

MILLENNIALISM AND THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

Millennialism, millenarianism, or chiliasm are terms which are used to designate the doctrine of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The issue of "the millennium" is one which has plagued Christianity ever since the beginning of the Christian era. Strictly speaking, the question arises from the interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6. Verse 6 states that the saints who share in the first resurrection "shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years" (R.S.V.). Within the context of the Book of Revelation itself this passage raises a major question of biblical hermeneutics--how literally is this passage to be interpreted and what is the chronology of events described by John in the book as a whole. In the broader context of the Old and New Testaments the issue is further complicated. Since there are no other explicit references to a thousand-year reign in Scripture, how does the passage relate to Old Testament prophecies of a future kingdom or to the concept of the kingdom in the Gospels? This question in turn impinges on the issue of the place of Israel and the Church in the divine order, and a variety of other questions. It quickly becomes evident that a whole theology can be significantly shaped or at least integrally related to one's concept of the millennium. It is therefore very difficult to discuss the question of the millennium apart from the total theological implications.

I shall not attempt to give an exposition of Revelation 20:1-6. Rather, I shall begin by broadly defining the various views which evangelical Christians have generally taken with respect to the millennium. These views are the following:

1) Amillennialism

Amillennialists do not believe in a literal millennium as such. Although there is considerable diversity in detail, in general there is no recognition of an earthly, physical reign of Christ, but a belief that the promise of the kingdom is fulfilled in the visible or invisible church. No period of peace and righteousness on earth is envisaged before the final consummation. The medieval Catholic Church under the influence of Augustine as well as the major sixteenth-century Reformers held to this view. Likewise, most of the Anabaptists were amillennialists.

2) Postmillennialism

As defined by Loraine Boettner, postmillennialism "holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the millennium".¹ Thus postmillennialism is generally the most optimistic about the present age and its prospects. This view

was especially popular with the liberal theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and led in many instances to what became known as the "social gospel". It suffered a severe setback by such events as the two world wars and the depression. Postmillennialism, however, is also still held by some conservative theologians who, despite their optimism with regard to the present age, still envisage a personal visible return of Christ at the end of the age in judgment and in triumph.

3) Premillennialism

Premillennialists believe that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years with his saints following his second advent. Probably the best-known spokesman for this view is George Eldon Ladd.² Ladd believes that Christ inaugurated the kingdom at his first advent and is now reigning as Lord and King over those who confess him as Lord. However, this is seen primarily by the eye of faith and is unrecognized by the world. The Church in this era stands in direct continuity with God's people, Israel, in the Old Testament.

The millennium will begin suddenly with Christ's second advent. The Jews will be converted en masse but on the same terms that salvation now comes to Gentiles--they will have to accept Christ in faith as the Messiah who was crucified for them. There will be no restitution of Old Testament sacrifices and Temple worship.

4) Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is essentially a form of premillennialism and there has often been little attempt to distinguish between the two. As a system, modern dispensationalism owes its origins to John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and its popularization particularly to the Scofield Reference Bible. Dispensationalists usually claim, however, that a form of dispensationalism has existed since the time of the early church and that even those who disagree with them today resort to creating dispensational categories.³

Modern dispensationalism divides history into seven distinct periods, each of which is characterized by a "distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose".⁴ It is therefore not only a particular view of eschatology, but a comprehensive theological system. With regard to its view of the future course of events, it looks forward to:

- 1 - the imminent rapture of the church,
- 2 - the earthly rule of the Antichrist during the seven-year Great Tribulation,
- 3 - the battle of Armageddon,

- 4 - the millennial reign of Christ on earth when the Jews are converted, the Temple is rebuilt, and the Old Testament ritual is reinstated, albeit as a memorial,
- 5 - a period at the end of the millennium when Satan is again released and evil reigns freely in the world,
- 6 - the final judgment after which the saints enter eternal bliss in heaven and the unrighteous and Satan are cast into a lake of everlasting fire.

