

Part 3: Amillennialism in the Ancient Church

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord explores the historical foundations and controversies surrounding amillennialism in early church theology.

Scripture: Daniel 7:13, Matthew 20:20, Luke 22:29, John 14:2, Acts 1:6, 1 Corinthians 15:23, 2 Timothy 2:15, 2 Peter 1:20, 2 Peter 3:8

Topics: "Millennial Theology", "Eschatology Studies"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the historical background of amillennialism and premillennialism, highlighting the revival of interest in millennial theology due to the decline of postmillennialism and the rise of premillennialism in recent years. The arguments surrounding the millennium have been characterized by a fresh study of ancient church literature, vigorous attacks on premillennialism, and a renewed investigation of millennialism in the early church. The sermon explores the lack of concrete evidence for amillennialism in the first and second centuries, with only disputed testimonies and a shift towards allegorical interpretations in the third century leading to the rise of amillennialism.

Transcript

[Author's Note: The present article is the first of a series of studies in amillennialism which will form a background for later articles on premillennialism.]

In recent years interest has been revived in the origin of millennial theology. This has been caused, first by the decadence of postmillennialism which seemed to demand a new search for perspective in this field; second, by the popularity of premillennialism with its claim that the early church was premillennial; and, third, by the trend toward more serious Biblical studies--a result of the decline of extreme liberalism. The reduction of millennial theories to only two principal viewpoints--amillennial and premillennial--has tended to simplify the issue and make the millennial argument largely one for or against a literal millennium.

The nature of the arguments bearing on the millennium has also been significant. These have been characterized by: (1) a fresh study of literature of the Fathers to see if it is necessary to concede that the ancient church was premillennial, as had previously been almost universally allowed by all parties; (2) a fresh study of the Scriptures by the amillennialists to defend themselves from the obvious Biblical approach of premillennialists; (3) a more vigorous attack on premillennialism with a view to proving its doctrines dangerous and heretical to orthodox theology as a whole. Many of the significant books in the controversy have come from the pens of amillennialists, and these books in turn are refutations of earlier

books of the premillennialists. Of particular interest is the recent restudy of millennialism in the ancient church with the objective of destroying or at least weakening the weighty argument of premillennialists that the ancient church was in sympathy with their viewpoints. That would seem similar to the modern amillennial method while at the same time subscribing to the idea of a coming kingdom on earth to follow the second advent--which is essentially premillennial. It is this factor that has occasioned considerable controversy in recent years and which needs further evaluation. In attempting to trace millennialism in the ancient church, one is faced with many difficulties if all facts are weighed impartially. The voice of the early centuries must be examined, however, not because it is decisive in itself, but because it throws some light on how the early church interpreted the Scriptures themselves. The recent renewed investigation of the available ancient sources with the claimed support for ancient amillennialism is of particular importance to the present study.

Amillennialism in the First Century

For most sober students of the Scriptures, the basic question in regard to the millennium is whether the Bible itself teaches decisively one view or the other. For the present discussion we can disregard that form of modern liberalism which might admit that the New Testament taught essentially the principal doctrines of premillennialism but pushes it aside as an error on the part of the apostles. It is assumed here that the New Testament is correct and the problem is not one of inspiration. In other words, is the New Testament as well as the Old premillennial or amillennial? The formal consideration of this question is impossible within reasonable limits. Either view requires an interpretation and harmonization of the entire volume of Scripture to sustain it completely. It may be said, however, that the New Testament bears no record whatever of a millennial dispute. While the early church was concerned over many doctrinal questions, no disputes on this issue are recorded.

The question of the disciples, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), occasioned no denial from the Lord Jesus, but merely the reminder that it was not for them to know the "time." The request of the mother of James and John for preferment of her sons in the kingdom was not refused on the ground that no future earthly kingdom was in prospect, but that the places of honor were reserved for those chosen by the Father (Matt 20:20-23). While the argument from silence is never decisive, Christ also told His disciples, "If it were not so I would have told you" (John 14:2). If no earthly kingdom was in prospect, it seems strange also in view of the prevailing Jewish concept of an earthly kingdom that Christ should tell His disciples, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father has appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30). The positive testimony of Revelation 20 with its six references to a reign of Christ on earth for one thousand years while hotly disputed and denied significance by the amillennialists is nevertheless their stubborn foe. These references to the millennial doctrine are at least more than straws in the wind. If the amillennial viewpoint as held in modern times is correct, it would have called for extensive correction of the prevailing idea among the Jews that an earthly kingdom was their Messianic prospect.

