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Pre-millennial Protestantism

By Gordon Dane

(This sermon was preached at a Conference in South Wales. We understand that it was recorded, and CDs can be obtained).

We believe that Protestantism is the religion of the Bible. The Reformers wanted to return to the principles announced in the Word of God and they would have no other authority. They believed that ‘All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness’ (2 Timothy 3:16). I have heard the Reformation described as a ‘Back to the Bible movement.’ It is therefore ironic that one of the criticisms that is sometimes levelled at those who want to take the Scriptures in as straightforward a manner as possible in their understanding of prophecy is that they are not Protestant enough!

Great Reformers like Luther and Calvin were a-millennial in their thoughts, and so in the minds of many this has come to be the epitome of Reformed and Protestant doctrine even though a-millennialism was the major view of the Roman Catholicism the Reformers had left. But there can be no doubt, and we would not deny it, that Reformation doctrine identified the papacy with the antichrist. It has to be borne in mind that the Waldensians and the Albigenses and many who carried the truth of justification by faith alone during the Dark Ages were pre-millennial in their view. Nevertheless, the major persons of the Reformation carried on the prophetic views they had learned as Roman Catholics, but they had come to view the pope as the antichrist. Because of this, in many minds, historicist views have become identified with Reformed doctrine and with Protestantism.

Much work has been done identifying the antichristian nature of the papacy, and the elements of pagan religion that have been included in the papacy. We think of Hislop’s book, ‘The Two Babylons,’ and so on.

We would not deny the antichristian nature of the papacy. We have no problem in seeing that there is Babylonianism in Roman Catholicism. What we would not do, as Pre-millennialists, is identify the papacy as the final antichrist, who is spoken of in Scripture. Because of that, pre-millennialism has been thought of as somehow less protestant. Now I am sure we all glory in what happened at the Reformation, and we all rejoice in our Protestantism, but some people see pre-millennialism as somewhat less than Protestant because of the fact that it does not say that the pope is the final antichrist spoken of in Scripture.

Then there is the accusation that Pre-millennialism stemmed from a Jesuit. I want to refute that and show that far from being something less Protestant, pre-millennialism is, in fact, most Protestant. Pre-millennialism should be the very heart of Protestantism for a number of reasons.

The Allegations that are Made

First of all, I want to show that Pre-millennialism is Protestant despite the allegations that are made. The allegation is that what we believe, as Pre-millennialists, has come about as a result of a Jesuit plot. I have come across this statement a number of times. One was made by Pastor David Carson and it was reported in the British Church Newspaper. Now I have met Pastor Carson a couple of times and some of the members of his church; I believe that he is a God-fearing man; I am not trying to denigrate him in any way, but he had a protest and it was reported that he said, ‘individual Christians and whole groups who have swallowed the Jesuit inspired Futurist lie do not see the point of earnestly contending for the faith.’ Well, I am a Futurist and I do see the point of earnestly contending for the faith and have organized and attended many protests. But the point I want you to notice is the mention of the ‘Jesuit inspired Futurist lie.’ Sadly, many have the idea that Pre-millennialism came from a Jesuit priest who put it forward as a way of undermining the teaching in the Protestant church about the pope being the antichrist.

I came across an article on the Internet at www.siscom.net which said, ‘*The early apostles did not teach a millennial reign. That doctrine came much later in church history when the Roman Catholic pope commissioned two*



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Jesuit priests (Ribera and Alcuser) to publish a teaching that would counter the Protestant belief that the pope was the antichrist. Eventually the book that Ribera and Alcuser wrote fell into the hands of protestant leaders, who unwittingly spread its teachings throughout their churches. The heart of the Reformation preaching challenged the high papal claims and questioned the teachings of Catholicism. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and other reformation preachers accused the pope from the word of God as the antichrist. The result of their preaching disarmed the strangle hold of papal authority ... and papal power began to tumble as multitudes of people forsook the Roman Catholic Church because of this teaching. The pope fought back with a false teaching contrived by Ribera and Alcuser. They developed a plot that rivalled the protestant interpretation of the Antichrist. Their plot designed a 'futurist' theory with a future antichrist and a future millennium ...leaving out the Roman Catholic Church as being part of any prophecy. They fed their plot to the Protestants, who adopted it as Biblical truth ... and who continue to teach it to this day. The Jesuits invented a mysterious and horrible person as the antichrist who would come in the future just before Christ returns to earth. A large segment of Protestants accepted their interpretation, which played into the hands of the Jesuits ... who had then accomplished the purpose of the pope far beyond any of their expectations.'

