

3 Last-Days Views That Lead to Massive Deception

Throughout its history, Christianity has had various eschatological views (beliefs on last things) that led it to nonengagement with surrounding cultures in favor of escapism, similar in essence to gnosticism and Platonism (from the Greek philosopher Plato). In these views, the natural world is considered unimportant or evil, resulting in a focus only on the spiritual ideal and the next life.

Since my intention with this article is not the theological details of each view but to show their cultural implications, I am not going to attempt to theologically explain each position.

The following are three prominent views that can have such a negative cultural effect:

1. Hyper-Premillennial Dispensational Eschatology

This is the view systemized by J.N. Darby in the late 19th century, made popular with the Scofield and Dakes Bibles in the 20th century and by many other books by authors such as Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye during the 1970s to 1990s. This view teaches that believers in Jesus will soon be caught up with the Lord in heaven (the rapture) before or in the middle of a future seven-year Great Tribulation, during which time the Satan-possessed Antichrist rules over the territories of the ancient Roman Empire, which then results in thousands of Jews turning Israel back to Christ, bringing a global revival culminating in the bodily return of Jesus Christ to judge the nations and usher in a thousand-year millennial reign.

Without getting into details, this relatively new view (the rapture wasn't taught until the mid-1800s; this system is only about 140 years old and has been rejected by an overwhelming

majority of evangelical scholars over the past 20 years) basically overrides numerous New Testament interpretations of Old Testament promises regarding Israel to arrive at an Israel-centric position in which the church is merely a parenthetical people in a holding pattern (based on a particular interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27) awaiting the rapture until the remnant of chosen biological Jews (the 144,000 of Revelation 7) get their act together by receiving Christ.

The result of this theological position over the past 150 years has been the church's abandonment of culture, since it is the converted Jews who are going to bring world revival, the Antichrist is going to take over everything anyway and the nations will not be Christianized until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the reasoning is: Why rearrange the chairs on the *Titanic*?

Although some great leaders with this eschatological position, such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Tim LaHaye and others, have attempted to reform America, one cannot deny the facts of recent church history illustrating that the American church generally lost its reformation zeal after the Civil War, when it moved from a postmillennial Puritan eschatological view to a hyper-premillennial view. Leaders with this position, like Falwell, generally have to go against their eschatological view of looming apostasy, defeat and escape for the present-day church in order to work toward their goals of political and cultural victory for the biblical worldview. In my opinion, this is inconsistent at best and schizophrenic at worst!

The truth is, most believers with this view are not engaged socially, "check out" of this world, don't believe in a victorious future church and pray for the Second Coming of Christ when things get rough. I know—I was one of them during my first 17 years as a Christian!

2. Hyper-Preterism

Hyper-preterism, or full preterism, is the opposite extreme of the view above. It teaches that the book of Revelation and all New Testament prophecies have already been fulfilled with the destruction of the Jewish temple in A.D. 70. These fulfilled prophecies include the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the coming of Antichrist and the like. Like the hyper-premillennial dispensational view above, this view is a late theological development with no major theologians holding to it until the 1900s.

Although I agree with some form of preterism (for example, many of the prophecies of Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation were fulfilled with the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70), the problems I have with this view regarding eschatology are the following:

If the resurrection of all believers is merely spiritual and not physical, then what about the teaching in Acts 1 in which the angels say that in the same manner Christ ascended into heaven, He will return? His resurrection and ascension include a physical body (Luke 24:39; John 20:27; Acts 1:9-11), not only a spiritual body. Thus, this view comports with the gnostic theme of spiritualizing everything and disregarding Christ's humanity and the material world.

Since Adam's sin had physical effects (for example, bodily death and disease) and not just spiritual effects, this view also denies the physical reality of our walk with God. First Corinthians 6:19 teaches that our physical bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Thus, if believers are presently fulfilling the full resurrection experience of the New Testament, then the physical world has been de-emphasized by Scripture and the gnostic Christians, which John the Apostle warned against, were in some ways correct (1 John 4:2).

Furthermore, if all biblical prophecies have already been

fulfilled, then the cultural commission of Matthew 28:18-20 is no longer in force, since Jesus says in this passage that He would be with His disciples to the end of the age, which consistent hyper-preterists must interpret as being fulfilled in the generation between the Resurrection and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. (Colossians 1:5-6 is the passage they cite to prove this.)

