

Millennialism and the Church

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Introduction

By millennialism I refer to Premillennialism which pervades the vast majority of Protestant churches, including the old “mainline” denominations, independent groups, the various Pentecostal sects, and the newer “community” churches. The *millennial* part of *Premillennialism* refers to a millennium—1,000 years, which they harvest from a highly figurative context and take literally (Rev. 20:2–7). The *pre* part of the word refers to the contention that Christ will come again immediately **before** He establishes an earthly political millennial reign. This phenomenon is more than merely “a doctrine.” It is a **system of theology** which its adherents impose like a template over the Bible and through which they view every passage. Several variants of this system are extant, but the one constant is belief in a material, earthly, political kingdom of Christ that will last for one thousand years.

“Historical” Premillennialism is the “standard” version. The “deluxe” version is “dispensational” Premillennialism, which includes the above, but also includes such doctrines as the “rapture” and the “great tribulation.” Dispensational refers to its division of all of time into seven mythical “dispensations.” By their calculations, we are in dispensation number six (i.e., “the church age”), awaiting number seven (i.e., “the millennial kingdom age”). Protestants in the USA are almost universally under the thrall of Dispensational Premillennialism. We do not question the sincerity of its devotees, but we hasten to point out that sincerity of belief does not transform religious error into Biblical Truth.

Some may be thinking that members of the Lord’s church are not in danger of succumbing to this system of error, so we need not study it. They could not be more wrong for several reasons:

1. The level of Biblical illiteracy among the saints is appalling. This fact means that many have no Biblical “information bank” upon which to call to evaluate doctrines and philosophies. Those who know little of the Truth are hardly in a viable position even to recognize—much less, reject and refute—error.
2. The less one knows of and relies upon God’s Word for his religious knowledge and convictions, the more susceptible he is to the errors to which he is exposed, including Premillennial errors. It is not uncommon to hear members of the church using such terms as signs of the times, the battle of Armageddon, and the rapture as defined by the Billy

Graham Association, the PTL Club, and other popular denominational authors and televangelists.

3. The dominant doctrinal crisis among brethren between the two World Wars in the previous century was Premillennialism, led principally by R.H. Boll. It attracted many and would have captivated more had it not been for such stalwart defenders of Truth on this issue as Foy E. Wallace, Jr., E.R. Harper, R.L. Whiteside, and G.C. Brewer (although he erred at times otherwise), whose articles, debates, and books exposed the system's errors. Without vigilance it can rise again.
4. Some today, who still claim affinity with the Lord's church, view this system of error as benign. Carroll D. Osburn, ACU Professor of New Testament, wrote: "There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who...differ on eschatological theories such as premillennialism[sic]..." (The Peaceable Kingdom, 1993, pp. 90-91). We should not be surprised at Osburn's compromise regarding this error, since in the same paragraph he argues that using instrumental music in worship and holding that baptism is **because** of remission of sins are likewise acceptable optional positions.

Premillennialism is based upon several misapprehensions about the kingdom of Christ; I now call your attention to a few of these.

Jesus' Church Is Not His Kingdom

A major fallacy of Premillennial theology is its dichotomy between the church of the Lord and the earthly state of His kingdom, although the New Testament repeatedly identifies them as one and the same. Among the several Scripture contexts that so teach are the following. Jesus said:

And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:18-19).

Jesus promised to build His church, and in the same breath, He promised to give Peter the "keys of the kingdom." We can hardly imagine the Lord's promising to build one thing, only to give Peter the keys to something entirely different. These "keys" would have been utterly useless in Peter's hands if they were for a kingdom that is still yet to come after 2,000 years, per Premillennial doctrine. The fulfillment of this promise is generally (and I believe correctly) understood to have been fulfilled on the first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection. On that day Peter led in announcing the terms of salvation to the vast international gathering in Jerusalem. These terms (i.e., commanding believers in Jesus as God's Son to "repent...and be

baptized... unto the remission of your sins...”) “unlocked” the doors of the church, to which the Lord added about 3,000 obedient believers on that day (Acts 2:36–41, 47). After thus using the “keys” to admit the Jews, he later used them to open the kingdom’s doors to the Gentiles (Acts 10:47; 11:11–18).

