

Part 7: Amillennial Soteriology

by John F. Walvoord

This sermon explores the relationship between Amillennialism and Soteriology, highlighting the theological implications and critiques of Covenant Theology compared to Dispensationalism.

Scripture: Genesis 17:7, John 1:17, Romans 11:6, Galatians 1:7, Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:8, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 8:6, Revelation 20:4

Topics: "Millennialism Debate", "Soteriology"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the theological debate surrounding millennialism and its impact on the doctrine of salvation. He discusses the contrasting views of premillennialism and amillennialism, highlighting the disagreements on the interpretation of covenants and the role of grace in salvation. Walvoord explores the historical development of amillennialism from Augustine to modern liberal Protestantism, emphasizing the shift in soteriology towards human works and away from the necessity of Christ's death for salvation. He concludes by examining the conflict between covenant theology and dispensationalism, pointing out the reductive error of covenant theology and the broader perspective offered by the dispensational view of Scripture.

Transcript

Recent discussions of the millennial issue in theology have crystallized the problem of the relation of millennialism to the doctrine of salvation. The growing realization that premillennial doctrine affects theology as a whole has inspired an attempt to prove that premillennialism teaches or implies an heretical view of salvation. Allis writes, for instance, "The Dispensational interpretation of prophecy minimizes the Cross! The traditional interpretation magnifies it!"[1] Oswald T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church, p. 121. Philip Mauro goes a step farther in his pamphlet, "Dispensationalism Justifies the Crucifixion." Having made their accusation with one broad statement, they sometimes withdraw it with another, as in the case of Allis, "Dispensationalists do not reject the Cross or minimize its importance: they glory in it." [2] Ibid., p. 234. The impression is left, however, by the space that separates the accusation from the retraction that premillennarians are either inconsistent or heretical. The idea that the millennial controversy affects the doctrine of salvation is, however, not held by all. Rutgers finds the doctrine of salvation as held by conservative amillenarians and premillennarians a point of agreement rather than disagreement.[3] Premillennialism in America, p. 289. It is the purpose of this discussion to evaluate the influence of amillennialism on the soteriology of its adherents. Such an approach will serve as a background for consideration of the influence of premillennialism on its soteriology. While there is a large measure of

agreement between them, certain important differences can be noted.

Historical Development

Without attempting a detailed historical analysis, it is possible to trace the broad movement of amillennialism in relation to soteriology. Beginning with Augustine, amillennialism became identified with a theology which was continued in Protestantism. Augustine had a profound sense of the unity of the divine purpose and program. His form of amillennialism identified the millennium with the present age. He viewed Christianity as being engaged in a vital struggle, the City of God versus the City of Satan. The outcome will be victory at the second advent of Christ. As a part of this program, Augustine developed a doctrine of sin which involved man's total depravity, and a doctrine of grace which provided for man's inability through the sacraments as ministered by the church. Salvation was mediated through the church and its sacraments and while it was by faith, it was attainable only through unceasing effort. While the precise bearing of Augustine's amillennialism to his soteriology is debatable, it is clear that his amillennial view of the present age and the role of the Roman Church in it was an essential part of his theology. The subsequent history of Roman doctrine evinces clearly the trend toward more emphasis on the place of the sacraments as the means of grace, less emphasis on man's inability, and more delineation of works as the basic ground of salvation in the Roman system. The Augustinian denial of a future to Israel or of a future kingdom of righteousness and peace on earth in literal fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets tended to enhance legalism and human effort and to subtract from divine grace immediately bestowed apart from sacraments by a work of the Holy Spirit. Augustinian soteriology whether or not a fruit of amillennialism went hand in hand with a system of salvation by religious works which has continued in Roman theology to the present day. The spiritualizing method of interpretation of Scripture fostered by Augustine was helpless to counter this trend in the Roman Church.

