

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of  
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs Christian leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

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### Proto-Fundamentalism, Part 2

### Premillennialism

Kevin T. Bauder

The connection between Fundamentalism and premillennialism has become a commonplace of Fundamentalist historiography. Ernest R. Sandeen's book, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, is subtitled *British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930*. Timothy P. Weber writes extensively about the relationship between Fundamentalism and premillennial eschatology in *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*. To suggest that premillennialism has strongly influenced Fundamentalism is nothing new.<sup>1</sup>

To suggest that Fundamentalism and premillennialism were one and the same, however, is far too simplistic. T. T. Shields, pastor of Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto, was one of the most visible Fundamentalists of his day, but his eschatology was strongly amillennial and anti-dispensational. The most prominent of the Presbyterian Fundamentalists was J. Gresham Machen. While Machen argued for a form of "eschatological liberty" that would permit premillennial views in his Presbyterian Church of America, he himself rejected premillennialism and emphatically opposed dispensationalism.

Shields and Machen were widely acknowledged as leaders by their Fundamentalist contemporaries. Even a rather populist Baptist such as David Otis Fuller could look to Machen as a model, as his correspondence reveals. If premillennialism is a *sine qua non* of Fundamentalism, it becomes difficult to explain the prominence of these leaders.

Nevertheless, premillennialism was such a powerful influence among Fundamentalists that the two can be difficult to disentangle. Granting that some within Fundamentalism did not accept premillennial eschatology, the fact remains that even they were forced to respond to premillennialism.

Harry Hamilton, first president of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, once complained of Shields's tendency to "rave against the Scofield Bible." Machen saw his fledgling church run into deep controversy over the issue of premillennialism.

Evidently, one can be a Fundamentalist without being premillennial. Equally evidently, no one can explain Fundamentalism without taking premillennialism into account. Even those who rejected the eschatology often imbibed its spirit.

The proto-fundamentalist period runs roughly from 1870 to 1920. The period opened with the vast majority of American Christians holding a postmillennial or an amillennial view. By the end of the period, however, premillennialism had become by far the most important eschatology within American evangelicalism.

During the first half of the Nineteenth Century, premillennialism was largely discredited by the date-setting of William Miller and his followers. Whether true or not, stories about the Millerites slinking home, still wearing their ascension robes, after Jesus failed to appear on schedule, sapped the credibility of their eschatology. To be fair, the Millerites were not unique. Millenarianism had often been connected with schemes that involved date-setting or apocalyptic political schemes.

After the Civil War, the credibility of postmillennialism was questioned. The war had been won at an appalling cost, and the slaves had been emancipated. What resulted, however, was the diaspora of the freed slaves, the savaging of the South, and the shocks of early urbanization and industrialization. The Kingdom appeared no closer than it had before the fratricide.

The form of premillennialism that appeared after the war was different than anything that had gone before. It included several theological strands that had existed previously, but the combination was unique. The term "dispensationalism" can be applied only anachronistically, but the elements out of which dispensational theology would develop were becoming apparent. Most importantly, the new eschatology emphasized the reality and imminence of Jesus' return without mandating any time table.

The new eschatology was spread most effectively by a new medium: the prophecy conference. In 1868, a small group of friends gathered for mutual encouragement in New York City. With one brief hiatus, they continued to meet year by year until the decision was made to launch a larger, more public gathering. The public conference, first held in 1876 at Swampscott, Massachusetts, was eventually relocated to Niagara-on-the-Lake, becoming the famed Niagara Bible Conference. Names connected with Niagara included Nathaniel West, James H. Brookes, W. J. Erdman, H. M. Parsons, and eventually A. J. Gordon.

Niagara was the largest ongoing prophecy conference, but it was certainly not the only one of its kind. In fact, two one-time conferences became important steps forward in the propagation of premillennial eschatology. The first was held in 1878 at Trinity Episcopal Church in New York City. The second took place in Chicago in 1886. Participants in these conferences included James H. Brookes, William G. Moorehead, A. J. Gordon, H. M. Parsons, Stephen H. Tyng Jr., William R. Nicholson, Maurice S. Baldwin, Rufus M. Clark, Nathaniel West, George C. Needham, and L. W. Munhall.

Outside of academic circles, the names of these early premillennialists have been virtually forgotten. In their day, however, they were among the most noteworthy voices in American Christianity. They became known, not only as conference organizers and speakers, but as pastors, Bible teachers, authors, and founders of schools and missions.

Effective as the prophecy conferences were in propagating premillennialism, the printed page was ultimately more powerful. Books such as William E. Blackstone's *Jesus Is Coming* and Sir Robert Anderson's *The Coming Prince* were religious best-sellers (Blackstone's book sold a million copies in a nation of only fifty million persons). Prominent prophetically-oriented periodicals included *The Truth* (edited by James H. Brooks), *The Watchword* (edited by A. J. Gordon), the post-tribulational *Watchword and Truth* (edited by Robert Cameron), and *Our Hope* (edited by Arno Gaebelein). These premillennial magazines went into the homes of thousands of Christians.

