

Part 5: Amillennialism as a Method of Interpretation

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon discusses the amillennial method of interpretation and its implications for biblical understanding.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 14:33, Ephesians 4:14, 2 Timothy 2:15, 2 Peter 1:20

Topics: "Eschatology", "Hermeneutics"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the theological debate between amillennialism and premillennialism, focusing on the differing methods of interpreting Scripture. The crux of the issue lies in the 'grammatical-historical' literal interpretation favored by premillennarians versus the spiritualizing method used by amillennarians. The popularity of amillennialism is attributed to its flexibility, allowing interpreters to align Scripture with their own theological systems. However, the lack of unity and consistency within amillennialism poses significant challenges to its credibility. Despite its historical adoption by Reformers and notable scholars, amillennialism faces scrutiny for its failure to address the core problems of its own system.

Transcript

{Editor's note: Footnotes in the original printed edition were numbered 18-30, but in this electronic edition are numbered 1-13 respectively.}

The Issue

There is a growing realization in the theological world that the crux of the millennial issue is the question of method of interpreting Scripture. Premillennarians follow the so-called 'grammatical-historical' literal interpretation while amillennarians use a spiritualizing method. As Albertus Pieters, an avowed amillennialist, writes concerning the problem as a whole, "The question whether the Old Testament prophecies concerning the people of God must be interpreted in their ordinary sense, as other Scriptures are interpreted, or can properly be applied to the Christian Church, is called the question of spiritualization of prophecy. This is one of the major problems in biblical interpretation, and confronts everyone who makes a serious study of the Word of God. It is one of the chief keys to the difference of opinion between Premillennarians and the mass of Christian scholars. The former reject such spiritualization, the latter employ it; and as long as there is no agreement on this point the debate is interminable and fruitless." [1] Albertus Pieters, The Leader, September 5, 1934, as cited by Gerrit H. Hospers, The Principle of

Spiritualization in Hermeneutics (East Williamson, N.Y., published by the author, 1935), p. 5. The issue, then, between amillennialism and premillennialism is their respective methods of interpretation, and little progress can be made in the study of the millennial issue until this aspect is analyzed and understood.

The Popularity of the Amillennial Method

It is quite apparent that the amillennial method of interpretation of Scripture which involves spiritualization has achieved a considerable popularity. It is not too difficult to account for the widespread approval of the spiritualizing method adopted by many conservative theologians as well as liberal and Roman Catholic expositors. Fundamentally its charm lies in its flexibility. The interpreter can change the literal and grammatical sense of Scripture to make it coincide with his own system of interpretation. The conservative and liberal and Roman Catholic can each claim that the Bible does not contradict his concept of theology. It is this very factor, however, which raises grave doubts concerning the legitimacy of a method which produces such diverse systems of interpretation. One of the major difficulties of amillennialism both as a system of theology and as a method of interpretation is that it has never achieved unity on the very essentials of Biblical truth. In the studies which follow this will have many illustrations.

It is significant that the first successful opposition to premillennialism came from the adoption of a spiritualizing principle of interpretation. The Alexandrian school of theology which came into prominence about 300 A.D. followed a principle of interpretation which regarded all Scripture as an allegory. They succeeded in arousing a considerable opposition to premillennarians of their days even if it was at the price of subverting not only the millennial doctrine but all other Christian doctrine as well. It remained for Augustine to give a more moderate application of this principle of interpretation. In general, he held that only prophecy should be spiritualized and that in the historical and doctrinal sections of Scripture the 'historical-grammatical' literal method should be used. This was a decided improvement as far as theology as a whole was concerned, even if it left the millennial issue unsolved and at the mercy of the allegorical school. Because of the weight of Augustine in other major issues of theology where he was in the main correct, Augustine became the model for the Protestant Reformers who accepted his amillennialism along with his other teachings.

It is quite clear from the literature of the Reformation that the millennial issue was never handled fairly or given any considered study. The basic issues of the Reformation involved the right of private interpretation of the Scriptures, the individual priesthood of all believers, the doctrine of justification by faith, and similar truths. It was natural for the emphasis to rest in this area, and for eschatology as found in the Roman Church to be corrected only in denial of purgatory and other teachings which were regarded as inventions. It was natural to accept Roman teachings where the error was not patent. Premillennialism at the time of the Reformation unfortunately was expounded chiefly by small groups of somewhat fanatical enthusiasts who were often discredited by extreme doctrines.

Because amillennialism was adopted by the Reformers, it achieved a quality of orthodoxy to which its modern adherents can point with pride. They could rightly claim many worthy scholars in the succession from the Reformation to modern times such as Calvin, Luther, Melancthon, and in modern times, Warfield, Vos, Kuyper, Machen, and Berkhof. If one follows traditional Reformed theology in many other respects, it is natural to accept its amillennialism. The weight of organized Christianity has largely been on the side of amillennialism.

