

Part 1: The Millennial Issue in Modern Theology

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord explores the contemporary theological debate on the millennial issue, emphasizing the significance of premillennialism in understanding biblical prophecy and interpretation.

Scripture: Exodus 32:9, Numbers 14:11, John 14:3, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20, Revelation 20:2, Revelation 20:4

Topics: "Eschatology", "Millennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the contemporary discussion of the millennial issue in theology, highlighting the impact of recent events on scholarly thinking in philosophy, science, and theology, particularly in eschatology. The sermon explores the current trends in millennial literature, the resurgence of amillennialism, and the convergence of three main streams of theology leading to amillennialism becoming the majority view in the church. It also addresses the importance of the millennial doctrine in shaping Biblical interpretation and theology, emphasizing the significance of premillennialism as a system of interpretation that impacts the entire Bible and the present purpose of God.

Transcript

[Author's note: Many have requested that Bibliotheca Sacra publish a series of articles dealing with the contemporary discussion of the millennial issue in theology. Beginning with this Number, this series will be undertaken. It is the desire of the author to be constructive, not controversial; but due note will be taken of the many recent books which have appeared bearing on this subject. The author will welcome suggestions from readers.]

The events of the last quarter of a century or more have had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the scholarly world. In philosophy there has been a trend toward realism and increasing interest in ultimate values and ethics. In science the moral significance of scientific knowledge and the growing realization that physical science is a part of world life and meaning have emerged. In theology there has been what amounts to a similar revolution, particularly in eschatology.

Current Trends in Millennial Literature

One of the significant facts of the theology of the last century is its emphasis on eschatological or prophetic questions. Even the works of liberal theologians frequently discuss the Christian outlook. Millar Burrows, for instance, in his work *An Outline of Biblical Theology* rightly gives a long chapter to the subject, and current liberal theological anthologies such as Thomas Kepler's *Contemporary Thinking about Jesus and his Contemporary Religious Thought* both have considerable sections on eschatology from recent writings of liberal theological scholars.

For the most part, writings in eschatology among the liberals are limited to the search for ultimate ethical values rather than a statement of a prophetic program. The light cast on the path ahead is at best out of focus and presents a blurred perspective. The trend toward eschatology is significant, however, as a background to our present study of the millennium. for the present and does not attempt to solve the future course of human history.

The lines of millennial discussion were defined somewhat as for and against an earthly millennium. This seemed to be the significance of the trend of world events. Historic amillennialism was against the idea of a literal kingdom of Christ on earth and all signs seemed to point to no progress in this direction. The ground was provided for abandonment of postmillennial optimism and leaving to heavenly realms any idealistic system of peace and righteousness.

In the last two decades there has been, accordingly, an evident resurgence in amillennialism. The converts have come from many sources. Those who had become skeptical about a millennium on earth to be achieved through Christian influence and the church found it a natural conclusion that their error lay in taking too seriously the glowing prophecies of the Old Testament of a kingdom of righteousness and peace on earth. There were no signs of such an era on the horizon, and both Christians and non-Christians were talking darkly of the end of civilization and a third and final world war in which man would destroy himself. It seemed in the spirit of the times to conclude that there would be no millennium on earth and that freedom from sin and war was to be found only in heaven. While the downward course of the modern world was no embarrassment to premillennialists who had been preaching about such a trend for years, the church as a whole was unwilling to admit any accuracy in the premillennial view. Instead the tendency was to return to the conservatism of the Reformation which made no pretense of being specific about the millennium.

Three main streams of theology have converged in our day to make amillennialism without question the majority view of the church. First, the old conservatism which had abandoned the hope of Daniel Whitby for a millennium on earth found refuge in the ancient creeds, which for the most part say nothing about the millennium. Their position was that the real issue was faith in the Bible and in the person, and work of Christ. Why argue about prophecy when the very foundations are threatened? As a great New Testament scholar put it in a private letter, "The issue of our day is for or against the Bible. We cannot afford to differ on other issues." While there is some force to this argument, Christianity will not survive on an undefined loyalty to Scripture. The hope of future events is inseparable from Christian faith and any vagueness weakens and limits the whole perspective.

A second influence in the resurgence of amillennialism is the growth in power of the Roman Catholic Church. Since the day of Augustine this body has been almost entirely amillennial. Their very structure of church government and their program of works depend on use of the Old Testament promises about the coming kingdom as fulfilled in the church. In a day when liberalism has weakened Protestantism, the solid influence of tradition and continuity of the Roman Church has had a profound appeal. Nothing could be

more antithetical than the Roman Church and premillennialism, and its influence is solidly amillennial.

