

The Destiny of the Unevangelized

by Allen Tunberg

“Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould.” (Romans 12:2, Phillips)

We frequently think that the way in which the world attempts to squeeze Christians consists of exerting cultural pressures toward certain fleshly attitudes and actions. It does, of course, include this, but the world’s squeeze also involves strong pressures to adopt or reject certain theological beliefs.

Sociologist Peter Berger contends that society determines prevailing religious beliefs. He states, “...theology and ecclesiastical practice accommodate themselves to the reality presuppositions of the man in the street.”¹ Social factors, in other words, determine which religious beliefs seem plausible—not which beliefs are true, but which ones appear believable. Furthermore, Berger states, pluralism tends to make it more difficult for people to hold dogmatic convictions. He writes, “We can only stress the net results of this pluralization of worlds—that it has become very difficult to maintain, or, for that matter, to establish de novo, any monopoly in the definition of reality.”²

Our Western society has become increasingly pluralistic, and with that pluralism has come a reaction against dogmatism and exclusiveness in matters of religious faith. University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter writes, “In the face of intense religious and cultural pluralism in the past century, the pressures to deny Christianity’s exclusive claims to truth have been fantastic. Intensive cultural pluralism, one of the hallmarks of the modern world order, has, at least in the United States, institutionalized an ethic of toleration and civility.”³

Nowhere is the exclusiveness of the biblical message more apparent than in its insistence that mankind is desperately lost because of sin; that Jesus Christ is the only solution for this condition; and that people apart from Christ are doomed and hell-bound. It is little wonder, therefore, that the biblical doctrines concerning judgment and hell have come under concerted cultural attack. Such doctrinal positions have been essentially jettisoned by those who give no allegiance to the authority of Scripture, and are being held increasingly more timidly even by many of those who do. John Wenham, in his book *The Goodness of God*, suggests that “Christians have been tempted to soft-pedal the theme of judgment. The theme of hell has been quietly omitted, and the wrath of God has been de-personalized” (p. 187).

It is not surprising that concessive theology has bought deeply into this cultural mood of the day. But the fact is that evangelicals have not been immune to this cultural squeeze, either. From a careful study of attitudinal trends among students and faculty at nine liberal arts colleges within the evangelical tradition and seven evangelical seminaries, James Davison Hunter concludes that younger evangelicals are less sure of their convictions regarding eternal judgment, hell, and the destiny of the unevangelized than had previously been the case within evangelicalism. Hunter states, “...it is clear that there is a measurable degree of uneasiness within this generation of evangelicals with the notion of an eternal damnation. ... There is a pervasive uneasiness both about the nature of hell and about who is relegated to it. It is an uneasiness which may portend a greater cultural Accommodation.”⁴

It is not that evangelicals are becoming universalists. Yet evangelical convictions concerning the lostness of man appear to be shifting in less radical but nevertheless disturbing ways. Within evangelicalism today there is a growing inclination to question whether as many people are really “apart from Christ”—and therefore eternally lost—as the Christian church has traditionally presumed. In particular, the destiny of the unevangelized (defined here as those who throughout their entire earthly life never hear the gospel of Jesus Christ) seems to be an increasingly open question in the present debate. Are the unevangelized certainly and necessarily lost? Might Christ have ways to unite to himself at least some of the unevangelized of which we are not aware?

Such questions about the eternal destiny of certain people are not merely the cultural product of the last part of the twentieth century, of course. These issues have cropped up before and include some notable credentials. But equivocation on the biblical doctrines of hell and judgment is a relatively new phenomenon in the Christian Church. If such views are gaining a more sympathetic hearing within evangelicalism today, one can scarcely doubt that the cultural mood of the day is one of the factors prompting this.

The firm conviction of believers in Christ that the unevangelized are lost has long been a compelling motivation for missions. What will happen to evangelicalism if that conviction weakens, or turns into uncertain opinion? We see the result in liberalism when belief in the certainty of hell and judgment disappears: missions efforts are redefined and reduced.

Certainly, belief in the biblical teaching regarding the lost has not left evangelicalism. Perhaps certainty on this issue is burning as brightly as ever among many. But we dare not presume that is the case. It is essential for every generation and every fellowship of believers to assess their conviction on the eternal destiny of the unevangelized.

