



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.4 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Millennialism

A millennium is a period of one thousand years. The only place in Scripture where a millennium is mentioned is the twentieth chapter of Revelation. There we read that **“an angel ... laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years”** (Revelation 20:1-2). We are also told that **“the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus ... lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years”** (Revelation 20:4).

From this brief mention an entire type of theology has arisen called millennialism, which is then subdivided into premillennialism and postmillennialism. Premillennialism also has its divisions: dispensational premillennialism and historic premillennialism, and also pretribulational premillennialism, midtribulational premillennialism, and posttribulational premillennialism. The very fact that millennialists have such disagreements and divisions among themselves indicates that Scripture does not clearly teach what the millennialists think it teaches.

In the first place the numbers in the book of Revelation need to be understood not as literal numbers, but as symbolic numbers. For example, Revelation 7:4 gives the total number of Christians in the world as 144,000. Where does this number come from? The answer is easy. There were 12 tribes in Israel in the Old Testament. There are 12 apostles of Christ in the New Testament. 12 times 12 gives us 144. Then we have 10 times 10, which is the number of completeness, and that gives us a total of 144,000, the total of all Christians, both Old Testament and New Testament believers.

Rather than referring to a literal 1000 years, the millennium in Revelation 20 refers to the total number of years between Jesus' first coming in Bethlehem and His second coming in judgment at the end of the world. We are living in this millennium right now, and we are told that **“when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations”** (Revelation 20:7-8). This indicates that as Judgment Day draws closer, Satan will be given a longer leash and be permitted to use more deceptions among the nations of the world. This agrees with what Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived”** (2 Timothy 3:13), and the many passages we read in the previous lesson.

Since Revelation is a book of visions and symbols, we cannot make it the starting point of our study of the last things. We need to interpret Revelation in the light of the many clear passages in the Bible elsewhere that describe the last things. If we study the clear passages of the Bible first, we will not become millennialists as the term is usually understood, but *amillennialists*, meaning those who do not find some special teaching of the millennium in Revelation and then interpret the rest of the Bible to fit in with this (false) millennial teaching.

Millennialists claim that there will be at least two resurrections from the dead: one before the millennium and one after the millennium. At this first resurrection they say the dead believers will be raised, and only after the millennium will the rest of the dead be raised. But Jesus taught clearly there would only be one physical resurrection: **“The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation”** (John 5:28-29). All the dead will rise at the same hour, and then the separation will take place between those rising to eternal life and those rising

to eternal condemnation. Moreover, Jesus taught: **“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day”** (John 6:40). Note that Jesus’ believers will be raised on the last day, not one thousand years before the last day.

Jesus will return only once, not many times, and His return will be visible. His first appearance is described in this way in the letter to the Hebrews: **“Once at the end of the ages He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself”** (Hebrews 9:26). His second coming is described like this: **“To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation”** (Hebrews 9:28).

The beginning of the millennium in Revelation 20 is not sometime in the future, but it has already taken place. The binding of Satan took place when Jesus died and rose again. It was in connection with Jesus’ death, descent into hell, and resurrection that the apostle Paul wrote: **“Having disarmed principalities and powers, He (God) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in Him (Christ)”** (Colossians 2:15). During the last week of His life, as Jesus looked ahead to His death and resurrection, He said: **“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out”** (John 12:31). In that same week, the night before He died, Jesus said to His disciples: **“The ruler of this world is judged”** (John 16:11).

One of the most common false views of the millennialists is that Jesus will return *invisibly*, and suddenly all the living believers will be raptured, that is, taken into heaven; at this same time the resurrection of the dead believers will take place and they will be taken to heaven as well. Apart from this, the world will continue to function as before, only without any Christians in it. Seven years later Jesus and the Christians will return to set up His earthly kingdom at Jerusalem, all the Jewish people will turn to Christ, and possibly even the temple will be rebuilt with the ritual of animal sacrifices being reinstituted. In other words, they believe that Jesus will rule as an earthly king in Jerusalem for a thousand years, even though Jesus clearly said: **“My kingdom is not of this world”** (John 18:36). Dispensationalists teach (falsely) that the Old Testament prophecies about Christ’s Messianic kingdom foretell an earthly kingdom in which the people of Israel will rule over other nations. They teach that since the Jews at Jesus’ time rejected the kingdom, Jesus worked out an alternate plan that was not His real intention. This alternate plan was to gather a Christian Church made up of Jews and Gentiles, but this Church would be only temporary until Jesus came back to set up His earthly kingdom in Jerusalem and fulfill all the Old Testament Messianic prophecies through this earthly kingdom.

