

Part 4: Amillennialism From Augustine to Modern Times

by John F. Walvoord

Augustine's amillennialism, which views the millennium as the present age of conflict between the church and the world, has been widely adopted but has failed to fulfill its predictions and expectations.

Scripture: Luke 10:18, Acts 5:3, 1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Corinthians 7:5, 1 Corinthians 15:24, 2 Corinthians 12:7, Revelation 20:2-6

Topics: "Church Doctrine", "Eschatology"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significant impact of Augustine on theology, particularly in shaping Catholic and Protestant doctrines. Augustine's contributions to the areas of church doctrine, hamartiology, grace, and predestination, as well as his pivotal role in the early history of amillennialism, are highlighted. The sermon explores Augustine's interpretation of the millennium, his spiritualized approach to Scripture, and the failure of his predictions regarding the second advent. It also examines the development of amillennialism in the Protestant Reformation and modern times, comparing different viewpoints within this theological framework.

Transcript

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Augustine in the history of theology. Not only did his thinking crystallize the theology which preceded him, but to a large extent he laid the foundations for both Catholic and Protestant doctrine. B. B. Warfield, quoting Harnack, refers to Augustine as "incomparably the greatest man whom, 'between Paul the Apostle and Luther the Reformer, the Christian Church has possessed.'" [1] B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, p. 114, citing in part Harnack, *Monasticism and the Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 123. While the contribution of Augustine is principally noted in the areas of the doctrine of the church, hamartiology, the doctrine of grace, and predestination, he is also the greatest landmark in the early history of amillennialism.

The importance of Augustine to the history of amillennialism is derived from two reasons. First, there are no acceptable exponents of amillennialism before Augustine, as has been previously discussed. Prior to Augustine, amillennialism was associated with the heresies produced by the allegorizing and spiritualizing school of theology at Alexandria which not only opposed premillennialism but subverted any literal exegesis of Scripture whatever. Few modern theologians even of liberal schools of thought would care to build upon the theology of such men as Clement of Alexandria, Origen or Dionysius. Augustine is, then,

the first theologian of solid influence who adopted amillennialism.

The second reason for the importance of Augustinian amillennialism is that his viewpoint became the prevailing doctrine of the Roman Church, and it was adopted with variations by most of the Protestant Reformers along with many other teachings of Augustine. The writings of Augustine, in fact, occasioned the shelving of premillennialism by most of the organized church. The study of Augustine on the millennial question is a necessary introduction to the doctrine as a whole.

In the current discussion of the millennial question the restudy of Augustine is especially apropos. Here we have one of the first great theologians of the Roman Church recognized by both Catholic and Protestant as an original thinker and solid contributor to the doctrine of Christendom. The fact that Augustine was amillennial in his viewpoint is noted with pride by modern amillennialists to show that their position is historic and a part of the central teaching of the church. Allis, for instance, loses no time in his attack on premillennialism to point out in the second page of his volume that Augustinian amillennialism was the norm for the church of the middle ages.[2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, pp. 2-5. While the significance of much of the material relating to the millennium in writers before Augustine is hotly debated, Augustine is perfectly clear in his position--the general facts of his position are not disputed. We have then concrete teaching which can be treated objectively.

In the previous study in postmillennialism, the current decline of postmillennialism was traced to certain specific factors: (1) its principle of spiritualizing the meaning of Scripture; (2) its trend toward liberalism; (3) its failure to fit the facts of history; (4) a trend toward realism in philosophy; (5) the present trend toward amillennialism. As postmillennialism is suitable for a test case for the principles of the millennial issue as a whole, so Augustinian amillennialism is suitable as a test case for amillennialism. In other words, does the viewpoint of Augustine demonstrate a proper method of interpreting Scripture? Does it provide a basis for liberalism? Does it fit the facts of history? Does it fit the trend of modern thought? While all of these questions are not decisive, it is clear that the question of method of interpreting Scripture, relation to liberalism and fulfillment in history are important bases for judgment of Augustine's views on the millennium. It is proposed to take his doctrine, which is considered normative amillennialism, and make it a test for the doctrine as a whole.

