

JOHN WESLEY - POST OR PREMILLENNIALIST?

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The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a controversy regarding John Wesley which still has not been settled conclusively. The basic issue of the debate centered around Wesley's eschatology. A number of scholars, theologians and evangelists contributed to this heated verbal exchange. The question being asked was whether John Wesley believed and preached the postmillennial or premillennial view of the second coming of Jesus Christ. As one might expect, the answers reflect the eschatological position of the individuals involved, and how they interpreted Wesley.

These two interpretations of eschatology, postmillennialism and premillennialism, make an interesting study in themselves.

Premillennialism holds that Christ will return bodily to earth before the millennial age begins, and that he will set up his visible kingdom at that time, ushering in the thousand years of peace. Many theologians believe that this was the eschatological position of the early church until the time of Augustine.

The postmillennial view teaches that through the preaching of the cross the whole world will be Christianized and brought into submission to the Gospel before the second coming of Christ. The literal return of our Lord will occur after the millennium has been ushered in by the Church.¹

Ironically enough, perhaps the earliest scholar to argue that John Wesley held the premillennial position was his Victorian era biographer, Luke Tyerman, whose *The Life and Times of John Wesley* first appeared in 1872. Tyerman provided a lengthy account of Wesley's reaction to Thomas Hartley's *Paradise Restored: A Testimony to the Doctrine of the Blessed Millenium*, published in 1764. However, while Tyerman devoted five lines of text to Wesley's quote about the book (which appeared in the *Methodist Magazine* in 1783), he took five pages of text for his own analysis! Hartley held the premillennial position, which Tyerman elaborated at length. He then asked, concerning these views, "Why are they enumerated here? Because, in substance, they were held by Wesley."² After quoting Wesley's brief note about Hartley's book, Tyerman goes

¹See Harold J. Ockenga, "Postmillennialism," in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 406-7, edited by Richard S. Taylor.

²Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890), II, 523.

on to say, "With such a statement, in reference to such a book, there can be no doubt, that Wesley, like his father before him, was a millennialist, a believer in the second advent of Christ, to reign on earth, visibly and gloriously, for a thousand years."³

What Wesley actually wrote about Hartley's book is a study in itself. He said, "Your book on the millennium was lately put into my hands. I cannot but thank you for your strong and seasonable confirmation of that comfortable doctrine; of which I cannot entertain the least doubt, as long as I believe the Bible."⁴ One might reasonably ask if Wesley meant to support Hartley's views on the millennium, or if Wesley meant to support Hartley's views on premillennialism. Luke Tyerman believed that Wesley here gave his support to the premillennial position, and argued at length for this interpretation of Wesley's comment. The matter might have ended there, but within a few years premillennial adherents in America picked up on Tyerman's arguments and made lengthy and emotional pleas of their own that John Wesley was a premillennialist.

The evidence suggests that the first American from this period to argue that John Wesley held the premillennial position was Nathaniel West, a Presbyterian minister from Ohio, and one of the leaders in the new premillennial revival. He presented a ninety-one page address on the "History of the Pre-Millennial Doctrine" at the first prophecy conference, held in New York City in 1878, and argued strongly that Wesley was a premillennialist. In fact, West claimed that Fletcher and Coke, along with Wesley, were premillennialists, and to support his contention for Wesley he cited Luke Tyerman.⁵ In so doing, West set the pace for premillennialists over the next fifty years, for invariably when long lists of premillennialists were assembled, several Methodists were usually included, especially John Wesley.

It should have been expected that such a conference, and such statements about John Wesley, would draw fire from many quarters, nor did it help matters any that six Methodist ministers signed the "call" for the conference, and Methodist Professor Henry Lummis read a paper during one of the sessions. The conference met for three days, October 30 through November 1, 1878, and within a short time Methodist rebuttles appeared.⁶ Beginning on November 28, 1878, Daniel Steele published an eight-part series, "The Prophetic Conference," in *Zion's Herald*, a Boston based Methodist periodical in which he answered the claims of the papers

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Works of John Wesley*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), XII, 244.

⁵ Nathaniel West, *Second Coming of Christ* (Chicago: F. H. Revell, 1879), 383-384.

