

# Millennialism: A Popular but Dangerous False Teaching

by Paul R. Raabe

Have you ever seen a bumper sticker that said, "In case of Rapture, this car will be unoccupied"?

Have you ever heard a TV preacher say that 1948, when the modern Israeli state began, was the fulfillment of Bible prophecy?

Have you ever heard people debate whether the Battle of Armageddon is near?

Maybe you have wondered what they are talking about. In a word, they are promoting a theology called "millennialism." (The word "millennium" comes from the Latin words *mille*—"thousand" and *annus*—"year." It refers to a supposed 1,000-year rule of Christ on earth.) To be precise, they are promoting *dispensational premillennialism*.

There are several types of millennialism, but dispensational premillennialism is by far the most popular. It is advocated by well-known TV evangelists such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart and Kenneth Copeland; by groups such as Campus Crusade for Christ and World Prophecy Ministry; and by books such as the *Scotfield Reference Bible* and Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

#### Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialism is an entire theological system, but at its center is its view of the end times. Basically, its advocates believe in the following future scenario:

One day Jesus will return secretly, and all Christians (both the living and the dead) will be caught up or "raptured" to the clouds to meet Him. Then begins the seven-year period of tribulation for the non-Christian Jewish people living in Palestine. During this

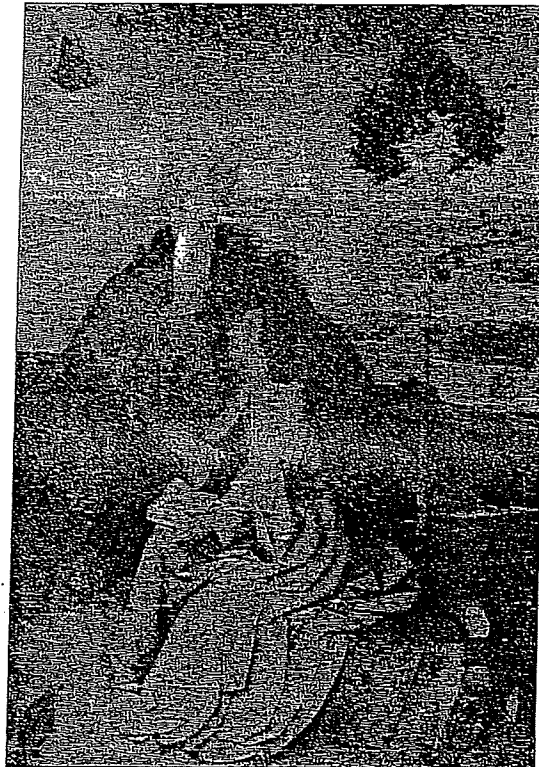
period they will worship and offer animal sacrifices at a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. The Gospel will be preached and the whole Jewish nation, together with many Gentiles, will be converted. Toward the end of this seven-year period, several wars will take place, culminating in the Battle of Armageddon, a nuclear war centered in the land of Israel. In the midst of this war, Jesus will visibly return to Jerusalem to set up the millennium. For a thousand years Satan will be bound and Christ will rule from Jerusalem over a political kingdom on earth. There will be good weather, bountiful crops, international peace and justice, and an end to crime.

In short, it will be a utopia on earth. After the millennium, Satan will be released for a brief period. Then comes the resurrection and judgment of unbelievers.

#### Evaluation

Millennialism contradicts the Word of God. Scripture teaches that Christ inaugurated His kingdom at His first advent (Luke 11:20). His kingdom is not an earthly, political one (John

WHAT THE  
BIBLE  SAYS



"St. John the Divine on Patmos" as painted by Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) of Flanders. Millennialist theology is based in large part on the 20th chapter of John's Revelation.

18:36). Rather, His gracious rule is hidden under the cross, operating through the Gospel and Sacraments and received by faith. Only on the last day will it become the kingdom of glory revealed to sight. On that last day Christ will return in glory (Matt. 24:29-31). (There is only one second coming of Christ, not two, one secret and one, visible.) When Christ returns in glory, all

the dead will be raised, believers in Christ to eternal life and unbelievers to eternal death (John 5:28-29). Only those who believe in Christ in this age will be saved, not the whole Jewish nation who are converted after the "rapture" (Romans 9:27; 10:9-13; Gal. 2:15-16).

Lutherans confess the historic Christian faith as expressed in the words of the Athanasian Creed: "He (Christ) ascended into heaven, he sits at the right hand of the Father, God Almighty, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies and will give an account of their own works. And they that have done good will go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith which, except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved" (*Lutheran Worship*, p. 135).

