

A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO THE PREMILLENNIALIST ESCHATOLOGY OF FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIAN GROUPS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Introduction

My interest in the subject of premillennialism comes from experiences in Papua New Guinea. There, I have noticed a number of Christian groups fervently teaching the doctrine. Equally, I noticed that Papua New Guineans readily recognised the basic themes of premillennialism. It is with this background that the study has been made.

First, premillennialism is described. The major focus is on pretribulation premillennialism as the most popular, perhaps the most promulgated, and the most complex, form of premillennialism. Those Christian groups, who are premillennialists, are then listed.

Secondly, a Lutheran perspective on premillennialism is given. A Lutheran critique on each separate detail of premillennialism is not made, though this would have been a useful study. Instead, hermeneutical principles are discussed, with particular reference made to the millennium.

The next section places premillennialism in the context of Papua New Guinea. I discuss whether traditional beliefs, and

modern conditions, make premillennialism attractive to Papua New Guineans.

Finally, suggestions are made for a response by the Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea.

Premillennialism

Stated briefly, premillennialism is the belief, based on Rev 20, that Christ will return to earth to set up an idyllic kingdom, which will last for 1,000 years. This belief is sometimes called “chiliasm”, based on the Greek word *χίλια* (*chilia* = thousand), whereas the word “millennium” is based on the Latin words *mille* for “thousand”, and *annus* for “year”. The fact that Christ comes before this 1,000-year period, gives rise to the word “premillennialism”. Beliefs, differing from premillennialism, are classified as “postmillennialism”, and “amillennialism”.

Postmillennialists believe that, through Christian teaching and preaching, the influence of the gospel, in this world, will spread, to such an extent, that the whole world will experience an extended period of peace and prosperity. This period they call the millennium. At the close of this period, there is a brief period of tribulation, after which Christ will return. That Christ returns after the millennial period, gives rise to the term postmillennialism.¹

Amillennialists do not believe in the millennium as a time of universal peace and prosperity just prior of the end of the world. They interpret the 1,000 years of Rev 20 to be a figurative expression, referring to the complete period, from the death and resurrection of Christ, to His second coming. Christ’s defeat of Satan at Calvary, and His reign in heaven, is the millennium, present now.²

¹ Loraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism”, in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, Robert G. Clouse, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1972, pp. 117-141.

² Anthony Hoekema, “Amillennialism”, in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, Robert G. Clouse, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1972, pp. 147-187.

Premillennialists are distinctive, in believing that there will be a literal reign of Christ on this earth before the end of this age. This, then, affects their perception of end-time events. While postmillennialists and amillennialists believe that the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the judgment, occur as a combination of events concentrated at the end of time, premillennialists believe these events occur in stages, extending over a long period of time. The return of Christ is not yet the end of the world. His return and the end of the world are separated by at least 1,000 years. For some premillennialists, the very return of Christ is not one event, but it occurs in stages. Likewise, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment also have distinct phases, and do not occur as one event. Thus, premillennialists develop a neat program of the different events that will take place. They outline when they will take place in relation to other events, and, sometimes, are able to indicate the number of years separating events, by their interpretation of prophetic numbers.

Among premillennialists, there are different opinions regarding the exact programme of end-time events. The major difference involves Christ's return, in relation to the tribulation period. The tribulation, in the context of premillennialism, refers to a short period (usually seven years) of intensive trouble in the period immediately preceding the millennium. Premillennialists are divided in opinion, as to whether Christ will return before, midway through, or after the tribulation.

Post-tribulation premillennialists believe that Christ returns after the tribulation. The tribulation is viewed as a period of intense persecution of the church, during which the Antichrist rises in opposition to the church.³

Pre-tribulation premillennialists believe that Christ's return will be in two stages – the first stage occurring before the tribulation. This first stage of Christ's return is known as the

³ Christianity Today Institute, "Our Future Hope: Eschatology and its Role in the Church", in *Christianity Today* 31 (February 6, 1987), p. 5-1.

“rapture”, when Christ takes His church to heaven. At the end of the tribulation period, Christ returns with His church to set up His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years.⁴

Mid-tribulation premillennialists believe in a seven-year period prior to the millennium, the first half of which is a period of persecution, experienced by the church. Then follows the rapture so that the church is spared the later, more intense, troubles, known as the great tribulation.⁵

Pre-tribulation premillennialism is probably the most-dominant eschatological position among premillennialists.⁶ Certainly, the more-sensational books about end-time events, which have found popular appeal, have been written from this perspective. It is their programme for end-time events that is outlined here.

1. **Signs of the end.** Despite their preoccupation with signs, pre-tribulation premillennialists believe that most signs of the end happen only after the church has been raptured from the earth.⁷ However, they believe that world events, prior to the rapture should reveal developments, which anticipate the signs to occur before the end. Therefore, conditions prevailing during the tribulation period – lawlessness and rebellion, violence, sexual perversion, occultism, earthquakes, unstable economic conditions, plagues, famines, and wars – are expected to assume greater magnitude, as the rapture gets closer.⁸

⁴ Ibid., p. 4-I.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5-I.

⁶ Ibid., p. 4-I.

⁷ R. Ludwigson, *A Survey of Bible Prophecy*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1973, p. 142.

⁸ Tim LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End*, Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 1972, pp. 91-136.

Current events, especially regarding Israel, the Middle East, a United Europe, Russia, and the World Council of Churches, are interpreted as prefiguring events and alliances, from which will arise, in the tribulation period, a world dictator, and world religion.⁹ Pre-tribulational premillennialists are at their most creative here, imagining how current events will evolve into fulfilled Bible prophecies.