A survey of current views

About a year ago, I completed a project for the School of World Missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, whereby I attempted to identify and critique current views on the destiny of the unevangelized and to relate those views to the doctrinal standards of The Evangelical Free Church of America. I summarized eleven different positions on the subject and submitted them to 132 EFCA leaders. These individuals are involved in the decision-making process for those who seek EFCA ordination or commissioning. My goal was to discover what the parameters of acceptable beliefs were for approval of ordination or commissioning by candidates within the EFCA. Which views would the EFCA conclude violated the doctrinal standards of the denomination, and which were compatible?

I will summarize here the eleven views which I identified and make a few comments on the survey results. I realize that there are different ways to categorize positions, but the views on the destiny of the unevangelized which I noted are these:

1. **Universalism** is the belief that all of mankind will, in the end, be saved. Universalism needs little explanation since it is a familiar position. Universalists differ considerably over the basis and time of the final restoration of all beings into fellowship with God, but the common

denominator of universalism is the belief that all human beings will eventually enjoy the presence of God.

Representative quotation: *“There are no incorrigible sinners; God has no permanent problem children. Heaven, to those who truly love all, can be heaven only when it has emptied hell ... The Good Shepherd insists on finding the hundredth sheep.”* (Nels Ferre, *The Christian Understanding of God*, p. 229)

2. **Inclusivism** is the notion that the saving work of Christ encompasses all people of sincerity and goodwill, regardless of their religious faith. Inclusivists hold that Christ is present in all people of goodwill and in their religious systems, even though they may not be aware of him. This presence of Christ is considered to be saving in its effects. Inclusivists agree that no one is saved apart from Christ. But they believe that people of genuineness and goodwill, regardless of their religion or lack of it, are in fact savingly united with Christ. Such individuals are part of the company of the redeemed even though they are unaware of the Redeemer.

Representative quotation: *“The good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and good life, through the Mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that Christ saved the Hindu normally. This amounts to saying that Hinduism has also a place in the universal saving providence of God.”* (R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, p. 54)

3. **Qualified Universalism** contends that salvation belongs to all those who do not refuse it. It is a position advocated by Neal Punt in two relatively recent books, *Unconditional Good News* (1980) and *What’s Good About the Good News?* (1988). I think a fair description of this view is that qualified universalism is the belief that the atonement of Christ counts for every person except those who opt out of it. That is, all are saved through Christ’s atonement except those who take willful steps to disengage themselves from him. Qualified universalism, therefore, involves a mental shift from assuming that all are lost unless they believe in Christ to believing instead that all are saved unless they deliberately reject Christ (or whatever amount of revelation of him they have).

Representative quotation: *“Those who will be finally lost are those, and only those, who, in addition to their sin in Adam, throughout their entire life, willfully and finally reject or remain indifferent toward whatever revelation of himself God has given to them... We no longer see all persons in Adam, outside of Christ, on the way to hell, with some specifically mentioned exceptions. We now see ‘the world,’ ‘all persons,’ ‘everyone’ as elect in Christ, certain-to-come-to-salvation, except for those specifically mentioned exceptions who will be finally lost.”* (Neal Punt, *What’s Good About the Good News?* pp. 24,29)

4. **Extended Probation** proposes that there may be post-death opportunities for individuals to become saved. This view denies that death necessarily ends a person’s opportunity to believe in Jesus Christ and suggests instead that post-death chances for repentance, faith and conversion are indeed possible. Some who hold this view are more cautious and restrained

than others, but all who espouse the idea of an extended probation believe in the possibility of post-death opportunities to receive Christ and be saved.

Representative quotations: *“We suggest that the Christian teacher who follows the doctrine and spirit of Christ will warn men that there is a most dreadful judgment awaiting the morally and spiritually careless, but he will also allow himself to hope that the very rude awakening of the unseen world may quite possibly be the occasion of an awakening of many to penitence, faith, and righteousness.”* (John Lawson, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, p. 262)

“Death does not fix the moral position of the soul irretrievably... There are more conversions on the other side than this, if the crisis of death opens the eyes as I have said.” (P.T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next*, pp. 12,37)

5. **General revelation as an avenue to saving faith** is the belief that salvation is possible for those who respond positively to general revelation, even though they have no factual knowledge about Jesus Christ. This view holds that through general revelation an honest inquirer may be led all the way to saving faith, even in the absence of special revelation. The essence of saving faith is defined as an individual repentantly casting oneself upon God’s mercy in full accord with the amount of spiritual light available. Proponents of this view believe that God may use the light of general revelation alone to lead sincere seekers to saving faith; thus, in certain cases, salvation may be possible without an awareness of the gospel.

