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Talk #3
St. Paul on the Second Coming



© **Dr. Lawrence Feingold STD**
Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Missouri

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Association of Hebrew Catholics • 4120 W Pine Blvd • Saint Louis MO 63108
www.hebrewcatholic.org • ahc@hebrewcatholic.org

3. St. Paul on the Second Coming:

1-2 Thessalonians

The Letters to the Thessalonians are probably the earliest letters of St. Paul that we have, written during St. Paul's second missionary voyage in 51-52AD, not long after he founded the Church in Thessalonica. Both letters focus on the theme of Christ's Second Coming.

In the first letter, St. Paul is concerned to strengthen and correct their hope in the Second Coming because it appears that some had expressed anxiety about the fate of the faithful who had already passed away. For this reason St. Paul writes to them:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

(1 Thes 4:13-18)

St. Paul reassures the Thessalonians about their faithful departed by saying that they too will participate in witnessing and sharing the glory of Christ's Second Coming. It is not at all necessary to be still alive to witness the *parousia*. Those still living will have no advantage over the dead with regard to the Resurrection and the manifestation of the glory of Christ.

Many rationalist exegetes have assumed that St. Paul thinks that he personally expected the *parousia* to come very soon, for he uses the first person plural to refer to those who will still be left at the coming of the Lord. However, this fails to understand the figure of speech used by Paul to give immediacy to the passage. The phrase, "we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord," should be taken to indicate "whoever is still alive at the coming of the Lord."

This interpretation is reinforced by the next lines in which St. Paul emphasizes that no one can know the time of Christ's second coming, for He will come "as a thief in the night":

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will

come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. (1 Thes 5:1-4)

St. Paul's teaching here is in perfect harmony with Jesus' eschatological discourse recorded in Mt 24:36-51,¹ in which Jesus uses the same metaphor of the thief in the night, and says that he will come when no one is expecting it, as in the case of the Deluge.

Clearly Paul has already preached this Gospel tradition, such as we find in Matthew or Luke 12:39-40,² to the Thessalonians in oral form. It follows that St. Paul cannot think that he knows that he himself or any other particular person will still be alive when Jesus comes again.

However, it appears that some of the Thessalonians misinterpreted St. Paul's First Letter to them in which he spoke of the *parousia*, and thought that the "Day of the Lord" was imminent. Some apparently even took it as an excuse to stop working. For this reason St. Paul had to write a second letter to the Thessalonians to caution them by reminding them of the signs that first had to be fulfilled in the world before Christ's Second Coming.

The Signs of the Second Coming

When are we to expect the Second Coming? Before looking at St. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, let us briefly review the apocalyptic signs preceding the end of the world in the preaching of Jesus and in the Jewish tradition.

Jesus' Preaching on His Second Coming

Jesus gives various signs of His second coming in His eschatological discourse recorded in the Synoptic Gospels

1 Mt 24:36-44: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. . . . Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

2 Luke 12:39-40: "But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would have been awake and would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour."

(Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21). These signs can be summarized in five principal points:

1) The “birth-pangs” of the *parousia* will be marked by great wars and catastrophes, and by a great and final persecution of the Church. In Mt 24:7-9, Jesus foretells: “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.”

2) In addition, there will be a falling away from the faith and a cooling of charity, for Jesus says (Mt 24:10-12):

“And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men’s love will grow cold.”

This falling away from the faith is also implied in Luke 18:8: “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

3) A positive sign is the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. In Mt 24:14, Jesus says: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” We see this condition being fulfilled more and more in our day.

4) A fourth enigmatic sign, mentioned in Mt 24:15, is “the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place.” There will be a supreme sacrilege in the holy of holies. But what is the “holy place” referred to here? Is it the Temple in Jerusalem, or the New Jerusalem which is the Church? It must refer to the latter.

5) Finally, there will be false Messiahs: “Then if any one says to you, ‘Lo, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Mt 24:23-24).

