

IS THE DOCTRINE OF PREMILLENNIALISM A “FATAL ERROR?”

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Introduction

My assignment for this series of lectures centers around the issue of just how serious a matter is the doctrine of Premillennialism (from the standpoint of a person’s spiritual condition and destiny). Specifically, this presentation is concerned with the question, “Is the doctrine of premillennialism a ‘fatal error’?” This is a particularly timely and relevant matter, because the Doctrine has become extremely prevalent throughout the protestant denominational world in recent years. No longer is it confined to what we might call “fringe” holiness groups. Premillennialism can now be found in virtually all “mainline” denominations as well. In fact, it is not uncommon to encounter brethren, from time to time, who seem to believe that it’s a rather harmless theory (in the realm of opinion) and who don’t see any reason to get all that concerned about the matter.

Even though the assigned topic is in the form of a question, it involves a definite proposition. Anytime a proposition such as this is being discussed (especially in a public forum like a lectureship or book), it is essential to define key terms. This is the case because different people (even within the church) may have different concepts of just what is meant by “Premillennialism” and “fatal” (i.e., the two key terms in this question). By way of introduction, therefore, some time should be spent defining and discussing these terms.

What Is Premillennialism?

The term *Premillennialism* literally means “before the millennium” (a millennium being a period of one thousand years). It is derived from the notion that Christ will return

immediately before reigning for one thousand years on this Earth. The most common form of this doctrine is perhaps best described as “Dispensational Premillennialism,” based on the belief that there are seven dispensations that cover the entire history of the world, and that the one thousand year reign is in the last dispensation. Common terms that comprise the nomenclature of this doctrine include *rapture*, *tribulation*, *end-times*, and *Armageddon*.

For purposes of this lecture, the term *Premillennialism* refers to a system of doctrine that holds the following:

1. All of the Biblical references and prophecies concerning the kingdom of Christ are unfulfilled (i.e., yet to be fulfilled).
2. The Old Testament land promise to the Jews has never been completely fulfilled.
3. When Christ came to this Earth, it was for the purpose of fulfilling the land promise, to establish a political kingdom, and to reign as an Earthly king.
4. The Jews completely thwarted Christ’s efforts (by rejecting Him and bringing about His crucifixion).
5. Because of Jews’ rejection, the church was instituted on the “spur of moment” (as an emergency measure). The church, therefore, was not God’s original plan. It was just what he had to settle for until Christ could come again and be accepted, successfully establish an Earthly kingdom, and reign for a thousand years.
6. There will actually be two “second” comings of Christ. The first time will be concealed from the world at large. On this occasion Christ will raise the righteous dead and call them (along with the righteous living) to live somewhere above the Earth for a seven year period known as the “rapture.” During this same time,

those who are left behind on the Earth will be undergoing a terrible period of “tribulation.” The second time Jesus returns, however, the entire world will see Him and He will re-establish David’s throne in the city of Jerusalem. Then every Jew will be returned to the land of Palestine (the land promise will finally have been fulfilled), the Law of Moses will be reinstated, and Christ will reign peacefully for a thousand years.

7. At some point during this millennium (some say at the beginning; some say near the end), Satan and his forces will launch a final, all-out attack. This will be the literal battle or war of “Armageddon,” taking place in the plain of Megiddo, in Northern Israel. Then the unrighteous dead will be raised, the final judgment will occur, and eternity will begin.

It would be a very simple matter to document that the tenets listed above are, in fact, the essence of Premillennialism. There is no shortage of books and other printed materials (including bumper stickers) in which the doctrine is sensationally and confidently promoted. It should not be necessary to review that evidence at this point, as other chapters in the lectureship book will likely address it in some detail.

What Constitutes “Fatal Error”?

As noted already, it is also very important to clarify what is meant by *fatal error* in the question, *Is Premillennialism a fatal error?* There are a number of factors involved in the concept of what makes an error “fatal.” In the first place, it must be recognized that to talk about “fatal error” is to talk about that which is spiritually fatal, resulting in the loss of one’s soul and eternal condemnation. It should go without saying that the only sound basis for making this type of determination is the Word of God.