Representative quotations: *“Man may receive a gift without knowing from whom it comes, or how much it has cost. So the heathen, who casts himself as a sinner upon God’s mercy, may receive salvation from the Crucified One, without knowing who is the giver, or that the gift was purchased by agony and blood.”* (A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 843)

“We do not slam the door shut on all those millions who have not heard the name of Christ any more than we restrict a saving knowledge of God only to Israelites in the Old Testament... there may be many hearts outside the sound of the gospel who have felt after God, who did seek for honor and immortality, who do have the true circumcision of the Spirit, and to these hearts God applies the salvation of Jesus Christ. How many we do not know.” (Bernard Ramm, “Will All Men Be Finally Saved? *Eternity*, Aug. 1964, p. 33)

6. **Extraordinary applications of the atonement** is a belief that some of the unevangelized may have Christ’s atonement applied to them in an extraordinary way. This view argues that extraordinary applications of the atonement may occur in situations where a conscious human response to the gospel is impossible. The lifelong mentally incapacitated and those who die in infancy are examples of such possible extraordinary applications and are considered by some to be precedents for the way in which God may deal with some of the unevangelized, as well. In other words, God may graciously apply the atonement of Christ to those who have never heard the gospel, as he is believed to do in the above two extraordinary cases.

Representative quotations: *“If God can and does save infants without the preaching and hearing of the Word, does He operate similarly in regard to adults who have no opportunity to hear the gospel?... It is conceivable and possible that God, in His sovereign mercy, regenerates some through the Spirit without the preaching of the Word....”* (Richard Wolff, *The Final Destiny of the Lost*, pp. 50-51)

“Certainly God’s ordinary method is to gather His elect from the evangelized portion of mankind, although we must admit the possibility that by an extraordinary method some few of His elect may be gathered from the unevangelized portion.” (Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, pp. 119-120)

7. **Faith that would have been** postulates that God deals with the unevangelized according to his knowledge of how they would have responded had they heard the gospel. Those who hold this view believe, first, that God’s omniscience means that he knows of things which never happened but *would have happened* under different circumstances, and second, that salvation through Christ is appropriated by the unevangelized not merely through “faith which is” but also through “faith which would have been.”

Representative quotations: *“God knows who would, under ideal circumstances, believe the gospel, and on the basis of his foreknowledge, applies that gospel even if the person never hears the gospel during his lifetime.”* (Donald Lake, “He Died for All: The Universal Dimensions of the Atonement,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock, p 43)

“... it is possible that an omniscient God will judge those who have never heard of Christ on the basis of what he knows would have been their response if they had heard....” (J.N D. Anderson, citing George Goodman, in *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, p. 104)

8. **Agnosticism** states that we simply do not know with certainty the future state of the unevangelized; thus, agnosticism is believed to be the wisest position one can take on the question. Those who hold this view say that since we do not know the destiny of those who throughout their lifetime remain uninformed about Christ, it is best not to expound on the subject.

Representative quotations: *“... I believe the most Christian stance is to remain agnostic on this question.”* (John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, p. 327)

“What, men are asking with a constantly heavier sense of the burden of difficulty, of the untold millions who have never heard of Christ at all, of the millions and millions who have never even had a chance of hearing of Him?... We feel instinctively that the last word has not been—cannot be—spoken by us here.” (James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, p. 339)

9. **Traditionalism** is the stance that, except for infants and the mentally incapacitated, only those who hear the essentials of the gospel and believe in Christ in this life are saved. This view teaches that for all morally responsible individuals, there is no salvation without (a) an awareness of the gospel and (b) a conscious response of belief in the gospel.