A third influence in the present power of amillennialism is found in liberal Protestant theology. With low views of the inspiration of Scripture and with no concern for any consistent interpretation of Scripture, the tendency toward skepticism in eschatology is marked. If postmillennialism could no longer be held, why not be skeptical of any millennium at all? Without availing themselves of historical arguments except when convenient to their purpose, liberals have united in almost one voice in their denunciation of premillennialism and the doctrine of an earthly reign of Christ.

In the liberal theological tendency toward amillennialism there appears an element which has not been evaluated properly in current arguments on the millennial issue. It is evident that premillennialism constitutes a large segment of conservative Christianity of our day. It was soon discovered by liberal theologians that it was a most effective device in combatting the old conservatism in theology to attack premillennialism. Any attack or discrediting of premillennialism redounded to the benefit of liberal theology without exposing them to embarrassing questions concerning their own belief in the Scriptures. Premillennialists could be attacked with impunity. Liberals who did so could pose as defenders of the Reformed faith, as those seeking the purity and unity of the church, as those who wanted to reclaim the Bible from a false and misleading form of interpretation. Liberals who could not stand examination on any essential of conservative Christian theology were found in the strange role of champions of Reformed theology because they denounced premillennialism. No doubt some of them were sincere in their error, but their zeal betrayed the hidden and sometimes unconscious motive.

In the last decade a further tendency to exploit this argument has appeared in the device to divide premillennialists into the old school of interpretation which often contented itself with a theology which was premillennial only in its eschatology, and the more recent type which makes premillennialism a system of theology. Conceding that premillennialism was ancient and to that extent honored, they denounced what they termed dispensationalism as a new and modern error.[3] Cf. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945). The subtitle of his book is "An examination of the claim of dispensationalists that the Christian Church is a mystery parenthesis which interrupts the fulfillment to Israel of the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament." Scholars who had no interest whatever in premillennialism wrote on fine points of dispute among premillennialists as if the existence of unsolved problems and disagreements proved beyond doubt that the principles on which the interpretation was based were hopelessly involved. Conservative scholars were influenced into playing right into the hands of the desire of liberals to divide the remaining strength of conservative theology.

One of the curious aspects of current literature on the millennial issue is the singling out of the Scofield Reference Bible for attack. This edition of the Bible which has had unprecedented circulation has done much to popularize premillennial teachings and to provide ready helps of interpretation. It has probably done more to extend premillennialism in the last half century than any other volume. This accounts for the many attempts to discredit this work. The recent book of Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, a product of a lifelong study and a special year of research, brings most of its attack down to refuting the Scofield Bible. *Millennial Studies* by George L. Murray published in 1948, the result of twelve years of study on the millennial problem, mentions the Scofield Bible more than any other work. The refutation of the Scofield Bible is curious because each succeeding writer apparently believes his predecessors have not succeeded in disposing of this work once-for-all. This belief apparently is well founded, for the Scofield Bible continues to be issued year after year in greater numbers than any of its refuters.

The current millennial debate is singular for its negative quality. While premillennialism has had poor handling by many of its own adherents, it has at least aimed at being constructive, offering a definite system of interpretation and providing a positive voice. While amillennialism has attracted many scholars and has produced many works on the millennial issue in the last two decades, for the most part their approach has been one of ridicule and attack on premillennialism rather than an ordered presentation of their own system of beliefs. This direction of published studies has been born of the nature of the amillennial theory--a denial of the millennium. Amillennialists have also rightly argued that if they successfully disposed of their opponents who were premillennial they would have no effective opposition to their own viewpoint. The negative attitude was also one of necessity, as amillennialists are by no means agreed on the very essentials of their own system of eschatology and millenarianism.

One of the most unfortunate and harmful aspects of the trend toward amillennialism is the desperation evidenced in the nature of their attempts to discredit other viewpoints. In particular, in their refutation of premillennialism every aberration which has been held by any premillenarian has been upheld as typical of the movement. Even scholars such as Allis and Kromminga, who do not descend to lower levels of debate, are guilty in numerous instances of the most flagrant ad hominem argument. Their obvious purpose is to prove that premillennialism has a tendency to heresy in all fields of theology. Kromminga, in his first reference to the Scofield Bible, attempts to prove that Scofield was guilty of "heretical aberration" in the doctrine of the Trinity. His proof for this is a rather obscure reference to Israel as the wife of Jehovah and the church as the wife of Christ.[4] D. H. Kromminga, *Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), pp. 23-24. Allis tries to link premillennialism with Russellism because both believe the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional.[5] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 48. Again, Allis in discussing the offer of the kingdom by Christ asserts that the issue is that if Christ offered the Jews a millennial kingdom He was by so much saying that the cross was unnecessary. He says the argument "amounts to this, Could men have been saved without the Cross?"[6] *Ibid.*, p. 75. As Allis would be the first to admit, no group of millennialists have been more faithful in preaching the necessity of the cross than premillennialists, and to say that their view requires declaring the cross unnecessary is a conclusion which no premillenarian would reach. Allis has forgotten that he is a Calvinist and that God can make a bona fide offer of something which in His sovereignty and foreknowledge He knows will not and cannot eventuate--a principle which has many illustrations in the Bible, as for instance the dealings of God with Moses (Exod 32:9-14; Num 14:11-20). This unfortunate tendency to raise false issues in the attack on premillennialism only confuses the issue, and makes partisans of those who should be in Christian fellowship however they may differ in the millennial doctrine. While objectivity has been lacking in all viewpoints of the millennium, on the scholarly level amillennialism has sinned the most. This defect will be discussed in great detail in the analysis of amillennialism which will appear later.

