

“The Second Coming of Our Lord and the Millennium”  
*The Presbyterian* 86 (December 7):6, 7, 27, 28. [1916]

In the Old Testament only one coming of the Christ is spoken of, and with this one coming the fulfillment of all the messianic predictions and promises is connected.

The New Testament has shown that what to the point of view of prophecy appeared as one undivided act resolves itself in the historical outcome into two distinct chronologically separated events, called by us the first and the second coming of Christ.

With this in view it would be quite conceivable that in the further progress of New Testament revelation the second coming again should have divided itself into a twofold appearance of the Lord with an interval between the second and third coming, as is the case between the first and second. Such a gradual resolution of the unit of Old Testament prophecy into a series of successive fulfillments would be quite in keeping with what we know of the method of revelation and even can claim a sort of historical attractiveness.

As a matter of fact, however, all warrant for thus resolving the future coming of Christ into two successive events is lacking in the New Testament. Whatever else premillenarians think themselves able to adduce of Scripture evidence in favor of their theory, in this one respect the New Testament affords them no help. From beginning to end the future coming of Christ remains one undivided act. Its possible compositeness is nowhere intimated.

And yet it is precisely along the line of the future coming of the Lord that the New Testament might have been expected to approach the conception of the millennium, had such a doctrine actually been an integral part of its eschatological hope. The only natural way to distinguish the provisional millennium and the final order of things would have been to speak of them as suspended on a second and third coming of Jesus, respectively. To the Christian eschatologist this was practically inevitable. A Jewish apocalyptic writer might conceive of the eternal world to come as preceded by a millennium, and yet quite naturally speak of only one coming of the Messiah, for the simple reason that to him the millennium alone is messianic, and in what lies beyond the Messiah has no further function. But to the Christian the figure of Jesus as the Christ has become so central for the whole of eschatology that He must be conspicuous through His appearance and activity in every important development. It is safe to say, therefore, that the belief in a millennium as distinct from the world to come could not have failed to produce the doctrine of a two-fold future coming. The mere fact that such a doctrine is foreign to the New Testament creates a strong presumption against the theory.

The one expected coming of Christ is throughout associated with the absolute consummation of this world and not with the ushering in of a merely provisional order of affairs (cf. Matt. 25:31ff.; Mark 13:27; 14:62; Luke 9:26; John 5:29; 6:40; Acts 2:20, 21; 1 Cor. 1:8; 3:13; 5:5; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:8; Heb. 9:27, 28; 1 Pet. 5:4; 2 Pet. 3:10-13).

If then the premillenarian theory does not and cannot have its origin in the New Testament teaching on the coming of Christ what are its actual roots? In answer to this question four things may be mentioned and briefly considered: (1) The theory has its preformation in a certain scheme of Jewish

eschatology dating back as far as the New Testament period or even earlier; (2) It gathers strength from the desire to vindicate literal fulfillment to the Old Testament eschatological prophecies; (3) It is adapted to obviate fear that the universal extension of the kingdom of God in this world cannot be reached under present conditions and with the present instrumentalities; (4) It appeals to a number of New Testament passages, most of which are supposed to imply the millennium through teaching a double resurrection.

In Judaism there existed two types of eschatological outlook. There was the ancient national hope which revolved around the destiny of Israel. Alongside of this existed a higher form which had in view the destiny of the creation as a whole. The former has its scene on earth, the latter in a new world, radically different from the present one. Now, in certain of the apocalyptic writings a compromise is effected between these two schemes after this manner, that the carrying out of the one is to follow that of the other, the national earthly hope receiving its fulfillment in a provisional messianic kingdom of limited duration (400 or 1,000 years), to be superseded at the end by the eternal state. It was felt that the eschatology of this world and that of the world to come would not mix, therefore the two were held together on the purely mechanical principle of chronological succession. This Jewish compromise was distinctly due to a lack of spirituality in the circles where it appears. It should not be confounded with the naive attachment of the Old Testament hope to the external, terrestrial forms of religious expression. The Old Testament saw the spiritual as wrapped up in the external. To the later Jewish mind the spiritual and the sensual, the things of the world to come and of this world, had become clearly distinct and its fault was that with this alternative before it, it was not sufficiently spiritual to make a resolute choice of the other world. Now there is reason to believe that some of this spirit was carried over from Judaism into the early Christian church, where in the form of Christian chiliasm it created a counterpart to the Jewish doctrine already in existence.