Thus, no longer would there be an impetus to reform the nations for Christ; the future could continue with sin dwelling on the earth *ad infinitum*. This could then lead us back into a spiritualizing of our present Christian journey, which would lead to a sort of gnostic existentialism and mysticism instead of cultural reform.

Finally, all the historic creeds teach there will be a literal Second Coming of Christ and bodily resurrection of the saints (for example, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds). Any view that totally disregards the hermeneutical grid of the early church bypasses the human process God uses to teach the collective church through the Holy Spirit, thus elevating a mystical, individualistic hermeneutical illumination of the Bible that coincides with early gnosticism.

3. Amillennialism

The majority of the church throughout history has technically been postmillennial. That is, the church has believed that Christ is presently reigning in heaven with the saints in glory and through the church on earth and will return physically after the millennium reign. (The "thousand years" is only mentioned six times in the book of Revelation, which is a highly symbolic book. For example, the 1,000 years mentioned in Revelation 20 has been historically interpreted by many theologians to be a long period of time, not literally 1,000 years.)

With the advent of many eschatological views the past 200

years, a new term was introduced, *amillennialism*, to contrast postmillennialism. The major difference between these two concepts is that postmillennialists believe Christ's reign will be physically and spiritually manifest on earth through the church fulfilling the cultural commission of Genesis 1:28 and Matthew 28:19-20, putting God's enemies under His feet before Jesus returns bodily to judge the world (based on Psalm 110:1-2 and Acts 3:21, among other passages). Amillennialists believe Jesus is already reigning spiritually in heaven with the saints who have passed into glory; because His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), this view does not depend on political or social reformation for Him to return bodily.

The problem with amillennialism is its lack of integration of the cultural commission as an essential component of eschatology, since Jesus' reign is spiritual. Thus, amillennialists cannot fully account for prominent passages such as Genesis 1:28, Psalm 2, Psalm 110:1-2, Acts 3:21 and others that covenantally connect both testaments. Because of this, a person who believes the reign of Christ is merely spiritual and not earthly knows not what to do with the Lord's Prayer, specifically Jesus' teaching to ask God for His kingdom to come and His will to be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.

In addition, one could hold to any political, economic or policy view (and, for example, be a total liberal when it comes to moral positions) since Jesus' reign is spiritual and will never be manifest on earth through the church. Like hyper-premillennialism, the church is in some sort of neutral holding pattern, concerned only with spiritual things until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Obviously, this view could also cause believers to fall into a sort of gnosticism if they do not attempt to seriously incorporate the cultural commission into their theological position.

In conclusion, postmillennialists are also divergent in their views, with some believing there will be a future thousand-

year golden age for the church before Christ returns. Others, like myself, have a view like amillennialists that the reign of Christ is not literally a physical 1,000-year future period.

I believe this because Scripture teaches the church (in heaven and on earth) already began to reign with Christ since the inauguration of the kingdom (Mark 1:15; Rom. 5:17; Eph. 1:17-2:26). Postmillennialists allow for both a spiritual reign in heaven and a gradual manifestation of Christ's kingdom on the earth before His return, since they believe the biblical covenants (starting with Genesis 1:28) are still in force on the earth and revealed by the blessings and curses God bestows on individuals and nations commensurate to the degree they accept or reject the laws of God and the gospel of Christ.

Lest anyone attempt to criticize me for adhering to some newfangled eschatology, I want to make sure you understand that the majority of the early church and Reformation theologians held to some form of postmillennialism, although it took centuries to unpack Scripture and systematize it. Its adherents stand in the tradition of august historians and theologians such as Eusebius (260-340), Athanasius (296-372), Augustine (354-430), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), William Carey (1761-1834), Charles Hodge (1797-1878), James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862), Robert Dabney (1820-1898), William G.T. Shedd (1820-1894), Augustus Strong (1836-1921), . Moule (1841-1920), B.B. Warfield (1851-1921), J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), John Murray (1898-1975), Loraine Boettner (1903-1989) and Greg Bahnsen (1948-1995), to name a few, and many other contemporary theologians too numerous to cite here.

In spite of all of our serious differences, there have been many great people of God who have impacted the world that stand in each of these camps. Also, notable adherents of each of the major millennial systems all agree that the full manifestation of the kingdom of God will never come until the

bodily return of Christ (although, as stated before, hyper-preterists believe the final return of Christ already took place!).

Joseph Mattera *is overseeing bishop of Resurrection Church, Christ Covenant Coalition, in Brooklyn, N.Y.*