

## Evaluating Premillennialism

(Part I)

This series of articles, "Evaluating Premillennialism" is taken from a new book, *The Promise of the Future*, by Cornelis P. Venema and published by *The Banner of Truth Trust*, 3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh, EH12 6EL, UK.

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### ***The Problem with Premillennialism***

The common feature of all premillennial teaching is the claim that Christ's return at the end of the age will take place before the period known as the millennium. Whatever differences exist between Historic and Dispensational Premillennialism — and they are considerable — this teaching is common to them. Though a number of arguments are offered for a premillennial return of Christ, two biblical passages are often cited in support of it. These are 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 and Revelation 20:1—6. The latter is the more important passage because without its teaching some premillennialists acknowledge that 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 would not obviously suggest a return of Christ before the millennium.<sup>1</sup>

Since we will treat Revelation 20:1—6 in some detail in the next chapter, our evaluation will be restricted here to two matters. First, we will consider what might be termed the 'general analogy' of the Scripture on the return of Christ at the end of the age. Second,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, George Eldon Ladd, 'Historic Premillennialism', in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. by Robert G. Clouse, p. 38. Unlike many dispensational premillennialists who find the doctrine of the millennium in many biblical passages, Ladd acknowledges that only Revelation 20:1—6 teaches a 'millennial' period. He admits that 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 confirms a premillennialist position only when this position has already been established from the clearer teaching of Revelation 20:1—6.

we will evaluate the appeal to 1 Corinthians 15:23—26. We will show that neither supports the premillennialist position.

## I. THE GENERAL TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE

As we begin our evaluation, a question worth raising is whether anyone would argue for a premillennial return of Christ, were it not for the supposed teaching of the two passages just mentioned. Does the Bible anywhere else support this position? This question leads into the subject of the general analogy of Scripture with regard to the return of Christ. It is a commonly recognized rule of thumb for interpretation that the general analogy of Scripture has more weight in determining what the Bible may be said to teach than one or two passages that are somewhat more obscure or difficult to interpret. Louis Berkhof, for example, in his *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, describes the general analogy of Scripture as any teaching that ‘does not rest on the explicit statements of the Bible, but on the obvious scope and import of its teachings as a whole . . . <sup>2</sup>Such a general analogy or teaching of Scripture is confirmed and strengthened when it is supported by a variety of texts throughout the Bible. Furthermore, when this general teaching of the Scriptures is apparently contradicted by a relatively more obscure Scriptural text, it is appropriate to interpret this more obscure passage in the light of the general analogy of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

Now it is remarkable to notice that the usual presentation of the return of the Christ in the Scriptures, and in a number of different passages, is that it is a consummating event at the close of the age. A number of features of the Bible’s teaching regarding the return of Christ confirm this general pattern of teaching:

Christ’s coming will be a visible, public event that will bring about the salvation of the people of God and the realization of the kingdom of God in fullness (*Matt.* 24:27, 33, *Luke* 17:24; 21:27—28, 31).

When Christ is revealed from heaven, he will bring rest immediately and simultaneously for his beleaguered church and eternal punishment upon the unbelieving and impenitent (*2 Thess.* 1:6—10).

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<sup>2</sup> Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to observe that Berkhof cites Revelation 20:1—4 as an instance of a relatively obscure passage that may not be used to contravene the clear teaching of Scripture throughout on the subject of the return of Christ (*Principles*, p. 166). Because most premillennialists believe the teaching of Revelation 20:1—6 to be plain and clear in its support of their position, they would insist that Berkhof has misapplied this rule of interpretation in this particular case. In their approach, the teaching of those passages that speak of Christ’s return must be understood in the light of the clear premillennialist teaching of Revelation 20:1—6.

In the New Testament descriptions of the believer's expectation for the future, the common thread is a focus upon the return of Christ as the event that brings the fullness of salvation, beyond which there is no further event that will surpass it in redemptive significance (cf. *1 Cor.* 1:7, 8, *Phil.* 1:6,10, *1 John* 2:28, *1 Tim.* 4:8, *2 Tim.* 4:1). The premillennial teaching that Christ's return will introduce a millennial period, whose conclusion will be marked by a new outbreak and manifestation of Satanic opposition to Christ and his people (Satan's 'little season' of Revelation 20:3), hardly seems to fit this focus and expectation.

When Christ returns, a rapture of the living and the dead leads to the resurrection transformation of all believers and their uninterrupted and undisturbed communion with the Lord from that day forward (*1 Thess.* 4:13—18). Though we will return to this passage and the subject of the rapture in the next section of this chapter, this communion with the Lord, as it is described in this passage, does not fit the conception of the millennium and Satan's 'little season' which characterizes the premillennial view.

Rather than teaching that the return of Christ will bring a provisional phase of God's kingdom, the millennium, which itself will be surpassed in the final state of God's eternal kingdom, the New Testament teaches that Christ's return will introduce the final state of new heavens and a new earth (*2 Pet.* 3:13, *Rom.* 8:17—25).

Finally the resurrections of the just and the unjust will coincide (*Dan.* 12:2, *John* 5:28—29, *Acts* 24:14—15, *Rev.* 20:11—15). In the premillennialist conception of the return of Christ, the resurrection of believing saints is commonly distinguished and separated in time — by at least one thousand years! — from the resurrection of the unbelieving. However, in New Testament teaching the resurrection of believers is said to occur at the 'last day' (*John* 6:40, *1 Thess.* 4:16, *Phil.* 3:20—21, *1 Cor.* 15:23), the day that marks the close of this present age and the introduction of the (final) age to come.