Fatal error can be thought of as anything which contradicts or denies any doctrine which is clearly taught in the Bible (or anything which implies such a contradiction). This would include any teaching that denies the nature of God, His role in our universe, His authority, omnipotence, omniscience, integrity, and such like. Fatal error would include anything which violates (or treats as non-essential) a matter of Scriptural obligation (i.e., that which God has clearly required us to do, to believe, or to understand). It would also include any teaching which proposes or implies a “man-made” way of salvation.

There are numerous instances within the Scriptures where the concept of fatal error is identified, either explicitly or implicitly. In general terms, for example, the Word of God teaches that it is a fatal error to:

- Remain outside of Christ (Rom. 8:1)
- Refuse to believe in Christ or to repent of one’s sins (John. 8:24; Luke. 13:3)
- Reject Christ or refuse to accept His Word (John. 12:48)
- Cause an innocent person to stumble (Mat. 18:6-7)
- Err from the truth and abide not in the teaching of Christ (Jam. 5:19–20; 2 John 9)
- Teach any other doctrine than what was delivered through the inspired writers of the New Testament (Gal. 1:6–9)
- Alter God’s Book in any way (Rev. 22:18–19)

More specific examples of fatal error, as taught in the Bible, would be:

- Any of the “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5)
- Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29; 1 Tim. 1:19–20)
- Hypocrisy (such as the Lord addressed in Mat. 23)
- Observing the Lord’s supper in a profane or flippant manner (1 Cor. 11:29)

- Lying to God or to the Holy Spirit, as did Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5)
- Greed, as displayed by Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:14–23)
- Refusing to acknowledge the plain evidence (i.e., from nature itself) of God’s existence, worshipping creatures rather than the Creator, homosexuality (Rom. 1)
- Rebellion against civil authorities (13:2)
- Prejudice or discrimination (for which Paul withstood Peter to the face—Gal. 2:11)
- Wrestling (twisting) the Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16–17)

The citations listed above represent just a small sample of the Biblical passages with this theme. Clearly, the concept of “fatal error” (for the Christian and the non-Christian alike) is well established and well defined in the Word of God. We don’t really have to wonder about what it is or what it means.

Implications of Premillennialism

Getting back to the question at hand, our concern is whether or not the Premillennial system of teaching falls into the category of “fatal error.” We believe that by simply noticing and highlighting a few of the logical consequences (i.e., implications) of this doctrine, the answer to this question will become obvious. Although there are many consequences of Premillennial philosophy, this chapter will address four of the more significant ones. Though it may be observed that there is some overlap in these points, each one is worth examining on its own.

*1. Christ is **not** now reigning as king, nor does He have a kingdom in which **to** reign.*

According to Premillennial teaching, since the Jews rejected Christ as king, the kingdom was post-poned and Christ returned to Heaven as nothing more than someone who had a claim to the throne—someone who merely hoped to be a king in the future. Therefore, He’s not a king now and won’t really be one until He can come back to Earth

and manage not to get rejected. The Bible affirms, however, that Christ's reign as king has been in progress ever since He ascended back to the Father, that His kingdom is in existence now, and that it will continue on into eternity. Note the following unassailable truths expressed so clearly by the inspired writers:

- The Father “has translated us [past tense, AM] into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1: 13)
- “But of the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever & ever; and the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of thy kingdom” (Heb. 1:8)
- “Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God...” (Heb. 12:28)
- Jesus is called the “ruler of the kings of this Earth,” and He has “made us to be kings and priests” (Rev. 1:5–6; 5:9–10)
- All authority has been given unto the Lord, in Heaven and on Earth (Mat. 28:18)

How can Jesus have all authority (in Heaven and on Earth) and **not** be king? How can He be the ruler of kings, if He is not king Himself? How can He have made us kings, if He is not king Himself? [Note that if this were the case, we would out-rank Him!] The simple truth is that Christ is king **now**, and He will be king until He delivers the kingdom back to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

