

A Case for
HISTORIC
Premillennialism

An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology

EDITED BY

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Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A case for historic premillennialism : an alternative to “left behind” eschatology / edited by Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung.

p. cm.

Chiefly proceedings of a conference held in 2007 at Denver Seminary.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3596-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Millennialism—Congresses. 2. Tribulation (Christian eschatology)—Congresses.

I. Blomberg, Craig, 1955–. II. Chung, Sung Wook, 1966–

BT892.C37 2009

236'.9—dc22

2008034926

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Introduction

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG AND SUNG WOOK CHUNG

Walk into one of the largest Christian bookstores in the Denver metropolitan area, and the first and largest display that visually confronts you is an attractive arrangement of the sixteen volumes of the *Left Behind* series.¹ Much like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* and subsequent volumes in the 1970s and 1980s, *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins has received countless hours of attention from readers in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first.² To the uninitiated, these books might appear as if they were the most important items for Christians to read, perhaps even more so than the Bible.

In fact, they are simply the latest in a long line of prophecy “manuals,” purporting to teach, through either didactic or narrative forms, how biblical apocalyptic literature is being fulfilled in the current generation of world history. Bernard McGinn's fascinating survey of all the candidates for the “antichrist” that have been confidently put forward throughout church history demonstrates one fact unequivocally: to date, 100 percent of all the attempts to

1. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1995–2007). Also available are, e.g., “kids’ editions,” packaged sets, study guides, and DVDs.

2. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). See also esp. idem, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973); idem, *The Liberation of Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); idem, *When Is Jesus Coming Again?* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974); idem, *The Terminal Generation* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976); idem, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (King of Prussia, PA: Westgate, 1980); idem, *The Rapture: Truth or Consequences* (New York: Bantam, 1983); idem, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam, 1989).

correlate biblical prophecy with current events have been wrong!³ This in itself should inspire enough humility in Christians that we stop assuming that if we just tweak one or two details, the next published scenario will get it right.

Moreover, not only does Jesus insist that “about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32 TNIV); he later admonishes his followers that it is not for them “to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Although a few date setters have avoided literally violating Mark 13:32 by predicting “merely” the month or year of Christ’s return,⁴ the Acts passage utilizes the two broadest words in Hellenistic Greek for “time” (*chronos* and *kairos*). Any claim to be able to pin down end-times events to any definable period of time violates Jesus’s word in the Scriptures.

How, then, should Christians interpret biblical prophecy and apocalyptic, particularly with reference to the events surrounding Christ’s return? Four broad approaches have developed and taken turns in the limelight throughout church history: historic or classic premillennialism, amillennialism, postmillennialism, and dispensational premillennialism. Numerous good resources introduce the interested reader to the interpretive grids of each of these perspectives in detail;⁵ some of the best are those in which each view is described by an advocate of that perspective and followed by a brief response from the other contributors to the volume.⁶ In its simplest form, premillennialism refers to the conviction that Christ will return at the end of human history as we know it, *prior* to a long period of time, depicted in Revelation 20:1–7 as a thousand years, in which he reigns on earth, creating a golden era of peace and happiness for all believers alive at the time of his return, along with all believers of past eras who are resurrected and glorified at this time. Postmillennialism takes this thousand-year period, or millennium, as the final period of time during this present era, in which believers, yielded to the power of the Holy Spirit, facilitate a Christianizing of the earth to an unprecedented extent, thereby creating the idyllic earthly conditions described in Revelation 20 and

3. Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

4. E.g., Edgar C. Whisenant, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* (Nashville: World Bible Society, 1988); recalculated to have been a year off in idem, *The Final Shout: Rapture Report, 1989* (Nashville: World Bible Society, 1989).

5. E.g., Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992); Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1977).

6. Esp. Craig A. Blaising, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977).

in numerous Old Testament passages (particularly in the closing chapters of a number of the Prophets). In this scheme, Christ then comes back *after* the millennium. Amillennialism has typically understood the entire church age, symbolically, as the millennium, during which believers *spiritually* reign with Christ but does not look forward to a literally transformed earth or literal millennium in the way that both premillennialists and postmillennialists do.⁷

Although representatives of all three millennial perspectives may be found in almost every era of church history, premillennialism appears to have commanded a majority of proponents in the first four centuries, amillennialism dominated from the time of Augustine's major writings in the fifth century onward, and postmillennialism found its greatest support in the modern missionary movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The nineteenth century also saw the development of a new form of premillennialism with the founding of the Plymouth Brethren denomination in Great Britain and Ireland by J. Nelson Darby. To distinguish this branch of premillennialism from its predecessor, scholars today speak of the newer development as dispensational premillennialism and the older form as historic or classic premillennialism.

Dispensationalism, in fact, represents an entire system of interpreting the Bible, not just an approach to eschatology or the study of future events.⁸ An analysis of most of this system need not detain us here. Of particular interest, however, is its characteristic view on the relationship between the rapture (in which believers are reunited with the incarnate Jesus when he descends to earth to gather them together; see esp. 1 Thess. 4:16–17) and the “great tribulation” (apparently an era of unprecedented distress on the earth just before Christ's public, visible second coming to judge all the peoples of the earth; see esp. Rev. 7:14). Nineteenth-century dispensational premillennialism developed the first unambiguous articulation of a “pretribulational” rapture, thereby separating the rapture and Christ's second coming into two discrete events.

The twenty-first-century church worldwide is becoming increasingly a potluck of Christian doctrines that individual believers and entire denominations are combining in unprecedented ways. Not long ago it would have seemed incongruous for Presbyterian or Christian Reformed churches to advocate anything except the amillennialism so consistently supported by John Calvin

7. Occasionally, however, amillennialists have tried to equate the millennium with the new heavens and the new earth, as in esp. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

8. For a standard explanation of its classic form, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), which was a substantially revised and expanded edition of idem, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1966).

and his theological successors in the Calvinist and Reformed wing of the Protestant Reformation. And it would have seemed anomalous for Pentecostal churches to embrace dispensational distinctives, since one of the bases for separating church history into different ages was the conviction that the charismatic gifts ceased within the end of the apostolic era. Today, at least at the grassroots level, one can find in both of these traditions many believers whose eschatology is largely or entirely determined by Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, Jerry Jenkins, and other writers of similar bent and who are oblivious to how contrary those traditions are to their church's own heritage. And with the proliferation of nondenominational churches (sometimes forming their own quasi-denominations) founded by visions and missions not primarily theological (other than broadly evangelical) in nature, many churchgoers do not even have an eschatological tradition to forget.

Only a few decades ago it was commonplace for eschatology to be overemphasized in evangelical church and parachurch settings. Seminars, conferences, and preaching series regularly featured as-yet-unfulfilled biblical prophecy. Pretribulational premillennialism could be made a litmus test of correct doctrine and/or fellowship. Many younger Christians have recognized that these trends assigned these concerns to a much more central place in Christian theology than they deserved, and they have, understandably, swung the pendulum in the other direction, sometimes to the point of almost disregarding eschatology altogether. In other cases, a healthy balance has been struck by removing a requirement that a particular view on the millennium or the rapture form part of a church or parachurch ministry's doctrinal statement that all of its members must affirm, even as teaching continues periodically on these topics and people are guided to see what is and is not at stake in the debates.