There you have it set out as clear as can be. They allege that the future antichrist and future millennium is a theory resulting from a Jesuit plot. Many people believe that. Of course, that would be a very serious thing for us if that were true.

But it is not true. It is a lie; and if people base their objections on that, they are standing on a broken reed. It is one of those dangerous fallacies because there is a little truth behind it. It is true that one of the first in relatively modern times who returned to the idea that the antichrist is future was a Spanish Jesuit by the name of Ribera in 1590. And it is true that his idea was to counter Protestant teaching that the pope was the antichrist by writing a commentary on the Book of the Revelation that said that the antichrist would be a single person who would be received by the Jews, rebuild Jerusalem, abolish Christianity and rule for three and a half years. To that extent there is some truth. But could I make two points here?

The first is that pre-millennialism quite definitely did not start with those two Jesuits. They may have made use of the ancient teaching that can be traced back to the times of the apostles to try and further their purpose at the time, but pre-millennialism stretches back to the very earliest days of the Church, and we would contend that it is the teaching of Scripture itself. We could make a very strong case that pre-millennialism was what the early church believed. One of the earliest pieces of Christian literature, after the New Testament was written, is called 'The Didache.' And in the last chapter of this there is a section about the woes expected at the time of the end; and it says there '*shall appear the deceiver of the world as a Son of God and shall do signs and wonders and the earth shall be given over into his hands and he shall commit iniquities which have never been since the world began.*' And it continues in much the same vein. Iraneus in the second century said, '*When antichrist shall have ravaged all things in the world, reigning three years and six months and shall have sat in the Temple at Jerusalem, then the Lord shall come from heaven in clouds, in the glory of the Father, to cast him and those who obey him into the lake of fire.*' Cyril of Jerusalem said in 360 AD, '*antichrist shall reign three and a half years only. I say not this from Apocryphal writings but from Daniel for he says and it shall be given into his hand until a time times and half a time. Now a time is one year.*'

Philip Schaff in his History of the Christian Church said, '*The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius, while Caius, Origen, Dionysius the Great, Eusebius (as afterwards Jerome and Augustine) opposed it.*' So this was the widespread teaching of the early Church. We would not go by the teachings of the Fathers. All I am showing you is that this was the widespread belief of the early Church and long before the Jesuit, Ribera. So it is quite easy to refute the contention that this was the invention of the Jesuits.



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The second thing is that the teaching that Ribera put out was not pre-millennialism. Ribera was not a Pre-millennialist because he did not believe in a Millennial reign. He followed the Augustinian idea to which Romanism held - that the millennium is the period that stretches from the cross to the Second coming. So when it is asserted that a Jesuit invented the whole of our pre-millennial doctrine we have to say that what he taught was not pre-millennialism. He was not even a Pre-millennialist at all. When you hear the assertion that what we believe was something that Jesuits invented and surreptitiously put like poison into the bloodstream of Protestantism, that is a lie.

So, I say that Pre-millennialism is Protestant despite the allegations that are made. I say that the evidence is that pre-millennialism, as we hold to it, is the belief that stretches right back to the times of the apostles.

The Antichrist it Identifies

The second thing that I want to say is that Pre-millennialism is Protestant despite the antichrist it identifies. Again because we identify the final Antichrist as other than the pope of Rome we are accused of not being Protestant enough. Michael Bunker, in an article he has posted on the internet entitled *The Doctrine of the Papal Antichrist*, puts it like this, *'The uniform reformed position that the papacy is the seat of antichrist, and the Bishop of Rome that 'man of sin', is now under renewed attack by both Futurists and Preterists, who would put forth prophetic interpretations that require that we discover antichrist somewhere other than in Ecclesiastical Rome.'* There are many people, particularly in Northern Ireland, who want to be as Protestant as they can be, and so the teaching that the pope is the antichrist is one that is very attractive.

There is one thing that I want to make absolutely plain before I proceed, and that is that I believe that the pope is an antichrist. I believe that popery is antichristian. I can concur with what the Westminster Confession of Faith declares of the pope, that he is 'that antichrist in the Church.' However, I do not think that the pope is the antichrist of 1 John 2:18 or the man of sin or 'that wicked' who is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10. The Bible indicates that the final antichrist will be an individual who will come. While the pope, being antichristian, displays many of the characteristics of the final antichrist yet there are others that he does not display. Let me show you very briefly some of the things he does not display.

