into a counterfeit minister of righteousness and an angel of light. He becomes critical, censorious, and exclusive until unconsciously he develops into a Pharisee and, despite his boasted fidelity, the religious motive is vitiated.

Many who call themselves premillenarians are better than their theory. But the thoroughgoing confine the ministry of the gospel to a narrow and superficial form of evangelism and limit the power of the divine Spirit. They utterly repudiate any sympathy or co-operation with a social gospel, mislabel any movements outside their type of evangelism, and attribute them to blind and malevolent inspirations. The religious appeal associated with the hope as held by the earliest Christians degenerates into a pharisaic zeal without knowledge.

Admitting that the early Christians were stimulated by the hope of the speedy return of the Lord, were they deceived by holding such millennial expectations? Not so! It is at least questionable whether the early adherents of this thesis held any such definite scheme of events as is held by pre-millennialists today. Their theory was an illusion not delusion. Delusion is something essentially false, while illusion is a conception which has at the heart of it something greater than the mind can at the moment apprehend. There is something in the Kingdom idea which millenarianism symbolized. But the reality and fulfilment will be greater than the millenarian imagined or thought. The religious appeal of the Kingdom has completely shifted its ground.

The long period of time which has elapsed and the many developments which have taken place since the apostolic days

do not fit into the primitive conception of the Kingdom. Not only the apostles, but every generation after them who cherished the hope of his coming in their day, have been disappointed. To say that it is a corporate hope and that they were not disappointed, but will through a resurrection have part in the advent is a begging of the question. If the judge stood at the door in the days of James, he has been standing there a long time. It seems probable that either he changed his mind or that they misread the signs.

The millenarian dream was conceived in minds laboring among the limitations of primitive knowledge. The investigations and discoveries of science which have changed our conception concerning the universe, space, and time could not but effect a change in this theory. For those who keep in step with the modern mind and have any acquaintance with modern learning, this doctrine has receded into the perspective and lost its outward significance. Where the doctrine has faded the religious appeal has completely changed.

The critical study of the Scriptures and their sources has brought into the field of vision the historic backgrounds and conditions out of which these Scriptures—including this doctrine—have grown. The apocalyptic writings current for two centuries B.C., but not included in the canon, threw their color if not their forms into Christian thought. In proportion to one's acquaintance with the sources of these writings as viewed against the background of modern knowledge, is the millenarian view completely outgrown. It can only maintain its hold and interest over belated minds which are still moving within the horizons of primitive knowledge, and hold their hopes by the canons of literal interpretation. For all who arrive at any knowledge revealed by science, discovered by historic methods and held by the lovers of facts and truth in all departments of research, the conceptions of the Kingdom of God shift their bases from the doctrine of premillennialism, and the religious appeal must be molded by something different from that one-time stimulating, but now archaic dream.