Augustine on the Millennium

Augustine's concept of the millennium is not difficult to grasp nor are the major facts subject to dispute, Augustine conceived of the present age as a conflict between the City of God and the City of Satan, or the conflict between the church and the world. This was viewed as moving on to the ultimate triumph of the church to be climaxed by a tremendous struggle in which the church would be apparently defeated, only to consummate in a tremendous triumph in the second coming of Christ to the earth. Augustine held that the present age of conflict is the millennium. Following as he did the chronology of the LXX which is somewhat longer than Ussher's chronology in the Old Testament, he found that the Christian era is the sixth millennium from creation. This age apparently began somewhat before Christ, according to chronology, but Satan in any case was bound, as Allis states, during the lifetime of Christ on earth (Luke 10:18).[3] Allis, *ibid.*, p. 3, "He held that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord (Lk. x.18)." Augustine puts it, "This binding of Satan began when the church began to spread from Judaea into other regions, and lasts yet, and shall do until his time be expired." [4] Augustine, *City of God*, XX, 8. Augustine considered the progress of the millennium in his day (400 A.D.) well advanced and predicted the consummation would occur in the year 650.[5] Cf. Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Augustine, however, qualified his

datesetting. He states: "In vain therefore do we try to reckon the remainder of the world's years.... Some say that, it shall last four hundred, some five hundred, some a thousand years after the ascension. Everyone has his view, it were vain to try to show on what grounds." [6] Augustine, op. cit., XVIII, 53.

Augustine's interpretation of Revelation 20 is not very specific. As in his entire discussion of this doctrine, the treatment is cursory and brief. He discusses Revelation 20 in three or four pages and dismisses without any real argument the literal view. In fact, Augustine, like many others, does not seem to grasp the principles involved. His reason for avoiding the literal view is reduced to one reason--some had made the millennium a time of carnal enjoyment, a view which Augustine rightly opposed. As Augustine himself put it: "This opinion [a future literal millenium after the resurrection] might be allowed, if it proposed only spiritual delight unto the saints during this space (and we were once of the same opinion ourselves); but seeing the avouchers hereof affirm that the saints after this resurrection shall do nothing but revel in fleshly banquets, where the cheer shall exceed both modesty and measure, this is gross and fit for none but carnal men to believe. But they that are really and truly spiritual do call those of this opinion Chiliasts." [7] Augustine, *ibid.*, XX, 7. Thus on trivial grounds Augustine abandons the literal interpretation of Revelation 20. Somehow, for all his genius, he did not see that he could abandon this false teaching without abandoning the doctrine of a literal millennium.

In spite of adopting a spiritualized interpretation of Revelation 20, Augustine hews closely to a literal interpretation of the time element--it would be a literal 1000 years. Instead of a future millennium however, he considered it already present. Revelation 20 was, then, a recapitulation of the present age which Augustine held was portrayed in the earlier chapters of Revelation. The present age, for Augustine, is the millennium promised in Revelation 20. Augustine, however, also held to a future millennium, to round out the seven millenniums from Adam which he held comprised the history of man. This future millennium, he held, was not literal but is synonymous with eternity--a use of the number in a symbolic sense only.

In Augustine, then, we have specific and concrete teaching on the millennium. [8] Cf. Augustine, *ibid.*, XX; Allis, op. cit., pp. 3-5; D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*, pp. 108-113. There is no future millennium in the ordinary meaning of the term. The present age is the millennium; Satan is bound now; when Christ returns the present millennium will close, the future millennium or eternity will begin. It remains, now, to test this teaching in its principles, implications, and fulfillment.

The Principle of Spiritualized Interpretation

It is clear that in arriving at his conclusion regarding the millennium Augustine used the principle of spiritualizing Scripture freely. While he did not use this principle in interpreting Scripture relating to predestination, hamartiology, salvation, or grace, he found it suitable for interpreting prophecy. A candid examination of his interpretation leaves the examiner with the impression that Augustine did not give a reasonable exegesis of Scripture involved. Augustine's doctrine that Satan is bound in this age--an essential of his system of interpretation--is a notable illustration of spiritualized and strained exegesis (cf. Luke 10:18 and Revelation 20:2-3). Nothing is clearer from Scripture, the history of the church, and Christian experience than that Satan is exceedingly active in this present age against both Christians and unbelievers. Ananias is declared to have his heart filled with Satan (Acts 5:3). The one to be disciplined in the Corinthian church is delivered unto Satan (1 Cor 5:5; cf. 1 Tim 1:20). The Christian is constantly warned against Satan's temptations (1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 11:14 ; etc.). Paul declares that he is sorely tried by the buffeting of the messenger of Satan (2 Cor 12:7). While the Christian can have victory over Satan, there is no evidence whatever that Satan is inactive or bound. It is no wonder that Warfield, though

a disciple of Augustine, completely abandons this idea of Augustine as far as earth is concerned and limits it to the idea that "saints described are removed from the sphere of Satan's assaults,"[9] B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, p. 651. i.e., Satan is bound in respect to heaven only. While Warfield's explanation is no more sensible than Augustine's as far as an exegesis of the Scriptures is concerned, it at least accords with the facts of church history. It can be stated flatly that Augustine's exegesis is an outright error as far as the binding of Satan is concerned.