Today three of the four major eschatological perspectives are comparatively well known, both in the academy and among rank-and-file Christians. Each has undergone significant development and enjoyed new arguments in its defense. In dispensational circles, a majority of practicing academics, at least in North America, have embraced what has been dubbed progressive dispensationalism—a movement that closely resembles historic or classic premillennialism by, for example, recognizing significant continuity between the Testaments and important overlap between the biblically defined roles for Israel and the church, by identifying many of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's restoration as events that will occur in the millennium rather than as signs of Christ's impending return, by recognizing the partial presence of the kingdom of God already in this "church age," and even by including at times certain sociopolitical, not just spiritual, dimensions. Progressive dispensationalism sees the church as God's intention for this age all

along and not a parenthesis or “plan B” implemented only because Israel as a whole rejected the kingdom offer at the time of Christ’s first coming, and it holds that Jesus’s teaching to his Jewish disciples (classically in the Sermon on the Mount) applies to all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, now and in the future.⁹ For the most part, however, progressive dispensationalism still affirms a pretribulational rapture.

Classic Reformed or covenant theology has also experienced significant shifts in recent years, allowing for important discontinuities between the Testaments and the different covenant eras in salvation history. In a different kind of development, preterism has taken on a higher profile in some Reformed circles. This view sees all biblical prophecy about the events leading up to Christ’s second coming as fulfilled in the first century. At times it even argues that the second coming itself was fulfilled in Jesus’s invisible coming in judgment on Israel in AD 70, when the Romans squelched the Zealot rebellion, razed the temple, and burned large parts of Jerusalem.¹⁰

Even postmillennialism, whose demise many were trumpeting in the 1960s and 1970s after two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, the liberal-leaning churches of many mainline Protestant denominations, and the rapid secularization of the Western world, particularly outside the United States, has made a comeback. The spectacular growth of the church, at least numerically, in many parts of Latin America, Africa, China, and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s led some people to revive a more chastened form of postmillennialism.¹¹ Although these postmillennialists might not have penned the lyrics to classic hymns with the triumphalism of previous centuries (e.g., “Jesus shall reign where e’er the sun doth his successive journeys run; his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more”), efforts to at least give everyone on the planet the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel proliferated. The arrival of the new millennium gave many people hope that it might mark a significant new stage in the progress of the gospel.

9. See esp. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint Books, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). Cf. Herbert W. Bateman, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

10. See esp. Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992). Agreeing with this interpretation for the parousia passages in the Gospels, though not for the rest of the New Testament, is N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

11. See esp. John J. Davis, *Christ’s Victorious Kingdom: Postmillennialism Reconsidered* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1986). Cf. Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999).

Arguably, the eschatological perspective that has received the least formal attention in the last twenty-five to thirty years is classic premillennialism. The scholar, professor, and writer who was by far more responsible than any other individual in the twentieth century for resurrecting this approach, for tirelessly promoting it throughout his career, and for convincing a generation of students and readers of its validity was George Eldon Ladd at Fuller Seminary. But Ladd passed away in 1982, and most of his major works on the topic spanned the 1950s through the 1970s.¹² No one has since emerged as his successor in championing classic premillennialism, even though countless evangelical biblical scholars and theologians have adopted his views. New generations of students, however, do not automatically follow their teachers, and since every other branch of eschatology has received sustained attention and developed new permutations, it is past time for a new look at classic premillennialism.

This collection of essays emerged from precisely this conviction. Beginning in February 2000, the Denver Seminary Institute of Contextualized Biblical Studies has sponsored an annual conference exploring a branch of biblical scholarship worthy of contemporary contextualization. The first seven conferences addressed, respectively, the topics of contextualized biblical studies in general, the Messiah in the Bible, the family in the Bible, methodologies for translating Scripture, war from biblical and ethical perspectives (including contributions by contemporary Christian military leaders), the integration of biblical studies and Christian counseling, and worship (both ancient and modern). The papers from the conferences on the Messiah, on the family, and on war have been published in book form, while those on translation and on the integration of the Bible and counseling have appeared as entire fascicles of journals.¹³ The very first conference, though including some of the finest presentations in the eight-year history of these conferences, was not woven tightly enough around an attention-catching theme to garner the necessary interest among the publishers that were approached. The worship conference,

12. See esp. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); idem, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); idem, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); and idem, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

13. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); idem, *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); *Bible Translator* 56.3 (2005); James R. Beck and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., special edition, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 25.2 (2006); Richard S. Hess and Elmer Martens, eds., *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century*, Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008).

because of the very nature of the topic, was not intended to produce academic essays, although its presenters possessed the caliber and the credentials to do so had the conference been packaged differently.

This brings us to the conference of 2007 and to this volume. Conference format has varied slightly over the years, but usually six presentations spanning a Friday evening through early Saturday afternoon, with time for discussion after each and with interaction of the presenters in panel format at the end, has proved optimal. In order to round out the published collections, we have often invited one or two supplementary essays on the theme of the conference, and this year proved no different. Thus the chapters by Don Fairbairn and Tim Weber do not reflect oral addresses from the conference; the remaining chapters do, even if in slightly revised form. Unlike the previous conferences, we began lining up participants for the one on premillennialism by looking solely in-house. Sung Wook Chung, Craig Blomberg, Rick Hess, H el ene Dallaire, and Don Payne all teach at Denver Seminary. As it turns out, Fairbairn and Weber also have close connections with Denver Seminary. Fairbairn received his master of divinity degree here, and Weber taught church history here for many years, and so we were doubly grateful to have them participate in this project. Finally, one of the goals in every conference has been to afford representation to women and minority participants. Because of our partnership, in recent years, in several endeavors with our peer institution for theological education in Guatemala City, the Seminario Teol gico Centroamericano (SET-ECA), we invited Oscar Campos to round out our program. Campos is the one contributor to this collection who would identify himself as a progressive dispensational premillennialist rather than as a classic or historical premillennialist, but, as is clear from his chapter, his positions within that interpretive community prove far closer to those held by the rest of us in this volume than to classic dispensationalism.

What, then, is the content of this volume? It begins with Tim Weber's overview of millennial positions throughout church history, culminating in the rise of dispensationalism in the last 180 years or so. This essay reflects on the reasons dispensational premillennialism has become much better known and more frequently adopted than historic premillennialism at the Christian grassroots level during the centuries since its conception. Weber offers the in-depth but very readable kind of survey that only one who has done most of his major scholarly work in this arena can produce. In short, dispensational approaches to biblical eschatology have proved so popular because they have consistently addressed the *populace* and at a *populist* level to a degree that historical premillennialists have never approached.

Two essays related to the Old Testament follow. Both branches of premillennialism have typically believed in the literal fulfillment of a variety of Old Testament prophecies about the end times, but the relationship of the rapture to the tribulation in view of these prophecies often remains comparatively neglected, understandably so because it could appear that the Old Testament teaches nothing explicit on this topic. Hess, however, shows a recurring pattern according to which God's people have to experience tribulation before restoration in a fashion that in fact supports posttributational premillennialism. Nonpremillennialists often point to early stages of Israelite religion, where eschatology seems altogether absent, and to later branches of Judaism, in which hope for a millennium or even a bodily resurrection seems unimportant, in order to dispute the viability of premillennial eschatology for a religion (Christianity) that grew organically out of Jewish roots.¹⁴ Dallaire, who reexamines a broad sweep of Old Testament, intertestamental, and early rabbinic thought on this subject, demonstrates that there was a much greater diversity of perspective than is often acknowledged. Blomberg rounds out the three biblically based chapters by arguing that posttributational premillennialism is the consistent teaching of the New Testament.

