

## Why Premillennialism Mattered in the Early Church's Battle against Gnosticism

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Discussions about eschatology and millennial views are sometimes dogged by questions about their importance and practical relevance.<sup>1</sup> Yet early church history shows that belief in a particular millennial view, in this case premillennialism, was no small thing. In fact, it was a major weapon in the early church's battle against the greatest enemy to Christianity of that era—Gnosticism. Donald Fairbairn argues this point in his article, "Contemporary Millennial/Tribulational Debates."<sup>2</sup> Fairbairn is a professor of historical theology at Erskine Theological Seminary and earned his doctorate in patristics from the University of Cambridge. I would like to summarize some of Fairbairn's points and then make some conclusions based on his findings.

Fairbairn asserts that "premillennialism was part of the polemic against Gnosticism."<sup>3</sup> Gnosticism promoted an unbiblical dualism between the spiritual and the physical—emphasizing the former and denigrating the latter. Gnostic dualism has four important implications:

1. It leads to the view that the material world is evil and unredeemable and that salvation only applies to the soul, not the body.
2. It leads to a denigration of history; if the physical world is unredeemable then the panorama of history played out in the physical world is of little consequence.
3. It leads to a distinction in gods—the lesser material god of the Old Testament and the higher spiritual God of the New Testament.
4. It leads to a docetic view of Christ in which Christ only appears to be human and fleshly.<sup>4</sup>

Fairbairn notes that the church's greatest battle in the second and third centuries was against Gnosticism. But importantly he also declares that, "the church fathers who led this battle—Irenaeus and Tertullian—used their premillennialism as a primary weapon."<sup>5</sup>

In this battle with Gnosticism, Irenaeus wanted to demonstrate the unity of Scripture and show that the Old Testament and New Testament worked in harmony. According to Fairbairn, this "is what drives him into the details of Daniel and Revelation."<sup>6</sup> Fairbairn also states, "Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Baptist theologian, Mark Dever, even scolded churches who take a position about the millennium in their statements of faith, saying churches who do so are in sin. See <http://theologica.blogspot.com/2009/07/dever-you-are-in-sin-if-you-lead-your.html>. Accessed August 11, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Fairbairn, "Contemporary Millennial/Tribulational Debates," *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology*, ed. Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 128–31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

behind Irenaeus's treatment of an earthly kingdom lies the concern to refute the gnostic denigration of the material world."<sup>7</sup> In Irenaeus's mind, "nothing could be more appropriate for the God who created the world and redeemed humanity through early history than to conclude his work with an earthly kingdom as a transition to an eternal kingdom that will also be on a refurbished earth."<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus believed that anyone who denied an earthly kingdom as being too sensuous or not "spiritual" enough was denying the goodness of God who created the physical universe.<sup>9</sup>

Fairbairn uses A. Skevington Wood for support. Wood, too, affirms that premillennialism was a weapon used by Irenaeus against the gnostics:

It ought also to be borne in mind that the strong emphasis of Irenaeus on the literal fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the Millennium were no doubt conditioned to some degree by the fact that he was contending against the gnostic heretics, who denied the redeemability of the material. The millennial teaching of Irenaeus must not be isolated from the rest of his theology. It is all of a piece with it, and Irenaeus was the first to formulate (however embryonically) a millennial—indeed premillennial—system of interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

Fairbairn claims that for Irenaeus, the significance of eschatology was not simply in knowing the details of what will happen in the end times. Instead, "eschatology's significance lies in the way it testifies to the unity of Scripture, the unity of God's purposes, and ultimately the unity and goodness of the God we worship."<sup>11</sup> For Irenaeus and most of the church before Origen, "an earthly kingdom following the return of Christ is not merely what Revelation 20 teaches. It is also a central tenet of the faith because it functions to reinforce the central truths of Christianity—that there is one God who in love has created this world for us and us for it, who has personally entered this world in order to redeem us for a future in this world, and who will ultimately triumph in this world over the forces that are arrayed against him."<sup>12</sup>

Fairbairn laments that the battle against Gnosticism has never been totally won. For him, "Perhaps part of the reason we have not won it is that we have forfeited the use of one of the greatest biblical/theological weapons in this battle—eschatology. Have we overspiritualized the hope held out to Christians and thus essentially conceded to the Gnostics among us that the material world is not ultimately important?"<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus and the early church, therefore, should

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 130

<sup>10</sup> A. Skevington Wood, "The Eschatology of Irenaeus," *Evangelical Quarterly* 40 (1968): 36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 131.

“serve as our wake up call” that eschatology is an essential part of our understanding of God and our place in His purposes.<sup>14</sup>

If Fairbairn is correct in his observations, the following principles can be drawn: First, eschatology is not a minor doctrine and defenders of the faith in the second century did not view it as such. It deals with crucial issues concerning the nature of man and the universe. It also deals with the unity of God and His purposes for creation. Second, premillennialism was and is a weapon against Gnosticism and any attempts to create an unbiblical dualism between the spiritual and the material. Premillennialism, therefore, appears to be an antidote to overspiritualized views of eschatology. Third, the abandonment of premillennialism has contributed to the church’s inability to decisively defeat gnostic tendencies even to this day.

In sum, the early church’s use of premillennialism to combat Gnosticism should mute any attempts to downplay the importance of eschatology and premillennialism in particular. Premillennialism was important to Irenaeus in the fight for a proper view of God’s purposes and it should be to us as well.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.