⁶ Anthony Atwood, *Christian Standard*, December 7, 1878, 1; Daniel Steele, "The Prophetic Conference," *Zion's Herald*, November 28, 1878; J. M. Buckley, "The Second Coming of Christ," *The Independent*, November 21, 1878, 1-2; "The Millennial Conference," *Christian Advocate* (NY), November 7, 1878, 1.

presented in New York. His first article nailed the issue of Methodist participation. In scathing tones Steele showed why Methodists would not "sit down and waste time speculating upon the future."⁷ Professor Henry Lummis replied to Steele, and appealed to Wesley. He wrote,

What may appear stranger than all to a reader of the *Herald*, John Wesley himself was a premillennialist, and in his notes on the book of Revelation *avowedly* followed that eminent premillennarian, Bengel. It will thus appear that the Prophetic Conference has authority equal to the *best* for its system of interpretation.⁸

Charles Munger, a Methodist minister from Maine, published an article in *Zion's Herald* which later was published as a pamphlet, and which, still later, Daniel Steele included as an appendix for the third edition of his book, *A Substitute for Holiness*. Entitled, "Was Wesley a Premillennialist?," Munger's article argued forcefully that "Tyerman was wrong" in presenting John Wesley as a premillennialist, and then presented two and one-half pages of argument to show the difference between modern premillennialism and Wesley. Munger ended the article with a brief synopsis of church history, in which he attempted to show that, while premillennialism has reared its head now and again, "Of the historians who lived in either of the first five centuries, not one has yet been found who even intimates that premillennialism was ever the faith of the primitive church."⁹

In 1888 Methodist evangelist L. W. Munhall published *The Lord's Return and Kindred Truth*, a popular volume which went through at least eleven editions. Munhall, an early Methodist advocate of popular premillennialism, and one of the few Methodists who became active in the prophecy conference movement, argued strongly that John Wesley espoused the premillennial view. In fact, Munhall also added George Whitefield, Charles Wesley, John Fletcher and Thomas Coke to his list of Methodist premillennialists. Unlike West, however, Munhall based his argument for Wesley completely upon excerpts from Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. He referred to Charles Wesley as the "Millennial Poet," and based his claim for John Fletcher on Tyerman's *Life of Fletcher*.¹⁰

In 1894 Nathaniel West published *John Wesley and Premillennialism*, a booklet which has gone through several editions, the latest under the title, *John Wesley, Premillennialist*. West argued at great length to prove

⁷*Zion's Herald*, November 28, 1878, 1.

⁸Henry Lummis, "The Real Issue on the Prophetic Conference," *Zion's Herald*, December 19, 1878, 2; emphases his.

⁹Charles Munger, "Was Wesley a Premillennialist," in Daniel Steele *A Substitute for Holiness* (Chicago: The Christian Witness, 1899), 281.

¹⁰Leander W. Munhall, *The Lord's Return and Kindred Truth* (Germantown: L. W. Munhall, 1888), 19-23.

his point, and used a number of sources, including Tyerman, Wesley's sermons, the *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* and some of Wesley's hymns.¹¹ So thorough was West's treatment that his book has become a classic upon the subject from a premillennial view, and many of the more modern writers have used him as a basic source.

In 1901 Methodist holiness evangelist L. L. Pickett published *The Blessed Hope of His Glorious Appearing*, and made the standard argument that Wesley was a premillennialist. Pickett published many books on the doctrine of holiness, edited a periodical and travelled extensively in holiness evangelism. He is important in that he represents an early holiness leader that espoused the premillennial cause.¹²

In 1911 Daniel Steele published his article, "Why I am not a premillennialist," in the *Methodist Review*. It was a scathing theological attack on premillennialism. Although the article did not concern Wesley, Steele added a parenthetical note so that his readers would be assured that Wesley was no premillennialist.¹³

In 1913 Reuben A. Torrey, later president of Moody Bible Institute, published a small volume entitled *The Return of the Lord Jesus*. He inserted a long list of famous premillennialists which included John and Charles Wesley, although he gave no reason for their inclusion.¹⁴