The End of the World in the Prophets

The preaching of Jesus on the last days does not come out of nowhere. The Old Testament prophets had foretold the general Resurrection of the dead and the Judgment,³ which was to follow on a great world-wide tribulation, a tremendous persecution of the People of God, and the unveiling of a reign of iniquity that is to last three and a half years.

³ See Is 26:19-21: “Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For thy dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall. Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past. For behold, the Lord is coming forth out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed upon her, and will no more cover her slain.”

The prophet Daniel gives an enigmatic sketch of the end times in Dan 12:

There shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” (Dan 12:1-4)

The last times, according to the prophet Daniel, are marked by the deliverance of the People of God and the resurrection of the dead, some unto eternal glory and others to eternal shame. Before this, however, there will be a time of tribulation that has never been known before. It is also foretold that before the end, mankind will be marked by abundant travel and/or communication, and knowledge will increase. It is not clear whether the prophet is referring to religious or secular knowledge, although the former seems more probable to me, given the religious context. If he is speaking of knowledge of God, then this increase should be related to Jesus’ prophecy that the Gospel would be preached to all nations. Evidently, this sign is rather generic and describes a drawn-out trend.

Is there any more specific sign of the coming Resurrection? Daniel then goes on to speak of a far more particular sign, consisting of a reign of persecution that is to last three and a half years.

And I said . . . , “How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?” The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven; and I heard him swear by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time; and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end all these things would be accomplished. . . . And *from the time that the continual burnt offering is taken away, and the abomination that makes desolate is set up*, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days. Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. But go your way till the end; and you shall rest, and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days. (Dan 12:6-13)

This reign of three and a half years, as we shall see, is to be identified with the reign of the Antichrist. Daniel’s description of the abomination of desolation and the cutting off of the burnt offering brings to mind the action of King Antiochus Epiphanes in the time of the Maccabees, which had been foretold by Daniel in the vision recounted

in chapter 8, in which Antiochus causes: “the continual burnt offering” to be taken away and an “abomination of desolation” to be set up in the Temple.

The prophecies of Daniel thus set up a parallel between the reign of the future Antichrist (chapter 12) and the persecution of the tyrant Antiochus (chapter 8), who was evidently a figure or type of the Antichrist still to come.

The Apostasy and the Anti-Christ

St. Paul speaks of the signs of the Second Coming in 2 Thes 2:1-10, in which he tells the Thessalonians not to be “quickly shaken in mind or excited” as if the end times were upon them, for the prophetic warning signs had not yet been realized. The two principal signs that he gives them are the great apostasy (rebellion against the faith) and the reign of the Anti-Christ:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

“Apostasy” here means that a formerly Christian society has rejected the Faith. Surely this is true of the modern world, which is increasingly referred to as a post-Christian society. The roots of this apostasy reach back to the fourteenth century, with the loss of harmony between faith and reason, and grew with the sixteenth-century Protestant rebellion against the Catholic Church, but it is much worse today with lack of faith and widespread atheism. Although it may continue to develop for centuries, one wonders how much longer this process can go on.

Cardinal Newman comments on the coming of the apostasy in an article on the Antichrist written in 1838, while he was still an Anglican: “Is there no reason to fear that some Apostasy is gradually gathering, hastening on in this very day? For is there not at this very time, a special effort made almost all over the world, that is, every here and there, more or less in sight or out of sight, in this or that place, but most visibly or formidably in its most civilized and powerful parts, an effort to be without Religion? Surely there is at this day a confederacy of evil, marshalling its hosts from all parts of the world, organizing itself, taking its measure, enclosing the Church as in a net, preparing the way for a general Apostasy from it.”⁴

⁴ *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), p.59.

The Antichrist spoken of by St. Paul should be interpreted as a human being, who has been prefigured by various “sons of perdition” in human history, such as King Antiochus, Nero, Henry VIII, and in modern times, figures like Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. All of these men have in some way “exalted themselves above every so-called god or object of worship,” taking their seat figuratively in the temple of God, as if they were God.