Leaving for later discussion the basic problem of Scriptural interpretation, the question remains as to what positive evidence there is for amillennialism in the first century. The question assumes considerable proportions inasmuch as George N. H. Peters lists fifteen advocates of premillennialism for the first century indicated as such outside the Scriptures themselves.[3] George N. H. Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom*, I, 494-95. While some of these no doubt would be disputed by amillennialists, all concede that Papias (80-163), who seems to have been intimate with John the Apostle and Polycarp, was premillennial if we

may believe Irenaeus who was a pupil of Polycarp. What can the amillennialists offer in support of the antiquity of amillennialism?

It is not difficult to find claims from amillennialists on the antiquity of their view. Ira D. Landis states flatly, "Jesus and the apostles were Amillennial in their eschatology." [4] Ira D. Landis, *The Faith of Our Fathers on Eschatology*, p. 369. His proof for this in his chapter on the history of millennialism is limited to one paragraph which states that Christ opposed Pharisees and that Pharisees were premillennialists; therefore Christ was an amillennialist. Landis ignores the opposition of Christ to Sadducees who were probably amillennial. In his discussion which follows in which he depreciates everyone claimed to be premillennial, the only extra-Biblical proof is that he cites Barnabas as not being premillennial among first century writers. The classification of Barnabas, as we will see, is at present hotly disputed though he has long been considered premillennial. Landis decides the argument in one sentence: "The epistle ascribed to Barnabas is not Premillennial as is claimed, but decidedly anti-Judaistic." [5] *Ibid.*, p. 370.

Other amillennial writers who are more objective in their scholarship seem to have nothing more to suggest than that the testimony of Barnabas is not conclusive in its support of the premillennial viewpoint. Louis Berkhof while claiming that half the church Fathers were amillennial during the second and third centuries (without offering any proof) does not even suggest that this was true in the first century. [6] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 708. According to the amillennialists themselves evidence for amillennialism in the first century is reduced, then, to the disputed testimony of Barnabas. Over against this is the undisputed fact that Papias and others were definitely premillennial in this same period. As the case of Barnabas is the only available evidence for amillennialism according to the amillennialists themselves, a brief examination of his testimony will be made.

Kromminga who gives the testimony of Barnabas lengthy consideration points out that Barnabas in chapter IV of his Epistle subscribes to the interpretation that the Roman empire is the fourth of the empires of Daniel. [7] Kromminga, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31. This seems to imply that Barnabas thought the coming of the Lord was near for he refers to the fact that "the final stumbling-block approaches...." [8] Cited by Kromminga, *ibid.*, p. 31. Kromminga further cites chapter XV of the Epistle of Barnabas as being the main passage in point: "Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression: 'He finished in six days.' This implies, that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying: 'Behold, today will be a thousand years.' Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. 'And He rested on the seventh day.' This meaneth: when His Son, coming shall destroy the time (of wicked man) and judge the ungodly and change the sun and the moon and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day." [9] Kromminga, *ibid.*, p. 31.

Barnabas seems to teach from this passage that the present age starting from creation will be completed in six thousand years--a common if unwarranted teaching. Of importance is his statement that "His Son" will come at the end of six thousand years, destroy the wicked, judge the ungodly, change the sun, moon, and stars, and then rest on the seventh day, i.e., for a thousand years. The plain implication that Christ will come before the final one thousand years has been taken almost universally to be a representation of a premillennial advent. Gibbon who was an infidel and totally impartial toward the millennial controversy interprets Barnabas (apparently) as follows: "The ancient and popular doctrine of the millennium was intimately connected with the Second Coming of Christ. As the works of creation had been finished in six days their duration in the present state, according to tradition, was fixed to six thousand years. By the same analogy it was inferred that this long period of labor and contention, which was now almost elapsed,

would be succeeded by a joyful Sabbath of a thousand years, and that Christ with His triumphant band of the saints and the elect who had escaped death, or who had been miraculously revived, would reign upon the earth till the time appointed for the last and general resurrection...the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers." [10] "Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 532.