In 1914 Free Methodist Jesse Silver published *The Lord's Return*, with the introduction by Free Methodist Bishop Wilson T. Hogue. Silver actually offered more proofs in support of his position than Nathaniel West did and concluded that Wesley did indeed espouse premillennialism. Silver stated that he agreed with West and disagreed with Charles Munger. Silver proceeded to examine the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* and Wesley's sermons to refute Munger's argument. He then appealed to Charles Wesley, the Moravians, Joseph Sutcliffe (Methodist biblical commentator), John Fletcher, Thomas Coke, Luke Tyerman, Robert Southey, William Nast (father of German Methodism), Professor E. F. Stroeter (German Methodist professor), George Smith (Methodist historian) and, of all things, Walter Churchey's remarks at the tomb of John Wesley.¹⁵

In February, 1914, Moody Bible Institute in Chicago held a four day "Prophetic Bible Conference," and published a stenographic report entitled *The Coming Kingdom of Christ*. At the conference Methodist evangelist L. W. Munhall presented a paper, "The Second Coming of Our Lord in

¹¹Nathaniel West, *John Wesley and Premillennialism* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1894).

¹²L. L. Pickett, *The Blessed Hope of His Glorious Appearing* (Louisville: Pentecostal Publishing Co., 1901), 189-191.

¹³Daniel Steele, "Why I am Not a Premillennialist," *Methodist Review*, May 1911, 406.

¹⁴R. A. Torrey, *The Return of the Lord Jesus* (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1913, 148.

¹⁵Jesse Silver, *The Lord's Return* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1914), 148-161.

Relation to Evangelism," and, quoting extensively from Nathaniel West, presented John and Charles Wesley as ardent premillennialists. Munhall claimed that Charles Wesley, "The millennial poet," (as West had called him) "... wrote over 7,000 hymns, and more than 5,000 were premillennial."¹⁶ In the back of the book is an appendix comprising an abridgement of an article in the December, 1913, issue of *The Christian Worker's Magazine*, which listed over four hundred fifty "witnesses" to the premillennial coming of Christ. There are three Free Methodists, two German Methodists and thirteen Methodists on the list; two of them are John and Charles Wesley.¹⁷

In 1917 George P. Eckman, Methodist Episcopal pastor and former editor of the *New York Christian Advocate*, published *When Christ Comes Again*, in which he argued that Wesley has been "proudly but incorrectly claimed by premillennialists." Eckman based almost the totality of his argument on Wesley's sermon, "On Former Times," and concludes that "The world is growing better by the hour."¹⁸

In that same year Methodist lay evangelist William E. Blackstone published the presentation edition of *Jesus is Coming*. The first edition had been issued in 1878, and quickly brought Blackstone to national prominence. Since his book had a profound effect on many people (including R. A. Torrey and J. Wilbur Chapman), Blackstone hoped to enlarge its influence even further. He commissioned Moody Bible Institute in Chicago to send free copies to "ministers, missionaries and theological students, especially in his own dearly-loved Methodist Episcopal Church."¹⁹

Blackstone hoped that all who read his book would "someday rejoice together with Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Knox, and the Wesleys, singing Charles' beautiful hymn as a welcome to our descending Lord."²⁰ For William E. Blackstone there could be no doubt that Wesley held the premillennial position.

In May, 1918, premillennial leaders held a prophecy conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. J. Wilbur Chapman gave a brief noonday address on "The Lord's Return," and in the course of it mentioned that

¹⁶L. W. Munhall, "The Second Coming of Our Lord in Relation to Evangelism," *The Coming Kingdom of Christ* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Calportage Association, 1911), 95-6.

¹⁷"Some Exponents of Premillennialism," in *The Coming Kingdom*, 241 ff.

¹⁸George P. Eckman, *When Christ Comes Again* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1917), 197-198.

¹⁹William E. Blackstone, *Jesus is Coming*, (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1917); see Blackstone's letter and "Presentation Copy" inscription at front of book. Interestingly enough, in his little book *The Millennium* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1904), Blackstone only mentions Charles Wesley as a premillennialist on page 8.