For this reason, St. Paul says that the “mystery of lawlessness is already at work,” and will be throughout the history of the Church. St. John, likewise, says that the spirit of Antichrist is already at work in the world.⁵ The Antichrist works through the power of Satan, as he has in those historical tyrants who prefigure the Antichrist.

With regard to the coming of the Antichrist, St. Paul gives an intriguing detail. He says that he told the Thessalonians orally when he was with them that there was a power that was restraining the future coming of the Antichrist. Because of this, the Antichrist would not be able to appear until the restraining power is taken “out of the way”:

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

What is this that restrains the coming of Antichrist? St. Paul does not tell us in his letter. This, by the way, is a good illustration of why Catholics believe that Tradition is necessary as a source of Revelation, complementing Scripture. Not everything that was taught orally by the Apostles (as revealed truth) was written down in the New Testament.

So what is currently restraining the advent of the Antichrist? It is not unreasonable to think that it is the Sacrifice of the Mass. The principal reason for this supposition comes from the parallel with the text of Dan 12:11. The prophet Daniel connects the beginning of the three and a half year reign of the Antichrist with the *cutting off of the “perpetual sacrifice” (olah tamid)*. In the Jewish context, the perpetual sacrifice would be the daily sacrifice offered every evening and morning in the Temple. It was this sacrifice, as well as the special sacrifices of the special

⁵ 1 Jn 2:18: “Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” 1 Jn 4:3 “Every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already.”

feasts, that were cut off by Antiochus when he profaned the Temple and set up the abomination of desolation.

In the New Israel, which is the Church, it is obvious that the “perpetual sacrifice” is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The perpetual sacrifice of Israel was a figure of the true sacrifice of the Mass, which makes the one sacrifice of the Messiah on Calvary present every day on all the Catholic and Orthodox altars of the world.

How could the perpetual celebration of the Mass be cut off? Probably in the same way that King Antiochus cut it off: through persecution. In England under Queen Elizabeth, for example, the Mass was “cut off,” although it was celebrated in secret by some Catholic priests, many of whom were martyred like St. Edmund Campion.

Since the power behind the future Antichrist is Satan, it makes perfect sense that the power of Satan to set up a Satanic reign in the world, imitating that of Christ in some sense, would be curtailed by the sacrifice of the Mass. For it is by the Holy Mass, offered every day on every Catholic altar for the living and the dead, that innumerable graces are brought down into the world and the power of Satan is tied.

Although no time frame is established for the Apostasy, an exact period of time is given in the Bible for the reign of the Antichrist, who will follow the Apostasy. The Antichrist will rule for three and a half years. The key sign of the Antichrist is self-divinization. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 675-676, gives a very profound explanation of the Anti-Christ:

Before Christ’s second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the “mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a *pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God* and of his Messiah come in the flesh.

The Antichrist’s deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism, especially the “intrinsically perverse” political form of a secular messianism.

The essence of the temptation of the Antichrist is to offer a radical distortion of the Messianic hope, professing a secular salvation that will come in history and through human agency alone, so as to glorify man rather than God.

The Conversion of the Jews before the Second Coming

Another prophecy of the end times, not directly mentioned by St. Paul in 2 Thes, concerns Jerusalem, and the conversion of the Jews before the Second Coming.

Jesus prophesied that “Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles, until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk 21:24). The fact that Israel is a sovereign nation today is perhaps an indication that that time has indeed been fulfilled, and this has confirmation in what could be called the great apostasy we seem to be witnessing today.