2. **The Rapture.** The second coming of Christ occurs in two stages. Christ comes in the air, secretly as a thief (1 Thess 2), at the rapture. He comes to the earth, publicly, in His glorious appearing (Rev 1:7). The chief text said to support the rapture is 1 Thess 4:16-17. Though this text seems to describe a very public appearing of Christ, pre-tribulational authors maintain that it is audible only to believers.¹⁰ Living Christians, together with dead Christians, who are raised at this moment, receive their glorified bodies, as described in 1 Cor 15:51-52. They meet Christ in the sky, and are taken with Him to heaven.¹¹ Promises, in scripture, that believers will be saved from the wrath to come (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 3:10) are cited as proof that the church must be taken to heaven before a time of tribulation is experienced by others left on earth.¹² Following a futurist interpretation of Revelation,¹³ the outline of Revelation also supports that the church (Rev 2-3) will not suffer the tribulation (Rev 6-18).¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., pp. 168-169, 146, 147, 158.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹² Ibid., pp. 81-82.

¹³ Barry Chant, and Winkie Pratney, *The Return*, Chichester UK: Sovereign World, 1988, pp. 122-123.

¹⁴ LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End*, p. 15.

3. **The Tribulation.** The period between the two stages of Christ's return is called the "tribulation". Rev 6-18 pictures this time of trouble on earth. Prophecies from Dan 9 are used to determine that it will last for a period of seven years.¹⁵ A number of events are expected to occur. The temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and temple sacrifices renewed. A political leader will make a seven-year treaty with Israel. Midway through, the contract will be broken, and the political leader will halt sacrifices at the temple, demanding absolute allegiance to himself. Those who do not worship him are severely persecuted (Dan 9:26-27; Rev 12-13). This world leader rules during a period of intense trouble on earth, which is seen as God's wrath on the idolatry of people, who have rejected him. However, 144,000 Jews are converted during this period, and preach the gospel to the ends of the earth.¹⁶

During this seven-year period of trouble on earth, Christians have already appeared before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), and have been fully reunited with Christ in heaven. Their time in heaven is usually called "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:5-10).¹⁷

4. **Armageddon and the Return of Christ.** The end of the tribulation period will be characterised by immense destruction of the earth and her people, and by a final world war (Armageddon), concentrated in Israel. Christ returns to the earth in time to save Jerusalem from attack. This is the public return of Christ, with His saints, to set up the millennial

¹⁵ Jerry Vines, *I Shall Return: Jesus*, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1977, pp. 69-70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

kingdom on earth. The immense destruction, at the end of the tribulation, is God's retributive judgment on the Christ-rejecting people of the tribulation period. They are sentenced to eternal punishment, but spend the next 1,000 years in a place called "torments" (Luke 16:19-31). A Jewish remnant, and others, who showed faith in Christ, by the way they treated this Jewish remnant, during the tribulation, are allowed into the millennial kingdom. The judgment, described in Matt 25:31-46 is believed to occur at this time.¹⁸

5. **The Millennium.** With evil utterly routed at Armageddon, Satan is bound for 1,000 years, and Christ begins His reign on earth. Revelation does not give many details about this kingdom, except its duration. Old Testament prophecies, made to Israel, are fulfilled, literally, during this period, and these provide the details of what the kingdom will be like. There will be peace among men (Is 2:4), and between men and the animal kingdom (Is 11:6; 65:20). Jesus rules a perfect, one-world government (Zech 14:9, 16-21). The ravaged earth will have been restored. Sacrifices at the temple will be restored (Ezek 45:17). Nations will regularly travel to Jerusalem to keep the feast of tabernacles (Zech 14:16).¹⁹

Christians have already been raised, at the time of the rapture. The first resurrection (Rev 20:4-5) is believed to refer to those believers, martyred during the tribulation, and possibly Old Testament believers. At the end of the millennium, Satan is released. Some descendants of Israel's enemies, born during the millennium, are deceived by Satan, and organise

¹⁸ Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming: a Prophetic Odyssey*, Santa Ana CA: Vision House, 1973, pp. 217-226, 263-265.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-270.

for war. But Christ defuses the rebellion, and ushers in God's eternal kingdom.²⁰

6. **The Great White-Throne Judgment.** At the end of the millennium, there occurs the resurrection of all the bodies and souls of the unbelieving dead of all ages, to be gathered at the great white throne of God (Rev 20:11-15). This last judgment is a final confrontation between God and unbelieving people, to clearly demonstrate to unbelievers why they are already condemned. They join Satan in the "lake of fire".²¹
7. **Creation of a New Heaven and Earth.** God destroys the old earth, and recreates a new heaven and earth. His crowning creation is the New Jerusalem (Rev 21). The building materials and dimensions are taken quite literally.²² God will supply all the natural resources for this restored paradise.²³

Who are the premillennialists? Premillennialism is prevalent among Christians, who favour a more literal interpretation of the Bible. It is, therefore, the predominant view among the more-conservative denominations.²⁴ Virtually all people, who identify themselves as fundamentalists, are premillennialists.²⁵ The majority of evangelicals are also.²⁶

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 277-278.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 279.

²² Ibid., p. 292.

²³ Ibid., pp. 285, 288-289.

²⁴ Chant and Pratney, *The Return*, pp. 123-125.

²⁵ Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, London UK: SCM Press, 1989, p. 53.

²⁶ Chant and Pratney, *The Return*, p. 125.