It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this that lack of spiritual mindedness was the sole cause responsible for the transplanting of this idea into Christian soil. In many cases a higher and relatively commendable motive came into play. As stated, the Old Testament avails itself of earthly and eternal forms to convey heavenly and spiritual things. Sincere attachment to the Old Testament Scriptures and a profound conviction of their absolute veracity could and can still underlie a desire to see them in their whole extent literally fulfilled, and since the eternal world offers no scope for this, to create a sphere for such fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. Instead of casting upon such a state of mind the stigma of unspiritualness and narrow-mindedness, we should rather admire the faith-robustness which it unquestionably reveals. None the less, we believe such faith to be a misguided faith. It rests on a failure to apprehend the deeper spiritual import of the Old Testament forms of revelation and to follow the guidance offered us by the New Testament in this respect. To some extent the Old Testament writers themselves are conscious of the figurative meaning of the realistic modes of statement they employ. In such a case as that of the promise of Isaiah 2:1, according to which the mountain of Jehovah's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, this is obvious of itself. But to a larger extent, perhaps, the Old Testament consciousness itself may have understood such things more or less literally, as for instance when in the same prophecy the nations are represented as flowing unto the temple mountain and yet the New Testament shows that even in such cases the fulfillment must be sought in the spiritual sphere. Taken in a broad sense, the New Testament regards itself as the perfect and true realization of the prophetic program, and that not in spite of but precisely in virtue of its spiritual complexion. It nowhere voices the feeling that

scant justice has been done to the Old Testament, because its forecasts have come true in spiritual form, but on the contrary glories in this as a realization far exceeding all that could be asked for or conceived. It were to discredit this whole trend of progress in the direction of spirituality, and to ignore the right of revelation to explain itself if one sought on the basis of the Old Testament alone to decide which elements of prophecy require literal fulfillment and accordingly postulate a millennium, and which items have found their sufficient realization in the spiritual developments of the new covenant. The only safe guide here is what the New Testament writers teach. In so far and in so far only as they maintain that certain predictions still await a literal, realistic fulfillment can there be warrant for expecting such, and for raising the question whether a millennium may perhaps be necessary to bring it about. Indiscriminate insistence upon the literal import of prophecy were not merely a weak, but an impossible basis to build chiliasm upon. In point of fact, even the most radical chiliasts discriminate between what they expect and do not expect to see materialized in the millennium. On the ground of the Old Testament alone there is no warrant for such distinction. The prophets proclaim as emphatically the restoration of the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrificial system as they predict the return of the people to Palestine and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Besides, the serious difficulty arises that the Old Testament ascribes to the fulfillment of these things eternal validity and duration. The attempt, therefore, to do justice to their literal import by a millennial, that is, temporary, embodiment in external forms is at best only a halfway measure. It would still leave the eternity feature of the prophecy unfulfilled.

A third consideration which predisposes many minds to a belief in chiliasm has to do with the promise that Christianity will regenerate the world in the most absolute sense, that the universe will be brought under the sway of Christ. It is a correct instinct which leads to the assertion that, when this prospect is taken in its extreme absoluteness, the present instrumentalities are not adapted or adequate to its realization. The reason for this is that in the prospect so defined strictly eschatological conditions pertaining to the eternal order of things are included, and it is no reflection on the gospel methods and instrumentalities as employed by the church to say that they are not equal to producing these. They were never intended to do so. Only the eschatological interposition of God at the end of the world is adequate to this. There is a point in the coming of the kingdom of God where no gradual development, not even the evolution of the supernatural suffices, where the catastrophic is the only thing in place. The supernatural process which brings the kingdom of God partakes of a twofold character: it works first by development and then in a crisis. In order to understand why this is so, a clear conception should be formed of what is the end to be attained by each of these actions. The difference lies in two points: (1) the catastrophic interposition of God affects, besides the spiritual, the physical side of the universe; it creates a new heaven and a new earth; (2) the gradual progressive supernatural activity of God in the spiritual sphere produces no absolute, but only relative results. From this distinction it should be plain what may and what may not be expected from the present instrumentalities and modes of procedure for extending the kingdom of God. The physical transformation of the universe lies obviously beyond their range of attainment. No amount of evangelization, no degree of success in the conversion of men, or in the reconstruction of social or political life, can ever change the constitution of nature or eradicate the physical forces of evil at work in the kosmos. If one were to assume this, it would mean the negation of all eschatology. But it is further plain that a provisional millennial order of affairs need not be brought into requisition for such a purpose. The consummation of this world and the bringing in of the world to come, this and nothing else can at this point effect the necessary change. As concerns the other point,

the evangelization of the world, so long as absolute completeness and perfection in the religious and moral result be not expected, there is no reason why the present forces and instrumentalities at the service of the supernatural should not be deemed fully adequate to the task, why any separate coming of Christ and the inauguration of entirely new modes of activity under millennial auspices should be required. We may safely trust the ancient power of the gospel for accomplishing whatever it has the promise of accomplishing in this world.