Modern liberal Protestantism has continued the amillennial tradition of Augustine but has abandoned his soteriology. While it is difficult to generalize on the doctrine of salvation in modern liberal Christianity, it may be observed that it usually denies the efficacy of the death of Christ, indeed the necessity of it as the ground of salvation, and transfers the work of salvation from God to man. Again, salvation is largely a matter of human works, following ethical ideals, achieving a mystic union with God through religious experiences. While modern liberalism is amillennial in relation to the millennial issue, it is really lacking in any vital soteriology. Man does not need to be saved because man is not lost. All he needs is education, experiences, and resolution. It is reformation rather than regeneration. The influence of amillennialism in modern liberal theology is more remote than in Roman theology. The main difficulty is not one of interpretation of the Scripture, but the denial of its authoritative revelation. In general, it may be concluded that the amillennial influence on soteriology in Roman theology and in modern liberalism is of only secondary importance.

The amillennial question comes more immediately to the fore when, comparing conservative amillennialism with premillennialism. Here the essential theological positions are similar. Both hold the Scriptures as inspired and authoritative. Both hold to essentially the same concept of the death of Christ as the work of God which is the ground of salvation. Because of this unity, it is possible to note significant variations in their soteriology in relation to the millennial issue.

Relation of Amillennialism to Covenant Theology

The major source of difference lies in the so-called covenant theology of the amillennialists in contrast to the dispensational theology of the premillenarians. While all amillennialists are not covenant theologians, and all premillenarians do not observe the same dispensational distinctions, in general the distinction between them is covenant theology versus dispensationalism.

The idea of a covenant relation between God and man is, of course, as old as the Scriptures. God frequently dealt with man in the Old Testament on obvious covenant grounds. In the New Testament a gracious covenant is contained in the very Gospel message itself--the promise of grace and salvation to those who believe. While there is considerable difference in approach in the definition and use of covenants in the Bible, both premillennialists and amillennialists are in agreement on the existence of the covenant of grace which is proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Upon closer examination, however, a sharp cleavage is found in the concept of the covenant idea. Covenant theologians such as Charles Hodge conceive of the covenant of grace as originating in eternity past in a covenant agreement between the persons of the Trinity. This is sometimes called the covenant of redemption as a covenant within the Godhead, sometimes a covenant of grace as between God and man as represented in Christ, and by a number of other terms, such as covenant of mercy, evangelical covenant, national-ecclesiastical covenant, and covenant of life.[4] Cf. C. F. Lincoln, "The Covenants" (unpublished doctor's dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary), pp. 79-80. As none of these terms is found as such in the Bible, their definition is largely what theologians have made them. The basic idea, however, is that the central purpose of God is salvation of the elect, and that this from eternity past has been the determining principle of divine providence.

Along with the idea of an eternal covenant of grace is the covenant of works which God is supposed to have made with Adam before the Fall. While including the Biblical material embracing the Edenic arrangement, it makes the important addition, without Scriptural warrant, of promising life to Adam and Eve if they proved obedient. Under this arrangement the harshness of predestination and the theology of the decree of God seemed to be softened by making it to some extent conditional upon man's decision.

A number of features appear in covenant theology which can be mentioned only in abbreviated form in this discussion.[5] For a statement of covenant theology by one of its able adherents, cf. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 262-300. Covenant theology is of comparatively recent origin. There seems to be no reference to a covenant of works as defined by covenant theologians until after 1600.[6] C. F. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 101. It was stated in extended form by Cocceius about 1645. While the covenant of grace as a general offer of grace in the Gospel was commonly held, the idea of an eternal covenant within the Godhead as the covenant of grace seems to have originated about the same time. In any case, covenant theology as such is not in the historic creeds of the church, was not taught explicitly by Calvin or the other Reformers, and even in the Westminster Confession was recognized only indirectly. In the Westminster Confession the covenant with Adam is regarded as the "first" and the covenant of grace as the "second," thereby making it clear that the latter is not considered in its eternal character.

Covenant theology is definitely a product of theological theory rather than Biblical exposition. While covenant theologians such as Berkhof labor over many Scriptural proofs, the specific formulas of the covenants are inductions from Calvinistic theology which go beyond the Scriptures. Charles Hodge, a covenant theologian, states plainly, "God entered into covenant with Adam. This statement does not rest upon any express declaration of the Scriptures." [7] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 117.