Premillennialism is widespread among Pentecostals.²⁷ Seventh-day Adventists have a distinctive premillennialist eschatology.

Fundamentalists accept premillennialism, because of its literal interpretation of prophecies. Those, who do not subscribe to premillennialism, are suspected as being of liberal persuasion. It is thought that, if one can interpret prophetic texts in a non-literal way, then the historic Christian doctrines can also be explained away, through non-literal interpretations.²⁸

Fundamentalists have also accepted dispensationalism, taught by J. N. Darby, and popularised by C. I. Scofield.²⁹ This view divides scripture into seven dispensations, or periods of time.³⁰ It teaches that, in each successive dispensation, God deals differently with humankind. Under the dispensation of Law, God dealt with Israel, while under the dispensation of Grace, God deals with the church. Israel and the church are two distinct peoples of God, for which He has two distinct purposes. The promises made to Israel, therefore, cannot find fulfilment in the church. They must be literally fulfilled in Israel. This, it is believed, will happen in the next dispensation – the millennium. In dividing scripture this way, dispensationalism has ensured that Old Testament prophecies are interpreted literally.³¹

Evangelicals separated from fundamentalists in the 1940s, as a reaction against the separatist, anti-intellectual tendencies among fundamentalists. They remained, however, strongly committed to biblical inerrancy.³² Often, they are characterised as

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Robert P. Lightner, *Prophecy in the Ring*, Denver CO: Accent Publications, 1976, p. 52.

²⁹ T. P. Weber, "Dispensationalism", in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1990, p. 358.

³⁰ Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, p. 50.

³¹ Hermann Hoyt, "Dispensational Premillennialism", in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1972, pp. 72-73.

³² B. L. Shelley, "Evangelicalism", in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1990, pp. 413-416.

stressing a personal experience of God's grace, usually termed the "new birth". Many evangelicals abandoned dispensational theology, though most have continued to be premillennialists.³³

In general, Pentecostals share the premillennial and dispensational beliefs of fundamentalists. They are unique, only, in their belief that their own movement is a fulfilling of end-time prophecy.³⁴ In recent years, there has been less dependency on dispensationalism among Pentecostal scholars. However, many are still premillennialists. The statement of faith of the Assemblies of God, for example, commits their denomination to a premillennialist, though not necessarily dispensational, eschatology.³⁵

Seventh-day Adventists have a unique understanding of the millennium. They believe that, when Christ comes again, all the wicked are slain, and Satan inhabits a desolate earth for 1,000 years. This is his chaining – he has no one to tempt. Resurrected believers, and living saints, are taken with Christ to heaven, where they reign with Him for 1,000 years. During this period, all the righteous participate in the "millennial judgment". This "judgment" serves the purpose of satisfying the righteous that God's judgments are just. At the end of the millennium, the wicked are raised, and Satan leads one last rebellion against Christ. Christ descends, with all the saints to the earth, and executes the decisions of the millennial judgment. Satan, his angels, and all the wicked, die an eternal death. Christ establishes

³³ J. A. Carpenter, "New Evangelicalism", in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, Daniel G. Reid, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1990, pp. 813-814.

³⁴ D. J. Wilson, "Pentecostal Perspectives of Eschatology", in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Stanley M. Burgess, and Gary B. McGee, eds, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1988, pp. 264, 267.

³⁵ F. L. Arrington, "Dispensationalism", in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Stanley M. Burgess, and Gary B. McGee, eds, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1988, pp. 247-248.

His eternal kingdom on a renewed earth, which all the believers inhabit eternally.³⁶

Premillennialism, then, is popular among quite different Christian traditions. Fundamentalists, described above, as a separate group, are distinct from Pentecostalism and Adventism. Yet “fundamentalism” is an approach to interpreting the Bible, I believe, which all premillennialists have in common. This is discussed in the next section, and it is in this more-inclusive sense that the term “fundamentalist” will now be used.

A Lutheran Perspective on Premillennialism

How are we able to know what prophetic passages in the scriptures mean? The answer to this question is important in determining what is the Lutheran position regarding premillennialist eschatology.

There are a number of convictions fundamentalists have about scripture, which Lutherans do not hold.³⁷ Some are important to the discussion of this topic. Firstly, the fundamentalist tends to believe that everything written in the Bible is of, more or less, equal importance.³⁸ Secondly, there is a strong tendency to interpret everything in the Bible literally. It is frequently asserted that the Bible is a plain book, and that literal interpretations are the obvious, common sense, ones.³⁹ Among many other distinct beliefs, fundamentalists hold regarding the Bible, these two, I believe, determine very much the hermeneutical principles operating for a premillennialist interpretation of scripture.

³⁶ Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*, Washington DC: Ministerial Association, 1988, pp. 335-372.

³⁷ Henry P. Hamann, *The Bible Between Fundamentalism and Philosophy*, Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1980, pp. 9-29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

Following these principles, fundamentalists staunchly uphold premillennialism as an unnegotiable tenet of faith. Old Testament prophecies are interpreted (at least in part) literally, without any reference to the New Testament. Isolated passages are interpreted to provide a timetable of end-time events, without allowing other passages of scripture to have any controlling influence. Fundamentalist interpretations have a kind of “proof text” support. Doubting their interpretations, doubting premillennialism, is tantamount to doubting the authority of the scriptures.⁴⁰

Fundamentalists, and premillennialists, at that, do face the dilemma of choosing whose “literal” interpretation is right. In the speculative area of the last times, different fundamentalist exegetes will interpret the same text quite differently from one another.⁴¹ In popular books on the subject, the proliferation of sensational interpretations, often changing according to the current events of the time, bears out this problem. Giving all texts equal value, and interpreting them “literally”, ends up with rather subjective interpretations. There are some other controls for fundamentalists, though. These, as much as fundamentalists claim to hold the Bible as their authority, are extra-biblical authorities. The Schofield Bible is one such popular and “accredited” authority, which controls many fundamentalist interpretations.⁴² The commentary in the Schofield Bible helps to guide the reader to the “obvious” meaning of the text. The division of scripture into seven periods (“dispensations”) is accepted, and determines how texts are interpreted.⁴³ Other commentaries, and the preachers and teachers in the movement itself, hold leading roles as authoritative interpreters. Usually, one is not to question their interpretations, or that could be construed as a lack of faith in the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴¹ Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, pp. 42-45.