When considered together, the cumulative effect of these features of biblical teaching is to confirm that when Christ returns, his coming will conclude history as we now experience it and introduce the final state. The pervasive testimony of the New Testament conforms to the natural reading of the Apostles' Creed when it describes the return of Christ 'to judge the living and dead'. This judgement presumably will prepare the way for the 'resurrection of the body and the life everlasting', commencing the final state. Unless clear and compelling evidence from one or more biblical text supports the premillennialist view, it would seem that we should follow the rule that the general teaching of Scripture has more weight than one text, especially when the teaching of that text is not clear and undisputed.

## **II. THE TEACHING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15:23—26**

George Eldon Ladd, an able defender of the premillennialist view, has argued that 1 Corinthians 15:20—28, and especially verses 23—26, teaches three stages in the unfolding of redemptive history, which include an interim period that is the equivalent of

the millennium of Revelation 20:1—6. Though this passage does not speak expressly of a millennium, it at least corroborates, according to Ladd, the sequence of events clearly set forth in Revelation 20. He summarizes his position as follows:

There is . . . one passage in Paul which may refer to an interim kingdom if not a millennium. In 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 Paul pictures the triumph of Christ's kingdom as being accomplished in several stages. The resurrection of Christ is the first stage (*tagma*). The second stage will occur at the parousia when those who are Christ's will share his resurrection. 'Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.' The adverbs translated 'then' are *epeita*, *eita*, which denote a sequence: 'after that'. There are three distinct stages: Jesus' resurrection; after that (*epeita*) the resurrection of believers at the resurrection; after that (*eita*) the end (*telos*). An unidentified interval falls between Christ's resurrection and his parousia, and a second undefined interval falls between the parousia and the *telos*, when Christ completes the subjugation of his enemies.<sup>4</sup>

Ladd's argument is that, though this passage may not explicitly speak of a millennial period, it allows for an intervening period between the time of Christ's coming and the resurrection of believing saints, and the time of Christ's subjection of all his enemies at the end of the age. This intervening period is the millennium of Revelation 20.

Though Ladd's argument can be defended on strictly grammatical grounds that the adverbs 'then. . . and then' used by the Apostle Paul can express a sequence in which a period of time could intervene, this requires an unnatural reading of this passage for several reasons.

First, in all the other New Testament instances where the words used in this passage ('*epeita* . . . *eita*') are found, they are used to express events in the closest temporal connection, without any protracted period of time intervening (*Luke* 8:12, *Mark* 4:17, *John* 20:27). In the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 15:23—26, we find the same adverbs used inter-changeably, and there, too, they express a simple sequence of events (*1 Cor.* 15:5—7). Furthermore, the second of these two, 'and then', is used alone in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to express an immediate sequence of events. If context and ordinary usage have a bearing upon the interpretation of a text, then it seems evident that these words ought to be read as expressing a simple sequence of events — when Christ comes, the dead in Christ will be raised and the end state will ensue with all things subject to him.

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<sup>4</sup> Ladd, 'Historic Premillennialism', in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, p. 39.

Second, the New Testament generally and the epistles of Paul particularly, show a close connection between the ‘coming’ (*parousia*) of Christ and the ‘end’ (*telos*). However, on Ladd’s and the premillennialists’ construction of this passage, these terms in 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 refer to distinct events, separated by a period of one thousand years. In 1 Corinthians 1:7—8, the Apostle Paul speaks of the ‘revelation’ and the ‘day’ of the Lord as the end to which believers look forward and until which they will be kept blameless. When Christ is revealed, the end will come and the believer’s need to persevere in hope will conclude (cf. 2 Cor. 1:13—14, Matt. 10:22; 24:6, 13—14, Mark 13:7,13, Luke 21:9, Heb. 3:6, 14; 6:11, 1 Pet. 4:7). Thus, treating the ‘coming’ of Christ and the ‘end’ in 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 as events that are closely connected, or even conjoined, is in keeping with the ordinary pattern found in the New Testament. That pattern is broken by Ladd’s view.

And third, the believer’s victory over death is said in 1 Corinthians 15:54—55 to occur when believers receive resurrection bodies. This coincides with what is said in 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 to occur in conjunction with both the ‘coming’ of Christ and the ‘end’, when the believer’s last enemy, death, will be overcome. The simplest and most obvious reading of these verses in their context is that when Christ comes and believers share in his resurrection, this event will coincide with or introduce the ‘end’, that circumstance in which death has been swallowed up in victory.

In short, though Ladd’s reading of this passage is grammatically possible, there are good and powerful reasons to conclude that it is contextually and comparatively most improbable. When 1 Corinthians 15:23—26 is read in its immediate context and in the more remote context of New Testament teaching generally, it corroborates the pattern we earlier termed the general analogy of Scripture: when Christ comes at the end of the age, this will mark the closure of redemptive history and commence (with the resurrection of the just and the unjust, the judgement of the living and the dead, etc.) the final state. The Scriptures simply contain no clear evidence for a premillennialist understanding of the return of Christ, with the possible exception of Revelation 20:1—6.

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