In our opinion the desire for the millennium on evangelistic grounds is partly due to an exaggerated and unduly optimistic conception of what this world is intended to become through the influence of Christianity in the present dispensation. An ideal state in which the forces arrayed on the side of Christ shall be in full control of all spheres of life is looked forward to. Such a belief reflects itself not merely in the premillenarian scheme, but likewise in the theory of those who would place a millennium conceived more or less fully after the analogy of the other, only more spiritualized, before the return of Christ. While ascribing its production to the present powers at work in the church, they nevertheless would mark it off as a period of ideal conditions from the preceding less perfect dispensation in which we live. It is a question to our mind whether Scripture furnishes sufficient ground for expecting this. One might even feel tempted to say that the exorbitant idealism of such hopes as cherished by non-chiliasts is to some degree responsible for the vitality of premillenarian belief. It is well to remember for this reason that, however high the Scriptures encourage us to set our hopes with reference to the future of the kingdom of God in this world, there are certain inherent limitations attendant upon every such outlook, which the Bible itself never fails to remind us of, lest our hope should outrun the methods of God and expect from this world what only the world to come is able to bring. All the nations must be evangelized, the fullness of the Gentiles go in and all Israel be saved, the kingdom of heaven must grow to a great tree, and the leaven permeate the entire lump. But all this certainly does not mean, not even to the mind of the most pronounced pre- or postmillenarian that there will be a period before the end of the world when the power of sin and evil will be entirely eliminated. The same kingdom parables which seem to set no limit upon the progressive extension of the kingdom also teach us that the wheat and the tares, the good and the bad fish remain together until the judgment day. The same Paul who outlines for us in Romans a program of the uninterrupted progress of the kingdom of God and points as its goal the Christianization of all the nations and the salvation of all Israel likewise teaches us that towards the end the power of evil will gather its greatest strength and find its supreme product and leader in the man of sin, the lawless one, usually called the Antichrist. It is only through a mechanical and one-sidedly exaggerated interpretation of the former kind of statements that they can be brought into contradiction with the latter kind, which then might seem to render an assignment of the two divergent elements to two distinct periods necessary. To apply the principle of chronological distribution here would be only a repetition for a somewhat different purpose of the method of Jewish apocalyptic. Just as the latter attempted a clean separation between the earthly and the super-earthly eschatological states by means of the idea of the millennium, so some now through the use of the same idea seek to keep apart the movement of undecided conflict with the forces of evil and the movement of unchecked triumph of the Christian cause. But Scripture gives us no warrant for such a mechanical mode of harmonizing of what after all is only apparently incompatible. The extension of Christianity on the periphery to the ends of the earth does not preclude a progressive apostasy within the bosom of Christianity itself. Historically considered, the judgment day will surely mean what its name implies it to be—a two-sided divine interposition in the state of the then existing world, where both its good

and its evil as still active forces will be reckoned with.

The Scripture passages to which the advocates of the premillennial coming chiefly appeal are Acts 3:19-21; 1 Corinthians 15:23-28; Philippians 3:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 20:1-6. In the first-named passage, Peter promises “seasons of refreshing,” when Israel shall have repented, and the arrival of these coincides with the sending of the Christ to the Jews, i.e., with the parousia. Now it is argued that Peter in verse 21—“Whom the heaven *must* (present tense) receive until the times of restoration of all things”—places after this advent of the Christ a renewed withdrawal of the Lord into heaven, to be followed after a certain interval by the restoration of all things. Here then would be two future comings with a period between described as “seasons of refreshing.” But this exegesis brings the passage into conflict with the teaching of Peter elsewhere in Acts, according to which the return of Jesus brings “the day of the Lord,” the day of judgment (Acts 2:17-21). A better exegesis, therefore, is that “the seasons of refreshing” and “the times of restoration of all things” are identical; both begin with the coming of the Lord and both are dependent on the conversion of Israel. This is exactly what Paul teaches in Romans 11, viz., that Israel’s conversion is the signal for the absolute end. The present tense in verse 21 does not indicate that the reception of Christ into heaven still lies in the future, but expresses a fixed eschatological principle, viz., that after His first appearance, the Christ must be withdrawn into heaven till the hour for His second advent has come.