Most scholars today recognize that all exegesis functions with various preunderstandings and presuppositions and within conscious and unconscious interpretive grids.¹⁵ What, then, are the most important hermeneutics of premillennial thinking that its adherents must recognize, and how defensible are they? Payne tackles this topic in the first of this volume's theological and historical essays. Though claiming that dispensationalism is the natural result of a straightforward, literal reading of Scripture, its adherents ignore certain tensions with the results of this method with which historic premillennialists find it easier (and important) to live. Dispensationalists in fact make important appeals to tradition, reason, and experience as well, which are actually more amenable to broader premillennialist hermeneutics.

Is it indeed true that classic premillennialism finds significant precedent in the early patristic writers instead of being a fringe movement, as some nonpremillennialists have argued, or instead of supporting dispensational and/or pretributational premillennialism, as some supporters of those positions have alleged? Fairbairn's study of Irenaeus in detail and of other early patristic millenarians helps to show that there is significant precedent. But what

14. From a Jewish perspective, Jon D. Levenson (*Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006]) presents and debunks this consensus perspective among more liberal Christian and Jewish scholarship.

15. See, e.g., William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 142–68.

of the Reformers, especially Calvin? If Reformation and Reformed theology recovered much of genuine biblical teaching on so many doctrines, and given the interrelationship among all of the major doctrines of systematic theology, must not amillennialist eschatology necessarily follow? Chung shows how the traditional Reformed covenant theology has spiritualized the biblical teachings on the material and institutional dimensions of redemption. For Chung, amillennialism is the product of a gnostic reading of Revelation 20:1–6. Indeed, much like Paul Jewett, who made a compelling case for believer’s baptism as the proper outgrowth of covenant theology,¹⁶ Chung argues that classic premillennialism flows naturally from this theology.

Finally, we return to the present and sample an important non-American perspective and set of insights. What were premillennialism’s influences on the mission field, especially in the Majority World? What is the lasting legacy of this influence, and how are things changing today? If the answer is not always the same, how should things be changing, both at home and abroad? Perhaps historic premillennialism or its very close cousin, *progressive* dispensationalism, is better poised to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century than classic dispensationalist premillennialism. Guatemala’s Campos reflects on these questions from several different angles. A brief conclusion, like these opening remarks from the pens of the editors, concludes the collection of studies. But enough of introduction; it is time to turn to the texts and to the presentations themselves.

16. Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

I

Dispensational and Historic Premillennialism as Popular Millennialist Movements

TIMOTHY P. WEBER

America has always been fertile ground for millennialism. Given the American free-market religious economy, people are free to believe what they want, organize as they please, and spread their ideas as best they can. Sometimes such efforts pay off nicely, but sometimes they do not. In a relatively few cases, millennialist ideas have generated large and hard-to-ignore movements. When this happens, millennialist ideas can even seep into the popular culture.

A 2002 *Time/CNN* poll reported that since 9/11 more than one-third of Americans have been thinking more seriously about how current events might be leading to the end of the world. Even though only 36 percent of those polled said they believe that the Bible is the Word of God, 59 percent thought that events predicted in Revelation were being fulfilled. Almost one in four Americans thought that 9/11 had been predicted in the Bible, and almost one in five expected to live long enough to see the end of the world. Finally, more than one-third of those who expressed support for Israel said they based their

views on the belief that the Jews must have their own country in the Holy Land for the second coming to occur.¹

One could credibly maintain that the poll merely uncovered the views of many American evangelicals, who now constitute somewhere between one-quarter and one-third of the population and among whom Bible prophecy still resonates. But as historian Paul Boyer has argued, many other Americans who usually ignore the Bible are willing to listen to teachers of Bible prophecy when world events reach crisis levels.² We probably all know biblically illiterate and religiously unaffiliated people who have somehow picked up rudimentary notions of the rapture, the antichrist, or Armageddon. It is clear, then, that one way or another, someone's millennialist beliefs have made their way into nonevangelical territory. And we know who they are. From Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* to Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind* series, dispensational premillennialists have made impressive forays into the popular culture, often combining their views of the future with well-organized right-wing and pro-Israel political action.³ No American millennialist group has received more attention or reached further into mainstream culture than dispensationalism. But despite its successes, dispensationalism is not the only kind of premillennialism current.

How does historic premillennialism—the subject of this book—measure up as a popular millennialist movement, especially when compared with its biggest rival, dispensationalism? As we shall see, comparisons are difficult because these are two very different kinds of movements. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two is interesting and revealing. This study will explain how and why.

The place to begin is a definition of what we mean by “popular.” When used to describe a millennialist movement, the word can have two quite different meanings. “Popular” can refer to the *size of its following*, to the extent of its acceptance. In this sense, then, a popular millennialist movement has a large clientele with recognizable leadership, supporting institutions and organizations, and a clear set of identifying beliefs. This “popular” refers to a movement's popularity.

The word “popular” can also refer to the *kind of following* a movement possesses. Does it appeal to common folks or to a more elite audience? Does it consciously position itself over against the so-called experts? Where do its

1. Nancy Gibbs, “Apocalypse Now,” *Time*, July 1, 2002, 41–48.

2. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1995–2007).

leaders come from, how do they make their case, and what is the nature of their appeal? Does it come across as a highbrow or a lowbrow movement? In this sense of the word, “popular” can mean that a movement is populist rather than elitist.

In a nutshell, this study will show that historic premillennialism does not qualify as a popular millennialist movement in either sense of the word, at least not yet.

Labeling Millennialist Movements

Christian eschatology includes a large number of end-times issues—death, the end of the world, divine judgment, and heaven and hell. Some Christians have paid special attention to the end of history and whether there will be a golden age of peace connected to Christ’s return. The key biblical passage for such speculation is Revelation 20, in which Christ returns to earth, defeats Satan, and sets up a thousand-year kingdom on the earth, a millennium (from the Latin *mille*, “thousand”). This passage in particular and the book of Revelation in general have been interpreted in vastly different ways, which has led systematic theologians and historians to provide labels to identify various millennialist positions.

Most early Christians interpreted Revelation 20 quite literally and expected a millennial age following Christ’s return. Such views are called *premillennialist* because they place the second coming *before* the millennium. After the fifth century and Augustine’s enormously influential *City of God*, most Christians adopted a more figurative interpretation of Revelation 20. They concluded that the “millennium”—a spiritual kingdom characterized by Christ’s reign—actually began with Christ’s resurrection and will continue to expand in both the church and in heaven until Christ’s return. Because they do not expect a literal millennium on the earth, they are called *amillennialists* (literally, “no-millennialists”). A third, more recent group of Christians argues that the second coming will follow the world’s conversion to Christ and the rise of a Christian golden age. Because they place Christ’s return *after* this millennium, they are called *postmillennialists*.

Differences extend beyond the interpretation of Revelation 20. Interpreters have also disagreed about the way to approach Revelation as a whole. Most modern scholars choose between a *preterist* and an *idealist* reading of Revelation. Preterists believe that the book reflects late-first- or early-second-century conditions and was written to bring hope to persecuted believers at that time. Thus preterists understand Revelation more in political than in

prophetic terms. Idealists set aside all chronological or predictive issues in order to treat the book as an artistic exposition of the ongoing battle between good and evil; in short, Revelation is a drama that speaks to the longings of the human heart.