First of all, it is very evident from the Bible that the antichrist holds such commercial power that he can forbid people to buy or sell if they do not have his mark. Look at Revelation 13:16-17: 'And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.' It has never been true that the pope has ever had power like that. It has not even been true in Roman Catholic countries. I know that when I lived in the Republic of Ireland there were priests involved in commercial operations and economic activity but they could not forbid me, as a Protestant, to buy or sell. Nor could they forbid anyone else. And it is certainly true of the Roman earth as a whole. So, this is to be a prominent characteristic of the prophesied man of sin and it is not true of the pope.

Then, look at another aspect of the final antichrist, which is not fulfilled by the pope. In Revelation 13:11 we read of 'another beast.' 'And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon.' And it goes on to speak of this second beast or false prophet acting as the prophet to the first beast, the antichrist. We are told that this second beast directs that the antichrist should be worshipped, and in order to reinforce this, he calls fire down from heaven to demonstrate to people that the antichrist is God. There has never been such a prophet to the pope. Furthermore, we are told that an image of the beast, or the antichrist, is made by the false prophet and the image is caused to speak and to command that whosoever would not give worship to it should be put to death. Revelation 13:15 says 'And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed.' Now there never has been such a speaking image associated with popery either. Again, there are aspects of this man of sin that are not fulfilled by the pope.

Another thing is that all the adherents of this final antichrist will be eternally lost. Look at what it says in Revelation 14:9-11: 'And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his



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image, and receive *his* mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.’ When you look at that and realise that all the adherents to this antichrist receive the mark and worship the beast you realise that there are none that can be saved out of this system. The adherents to the religion of this beast are eternally lost. If that is so, it would mean that there could be no such thing as a converted Roman Catholic. Those who have been in that church could never be saved. It would most certainly mean that those who have been religious Roman Catholics could never be saved. There would never be a saved former priest or a saved former nun. And that would mean that people like Luther and Melancthon and many of the Reformers could never have been saved.

There is another thing that consistent historicist interpretation concedes to popery and that is that it places Peter in Rome. The great claim of the papacy is that Peter was the first Bishop of Rome. There is no historic evidence for that at all. If you read 1 Peter 5:13 you will see that Peter wrote his first epistle from Babylon. He says, ‘The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son.’ Now when it comes to the interpretation of prophecy, historicists say that Babylon represents Rome; and there are those, although not all, who carry that over to this passage and say that Peter wrote this first epistle from Rome. Consistency would mean that they all should. So they are actually conceding to the papacy their contention that Peter was in Rome and that he was a bishop in Rome.

There are many other things I could say. I could show you that the persecution of this antichrist only lasts three and a half years, and so on; but I think I have done enough to show that there are major problems with identifying the pope as the final antichrist mentioned of the Bible.

Protestantism first and foremost is the religion of the Bible. There were certainly many of the Reformers, indeed the vast majority of the Reformers, who identified the pope as the man of sin and I repeat what I have said. Examining the papacy, I have no problem in identifying the spirit of antichrist in it. Also, the antichristian religion of the end time will have major elements of Romanism in it but, in order to maintain a Protestant position, we cannot go against what the Scripture indicates.

The Attributes it Displays

Our Pre-millennial views are Protestant not only despite the allegations that are made, and despite the antichrist it identifies, but because of the attributes it displays. We say that it is more Protestant than other systems of prophecy that claim to be so very Protestant because of the agreement with Reformation doctrine that Pre-millennialism displays. What is the heart of Reformation doctrine? That has been stated in terms of the five ‘Solos.’ Sola Fide - by faith alone, Sola Gratia - by grace alone, Sola Scriptura - by the Scriptures alone, Solus Christus - by Christ alone, and Sola Deo Gloria - to the glory of God alone. Our Pre-millennial views certainly do not contradict any of those five reformation Solas. We believe that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; and we believe that the only rule of faith and practice is the Bible, and that all we do is for the glory of God alone. Those were the key words and the watchwords of the Reformation. I have no problem in adhering to them. In fact, I glory in them. I believe that it was the genius of the Reformation that saw a return to this fundamental doctrine. Many historicists, in their interpretation of prophecy, would adhere to those and so do I; and I have no problem in owning those of my brethren as fellow Protestants; I feel that they should not write and speak of us as if we are not.

However, there is a sense in which the true Futurist is more Protestant than his Historicist brethren, and that is in the area of Sola Scriptura. *Sola Scriptura* (meaning ‘by scripture alone’) is the assertion that the Bible, as God’s written word, is self-authenticating, clear (perspicuous) to the rational reader, its own interpreter (‘Scripture interprets Scripture’), and sufficient of itself to be the final authority of Christian doctrine. One of the great strengths of the historic pre-millennial position is that it has such a high regard for Scripture. It would seek to take the Scripture in its plain and ordinary sense. David Cooper’s golden rule of interpretation applies: ‘When the plain sense of



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Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. In other words we take the Bible to mean what it says. When it speaks about a 1000-year millennial reign we take that to be literal, and when it speaks about the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and when it speaks about the Mount of Olives split in two, and so on, we take those things to be literal. And when God made a covenant with David of a worldwide government of God we believe in the literal fulfilment of that covenant. The problem with the historicist position is that it does not take many of the prophecies in their plain and ordinary sense.