In 1 Corinthians 15:23-28 two “orders” of the resurrection are distinguished, and it is urged that these consist of believers (before the millennium) and of nonbelievers (after the millennium). In reality, there is no reflection here upon nonbelievers at all; the two “orders” are Christ and they that are Christ’s. “The end” in verse 24 is not the end of the resurrection, but the end of the events that conclude the present world. Paul here distinguishes the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of God. The former closes, the latter begins with “the end.” But the kingdom of Christ, which closes at “the end,” takes its beginning with the resurrection of Christ and not with an alleged intermediate coming. It is the reign of Christ now being exercised from heaven in which He reduces all enemies to subjection. It is moreover plain from verses 50ff., in the same chapter, that for Paul the resurrection of believers coincides with the consummate state, in which “flesh and blood” have been superseded. This could scarcely be said of the millennium.

As to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, we are told that the perplexity of the readers concerning the dead which Paul seeks to remove can have consisted in nothing else than that they feared their exclusion from the *first resurrection* and the millennial reign of Christ. This is put on the ground that in regard to *the resurrection as such* they could not possibly have been in ignorance or doubt. As a matter of fact, the context compels us to ascribe to them doubt of the resurrection as such, for Paul exhorts them not to sorrow, even as the Gentiles, who have no hope whatever, and gives them in verse 14 the general assurance that in the resurrection of Jesus that of believers is guaranteed. In verse 17, “So shall we ever be with the Lord,” the word “ever” excludes the conception of a provisional kingdom.

In Philippians 3:9-11, it is urged, Paul represents his attaining to the resurrection as dependent on special efforts on his part, therefore as something not in the same sense in store for all believers. Now, since the resurrection as such belongs to all, a special grace of resurrection must be meant, i.e., inclusion in the first resurrection at the dawn of the millennium. It will be observed that the adoption of this exegesis must put our passage in contradiction with the chiliastic exegesis of 1 Corinthians

15:23-28, for there, as we have seen, a first resurrection of all believers is supposed to introduce the millennium, whereas here it would be a resurrection of the martyrs only. In reality Paul does not speak in our passage of a partial or specially privileged resurrection at all. He simply gives expression to the idea that the resurrection in all cases is organically connected with the believer's progress in grace and conformity to Christ, an event not out of all relation to his spiritual development, but the fitting climax of the transformation begun in this life. Besides in verse 20 the resurrection and change of *all* believers is joined to the coming of Christ.

In connection with Paul's teaching it should always be remembered that its trend as a whole is distinctly unfavorable to the introduction of a transitional, millennial period between the Christian life here and the eternal life to come. Paul looks upon the present Christian state as half-eschatological, because it is a state in the Spirit, the enjoyment of the first-fruits of the Spirit, the full possession of the Spirit constituting the life of heaven. The point may be made that thus considered, the present so directly leads up to, so thoroughly pre-fashions the eternal future as to leave no room for a third something that would separate the one from the other. No matter with what concrete elements or colors the conception of a millennial state may be filled out, to a mind thus nourished upon the first-fruits of eternal life it can for the very reason that it must fall short of eternal life, have neither significance nor attraction.

The passage, Revelation 20:1-6, at first sight seems to favor the conception of a millennial reign of Christ, participated in by the martyrs brought to life in a first resurrection, and marked by a suspension of the activity of Satan. And it is urged that the sequence of the visions places this millennium after the advent of Christ narrated in chapter 19. The question of chronological sequence, however, is in Revelation particularly difficult to settle. It is far from impossible that the thousand years may be synchronous with the earlier developments recorded and symbolically describe the glorified life enjoyed with Christ in heaven by the martyrs during the present period up to the second advent. The terms employed do not suggest an anticipated bodily resurrection. The seer speaks of "souls" which "lived" and "reigned" and finds in this the first resurrection. The scene of this life and reign is in heaven, where also "the souls" of the martyrs are beheld, according to Revelation 6:9. The words, "this is the first resurrection," may be a pointed disavowal of a more realistic interpretation of the same phrase. The symbolism of the thousand years may consist in this, that it contrasts the glorified state of the martyrs on the one hand with the brief season of tribulation endured here on earth, and on the other hand with the eternal life of the consummation. The binding of Satan for this period would then mark the first eschatological conquest of Christ over the powers of evil, as distinguished from the renewed activity of Satan toward the end. In regard to a book so enigmatical, it were presumptuous to speak with any degree of dogmatism, but the uniform absence of the idea of the millennium from the New Testament elsewhere ought to render the exegete cautious before affirming its presence in this one passage.