⁴² Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1977, p. 114.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 109.

Bible itself.⁴⁴ Ultimately, then, fundamentalists have some controlling factors in interpreting biblical texts literally. These controls demand a premillennialist eschatology. But, as to specific interpretations of end-time events, these controlling factors have not been able to contain the speculative interpretations: all claiming to have biblical support.

The doctrinal statements of the Lutheran church of Australia set out, clearly, its hermeneutical principles for interpreting scripture passages about the last things. As with all doctrines, the person and work of Jesus Christ is at the centre of the doctrine of last things. Scripture passages about the last things cannot be interpreted in a way that is inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The doctrinal statements see this as the determining principle of scripture interpretation, including also the interpretation of eschatological passages, and figures, in both the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁵

Other principles, guiding interpretation, are: to adhere closely to the words of scripture; to emphasise the clear doctrinal passages (*sedes doctrinae*); to interpret scripture with scripture; to read the Old Testament in the clear light of the New Testament; to maintain, carefully, the essential distinction between Law and Gospel.⁴⁶

These principles, properly adhered to, guard against speculative interpretations being peddled as having biblical authority.

Lutheran interpretations are usually unable to provide direct, and absolute, information about the end times, in the way the premillennialists do. The prophetic passages on the last things often use figurative language. This is because they usually speak

⁴⁴ Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, pp. 72-73, 78, 81-82, 94-95.

⁴⁵ *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1985, p. A14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

about things, which are beyond our experience, and about events, which have not yet happened. It is not always possible to interpret precisely what is meant by each prophecy. The principle of “scripture interprets scripture” is often not able to be used either, since many figures in the passages on the end times have no analogy elsewhere in the scriptures.⁴⁷ In such cases, it is not right to assert that one particular interpretation is dogmatically correct. A tenet of faith cannot be built on an isolated and/or obscure passage. Clear doctrinal passages should, therefore, control our interpretation of obscure passages.⁴⁸ Lutherans, therefore, do not join with premillennialists, in publishing details and timetables about unfolding end-time events. These, they believe, cannot be arrived at with certainty, from scripture, but are supplemented by human speculation.

The Lutheran Confessions reject the teaching that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom, and annihilate all the godless (AC XVIII). The premillennialist expectation of a 1,000-year reign of Christ, and the saints on earth, is rejected as unscriptural.

The Old Testament passages, which prophesy about universal peace and prosperity (Is 2:2-4; 11:6-9; Zech 9:9-10; 14:16; Mic 4:1-4), do not demand, as premillennialists maintain, a future millennium, as fulfilment of the prophecies. Lutherans see these prophecies as fulfilled, beginning with the establishment of God’s kingdom rule at Christ’s first coming, continuing through the church age, in the preaching of the gospel, and administering of the sacraments, and, finally, consummated, when Christ comes again.⁴⁹ The New Testament witnesses to the peace on earth that came at Christ’s birth (Luke 2:14), and is for all who believe in the gospel (John 14:27; 16:33; Eph 6:15; Phil 4:7).

⁴⁷ Werner Elert, *Last Things*, Martin Bertram, tran., St Louis MO: Concordia Publishing, 1974, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Doctrinal Statements*, p. A14.

⁴⁹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics III*, St Louis MO: Concordia Publishing, 1953, pp. 520-521.

Old Testament prophecies even link the promises for peace with promises the New Testament sees fulfilled with the incarnation (Is 11:6-9; cf. Is 11:1-8). In that any prophecies still pertain to the future, Lutherans interpret that their fulfilment will come at the last day, and in the age to come.⁵⁰

The only passage in the Bible, speaking of a 1,000-year reign, is in the Apocalypse (Rev 20:1-6). This calls into question the importance the premillennialists have put on the doctrine. Although Jesus spoke about the end times, He never predicted a 1,000-year earthly reign, nor any events that require such a period to take place. Likewise, the apostle Paul made no mention about such an earthly rule.

Compounding the difficulty, in interpreting the passage, is its obviously figurative language. For example, not even premillennialists demand that a literal chain is used to bind Satan (Rev 20:1-2). Key, chain, abyss, serpent, all are figures, and so, most likely, is the 1,000 years. Clear scripture passages, and the message of the Bible, centring in the gospel of Jesus Christ, must guide the interpretation.

Premillennialists are determined that an earthly kingdom is meant. Some believe that it will be the time, when a Jewish kingdom is literally restored, having been postponed, when the Jews rejected Christ. Lutherans see no support for this theory of postponement, nor of an earthly kingdom. Quite the opposite is spoken of in scripture. The kingdom of God, which will be finally consummated, at the end of time, has already begun (Luke 17:20-21). It was inaugurated in the life of Jesus Christ, His proclamation of the good news, and in His death and resurrection. It is not a kingdom, belonging to this world (John 18:36), offering an earthly, and external, peace.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 522.