²⁰*Ibid*; on the opposite page of Blackstone's letter he included Charles Wesley's hymn, "Lo! He Comes, With Clouds Descending."

Wesley, like Spurgeon, Moody and Gordon, held the premillennial view.²¹ He listed no sources for his argument.

Two years later, in 1920, Harris Franklin Rall, eminent Methodist theologian, and professor of systematic theology at Garrett Biblical Institute in Evanston, Illinois, published his *Modern Premillennialism and the Christian Hope*. The book itself is a masterful treatment of the Christian's hope from a postmillennial view, and Rall included an appendix, "Was John Wesley a Premillennialist?" Rall quickly pointed out that the huge list published by the prophecy conference of 1914 included only eight Methodists, and not one Bishop, general officer, district superintendent or teacher from a Methodist college or seminary. (He, of course, excluded Free Methodist Bishop Wilson T. Hogue, German Methodist editor William Nast and German Methodist professor E. F. Stroeter.) The sermons of Wesley provided the strength of Rall's argument, and he referred to "The Way to the Kingdom," "The Great Assize," "The Spread of the Gospel," "The Signs of the Times" and "On Former Times." Since the premillennial writers had appealed to Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Rall commented briefly, referring to the dual millennium of Revelation 20 as "Wesley's curious theory."²² Rall concluded in a positive manner—John Wesley was a postmillennialist.

In that same year Rall published a lengthy article in the *Methodist Review*. It is very similar to his book, and drew the same conclusions.²³

In 1923 Methodist evangelists L. L. Pickett and Andrew Johnson published *Postmillennialism and the Higher Critics*. They severely criticized anyone who disagreed with them, friend and foe alike, and insisted that John Wesley "was more premillennial than postmillennial in his view."²⁴ They brushed aside the arguments of Rall and fully accepted the statement of Tyerman that Wesley was premillennial.²⁵

In 1930, John A. Faulkner published *Burning Questions in Historic Christianity*, and devoted an entire chapter to the question, "Was Wesley a Premillennialist?" Like Rall, he dealt first with some of the sermons, and commented at length on "The Great Assize," "The General Deliverance," "The Mystery of Iniquity," "The End of Christ's Coming," "The General Spread of the Gospel," "The New Creation" and "The Signs of the Times." Faulkner thought it significant that Wesley did not publish a single sermon on the second coming. Regarding the *Explanatory Notes*

²¹J. Wilbur Chapman, "The Lord's Return," in *Light on Prophecy* (New York: The Christian Herald, 1918), 355.

²²Harris Franklin Rall, *Modern Premillennialism and the Christian Hope* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1920), 245 ff.

²³Harris F. Rall, "Methodism and Premillennialism," *Methodist Review*, March 1920, 215.

²⁴Andrew Johnson and L. L. Pickett, *Postmillennialism and the Higher Critics* (Chicago: Glad Tidings Publishing Co., 1923), 259.

²⁵*Ibid.*

upon the New Testament, Faulkner believed that these confirm the sermons, and show how very little Wesley had of the "Premillennial mind," and, unlike West, Faulkner thought Wesley's thoughts on Revelation 20 showed his postmillennial bias!²⁶ Tyerman's treatment of Wesley as a premillennialist received special criticism because Faulkner believed Tyerman read into Wesley's words a meaning that Wesley never intended. Wesley thanked Thomas Hartley for his confirmation of the millennium, nothing more; Wesley was not agreeing with Hartley's premillennial views. Regarding the Wesleyan corpus of hymns, Faulkner thought they could be sung by any Christian, regardless of the millennial bias. All can sing

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,
Once for favored sinners slain!
Thousand, thousand saints attending,
Swell the Triumph of his train.
Hallelujah!
God appears on earth to reign.

