

Pentecostal Theological School, Budapest

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Catholic – Evangelical Differences

3. Eschatology: Part I

Today, there is a considerable difference between Catholic and Evangelical eschatology. It is an area in which there is little meeting of minds and little mutual sympathy. At the time of the Reformation, however, eschatology was not one of the issues in dispute.

However today the differences are not a matter of argument and discussion like the issues we have examined so far: Scripture and Tradition, Justification by Faith and the sacraments. These are **hot potato** topics. By contrast, the differences in eschatology are not much discussed: so we can begin by asking why this is.

The historic churches have settled down in the world and have largely abandoned apocalyptic. Their vision has tended to become corporate for this world but individualistic for the next, because there is no real hope for the second coming. Eschatology is thus a neglected area, though there have been some notable attempts to make it central again (Moltmann, Pannenberg).

Historic Millenarianism

“In the early Church, Millenarianism was found among the Gnostics and the Montanists, but was also accepted by more orthodox writers such as St Justin Martyr, St Irenaeus, and St Hippolytus of Rome, all of whom were pre-millennialists. Millenarianism came, however, increasingly to stress the carnal pleasures to be enjoyed during the thousand years of the saints’ earthly reign and eventually a revulsion against the whole concept set in, initiated by Origen and completed by St Augustine.” (ODCC, p. 1086).

They understood the creation story prophetically as the six days meaning six thousand years using “a thousand years are as one day”.

Reformation

“Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless.” (Augsburg Confession, XVII).

“The Reformers were also convinced that the millennium was a historical era in the past, and that with the manifestation of the pope as antichrist this era had come to an

end. It is understandable that Luther should have believed that he lived at the end of the times, that in the struggle with Rome he was involved in the struggle with the Antichrist, and that he should have seen ahead only ‘the dear Last Day’, the general resurrection of the dead and the great Judgment.” (Moltmann, p. 155).

“Moreover we condemn the Jewish dreams that before the Day of Judgment on earth there will be a golden age, and the devout will capture the kingdoms of the world and will suppress their godless enemies.” (Confessio Helvetica, 1566, XI).

“For the Christian chroniclers of world history and for the apocalyptists, a Talmud passage also played a part that should not be underestimated: “In the school of Elijah [Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon, the Vilna Gaon] it is taught: the world will endure for 6,000 years: 2,000 years chaos, 2,000 years Torah, 2,000 years messianic time; but because of our many sins some of these (years) have already lapsed.’ Melanchthon, Carion, Osiander and Pezel already quoted this passage, and made use of it.” (Moltmann, p. 143).

First Reactions

Joseph Mede (“a moderate Anglican with some Puritan sympathies”): *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627); eng. Trans. *The Key to the Revelation* (1643): “Mede was a millenarian, who strongly rejected the traditional Augustinian view of the millennium; a futurist, who expected a first resurrection of the saints at the beginning of the time of the *Regnum Christi*. In this, his views coincided with those of the German Reformed theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted, whose *Diatribes de mille annis apocalypticis* appeared in the same year in which Mede’s *Clavis* was first published.” (Van den Berg in SCH Sub 10, p. 113). Mede believed „in a return of the Jews to the land of Canaan, which would be the beginning of the day of judgment, identified by Mede with the millennium” (van den Berg, p. 114).

“The confidence of being God’s chosen people and thus ‘new Israel’ came to America from England with the early Puritans. Between 1629 and 1640 more than 20,000 Puritans emigrated to New England. They took with them the apocalyptic images of the fight between Christ and Antichrist, the true and the false church, and the prophecy about the imminent advent of Christ’s Thousand Years’ empire.” (Moltmann, p. 170).

“Of great influence on Christians in Europe was Manasseh ben Israel’s book ‘The Hope of Israel’ (*Spes Israelis*, Amsterdam, 1650).” (Moltmann, p. 157).

Bebbington

“Evangelicals identified the future epoch as a time of peace and glory for the church that would follow on persistent mission.” (p. 62). Thus Evangelicals in the 18th century were post-millennialists.

“William Carey, explicitly appealing to Edwards, held that no fulfilment of prophecy would intervene before the conversion of the heathen that would usher in the millennium.” (p. 62).

Lewis Way, the sponsor of the Jews’ Society, argued in 1821 that the Old Testament prophecies had ‘a primary and literal reference to the Jews’. “If the return of the Messiah is to be associated with the restoration of the Jews, they [Albury group Advent 1826] concluded, the millennium can be located only after the second coming.” (p. 83). This current was more “adventist” than “millenarian” (p. 83).

Two 19th century theologian-teachers: Irving and Darby

Two men especially changed the scene. Irving, much deeper in my view, and Darby. For Irving, the Incarnation and the Resurrection-Ascension are central. Irving developed in fact a Pentecostal theology (book of Gordon Strachan), that is very trinitarian, incarnational, pneumalogical and eschatological. He develops a whole theology of the gifts, in a Trinitarian and Church-being-prepared-for the Kingdom context.