The 1,000-year period of Rev 20 can be understood as the whole Christian era between Christ's first and second comings. Firstly, Satan is bound (Rev 20:1-3), and secondly, the souls of those beheaded for witnessing for Christ, and those who remained faithful to Christ, in not worshipping the beast (Rev 12-13), reign with Christ (Rev 20:4-6). The binding of Satan, in Rev 20:1-3, seems to parallel Rev 12:7-17, which pictures Christ's victory over Satan (12:4-5,10), the persecuted Christians' victory over Satan, because of Christ's death on the cross (Rev 12:11), and God's protection of the church, despite Satan's continuing attack (Rev 12:13-16). Satan is bound, in that Christ has won the victory. Because individual believers, martyrs, and the whole church, participate in this victory, Satan is ultimately unable to take away the blessings of God's kingdom from them, even though he continues to attack them. Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress", expresses this well.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus' casting out of demons is evidence of His victory over Satan, binding (δησῆ (dēsē) = binding) the strong man (Matt 12:29), and evidence, also, of the presence of God's kingdom (Matt 12:28). Noticeably, the same verb (ἔδησεν (edēsen) = bound) is used in Rev 20:2, speaking of Satan being bound for 1,000 years. Jesus also sees, in the disciples' missionary activity, a repression of Satan's power (Luke 10:17-18). The binding of Satan, the thwarting of his power, is understood, then, in the New Testament, as occurring already with Christ's first advent.⁵¹ Essentially, of course, the good news proclaims Christ has won the victory over sin, death, and Satan, in His death and resurrection. Passages, such as John 12:31-32 and Col 2:14-15, unmistakably emphasise Christ's death, as the triumph over Satan. Because of such clear New Testament teaching, then, Lutherans would generally regard the 1,000-year binding of Satan to refer to the church age – the time between Christ's first and second advent, when, although Satan's attacks are felt, Christians already have victory over Satan, because of

⁵¹ Hoekema, "Amillennialism", p. 163.

Christ. This particularly fits the context of Revelation. Persecuted Christians are assured that Christ has won the victory, and as has been said above, no matter what happens to them, Satan is unable to take away their participation in Christ's victory (Rev 12:11).

The reign with Christ for 1,000 years (Rev 20:4-6), does not demand to be interpreted as an earthly reign. Many points of the text indicate that it is not that. John saw thrones. In every other instance in Revelation, except for Satan's, or the beast's, thrones, John saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their faithful witness to Christ. The indication is that John, in a visionary way, saw martyrs – people who had died for their faith, and consequently were no longer living on this earth. A parallel vision is in Rev 6:9.

John's vision assures people, who had seen, or would soon see, friends and relatives persecuted, and executed, for their faith in Christ, certainly that, even though they die, they are alive with Christ. This interpretation holds that the "first resurrection" (Rev 20:4) refers not to the resurrection of the body at the last day, which is mentioned later in Rev 20:11-13. It refers, rather, to the transition from physical death to life with Christ in heaven for the believer.⁵² The "first resurrection" is a way of describing that, even though Christians die, they are enjoying life, in fellowship with Christ. "This is the first resurrection", John says (Rev 20:4c). In contrast, the rest of the dead, those who have rejected Christ, John does not see as coming to life (Rev 20:5). They do not share in this living and reigning with Christ. What is more, they will suffer the second death, which is eternal punishment at the last day (Rev 20:14). This second death, however, has no power over those who have shared in the "first resurrection". This interpretation then, sees the 1,000-year reign as speaking about a heavenly, not an earthly, reign. Those Christians, who die, enjoy life with Christ now (cf. Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:8), and, at the second advent of Christ, their bodies are resurrected. Sometimes this

⁵² Ibid.

interpretation is called “realised millennialism”, referring to its belief that the millennium is not a future period on earth, but a ruling with Christ now, in heaven.⁵³

Lutherans have not made this interpretation of Rev 20 a doctrine, to be confessed. The interpretation is largely dependent on doctrines, clearly taught elsewhere in the New Testament. On the basis of these clear doctrines, Lutherans reject that Rev 20 teaches that there will be resurrections at different times for believers and unbelievers. They teach that there will be a general resurrection of all the dead, both the godly and ungodly, on the last day.⁵⁴ The second advent of Christ also will be a single, visible return – not in the stages of the premillennialists’ schedule.⁵⁵ Logically interconnected with these, is the belief, clearly stated in the New Testament, that the time of the end is unknown.⁵⁶ Premillennialists, in our generation, design timetables for end-time events, which preserve only an imminence for the commencement of the timetable.

Pre-tribulational premillennialists believe the rapture will occur unannounced. But, following the rapture, a dependable programme of end-time events sets the time period for the tribulation, followed by the millennium. The beginning of the millennium, and the last day, can then be calculated fairly accurately.⁵⁷ This is clearly contrary to scripture (Mark 13:33; 1 Thess 5:2; Matt 24:36).

Likewise, when the Bible speaks about signs, premillennialists determine, with various degrees of precision, how, exactly, these signs are unfolding in history. The purpose for all this is to pinpoint how soon the end-time events will be. Jesus’

⁵³ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁴ *Doctrinal Statements*, p. A15.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hans Schwartz, “Eschatology”, in *Christian Dogmatics 2*, Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W Jenson, eds, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 581-582.

eschatological discourse (Matt 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21) contains images for the end of the world, which refer, in the first case, to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. We are not able to ascribe particular historical events as fulfilment of each sign, and so determine that the end is near. Much that Jesus described already occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem. During the church age, similar types of signs have occurred again. At the end, they will be not so much pre-signs, as Elert says, “but the very tokens of the dramatic end itself”.⁵⁸ The purpose of the signs has been, and is, even now, in summoning Christians to be ready to live, in anticipation of the second advent of Christ (Mark 13:37; Matt 24:27; 25:1-13).