Paul addressed his Colossian letter to “the saints and faithful brethren in Christ,” obviously referring to the church at Colossae (Col. 1:1). Subsequently, he described their leaving the world and becoming members of the church as follows: God “...delivered out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (vv. 12–13). Obviously, Paul equated being members of Jesus’ church with being citizens in His kingdom. Neither the inspired apostle nor members of the Colossian church were “future kingdom” advocates.

Near the close of the first century A.D. John wrote to the “seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4). To them he said that Jesus “made us to be a kingdom” (vv. 5– 6). Later in the same context he said that he was at that time (i.e., in the first century A.D.) “a partaker with you in the kingdom” (v. 9). The cross-referencing of the church with the kingdom of Christ in the foregoing is unavoidable unless one is so blinded by the Premillennial template that he refuses the force of indisputable terms.

Readers will find another plain identification of Jesus’ church as His kingdom in the following passage:

But **ye are come** unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels, **to the general assembly and church of the firstborn** who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and the Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel... Wherefore, **receiving a kingdom** that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe (Heb. 12:22–23, 28; emph. DM).

While there is much rich material in the foregoing passage that invites exegesis and homiletic treatment, note the explicit declaration of the emphasized words: those who were/are in the church had “received” (i.e., entered, become a part of) an unshakeable kingdom. They were not looking for a kingdom yet to come, but were, at the time they read this epistle, in it – and it was the church.

Further how can one read this description of the Lord’s unshakeable kingdom and fail to see its close connection to Daniel’s prophecy of the “kingdom that shall never be destroyed” but

that “shall stand for ever” (Dan. 2:44)? His prophecy was time-stamped as coming in the days of the Roman empire (27 B.C.–A.D. 476), which fact is impossible to harmonize with the “future-kingdom” advocacy of the millennialists. However, the establishment of the church of Christ in about A.D. 30–33 harmonizes perfectly with the kingdom’s descriptions in both Hebrews and Daniel, thus making the church and the earthly state of the kingdom of Christ one and the same.

The Premillennial denial of the church/kingdom identity implies that the blood-purchased church of the Lord (Acts 20:28) was/is little more than an afterthought in the mind of God, arranged spontaneously to substitute for the alleged failed establishment of their expected earthly political kingdom. The Premillennial view of God is thus of one so impotent that He is unable to anticipate the rejection of His Son and His earthly kingdom ambitions. Of course, the true and living God knew what they would do to His Son. This fact is fully apparent with even a hurried reading of Isaiah 53. The church was no sudden substitute for some greater royal institution—it **was** the plan and the kingdom. It was/is according to God’s “...**eternal** purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:9–10; *emph. DM*). Jesus built it despite His cruel rejection and murder by the Jews. Indeed, even His death and entrance to the “gates of Hades,” did not “prevail against” His establishment of it (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:27, 3132).

Jesus Had Earthly Kingdom Ambitions

A bedrock doctrine of Premillennialism is that Jesus came to establish an earthly, political kingdom. There can be little doubt that the Jews generally interpreted the kingdom prophecies in this way. They had chafed as a subject people for centuries under various rulers, and they longed for the coming of a glorious and powerful kingdom in the likeness of David’s or Solomon’s. They misread the prophets and thus expected the promised Messiah to be their king over such an earthly domain. However, the A.D. first-century Jews’ interpretation of the prophets was mere wishful thinking, consisting of fatal eisegesis (reading into a text by reading one’s own ideas) rather than faithful exegesis (critical reading or interpretation of a text to extract its meaning without addition).

Premillennialism makes the same deadly error as that of those old Jews concerning the Messiah and His kingdom. Jesus never had any such kingdom plans or ambitions, which fact the Lord demonstrated by both His doctrine and His practice. The Lord attracted crowds of thousands and could likely have led a political revolt of considerable consequence, even without the miraculous help of angelic legions (Matt. 26:53). With miraculous forces at his disposal, He could have utterly and immediately crushed Rome and every lesser power. The

materialistic Jews once mistakenly sought to force a crown upon Him, but he refused it and fled rather than accept such (John 6:15). Instead of seeking to overthrow Rome (as the Jews falsely accused Him before Pontius Pilate [Luke 23:2]), He had taught the people to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17).