Another important sign heralding the imminence of the *parousia* will be the conversion of Jews to faith in Christ. This hope is based on several Biblical texts. In the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah alludes to the future conversion of Israel in 12:10-14, for he prophesies that the day will come when the inhabitants of Jerusalem will weep over the Messiah whom they have pierced:

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

It seems that Jesus indirectly alluded to this future conversion of Israel when He wept over Jerusalem as He came down the Mount of Olives on Palm Sunday. While looking upon the Temple from the Mount of Olives, He said that the world will not see Him again until the Jewish People accept Him as the Messiah who “comes in the name of the Lord”:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused! Behold! Your house will be deserted, for, I promise, you shall not see me any more until you say: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ (Mt 23:37-39).

St. Paul develops this theme in Rom 11, in which he speaks of his anguish with regard to Israel’s rejection of Christ. He sees that the blindness of a large part of Israel was permitted by God to help the Gentiles to come into the Church. However, he reasons that “if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean, but life from the dead?” He compares ancient Israel to a cultivated olive tree. With the coming of the Messiah, some branches were lopped off because of their unbelief (a symbol of the Jews who did not believe in Christ), and other branches of wild olive trees (Gentile believers) were grafted in. But those who were engrafted can easily be removed once again, and the natural branches more easily re-inserted. The hardening that has come

upon Israel is only for a time, until the full number of the Gentiles come in:

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. *For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? . . .*

. . . Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: *a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved*; as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

. . . Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you *they also may receive mercy*. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. (Rom 11:11-16; 23-32)

Drawing on this text of Rom 11, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 674, treats this theme:

The glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by “all Israel”, for “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” in their “unbelief” toward Jesus.⁶ St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost: “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.”⁷ St. Paul echoes him: “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”⁸ The “full inclusion” of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of “the full number of the Gentiles”,⁹ will enable the People of God to achieve “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”, in which “God may be all in all.”¹⁰

Millenarianism

When Christ returns in His Second Coming, what will He do? Will He immediately establish the definitive heavenly Kingdom through the Resurrection and the Last Judgment, or will He come to reign on earth first for a thousand years?

The expectation of a thousand year reign of the Messiah on earth before the Last Judgment is referred to as Millenarianism, which derives from the word, “millennium.” The roots of Millenarianism go back to Judaism in the centuries before Christ. The general expectation of the Messianic Kingdom to be established by the Messiah involved a reestablishment of the kingdom of Israel as in the times of David and Solomon, accompanied by a renovation of the natural world and a glorious reign of peace and harmony. This Messianic kingdom was to be the last age of the world, after which there would be the Resurrection, the Last Judgment and the life of the world to come.

The Apocalypse of St. John draws on the imagery of this belief in the Messianic kingdom, but expressed in symbolic or metaphorical language. In Rev 20:1-8 we read:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years. And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.

Many of the early pre-Nicene Fathers interpreted the book of Revelation in an excessively literal way (millenarianism). By the fourth century, however, the literal interpretation of the thousand year reign was generally rejected and abandoned, in favor of an allegorical understanding. According to this interpretation, popularized by St. Augustine, the thousand-year reign in which Satan was bound and the saints rule with Christ, refers to the

6 Rom 11:20-26; see Mt 23:39.

7 Acts 3:19-21.

8 Rom 11:15

9 Rom 11:12, 25; see Lk 21:24.

10 Eph 4:13; 1 Cor 15:28.

Catholic Church, especially insofar as she is able to imbue society with the values of the Gospel. In other words, the thousand-year reign refers to the period of Christendom. The binding of Satan for a thousand years should be connected with Christ's parable about the binding of the strong man¹¹ (Mt 12:29): "Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house." Christ bound the devil in His Passion. However, the devil continues to hold sway over the nations until they are progressively "plundered" by the expansion of the Church and the conversion of the nations.

Obviously, the devil always deceives many individuals in all times. However, when the faith takes hold in a particular society, the devil is not able to lead it astray in the same way that he does a pagan or non-Christian nation. His power is restricted by the presence of the Church. For example, *when Christian views of marriage and family life, and the dignity of the human person, become social and civil norms, the power of the devil is bound*. When a society rejects the normativity of those Christian views, then his power can be said to be loosed again.