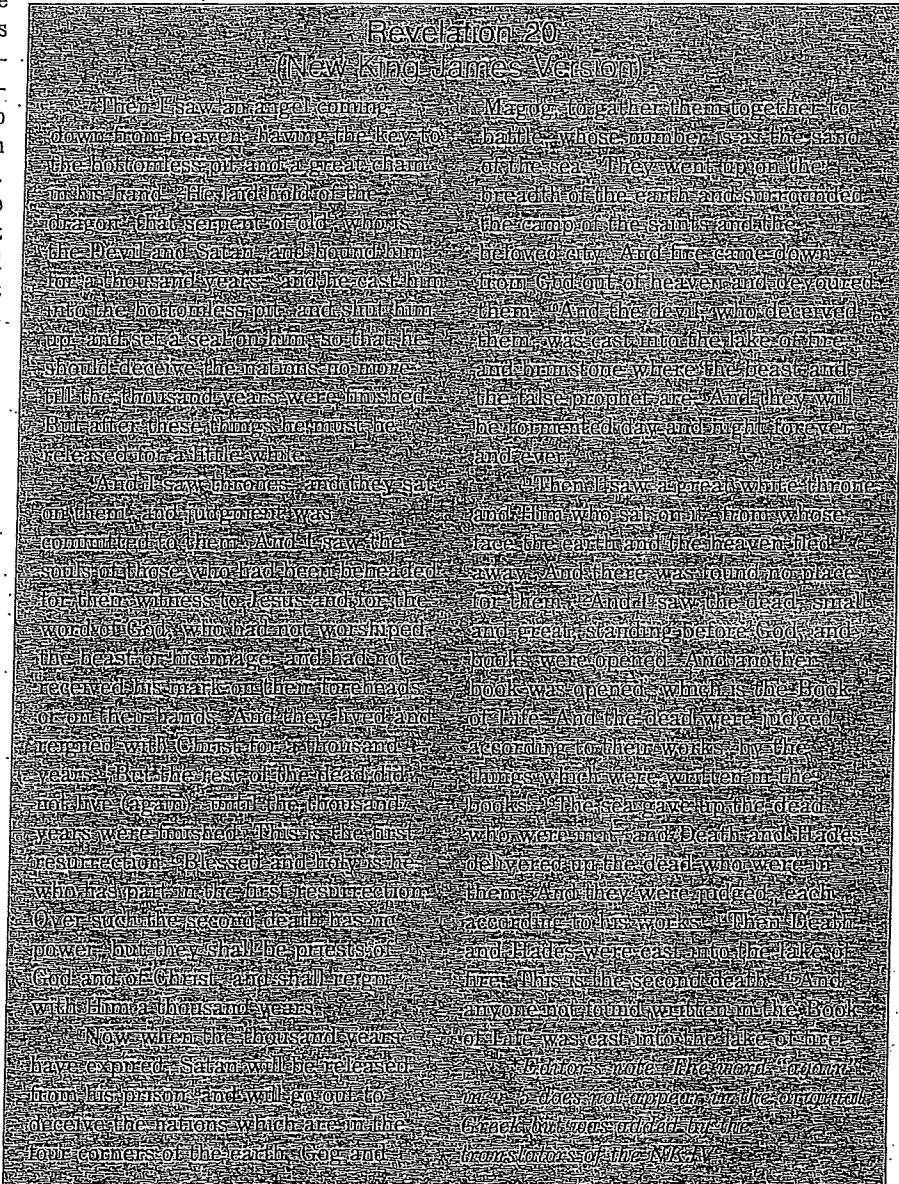
Millennialism is a very dangerous false teaching. It deludes people by of-

fering a second chance after the "rapture" and the false hope of a this-world utopia. It also takes away from the Christian the comfort of the present kingdom of Christ. It teaches that Christ's kingdom is only in the future, whereas the Scriptures teach that Christians by faith are *already* enjoying the full benefits of Christ's gracious rule, the forgiveness of sins, life and

one needs to keep in mind a preliminary point.—The book of Revelation paints pictures for the reader. It is written with symbolic imagery rather than in newspaper prose. Thus we read about four horsemen (chapter 6), locusts like scorpions (chapter 9), two beasts (chapter 13) and so on. Therefore, it should be interpreted in keeping with its use of symbols.

For example, in 5:6 it says that the lamb (Christ) has seven horns and seven eyes. Obviously Christ does not literally have seven horns and seven eyes. The number seven is a symbol for "perfect," that is, Christ has *perfect* strength and omniscience. So also the number 10 signifies "completeness." In chapter 20 "one thousand years" symbolizes the *complete* period of time God has allotted for the Church to carry out its mission (10x10x10). Because of its use of symbols, it is important to interpret Revelation in light of the non-symbolic verses of the Gospels and Epistles. With this in mind, we shall look at Rev. 20 more closely.