When the officers and soldiers came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane, Peter sought to defend Him with a sword, but Jesus forbade it (Matt. 26:49–52). Has it never occurred to Premillennialists that, if the Lord had intended to establish a political kingdom, all the demons of Hell could not have prevented His doing so, just as His death could not prevent the establishment of His church (Matt. 16:18), and His enemies could not have taken His life had He not determined to “lay it down” Himself (John 10:18)?

As already indicated, He could have called more legions of angels than Rome had armies, had He sought an earthly domain (Matt. 26:53). Do these earthly kingdom crusaders never ponder the fact that the murderous Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah, not because He **wanted to be their earthly king**, but because He **refused to have anything to do with the kind of kingdom** the Premillennialists still envision? What part of Jesus’ statement to Pilate do they not understand?

My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence (John 18:36).

I have often wondered if advocates of this theology are even aware that this statement is in the New Testament. Had the Son of God sought an earthly kingdom, not only would all the power of Rome have been unable to join the Jews in murdering Him—He would never have even been arrested in Gethsemane.

Jesus Failed in His Kingdom Plans

The false Premillennial averment that Jesus’ failure to establish an earthly political kingdom at His First Coming implies that its establishment will be sometime in the future (at His Second Coming, they allege). First, surely, they do not understand the gravity of this accusation—that **the Son of God failed** to do what God sent Him to do and what He Himself came to do. Furthermore, it is only fair to ask them how they can have any confidence that the Lord will be able to do the second time that which, they assert, He was not able to do the first time?

They must ignore numerous statements from the Lord and other inspired men to believe that He failed. All the passages already cited, indicating that people were citizens in Jesus' kingdom in the first century, necessitate the conclusion that He established His kingdom. Moreover, before His self-sacrifice on Calvary He told the apostles that some of them would be alive to see His kingdom come with power:

And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There are some here of them that stand by, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of come with power (Mark 9:1).

Clearly and specifically, Jesus tied the time of the beginning of His kingdom to the lifetime of His contemporaries. If it did not begin while the apostles (excepting Judas Iscariot) lived, then Jesus either knowingly lied or was grossly misinformed, either of which disqualify Him as the sinless Savior of mankind. However, if He told the Truth, then the kingdom was established in the first century – just as Jesus said it would be (and as various passages demonstrate that it was). All must choose one of the following mutually exclusive propositions:

1. Jesus lied when He said His kingdom would come with power while some of the multitude and of His disciples lived.
2. Premillennialists lie (whether from ignorance or intent) when they say Jesus failed to establish His kingdom, which is His church in the first century A.D.

Numerous times Jesus stated that His aim in coming the first time was to do His Father's will and to teach His Father's doctrine (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:28; 14:10; cf. Matt. 26:39). If He failed in this aim, He again lied to His Father as He prayed; "I glorified thee on the earth, **having accomplished the work** which thou hast given me to do" (John 17:4, emph. DM). He either did or He did not succeed in what His Father sent Him to do. The Premillennialist argues that He failed, which makes our Savior both a failure and a liar. No, He did not fail, He did not lie, and He was not mistaken.

Conclusion

The theological system of Premillennialism is a prime illustration of the uninspired (but true) proverb: "Some people are willing to believe almost anything in religion as long as it is not in the Bible." The doctrines and twists of Scripture that comprise this collection of errors are not only unscriptural – they are anti-Scriptural. The three doctrines of the theological system discussed above are fundamental to the entire scheme. The remainder of this multifaceted, almost science-fictional, pot-pourri of doctrines collapses with their removal.

If there were no other reason to reject Premillennialism, one should do so just because it is false. However, it is not "merely" false, but **fatally false** on the grounds that it:

1. Denies that the church and the kingdom are one,
2. Implies that the church is a Divine afterthought,
3. Rejects the spiritual nature of the kingdom,
4. Makes the Son of God a failure and a liar, and
5. Ignores the Bible's clear teaching that the kingdom was established in the first century and that the only "future kingdom" will be the eternal Heavenly state of the church/kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24-25).

It is sheer folly to pronounce Premillennialism a mere innocent and inconsequential "doctrine"!

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