A very succinct, and final, criticism of the earthly millennial kingdom theory can be made with a statement from Elert: “The cross ever remains the kingdom’s emblem in the world”.⁵⁹ Jesus called those, who would be His disciples, to take up their cross, and follow Him (Mark 10:38f; Rom 6:6; Col 2:19; Gal 5:24; 6:14). Tribulation and distress would be the ongoing experience of God’s people, according to the New Testament (John 15:18-20; 2 Tim 3:12; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:35-37). Only pretribulation premillennialists are able to assign the major portion of Rev 6ff. to tribulation events that happen after Christians have been taken to heaven. John, contrary to this, saw himself as sharing in these sufferings (Rev 1:9). During this church age, our faith is in Christ, and His victory won on the cross. Our hope is for the consummation of all His promises at the end. This is the tension, characteristic of Christ’s kingdom, between His first and second advent: the “already”, and the “not yet”, the victory we have in Christ, yet the appearance of defeat that exists while we are in this world.⁶⁰ Christ’s kingdom, therefore, will remain under the cross, until the end of the world. The Parousia, resurrection, and last

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 581-582.

⁵⁹ Elert, *Last Things*, p. 32.

⁶⁰ *Doctrinal Statements*, A15.

judgment, must, therefore, occur as a combination last event at the end of the world.

Papua New Guinean Predisposition to Premillennialist Eschatology?

That cargo cults have been both prevalent and prolific in Melanesia is well-known. Tourist information publications, especially, recount their bizarre activities.⁶¹ However, from the more serious studies of the movements, some indications of why premillennialist eschatology is popular and attractive in Papua New Guinea may be suggested.

Worsley, in his book, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, compares cargo cults, occurring across Melanesia, from Fiji to Irian Jaya, over a time spanning the 1870s to the 1950s. He calls cargo cults, “millenarian movements”, because he sees the cults as expecting and preparing for a future period of paradise on earth, a soon-radical change in the present order of things.⁶²

Worsley argues that millenarian movements are likely to occur among people divided into small, separated social units, who feel themselves to be oppressed by another class or nationality.⁶³ They tend to occur among people, who lack the scientific and technical knowledge of their oppressors.⁶⁴ Worsley shows that Melanesians felt oppressed, in their contact with foreign colonial administrators and merchants, and with Christian missionaries. Some groups lost land,⁶⁵ some lost, at least for a time, a large proportion of their male population to labour recruiters.⁶⁶ All were confronted by challenges, and attacks on

⁶¹ David Stanley, *South Pacific Handbook*, Chico CA: Moon Publications, 1986, p. 422.

⁶² Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, London UK: Paladin, 1970, p. 22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50, 67, 89, 107.

their beliefs and values.⁶⁷ All felt frustrated and deprived, when the new goods, which accompanied the foreigners, as they took control of the region, were not shared freely with the Melanesians.⁶⁸

While Worsley has been criticised, for emphasising a political agenda for millenarian movements, largely ignoring them as religious movements, his basic conclusion is widely accepted. Cargo cults occur as a response to some crisis, usually man-made, whether that crisis be called deprivation, frustration, economic exploitation, military suppression, or colonial domination.⁶⁹

Do the conditions, of which Worsley wrote, still exist in an independent Papua New Guinea? To a large extent, they do. Even though Papua New Guinea has gained political independence, social organisation, along the lines of small, separated villages, is still basic.

Groups remain isolated from each other by different languages, traditional hostilities between near neighbours, and geographic barriers. Even though foreign colonial powers no longer administrate Papua New Guinea affairs, there is still an oppression, felt by many people, in that aspirations for a better life, have not been met. Firstly, the frustration that the Western lifestyle has not been attained, is compounded by Papua New Guinea's continual exposure to it, through the media, through their experience with expatriate workers and tourists, and through their own overseas travel experiences. Secondly, an educated and successful business elite form a superordinate class with Papua New Guinea, persuading others to aspire towards the same. Thirdly, failed attempts at business, the lack of urban employment for secondary- and tertiary-educated youth, and the fluctuation in world market prices for the agricultural products of village-based

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100, 107, 131, 251-252.

⁶⁹ Palle Christiansen, *The Melanesian Cargo Cult: Millenarianism as a Factor in Cultural Change*, Copenhagen Den: Akademisk Forlag, 1969, p. 122.

cash economies, fosters the feeling that the current system is also oppressive.⁷⁰ With such conditions prevailing, Papua New Guinea still remains fertile ground for millenarian movements. The message of premillennialist prophets is highly accessible, therefore, to many in Papua New Guinea.