The exegesis of Augustine on Revelation 20 as a whole fares no better. After concluding that the binding of Satan is synonymous with the victory of Christ in His first advent, he draws the strained conclusion that the "first resurrection" of Revelation 20:5 is the spiritual birth of believers. The context in Revelation 20:4 makes it perfectly clear that as far as this passage goes those who are "raised" are those who "were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads." The subject of the passage is not the living but the dead; not the church as a whole, but the martyrs only. To spiritualize this portion of Scripture to make it conform to the course of the present age is to destroy all its plain literary meaning. Augustine's view required also, of course, the spiritualization of the many Old Testament passages bearing on the future righteous kingdom on earth, and this he does in his treatment of the Old Testament.

Augustine's Concept of the Present Age

It is central to Augustine's theology that he regards the church as ultimately triumphant. While his viewpoint varies somewhat from postmillennial theology, the similarities are so marked that some have taken Augustine to be postmillennial. Like the postmillennialist, Augustine regarded the present age as a progressive triumph culminating in the second advent and the final judgment of men. He differed from the postmillennialists only in matter of the degree of that triumph. As Augustine held the millennium was already three-fourths past when he lived, he found it necessary to account for the widespread evidence of sin in his day and the comparative inadequacy of the church to bring in a golden age of righteousness. He accordingly did not claim that the present age was a literal fulfillment of the promised age of righteousness, but was rather a time of conflict in which evil often seemed to have the upper hand. Like the postmillenarians, however, he did not doubt that ultimately righteousness would triumph.

While Augustine's predictions of continued struggle and conflict have been abundantly fulfilled to the present day, there is little evidence that there has been any progress toward the ultimate goal. It is significant that many present-day amillennialists have further retreated from the predictions of triumph and are content to leave a golden age to eternity future or limited to heaven. Premillennialists will not necessarily disagree with Augustine's basic idea of conflict in the present age nor with the idea that the second advent will signal the coming of righteousness to the earth, but they will attach a different meaning to both the present age and the second advent.

The Failure of Fulfillment

The test of any system of interpretation is its correspondence to the facts of history. This is especially true in interpretation of prophecy. The question may fairly be asked whether the history of the church and the world since Augustine has given any confirmation of the essentials of his interpretation.

The Augustinian concept of the binding of Satan has already been shown to be without Scriptural or historical warrant. Certainly there has been no real change in the working of Satan in the world and plainly no lack of activity of Satanic forces. The concept of progress and a triumphant church, while not stressed

by Augustine in the postmillennial way, falls far short of fulfillment or even significant attainment. The Christian era has been no golden age of righteousness nor has the church conquered the world. It is more accurate to recognize that the world has to a large degree possessed the church.

One feature of Augustinian millennialism has notably failed. Augustine, as has been previously brought out, considered the coming of Christ within one thousand years after the ascension an essential of his system. So impressed was Augustine with the necessity of interpreting literally the six references to the one thousand years in Revelation 20 that he departed from his otherwise spiritualization of the passage to assert it. Because of his involvement with the theory that the entire history of man would be finished within seven millenniums, he considered it entirely possible that the sixth millennium, the last in ordinary world history, had already begun when Christ was born. Based on calculations from chronology of the LXX, Augustine concluded that the second advent would occur in the year 650 A.D.[10] Cf. Allis, op. cit., p. 3. This would seem the most flagrant date-setting one could imagine. In fairness to Augustine, however, it should be said that he is not arbitrary and recognized the possibility of error in the system of chronology which he followed. At the outside, nevertheless, the second advent would certainly occur within one thousand years of the ascension.[11] Augustine, op. cit., XVIII, 53. Augustine was positive that in any case the millennium was started no later than the ascension and would last no longer than one thousand years.

The year 650 came and went with no notable events to fulfill the promise in Augustine's teaching. Attention was soon fastened on the year 1000 A.D. The belief was widespread that the second advent would occur on this date. As Kromminga points out, not only at the year 1000, but also in the year 1044, and again in 1065, when Good Friday happened to coincide with the Day of Annunciation, there was hope that the second advent would occur on Good Friday.[12] Kromminga, op. cit., p. 117, citing Glaber, Erdmann, etc. The expectation of the church based on Augustinian eschatology was not fulfilled, and it became evident that by no stretch of the imagination was the Augustinian teaching to be considered fulfilled. For a time they could hope they were in the "little season" (Rev 20:3), but as the years wore away this became increasingly untenable. Both of Augustine's suggestions--the year 650 and the year 1000 or thereafter--were obsolete.