Others (mainly those holding millennialist views) utilize either a *historicist* or a *futurist* approach. Historicists believe that Revelation contains a prophetic overview of the entire church age. Thus they look for prophetic fulfillments in past, present, and future historical events. Futurists believe that Revelation's prophecies are scheduled to occur in the future, just before Christ's return, which leads them to develop elaborate future scenarios and look for current "signs of the times" that point ahead to expected events. If a core sample is taken of Christian thought almost any time in the last two thousand years, advocates of these positions can be found.⁴

Although such labeling helps in distinguishing one group from another, many millennialist movements are difficult to classify. History is messy, and most prophetic movements do not consult with theologians before putting together their belief systems. Consequently, historians who trace these movements over time often find it very difficult to fit them into neat categories.⁵ Nevertheless, for the people within these movements, even small distinctions can have big consequences. For example, the premillennialist revival that began in Great Britain in the late eighteenth century and moved in waves to America in the nineteenth produced not only advocates of historicism and futurism but fierce divisions within the ranks of the futurists, as the comparison below between dispensationalists and historic premillennialists will show.

So Many Millennialist Choices

Dispensationalism and historic (not historicist) premillennialism were relative latecomers to a religious culture already replete with millennialist successes and failures. In the first half of the nineteenth century, evangelical Protestantism was overwhelmingly postmillennial. Historians have called antebellum America an "evangelical empire" characterized by optimism, growth, and democratic ideals. Religious and political leaders alike viewed the new nation in millennial terms, as a "city upon a hill" with a special role to play in the world.

4. Steve Gregg, *Revelation, Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997).

5. Historical surveys of Christian millennialism include the following: Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999); Stephen Hunt, ed., *Christian Millennialism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

The dominance of postmillennialism came as a surprise. Most of the Protestants and Catholics who settled colonial America were overwhelmingly and “officially” amillennialists; however, most Puritans who settled New England held historicist premillennial views that had grown popular in England in the early/mid-seventeenth century, especially among the radical Fifth Monarchy Men. Colonial Puritans believed that they were in the last days, that the work of the antichrist was already evident all over the world, and that signs of the end were everywhere. Then the unexpected happened: the First Great Awakening of the 1740s generated thousands of conversions and hundreds of new churches. Jonathan Edwards, borrowing heavily from the prophetic writings of Daniel Whitby, concluded that God was using such ordinary means of grace to Christianize the world and bring in a golden millennial age *before* Christ’s return. Although the results of the First Great Awakening faded fast, these postmillennial expectations were revived and validated by the even more impressive Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century. Popular commentaries throughout these periods by Matthew Henry, Thomas Scott, and Adam Clarke articulated a postmillennial understanding of the Bible that became deeply rooted in the evangelical churches.

Postmillennialism joined forces with the surge of democratic ideals to make American Protestantism boldly evangelical and activist. Operating with the certainty of prophetic promises, evangelicals built schools, churches, publishing houses, and missionary agencies in order to carry out God’s plan to Christianize America and the world. Their strategy included both religion and politics. Evangelists such as Charles Finney told their converts to apply Christian principles to social and political causes and predicted that if they did so, the millennium was just around the corner.

Along the margins of this culture-shaping postmillennial juggernaut were a number of other distinctive and often controversial millennialist movements. In the 1770s an Englishwoman called Mother Ann Lee brought the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Coming to America. More popularly known as the Shakers for their distinctive worship style, her followers believed that Mother Ann was a female incarnation of Christ who intended to bring in the millennium by forming distinctive communities. Eventually the Shakers established nineteen such communities from Maine to Florida, where they attempted to reproduce primitive Christianity. Shakers adopted simple lifestyles; husbands and wives lived apart and turned their children over to be raised by the community; and no one had sex. Because of the latter restriction, the Shakers prospered only as long as the Second Great Awakening provided a stream of new converts or as orphans found their way to the Shaker communities. But

once the revival peaked, the Shaker communities started their slow decline. On their best day, the Shakers numbered no more than five thousand.⁶

John Humphrey Noyes, a Yale graduate and convert of Charles Finney, formed another millennialist group. He taught that the second coming occurred in AD 70 but that Christ decided not to establish his millennial kingdom because of the lack of Christian love among his followers. Noyes believed that it was up to him to set things right. In 1838 he started a small Christian commune in Vermont where he promoted his notion of sinless perfection and “complex marriage.” Under his careful supervision and control, community members were encouraged to have sex with each other’s spouses, which he thought would facilitate greater love within the community and counter the selfish tendencies of traditional marriage. Noyes maintained that such practices marked the arrival of the kingdom of God, but outraged neighbors saw things differently. Fierce opposition forced Noyes to move the commune to Oneida, New York, where in time his followers tired of the unavoidable and disruptive complications of complex marriage and Noyes’s millennial schemes. Their numbers, which never exceeded three hundred, dwindled, but those who remained found a new calling in successful business ventures.⁷

In the 1830s Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after he discovered and translated the *Book of Mormon*. The Mormons believed that through them God was restoring the authentic apostolic gospel and reestablishing the Aaronic priesthood. As a modern-day prophet, Joseph called all Mormons to relocate (“gather”) to Jackson County, Missouri, to begin the work of establishing the new Jerusalem to which Christ would shortly return. When anxious and angry Missourians drove the Mormons out of the state in 1839, Smith led them across the Mississippi River to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he built a new temple, revealed new “endowments” (i.e., temple rituals), and began preaching the plurality of gods and wives. After the prophet’s murder in 1844, Brigham Young led the church to a temporary Zion in Utah. Unlike the Shakers and the Oneida Colony, the Mormons survived and prospered. In the twentieth century, Mormon leaders talked much less about Joseph Smith’s prophetic teachings, but faithful Mormons still await a new prophet’s call to move back to Missouri just before Christ returns.⁸

6. Stephen Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

7. Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

8. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Reflecting more-typical evangelical Protestant beliefs and practices were the followers of William Miller, a Baptist preacher from Vermont and upstate New York. A skeptical deist, Miller was converted after the War of 1812 and began reading the Bible with the critical eye of a former rationalist. Using a historicist and premillennialist approach to the study of Bible prophecy, he studied the numerology of Daniel and Revelation. Once he established past prophetic fulfillments as a starting point, he used “millennial arithmetic” and the “year-day theory” (by which he converted days to years in prophetic texts) to set a date of the second coming “in about 1843.” Although Miller claimed that he came to these conclusions on his own, as we shall see, they were nearly identical to those held by other historicist premillennialists in Great Britain at about the same time.

Miller arrived at these findings in 1818 but waited about fifteen years before making them public. Thanks to new advertising and promotional techniques, his message generated a large following (estimates range from thirty thousand to one hundred thousand) drawn from the evangelical denominations, more or less where the Shakers, John Humphrey Noyes, and the Mormons obtained their followers. But the Millerites were different. They never questioned traditional marriage or practiced unconventional sex or altered the church’s historic teachings about the Godhead. Miller did not claim to be a prophet, only a careful reader of Scripture who invited others to check his calculations and come to their own conclusions. In time, however, he grew tired of his critics and instructed his followers to separate from “Babylon,” by which he meant the dismissive evangelical denominations, in order to spread the word of the “Advent near.” As the predicted time approached, Miller felt pressure to be more precise about the date for Christ’s return. He eventually settled on October 22, 1844, which set him and the Millerites up for the Great Disappointment. Some Millerites returned to their former churches, but others established a number of new Adventist denominations. The largest was the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which made a few necessary adjustments to Miller’s historicist premillennialism and in time became famous for other characteristics, such as worshiping on Saturday, vegetarianism, medical care, and missions.⁹

In comparison to the other millennialist alternatives discussed above, the early Millerites were the most orthodox and traditional premillennialists before the Civil War. But their very public failure dealt a serious blow to the credibility of premillennialism and confirmed most evangelical Protestants

9. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan Butler, eds., *The Disappointed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

in their postmillennialist ways. Nevertheless, postmillennialism's days were numbered. Instead of the coming millennium, America experienced a series of unprecedented social, political, intellectual, and religious crises in the second half of the nineteenth century. By almost any measure, the world was growing worse, not better, and demographic studies proved that Christianization was not keeping pace with world population growth. What did devoted postmillennialists do when events ran counter to their eschatological expectations?¹⁰ Some held on, convinced that the golden age was still coming, despite the temporary setbacks. Others dropped their postmillennial expectations for other forward-looking causes, such as the Social Gospel, the Progressive movement, and, later on, the New Deal. Still others traded one kind of millennialism for another, a new kind of premillennialism that eventually gained unprecedented success in the United States.

