

## INTRODUCTION

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From my earliest youth I was taught that a secret rapture of Christian believers was a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. I recall our family gathering in front of the television to watch Howard C. Estep of the World Prophetic Ministry explain how the Arab-Israeli conflict was setting the stage for the coming of the antichrist. This man, Estep told us, would dazzle the world with his solution to the problems of the Middle East, guaranteeing peace for Israel. In the panic caused by the sudden removal of Christians from the earth after the rapture, the entire world would embrace this demonic leader, who would preside over a ten-nation confederacy and a revived Roman Empire of sorts. Shortly thereafter, Israel would be betrayed, and seven years of horrible tribulation would pass before Jesus Christ would return to earth to put an end to the antichrist and the devil who empowered him. The subject of Bible prophecy has interested me ever since.

As a teenager I read with utter fascination Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey gave biblical answers to the tumult and uncertainty which characterized the sixties. I wasn't the only one fascinated by Lindsey's book. *The Late Great Planet Earth* became the best-selling book of the 1970s, ensuring that dispensational premillennialism—a term for his book's view of the end times—would remain a major influence upon American evangelicalism for a generation to come.

Many of us thought that the coming and going of Y2K and the beginning of a new millennium would cause people to question dispensational assumptions and preoccupation with signs of the end. However, the success of the Left Behind series of end-times novels, authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, proves the influence and staying power of dispensational teaching. LaHaye and Jenkins have equaled if not surpassed Lindsey's amazing publishing success.

Because dispensationalism is so popular, the question is rarely asked, Do these books and the dispensational theology they represent reflect what the Scriptures actually teach about the return of Christ and the millennial age? As one born and bred a dispensationalist, I know these authors and the people who read their books to be sincere and committed Christians. But after a difficult journey from dispensationalism to the theology of the Protestant Reformation, I have come to believe that these books and the particular interpretation of biblical prophecy they present seriously default at many points. My goal in writing this book is to humbly attempt to point out these errors and provide what I think is a more biblical way to understand the Bible's teaching on the coming of the Lord and the millennial age.

It is difficult to write a readable book on a complicated subject. Eschatology—the study of future things—is by all accounts a complicated subject. Christians are deeply divided about these matters, and discussions of future events naturally tend toward sensationalism and undue speculation. Sadly, this is what we have seen in many recent books about this subject. Therefore, a brief word of explanation about the nature and scope of this book is in order.

My purpose is to set forth the historic Protestant understanding of the millennial age. This position is commonly known as *amillennialism* and is centered in the present reign of Jesus Christ. Amillennialism is grounded in *redemptive history*, the historical acts of God as they unfold in the Bible to provide for the salvation of his people.

Although it is commonly argued that amillennarians do not believe in any millennial age (the term itself, *a* millennial, could imply as much), this is not the case. Amillennarians believe that the millennium is a present reality (Christ's heavenly reign), not a future hope (Christ's rule on earth after his return).

Although amillennialism has fallen into disfavor among prophecy devotees, I believe this position makes the best sense of the biblical passages that address the subject. So I write from a Reformed perspective and make no pretense of being neutral on the millennial question. However, *A Case for Amillennialism* is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of eschatology. That has already been done.<sup>1</sup> The scope of this effort is limited to an evaluation of the three prominent millennial views held by Christians: *amillennialism*, *postmillennialism*, and *premillennialism*.

Because this is a controversial subject, a number of biblical, theological, and historical matters are developed in some detail. Recent discussions of this subject, while interesting and informative, have suffered due to space limitations and editorial constraints.<sup>2</sup> To make my case for amillennialism

in an effective manner, I have divided the discussion into four parts, each of which treats one particular aspect of this topic.

Part 1 includes definitions of key theological terms associated with the millennial question, including an overview of millennial viewpoints. This is followed by a discussion of hermeneutics—the science of biblical interpretation—which grapples with the question, How do our theological presuppositions affect our understanding of the millennial age?

Part 2 develops a number of biblical and theological matters, which will enable us to correctly understand the biblical data regarding the millennium. This section will also discuss the Old Testament expectation of the last days and the development of this theme throughout the New.

I will offer a survey of the New Testament writers' use of the terms *this age* and *the age to come* as well as the related terms *already* and *not yet*. This so-called "two-age model" serves as the interpretive grid through which amillennialists should understand the biblical concept of future history. Such a model enables us to make sense of eschatological language in the New Testament, specifically as it relates to the future and the millennial age. I will also discuss the kingdom of God, Christ's resurrection, the new creation, and the New Testament's identification of the church as the Israel of God. Part 2 concludes with a discussion of the heart of New Testament eschatology—our Lord's second advent.

Part 3 discusses key biblical passages bearing upon the millennial age. The exposition of Daniel 9:24–27 calls attention to the context of messianic prophecy and answers the specific question, Does Daniel teach a future seven-year tribulation period? The exposition of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13) discusses Jesus' teaching about the signs of the end and the future course of redemptive history. The exposition of Romans 11 wrestles with the question, Is a distinct future for ethnic Israel in God's redemptive purposes? Concluding part 3 is an exposition of the critical millennial text, Revelation 20:1–10, and such matters as John's use of symbolism, the binding of Satan, the first resurrection, the revolt of the nations, and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Part 4 evaluates the main problems of the different millennial positions. What are the biblical and theological questions facing pre-, post-, and amillennialists? What about the presence of evil during the millennial age? Does the Bible teach that a golden age lies ahead for the church? Does the Bible teach that the millennium is characterized by a return to Old Testament "types and shadows" as claimed by dispensationalists? Does the Bible teach that Christ's coming occurred in A.D. 70 when God's judgment fell upon Israel, Jerusalem, and its temple as claimed by preterists? What about the charge that amillennialists do not interpret the Bible literally?

What about the future of the nation of Israel? There are consequences for our millennial views, and we need to be aware of them.

One final note is in order. Sadly, when it comes to eschatology, a great deal of *ad hominem* argumentation goes on. For example, dispensationalists accuse amillennialists of being anti-Semitic, liberal, or of spiritualizing the Bible by not taking the Bible literally. Amillennialists accuse dispensationalists of being literalists who are prone to sensationalism. While we may have to agree to disagree, we should always strive to conduct this debate with charity and respect.