Verses 1-3 describe the binding of Satan. The key question is: *When* is Satan bound? The rest of Scripture answers: at Christ's *first* advent. By His earthly ministry, death and resurrection, Christ bound and defeated Satan (Mark 3:27; John 12:31-33; 1 John 3:8). Verse 3 clarifies in what sense Satan is



salvation.

**Revelation 20**

At the heart of millennialism is the belief in a future, 1,000-year rule of Christ on earth. This view is based on a literalistic interpretation of Rev. 20. Therefore, it is important to study this chapter to see what it teaches.

In order to understand Rev. 20,



Renaissance painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer made a series of woodcuts on Revelation. In this one, an angel with key and chain imprisons Satan while another points St. John toward the New Jerusalem.

bound, "in order that he might no longer deceive the Gentiles." Satan is still, of course, "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). But he does not have the power to prevent the Gospel from going out to all nations (Matt. 24:14) as in B.C. times (Acts 14:16; 17:30). Christ will build His Church, and the gates of hell will not prevent Him (Matt. 16:18). Satan is bound for "a thousand years," that is, for the complete period of time that God has decreed for the Church to carry out its worldwide mission.

Verses 4-6 describe the "first resurrection." Verse 4 says that the souls of the faithful martyrs and "whoever did not worship the beast and its image . . . lived and ruled with Christ a thousand years." Verses 5-6 add that this is the "first resurrection." Over those who have a share in the "first resurrection," the "second death" has no power. These verses reveal that there are two "deaths" and two "resurrections." Verses 13-14 tell us that the "first death" is <sup>second</sup> death and the "second death" is eternal death. But what are the first and the second "resurrections?" Verse 6 tells us that the first resurrection delivers people from

the *second* death. This indicates that the "first resurrection" is the gift of eternal life, the opposite of the "second death." Being involved in the "first resurrection" is to become "priests of God and of Christ" (v. 6); it is to have one's name written in the Book of Life (v. 15). Being a part of the "first resurrection" is to be raised up to newness of life through baptism (John 3:3-5, 36; 5:24-25). The "second resurrection" is the bodily resurrection to happen on the last day (vv. 11-15). This "second resurrection" goes with the "first death"—bodily death.

Only believers in Christ (including the faithful martyrs) have received the "first resurrection," whereas all people (including the bodily dead unbelievers—v. 5) will experience the "second resurrection." One should also see John 11:25-26, which speaks of these two "deaths," and John 5:24-29, which speaks of these two "resurrections."

After this period of time in which the Gospel is preached to all the Gentiles, Satan is released "for a little season"—vv. 7-10. God permits Satan to hinder the Church's mission and to persecute the Church intensely for a short time before the final judgment (see

Matt. 24:15-30). Then God intervenes and casts Satan into hell (v. 10).

Verses 11-15 then describe the final bodily resurrection and judgment. All the dead are raised and are judged by Christ. Those whose names appear in the Book of Life enter into the eternal bliss of the new Jerusalem (chapters 21-22), but those whose names are not written there are thrown into "the lake of fire."

#### The Comfort of Revelation 20

What a comforting message of Good News Rev. 20 must have been for its original readers! John wrote the book of Revelation about A.D. 95, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. At that time the churches of Asia Minor were being persecuted from within by false teachers (2:2) and from without by the Roman government (1:9; 17:9). Certain Jewish synagogues were persecuting them as well (2:9; 3:9). Some Christians were even martyred for the faith (2:13; 6:9; 20:4). No doubt many believers then (as now) despaired that the gates of hell had prevailed against the Church.

For them, and for us, John wrote this comforting chapter. Christ, the Lamb who was slain for the forgiveness of sins, is the victorious Lord who defeated Satan. Satan is bound and will not prevent the Gospel from going out to all nations. Contrary to reason and experience, Christians—though persecuted—are already more than conquerors and have eternal life. Even martyrdom does not rob God's people of eternal life. Though Satan is permitted to persecute the Church intensely for "a little season," the Church is assured of the victory. Those who are Christ's will be raised from the dead to inherit eternal life on the last day.

What a comforting message of good news Revelation 20 must have been for the Church Militant in A.D. 95. And it still is. "For us fights the valiant One. . . . The Kingdom ours remaineth."



Prof. Paul R. Raabe teaches Old Testament at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

# APPENDIX I

## Diagrams of Millennial Views