Faulkner thought this hymn came the closest to a premillennial expression, although it appeared in the 1905 *Methodist Hymnal*. He observed, "and you may be sure there were no premillennialists on the committee which compiled that book."²⁷ After considerable study of the primary Wesley sources, Faulkner concluded that Wesley's emphases lay closest to the postmillennial view.²⁸

In 1944 C. F. Wimberly published an article in the *Christian Witness* entitled, "John Wesley—a Premillennialist." In a time that tried to rediscover Wesley, Wimberly attempted to rediscover the premillennial element of Wesley's faith. He offered "seven proofs" that Wesley held the premillennial view. These proofs included a quote from Samuel Wesley, one on Charles' hymns, a brief examination of Wesley's associates and the early Methodist leaders, Wesley's 1749 letter to Dr. Middleton and review of Thomas Hartley's book, and sundry comments from various people who believed Wesley a premillennialist, including Luke Tyerman.²⁹

It was suggested at the beginning of this article that the controversy over which eschatological position Wesley held has still not been conclusively settled. Over the last several years some items have appeared which tend to reopen this discussion.

In 1967 Dr. Jerry Mercer published an article in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* in which he wrote, "it can hardly be doubted that

²⁶John A. Faulkner, *Burning Questions in Historic Christianity* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1930), 131.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 182.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹C. F. Wimberly, "John Wesley—a Premillennialist," *The Christian Witness and Advocate of Bible Holiness*, April 20, 1944, 14.

Wesley's adopted view is what would today be termed 'postmillennialism'.³⁰

Dr. Frederick E. Maser wrote "The Unknown John Wesley" for *The Drew Gateway* in 1978, and argued "it is difficult to discover what view of eschatology Wesley supported."³¹ Maser goes on to say, "by 1788 he [Wesley] seems tired of the whole subject and is content simply to save souls."³²

In 1979 Clarence Bence published an article in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* in which he at first appeared to argue that Wesley held the premillennial view.³³ However, that is not his intention, and Bence quickly showed that Wesley can appropriately be claimed by advocates of either side.³⁴

Dr. W. Ralph Thompson wrote the section, "The Millennium," for the two volume set, *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, which appeared in 1983. He wrote, "while John Wesley did not emphasize post-millennialism, his writings reveal that he tended to think in keeping with that frame of reference."³⁵

Donald W. Dayton, whose *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* appeared in 1987 claimed "the basic thrust of Wesley's thought was probably better captured by the less apocalyptic and more postmillennial schemes of thought."³⁶

Did John Wesley espouse the postmillennial or premillennial view? As this survey illustrates, scholars have been almost equally divided on the issue over the years, and that is not likely to change.

The problem appears to be a double edged one. First, Wesley did not specifically say which eschatological interpretation he preferred, and scholars have gotten into trouble when they took the liberty to choose one for him. Secondly, as Donald Dayton suggests, "Wesley was so oriented to soteriology that his followers could combine a basically Wesleyan scheme of salvation with a variety of eschatologies without an obvious sense of betrayal."³⁷

Interestingly enough studies have appeared in recent years which tend to see Wesley from different eschatological perspectives. For example,

³⁰Jerry Mercer, "The Destiny of Man in John Wesley's Eschatology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Spring 1957, 60.

³¹Frederick E. Maser, "The Unknown John Wesley," *The Drew Gateway*, Winter 1978, 11.

³²*Ibid.*

³³Clarence Bence, "Processive Eschatology: A Wesleyan Alternative," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Spring, 1979, 45.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 46.

³⁵W. Ralph Thompson, "Eschatology," in Charles W. Carter, general editor, *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1983), 2, 1119.

³⁶Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Frances Asbury Press, 1987), 153.

³⁷*Ibid.*

Colin Williams published *John Wesley's Theology Today* in 1960 and claimed that Wesley "stressed realized eschatology more than any other leading western theologian."³⁸ Cyril Downes argued that a better term for Wesley's position would be "anticipated eschatology," and Clarence Bence suggests that "we can and should develop a processive eschatology" to interpret modern Wesleyan theology.³⁹

What these scholars are saying is that Wesley's message may be understood from more than one eschatological perspective. We need to understand him as an evangelist of salvation as well as an apocalyptic prophet. There is room in the Wesleyan biblical interpretation for both emphases.

So where did Wesley stand in relation to the end times? Was he postmillennial or premillennial? The answer lies with the interpreter.

³⁸Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 194.

³⁹Bence, "Processive Eschatology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Spring, 1979, 46.