

# Christian Studies

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## *Foreword*

To a visitor from earlier in this century, the single most eye-catching feature of modern life would be the overwhelming presence of unimaginable technologies in every area of human life. Medical, transportation, and communication technologies alone have revolutionized modern culture and brought enormous benefits. Innumerable other technologies bring a wide range of conveniences to modern life undreamed of even fifty years ago. We live in a technological culture.

Christians, always finding themselves at the juncture of the old age and the age to come, must constantly be discerning the signs of the times. Being the people of God in a technological culture raises critical and complex questions for the contemporary church.

Is technological progress the same as human progress? Is technology a morally neutral tool no better or worse than the ends it serves? Do technological means “overrun the ends,” unconsciously limiting human vision and predisposing human action? To what extent is the maker of the machine morally and spiritually altered by the machine?

The essays in this issue of *Christian Studies* address the nature and significance of technology in the world and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

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# The Lure of Millennium 2000

## *What Is at Stake for the Christian Believer?*

Allan J. McNicol

Only if you just arrived from Mars would you, by now, not have an opinion on the Y2K hullabaloo. Mercifully, I come today with no new claim to knowledge or particular expertise on that matter.<sup>1</sup>

I am told that my computer is Y2K compliant. I will not be taking a flight on December 31. And since, by the grace of God, I will have a significant decade-entering birthday a week before the change of the millennium, the near arrival of that particular milestone in my life looms with as much importance to me as that other change in the calendar.

Nevertheless, for Christian believers, the most significant fact in human history is the event of Jesus. Jaroslav Pelikan calls it the “turning point of history.”<sup>2</sup> And the fact that we now mark two thousand years since Jesus’ coming is a matter that surely warrants some reflection. Also, it just so happens that the term “millennium” is also a concept that spawns its own particular cluster of issues and creates its own field of story within Christianity. The term, of course, is drawn from several references in Revelation 20 where it speaks about the reign of Christ for *mille annum* (Latin) one thousand

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<sup>1</sup>An abbreviated form of this article has been presented in various forums over the past twelve months. Notes and documentation have been added to the text of the oral presentation for purposes of clarification.

<sup>2</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985), 21, 32-33.

years. The fact that we are now on the verge of a third millennium since the Christ-Event also invites reflection on this well traveled concept since it first came to light in a significant way in the Apocalypse of John.

Our task is straightforward. It is to take up several important faith issues for consideration that are suggested by the arrival of the dawn of the third millennium of Christian history.

First, we wish to consider a significant fact. Is it merely an accidental detail of history that the name of Jesus hardly appeared in any standard book of history or literature of the cultured elite in the first hundred years after his death, but now, two thousand years later, we find time is dated from his birth? How can this be that someone that few heard of in the era in which he lived, or for a considerable time later, could be reckoned to be the most significant figure in human history? To repeat, is this a mere accident of history? What can we glean from this startling fact with respect to how God works in history? What is the story behind the growth of influence of Jesus culminating in the calendar change in his honor anyway?

In addition, the view that there will be a time in history when things will work well—the coming of a millennium—is an idea that has persisted in Christianity for two thousand years. At the heart of the concept of millennium lurks another set of questions that appear to have some significance for Christian faith. Two issues emerge that are of special relevance. First, how has the thinking about the millennium played a role in Christian faith? Given all that has happened in the past century, do we still believe that there will be a golden age? Or to put it more theologically, do we believe that God will fulfill his promises and finally bring his new creation to fulfillment? Second, now that two millennia have elapsed, as we anticipate the dawn of the third millennium, what is the appropriate way for Christians to celebrate this up-coming event? Procedurally, we will now move to discuss these issues in more detail.

### **The Growth of Jesus' Influence and the Calendar Question**

Our best historical sources indicate that Jesus of Nazareth was born in about

6 to 4 BC. Of course in those times there was a very different system of dating time. Jesus was born in the early period of the Roman Empire. By and large, historians during this era situated historical events in the context of the tenure of a particular Roman emperor or official. Thus Luke, who has some pretensions to being a Hellenistic historian, dates major events in the life of Jesus from either the time of the Herods or the relevant Roman emperors (Lk 1:5; 2:1; 3:1). Others up until Eusebius do the same thing. For the wider picture the Romans placed the imperial reigns in a chronology computed from the legendary date of the founding of Rome known as A. U. C. (*ab urbe condita*). According to this basic calendar Jesus was born in about 750 A. U. C. Thus the question arises, how and on what basis was the calendar changed? Herein rests a story that has some significance for faith.

