

The End Times: A Historical Relook into Baptists' Eschatology

Mr. Vanlalpeka (*History of Christianity*)



Upon reading some biblical passages that speak about the end times or texts that predicted the earthly kingdom on earth, the early church writers including Papias, Justin Martyr, Ireanaeus and Tertullian believed that the thousand-year earthly kingdom will be followed by the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Ireanaeus stressed the earthy kingdom on earth as distinct from a spiritual notion of kingdom as taught by the Gnostics.¹ However, Augustine exegeted eschatological texts in reference to the ministry of Jesus' earthly ministry during which Satan was bound (Like 10: 18) and he also identified the 'Beast' with the Roman Empire and its associates. Afterwards, the different Christian theologians remained almost silent on the teaching of Jesus earthly reign until it was brought back by Joachim of Fiore.² From the thirteenth century onwards, the Christ's literal earthly kingdom was brought up time to time by different writers with new meanings and sometimes by repeating the past meanings.

Persecuted for many years, Baptists found solace in reading the story of persecuted Christians who endured the majoritarian persecution with the expectation that the end times would bring their salvation and ultimate glory. In fact, the identity of the community as well as the rhythm of the movement, their priorities, and mission approach was determined by their understanding of the end of times in different stages of history.

Understanding Eschatology

According to Franck Stagg, eschatology asserted that history is moving under God's guidance towards the specific goal the ultimate point both in judgement and redemption. Even in Judaism before a doctrine of life beyond death was properly formulated, there was some sense of

looking at the future, life beyond the present situation (Amos 5: 18-20).³ With Christianity, the end times involved understanding the historical process with Christ Jesus as the central point. In Christ, time reached its climax and the ultimate fulfilment of salvation.

Biblical exposition of Revelation 20 often resulted in the development of

¹ Cited by Adela Yarbro Collins, "Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century," *Union Seminary Review* 40/3 (1986): 229-242.

² Collins, "Reading the Book of Revelation," ..., 229-242.

³ Frank Stagg, "Eschatology: A Southern Baptist Perspective," *Review and Expositor* 79 (May 1982): 381. (381-395).

four millennial views, differentiated by different prefixes like ‘a’, ‘post’, ‘pre’ and ‘historic pre.’ The different terms refer to the coming of Christ for the second time and also, indeed, more importantly, the basic nature of the kingdom of God.⁴⁵

Baptist Beginning

Baptists struck a common chord with Lutherans, Zwinglians and Calvinists in their protest against the papal totalitarianism of the papacy and in their zeal to recover the spirituality of the New Testament church. On their theological conviction, the General Baptists adhered to the Arminian modification of Calvinism, and the Particular Baptists embraced covenant theology expressed in the Westminster Standards.⁶ When the Church of England was formed, many “popish traits” were still retained within the

church. In fact, Queen Elizabeth seemed to be content with a church that embraced protestant theology but followed a medieval pattern of worship and liturgy with the most power in the hands of the monarch.

Since the 1580s, some of the radical puritans gave up any hope to reform the Church of England and seceded itself, establishing the so called Separatist congregations.⁷ More and more people were convinced with the idea of planting an independent church free from the state and the parish administrative system. A decisive trip under the leadership of John Smyth was undertaken to Amsterdam in 1608 which was probably sponsored by Thomas Helwys.⁸ For some time, they worshipped together with another Separatist congregation led by Francis Johnson, Smyth’s former tutor at Cambridge. Within no time, contradictions

⁴A brief outline on different explanation of the millennial positions is given in the following ways:

Amillennialism: Proponents of amillennial believed that there will not be any physical kingdom on this earth. They taught that the kingdom of God is at present experienced in the world as Christ rules his church through the Word and Spirit. For them, the future, glorious, and perfect kingdom refers to the life in heaven.

Postmillennialism: Postmillennialism proposed that there will be a millennial rule time of peace, prosperity and godly world on this earth realised through “Christian preaching and teaching. This period will witness the universal rule of the church with Christianity as the guiding principles that will culminate with the return of Christ and a shift to the eternal state of existence.”

Premillennialism: The historic or covenantal premillennialism outlined a thousand year kingdom on earth in which Christ will personally rule after he returned to earth for the second time.

⁵ Dennis M. Swanson, “The Millennial Position of Spurgeon,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 7/2 (Fall 1996): 183-212.