Other studies of cargo cults in Melanesia have recognised them as religious movements. Strelan's study, *Search for Salvation*, concludes that these movements are authentic expressions of indigenous religious beliefs.⁷¹ They will continue to exist, he says, "unless there is a radical (i.e., at the very roots) change in Melanesian religious orientation".⁷² Thus, cargo cult ideology is not imported into the Melanesian religious system, but is an expression of some of the fundamental, indigenous, religious beliefs of Melanesians.⁷³

Does premillennialist eschatology harmonise, in any way, with these indigenous Melanesian beliefs and aspirations? Those, which consistently have been expressed through cargo cults, could, I believe, also find expression through Christian premillennialism. Firstly, there is the belief that Melanesians have lost their true identity, and the idyllic life that went with it, by either an ancestor's choice, which divided humanity into two groups, or through hostility, or stupidity, which separated one brother from another.⁷⁴ This particularly matches dispensational premillennialism, which divides, and maintains, separate identities for the church and Israel. Israel, they believe, lost the opportunity for God's kingdom to be fully established in Jesus' time, when their rejection of Him led to His crucifixion. Jews still, however, maintain a privileged position in God's plan, and can look forward

⁷⁰ Garry W. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 254.

⁷¹ John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1977, p. 11.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

to experiencing God's kingdom with Christians in the millennium. A similar hope for restoration of the world's original good order, through reconciliation of two estranged brothers, or through the return of an ancestor, or ancestors, is expressed in Melanesian myths.⁷⁵

Secondly, there is an expectation of a coming end time, for which cosmic upheaval is predicted.⁷⁶ The premillennialist preoccupation with signs, pointing to the nearness of the end time, matches this perfectly.

Thirdly, there is the belief that salvation is to be experienced in a concrete, and material, way, embracing the whole community and creation.⁷⁷ The millennium, expected by premillennialists, coincides with this belief of a this-worldly salvation.

Fourthly, the belief that knowledge and performance of correct ritual is necessary for gaining access to this "salvation"⁷⁸ could attract Melanesians to defect from the mainline denominations, longer established in Papua New Guinea, to the newer, fundamentalist groups, who they feel may provide the answer. May suggests that the mainline Christian denominations are perceived as teaching knowledge and rituals that have failed to provide access to this "salvation". Fundamentalist Christian groups, fresh on the scene, he says, are unconsciously filling the void.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Trompf, p. 243.

⁷⁸ Brian Schwartz, "Cargo Movements", in Ennio Mantovani, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Religions, Point 6* (1984), p. 243.

⁷⁹ John D'Arcy May, *Christian Fundamentalism and Melanesian Identity*, Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute 3, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1986, pp. 1-2.

It can be concluded, then, that indigenous religious beliefs could quite conceivably be providing a powerful motivation for Papua New Guineans to accept premillennialist eschatology.

Some final suggestions about the appeal of premillennialist eschatology in Papua New Guinea can be made from May's study, *Christian Fundamentalism and Melanesian Identity*, because Christian fundamentalists almost always hold to a premillennialist eschatology. It is in the towns, May suggests, where Papua New Guineans, feeling isolated from their traditional religious communities, urgently seek to fill the void left in their lives.⁸⁰ Fundamentalists, crusading through the towns, and using aggressive evangelism techniques, have often filled that void. Their quite distinct American image appeals to modernised Melanesians. The fashion, music, and Western customs, that are part of the fundamentalist worship style, supplies, at least, some symbols of success. Urban dwellers, returning to the village, or village dwellers visiting town, often become the evangelists, communicating the fundamentalist message back to the village.

Fundamentalists provide absolute answers – a “no-questions-asked religion”.⁸¹ Uncovering exactly what the mystic numbers of Revelation and Daniel mean, and pointing to prophecies being literally fulfilled in current affairs, powerfully authenticates the fundamentalist message. Since the mainline denominations had never revealed such amazing truths, they are exposed as charlatans. Converts from mainline denominations to fundamentalist groups usually testify: “I was not sure before, but now I know”.⁸² Fundamentalists, therefore, especially with the detailed timetables in their premillennialist eschatology, hold out the promise of disclosing secrets that Melanesians desperately want to know.⁸³

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Finally, the hysteria that is mounting world wide, as the year 2000 approaches, must also be mentioned as contributing towards a magnetic attraction to premillennialism. A sense of urgency and alarm combine in premillennialist messages with an emphasis on flagging world and/or local conditions, which link in with 2000 as a prominently-published target date, both in Christian, and secular, discussion.⁸⁴ An association of 2000 with the end of the world can be expected to be fuelled by premillennialist teaching, at least in popular gossip and rumour. In turn, one can expect more Melanesians to look for, and accept, answers from premillennialist eschatology.

Suggestions for a Response to Premillennialism by the Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea

Suggestions for church or pastoral responses to cargo cults have been made by Strelan and Schwartz.⁸⁵ To a degree, some points are also relevant for a response to fundamentalist premillennialism.

Strelan suggests that the church needs to have a thorough understanding of cargo cults, and of the Melanesian cultural context, to establish genuine theological communication between church and cult.⁸⁶ In this way, cargo ideology can be challenged with the gospel. When the church has not had such an understanding, it usually has not challenged cargo ideology. Rather, it has unwittingly abetted it, with preaching and teaching that has resonated with the themes of cargoism, or it has totally ostracised cargo cult adherents.

The appeal of cargoism to premillennialism, means that this understanding of the Melanesian context, in the church's preaching and teaching, remains urgent. Likewise, if the church is

⁸⁴ David B. Barrett, "Overall Status of Global Mission and World Evangelisation, AD 1900-2000", in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1990), p. 26.

⁸⁵ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, pp. 243-249.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

going to respond, in ways, other than merely ostracising people, who join fundamentalist groups, an understanding of the theological and sociological characteristics of fundamentalism is necessary. It will not do to ignore or underestimate fundamentalism.⁸⁷

Other suggestions have the church looking at itself.⁸⁸ The church also needs to review its own preaching, teaching, and practice, to determine why its members so readily accept the premillennialism of fundamentalist groups.