The Rise of a New Kind of Premillennialism

The premillennialism that gained a following in late-nineteenth-century America differed significantly from the teachings of William Miller. It was futurist, not historicist, which made it virtually incapable of date setting, the Millerites' undoing. In addition, futurist premillennialism introduced a number of new elements into the millennialist mix and offered a much more realistic view of current conditions, about which postmillennialism seemed obviously mistaken.

This new prophetic option came out of a British revival of premillennialism that began in the late eighteenth century and reached its zenith in the 1830s and 1840s. The French Revolution was the catalyst for this revival. Something so momentous had to fit into God's prophetic plans, but how? In the beginning, leadership in the movement came from clergy and lay leaders of the established churches (Anglican and Scots Presbyterian). At first, interested persons found each other through Bible studies, new books and journals, and missionary groups, but eventually the revival took shape in three weeklong study conferences at Henry Drummond's Albury Park estate in 1826, 1827, and 1828. Using a more-or-less literalistic hermeneutic, participants agreed on a number of bedrock convictions: the present age (or "dispensation") will end in cataclysmic judgment; the Jews must be restored to Palestine before this judgment takes place (something never taught by William Miller); divine judgment will begin with an apostate Christendom; the millennial age will follow God's judgment on the earth and

10. James H. Moorhead, *World without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

the second coming of Christ; and the second coming is imminent, a view based on a particular way (strikingly like Miller's) of connecting prophecies in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 to current events.¹¹ In short, like the Millerites, these British millennialists believed they had cracked the prophetic code by using a historicist and premillennialist approach to the Bible.

Not all British millennialists, however, were historicists. There was a small group of futurist premillennialists as well. Futurism did not originate in the British revival but came from sixteenth-century Roman Catholic scholars who tried to repudiate the common Protestant assertion that the present pope was the antichrist. The Catholic futurists argued that since Revelation's prophecies were meant for the future, not the present, the current pope could not possibly be the "man of sin." In the 1820s and 1830s, some premillennialists found in futurism a connection to early-church teachings about the end times and began to promote it; examples are S. R. Maitland, James H. Todd, and William Burgh. These futurists used the prophetic teachings of the early church to refute historicist premillennialism's approach to prophetic texts, especially the year-day theory.¹²

One early futurist leader was the charismatic Scot, Edward Irving. Like most other British millennialists, he used a literalistic approach to prophetic interpretation, affirmed the restoration of the Jews, expected (and saw current evidence for) the apostasy of the churches, and preached the imminent return of Christ to establish his millennial kingdom in Jerusalem. He had read Catholic futurists and agreed with them: Revelation's prophecies pointed to the future, just before Christ's return. He preached futurist views after he accepted the pulpit of a London congregation, and he began attracting large crowds. But his standing among British evangelicals and premillennialists declined when his church experienced an outbreak of glossolalia and divine healing. Even though many evangelicals expected a restoration of apostolic gifts shortly before Christ's return, the experience of it in Irving's church proved to be extremely controversial. When he started preaching that Christ had a fallen nature, the Scots Presbyterians defrocked Irving, who then helped to establish the Catholic Apostolic Church as an alternative to the religious apostasy he saw in his former denomination.

The Plymouth Brethren, who had left apostate Anglicanism in order to meet regularly for Bible study, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper, likewise championed futurist premillennialism. At first the Plymouth Brethren lacked direction and a clear identity despite the emergence of two powerful leaders

11. Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 3–22.

12. George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 35–40.

and teachers, Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby. During a series of study retreats first held at the estate of Lady Theodosia Powerscourt in 1831, the Brethren defined their eschatology: they took a futurist approach to Revelation, rejected the year-day theory, and declared the established churches already apostate. This challenge to the dominant historicist perspective also closely followed Irving's views.

The Plymouth Brethren received a shock at the third Powerscourt Conference in 1833, when Darby introduced his teachings on the pretribulation rapture of the church and the postponement theory, which argued for a "great parenthesis of prophetic time" between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel 9. Most Brethren as well as other futurists initially considered both ideas complete novelties. The ensuing argument drove a deep wedge between Darby and other Brethren leaders, especially Newton and Samuel P. Tregelles, another respected Bible teacher, and eventually split the Plymouth Brethren. Futurist premillennialism has never been the same.

Darby's mind remained open on these new ideas for another decade, but by 1840 he had constructed an elaborate dispensational system that supported and explained them. Darby's version of futurist premillennialism divided history into distinct eras or dispensations in order to keep track of God's changing redemptive plan. But even more fundamental to his interpretation of the Bible was the conviction that God had two completely separate plans and peoples in the divine plan of redemption, one "earthly" (Israel) and one "heavenly" (the church). Thus, "rightly dividing the word of truth" meant keeping the passages that applied to the two plans clearly delineated. This interpretive rule of thumb led Darby to his striking innovations. Because he believed that God could work with only one of his peoples at a time, he insisted that Jesus must rapture the church before he can restart the prophetic clock and resume his dealings with the Jews. In practical terms, this required Darby to divide the second coming into two parts—Christ coming *for* his saints before the tribulation and *with* his saints after it, when he will defeat the devil and the antichrist and establish the millennial kingdom. Darby also taught that since the church, as God's heavenly people, had no earthly prophecies of its own, there was no prophesied event between the present and the rapture of the church; thus it might occur at any time. In short, Darby's view of the any-moment, pretribulation rapture allowed him to avoid "the pitfalls both of attempting to predict a time for Christ's second advent and of trying to make sense out of the contemporary alarms of European politics with the Revelation as his guidebook."¹³ Darby was not deterred by the fact that before

13. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 64.

him no millennialist, British or otherwise, had taught anything like his view of the rapture.¹⁴ He continued to teach his version of futurist premillennialism in Britain, throughout Europe, and, most significantly, in the United States, where it had its greatest success.¹⁵

The New Premillennialism Comes to America

John Nelson Darby made seven trips to North America between 1862 and 1877. At first he worked among Canadian Plymouth Brethren, but eventually he shifted his attention to non-Plymouth Brethren evangelicals in Chicago, St. Louis, Boston, and New York. His initial forays into the American churches were disappointing. He was appalled by the worldliness of American Christians and their still overwhelmingly positive view of their denominations. Most American evangelicals found the separatist views of the Plymouth Brethren too crabby and schismatic. Darby quickly discovered that although some American Christians were interested in his eschatology, the overwhelming majority rejected his ecclesiology.