Many who hold this view believe that those who die in infancy and some of those with lifelong mental incapacitation are not morally responsible because, though they are guilty of original sin—and therefore stand in need of atonement, they have not ratified their Adamic nature by personal and willful choice (i.e., they have not committed “active sin” or “volitional sin”). To these individuals, it is believed, God applies the atonement apart from a conscious response of faith. Not so with the heathen who have never heard the gospel. Since they are guilty of *both* original *and* active sin, the heathen are morally responsible and therefore must both hear and believe the gospel in order to be saved.

Representative quotations: “*We conclude that the Bible does not make any clear statement about exceptional persons to whom God speaks directly and gives salvation without their hearing the gospel... The Bible does not give us sufficient ground to entertain a hope of salvation for anyone apart from the gospel.*” (Ajith Fernanco, *The Christian’s Attitude Toward World Religions*, p. 139)

“*Again we go to the source of our final theology and there we discover that there is absolutely nothing in the revelation which states or infers that there is any hope for those who die without having heard of Christ.*” (Harold Lindsell, *A Christian Philosophy of Missions*, p. 111)

“*... the Bible indicates that apart from hearing and believing the Gospel, the heathen are hopeless.*” (Robert Gundry, “Salvation According to Scripture: No Middle Ground,” *Christianity Today*, Dec. 1977, p. 16)

10. **Annihilationism and conditional immortality** are positions which hold that the conscious existence of the unsaved will cease at a time known to God. These views do not deny the eternal lostness of those without Christ; they instead pronounce upon the nature of the punishment of the lost. Instead of the traditionally-held conviction of the everlasting conscious existence and punishment of people apart from Christ, annihilationism and conditional immortality soften the penalty by limiting its duration. For convenience, both views can be lumped together under the term, “conditionalism.”

Representative quotations: “*The term ‘conditionalist’ is used for the view that the wicked will suffer conscious punishment precisely measured by divine justice but that they finally will perish in hell so as to become totally extinct forever.*” (Edward Fudge, *The First That Consumes*, p. xvi)

“*Eternal death, called the ‘second death’ in Scripture (Rev. 21:8) is the complete and total destruction of sinners in the judgment fires of the last days. In this death, the lost will be destroyed ‘body and soul’ in hell, so that there will be an irrevocable loss of personal existence and life. The wicked will ‘become as if they had never existed’*” (Obad. 16). (David Dean, *Resurrection: His and Ours*, p. 38)

11. **Degrees of punishment in hell** is the notion that the unevangelized, though eternally lost, will suffer a lighter penalty in hell. This view accepts the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment of the lost, but presumes that not all the lost will experience the same intensity of suffering in hell—the same duration, yes, but not the same intensity. Those believing in degrees of punishment in hell frequently assume that the degree of punishment is

related to the degree of privilege; on that basis one could also expect that those who never hear the gospel in this life might suffer a lighter penalty in hell.

Representative quotations: “... *there is no one who will have a legitimate grievance against the judgment. And indeed the Bible makes it plain that there will be degrees of punishment, not in duration, but in severity*” (Luke 12:46,47). (Roger Nicole, “Universalism: Will Everyone Be Saved?” *Christianity Today*, Mar. 20, 1987, p. 38)

“This, of course, does not mean that all of the lost shall suffer the same degree of punishment. We believe that from a common zero point there will be all degrees of reward and all degrees of punishment, and that a person’s reward or punishment will, to a certain extent, be based on the opportunity that he has had in this world.” (Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 120)

Survey results

Of the 132 surveys which I sent out, 121 were returned—a gratifying response. The respondents were categorically against EFCA ordination or commissioning for anyone holding views 1, 2, 3 or 4. On the other hand, view 9—Traditionalism—received the overwhelming approval of the survey respondents, indicating to me that this view is at the center of the EFCA comfort zone. Those surveyed revealed varying degrees of ambivalence about views 5, 6, 7, and 8.

For each of these four views, the collective survey response was far more negative than positive. But there was also a fairly significant number of respondents who were either (a) unsure whether they would approve ordination or commissioning within the EFCA for someone holding such a view or (b) personally uncomfortable with the view but unwilling to exclude someone from EFCA ordination or commissioning for holding it, showing that these views would prompt some discussion. As for view 10 (Conditionalism), survey respondents expressed strong disapproval for EFCA ordination or commissioning for anyone having this position. Respondents indicated that view 11 (degrees of punishment in hell) falls well within the boundaries of acceptable EFCA beliefs, with the caveat that care must be taken to guard against letting this view foster any complacent attitudes toward hell.