⁶ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* 3rd Edition (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1973), 24.

arose on various themes like abolition of books, Scriptures and the use of Psalms in public worship, the use of one pastoral elder instead of ruling elders and other matters.⁹ Helwys returned to London and started his own congregation in 1611. So, the first Baptist congregation made its journey as a distinct religious group from England to Holland and later from Holland to England.

Baptist Apocalypse

As a product of its own time, the eschatology upon which John Smyth and Tillam's teachings were based was not so different from the other seventeenth century socio-religious worldviews in England. A sense of living in the final days and preparing oneself for the kingdom of God were remarkable. The distinctive part of

Baptist's eschatology was the degree and direction of the movement.¹⁰ Initially, like any other Protestant church, they referred to the Pope as the 'Antichrist.'

The Baptists wrote different works in the mood of an eschatological fervour. John Smyth in his writing *The Character of the Beast* (1609) compared the baptism of infants with references in Revelation. By the 1640s, they stated that the influence of 'Antichrist' had gone far beyond Rome and reached as far as the Puritans. In the same way, Christopher Blackwood also argued that meetings of the Presbyterians and the Independents were under the influence of such effluence.¹¹ However, the degree of millenarian enthusiasm continued to change its tempo among the different Baptist families. For some

Dispensational Premillennialism: For the Dispensationalists⁴, the thousand year kingdom is the climax and final fulfilment of God's promises to Israel, not the culmination of the church period of time. It is the kingdom over which Christ personally ruled is the Davidic Kingdom of Israel's Messiah; See also _____,

The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (September 1989): 3-8.

⁷ Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story. From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2015), 14.

⁸ Thomas Helwys belonged to a rich family of Norman descent that owned a large plot of land in different parts of Europe. He studied law and soon enough interested in the 'Dissenters' group of England, a religious group that believed that there could be a pure religion by departing from the set up of the Church of England altogether; See also Bruce T. Gourley, *A Capsule History of Baptists* (Atlanta: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2010), 10.

⁹ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2009), 23-24.

¹⁰ Mark Robert Bell, *Apocalypse How? Baptist Movements during the English Revolution* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000), 5.

Baptist groups like Particular Baptists, it was generally high in the early 1640s and decreasing in the 1650s. For the Fifth Monarchists and the Seventh-Day Baptists took millennialism to a new level in the 1650s.¹²

Belonging to a minority group, the Baptists found it easier to identify themselves with the godly remnants of true believers described in the different apocalyptic writings. Persecution would be an opportunity for them to prove their godliness. Along that line, one group of general Baptists clarified their maltreatment by showing out that God's people in different pages of history have always endured different types of persecution. Apocalyptic language was also useful in their writings as it could reveal as well as conceal messages. The General Baptists writer Henry Denne once remarked "I shall speak a riddle to some, to whom it is not given to know the mysteries of the kingdom, but you to whom it is given, will understand what I shall say."¹³ Hiding from the hatred of the 'Beast' was a demanding task, possible only with the apocalyptic writings.

Issues like the laying on of hands, revival of the position of messengers, or paying tithes were seen as important agenda to be resolved before the church could be reformed and the kingdom established. When the millennial reign was just around the corner, they were the last obstacles to be cleared. Baptists associated such barriers with the last defences of the Antichrist in two forms called religious persecution and infant baptism. In their encounter against Antichrist, the most powerful defence should be reinstatement of believer's baptism.¹⁴ In that sense, Mark R. Bell argued, "Seeing the mark of the Beast in infant baptism and religious persecution was the central theme of Baptist apocalypticism." For the Baptists, bearing witness against the 'Beast' was considered as the final facet of Baptist eschatology.¹⁵

Some of the early Baptists were present in the Fifth Monarchy movement, a millennial sect that believed the universal rule of God's people on earth as seen in Revelation and the Apocalyptic book of Daniel. After the execution of Charles I and the genesis of the Cromwell protectorate, the Fifth monarchists were impatient to wait the

¹¹ Crawford Gribben, "The Eschatology of the Puritan Confessions," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 20/1 (2002): 51-78.

¹² Bell, *Apocalypse How ...*, 5.

¹³ Cited by Bell, *Apocalypse How...* 24.

¹⁴ Bell, *Apocalypse How ...*, 26.

¹⁵ Bell, *Apocalypse How ...*, 29.