Darby's reception in America was clearly mixed. Writers in some Protestant journals warned readers of the dangers of dispensationalism, but Darby's views found an outlet in the premillennialist *Prophetic Times*, edited by the Lutheran Joseph Seiss. Its leading contributors were denominationally diverse (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian [Old School and New School], Dutch Reformed, Moravian, and Baptist) and advocated both historicist and futurist positions. Without mentioning its origin among the Plymouth Brethren, which would have put most readers off, some writers promoted the pretribulation rapture, which the journal's "creed" was broad enough to allow. Another journal, James Inglis's *Waymarks in the Wilderness*, took an unapologetic pro-Darby stance. This journal's readership was a fraction of that of the *Prophetic Times*, but many of the people associated with Inglis's journal were

14. The origins of Darby's rapture view remain cloudy. He claimed that it just came to him once he understood God's two peoples and plans. Other explanations—that the idea arose during a tongues-speaking outburst in Irving's church or that it came from a teenager named Margaret MacDonal in Scotland during another Pentecostal outbreak—seem far-fetched and unproven. See John Nelson Darby, *Collected Works*, ed. William Kelly, 34 vols. (London: G. Morrish, 1967), 11:56; Samuel P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1864), 35; and David McPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up: The True Story of the Pre-trib Rapture* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975).

15. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 59–80; H. A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1942); Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1960). For Darby's views, see Darby, *Collected Works*.

influential in starting the Bible conference movement, which spread dispensationalism far and wide.

Inglis organized the Believers' Meeting for Bible Study in the late 1860s. After his death and a brief hiatus, the Believers' Meeting was restarted in 1875 and eventually located at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. The Niagara Conferences, which met for a week or two each summer, offered a packed schedule: two speakers in the morning, two in the afternoon, and one in the evening. For two decades the Niagara Conferences were led by James H. Brookes, for thirty-nine years the pastor of the Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, author of *Maranatha* (1878), and editor of *The Truth*. Niagara became a gathering place for traditional Protestants, an outpost against the spread of liberal theology. Ironically, although Niagara stood fast in support of the old doctrines, it also welcomed advocates of the new premillennialism. Under Brookes, then, Niagara became a kind of boot camp for emerging premillennialist leaders and the launching pad for the dispensationalist movement in America.

In 1878 Brookes composed a fourteen-point statement of faith to mark theological boundaries for speakers and attendees. The Niagara Creed was typically evangelical but obviously Calvinist-leaning. It began with an article on biblical inerrancy and ended with a rather generic article on millennialism. The latter took no stand on futurism or Darby's rapture doctrine, but it did affirm the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land, the worsening of world conditions in the present age, and Christ's personal and premillennial return to establish his earthly rule.¹⁶ With such wiggle room in the creed, dispensationalists pushed their views hard. Given the makeup of evangelicalism at the time, many Niagara regulars objected to the creed's premillennial statement and complained that such prophetic views were getting far too much attention at the summer sessions. Wanting to keep their clientele happy, Niagara leaders decided to organize another series of Bible conferences that focused solely on prophecy.

The first American Bible and Prophetic Conference was held in New York City in 1878. Six more followed: Chicago in 1886; Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1895; Boston in 1901; Chicago again in 1914; and Philadelphia and New York in 1918. At the beginning, speakers and hearers represented a variety of premillennialist views, but over time these prophetic conferences came to be dominated by dispensationalists, who were quickly discovering how to get their message across.¹⁷

16. Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 141–42; for the entire Niagara Creed, see 273–77.

17. Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875 to 1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 28–29.

Niagara had the same experience. Once those in charge developed a clear preference for dispensationalism, they pushed to the forefront those who taught it. Rapidly the differences within the new premillennialism became apparent for all to see, and the ties that initially held futurist premillennialists together began to break. In 1897 the Niagara Conference was nearly torn apart over whether the rapture will occur before or after the tribulation. The arguments were repeated over and over in the decades to come. Dispensationalists insisted that by “rightly dividing the word of truth,” the pretribulation rapture became obvious. For them, dispensationalism was the key to understanding the whole Bible, not just prophecy, and it was a bulwark against liberalism and the guarantee of orthodoxy. They held that all other approaches were seriously defective. The other premillennialists argued that Darby’s view of the rapture was not explicitly taught in the Bible and was merely an inference based on other mistaken notions. They maintained that dispensationalism was a theological novelty created by Darby out of thin air and that, in short, its claims were pretentious and unsubstantiated by either the Bible or the history of Christian theology. With so little room for compromise, no one was able to resolve the dispute, and Niagara closed down for good in 1900. In the story of Niagara’s demise we can see something of the future of American premillennialism.¹⁸

By the twentieth century, then, futurist premillennialism had divided into two warring camps. Many of dispensationalism’s strongest critics were veterans of Niagara and the prophetic conferences. Some of them had even been dispensationalists themselves, early devotees who changed their minds later on. Nathaniel West, one of the founders of Niagara, wrote the highly regarded but nondispensational *Thousand Years in Both Testaments* (1880). A. J. Gordon was an early follower of Darby but repudiated his teachings in *Ecce venit* (1889). Two men who are listed as contributing editors of the *Scofield Reference Bible* later repudiated dispensationalism: William J. Erdman and William G. Moorehead. Robert Cameron also disavowed his earlier dispensationalist convictions in *Scriptural Truth about the Lord’s Return* (1922).¹⁹ These men appealed to a more venerable premillennialist tradition that was rooted in the early church’s eschatology, which contained no reference to a pretribulation rapture.²⁰

18. Ibid., 132–61. William Trollinger, “Niagara Conferences,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 824–25.

19. His personal explanation of this shift is found in Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 278–81.

20. Ladd, *Blessed Hope*, 45–49.

Such a list constitutes only some of the leading voices of the nondispensationalist, futurist premillennialism in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America. Others who should be included are Charles Erdman, Philip Mauro, Rowland Bingham, G. Campbell Morgan and Oswald J. Smith (both leading dispensationalists at one time), and Harold John Ockenga, the Boston pastor who called for a “new evangelicalism” after World War II.²¹ Their views have often been called historic premillennialism because they claimed to be following the legacy of earlier premillennial perspectives stretching back to postapostolic times. The term “historic,” however, must be qualified, since futurism in its present form is in fact a post-Reformation perspective or at best a late medieval one.

Although it is certainly true that modern-day futurists can find similar views of prophetic chronology in the first three centuries, the eschatology of the early church is hard to fit into modern categories and contained features that futurists have never accepted. For example, *Epistle of Barnabas* 15 and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.28, use a “days of creation” motif to understand the flow of history: just as God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, so the world will last six thousand years, then be followed by a millennium of peace (“with the Lord a day is like a thousand years,” 2 Pet. 3:8). Interpreters in the third and fourth centuries employed this theory to predict Christ’s coming about three hundred years beyond their own time (Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*).²² Nevertheless, on the question of the rapture’s timing, posttribunational historic premillennialists have many allies in the early centuries, whereas pretribunational dispensationalists have none.²³

Comparing Dispensational and Historic Premillennial Movements

By the end of World War I, dispensationalists had clearly eclipsed their rivals in size and influence. How did this happen? How do dispensationalism and historic premillennialism compare as popular millennialist movements? In

21. *Ibid.*, 50–60.

22. Timothy P. Weber, “Millennialism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 365–83. As the year 2000 approached, a few dispensationalists (e.g., Jack Van Impe) resurrected the “days of creation” approach. To make the six thousand years of human history work as a predictor of Christ’s return ca. 2000, they had to date the creation of the world to 4000 BC, which even many fundamentalists found difficult to accept.