2. Jesus was a false prophet (one of many) who could not have come from God (unless God Himself is false).

As noted already, a fundamental tenet of Premillennialism is that Christ did not establish His kingdom while He was on this Earth because the Jews prevented His doing so. The doctrine also holds that Christ intended (and still intends) to establish an earthly kingdom. Centuries before our Lord came, however, Daniel and Isaiah told of a kingdom that God would establish “in the latter days”, “in the days of these kings” (i.e.,

the Roman empire); a kingdom which would not be like any other before or after it, everlasting and never to be replaced (Dan. 2; Isa. 2). In Joel 2 and Acts 2 we see these prophecies tied directly and unmistakably to the events that occurred on the day of Pentecost.

Jesus promised that His kingdom was “at hand” (i.e., close enough to reach out and touch, Mat. 4:1). John the baptizer, the apostles, and the seventy disciples (all acting under Christ’s authority and direction) made the very same promise. The kingdom was “at hand” in their lifetimes.

Just after promising to build His church, Jesus promised to give to the apostles the “keys of the kingdom” (Mat. 16:19), a figure that clearly implies terms of entry. If the kingdom is yet to be established, however, then the apostles never used the keys and it was a nonsensical waste of time for the Lord to provide them. It should be obvious from even a casual study of this passage that the terms “church” and “kingdom” are being used interchangeably (just as they generally are throughout the New Testament). In John 18:33–37 (when asked about His being the king of the Jews), Jesus stated, “My kingdom is not of this world...my kingdom is not from hence.” Pilate asked, “Art thou a king then?” Christ responded, “To this end have I been born and **to this end have I come into this world**” (emph. AM). Jesus established His kingdom all right, it just wasn’t an earthly kingdom.

On one occasion (Mark 9:1), Jesus promised explicitly that the kingdom would come, with power, in the lifetime of His apostles. The suggestion that some of those apostles are still living, still looking for the kingdom, is laughable at best. The notion that Christ was lying about His kingdom (or maybe was just honestly mistaken) is nothing

short of blasphemy; yet this is exactly what the doctrine of Premillennialism implies! Some Premillennialists, in an effort to escape the force of this logic, propose that some of Christ's apostles saw a demonstration of power during the transfiguration (Mat. 17), and that the church is a "manifestation" of the kingdom (though not the kingdom itself). Therefore, they say, the promise has been fulfilled. In other words, the kingdom has "sort of" been established, but not really. This is nothing more than "semantic silliness," and the result is the same: the kingdom has not yet come, so Jesus must have been deceitful or mistaken.

*3. The church is just an ill-timed **accident**; an interim substitute for what Christ really had in mind (i.e., an earthly, political kingdom).*

Premillennialism teaches that the church was a temporary, emergency measure (instituted with no forethought or design), "hatched-up" on the spur of the moment in response to the Jews' rejection of Christ. The Bible teaches, however, that the church has always been a central component of God's scheme of redemption—something that God had in mind before He even created this world. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul shows that God planned for and provided for the relationship between Christians and Christ "before the foundation of the world" (1:3–5). He also writes that the church is according to God's "eternal purpose, which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (3:10–11) and makes note of the glory which God has "in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever..." (v. 21). These passages (as well as many others) drive home the point that the church was no accident; it was "on purpose." The church was not an alternate plan; it was **the plan**—in the mind of God

before our existence even began. There is no institution God has planned for after the church.

God sent His son into this world “in the fulness of time” (Gal. 4:4–5). According to Premillennial doctrine, however, the time just wasn’t “right” when Jesus came, and that’s why He was rejected. The obvious implication is that God just picked a “bad” time. The Bible says that God picked the perfect time to send His son, according to His own perfect design.