Aspects of the above are obviously shared by many non-dispensationalist premillennialists. However, often rather fundamentally different theological conceptions are involved despite superficial similarities. With regard to the present age, dispensationalists believe that the Church was not foreseen or prophesied by the Old Testament. Rather, when Christ came, he offered the kingdom to the Jews, who rejected it. Consequently, the kingdom was postponed and it is that kingdom which was offered to the Jews which will be fulfilled in the millennium. Some of the passages in the Gospels which relate to the kingdom (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) have often been regarded as not intended for the Church or at least having a minimal significance for Christians today. Some contemporary dispensationalists are less rigid in such distinctions.⁵

Dispensationalists have probably developed the most elaborate and intricate schemes predicting the future course of events and relating contemporary events to biblical prophecy. Most have been reluctant to set precise dates for Christ's return but approximations have been attempted. One of the most popular contemporary spokesmen for dispensationalism is Hal Lindsey.

In addition to the above positions, there are a number of other eschatological interpretations which do not neatly fit any of the above categories.

We shall now turn to the question of millennialism particularly as it relates to the beginnings and later development of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and America. Then, in the final section, we shall attempt to focus on some of the major issues which either are or are believed to be at stake with regard to the various interpretations of the millennium. By the very nature of the case, the focus of attention here will be on dispensationalism because dispensationalism is undoubtedly the most clearly identifiable such movement to make a major impact on the Mennonite Brethren Church and has been the subject of considerable controversy for much of the twentieth century. It behooves us to be aware of this, whether we view it in positive or negative terms. Many younger people in particular do not understand the context from which the question arises in our constituency. Furthermore, dispensationalism is the form of millennialism which has influenced American conservative Protestantism as a whole most significantly and the implications go far beyond the specific views regarding the end times. This fact is recognized by theologians on all sides of the issue.

A. ESCHATOLOGY AND THE ROOTS OF THE MENNONITE BRETHERN CHURCH

1. The Anabaptists

The sixteenth century was marked by the emergence of a number of individuals and movements with very radical eschatological ideas. Some of these individuals were very closely associated with the early Anabaptists or even identified with them by their opponents. Chiliastic teachings became an important constituent of the preaching of such individuals as Hans Hut and Melchior Hofmann. Hofmann's followers, Jan Matthijs and Jan von Leiden, adopted the most extreme chiliastic views and eventually sought to establish God's Kingdom by force in the New Jerusalem--the city of Muenster in northern Germany. The city was besieged by opposing Catholic and Protestant forces and ultimately fell. A terrible slaughter of the inhabitants followed. Menno Simons was among those who was deeply disturbed by the very simple, well-meaning people who were misled by the visions and prophecies of their fanatical leaders. He tried to restore a sober but radically biblical form of Christianity. The tragic episode at Muenster served as an effective warning against over-zealous preoccupation with the interpretation of Old Testament and New Testament apocalyptic writings. At the same time, it has possibly prejudiced the case against all forms of chiliasm.

The majority of the Anabaptists in the first generation did not exhibit chiliastic tendencies. This includes such leaders as Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, Pilgram Marpeck, and Menno Simons. According to J. C. Wenger, this continued to be true for several centuries thereafter.⁶ The Russian Mennonites were apparently the first to be significantly exposed to millennial teachings.

2. The Influence of German Pietism in Russia

The most significant millennial influences in Russia prior to 1860 undoubtedly came from German Pietism which was transplanted from Wuerttemberg to the Ukraine in the early nineteenth century. Wuerttemberg Pietism had its beginnings about 1662 when Philipp Jakob Spener made an extended visit to that region. Thereafter it developed along somewhat independent lines with a theological center at Tübingen.⁷ The most prominent leader of this "school" was Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1792), who, contrary to the restraint of the Spener-Halle pietists, engaged rather freely in eschatological speculation and made a profound impact on a number of followers. He confidently predicted that the Parousia would occur in 1836 and set out a detailed chronology of human history from creation to final judgment. These predictions were elaborated on in a series of publications between 1740 and 1746 and were widely read by the Wuerttemberg Pietists.