23. When I was teaching the History of Millennial Thought at Denver Seminary, I made my students read the eschatological writings of the early fathers; they likewise could not find the pretribulation rapture.

a nutshell, dispensationalism developed into a robust popular millennialist movement, whereas historic premillennialism did not. By the end of the nineteenth century, dispensationalists were collecting supporters and institutions the way speakers at the Niagara Conferences used to pile up Bible passages for a Bible reading.

Darby appealed to successful evangelical pastors with big churches, good reputations, and large followings. Such leaders used their pulpits and their sizable clergy networks to open doors for dispensational teachings. Other early adopters were the professional revivalists who found in the teaching of the any-moment rapture an important tool to shake sinners from their lethargy: Jesus may come at any time, even before I finish this sermon; are you ready? D. L. Moody became an early but not always consistent convert to dispensationalism, and virtually every major revivalist from him to Billy Graham has preached a gospel message anchored in premillennialism.²⁴

At a time when conservative evangelicals were building new coalitions to do battle against liberalism, dispensationalists often maintained a nondenominational and sometimes even cooperative ethos. This was certainly true at places such as Niagara and the prophetic conferences, but although everyone was welcome, not everyone came. Dispensationalism did not spread evenly through American Protestantism. Lutherans, Methodists, the German and Dutch Reformed, and Congregationalists seemed especially impervious to dispensational teaching. There were exceptions: Joseph Seiss was a prominent Lutheran; L. W. Munhall, E. F. Stroeter, Arno C. Gaebelein, and W. E. Blackstone were Methodists; W. R. Gordon and George S. Bishop were Dutch Reformed; and Edward P. Goodwin, Reuben A. Torrey, and C. I. Scofield were Congregationalists. But most pastors and laypeople from such churches remained indifferent or opposed. Dispensationalism enjoyed its greatest success among the Baptists, the Reformed Episcopalians, and especially the Presbyterians. Even so, denominational arguments over eschatology could become fierce. For example, James H. Brookes often complained that even fellow conservative Presbyterians made his life difficult; these included fellow biblical inerrantists A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. G. Machen, who were outspoken opponents of dispensationalism, which they considered close to heresy, even though they found much to admire among dispensationalists on other issues. Since dispensationalists saw themselves as thoroughly orthodox and fierce defenders of the Bible, such criticism hurt.²⁵

24. Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 13–28. See also William McLoughlin Jr., *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), 167–530.

25. Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 29–31.

Although dispensationalism did not gain majority status in any of the existing mainline evangelical denominations, its impact on new churches was more pronounced. For example, many immigrant groups were deeply influenced by the revivalism of D. L. Moody. Some Scandinavians adopted both his style and his dispensationalism; what eventually became the Evangelical Free Church certainly did so, but the Swedish Mission Covenant (now Evangelical Covenant Church) did not. The new Pentecostal denominations adopted dispensationalism wholesale, although Pentecostals rejected the view, held by most other dispensationalists, that the apostolic gifts of tongues, divine healing, and prophecy ceased with the closing of the New Testament canon. Thousands of new independent and Bible churches included dispensationalism in their statements of faith, and almost all the self-identified fundamentalists who left their old denominations to start new ones were dispensationalists also; these included the General Association of Regular Baptists, the Conservative Baptists (with exceptions), and the Bible Presbyterians. Although historical generalizations are often foolhardy, this one is not: by the end of World War I, dispensationalism was nearly synonymous with fundamentalism and Pentecostalism.²⁶

In the early days of the fundamentalist movement, it often seemed that dispensationalists had to force their way into the newly forming conservative coalitions. But once it became clear that fundamentalists were not going to regain control of the older evangelical denominations, dispensationalists were quite willing to go their own way. During the 1930s and 1940s, they completed the construction of a large and sophisticated subculture that had been decades in the making. In many ways dispensationalists operated like a typical denomination: they developed a full complement of goods and services and founded numerous institutions to support and perpetuate their movement. The Bible institutes, which began in the 1880s with the founding of schools such as the Moody Bible Institute, quickly fell into dispensationalist hands.²⁷ Some of these Bible institutes transformed into Bible colleges and then liberal arts colleges. Dispensationalists founded a few seminaries, starting with Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924, and gained control of a few others. They also founded a number of “faith missions” (e.g., the Central American Mission, the Sudan Interior Mission, and the African Inland Mission), which soon were taking the lead in the American foreign missionary movement after mainline

26. Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 1, *The Irony of It All, 1893–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 208–37; Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 251–65.

27. Virginia L. Brereton, *Training God’s Army: The American Bible School, 1880–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

Protestant missions began cutting budgets and bringing their missionaries home during the Great Depression.²⁸ They had their own publishing houses; Zondervan, Baker, Eerdmans, Scripture Press, David C. Cook, and others were established to serve a dispensationalist clientele. In short, their networks of institutions were fully capable of sustaining and expanding their movement without help from anyone else.²⁹

For much of their history, dispensationalists kept their subculture hermetically sealed. Reflecting Darby's view of the coming apostasy and the need to separate from unbelief, they kept their walls high and their contacts with the outside world few and far between. But as many historians have noticed, while they condemned the world, they also became masters of the world's media. They knew how to write best sellers to spread the word beyond their boundaries. The first was W. E. Blackstone's *Jesus Is Coming* (1878), which broke down the complicated dispensationalist system for the average reader and identified the "signs of the times." It was followed by C. I. Scofield's *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (1888) and the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), published by Oxford University Press no less. *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* series (1995–2007) are more recent examples of this old dispensational tradition.

In addition to the printed word, dispensationalists also made use of music and films. With the rise of popular Christian music came a number of "second coming songs"—for example, Larry Norman's "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" (1969). Churches used "rapture movies" to attract outside audiences—for example, *A Thief in the Night* (1972), *A Distant Thunder* (1977), *Image of the Beast* (1981), and *Prodigal Planet* (1983). There has been a steady stream of such movies since then, including the four-film *Apocalypse* series (1998–2001) and the three *Left Behind* movies (2000–2005). One can hear and see dispensationalism being preached on cable television all day every day, and it is a rare televangelist who does not keep his or her prophecy charts handy.

To some extent at least, these efforts have been successful at spreading the dispensational message, even into the crevices of the popular culture. Why? The basic answer lies in dispensationalism's ability to link prophecy with current events. With the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other, dispensationalist teachers have been able to make a case for their view of the world and what is going to happen next. No millennialist movement retains its audience for long unless it is able to do this consistently or else

28. Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds., *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880–1980* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

29. Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

adjust its system when history takes an unexpected turn. Dispensationalism has always been able to do both.

From the early days of their movement, dispensationalist Bible teachers worked out an amazingly detailed scenario for the end times, then stuck to it: the decline of human civilization, the growing apostasy in the churches, the refounding of the State of Israel in the Holy Land, the rapture of the church, growing pressure on Israel and the rise of a peace-promising antichrist, the building of a third temple in Jerusalem, the revelation of the antichrist as the “man of sin,” the great tribulation, the battle of Armageddon, and the return of Jesus. Although they did not expect to be here to see these events take place, they expected to witness history move in discernible directions. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Bible teachers have kept their story straight but also stayed flexible enough to change their interpretations when necessary. Sometimes all that was needed to keep the dispensationalist rank and file happy was a good second edition. Dispensationalists have proven themselves to be quite willing to forgive and forget their teachers’ mistakes, and they seem eager to accept new explanations.³⁰

Since the founding of Israel in 1948 and especially the Six-Day War of 1967, dispensationalists have taken the lead in promoting U.S. support for the Jewish state. For most of their history, they sounded and acted like people who had completely given up on the world, and so they surprised nearly everyone by taking up politics and becoming major players in the new Christian right. At one time dispensationalists believed that their job was to teach the Bible and explain the end times, but by the 1980s they were becoming active in the political fray, evidently convinced that they could keep the devil somewhat restrained until the rapture. They took up various causes, formed political-action groups, and began lobbying Congress and the White House for Israel and a strong military. Given all this activity, they are hard to miss and evidently love being in the middle of things.