While not directly related to millennial literature, there has been a significant current trend in institutions of learning in America respecting the doctrine of the millennium. In theological institutions the common viewpoint is that of amillennialism. The most notable change has been in liberal seminaries, which were predominantly postmillennial before World War I. While there is still much talk of a "better world" and "bringing in the Kingdom," it is quite divorced from millennial discussions. Most theological seminaries view the millennium as an unfruitful area for study and tend to suspend judgment on any detailed exegesis of related Scriptural passages.

A significant exception and contrast to the trend toward amillennialism is found in Bible institutes which, while having relatively lower scholastic standards, are definitely more Biblical in their curriculum than the

great majority of theological seminaries. The Bible institute movement in America has not only been predominantly premillennial from the start, but there has been no noticeable trend away from this position. The way in which premillennialism is held by Bible institutes is also significant. The viewpoint is in part unconscious, that is, their curriculum is not designed to propagate premillennialism in itself. The acceptance of premillennialism is rather as a means of interpreting the entire Bible and acquainting students with a consistent form of interpretation. The thousands of institute graduates being poured forth each year constitute one of the bright spots for premillennialism in the current trend. On a popular level Bible institutes or related organizations publish a large amount of literature which follows the premillennial interpretation of Scripture.

Taken as a whole, the current trend in millennial literature indicates a mounting attack on premillennialists by those who hold the amillennial position, a foresaking of postmillennialism as outmoded, and an increasingly significant use of the millennial issue by liberals to divide and conquer those remaining in conservative theological circles. The qualities of the respective arguments remain for detailed study.

Importance of Millennial Doctrine

The question has been raised whether the discussion of the millennial doctrine is in itself important and worthy of the consideration of the scholarly world. There remains today a tendency to dismiss the whole subject as belonging to another age and as being foreign to intellectual studies of our day. D. C. MacIntosh refers to premillennialism as obsolete: "the whole obsolete idea of a literal, visible return of Jesus to this earth." [7] D. C. MacIntosh, op. cit., p. 203. On the other hand, the continued production of books on the subject points to a growing realization that the issue is more important than appears on the surface. If premillennialism is only a dispute about what will happen in a future age which is quite removed from present issues, that is one thing. If, however, premillennialism is a system of interpretation which involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible, defines the meaning and course of the present age, determines the present purpose of God, and gives both material and method to theology, that is something else. It is the growing realization that premillennialism is more than a dispute about Revelation 20 that has precipitated the extended arguments on the issue in our day. For the first time it seems to be commonly recognized that premillennial theology has become a system of theology, not an alternate view of eschatology which is unrelated to theology as a whole.

It has already been noted that premillennialism is a stubborn obstacle to liberal theology as well as being utterly opposed to the principles governing Roman Catholic theology. The reason for this is that premillennialism uses a literal interpretation of the prophetic Word which is the backbone of comprehensive Bible study. Premillennialism not only takes the Bible as authoritative in opposition to liberalism, but believes that an ordinary believer can understand the main import of the Scriptures including the prophetic Word. This is utterly contrary to the Roman conception. The present Bible-study movement in this country as illustrated in Bible and prophetic conferences and the Bible institutes is almost entirely premillennial in its background. In fact it is considered a common charge against premillennarians that they are guilty of Bibliolatry or worship of the Bible. Opposition to premillennialism particularly by the liberals is largely against regarding the Bible as the only final authority. MacIntosh states flatly that "the explanation" for "the long-expected and theoretically hoped-for second coming of Christ...is to be found in the doctrine of the miraculous inspiration and consequent literal infallibility of the Bible." [8] Ibid., pp. 192-193. This to him is "incredible." [9] Ibid., p. 193. It is inevitable that defense of premillennialism becomes a defense of the Bible itself and its sole authority in speaking of future events and programs of God.