Two Recommendations

In light of the survey results, I offer the following two recommendations to our Ministerial Association:

1. *There is clear need for more teaching, discussion, and interaction on the biblical message of hell, judgment, and salvation.* The number of respondents who indicated that they were unsure whether or not they would approve EFCA ordination or commissioning for those who hold views 5, 6, 7, or 8—and, to a lesser extent, views 10 and 11—attests to the need for clearer teaching and interaction on this subject.
2. *The EFCA may wish to consider setting more specific parameters for acceptable beliefs among its leaders.* If so, what are those parameters and how will they be communicated? The diversity of the survey responses should not be overemphasized. As stated above, the respondents were overwhelmingly traditionalists on the subject of the destiny of the lost. There

was enough difference of viewpoints, however, to conclude that not all the respondents either agreed on or were aware of what the parameters for acceptable beliefs in the EFCA should be. It might be advisable for the Ministerial Association to develop some position papers which could aid our fellowship in determining which viewpoints are in harmony with Free Church doctrines. Such corporate dialogue and study will help ensure that we are not unconsciously allowing the present cultural mood to squeeze the Church into its own mould on this awesome subject of the destiny of those who are uninformed about Christ.

¹“*A Sociological View of the Secularization of Theology*,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6.1 (1967):7.

²*Ibid*, p. 9. ³*Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, pp. 34,35. ⁴*Ibid*. pp. 38,39, 47,48.

EFCA Doctrinal Tolerance

by Dr. Michael P. Andrus

There have been several notable areas over the years where the Evangelical Free Church of America has tolerated divergent viewpoints—viewpoints that probably weren't anticipated in 1950 by the writers of the Statement of Faith.

In the late 1980s, much debate arose over Murray J. Harris' views on the nature of the resurrection body. Harris then served as professor of New Testament Exegesis and Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

While Harris repeatedly affirmed the EFCA Statement of Faith “without mental reservation,” he preferred the biblical terminology “spiritual body” to the terminology some theologians use, namely, “literal, physical body.” He also stressed discontinuity between the resurrection body and the earthly body, while his detractors tended to stress continuity between the two, though both sides acknowledged both.

Since the EFCA Statement of Faith speaks only of the *fact* of a bodily resurrection and does not describe the *nature* of that body, Dr. Harris was judged by EFCA leaders to be in compliance. But the controversy raised a legitimate question: Just how unusual can a view be and still be acceptable?

Another area where doctrinal tolerance has challenged the denomination is in regard to the time of the rapture of the church relative to the Tribulation. Without question, the reference to “imminency” in the Statement of Faith implied a pre-Tribulation rapture to most of those approving the Statement of Faith in 1950. But since imminency *can* be defined in such a way as to allow for other views, diversity on this subject was specifically permitted by President Tom McDill and the Committee on Ministerial Standing as early as 1977.

Dr. Arnold T. Olsen was in agreement with this; in fact, he shared in several forums that he felt it was “providential” that the authors of the Statement of Faith did not use the term “pre-tribulation rapture,” although that is what they believed. Eventually the National Conference in effect sanctioned a broader interpretation of “imminency.” They did so in 1984 by approving tenure for a faculty member at TEDS, Dr. Doug Moo, who was committed to the posttribulation view.

Was it permissible to abandon the strict constructionist approach to the movement's founding documents and allow doctrinal latitude in this area? Would it have been better to vote to amend the Statement of Faith (requiring a two-thirds vote)?

It is instructive to note that the 1950 Statement of Faith was written so as to allow a few EFCA churches that were out of the theological mainstream to sign it. The article on the atonement was specifically written so as not to eliminate those who held to a governmental (or example) theory of the atonement. This is generally viewed as doctrinal error in the EFCA today, and the proposed revisions to the Statement of Faith will require a substitutionary, vicarious atonement.

The Spiritual Heritage Committee believes that it is better to state the essentials of the faith with sufficient clarity (and avoid the nonessentials entirely), so that all who sign the Statement of Faith can do so without mental reservations.

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A Pyramid of Doctrinal Issues

by Dr. Michael P. Andrus

How do we decide which theological views are *dogma* and therefore indisputable; which are *doctrine* and thus well-established; which are *theory* and open to vigorous debate; and which are mere *speculation* and warrant little more than curiosity?