It is easy to conclude that no American millennialist group has been larger or more successful than the dispensationalists. By almost any measure, they are popular, although it is impossible to determine with certainty how many dispensationalists there are. They would have everyone believe that their views are held by most American evangelicals, but no serious observer believes it, although there is no scientific or reliable poll to settle the issue one way or the other. Probably the best guess is that no more than one-third of American evangelicals are dispensationalists. Or perhaps it is two-fifths or one-quarter.

30. Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

Who knows for sure? Whichever fraction is correct, it still represents a very large number of dispensationalists. If there are seventy-five million evangelicals in America, then there may be anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five million dispensationalists. Darby would be both pleased and astonished.

Where does this leave historic premillennialists? They never developed anything like the dispensationalist network or numbers. As we have seen, it did not take long for dispensationalists to take charge. As people who lived along the margins of a larger movement, historic premillennialists had few options other than to argue for tolerance and maneuver for a place at the table. But it was not easy. Once fundamentalists put dispensationalism on their list of orthodox nonnegotiables, they in effect hung out a sign: “Nondispensationalists need not apply.”³¹

Dispensationalism maintained its hegemony as long as the fundamentalist movement stayed strong and united. But maintaining unity was not a fundamentalist strong suit. By the 1940s many second-generation fundamentalists began calling for reforms, and by the 1950s many openly advocated a new evangelicalism that toned down some of fundamentalism’s less appealing features, such as its separatism, legalism, anti-intellectualism, and general bad manners.³² The new evangelical adjustments frequently included the reconsideration of eschatology, which opened the door for people such as George Eldon Ladd, probably the greatest historical premillennialist of them all. Raised a dispensationalist Northern Baptist in New England, Ladd graduated from Gordon College and Divinity School, earned a doctorate at Harvard, pastored for nearly fifteen years, and joined the faculty of Fuller Seminary in 1950. Within six years he published *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* and *The Blessed Hope*, which started historic premillennialism’s comeback in American evangelicalism.³³

Ladd paid a price for his views; for the next three decades, he told his Fuller students about the recriminations and condemnations sent his way by angry dispensationalists.³⁴ But Ladd’s books had broken the ice, and other scholars

31. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. 2, *The Noise of Conflict, 1919–1941* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 155–214.

32. George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

33. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); idem, *Blessed Hope*.

34. People at Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary also paid a price. From its founding, the seminary allowed its faculty to hold various premillennialist views, which produced intense outside opposition for decades. Having a theologically mixed faculty also made things

found it easier to take dispensationalism on. In the 1960s a new generation of historic premillennialists began publishing scholarly books on eschatology to make their case historically, biblically, and theologically.³⁵ Soon it became clear to dispensationalists that the rules of the game had changed. And since the 1970s, a number of books have been published that bring together representatives of various eschatological views to discuss them side by side, on what seems almost a level playing field.³⁶

Despite this intellectual resurgence, historic premillennialism has never come close to becoming a *popular* millennialist movement, and I am not aware of any reliable study that even estimates how many historic premillennialists there are. Part of the problem is that its advocates do not write best sellers (fiction or nonfiction), produce movies, or write songs. They do not organize politically or lobby Congress. They believe many of the same things about the future that dispensationalists do, but they do not spend their energy figuring out elaborate scenarios or creating prophetic charts or battle maps of future wars. They host not a single *Post-tribulational Prophecy and the News* program on cable television, nor do they sell board or video games based on their view of the future. In comparison to dispensationalists, they do not seem to be trying very hard.

If historic premillennialism is not popular in the sense of having a large (or at least discernible) following, how does it measure up on the populist/elitist scale? One is tempted to say that historic premillennialism rates high as elitist because its leadership tends to be school-based. Most writing on historic premillennialism is not intended for the masses; most of it is written by scholars for scholars. In contrast to most dispensationalist writing, it aims high and thus misses a more popular audience. Every successful millennialist movement has both highbrow and lowbrow elements. Dispensationalism certainly has its share of smart and well-trained defenders who lack neither sophistication nor the ability to elaborate. It has schools and scholars who remain committed to research and high-level academic discourse. The new wave

interesting on the inside. Well into the 1970s and 1980s the faculty and students at Denver Seminary sometimes argued over the merits of dispensationalism and historic premillennialism.

35. A short list would include Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Millard Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1977); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

36. Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977); Gleason L. Archer et al., *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-tribulational* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1984); Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

of “progressive dispensationalists” have doctorates from Oxford, Cambridge, and other impressive universities. This is true also for some more traditional dispensationalists, but most tended to stay close to home and take their degrees at “insider” schools. Nevertheless, even some of dispensationalism’s best scholars have been wary of highbrow academic theology. Lewis Sperry Chafer, by far dispensationalism’s most influential mid-twentieth-century theologian, left Oberlin College after three years to become a pastor. He saw his lack of formal academic study as a distinct advantage: “The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches.”³⁷ Such a populist statement plays well among common folks but not among academic elites.

The biggest names in popular dispensationalism have never needed high-brow academic credentials to attract and keep a popular following. They know their material and are very good at communicating it to common people. It is very significant that the best-selling dispensationalist books of all time are *fictionalized* accounts of the end-times scenario: no careful exegesis there, no laborious comparisons with other alternatives, just a ripping good story told well. This is exactly what one would expect in a populist millennialist movement. In comparison to dispensationalism, historic premillennialism scores low in “lowbrow.”

Perhaps, in the end, what separates the two versions of futurist premillennialism is that dispensationalists simply have a better story to tell. Laying all matters of truth aside, in a popularity contest the pretribulation rapture is always going to easily beat the posttribulation rapture. No matter what they do, historic premillennialists have a hard sell: going through the tribulation is not nearly as appealing as escaping from it. Years ago, while teaching an adult Sunday school lesson on pre- and posttribulation rapture positions, I was stopped cold in my pedagogical tracks by a class member who exclaimed, “But I really don’t *want* to go through the tribulation.” Case closed.

What does the future hold for these two versions of futurist premillennialism? Clearly, dispensationalism is not what it used to be. “Progressives” have tweaked the system in ways that concede major points to historic premillennialists. While maintaining their insistence on a distinct future role for the Jews in God’s prophetic plan and the pretribulation timing of the rapture, they affirm, among other things, Ladd’s argument that the coming kingdom is also present now and that there are hermeneutical dangers in overplaying one’s

37. Quoted in Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1986), 59–60.

prophetic hand in interpreting current events.³⁸ Furthermore, dispensationalism's hold on institutions has declined considerably. Old-line dispensationalists have detected slippage at, for example, Dallas Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute, once bastions of dispensational truth, and many schools that once defined themselves in dispensational terms now recognize that their own survival depends on appealing to a broader kind of evangelicalism. As separatist fundamentalism has lost ground to a more inclusive evangelicalism, so has dispensationalism to historic premillennialism. When once fervent dispensationalists tire of their movement's lowbrow excesses or can no longer accept its exegetical arguments, they move to historic premillennialism, which is the most logical fallback position for those who want an alternative. More and more evangelicals are coming to the conclusion that dispensationalism is not the only way of being premillennialist.

38. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint Books, 1993); Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).