For about three centuries after its beginnings, the Christian community was marginalized. In my judgment, well into the second century, the number of adherents to Christian faith could be numbered in the low thousands. However, as time went on, growth became more significant. Among the more significant events that galvanized Christian consciousness in the early centuries were the terrible persecutions which hit hardest during the last half of the third century, especially under Diocletian (284-305). The impact of this time was seared in the memory of the church. It led some Christian groups to date year one of their calendars from the age of the Martyrs (284, the beginning of the reign of Diocletian, being a popular choice). Perhaps this way of dating came from an ancient Christian custom of commemorating the anniversary of the death of martyrs. The actual day of martyrdom was thought to be the *dies natalis* (the day of the birth of the heavenly life of the martyr). This dating is still utilized by certain groups like some of the Copts in North Africa today. Nevertheless, the influence of the Roman calendar still continued.<sup>3</sup>

It was not until about the year 500 that the obscure Scythian monk

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<sup>3</sup>Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 21, 32-33.

Dionysius Exiguus arrived on the scene in Rome. As an accomplished scholar, he was instrumental in persuading the authorities to begin the calendar from the time of another birth: the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. Specifically, Dionysius decided that the true beginning of the Jesus-Event should not be December 25 (the date the Roman Church had settled on as the actual *birth day* of Jesus), but taking the time span of a normal pregnancy, he went back nine months and settled on March 25, which was reckoned to be the time of the Annunciation to Mary (Lk 1:26-34). This is the point of time from which he began to date the years. From Dionysius onward until the Gregorian reforms of the calendar in the Sixteenth Century, in Europe, the New Year started on March 25. For some reason Dionysius miscalculated the actual date of the birth of Christ by 4 to 6 years. So on our calendar Jesus was actually born somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C. *Therefore, two thousand years have actually passed since the time of Christ's birth.* But with the triumph of Christianity in Europe, Dionysius' calendar became entrenched as the normative reckoning of time in Europe. From then onward the die was cast. Yet it would be a long time before the rest of the world would recognize this calendar. Indeed, it was not until the nineteenth century of missionary expansion in Africa and Asia, what Kenneth Latourette calls "the Great Century," that Christianity truly became a world-wide phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Pursuant to the expansion of Western culture and technology that followed in the wake of this missionary movement (or is it the other way around?) the use of the Christian calculation of time has practically become universal.

Thus, almost imperceptibly in the modern era, the early Christian claim, to paraphrase Oscar Cullmann, that Christ stands at the mid-point of time between Creation and Parousia, has taken on a deeper dimension.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Kenneth Latourette, "New Perspectives in Church History," *Journal of Religion* 21 (1994): 436-438.

<sup>5</sup>Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

Indeed Christ not only stands at the mid-point of time but, as we noted, at the turning point of time. As we speak, no other figure can approach his impact on human history. How ironic that someone who lived the life of a servant, suffered the humiliation of the cross, and is hardly mentioned in the annals of ancient cultural literature until more than a century after his birth, turns out two thousand years later to be arguably the most significant figure of human history: just as the early Christians confessed him to be in their worship and writings. Surely it is not just a mere expression of Christian triumphalism to say that this brute fact should be cause for reflection. Fundamental elements of the confession which a mere handful of people in the first century somewhat implausibly acknowledged and staked their eternal destiny upon, *suo iure*, are now acknowledged to the four corners of the earth as pivotal and are even embedded in our calendar. This, I would submit, is a reality worth pondering as we stand at the beginning of the third millennium. Is this a mere accident of history? Or is there something more to the matter than that?

### **The Third Millennium**

Now to the other issue. Yes, we stand at the doorway of the third millennium. And this too is a term, which, due to its potent past, demands at least passing familiarity among Christians today.

The word, as we have noted, comes from the text of Revelation 20. In the narrative context of Revelation it refers to a special reward given to the martyrs or, in the words of John, "the souls of those who were beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the Word of God" (Rev 20:4). During this time Satan is bound, the martyrs are brought to life, and as their reward they will reign with Christ a thousand years. In the context of Revelation at the end of the thousand years there comes a brief final rebellion of the nations, which culminates in the ultimate banishment of Satan, followed by the general resurrection and Last Judgment.

To put it mildly, the interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Christ has been a conundrum for interpreters ever since the Book of Revelation

came to light. As noted above, the thousand-year period primarily involves the vindication of the martyrs, a major theme that has been stressed throughout the book (cf. Rev. 6:9-11; 12:17; 13:8; 18:24; 19:2; etc.). There is also evidence in interpretation among the Jews that the idea of the thousand years appears to represent a return to ideal Adamic existence (an interpretive combination of Gen. 2:4, 17, and Ps 90:4). Ideal Adamic existence may have been considered to have lasted for about a thousand years. If we put these ideas together, we have the promise that those who would exhibit loyalty to Jesus, to the extent they may even face martyrdom, are promised a new world in which they will enjoy the glories of the original Adamic existence. This may not be too far from what the prophet John was saying to the seven churches.