The thousand-year period should not be taken literally, for it is the custom of Scripture to use figures like a thousand years in a loose or symbolic sense. It clearly refers to a very large period of time: an age or epoch.¹² The unloosing of the devil should be associated with the prophecies of the great apostasy, which culminates in the brief reign of the Anti-Christ, after a long preparation.

The "first resurrection" spoken of in Rev 20:5 should be understood to refer to Baptism and the life of grace given to us through the sacraments of the Church.

After St. Augustine, millenarianism was completely eclipsed, although it tended to reemerge in heretical sects. A notable example was the abbot, Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202, Calabria), who gave a Trinitarian theology of history, according to which God's plan for mankind is organized in three dispensations: the age of the Father (Judaism), the age of the Son (the institutional and hierarchical Church), and the age of the Holy Spirit. He predicted that the age of the Holy Spirit was imminent. This was to be a millennial period of peace and blessing in which the institutional and hierarchical Church would be superseded by an entirely charismatic church. This revolutionary doctrine was condemned by the Church in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, it inspired various heretical movements in the later Middle Ages.

After the Reformation, millenarian ideas have tended to reappear massively in various forms.

¹¹ St. Augustine makes this connection in the *City of God*, book 20, chap. 8.

¹² If one sought a more literal reading, it could be taken to refer to the height of Christendom, from about 325 to 1350 or 1500.

The two dominant forms this has taken in modern Protestantism are known under the terms, *Postmillennialism* and *Premillennialism*. The "post" and "pre" in these terms refers to whether the Christ's Second Coming is understood to occur before or after the thousand-year Kingdom spoken of in Rev 20:1-6. Premillennialism puts the Second Coming *before* the millennial kingdom, whereas Postmillennialism puts it at the close of the millennium.

In other words, for Premillennialism, both the reign of the Antichrist and the Second Coming will precede the millennial Kingdom. Christ will come to destroy the kingdom of the Antichrist, and then personally establish his millennial kingdom, in which He will rule from Israel.

For postmillennialism, the Kingdom will not come about through Christ's Second Coming, but through human agency within human history.

In addition to these two alternatives, Protestant theologians also speak of a third view, which they refer to—inaccurately—as *amillennialism*, and which they identify with the position of St. Augustine and thus with the traditional Catholic view. It is called "amillennial" because it denies that there will be a literal thousand-year Kingdom in which Christ will rule in person. In reality, the Catholic interpretation is that the thousand year Kingdom in which they devil is bound, refers to the age of the Catholic Church. It would be better to refer to it as an "ecclesiological interpretation of the Millennium."

Postmillennialism reached its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries in the Anglo-American Protestant community, and was marked by an (excessively) optimistic view of human history, viewed as the march of universal progress. This view expected a glorious thousand-year reign of Christ to come about through the march of human history. At the end of this glorious period, Satan was to be unleashed, Armageddon would occur, and Christ would return in glory. Thus the millennium is understood to come before the Second Coming.

The millennium was often understood in political terms, as a glorious age to be brought about by political revolution, social justice, and the putting into place of new political structures. Not surprisingly, each revolutionary group tends to think of itself as the one that will bring in the millennium. For example, the millennium has often been thought of by Americans as an age of democracy to be led in through the example and influence of the United States. The French Revolution was seen in a similar way, at least at first, by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Curiously, this scheme was common both to believers and to skeptics. Often millenarian ideas went together with progressivist views and experiments in socialism and communism. Even militantly atheist revolutionaries were affected by this mentality. Indeed, millenarian ideas

were crucial in preparing the soil for Marxism, Nazism, and other totalitarian regimes.

Postmillennialism has become less common in the course of the last century, because the unbelievably brutal events of the twentieth century, together with the rapid decline of Christian faith and morals, have made such an optimistic view of history seem absurdly naïve.

Premillennialism, which is the most common Evangelical view today, is more pessimistic about the current trend of history. It does not expect the 1,000 year Kingdom of God on earth to come about through human agency or progress in history. On the contrary, it sees contemporary history as regressing in the religious and moral dimension, due to the increasing secularization of Western society.