As one way of responding to this challenge, I suggest a four-sided pyramid of theological thought. The apex of the pyramid represents theological dogma; i.e., those truths that have the highest exegetical certainty, the greatest theological importance, the strongest biblical emphasis and the most uniform historical agreement. Let's take a few doctrinal issues and see where they might fit on the pyramid.

Consider first the vicarious atonement of Christ. The exegetical certainty of this truth is extremely high; its theological importance is paramount; there are numerous Scripture passages in both Testaments that attest to it;¹ and it has been considered a dogma of the church from the first century. Thus, I would place the vicarious atonement of Christ in the pyramid's apex.

What about the salvation of infants who die in infancy? I recognize that this subject has a high level of theological importance, particularly to people who have lost an infant. And the orthodox church has nearly always held to some form of infant salvation. However, the scriptural emphasis is sparse,² and the exegetical certainty arising from those passages is quite low. As much as I would like to have a "doctrine" of infant salvation, I feel constrained to offer only a "theory" regarding it. I happen to believe that theory as much as I believe some doctrines (due more to theological deduction than to exegetical evidence), but the fact that it is a theory precludes me from expecting others to agree.

Next, let's look at the proper mode of baptism. In my assessment, the exegetical certainty for any particular mode of baptism is modest; the biblical emphasis is relatively low;³ the theological importance is quite debatable; and diverse views continue to exist in the orthodox church. I would place mode of baptism somewhere in the "theory" category. (Bear in mind that the *fact* of baptism would be in the "doctrine" or "dogma" category,⁴ even if the *mode* of baptism is not.)

Consider a final example—the issue of divorce and remarriage. The biblical emphasis is once again strong: The subject appears in the Old Testament and the New, in the Gospels and in the Epistles.⁵ The theological importance is indisputable, especially as the rate of divorce increases, even among believers. The exegetical certainty, however, is not all we would like it to be.

In the 1980s, the EFCA published a position paper regarding the credentialing of those who have been divorced and remarried. While I am comfortable with the conclusions in that paper, I also recognize that honest evangelical scholars have taken other positions (some more conservative and some more liberal), and they have offered reasoned justification. I would place divorce and remarriage in the “doctrine” category. However, I understand why some would place divorce at a “doctrine” level and remarriage at a “theory” level.

The more fully we think through theological issues logically, rationally and objectively, the more discerning we will be as to when to “go to the mat” with fellow Christians. Unity in the body of Christ is such a high value in Christ’s teaching⁶ that we should be very reluctant to separate from other believers over any view that doesn’t have high exegetical certainty, significant theological importance, strong biblical emphasis and uniform historical agreement.

¹Isaiah 53:6,12; John 1:12; Romans 5:6-8; Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:15,21; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18. ²Samuel 12:23; Matthew 18:10. ³Several passages speak of Jesus “coming out of the water” (Matthew 3:16), while the Ethiopian eunuch “went down into the water” (Acts 8:38), but even that doesn’t prove whether they were immersed or sprinkled. ⁴Matthew 28:18-20. ⁵Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 5:31,32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; Romans 7:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. ⁶John 17.

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Premillennialism

by Dr. David V. Martin

Three views have been held by major segments of the Church at some time throughout its history: *premillennialism*, *amillennialism* and *postmillennialism*. As noted in the *EFCA Today* article, *premillennialism* is the view that our Lord will return to earth physically at a time unknown to us and will inaugurate an earthly kingdom that will last a thousand years (Revelation 20). Those who hold to *amillennialism* generally agree that the reality to which the “thousand years” in Revelation 20 points is the reign of Christ that began when Satan was defeated at Christ’s first coming, and which will find its fulfillment when Christ returns. And *postmillennialism* is the view that the kingdom of Christ, already begun, is increasing and will spread over the whole world until finally Jesus returns.