Not only impartial historians but also many amillennialists concede that this passage indicates Barnabas is properly classed as a premillennialist. Albertus Pieters, a longtime foe of premillennialism, in his series of articles in the Calvin Forum (August-September, 1938) agrees that both Papias and Barnabas are premillennial. W. H. Rutgers who attacks premillennialism without reserve nevertheless finds Barnabas merely doubtful but not clear. [11] *Premillennialism in America* (Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, Goes, Holland, 1930), p. 55. Landis as we have seen dismissed Barnabas as a premillenarian, but made no claim that he was amillennial. Only Kromminga of all authors consulted seems to believe that Barnabas is an amillenarian.

The contribution of the late D. H. Kromminga to the millennial controversy is one of the curious aspects of the current argument. Kromminga classifies himself as premillenarian because he finds it necessary to interpret millennial passages literally. It is evident from his writings, however, that he is more concerned in maintaining the tenets of covenant theology than of premillennialism, and his denominational and associational relationships were predominantly amillennial. His works on the millennium are so obviously catering to amillennial arguments that apart from the facts he presents the value of his argument is often stultified. In his discussion of Barnabas he labors for many pages to classify Barnabas as amillennial, and his entire chapter on the "Extent of Ancient Chiliasm" is devoted to it. His argument concedes that Barnabas is not a postmillenarian. Kromminga finds, however, in the spiritual interpretation and application which Barnabas makes of Exodus 33:3, Ezekiel 47:12 and Zephaniah 3:19, that his method is figurative interpretation, which he thinks is typical amillennialism. [12] Kromminga, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-38. This is at best an argument that Barnabas is not a consistent premillenarian, but it certainly does nothing to negative his positive statements. Certainly modern premillenarians make a similar use of the Old Testament in typology and spiritual applications without denying the basic method of literal interpretation which is the basis for premillennialism.

About the only notable contribution of Kromminga in his entire discussion is his reference to the fact that Barnabas evidently believed in the judgment of the wicked at the second, premillennial advent rather than at the end of the millennium. Kromminga infers this contradicts the usual premillennial view. [13] *Ibid.*, p. 32. What Kromminga himself overlooks is that Barnabas does not say that the wicked are raised from the dead. Judging from the context, Barnabas is stating merely that the living wicked are judged "when His Son, coming, shall destroy the time (of the wicked man) and judge the ungodly...." [14] *Ibid.*, p. 31. Barnabas merely leaves out any statement about how the millennium will end. Even if Kromminga is right, however, it again would indicate only a variation rather than a denial of premillennialism. As far as making a positive contribution in favor of amillennialism, Barnabas has nothing to offer. The overwhelming testimony of reputable scholars has been for many years that Barnabas is properly a premillennialist, and it should be borne in mind that the literary evidence is entirely unchanged. The current attack on Barnabas is of recent origin and arises from the desire to shrink the historical basis of premillennialism rather than from an impartial and objective study of the evidence.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the first century is barren of any real support to the amillennial viewpoint. While, indeed, the evidence is not altogether clear and not abundant for this century, it is significant that amillennial polemics have contented themselves with minimizing premillennial claims

without attempting to support their own view by historical evidence. The first century is a lost cause for amillennialism.

Amillennialism in the Second and Third Century

The second century like the first is devoid of any testimony whatever for amillennialism except at its close. To be sure Rutgers states with enthusiasm, "Chiliasm found no favor with the best of the Apostolic Fathers, nor does it find support in the unknown writer of the Epistle to Diognetus.... We find no trace of the teaching in Athenagoras, Theophilus, Tatian, Hegesippus, Dionysius of Corinth, Melito of Sardis or in Apollinaris of Hierapolis." [15] W. H. Rutgers, op. cit., p. 57.

This is an astounding confession. Rutgers's evidence for amillennialism is that a whole century rolls by with no voice lifted against premillennialism. He concludes that chiliasm found no favor! If Peters is right, there were many premillennialists in their era, including some whom Rutgers believes have no trace of millennial teaching. Peters lists Pothinus, Justin Martyr, Melito, Hegesippus, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Apollinaris as second century premillennialists. [16] G. N. H. Peters, op. cit., I, 495-96.

The best that the most ardent amillennialist can do in the first two centuries, then, is to claim the disputed Barnabas and hide behind the apparent silence of many of the Fathers. If amillennialism was the prevailing view of the church during this period we are left without sources or evidence.