¹⁶ Bill, *Baptist Ways ...*, 33.

gradual change and took up arms to hasten the kingdom. Fearing any on towards developments in England, Oliver Cromwell suppressed the movement almost altogether.¹⁶

Postmillennialism and Mission

By the beginning of the twentieth century, when mission had almost become the Baptist's trademark, Theodor Oehler, Director of the Basler Mission, argued that there has always been a strong connection between Baptist's mission and their hope for the future. R.G. Clouse explained the role of Postmillennialism by emphasizing the present aspect of God's kingdom that will reach its highest point in the future. Millennium will be realised through Christian preaching, and teaching that will also produce "a more godly, peaceful and prosperous world." For Clouse, the new age will not be so different from the present situation and it will come as more and more people come to the saving knowledge of Christ.¹⁷ Also, Charles L. Chaney, as he studied the early American Protestant Mission boards observed that almost all the sermons on mission or mission works revolved around the eschatological considerations of the people.¹⁸

In England, it was undeniable that the postmillennial view was widespread in Victorian England. William Carey and Thomas Chalmers were largely responsible for spreading the view. Likewise, the so called postmillennialism was one of the most popular theories on the end of times in America from the puritan period to the early 1900s.¹⁹

William Carey's theological stand on eschatology as a postmillennialist was seen in his book 'An Enquiry.' Carey posed two questions about the Great Commission:

First, was the Great Apostles directed only to the apostles or does the validity continues for new generations of Christians at all times? *Second*, can the Great Commission be really fulfilled?

In his answer to the first question, Carey pointed out that the Great Commission is binding "even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). If the command was directed towards the apostles alone, then the churches would have to stop baptizing people. The answer to the second question also

¹⁵ Bell, *Apocalypse How ...*, 29.

¹⁶ Bill, *Baptist Ways ...*, 33.

¹⁷ R.G. Clouse, "Millennium, Views of the," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 715.

¹⁸ Cited by Thomas Schirrmacher, *Be keen to get going. William Carey's Theology* Translated by Cambron Teupe (Hamburg: RVB International, 2008), 20.

¹⁹ Dennis M. Swanson, "The Millennial Position of Spurgeon," *The Master's Seminary* 7/2 (Fall 1996): 183-212.

reflected Carey's postmillennial expectation on missions' final success. He opposed objections to the continuing validity of the Great Commission on eschatological grounds. Carey taught that the prophesied growth of the kingdom of God should not make believers passive and weak; it should rather boost up their morale to do missions.²⁰ In fact, not only Carey, but his mission society and his teammates were postmillennialists.

Other Baptist leaders of nineteenth century England were also well-informed in the subject of eschatology. On September 18, 1876, Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-92) preached to the Metropolitan Tabernacle congregation his view on eschatological events as follows:

"It is also certain that the Jews, as a people, will yet own Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, as their King, and that they will return to their own land ... It is certain also that our Lord Jesus will come again to this earth, and that he will reign amongst the ancients gloriously, and that there will be a thousands of years of joy and peace such as were never known on this earth before. It is also certain that there will be a great and a general judgement, when all these nations shall be gathered before the Son of Man

sitting upon the throne of his glory; and his final award concerning those left hand will be ... How all these great events are to be chronologically arranged, I cannot tell."²¹

Spurgeon refused to give a detailed chronological sequence of the end times in his preaching. To him, eschatology was often not as important as teaching on practical Christian life and Christian holiness. When questions on the second coming of Christ were raised, Spurgeon believed in the literal and physical return of Christ. He also did not consider that the millennial rule on earth was to be identified with eternal existence in heaven. While discussing the time of "the return of Christ to the millennium and the necessity of its commencing that millennium, he rejected a postmillennial position." A third area of his eschatological interest lay in the resurrection of the just and the wicked. He taught separate resurrections of the just and the unjust which was supposed to be both literal and physical resurrection. For him, the first resurrection will definitely be a resurrection of the righteous.²²

Baptist Eschatology and Prophecies

Some of the important revivalists in nineteenth century America like Jonathan Edwards and Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) were

²⁰ Schirrmacher, *Be keen to get going...*, 36.

²¹ Spurgeon, "The Harvest and the Vintage," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* 50: 553-54; Swanson, "The Millennial Position of Spurgeon," ..., 190.