Christ sacrificed His own blood and His own life to purchase the church (Acts 20:28). If the church was just an accident, was Christ’s death an accident, too (or did He, perhaps, shed His blood to purchase an accident)? The church is depicted in the Scriptures as the “Bride of Christ” (Eph. 5:22–23). In the Premillennial scheme of things, the wedding was of the “shot-gun” variety, because Christ neither planned for nor desired the church.

4. God is neither all-powerful nor all-knowing.

At the very heart of Premillennialism is the idea that, when the Jews rejected Christ, God was unprepared and caught off guard; that He was powerless to stop the crucifixion. Premillennialism holds that this “unforeseen” turn of events caused God to have to scramble around and throw together a back-up plan (i.e., the church). In sharp contrast, however, the Bible is very clear and consistent regarding God’s infinite power, knowledge, and wisdom. The Bible also teaches emphatically that the death of Christ occurred and the church was established because that was precisely what God intended (centuries before the Jews had the first thought about getting rid of Jesus).

The prophet Isaiah, writing some 700 years before Jesus walked the Earth, described Him as God's suffering servant, one who would be despised and rejected, who would be smitten of God for the transgressions of others, who would bear our iniquities, who's life would be sacrificed for sin, though He had no sins of His own (ch. 53). The certainty of this prophecy is emphasized by the fact that it's expressed entirely in the past tense, as if it had already happened! Our Lord Himself proclaimed, "No one taketh my life from me, I lay it down myself" (John 10:18). He obviously knew what was coming, and He knew why it was coming. Furthermore, He had the power to stop it (cf. Mat. 26:53–54), but He didn't in order that God's will would be done and the Scriptures would be fulfilled.

The apostle Peter preached that Jesus was delivered up (to be crucified) "by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:22–23) and that God foreshowed (i.e., showed ahead of time), by the mouth of all the prophets, the things which Christ should suffer (Acts 3:18). In Acts 4:25–28, the second Psalm of David (written some 1,000 years before Christ) is quoted and applied to the rejection and crucifixion of Christ. It is said that God's hand (God's counsel) foreordained all of these things to come to pass. Peter used very similar language in his first epistle, affirming that the shedding of the blood of Christ (the perfect lamb) and the redemption that that would bring were "foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world" (vv. 18–20).

In addition to these specific statements regarding the rejection and subsequent death of our Lord, it is also relevant to note the Bible's general teaching on the omniscience and omnipotence of God. From our standpoint, His judgments are "unsearchable" and His ways are "past tracing out." Human beings are totally incapable

of knowing the mind of God (save what He has chosen to reveal to us) or providing counsel to God (Rom. 11:33–34). The Proverbs remind us that “there is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord” (21:30). Indeed, if the Lord of hosts has purposed, no man shall disannul it; and if His hand is stretched out, no man shall turn it back (Isa. 14:27). God was neither surprised by, nor powerless to prevent what happened to the Son

Conclusion

It doesn't really take an in-depth study of the Scriptures to see that Premillennialism is not just some “harmless theory” or an alternate viewpoint regarding some peripheral matters of opinion. Premillennialism is a completely and inherently false viewpoint concerning some of the most fundamental and essential truths that God has revealed to us. To embrace the doctrine of Premillennialism is to contradict all that the Bible teaches about the kingdom and the reign of Christ. To believe the teachings of Premillennialism is to make a liar (or an incompetent fool) out of the Son of God, not to mention numerous other prophets of God. To accept the doctrine of Premillennialism is to deny the value, the importance, and the glory of the church for which Jesus died. To embrace the Premillennial system of theology is to deny the power, knowledge, and wisdom of the God who created us, along with everything else in this universe. A person cannot do any of these things without involving himself in **fatal error** (i.e, without putting his eternal soul in jeopardy). The doctrine of Premillennialism needs to be recognized and exposed for exactly what it is.

[NOTE: I wrote this MS for the Houston College of the Bible Lectures, hosted by the Church of Christ, Spring, TX, June 15–18, 1997. I delivered it orally and it was published in the lectureship book, *Premillennialism*, ed. David Brown. I was serving as a part-time instructor at the time.]