Most *premillennialists* agree on these key points:

- Christ will personally, gloriously return to reign on earth. His coming will be abrupt and will deliver the Church from entering or from the midst of a period of unprecedented tribulation on earth.
- Believers who have died prior to Christ’s return will be raised to life and reign with Him on earth.
- Most of the Old Testament promises of a restored, fructified and pacified earth will be literally fulfilled during an earthly, thousand-year reign of Christ.
- During Christ’s earthly reign, Satan will be bound and kept in the bottomless pit, unable to “deceive the nations.”
- The final judgment of all the nations and the consignment of Satan and his cohorts to hell will follow the millennium.
- The new heavens and earth and the eternal state will follow the judgment.

In spite of general agreement on the above points, premillennialists disagree on other notable points:

- Will Christ’s return take place in one or two phases: one return (after the tribulation) or two (“rapture” before or during the tribulation, and “second coming” after the tribulation)?
- Will the millennium have a mostly Jewish flavor, chiefly the fulfillment of promises to ethnic Israel, or will it be the culmination of God’s plan for the Church, in which the distinction between Jew and Gentile has been overcome in Christ?
- Has Christ’s kingdom already begun (in the defeat of Satan at Christ’s first coming), or will it only begin when He comes again?

Most *amillennialists* agree on the following points:

- The thousand years in Revelation 20 should be interpreted symbolically (as should much of Revelation). This position is “*amillennial*” since it sees Revelation 20 as referring to something other than a future, literal, thousand-year, earthly reign of Christ.
- The reign of Christ began when Satan was defeated at Christ’s first coming, and it is being realized now either mostly in the personal salvation of individual believers (older view) or in the realization of God’s purposes in history and eternity (newer view).
- The New Testament, according to *amillennialists*, treats the promises of the Old Covenant (to Israel) as fulfilled in Christ and His inauguration of the New Covenant (the Church). So should we, they contend. More recent *amillennial* thought (along with the Puritans) is acknowledging a continued place for ethnic Israel in the plan of God.
- The *amillennial* reading of the Bible is canonical, which means that individual passages, including prophetic ones, should be read in light of the entire canonical Scriptures. “In the Old Testament the New is concealed, in the New the Old revealed,” according to Augustine.¹ The Old Testament prophecies should be read especially in light of the momentous and epoch-altering birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In Christ, the “last days” have arrived.

Postmillennialism shares with *amillennialism* the belief that the first coming of Christ inaugurated His kingdom. *Postmillennialism*, however, places more emphasis on the physical, earthly benefits of the increasing spread of the kingdom in this age. One day it will dominate the entire world. Then Christ will return. The “millennium,” in this view, is not necessarily a literal, thousand-year reign. Because Satan has been “bound” and is unable to deter the spread of the gospel, this present age constitutes the “millennium.” Christ will—through the power of the Spirit and the prayer and work of the church—fulfill the promise of His kingdom’s coming on earth as it is in heaven.

Particular Scriptures appear to give warrant to each of the three views. Each view carries forward and builds upon an important element of biblical teaching. That’s why sincere Bible believers can be found supporting each of these positions.

- *Postmillennialism* highlights the biblical emphasis on the power of the gospel to change both individuals and corporate structures. It lives on the hope found in the New Testament of an ever-growing Church moving toward “the restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21, New American Standard version).
- *Amillennialism* underscores the biblical emphasis on the epochal nature of Christ’s first coming and the radical change in history that occurred through His once-for-all redemptive action, as recorded in the New Testament. It appreciates the apostolic witness to the fulfillment of many messianic prophecies in the history of the Church.

- Premillennialism accentuates God's faithfulness to His promises as "literally" (or historically and grammatically) understood. When God made promises to His people (the Jews), He intended for them to be kept as they would have generally understood them. Many messianic prophecies were actually fulfilled in that way (e.g., Christ's birth in Bethlehem). The Jewish disciples continued to interpret the prophecies in that way, and Christ appears to have not dissuaded them from doing so (e.g., Acts 1:6). Furthermore, premillennialism emphasizes the strong thread of teaching regarding the darkness of the days associated with the end of this age.

Of course, each view has its detractors and each struggles with its difficult passages. The task before the Evangelical Free Church of America is to decide whether we should continue to see our view of the millennium as an essential of the faith, worthy of being a boundary belief for us, or whether our movement can or should absorb brothers and sisters with a viewpoint other than that of premillennialism.

¹*Instructing Beginners in Faith, by Augustine, translated by Raymond Canning, edited by Boniface Ramsey, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), p. 70 (Part 1:4,8).*

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