Yet, ever since the second century this text has been awash in controversy. Many early leaders such as Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus took the reference to a thousand years literally. They went on to claim it was an essential element of Christian doctrine to anticipate an *earthly* reign of Christ with his resurrected holy ones over the nations after his parousia. The idea of the millennium was integrated into views that each day of the seven days of the Jewish week symbolized one thousand years of human history. This history would conclude either with a Sabbath rest of a millennium after six thousand years, or an eighth day after seven thousand years.

But there were always doubters. The text of Revelation does not indicate explicitly where the thousand-year reign of Christ is supposed to take place (on earth or somewhere else), or when it was supposed to begin. Given the fact that numbers are notoriously symbolic throughout the Apocalypse, such ambiguities fueled the view that this whole passage should be read in a more allegorical way. Especially influential was Augustine's interpretation. In his famous *City of God* he viewed the world in conflict between two powers: the *City of God* and the *City of Man*. The *City of God* is the church. With its inauguration after the resurrection of Christ, it represents the action of the binding of Satan. Thus, the beginning of the millennium,

for Augustine, was the era of the church. Gradually the power of Rome (the referent to the *City of Man*) was to be usurped by the *City of God*—the church. This interpretation took considerable liberties with the text of Revelation 20:4-6, but it did have the advantage of providing a basic rationale for the role of the church as the ideological sub-structure for the state in the Middle Ages.

Despite some recent writings to the contrary, the historical evidence is ambiguous that the coming of the year 1000 precipitated apocalyptic fever in Europe. However, a critical turning point in Western millennial thinking did come with the writings of Joachim of Fiore (1132-1202). Joachim was concerned with the moral decadence that was widespread in the church of the medieval period. He read the Apocalypse as encoding the history of the church up until his time. He was particularly interested in the reference to 1260 days in Revelation 11:3 and 12:5. He viewed these passages as saying that somewhere about the year 1260 (he read the 1260 days as 1260 years) the Antichrist would appear, and after his overthrow would come the millennium. What was necessary was that the church needed moral renewal to be ready for the millennium. In Joachim's view the response to the preaching of the monks would precipitate this renewal.<sup>6</sup>

What is especially significant about this is that the idea of 1260 embedded itself in the consciousness of the West. Reformation theologians argued for some centuries that 1260 referred to 1260 years of the papacy and this would be followed by the millennium. Many early Restorationist commentators took this view.

In the late nineteenth century John Nelson Darby and other dispensationalists argued that the references to 1260 in the Apocalypse should not be seen as a reference to years but ought to be taken as literal days of the

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<sup>6</sup>A. W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 45-53 has a helpful discussion of the life and significance of Joachim of Fiore for the study of millennial thinking.

time of Antichrist which would come after a supposed rapture of the saints by Christ from the earth to heaven, and would eventually be followed, after a period of tribulation, by a second return of Christ to inaugurate the millennium.<sup>7</sup> This view is widespread among evangelicals to this day.

One could go on with a recitation of the various mutations of these views, but I think we have established the position that millennial thinking has been an important factor in Western Christian culture for over two thousand years.

Well then, what is the significance for us as we approach the new millennium? Since the rise of modern science, we doubt very much whether there are many who will expect, upon the turn of the calendar to 2000, there will be ushered in the Sabbath rest that the ancients expected. In fact, especially in some secular circles, there is an anxiety that just the opposite may take place with potential technological melt-downs! Still, the coming of the millennium is a biblical concept. No matter how much the fanatical date setters have discredited it, its appearance in the Canon is a reminder that God has pledged that he will bring his new creation, inaugurated through the resurrection of Christ, to fulfillment. And not only that, but those who suffer with Christ will reign with him. Christians do believe things will get better. In a time when the world is beset by various conflicts, it would be good not to forget that. Christianity is not a religion of an "Eternal Return." Each day we live we are one day closer to the time of our ultimate salvation (Rom 13:11). History has a goal. If the coming of the new millennium does nothing else, it serves as a reminder that the world does not belong to Caesar but will be fully claimed at a future point of time by the Christ of Calvary. Is this a

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<sup>7</sup>Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992 English Edition) gives a thorough description of Darby's views. In many ways Darby's influence in the United Kingdom paralleled that of Alexander Campbell in America. Both, in their own right, were nineteenth century Restorationists who had deeply held views on millennial matters. Of course, Campbell moved in the orbit of post-millennialism while Darby popularized dispensational pre-millennialism.

living reality for us?

### **The Celebration of the Millennium**

What, then, is the appropriate way for Christians to celebrate the turn of the calendar to 2000?<sup>8</sup> This is a reasonable question, because at the time of writing there is considerable hesitancy within the Christian community with respect to the stance believers should take on this issue.