The acknowledged lack of evidence for amillennialism in the second century is all the more remarkable because amillennialists are making so much in our day of the comparatively few evidences for premillennialism. If premillennialists are wrong for building upon such evidence as has been discovered--much of it almost beyond dispute in support of early belief in the millennial reign of Christ, what is the case for amillennialism which has no evidence at all which is undisputed? For 150 years after the crucifixion of Christ, the amillennialists have only one disputed exponent of amillennialist character--Barnabas--who is commonly conceded by many amillennialists and most neutral scholars to be premillennial. Such is the void that faces those seeking evidence for amillennialism.

At the very close of the second century and the beginning of the third we come upon the first bona fide amillennialists, Gaius (or, Caius) who wrote early in the third century; Clement of Alexandria, a teacher at the school there from 193 to 220; his pupil, Origen (185-254); and Dionysius (190-265). It was from these men that premillennialism suffered its first vocal and effective opposition. The nature of this opposition, its exegetical grounds, and the effect upon premillennialism are all significant.

Most of what we know about Gaius comes from other sources which are very much opposed to premillennialism. It is probable that he is properly classed as an amillenarian. The nature of the teachings of Clement and Origen are, however, well established and their ground for opposition to premillennialism is very significant.

The allegorizing method of interpreting Scripture which Kromminga attempted to find in Barnabas is clearly evident in Clement. Rutgers in his refutation of premillennialism shows little enthusiasm for the basis of Clement's argument: "Clement, engrossed and charmed by Greek philosophy, applied this erroneous allegorical method to Holy Writ. It was a one-sided emphasis: opposed to the real, the visible, phenomenal, spacial and temporal. A Platonic idealistic philosophy could not countenance carnalistic, sensualistic conceptions of the future as that advanced by chiliasm. It shook the very foundation on which chiliasm rested. Robertson observed that 'it loosed its [chiliasm's] sheet-anchor,--naive literalism in the

interpretation of Scripture." [17] W. H. Rutgers, op. cit., p. 64.

The work of Origen, if anything, was worse than Clement who was his teacher. No doctrine was safe from his use of the allegorical method, even the doctrine of resurrection. His method subverted the plain meaning of Scripture by a principle of interpretation so subjective that the interpreter could make what he willed from the written revelation. It was natural that one who opposed literal interpretation of Scripture in other realms should do the same in regard to the millennium. The influence and place of Origen is well-known and beyond question, and his hermeneutical method is repudiated at least in part by all modern scholars.

Dionysius who was Bishop of Alexandria in the latter part of the third century is noted for his controversy resulting from the teachings of Nepos, an ardent premillennialist, who as bishop had taught and written with such effectiveness that whole churches were withdrawing in protest against the spiritualization of Origen. Eusebius who gives the account (Chapter 24 of his Church History) describes a three-day conference held by Dionysius in which the matter was thoroughly discussed with the result that the schism was healed. [18] Cf. D. H. Kromminga, op. cit., pp. 61-63. Nepos had died sometime previous to the conference.

With the close of the third century, the evidence indicates a distinct increase in power in amillennialism and a corresponding loss of power for the premillennialists. In the church, it is clear that the rising tide of amillennialism comes almost entirely from the Alexandrian school, in particular, from Clement, Origen, and Dionysius, all of this locality. Accompanying this change in the church was the corresponding political change under Constantine which became effective more and more in the fourth century. With the coming of Augustine a new day and a new chapter in the history of millennialism was written.

BSac 106:423 (Jul 49) p. 302

Before considering the great influence of Augustine, which seems to have dominated the church for centuries afterward, it is necessary to recapitulate and evaluate the sources of amillennialism thus far discovered. In the first two centuries, only the disputed testimony of Barnabas can be cited. With the close of the second century and continuing through the third, a new foe to premillennialism arose in the Alexandrian school of interpretation. Its roots were in Platonic philosophy and in keeping with it the literal and plain meaning of Scripture was sacrificed for allegorical interpretations often of a most fanciful kind. Premillennialism was attacked then, not as a teaching unwarranted by the Word of God, but rather because it was a literal interpretation of it. The method used against premillennialism was unfortunately used against other major doctrines of Christianity with devastating effect. In their doctrines of the person of Christ, of sin, of salvation, and of eschatology the evil results of the allegorical method are easily traced. It was to this foe of proper interpretation of Scripture that premillennialism owed its decline. It may be concluded, then, that amillennialism in the first three centuries rests for the most part on silence, on one disputed representative in the first century, none in the second, and a fallacious and destructive principle of interpretation in the third century.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/part-3-amillennialism-in-the-ancient-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net