Unfortunately, Pentecostals did not know of Irving and followed mostly the theology of Darby, who was inherently sectarian (Pentecostal experience of rejection fostered this) and who was cessationist. One could also say “anti-incarnational” in his separation of the Church from Israel.

Edward Irving

Key Ideas: (1) Incarnation for cleansing and sanctification; (2) Lordship by which power poured out to effect his rule in the Spirit to prepare the way for his full rule in the Kingdom.

“the Church, under Christ its head, and with the Spirit for its inspiration, is the one great instrument of God in which and by which to carry on all His operations; a temple for the Eternal God to dwell in; a sufficient body for expressing all His mind, and doing all His will.” (Vol. 5, p. 469).

“The Church is like a man who has been fed upon sloes, without fruit and husks, without kernels, refuse which the swine should eat; and she is grown lean and weak and helpless; and, moreover, she has grown degraded in her ideas – she has forgotten the nobility of her birth, and the grandeur of her destination” (p. 502).

“it is abundantly manifest from the premises that the habitation of God, which Christ was to construct for His Father, out of the gifts which He received when He ascended up on high, is the Church, His body, the fullness of the election which the Father had given to Him for His inheritance. And it is further evident, that the unity of these many members is bound together by the wise distribution which He makes of the Spirit, given to Him of the Father, among the members of the body, in such wise, as

that one shall be necessary to the help and support of the other, and, all together co-operating, shall make the body to grow, and wax like the body of a child, from its rudiments then forming in the days of the apostles, until it should attain unto the measure of its appointed fullness – that is, until all the election should be brought in, and the bride of the Lamb, the new Jerusalem, which is the tabernacle or habitation of God for ever, should be completed.” (pp. 515 – 16).

“the meanness of our idea, and the weakness of our faith, concerning the oneness of Christ glorified, with His Church on earth: the unworthiness of our doctrine concerning the person and office of the Holy Ghost, to knit up the believer into complete oneness with Christ, every thread and filament of our mortal humanity with His humanity, immortal and glorious; to bring down into the Church a complete Christ, and keep Him there, ever filling her bosom, and working in her members; the short-coming of our knowledge, in respect to the gifts themselves; our having ceased to lament their absence, and to pray for their return; our want of fasting, and humiliation, and crying unto the Lord; our contentment to be without them; our base and false theories to account for their absence, without taking guilt to ourselves.” (p. 560).

John Nelson Darby

“He steadily elaborated the view that the predictions of Revelation would be fulfilled after believers had been caught up to meet Christ in the air, the so-called ‘rapture’. No events in prophecy were to precede the rapture. In particular, the period of judgments on Christendom expected by other pre-millennialists, the ‘great tribulation’, would take place only after the true church had been mysteriously translated to the skies. The second coming, on this view, was divided into two parts: the secret coming of Christ for his saints at the rapture; and the public coming *with* his saints to reign over the earth after the tribulation.” (Bebbington, p. 86). Darby argued from 1829 that the biblical prophecies regarding the Jews would be fulfilled literally.

Replacement teaching had resulted in OT prophecies regarding Israel and Jerusalem being applied to the Church and spiritualised. This meant that the fulfilment was not on earth but in heaven. Darby saw the wrongness of this. But he dealt with it in a way that separated the destiny of Israel from the destiny of the Church. He maintains the earthly fulfilment for Israel by separating Israel’s earthly destiny from the heavenly destiny of the Church.

Darby’s exegetical principles: 1. “in prophecy, when the Jewish church or nation is concerned ...I look for a plain, common sense, literal statement” (Bass, p. 129 citing Darby); “when the address is to the Gentiles ... there we may look for symbol, because earthly things were not their portion” (Bass, p. 129). 2. every text is to be understood only in the context of the dispensation to which it refers. Thus in this view the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to the Church, because it is part of the gospel of the kingdom. “it is legitimate to ask whether dispensationalism is not

oriented more from the Abrahamic Covenant than from the Cross. Is not its focus more on the Jewish kingdom than on the Body of Christ?" (Bass, p. 151).

"The hope for the church is that it will share in Christ's glory, both earthly and heavenly. The hope for Israel is the kingdom on earth with Christ seated on the throne of David." (Bass, p. 132). "The kingdom will be literal; the nation will occupy the land, the temple will be rebuilt, the sacrifices reinstated, Christ will sit upon the throne of David, and Israel will be acknowledged by the nations of the world to be the favored people of God. ... This will grow out of the remnant who will come out of the tribulation, who will acknowledge Jesus as the Jewish Messiah." (Bass, p. 139).

"Is not the attitude of a 'pure' church in the midst of an apostate Christendom still an integral part of the dispensational view?" (Bass, p. 145).