Another German Pietist whose influence on eschatological thinking was significant was Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817). Jung-Stilling's History of the Victory of the Christian Religion closely follows Bengel's apocalyptical speculations.⁸ Jung-Stilling was con-

vinced that the end of the age was near--the signs of the time (the French Revolution, materialism, societal decay, etc.) were unmistakable. Christ's return was to take place in 38 years. It would be preceded by tribulation, then the resurrection at Christ's return, and then the millennium.⁹ Not only was the time designated (1819), but also the place in which the final kingdom of peace was to be established--among the Tartar tribes of Central Asia.¹⁰

Both Bengel and Jung-Stilling obviously influenced the Mennonites of South Russia, not to mention the influence of other Pietists who may have had similar eschatological views. The evidence pertaining to Jung-Stilling is clearest. He himself visited Russia (1812-1813) on the invitation of Czar Alexander I. He also was familiar with the Mennonites in Germany and had a number of contacts with them. He published a biography of Menno Simons in 1813, lived in the midst of a Mennonite settlement while he was at Kaiserslautern (1777-87), and wrote a number of personal letters to Mennonites.¹¹ There is also evidence of his ideas finding their way into the communities of South Russia. One of the first Mennonite teachers in Russia, Tobias Voth, made a trip in 1818 to acquire the writings of Jung-Stilling.¹² It was apparently through the reading of these writings that Voth experienced the grace of God. In his recent book, Fred Belk details some of the further associations and influences of Jung-Stilling on the Mennonites, particularly on Claas Epp who on the basis of his interpretation of the book of Daniel set the date of Christ's return at 1880. He then proclaimed the place of refuge and deliverance to be in the province of Turkestan in Central Asia. A group of zealous followers began the Great Trek, only to be thoroughly disillusioned and disappointed. A group of his followers which was purged of such radicalism eventually organized a Mennonite Brethren Church.¹³

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which chiliastic ideas of the kind emerging from the German Pietists, and Jung-Stilling in particular, were present among the founders of the Mennonite Brethren Church. It appears remarkable that although the writings of Jung-Stilling must have been readily available, references to him are difficult to find in the literature pertaining to the birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church. P. M. Friesen does indicate that Heinrich Huebert, who had been a student of Tobias Voth, avidly studied Jung-Stilling's works in his early years.¹⁴ Later, however, some caution was apparently exercised in referring to him because of some other ideas emanating from him.

The prominent feature of the preaching of Eduard Wuest, the spiritual father of the Mennonite Brethren Church, was certainly not an emphasis on eschatology. It is known that Wuest read a German periodical, the Sueddeutsche Warte, which was published regularly after 1853. It emphasized prophecy to a considerable degree, especially later when it became known as the Warte des Tempels. Radical chiliastic ideas emerged from segments of the group associated with this publication. According to Abraham Kroeker, Wuest's biographer, Wuest was critical of some of the teachings in the Warte as early as 1858, but he did continue reading it until his death.¹⁵ Kroeker asks rhetorically

what Wuest would have said had he lived to see the later developments of the Temple teaching.

Jacob Bekker, in the Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, includes a statement entitled "On the Return of our Lord"¹⁶ which might be taken to reflect some ideas arising from German chiliasm. A closer examination however, reveals that the statement was written largely in response to Adventist teaching in America and comes from a much later period in Bekker's life.¹⁷

On the whole it is remarkable that there seems to have been very little preoccupation with eschatology by the early brethren. Again and again the concerns that surface (in the Document of Secession as well as in other letters and statements) center around a joyous assurance of salvation, the grace of God, righteous living, and a repudiation of the formal and dead Christianity from which they saw themselves emerging. The early Confessions of Faith which they used (the Rudnerweide Confession of 1853 and the Einlage Confession of 1876) had simple statements on eschatology in which they referred to the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment, without significant amplification of any of the points.¹⁸

B. SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIA AND AMERICA

1. The Influence of the Plymouth Brethren in Russia

A new stream of millennialism entered Russia in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This source was the Plymouth Brethren movement which originated in Great Britain with J. M. Darby around 1830. As stated earlier, this developed into modern dispensationalism.