A-millennialists are inconsistent. The literal method is applied to most parts of Scripture, but when they come to the prophetic texts, especially those that relate to Israel or to the millennium, they switch to the allegorical method. This dualistic way of interpreting the Scriptures is due to their presuppositional bias against the nation of Israel. They do not see God having a purpose for the nation of Israel; and where Scripture speaks of that purpose they will take that as pictures or symbols of something else. In order to make a consistent historicist position they have to explain many prophecies in a figurative sense and not with the plain and exact grammatical meaning.

It is, of course, true that some of the prophecies do use figurative language. For example, Joseph dreamed a dream, which represented him and his brethren binding sheaves in a field and his sheaf stood upright and their sheaves did obeisance to his sheaf. It did not mean that literal sheaves would bow to one another. It represented the day when Joseph's brethren would bow before Joseph. When Nebuchadnezzar saw the image, and Daniel said to the king, 'Thou art this head of gold,' it did not mean that he was a literal head made out of gold; but it spoke of the splendour of the Babylonian Empire. Sometimes the Bible uses figurative language; but the figurative language points to a plain and literal fulfilment.

When you look at the fulfilled prophecies of the Bible you will find that most of them were fulfilled literally. Think of the prophecies that speak of the incarnation and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. The place of His birth was literally foretold and literally fulfilled. The wise men asked, 'Where is He that is born King of the Jews?' And when the chief priests and the scribes came to answer that question, they said, 'In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, *in* the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule My people Israel.' They knew exactly where He should be born because the prophecy had been literal. It did not say Bethlehem in Judea and then mean somewhere else.

We think of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Isaiah 35:4-6 gives a prophecy showing what it would be like, 'say to them *that are* of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come *with* vengeance, *even* God *with* a recompense; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame *man* leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.' We read in Matthew 11 that John the Baptist asked, 'Art thou He that should come?' And in answer, the Lord pointed to the literal fulfilment of the prophecy. He said 'Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.' And those are only two of the multitudes of instances I could give.

We think how Isaiah prophesied that Christ would be despised and rejected of men, and we know that was literally fulfilled. Prophecy has been literally fulfilled and if that is the way prophecy has been fulfilled in the past, then is it not the way it will be fulfilled in the future? You have to take it literally because if it does not mean what it says it means, then any suggestion is as bad as any other suggestion. Are we supposed to be comfortable with the notion that the hard and fast and true principles of Bible interpretation have to be set aside in prophetic texts? That is essentially what they are asking us to do.

Some of the most formidable a-millennialists, well-respected, very erudite influential theologians, say strange things. Oswald T Allis, well known for his book, 'Prophecy and the Church' said, '*The Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or being capable of fulfilment in the present age.*' That is true. If you interpret Old Testament prophecies literally, they cannot be fulfilled in this present age. And he is suggesting therefore that we cannot interpret them literally because somehow we have to make them fulfilled in this age because there is no future age.

Floyd Hamilton in his book, 'The Basis of Millennial Faith' said, '*Now we must frankly admit the literal interpre-*



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tation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the pre-millennialist pictures.'

There are not many a-millennial prophetic conferences because if anyone interpreting prophetic truth in the same normal natural way in which the rest of Scripture is interpreted, would end up being pre-millennialist. It is inevitable. So they have to change the rules of interpretation; and once you say the Bible does not mean what it says, then you have no idea what it does mean. That is sad and that is not what Protestantism is meant to be. I want to emphasise that the principle of taking Scripture as literally as possible is far more in line with the reformation principle of the primacy of Scripture than that of trying to explain it as figurative.

Can I say this to you? I am a Protestant. I have no time for the errors of Rome and its false doctrines. If I thought that I was being taken in by some kind of Jesuit plot I would be the first to repudiate it. All sorts of allegations may be made but we must ask, 'what saith the Scriptures?' The Bible and the Bible alone is the religion of Protestants; and I believe as I do because I believe it is what the Bible says. The plain meaning of Scripture is what it indicates.

So, Protestantism exalts the Bible and thus I believe Pre-millennialism is the best representation of what Protestantism should be. Let us believe what the Bible has to say.