²² Swanson, "The Millennial Position of Spurgeon," ..., 192-194.

postmillennialists. They hold the view that a millennium reign called a thousand years of peace and spiritual enlightenment would precede the return of Jesus Christ. They believed that the church could accelerate the golden age of Christ's reign through its missions and revivalist works. The conversion of the "heathen" would indicate that the millennium was drawing near.²³ At the same time, the idea of premillennialism was increasingly gained momentum. As the return of Christ was imminent, missionary activities and revivals were necessary to save the "perishing souls" before the final judgement.²⁴

Predicting the actual date and time of Jesus' return, it almost turned out to be the beginning of such prophets' downfall. A Baptist preacher by the name of William Miller (1782-1849) made significant impacts on the teaching of millennialism in the Baptist's community in particular and the American Protestants in general. Miller developed elaborate calculations mathematically based on his reading of "prophesies" in both the Old and New Testament especially Daniel 9: 24.²⁵ He calculated that the return of Jesus would happen somewhere between March 1843 and

March 1844. The Miller's teaching became powerful within no time, when the appointed time for the second coming reached; it turned out to be a day of disappointment.

While most of them dispersed, Hiram Edson and Ellen White reformulated the Millerite teachings and congregated the so-called Seventh-Day Adventist movement.²⁶ One of the most significant leaders who stood for the cause of the premillennialism was Adoniram Judson Gordon (1836-1895), who pastored Boston's Clarendon Street Church. Gordon defended premillennialism eschatology and he pointed to the signs of time for the scene of Christ's return.²⁷

Eschatology in the Twentieth Century

James Leo Garret articulated that Christ's Second Coming will consummate the kingdom of God, bring about the resurrection of the dead, and inaugurate the final judgement for humanity. Garret denies the rapture of the church, seeing only the second coming of Christ. Garret considers Dispensationalism an extreme version of understanding the end times. Garret denied the chance for repentance after the return of Christ. He flatly rejected the dispensational teaching of multiple

²³ Cited by Leonard, *Baptist Ways ...*, 163.

²⁴ Leonard, *Baptist Ways ...*, 163.

²⁵ Torbet, *A History of the Baptists ...*, 280.

²⁶ Leonard, *Baptist Ways ...*, 213.

²⁷ Ernest Sandeen, "The Baptist and Millennialism," *Foundations* 13 (January–March 1970): 21-22. Cited by Leonard, *Baptist Ways ...*, 399.

eschatological judgements, instead preparing one universal and simultaneous eschatological universalism and annihilationism - the unrighteous will enter hell while the righteous will enter heaven.²⁸

Bill J. Leonard observed eschatology as something simply grounded on hope, the assurance that God is really God of the universe, and God will ultimately have the last say. Many Baptists believed that it is the duty of every baptized believer to bring person to salvation as the first step of their entry into the kingdom of God. On the other hand, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) articulated that Christian action for the poor and the exploited would hasten the kingdom of God on earth. Rauschenbusch proposed a mission strategy of Christianizing the social order along with worldwide Christian evangelization.²⁹ Some Landmark Baptists believed that the local church has all the criteria of the kingdom of God on earth.³⁰ The African American Baptists, who endured slavery, expected the final judgement to be a court proceeding where justice is given once and for all.³¹

Conclusion

Baptists in different parts of the globe claimed to be embracing a particular distinctive identity and following a set of principles. In reality, such claims were often very much rooted in their stands and powers in changing society.

When English Baptists in the seventeenth century were the minority and politically powerless, their eschatological outlook was steered by the call to be faithful to God. They saw the end of time as the finishing line or the climax of their witnessing as believing community. Their eschatological expectations did not put them to engage in some creative mission works. They gave top priority to their survival in the midst of their persecutors so that they would reach the end time as a fulfilment of their loyalty. Gradually, during the nineteenth century, mission began to be closely associated with the eschatological perspective of the Baptists. The second coming of Christ demands the evangelization of different people groups around the globe. By the twentieth century, the coming of Christ and the final days required both philanthropic works in addition to evangelizing works.

²⁸ James Leo Garret, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical* Vol. 2 (North Richland Hills, Texas: Bibal Press, 2000), 709-903.

²⁹ Barbara A. Lundsten, "The Legacy of Walter Rauschenbusch: A Life Informed by Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 28, No 2 (April 2004): 75-79.

³⁰ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Questions, Baptist Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2009), 107-108.

³¹ Leonard, *Baptist Questions* ..., 109.