Many other factors increase the prestige of amillennialism. As a system of doctrine it enhances the church as an institution, a continuance of God's administrative government. This strengthens the power of ecclesiasticism. The simplicity of the amillennial eschatology has a strong appeal as a way of unifying the many elements indicated in a literal interpretation of Scripture. It tends also to concentrate attention upon present problems and practical truth. Amillenarians do not need to hold prophetic conferences and preach often on prophetic themes. It is comparatively easy to grasp a simple formula of final resurrection, final judgment, and eternal state, and not to attempt to harmonize hundreds of verses in Scripture which give details of the future.

Amillenarians can also claim, with some ambiguity, that they are aiming at a spiritual interpretation of Scripture--meaning by this, its ultimate practical meaning rather than its literal sense. On the whole it is not difficult to explain the charm of amillennialism which has appealed to scholar and layman alike. One can understand the psychological reasons which dismiss premillennialism as an impractical and contradictory amassing of details of prophecy and the study of prophecy itself as fruitless and confusing.

While the popularity of amillennialism is therefore easily accounted for, the very nature of this popularity raises some serious questions. It is quite apparent in the literature of amillennialism that both in its historic origin and its modern discussion amillenarians are quite unwilling to face squarely the problems of their own system. Only under the goading of scholarly premillennial works and the tremendous acclaim of premillennialism in the Bible study movements of recent centuries have amillenarians been willing to back up and to consider formally, as for instance M. J. Wyngaarden does,[2] "The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1934). the reasons behind premillennial theology. It is still the fashion to resort to ridicule rather than to objective study of the conflicting viewpoints.

A proper study of the millennial issue demands, first, an analysis of the methods of interpretation which has produced amillennialism and premillennialism. This lays bare the problem and opens the way to see the issue in its true light.

Analysis of the Amillennial Method of Interpretation

Amillennial use of the literal method. The amillennial method of interpreting Scripture is correctly defined as the spiritualizing method. It is clear, however, that conservative amillennialists limit the use of this method, and in fact adopt the literal method of interpreting most of the Scriptures. The methods followed by the allegorizing school of Alexandria which characterized the early amillennialists are now repudiated by all modern scholars. As Pieters states, "No one defends or employs the allegorizing method of exegesis. Calvin and the other great Bible students of the Reformation saw clearly that the method was wrong and taught the now generally accepted 'grammatical-historical' literal interpretation, so far as the Scriptures in general are concerned. That they retain the spiritualizing method in expounding many of the prophecies was because they found themselves forced to do so in order to be faithful to the New Testament." [3] "Pieters, "Darbyism vs. The Historic Christian Faith," Calvin Forum, II, 225-28, May 1936, cited by Homer Payne, Amillennialism as a System (Unpublished Doctor's Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949), p. 75.

Not only Pieters but all conservative amillennialists recognize the need for literal interpretation. In addition to Pieters, Payne [4] Payne, op. cit., pp. 82ff. It is regrettable that this work, including the long chapter on "The Spiritualizing Principle of Interpretation," has not been published. cites Hamilton, [5] F. E. Hamilton,

The Basis of Millennial Faith (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1942), pp. 38,40,58. Allis,[6] Oswald T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church, p. 238. Calvin,[7] F. W. Farrar, History of Interpretation (London: MacMillan and Co., 1886), pp. 193-94. Luther,[8] Ibid., p. 327f. and others as following and supporting the principle of literal interpretation as the only proper grammatical-historical method. Amillennialists use two methods of interpretation, the spiritualizing method for prophecy and the literal method for other Scriptures. They differ from early amillennialists who regarded all Scripture as an allegory. The extent of application of one method or the other is determined by their rules for use of the spiritualizing method.

It is obvious at the beginning that, if the interpreter has a choice of method in interpreting Scripture, a large door for difference of opinion is opened. The general designation of prophecy as the field of spiritualization is by no means definite. In fact, amillennialists who are conservative interpret many prophecies literally and, on the other hand, use the spiritualizing method in some instances where prophecy as such is only remotely involved. The modern liberal scholar, who is also an amillennialist, feels free to use the spiritualizing method rather freely in areas other than prophecy whenever it suits his fancy, and being bound by no law of infallible inspiration need not be concerned if the result is not consistent. The spiritualizing method once admitted is not easy to regulate and tends to destroy the literal method. While the amillennial use of the literal method is general among the conservatives, among liberal groups it has less standing and use.