The dispensational views of the Plymouth Brethren apparently first entered Russia through the person of Lord Radstock. Radstock was closely associated with the Plymouth Brethren, especially during the early part of his ministry after his conversion, probably in the early or middle 1860's.¹⁹ Radstock visited Russia twice, once in 1874 and a second time in 1877-78. While he apparently did not seek to impose his distinctive teachings on others and preferred to work with sincere Christians of various denominations, it is likely that his millennial and dispensational views became known to some extent.

Much more significant, however, was the influence of his so-called successor, Dr. Baedeker. Baedeker was a German who had lived in England for some time²⁰ and was converted at one of Radstock's meetings in England in 1866.²¹ Baedeker later went to Russia (first in 1877) and became engaged in a very effective ministry to prison inmates and also to many others. Like Radstock, Baedeker did not emphasize distinctive teachings--he was a typical "Allianzman".²² Again, however, his dispensational views certainly became known. Baedeker had a number of contacts with Mennonites and also ministered to them on occasion.²³ His name was well known among Mennonite Brethren.

At this point a direct line of succession between the Plymouth Brethren and the Mennonite Brethren can be established. One of the young Mennonite Brethren men who was converted as a result of the ministry of Dr. Baedeker was Jakob W. Reimer, who later became a well known "Reiseprediger" and interpreter of the books of Daniel and Revelation. As H. H. Janzen states, Reimer "became a leading advocate of chiliasm".²⁴ His dispensational views were eventually published in the booklet entitled, Der wundervolle Ratschluss Gottes mit der Menschheit (The Wonderful Plan of Salvation of God with Men). In Russia, Reimer preached in many churches, was a speaker at Bible courses for ministers which were held at various locations, and helped to bring other speakers from Germany, Switzerland, and England to Russia for these conferences. Among the speakers invited was E. F. Stroeter. Stroeter gave lectures on such topics as Israel, the rapture of the church, the tribulation, the millennium, the final judgment, and the new heaven and the new earth.²⁵ He also made sharp distinctions between the church and the kingdom of God, the body of Christ and the bride of Christ, etc.²⁶ Stroeter's influence apparently was considerable.

The extent of contact between the Russian Mennonite Brethren and evangelical groups like the Plymouth Brethren and Baptists in Germany and England in the last decades of the nineteenth century is truly remarkable. The most popular centers of contact were undoubtedly the Blankenburg Conference and the Hamburg Baptist Seminary. Another center which became more significant later was St. Chrischona. Blankenburg and St. Chrischona were both Plymouth Brethren centers which had developed on the continent. J. W. Reimer served as lecturer at Blankenburg on at least two occasions.²⁷

In reviewing the historical evidence that is available concerning the millennial views of the Mennonite Brethren in Russia until the beginning of the twentieth century, several observations can be made. First, it is well to remember that although there were two sources of millenarian influence, the majority of Mennonites in Russia probably were not significantly affected by either. Further, although the early Mennonite Brethren may have been influenced to some degree by the millennialism of the Pietists, they apparently did not seek to refine their views on eschatology to any marked degree. Many may have held to a mild form of premillennialism, but they certainly were repulsed by the chiliasm of individuals like Claas Epp and others who set dates for Christ's return. They were not even aware of the intricate dispensational theology of the Darbyites until a decade or two after 1860. When dispensational theology made its inroads, to the extent that it was accepted, it probably happened without much awareness of the implications or a thorough understanding of the alternatives. Mennonite Brethren views on eschatology developed in a relative vacuum of theological understanding. Dispensational eschatology, although widely accepted eventually, never became the official view of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia. P. M. Friesen himself deeply lamented the extent to which chiliastic teachings had entered the Church and was convinced that they were contrary to Mennonite teaching.²⁸