The situation with the covenant of grace is somewhat different. The purpose of extending grace to man is obviously an eternal purpose of God. The aspect which is theoretical rather than Biblical is the creation of a covenant arrangement in regard to grace in the Godhead in which a "bargain" is struck in the eternal counsels of God, with the Father promising to extend grace, the Son to procure it by His death, and the Spirit to apply it. The original idea of the covenant of grace regarded it as an event subsequent to the fall of man, that is, an offer of grace with attendant promises to fallen man. This was the view of Cocceius, and the Consensus Helveticus and the Westminster Confession so regarded it. Witsius (1636-1708) in his *Economy of the Covenants* seems to be the first advocate of the idea of a covenant of grace from eternity past. Charles Hodge followed Witsius and other Calvinists found the covenant of grace in eternity past an important ingredient in the decree of God. The point of distinction in covenant theology, then, is not simply an assertion of a covenant of grace in the broad sense of the offer of grace to man, but the doctrine that the covenant of grace is an important and determinative aspect of the eternal decree and is in fact the central purpose of God.

Covenant theology as held today is confined largely to amillennial Reformed theologians who are essentially conservative and following closely in the theology derived from the Reformation. Modern Arminians and Unitarians while usually amillennial do not accept covenant theology. Modern Baptists while often essentially Calvinistic are not followers of the covenant idea. Covenant theology is therefore confined to a minority of contemporary amillennialists. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to find some premillenarians who embrace in part the covenant idea. It is therefore not only difficult to generalize, but the very relation of amillennialism to covenant soteriology might be questioned. In spite of these facts, a definite relation exists between amillennial covenant theology in the field of soteriology and the concept of the same field by the premillenarian. This is not only supported by obvious facts, but explains some of the antagonism between the soteriology of amillenarians and premillenarians.

Covenant Theology in Conflict with Dispensationalism

The major conflict of covenant theology is with dispensationalism. Covenant theology regards all dispensations as phases of the one purpose of God expressed in the covenant of grace. Dispensations are different and progressive applications of the same essential principles of grace. Berkhof's summary of the covenant view may be taken as representative: "On the basis of all that has been said it is preferable to follow the traditional lines by distinguishing just two dispensations or administrations, namely, that of the Old, and that of the New Testament; and to subdivide the former into several periods or stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace." [8] Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 293. The entire Old Testament constitutes under covenant theology a progressive revelation of one covenant, the covenant of grace, and all the Biblical covenants are phases or developments of it. The final revelation is given in the New Testament. This in effect declares that God has one central purpose, the salvation of the elect, and that all the dispensations are essentially the fulfillment of this purpose. By contrast, the premillennial and dispensational interpretation of Scripture builds upon the successive Biblical covenants which are expressly revealed in the Bible, interprets them literally, and conditions the form and responsibility of life in successive dispensations according to the covenants which apply.

It is not possible in limited space to undertake the refutation of covenant theology and the defense of a dispensational view. The major objections to the covenant view can only be stated. Covenant theology is built upon a spiritualizing method of interpreting the Scriptures. In order to make the various covenants of the Old Testament conform to the pattern of the covenant of grace it is necessary to interpret them in other than their literal sense. This is illustrated in the promises given to Abraham and to Israel which are

interpreted as promises to the New Testament church. Berkhof states, in regard to the covenant of grace, "The main promise of God, which includes all other promises, is contained in the oft-repeated words, 'I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.' Gen 17:7." [9] Ibid., p. 277. The promise was intended to be applied to Abraham's physical seed and to Abraham himself. It is characteristic of covenant theology to appropriate these promises as belonging to all who receive grace under the covenant of grace. The covenant theory allows no place for literal fulfillment of Israel's national and racial promises and either cancels them on the ground that Israel failed to meet the necessary conditions, or transfers them to the saints in general. From the dispensational and literal standpoint, this is misappropriation of Scriptural promises.