Two major viewpoints eventuated out of the welter of speculation which continued to regard the coming of Christ as an imminent event. The postmillennial idea that the millennium was literal but would begin someday after the time of Christ had many adherents. All sorts of starting points were suggested. Even to modern times postmillennialists were wont to start the millennium at such time as to bring its consummation in their lifetime. Hengstenberg, for instance, began the millennium in the ninth century, which would bring the second advent in his lifetime. Others began the millennium in more recent times. Allis cites Durham as dating its beginning in 1560.[13] Allis, op. cit., p. 4. Normal postmillennialism follows Whitby, however, in finding the entire millennium or golden age still future. Both Roman Catholic and Reformed scholars were in total confusion as far as arriving at an agreed teaching on this matter. A popular and more tenable position was adopted by some who spiritualized the time element of the millennium along with the teachings which relate to it. Undoubtedly this is a more consistent position even if it leaves the passage indefinite. In any case the outstanding feature of Augustinian amillennialism which captured the church and caused the eclipse of premillennialism proved to be a total failure in the history of the church. There was absolutely nothing to confirm the Augustinian view of the millennium in the centuries which followed him. If the law of fulfillment is essential to establish an interpretation, the Augustinian view is tried and found wanting.

The Amillennialism of the Protestant Reformation

The Roman Church did not make any significant advance in the doctrine after Augustine, and Protestant teachings did not fare much better. Without attempting within the limited discussion possible here an analysis of the whole Protestant Reformation, it is safe to conclude that the early years of Protestantism saw little if any advance over the Augustinian view. It is clear that the great Protestant leaders such as Calvin, Luther, and Melancthon are properly classed as amillennial. As far as millennial teaching was concerned, they were content to follow the Roman Church in a weakened Augustinian viewpoint. Calvin's discussion of the millennium is a fair sample of the attitude of the Reformers. They treated the doctrine superficially and arbitrarily, making the view ridiculous by misrepresentation. Calvin, for instance, has this to say: "...not long after arose the Millenarians, who limited the reign of Christ to a thousand years. Their fiction is too puerile to require or deserve refutation. Nor does the Revelation, which they quote in favour of their error, afford them any support; for the term of a thousand years, there mentioned, refers not to the eternal blessedness of the Church, but to the various agitations which awaited the Church in its militant state upon earth. But the whole Scripture proclaims that there will be no end of the happiness of the elect, or the punishment of the reprobate.... Those who assign the children of God a thousand years to enjoy the inheritance of the future life, little think what dishonour they cast on Christ and his kingdom." [14] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), II, 250-51 (Book III, 25). While Augustine discarded premillennialism because he took a carnal interpretation of the millennium as essential to the view, Calvin commits a greater error in assigning to the premillennial view a limited eternity of one millennium. Neither view would be claimed by any thinking premillennialist of our day. One can wonder what Augustine and Calvin would do with the complete system of premillennial teaching available in modern times.

Modern Amillennialism

Because of the analytic treatment of amillennialism from a modern viewpoint, which will follow, it will be sufficient here to observe the broad trend of amillennialism in modern times. For the most part amillennialists of today such as Allis and Berkhof claim to follow in the hallowed tradition of Augustine while admitting the need for adjustment of his view to the actual modern situation. A new type of amillennialism has arisen, however, of which Warfield can be taken as an example which is actually a totally new type of amillennialism. Allis traces this view to Duesterdieck (1859) and Kliefoth (1874) [15] Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 5. and analyzes it as a reversal of the fundamental Augustinian theory that Revelation 20 was a recapitulation of the church age. The new view instead follows the line of teaching that the millennium is distinct from the church age though it precedes the second advent. To solve the problem of correlation of this interpretation with the hard facts of a world of unbelief and sin, they interpreted the millennium as a picture not of a time-period but of a state of blessedness of the saints in heaven. [16] Allis, *loc. cit.* Warfield, with the acknowledged help of Kliefoth, [17] Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, pp. 643-44. defines the millennium in these words: "The vision, in one word, is a vision of the peace of those who have died in the Lord; and its message to us is embodied in the words of XIV.13: 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth'--of which passage the present is indeed only an expansion. The picture that is brought before us here is, in fine, the picture of the 'intermediate state'--of the saints of God gathered in heaven away from the confused noise and garments bathed in blood that characterize the war upon earth, in order that they may securely await the end." [18] Warfield, *ibid.*, p. 649.

Among amillennialists who are classified as conservative, there are, then, two principal viewpoints: (1) which finds fulfillment in the present age on earth in the church; (2) which finds fulfillment in heaven in the saints. The second more than the first requires spiritualization not only of Revelation 20 but of all the many

Old Testament passages dealing with a golden age of a righteous kingdom on earth.

Such are the antecedents of modern amillennialism. It remains, now, to analyze this historic doctrine in its modern setting in the light of the Holy Scriptures. Both premillennialism and amillennialism have many honored and historic exponents. The question remains which view provides the best interpretation of the entire Word of God. Obviously the Scriptures do not teach both viewpoints; obviously this is not a trivial matter. The contemporary serious trend of studies in this direction while not always pure in motive finds justification in the significance of the question. What, after all, is the answer of amillennialism to the main issues of Christian doctrine? This is the question which is now to come before us.

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