2. The Impact of the Dispensationalist Movement in America

Millenarianism began to make a major impact in America by about the middle of the nineteenth century. The British heritage, in the form of Darbyite dispensationalism, soon became dominant. A recent book by Ernest Sandeen extensively documents the history and character of the movement. Although serious questions have been raised about the central thesis of the book, the historical record it presents is basically accurate.²⁹

Of particular importance to the later developments of the Mennonite Brethren Church are the institutions and individuals who became identified with the dispensationalist form of millennialism. According to Sandeen, Dwight L. Moody became a millenarian around 1877 and was responsible for changing the character of the movement in two ways: a) by bringing in the holiness emphasis and b) by beginning the Bible institute movement.³⁰ Sandeen goes on to say that the Bible institutes form one of the most important bridges between the millenarian and Fundamentalist movements and that the Bible institutes were basically the product of millenarian leadership.³¹

A brief glance at some of the institutes and their leaders confirms this assessment. Moody Bible Institute began in the 1880's and the early leaders (W. J. Erdman, W. G. Moorehead, R. A. Torrey, James M. Gray) were all millenarians. The Bible Institute of Los Angeles (Biola, founded in 1907) was likewise millenarian in orientation and Reuben A. Torrey became one of the deans of the school. Similar statements could be made about Northwestern Bible Institute in Minneapolis and Gordon Bible Institute in Boston. Others came later. In Canada a similar orientation prevailed at such schools as Prairie Bible Institute in Three Hills, Alberta, The Prophetic Bible Institute in Calgary, and the Briercrest Bible Institute in Briercrest, Saskatchewan. These institutes were all non-denominational in character and therefore drew students from a variety of denominations.

The appeal of the Bible institutes and the millenarian movement in America as a whole to the Mennonite Brethren can be readily understood, not only because of some similar associations in Russia. American Protestantism in the early twentieth century was facing the crisis known as the Liberal-Fundamentalist controversy. The polarization of Protestantism into these two camps made identification with the conservative camp, which was largely millenarian, the obvious alternative. Furthermore, the Mennonite Brethren from the beginning had had a strong emphasis on Bible study and Bible conferences which was a major characteristic of the millenarian movement in the United States and Canada. Many Mennonite Brethren leaders therefore studied in the institutes named above, although there were also those who studied at Baptist schools at Rochester, Louisville and a variety of other institutions.

By the beginning of the present century the trend to establish Bible institutes and colleges had begun, first in the United States with

the establishment of Corn Bible Academy in 1902 and not long after in Canada with the establishment of Herbert Bible School in 1913. A large number of institutions were in existence on both sides of the border by 1930, and these became major theological training centers not only for ministers but for many laymen. Hence the eschatological views of a large part of the constituency were shaped by the teachers at these institutions.

It is difficult to determine the eschatological views of all the leading teachers at these institutions. However, the views of some of the brethren and the characteristic emphases of some of the schools are well known. H. F. Toews, one of the early teachers at Tabor College wrote a pamphlet entitled Jesus Kommt Wieder (Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1919) which had a clear dispensationalist theology. In general, however, Tabor College was apparently not known for its dispensationalist teaching in the early years. In Canada, the Herbert Bible School was probably strongest in its dispensationalist theology. William J. Bestvater, who became principal of the school in 1921, had become a convinced dispensationalist through various exposures to the movement in America. In 1901 he attended the Light and Hope Bible Institute in Cleveland, Ohio which was founded by John A. Sprunger, a zealous dispensationalist.³² In later years he took correspondence courses such as the Scofield Bible course and attended Bible conferences in Elim Chapel in Winnipeg where speakers such as A. C. Gaebelin, William Evans, A. C. Dixon, and W. B. Riley were featured. Bestvater wrote several booklets which clearly indicate his indebtedness to men like Torrey, James M. Gray, Gaebelin, C. J. Scofield, and others.³³ Not only did Bestvater teach at the Bible school but he was also much in demand as a conference speaker, as a contributor to periodicals and as a writer of study materials for various purposes. Thus his influence was widespread. His colleagues likewise contributed to this emphasis.