Rapture

This view has several peculiarities. First of all, premillennial dispensationalists believe in a “Rapture,” popularized in the *Left Behind* series. The Biblical basis for this belief is 1 Thes 4:13-17, with which we began this talk. In this passage, St. Paul is responding to a concern, or excessive grief, of the Thessalonians about the members of their community who had died:

The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up¹³ [“raptured”] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Both the living and the dead will witness the Second Coming. The faithful departed will witness it because “the dead in Christ will rise first.” In other words, St. Paul seems to be saying that the Second Coming of Christ will coincide with the general Resurrection of the dead. The trumpet call mentioned in 4:16 is a frequent symbol in Scripture for the Resurrection. Both of these events—Resurrection and Second Coming—seem to constitute the “day of the Lord,” which, as St. Paul reminds them in the following verses, comes as a “thief in the night” (1 Thes 5:2).

Premillennialists, on the other hand, take this passage to refer to a Rapture prior to the Second Coming, prior to the reign of the Antichrist, and prior to the general Resurrection. The resurrection referred to by St. Paul as preceding the “rapture,” would just be partial.

Clearly this interpretation does violence to the text of St. Paul. Even from the point of view of *sola Scriptura*, such an interpretation is exceedingly implausible.

Dispensationalism

Another very peculiar feature of premillennialism (also called premillennial dispensationalism) is its understanding of Israel and the Church. Premillennialist Evangelicals understand the promise of the millennial Kingdom to refer not to the Church, but to Israel according to the flesh, that is, to ethnic Jews. They see the Kingdom as the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and Israel, and deny that the Church should be understood as the new Israel. In the millennial Kingdom, the Mosaic Law will be in force, and they expect the Jewish Temple to be rebuilt and animal sacrifices to be resumed. This partly explains the great interest that Evangelicals take in Israel.

The age of the Church from the Gentiles, for pre-millennial dispensationalists, is thus merely a kind of “parenthesis” in history, which is going to be “whisked” out of the world at any moment by the “Rapture,” so as to spare true believers from the “great Tribulation” of the reign of the Antichrist. Of course, they think that the Catholics will be *left behind*, not being true believers. What should we think about all of this?

First, the idea of a “rapture” to spare true believers from the Tribulation is contrary to God’s way of working, which is to bring about holiness through a participation in the Cross of Christ. God does not whisk those whom He most loves out of the danger of trial and suffering, but allows trials to be the crucible in which holiness and charity are consummated.

Secondly, the entire system is based on a fundamental error of tremendous importance: it fails to recognize that the Kingdom whose advent Christ preached, and which was foretold by the prophets, is the Church founded at Pentecost—the Church that Christians profess to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” and which has grown in the entire world from Pentecost until the present: the *Catholic* or universal Church. Of course, this is difficult to recognize for Protestants! Thus they fail to recognize that the Kingdom spoken of in Rev 20:1-6 is none other than the Catholic Church, through the influence of which the power of Satan is bound and hindered from seducing the nations.

The Evangelicals who follow this system (dispensationalism) have ironically, and tragically, missed the presence of the Kingdom for which they so yearn. This Kingdom is already present in the world, enriched with the seven sacraments that distribute God’s grace and enriched with God’s Revelation. When Christ comes again, this Kingdom will be transfigured, and as St. Paul explains in Eph 5:27, Christ will present the Church “to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

Let us pray that we not be among those deceived by the spirit of the Antichrist, but rather, in the words of St. Paul to the Thessalonians (2 Thes 2:15), “stand firm and hold to

¹³ The Latin term here, “rapiemur,” is the origin of the term “Rapture.”

the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” That is, that we may stand firm to the Apostolic teaching, made known to us by Tradition (word of mouth), and Scripture, and interpreted authentically by the Magisterium of the Church.