

Premillennialism

W. L. KARNES, Nashville, Tenn.

Webster defines the word "premillennialism" as "the doctrine that the second coming of Christ precedes the millennium." The same author defines the word "millennium" as follows: "(1) A thousand years; also, a thousandth anniversary. (2) Specif., the thousand years mentioned in Rev. 20, during which holiness is to be triumphant. Some believe that during this period Christ will reign on earth. Hence, a period of great happiness, good government, etc."

The premillennial doctrine is a very ancient doctrine; in fact, it seems to have been believed by Christians during at least a part of the first century. During the second and third centuries the doctrine seemingly had its greatest number of Christian believers and advocates. Since the beginning of the fourth century the teaching of the doctrine seems to have been rather spasmodic. When the greater part of the earth seems to be at peace, the millennial doctrine seems to hush up; but when strife and ill will and war spring up among the nations of the earth, the millennial doctrine is usually revived. I really think that people who are not members of any church at all are more responsible for the revival of that doctrine during those times than any one else. I think if you will look carefully into the character of the masses of the people who believe and back up the doctrine, you will find the rank and file of the devotees of the doctrine to be made up of a certain class of nonchurch members and a class of church members, both classes of whom you will usually find are lazy and afraid to die. They know, of course, that they are unfit to enter heaven; hence, they have coddled themselves into believing that Jesus is coming back to the earth to conquer it and to rule over it, and that his subjects will live in peace and plenty without work. Of course these premillennialists believe that they will be living when Jesus gets here. To them he is always just around the corner. Of course I believe good men and women have been led into believing this doctrine, but they have been misled.

The premillennialists generally teach that during the first three centuries pretty well all the members of the church believed the premillennial doctrine of the kingdom. We find the following in Whitby's "Commentary of the New Testament," Volume 2, that was written more than a hundred years ago: "The patrons of the millennium do usually say their doctrine was both generally received in the three first centuries and was derived by tradition from the apostles." R. H. Boll, in his book, "The Kingdom of God," on page 10 says: "Neither will we be prejudiced on *a priori grounds*, this way or that. It might be reasonable to incline to side with the almost universal belief of the early church during the first three centuries."

It is not clear just where the premillennialists get their information. They cannot get it from the Bible. In the first place, the New Testament does not cover any part of the second and third centuries. They do not get it from unbiased church historians. They must depend upon the histories written by their own historians.

Neander, one of the very best church historians, has the following to say along that line: "What we have just said, however, is not to be understood as if *Chiliasm* had ever formed a part of the general creed of the church. Our sources of information from different parts of the church, in these early times, are too scanty to enable us to say anything on this point with certainty and positiveness. Wherever we meet with *Chiliasm*, in Papias, Irenæus, Justin Martyr, everything goes to indicate that it was diffused from one country and from a single fountain-head." (Volume 1, page 651.)

Dr. Mosheim, in Volume 1, page 185, of his church history, says: "Among the controversies which divided Christians in this century, the most considerable were concerning the millennium, the baptism of heretics, and concerning Origen. That the Savior is to reign a thousand years among men, before the end of the world, had been believed by many in the preceding century, without offense to any; all, however, had not explained the doctrine in the same manner nor indulged hopes of the same kind of pleasures during that reign."

I have examined no church history nor Bible dictionary that teaches or indicates that the church during the first, second, and third centuries generally believed the premillennialist doctrine. But the historians are pretty generally agreed (I did not find one objector) that this doctrine never formed any part of the creed or faith of the church at any time. They also seem almost wholly a unit in asserting that the doctrine came from the Jews.

I think I can easily see how such a doctrine could spring up. We know the Jews were looking for some one to arise out of the house of David who would establish David's throne in Jerusalem. Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, or the church. The Jews generally refused him and managed to get him killed. A few of the Jews accepted Jesus and believed that he had come to reestablish the old Jewish kingdom. The mother of John and James asked for special places in his earthly kingdom for her two sons. It is clear in Matt. 24 that the apostles were expecting Jesus to rise up against Rome, overthrow the government, and establish his own throne in Jerusalem and he and his seed reign there forever. Notice in Acts 1 how disappointed the apostles seemed when they remembered that Christ had not during his life reestablished the kingdom of Israel; and seemingly just a few minutes before he leaves them they ask: "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Hence, it can easily be seen that when Christ was gone it would have been perfectly natural for the nonbelieving Jews to ask: "Where is your kingdom?" Then it would be just as natural for the untaught Christian to reply: "Just wait; he will come back and take care of that."

But you ask: "If Christ did not intend to establish an earthly kingdom, why did he not tell his disciples and not leave them in doubt and uncertainty about the matter?" In the first place, I do not know why God or Christ did this, or why they did not do that, unless they give the reason for doing or not doing such things. God does not always make confidants of man. You might ask why Christ did not tell Nicodemus plainly what to do to be saved. We know he did not do it. Nicodemus left Christ not knowing what to do. Christ did tell his disciples about what my mother used to tell me when I got in a great rush about this or that. She would say: "Just hold your potatoes." That means just be patient. The disciples waited at the bidding of Jesus. The Holy Spirit came upon them, and from that time they never once hint at an earthly kingdom. That all hushes up, so far as the apostles are concerned. Men are now taught everywhere by inspiration to obey Christ, and hence to be translated from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of Christ. But, no doubt, many of the untaught Christian Jews held to the Jewish notion that the old Jewish kingdom must be reestablished; and as Jesus had promised to return to the earth, to these untaught Jews his return could be only for the reestablishment of the Jewish earthly kingdom. Right there is where the premillennialists' doctrine of the kingdom comes from.