We can quickly set aside the obscene expressions of spending extravagant amounts of money on partying as not being an option for the thinking Christian. After all, despite technical problems of dating, it remains a fact that we are celebrating the blessings that have accrued for humankind since Jesus came into the world two thousand years ago and not some secular event.

Normally, the culturally approved way of marking such a time would be to stage huge rallies and use the occasion to engage in inflated expressions of the glories of past accomplishments. But, again, one senses that the Christian community is in no mood for displays of triumphalism.<sup>9</sup> And it is a good thing, too! For if one looks back to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago, need we be reminded that it was an event that occurred in the humblest of circumstances? Less than a generation later, the apostle Paul would have no qualms in telling a Greek-speaking audience that the central focus of Jesus' life was that "he took the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:6-11). Perhaps with the recollection of these circumstances and the impact

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<sup>8</sup>Here we intend to set aside the fruitless discussion as to whether the next millennium actually commences in 2000 or 2001. Technically, those who agree with the latter perspective are correct. But it is a fruitless argument because the attention of most people is concentrated on one thing: the precise time of the turn of the calendar from 1999 to 2000.

<sup>9</sup>This point has been made recently by Mike Shepherd: "Why celebrate the Millennium Anyway?" *Expository Times* 110/11 (1999): 357-359. However, Shepherd engages in some unnecessary self-flagellation with his tired remarks suggesting that after the Crusades and other excesses of Constantinianism, Christians ought to mark the up-coming transition to the new millennium with repentance.

of Jesus' life still riveted in our minds, we may have stumbled upon the clue of developing a stance toward carrying out an appropriate Christian recognition of the transition to the third millennium. And that is to highlight the fact that the Kingdom which Jesus inaugurated and to which we owe allegiance is different from all other kingdoms.

If we go back to the Matthean account of the birth of Jesus, we are struck immediately by the reality that the birth of Jesus was terribly inconvenient and problematic to the political authorities of the time (Matt. 2:1-18). To the Herods and other claimants to power, Jesus' *birth day* was subversive to another gospel which claimed *their* allegiance: namely, that Caesar was the patron of all spiritual and material benefits. We would humbly suggest that not much has changed. Ever since, even after the calendar was changed to put Jesus at the center of history, the analogues to Caesar have sought to displace the stranger from Galilee from his rightful place as the central figure of history. It is generally recognized that we are approaching the end of an era known as the European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment celebrated reason and personal autonomy as the ultimate value for humankind. One of the pivotal events of the Enlightenment era was the French Revolution. It is seldom recalled these days that there was a very serious attempt by the instigators of that revolution to start the calendar anew from that time.<sup>10</sup> Other totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century have entertained the same idea.

And yet the gospel brought by Jesus subverts all of these claims. It is a story that highlights the claim that the Creator himself reclaimed the Creation and began to set all things right through the power of the wounded suffering love of Jesus of Nazareth. This story is the very antithesis to both the claims of the Caesars and all the other Y2K hoopla of our times. Somehow it remains incumbent upon a sometimes demoralized church, pushed back in

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<sup>10</sup>As noted by N. T. Wright, *The Millennium Myth: Hope for a Modern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999), 80.

the corner of the flow of history, to raise quietly its hand and speak the truth that it is, after all, Jesus' *birth day* we are about to celebrate. And when the dust has cleared after these past two thousand years, he *was* the turning point of history. What is the appropriate way to celebrate the new beginning of the new millennium? Rehearse to those who have never heard it the gospel of Jesus. This remains the only true alternative to the gods of the age.

### **Conclusion**

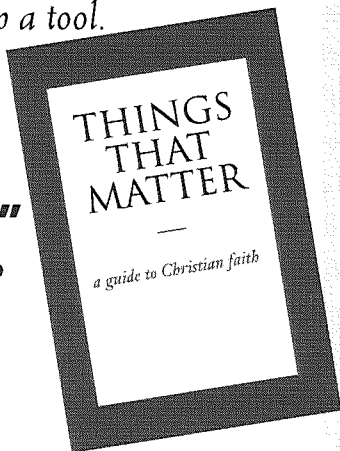
Millennium 2000 has an interesting ring to it! Almost a lure. It reminds us that no matter how improbable the initial claims of the early Christians that Jesus is Lord may have seemed, two thousand years later they echo with plausibility and conviction. Despite the many dead-ends into which millennial theories have taken the church throughout its history, the fact remains that what the apostle reminds us is true: the time of our ultimate salvation is "nearer to us when we first believed." Fortified with the conviction that the coming of Jesus was the turning point of history, we approach the dawning of the new millennium confident in the hope that before too long God will bring his new creation begun in Christ to total fulfillment.

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