Premillennialism is presented as absolute truth, with Bible proof texts for support. Generally, Lutherans vaguely know something about eschatology, but usually avoid preaching and teaching about it. Fundamentalists capitalise on this, accusing the mainline churches of hiding the truth from the people. They present themselves as revealing the hidden truths, especially of Revelation and Daniel.

More recently, seminarists in Papua New Guinea have studied Revelation and eschatology. However, most of the pastors, evangelists, and, more importantly, the elders, who do a fair share of preaching and teaching, have never studied these subjects. They do not know what the church teaches about eschatology and Revelation. They do not understand the Lutheran hermeneutical principles of interpretation, and so are prone to losing debates, when premillennialists quote their proof texts.

Popular teaching materials, which aim to reach those actively engaged in teaching and preaching in the church, are urgently required. A recent popular study booklet of Revelation is useful.⁸⁹ The church's publisher, Kristen Pres, should publish further study booklets, which teach the Lutheran understanding of current popular eschatological themes. Even tracts should be

⁸⁷ May, *Christian Fundamentalism*, pp. 18-19.

⁸⁸ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, pp. 103-104.

⁸⁹ Richard Haar, *Stadi Buk Bilong Revelesen*, Madang PNG: Kristen Pres, 1987.

considered. These should be written in *Tok Pisin*, though simple English translations should be made, for urban- and secondary/tertiary-educated Christians. Unfortunately, such materials reach only those, who have access to the church's bookshops.

To reach an even wider audience, articles on popular eschatological themes should be published in the Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea's *Niugini Luteran*. The *Sios Kalena*, the annual diary with lectionary, is a popular publication of the church, especially among those involved in a preaching and teaching ministry. It would be useful if short, simple, biblical studies would become a regular feature of this publication. Studies on popular eschatological themes would gain widespread distribution through such a publication, and would reach the preachers and teachers of the church.

Other programmes within the church should include sections on eschatology. *Miti Bible Correspondence* could offer a course on eschatology. The *Was Long Sipsip* programme should consider studies on eschatology, in the Bible study materials they produce for women and youth. Those producing religious instruction materials, especially for secondary students, need to include such studies also.

The Lutheran church needs to take these steps to equip its members with an understanding of Lutheran eschatology. Church members should know that Lutherans have definite beliefs about eschatology, and that these beliefs are thoroughly biblical.

The church will, of course, in presenting Lutheran eschatology, not merely emphasise the other-worldly spiritual dimension. It has been the practice of most premillennialists, I believe, to focus people's faith on what will happen at the end. Meanings of the numbers and figures in Revelation, and the proposed timetable for end-time events, become the central tenet of faith. Their trust is focused on these beliefs. Lutherans need to

counter this distortion, by solidly grounding their eschatology in the certainty of the good news of Christ. They also need to proclaim, and congregations should be signs of, the kingdom's presence already now.⁹⁰ Sadly, certainty in Christ's kingdom present now, through the proclamation of the gospel, and administration of the sacraments, is often lacking. Worship is performed as a duty, and Christian faith is divorced from everyday life. This calls for a renewal of congregational life, which, as has been pointed out by Strelan, can come only from a deeper understanding of the gospel, which, Lutherans believe, comes only when Law and Gospel are properly distinguished.⁹¹

Finally, it has long been noted that the Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea has restricted itself more to traditional village communities, making little progress in meeting the challenge of urban ministry.⁹² Usually, foreign fundamentalist groups, with their premillennialist eschatology, have targeted these areas. It is true that Melanesians, ultimately, find it difficult to forsake loyalty to their kinship group, even when living in urban areas.⁹³ The Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea has long used this cultural norm, also, for its work in urban areas. However, there is evidence that whole generations are being raised within urban areas, forming a different social unit than one based on kinship identity.⁹⁴ Urban ministry by the Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea should take seriously these whole, new people groups, based on sociological, rather than cultural, factors. Lutherans urgently need to face the challenges of ministry with such groups, because fundamentalist groups have long been filling the void.

⁹⁰ Schwartz, "Cargo Movements", pp. 247, 249.

⁹¹ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, pp. 102-103.

⁹² Bishop Zurewe, in John D'Arcy May, "Autonomous Church in Independent Papua New Guinea", in *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years 1886-1986*, Herwig Wagner, and Hermann Reiner, eds, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1986, p. 317.

⁹³ May, *Christian Fundamentalism*, p. 7.

⁹⁴ Leonora Mosende Douglas, ed., *World Christianity: Oceania*, Monrovia CA: MARC, 1986, p. 113.

Conclusion

Premillennialism, and, more specifically, pretribulational premillennialism, is dependent on a fundamentalist interpretation of scripture. It is a doctrine, vigorously promoted by some groups, as having absolute biblical authority.

Guided by their interpretation principles, especially:

- the centrality of Christ, and
- that clear passages guide the interpretations of obscure ones,

Lutherans reject premillennialism. Although specific premillennialist beliefs, other than the millennium, are not investigated in full, from a Lutheran perspective, I have shown that the whole premillennialist system of belief is generally undermined by Lutheran interpretation principles.

I have found that there are two reasons why Papua New Guineans could find premillennialism attractive. Many themes of premillennialism resonate with traditional Melanesian religious beliefs. Modern Papua New Guineans are attracted to the Western cultural form of religious groups promulgating the doctrine.

Finally, I suggest that the Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea should recognise, and understand, traditional Melanesian and fundamentalist Christian eschatological beliefs. They should challenge these with a gospel-centred eschatology, which needs to be popularly expressed and available.

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