At the Winkler Bible School, where A. H. Unruh was the prominent early leader, the emphasis was somewhat different. There, according to J. A. Toews, the curriculum was patterned after the Tschongraw Bible School in Russia which in turn was patterned after the German Baptist Seminary in Hamburg.³⁴ A. H. Unruh did not teach a dispensationalist theology. Hence, when the Mennonite Brethren Bible College was established in 1944 and Unruh became the first President, it also did not become dispensationalist in orientation, although there were prominent instructors who held such views.

In addition to leading men in the institutions there were those not connected with institutions who nevertheless made a profound impact on the eschatological views of Mennonite Brethren churches. In Canada the names of Jacob W. Reimer and Jacob G. Thiessen, both strong dispensationalists, would have to be mentioned. In the United States others, no doubt, made a significant impact.

A complete catalogue of the names of leading men and institutions and the eschatological views taught by them would be interesting but might not serve any further useful purpose. What does emerge rather clearly is that at least since the beginning of the present century there has

been considerable diversity with respect to eschatological views in the Mennonite Brethren Church. Dispensationalist eschatology was strongly represented especially after 1925, although it was never officially adopted as part of the Confession of Faith of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Its appeal to laymen in particular must be attributed largely to its strong emphasis on Bible study and its clarity and precision in interpreting contemporary events and predicting future events. Those who did not adhere to a dispensationalist eschatology usually wrote and spoke less about eschatology as a whole and perhaps often did not define their views as precisely. Therefore there was less homogeneity in the views of non-dispensationalist Mennonite Brethren. The alternatives to dispensationalism were seemingly not examined as carefully. It is interesting that although quite a number of booklets with a dispensationalist eschatology have been published by Mennonite Brethren in this century, apparently none have been published which give an alternative view of eschatology.

C. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND EVALUATIONS: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

1. Biblicism?

It is to be regretted that sometimes an attempt is made to convince others of the validity of a particular interpretation by a simple claim to biblicism without adequately assessing the basis of such a claim. All of us are guilty of trying to make such short-cuts at times--if we can find a convenient label then we may not have to prove a point. On the question of the millennium it would seem that those who interpret it as a literal thousand-year reign have a natural advantage, for to take the Scriptures literally appears always to suggest that it is also more authoritative. And yet none of us really endorses a totally literal interpretation of all texts.

In a recent essay Herman A. Hoyt of Grace Theological Seminary argues for a principle of interpretation that brings the meaning of the Bible within the grasp of the rank and file of the people of God. Then he goes on to say, "This principle clearly stated is that of taking the Scriptures in the literal and normal sense, understanding that this applies to the entire Bible".³⁵ Ryrie and Lindsey make similar claims, implying that their hermeneutic is the only truly biblical one. While the conviction is obviously held sincerely, it does nothing to facilitate creative dialogue concerning the nature of biblicism. Other evangelicals, holding to different convictions, do so equally convinced that their method is biblical. In responding to Hoyt, Anthony A. Hoekema lists six instances in which Hoyt himself has not interpreted Scripture literally.³⁶

I am not suggesting either that all claims to biblicism must be accepted or that we should abandon our attempt to be biblicists. I am merely asking us to recognize that the issue is what it means to be biblicists rather than whether we ought to be biblicists.