As previously stated, a serious objection to the covenant of grace is that it is nowhere directly stated in Scripture in the form claimed by the amillenarian covenant theologians. The concept of an eternal covenant of grace was never seriously advanced until the post-Reformation period when it was proposed by Witsius. It is not contained in the historic creeds of the church as an eternal covenant.

One of the serious errors of the covenant theologians is their disregard of the essentially legal and non-gracious rule provided by the Mosaic Covenant. The New Testament in no uncertain terms describes it as a ministry of death and condemnation, and it is never described as a way of salvation. Allis, however, plainly states, "The law is a declaration of the will of God for man's salvation." [10] Oswald T. Allis, op. cit., p. 39. He further states, "The reward of obedience is life; the penalty for disobedience is death." [11] Loc. cit. Again, "The priest and the altar make it possible for sinful man to obtain mercy from a righteous God. In this respect the law is an impressive declaration of the covenant of grace." [12] Ibid., pp. 39-40. It is hard to reconcile such a theory to the direct statement of Scripture that "the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). According to Galatians 2:16, justification is impossible by the law. Paul denounced this concept as a perversion of the gospel (Gal 1:7-9) which deserved the severest condemnation. If the Mosaic law could provide salvation, then it was a salvation by religious works and not of faith. Such a viewpoint does violence to the pure grace of God provided in Christ.

The Reductive Error of Covenant Theology

Covenant theology is another illustration of overstatement of that which is true in its right perspective. All Reformed theologians would agree that God has a complete and comprehensive purpose as stated in the theological doctrine of the decree of God. Under this concept, all events of every classification have been determined by God from eternity past, but with full respect to the manner of their execution. Thus the necessary element of freedom is preserved and man acts according to his will while at the same time fulfilling the decree of God. Under a proper concept of this decree of God, it must be held that the decree of God is holy, wise, and good, in keeping with the attributes of God. All the events of the created world are designed to manifest the glory of God. The error of covenant theologians is that they combine all the many facets of divine purpose in the one objective of fulfillment of the covenant of grace. From a logical standpoint, this is the reductive error--the use of one aspect of the whole as the determining element.

The dispensational view of Scripture taken as a whole is far more satisfactory as it allows for the literal and natural interpretation of the great covenants of Scripture, in particular those with Abraham, Moses, David, and with Israel as a whole, and explains them in the light of their own historical and prophetic context without attempting to conform them to a theological concept to which they are mostly unsuited. This explanation fully sustains the fundamental thesis of Calvinism, that God is sovereign and all will in the end manifest His glory. The various purposes of God for Israel, for the church which is His body, for the Gentile

nations, for the unsaved, for Satan and the wicked angels, for the earth and for the heavens have each their contribution. How impossible it is to compress all of these factors into the mold of the covenant of grace!

The amillennial viewpoint in soteriology as contained in the covenant theory limits the saving purpose of God to the salvation of the individual soul. The dispensational interpretation of Scripture, on the other hand, magnifies the death of Christ as providing not only the ground of salvation of all saints in all ages--essentially one way of salvation for all--but also the ground for the peculiar and unique features of grace revealed to the church, the body of Christ, the saints of this present dispensation. It secures for them not only the riches of grace in Christ, but the ground for victory over present sin. The death of Christ under the dispensational viewpoint also constitutes the basis for the fulfillment of the new covenant to Israel, the promises of grace to the nation Israel in the prophesied kingdom on earth when the Son of David will reign. Properly understood, the dispensational viewpoint magnifies and enriches the meaning of the death of Christ and frees it from the limiting restrictions of covenant theology.

Conclusion

By way of general conclusion, amillennial soteriology has its own peculiar characteristics. Amillennialism provides the spiritualizing method of interpretation of the Old Testament necessary to covenant theology. It permits the Roman Catholic as well as the modern liberal soteriology. While amillennialism cannot be charged with being the causal factor of all the variations of soteriology held by amillenarians, its material and method permit them. On the other hand a genuine premillennial and dispensational interpretation rule out at once the Roman Catholic, the modern liberal, and if applied consistently the covenant theology view as well. The millennial issue does provide, then, an influence in the field of soteriology which demands more recognition than has been given to it in the history of doctrine.

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