The amillennial use of the spiritualizing method. Conservative amillennialists, as we have seen, are somewhat embarrassed by the early allegorical school of amillennialists and with one voice deny the allegorical method as proper in interpreting Scripture. As Pieters stated above, "No one defends or employs the allegorizing method of exegesis." [9] Pieters, loc. cit. In regard to the allegorical method, Farrar writes: "Allegory by no means sprang from spontaneous piety, but was the child of Rationalism which owed its birth to the heathen theories of Plato. It deserved its name, for it made Scripture say something else than it really meant.... Origen borrows from heathen Platonists and from Jewish philosophers a method which converts the whole Scripture, alike the New and Old Testament, into a series of clumsy, varying, and incredible enigmas. Allegory helped him to get rid of Chiliasm and superstitious literalism and the 'antitheses' of the Gnostics, but opened the door for deadlier evils." [10] Farrar, loc. cit., cited by Payne, op. cit., p. 81.

Now just what is the spiritualizing method and how does it differ from the allegorical? An allegory is commonly considered to be an extended metaphor. As Hospers puts it: "To exemplify: 'Israel is like a vine,'--that is a simile. 'Israel is a vine,'--that is a metaphor. And Psalm 80 gives an extended description of this idea, and that is an allegory." [11] Hospers, op. cit., p. 10. Spiritualization of the same word Israel would involve in Webster's definition of spiritualization: "to take in a spiritual sense,--opposed to literalize." [12] Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition, s.v. spiritualize. In other words, if Israel should mean something else than Israel, e.g., the church in the New Testament composed largely of Gentiles, this would be spiritualization. Actually the church is not Israel at all, but has certain similarities to Israel (as well as many contrasts) just as the vine used in Psalm 80 is similar in its properties to Israel.

It can be seen that spiritualized and allegorized interpretations are not children of different races, but instead one family of thought separated only by degree of application. In both, the ordinary literal meaning is denied. Actually, Israel is no more a vine than Israel is the church. The difference in allegorizing and spiritualizing is for practical purposes nominal rather than essential. It is one of degree rather than one of principle.

It is clear, however, that the amillennial doctrine of spiritualization is far more restrained and less destructive to doctrine in general than the old allegorizing method which knew no rules and respected no boundaries. Conservative amillennialists have made a determined effort to formulate principles and rules governing the use of spiritualization in Scripture.

Hamilton summarizes these principles in his attack on interpreting Old Testament Scriptures literally: "But if we reject the literal method of interpretation as the universal rule for the interpretation of all prophecies, how are we to interpret them? Well, of course, there are many passages in prophecy that were meant to be taken literally. In fact a good working rule to follow is that the literal interpretation of the prophecy is to be accepted unless (a) the passages contain obviously figurative language, or (b) unless the New Testament gives authority for interpreting them in other than a literal sense, or (c) unless a literal interpretation would produce a contradiction with truths, principles or factual statements contained in non-symbolic books of the New Testament.

Another obvious rule to be followed is that the clearest New Testament passages in non-symbolic books are to be the norm for the interpretation of prophecy, rather than obscure or partial revelations contained in the Old Testament. In other words we should accept the clear and plain parts of Scripture as a basis for getting the true meaning of the more difficult parts of Scripture." [13] Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 53-54. problems of fulfillment of prophecy--it is born of a supposed necessity rather than a natural product of exegesis. (4) They do not hesitate to use spiritualization in areas other than prophecy if it is necessary to sustain their system of doctrine. (5) As illustrated in current modernism which is almost entirely amillennial, the principle of spiritualization has been proved by history to spread easily into all basic areas of theological truth.

If the earthly reign of Christ can be spiritualized, so can His resurrection, His miracles, His second coming. Modern liberals can justify their denial of literal resurrection by use of the same hermeneutical rules that Hamilton uses for denial of an earthly millennial kingdom. (6) The amillennial method does not provide a solid basis for a consistent system of theology. The hermeneutical method of amillennialism has justified conservative Calvinism, liberal modernism, and Roman theology alike.

Even conservative amillennialists are in almost total confusion, as will be shown later, in their spiritualized interpretation of passages taken literally by the premillenarians and in such basic and elementary problems as the fulfillment of the millennial kingdom idea. (7) Amillennialism has not arisen historically from a study of prophetic Scripture, but rather through its neglect. The inherent difficulties of the amillennial method of interpretation are discovered principally by study of their interpretation of Scripture.

It becomes apparent early in such a study that amillennialists have no real guiding principle in spiritualization and that they come to widely different conclusions. In fact, as will be shown, the principal unifying factor which dominates amillennial interpretation is its negative note, its denial of an earthly reign of Christ. The expedients that are used and the interpretations of kingdom passages of Scripture that are reached to achieve this negative conclusion are often mutually destructive of each other. Having analyzed the method of amillennial interpretation, it now follows that an analysis of their interpretation of Scripture itself must be undertaken.

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