2. The Faith of our Fathers?

This essay has devoted considerable attention to an investigation of what our spiritual fathers believed concerning the millennium. It may be argued that this is irrelevant--that all we ought to concern ourselves with is the text of Scripture itself. Such a solution, however, would seem to me to make us extremely vulnerable and might result in a total lack of biblicism. Those who presume to be able to make a direct leap from the twentieth century to the first, unencumbered by what anyone else has said, are often the ones who are most victimized and conditioned by their own time and least able to understand what the biblical writers meant. As one notable historian stated, "A society that forgets its history is like an individual who loses his memory. The victim of amnesia does not know who he is because he cannot remember his background".³⁷

To be sure, the sixteenth century Anabaptists are not our norm and neither are the brethren of 1860. Dispensationalism cannot be proven wrong on the basis that it is a relatively recent phenomenon--dispensationalists themselves frequently admit this but still claim that its principles are found in Scripture. However, we can be helped a great deal if we understand the circumstances under which particular emphases arose in the Christian Church and can often gain new perspectives from which to evaluate a position. Similarly it may help to free us to look more objectively at the factors which may be conditioning our own understanding. None of us can free ourselves entirely from our prejudices, but with God's help we may from time to time begin to recognize more of them.

3. The Social Gospel?

It was stated above that postmillennialism and liberal theology in the form of the "Social Gospel" became closely identified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Conservative Protestants, especially the so-called "Fundamentalists", reacted strongly against the Social Gospel and consequently repudiated almost everything which involved the attempt to improve human conditions as a legitimate and Christian end in itself. Premillennialists as a whole have probably over-reacted in the past several generations and have frequently been criticized for their lack of social concern and their very pessimistic approach to world problems.³⁸ Someone has remarked rather aptly that what was wrong with the Social Gospel was not so much that it was social but rather that it wasn't Gospel. Too often we end up supporting the status quo rather than sacrificially seeking to bring healing and reconciliation to mankind. A truly prophetic quality is often most lacking in those who expect the millennium in another age. It may be heretical to identify the present age with the millennium, but is it not equally heretical to imply that the quality of life which is to characterize the millennium must be kept from making a significant impact in this life? As a writer to the Rundschau stated seventy-five years ago,

Wir wollen uns um das Tausendjährige Reich nicht tausend Jahre streiten. Je eher wir die Kontroverse darüber beendigen, desto

eher kann es kommen, oder desto eher könnte man glauben, das es schon da sei.³⁹

4. Church or Kingdom?

One of the most crucial if not the most crucial issue arising from the different interpretations of the millennium is the nature and function of the Church and its relationship to the kingdom. While postmillennialists have often blurred all significant distinctions between the Church, the kingdom, and the world, dispensationalists have made radical distinctions between all three, insisting that the kingdom or the millennium derives its significance almost entirely in relation to the people of Israel. Non-dispensational premillennialists like Ladd refuse to absolutely identify the kingdom and the Church but assert that the two overlap and are historically related--the kingdom is already present with the people of God though not outwardly recognized. Amillennialism has been open to a variety of interpretations of the Church. For the Anabaptists the Church as a community was already visible evidence of the kingdom, albeit in imperfect form.

I believe that one of the most valuable heritages that the Anabaptists have given us is their emphasis on the doctrine of the Church. The Church is a visible community in which the kingdom ethic comes to expression. It is a community of the Spirit,⁴⁰ not only a collection of individual Christians in whom the Spirit dwells. It is this emphasis which is lacking in so much of contemporary American evangelical Protestantism. We need a new appreciation for the corporate kingdom nature of the Church--the Church as a city set on a hill, the Church as a model community in which the ideal of love comes to expression, the Church as an embodiment of the fundamental purpose of God.