These millennialistic views have confused and disturbed many Christians and have led them away from a true faith in Jesus as their Savior from sin. It has led them from the hope of eternal life to a fantasy of a future that involves earthly glory and riches.

In a general way millennialism opposes the Bible’s clear teaching that Christ’s kingdom is spiritual, that there is only one future resurrection of the dead, and that Christ’s Church on earth should not look forward to earthly glory but rather cross of persecution and suffering for Christ’s sake. The apostle Paul told his converts: **“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God”** (Acts 14:22). Paul wrote to Timothy: **“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”** (2 Timothy 3:12).

Most millennialists and some non-millennialists as well have taught that before Jesus returns at the end, there will be a general conversion of all the Jews. This is often based on a faulty understanding of Paul’s words in Romans 11:25-26: **“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written.”**

In chapters 9-11 of his letter to the Romans Paul is discussing the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles in the Christian Church. The Jews had the special privilege of receiving God’s Word in Old

Testament times and hearing the promise of the Messiah who would come from the Jewish people. But when He came, most of the Jews rejected Him. There were those Jews, like the twelve apostles, who received Him gladly. God always had in mind the gathering of a people for Himself from all the nations of the world. Paul and the other apostles always first preached to the scattered Jews. But what usually happened is that Christ's Gospel found a greater hearing among the Gentiles than among the Jews.

Nevertheless, from that time until now there have been Jews who have become Christians, whom we can call Messianic Jews, or Jewish Christians. Together with the believing Gentiles, these believing Jews make up the new Israel, the spiritual Israel, the believing Israel. Paul calls this Church of Jews and Gentiles **"the Israel of God"** (Galatians 6:16). Paul makes a distinction between being from Israel and being Israel, saying: **"They are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham"** (Romans 9:6-7). True Israelites are those who believe in the Savior promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; these believers in Christ are **"the Israel of God"**. And this is the way **"all Israel will be saved"** (Romans 11:26). Paul says of himself and other believers in Jesus: **"We are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh"** (Philippians 3:3).

Because of differences in teaching on this topic among Lutherans in America, confessional Lutherans have drawn up the *Brief Statement* of 1932, which includes the following paragraphs concerning the millennium:

"With the Augsburg Confession (Art. XVII) we reject every type of Millennialism, or Chiliasm, the opinions that Christ will return visibly to this earth a thousand years before the end of the world and establish a dominion of the Church over the world; or that before the end of the world the Church is to enjoy a season of special prosperity; or that before the general resurrection on Judgment Day a number of departed Christians or martyrs are to be raised again to reign in glory in this world; or that before the end of the world a universal conversion of the Jewish nation (of Israel according to the flesh) will take place.

"Over against this, Scripture clearly teaches, and we teach accordingly, that the kingdom of Christ on earth will remain under the cross until the end of the world, Acts 14:22; John 16:33; 18:36; Luke 9:23; 14:27; 17:20-37; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 12:28; Luke 18:8; that the second visible coming of the Lord will be His final advent, His coming to judge the quick and the dead, Matthew 24:29, 30; 25:31; 2 Timothy 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:8; Hebrews 9:26-28; that there will be but one resurrection of the dead, John 5:28; 6:39, 40; that the time of the Last Day is, and will remain, unknown, Matthew 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:32, 37; Acts 1:7, which would not be the case of the Last Day were to come a thousand years after the beginning of a millennium; and that there will be no general conversion, a conversion en masse, of the Jewish nation, Romans 11:7; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Romans 11:25; 1 Thessalonians 2:16.

"According to these clear passages of Scripture we reject the whole of Millennialism, since it not only contradicts Scripture, but also engenders a false conception of the kingdom of Christ, turns the hope of Christians upon earthly goals, 1 Corinthians 15:19; Colossians 3:2, and leads them to look upon the Bible as an obscure book" (Brief Statement, paragraph 42).

Questions

1. What does millennium mean? Where in the Bible is this expression found?
2. How are the numbers in Revelation to be understood?
3. Why can we be sure there will be only one resurrection from the dead?
4. When was Satan cast out and bound?
5. Why can we be sure Jesus will not reign over an earthly kingdom?
6. In what way will all Israel be saved?
7. Why must we reject millennialism?
8. What can Christians expect in this world until Christ returns?
9. If there are any Christian groups in your locale that teach millennialism, which are they?