Perhaps the most influential publication for premillennialists, however, was the *Scofield Reference Bible*, which first appeared in 1909. While it was not the first annotated Bible (the Geneva Bible contained extensive commentary), it may have been the first to be mass-printed. It featured comprehensive cross-references and a system of interlinked glosses that advocated an elaborate premillennial and pretribulational eschatological scheme. Revised in 1917, the Scofield Bible became virtually *the Bible* for two generations of American Fundamentalists. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, Fundamentalist pastors could simply reference a text by page number, safely assuming that the majority in their congregations would be carrying a Scofield Bible.

The premillennial emphasis upon biblical prophecy produced several effects within proto-fundamentalism, most of which carried over into the Fundamentalist movement. First, in a sense premillennialism became its own denomination. Those who held premillennial beliefs took their eschatology as seriously as they did their traditional denominational distinctives. Therefore, premillennialism grew into a movement that drew from and paralleled the traditional denominations. With respect to prophecy, premillennial Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and even Lutherans and Episcopalians found that they had more in common with each other than they did with other members of their own denominations. Within the premillennial movement, traditional denominational distinctives were de-emphasized in favor of these eschatological commonalities. People of different denominations labored side by side, creating an ethos that led to widespread inter- and non-denominationalism.

Second, the fascination with premillennialism made eschatology a regular part of the life of ordinary Christians and churches. Prophecy became a regular feature of preaching and teaching in the great majority of proto-fundamentalist and Fundamentalist congregations. After Clarence Larken released his dispensational charts in the 1910s, preaching prophetic series became a duty of most pastors. One Bible institute even required its students to make their own wall-sized dispensational charts before they could graduate. It is doubtful that eschatology had ever before gained such a concentrated focus for ordinary churches and individuals.

As premillennialism, and especially pretribulationism, began to capture the imagination of Christians, it altered the ethos of American Christianity. People not only affirmed, but actually felt, the doctrine of imminence. For many, the expectation of the Second Coming became a fixture of daily life. This occupation with an about-to-be-realized future lent urgency to the ways in which Christians viewed the present. While they still took the affairs of daily life seriously, evangelicals were careful to hold present things with a light grasp. After all, these things might be taken away at any moment. More important were spiritual tasks such as evangelism and missions, tasks that would produce results for eternity.

Premillennialism also changed the way that Fundamentalists looked at Israel. Rather than seeing a people who were presently under the curse of God, Fundamentalists viewed Israel as a nation about to be restored. They manifested a friendliness to national Israel that was almost completely absent during the long centuries when the church was dominated by theologies of replacement. Indeed,

it was partly (largely?) due to the influence of Fundamentalists that the modern state of Israel was eventually created as a homeland for Jewish people. To this day, W. E. Blackstone (author of *Jesus Is Coming*) occupies a special place in the hearts of Israelis. The “righteous gentiles” commemorated at *Yad Vashem* have a tree planted in their honor, but Blackstone has a whole forest named for him.

Not all proto-fundamentalists were premillennialists, and not all Fundamentalists have been. Nevertheless, premillennialism has done as much to shape the thinking and ethos of the Fundamentalist movement as any other single factor. Even Fundamentalists who reject premillennial eschatology must nevertheless reckon with it. ✖

<sup>1</sup>Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, enlarged edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

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This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#). Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at [inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu](mailto:inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu).

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## Song of Assurance

Johann Andreas Rothe (1688-1758)  
Tr. John Wesley (1703-1791)

Now I have found the ground wherein  
Sure my soul's anchor may remain,  
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin  
Before the world's foundation slain;  
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,  
When heaven and earth are fled away.

Father, Thine everlasting grace  
Our scanty thought surpasses far:  
Thy heart still melts with tenderness.  
Thy arms of love still open are,  
Returning sinners to receive,  
That mercy they may taste and live.

O Love, Thou bottomless abyss,  
My sins are swallowed up in Thee!  
Covered is my unrighteousness,  
Nor spot of guilt remains on me,  
While Jesus' blood, through earth and skies,  
Mercy, free, boundless mercy cries.

With faith I plunge me in this sea;  
Here is my hope, my joy, my rest;  
Hither, when hell assails, I flee,  
I look into my Saviour's breast;  
Away, sad doubt, and anxious fear!  
Mercy is all that's written there.

Though waves and storms go o'er my head,  
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,  
Though joys be withered all and dead,  
Though every comfort be withdrawn,  
On this my steadfast soul relies,--  
Father, thy mercy never dies.

Fixed on this ground will I remain,  
Though my heart fail, and flesh decay;  
This anchor shall my soul sustain,  
When earth's foundations melt away;  
Mercy's full power I then shall prove,  
Loved with an everlasting love. ✠

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900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043