ENDNOTES

1. Loraine Boettner, "Postmillennialism" in The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views, edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 117.
2. Ladd has written a variety of books relating to the topic including The Blessed Hope (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956) and Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954). He is also the writer of the chapter on "Historic Premillennialism" in The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views, referred to above.
3. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pp. 15, 16.
4. Ibid., p. 29.
5. Ibid., pp. 105-109. Ryrie states explicitly that the relevance of the Sermon is not to be postponed to a future age (p. 108) but then concludes that one should not try to "relegate primarily and fully the teachings of the Sermon to the believer in this age" (p. 109). Here the issue seems to be not so much the claim that is made as the actual emphasis which is given to the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount.
6. "Chiliasm", Mennonite Encyclopedia (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), I 558.
7. F. Ernest Stoeffler, German Peitism During the Eighteenth Century (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), p. 94.
8. Ibid., p. 262.
9. Ibid., p. 263.
10. Fred R. Belk, The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia: 1880-1884 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1976), p. 54.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 55.
13. Peter M. Friesen, Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland, 1789-1910 (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911), pp. 480ff.
14. Ibid., p. 453.
15. Abraham Kroeker, Pfarrer Eduard Wuest: der grosse Erweckungsprediger in den deutschen Kolonien Suedrusslands (Hillsboro: M. B. Publishing House, 1903), p. 97.

16. Jacob P. Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, trans. by D. E. Pauls and A. E. Janzen (Hillsboro: M. B. Publishing House, 1973), pp. 186-205.
17. Ibid., pp. 165, 203.
18. Abram J. Klassen, "The Roots and Development of Mennonite Brethren Theology to 1914" (Unpublished M. A. thesis, Wheaton College Graduate School, 1966), p. 185.
19. Waldemar Gutsche, Westliche Quellen des Russischen Stundismus (Kassel: J. G. Oncken Verlag, 1956), p. 60.
20. Ibid.
21. Rev. Alexander Karev. "The Russian Evangelical Baptist Movement" or, "Under His Cross in Soviet Russia". An unpublished manuscript translated by Frederick P. Lehman (1959), pp. 92ff.
22. Gutsche, p. 60.
23. A. A. Toews, Mennonitische Maertyrer der juengsten Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart (Winnipeg: The Christian Press, 1949), I, 370-371.
24. "Chiliasm as accepted and taught in the Mennonite Brethren Church", Mennonite Encyclopedia, I, 559.
25. A. J. Klassen, "Roots and Development", p. 162.
26. D. Fleisch, "Stroeter, Ernest Ferdinand", Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (Tübingen, Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1931), V, 850.
27. J. H. Lohrenz, "Reimer, Jacob Wilhelm", in Mennonite Encyclopedia, IV, 277.
28. P. M. Friesen, p. 264: "Das die Lehre vom tausendjaehrigen Reich wider die altmennonitische Lehre ist, ist gewiss. . . . Wir lassen die Frage von der biblischen Berechtigung dieser Lehre hier voellig uneroertert; nur haben wir uns hunderte Male gefragt; welchen Nutzen hat die Art und Weise, wie diese Lehre unter uns getrieben worden ist, in einem halben Jahrhundert und besonders in den letzten 8 Jahren (1902-1910?), uns gebracht in Beziehung auf unsere 'Heiligung durch und durch. . . .'"
29. Ernest R. Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development by C. Norman Kraus (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958).
30. Ibid., pp. 176ff.

31. Ibid., p. 181.
32. Anna Redekop, Life Story of Wm. Bestvater (unpublished manuscript, Canadian Conference Archives, Winnipeg), p. 6.
33. The two books which are particularly relevant in this regard are Betrachtungen über das letzte Buch der Bibel (Hillsboro: M. B. Publishing House, 1919), and Textbüchlein in Bibel-Kunde für Deutsche Bibelschulen (Regina: Courier Press, n. d.).
34. A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, 1975), p. 260.
35. "Dispensational Premillennialism", in The Meaning of the Millennium, p. 66.
36. "An Amillennial Response", Ibid., pp. 105-107.
37. Gerald R. Cragg, "The Church's Heritage and the Church Historian's Task", Andover Newton Quarterly, XIII, 2 (Nov., 1972), 162.
38. See for example Robert G. Clouse's remarks in his "Postscript", Ibid., pp. 209-212.
39. "In der Mennonitischen Rundschau", Mennonitische Rundschau, 101:2 (January, 1978), 12.
40. For a good discussion of this concept see The Community of the Spirit by C. Norman Kraus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