The millennial doctrine determines also large areas of Biblical interpretation which are not in themselves prophetic in character. The distinctions in dispensational dealings of God, the contrasts between the Mosaic period, the Abrahamic promises, the present age of grace, and the unfulfilled prophecies about the coming kingdom are of major importance in Biblical interpretation and systematic theology. Many of these issues are largely determined by the millennial doctrine. Distinctions in particular which pertain to the character of the present age in its purpose and program are involved. If the present purpose of God is to bring in a millennium through Christian influence and preaching, that is one thing; if there is no millennium at all, that is another; if the millennium is yet to be fulfilled on the earth through the second coming of Christ, that is still another. The concept of the present age is therefore vitally affected by the doctrine of the millennium. It is not too much to say that premillennialism is a determining factor in Biblical interpretation of comparable importance to the doctrines of verbal inspiration, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection. These doctrines are held by both premillenarians and conservative amillenarians. It is of course true that to individual faith a denial of the deity of Christ is more momentous and far-reaching than denial of premillennialism, but as far as a system of interpretation is concerned both are vital. The growing recognition of the importance of the millennial doctrine is one of the principal causes of resurgence of interest in this field.

Contemporary Viewpoints on Millennialism

Various conceptions of the millennium are inevitably related to the doctrine of the second advent of Christ. The four views of the Lord's coming which have existed in the last two millenniums {sic} carry with them a concept of the millennium. As a preliminary to later more detailed consideration of these theories, a survey of the field is in order.

Spiritualized second advent. A common modern view of the Lord's return is the so-called spiritual view which identifies the coming of Christ as a perpetual advance of Christ in the church that includes many particular events. William Newton Clarke, for instance, held that the promises of the second coming are fulfilled by "his spiritual presence with his people," which is introduced by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, accompanied by the overthrow of Jerusalem, and ultimately fulfilled by continual spiritual advance in the church.[10] William N. Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, fifth edition, pp. 443-46. In other words it is not an event, but it includes all the events of the Christian era which are the work of Christ. Such a viewpoint not only fails to provide for all the attendant events related to the second coming of Christ but eliminates the millennium completely. Essentially it is amillennial, though not the historic type. This viewpoint--held by many liberals of our day--contributes practically nothing to the millennial issue. Between the first and second comings is the fulfillment of the millennium. Its adherents differ as to whether the millennium is being fulfilled in the earth (Augustine) or whether it is being fulfilled by the saints in heaven (Warfield). It may be summed up in the idea that there will be no more millennium than there is now, and that the eternal state immediately follows the second coming of Christ. It is similar to postmillennialism in that Christ comes after what they regard as the millennium. As they freely recognize that their concept of the millennium is quite foreign to the premillennial view they have been given the title amillennial by most writers, but there continues a measure of disagreement. The evolution of amillennialism will be discussed later and its various turns defined.

Premillennialism. This term derives its meaning from the belief that the second coming of Christ will be premillennial or before the millennium, and that a literal reign on earth for a millennium will follow. As a system of doctrine it is necessarily more literal in its interpretation of prophecy than the other viewpoints. It views the end of the present age as sudden and catastrophic, with great judgment upon the wicked and

the rescue of the righteous. It is characteristic of premillennialism both ancient and modern to distinguish the dealings of God with Israel and with the church. As Van Oosterzee (1817-1882), a Dutch theologian who was premillennial brings out, premillennialism distinguishes the church which Christ founded as separate from the saints of the Old Testament: "It is, however, more exact, not to fix the date of the beginning of the Christian Church before the appearing of the historical Christ.... From the outpouring of the Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost the Church was really brought to life." [13] Jan Jacob Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), II, 701. Premillennialism generally holds to a revival of the Jewish nation and their repossession of their ancient land when Christ returns. Satan will be bound (Rev 20:2) and a theocratic kingdom of righteousness, peace, and tranquility will ensue. The righteous are raised from the dead before the millennium and participate in its blessings. The wicked dead are not raised until after the millennium. The eternal state will follow the judgment of the wicked. Premillennialism is obviously a viewpoint quite removed from either amillennialism or postmillennialism. It attempts to find a literal fulfillment for all the prophecies in the Old and New Testament concerning a righteous kingdom of God on earth. It does not lend itself to liberal theology as do the other millennial theories. Premillennialism assumes the authority and accuracy of the Scriptures, and the hermeneutical principle of a literal interpretation wherever this is possible.

While there is confusing differences in detail with all the millennial viewpoints, the main lines of interpretation are rather clearly drawn. The issue is whether there will be a literal reign of Christ on the earth following His second advent. The issue is not one which should divide evangelicals or arouse needless antagonism. Genuine and spiritual Christians have held various millennial views. The issue is, however, important. Much of the argument produced has been too partisan to be objective. Prejudice is as natural in this field of theology as in any other. On the whole the millennial issue has been badly handled. It is the aim of the present discussion to be as objective as possible. To this end the study will continue by treatment of the rise and fall of postmillennialism first, to be followed in order by the treatment of amillennialism and premillennialism. The strength and weakness of each system will be analyzed. It will not be the purpose of this study to dissolve differences which exist within any system except as they have bearing on the strength of the system itself.

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