

Part 6: Amillennialism as a System of Theology

by John F. Walvoord

Amillennialism is a system of theology that uses the spiritualizing method of interpretation, which undermines the proper objective interpretation of the Scriptures and has significant implications for various areas of theology.

Scripture: Matthew 25:31, John 3:16, Acts 5:3, Romans 3:24, Romans 8:38, 1 Corinthians 7:5, 1 Corinthians 12:27, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 2 Corinthians 4:3, 2 Corinthians 11:14, 2 Corinthians 12:7, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 1:7, Ephesians 2:19, 1 Thessalonians 2:18, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 2 Thessalonians 2:9, 1 Timothy 1:20, 1 Peter 5:8, 1 John 3:8, 1 John 3:10, Revelation 20:1, Revelation 20:4

Topics: "Millennial Theology", "Eschatology"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on 'The Growing Importance of Millennialism,' highlighting how millennialism now plays a crucial role in shaping theology as a whole, influencing systems like premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism. The controversy between amillennialism and premillennialism has intensified, revealing significant theological implications. Amillennialism's impact on bibliology is explored, showcasing its figurative interpretation of Scripture and its potential dangers in undermining the inspiration of the Bible. The sermon delves into amillennial theology's influence on soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, emphasizing the differences between amillennial and premillennial views in these areas.

Transcript

The Growing Importance of Millennialism

While the millennial controversy is nothing new, it has come to be recognized only recently that it plays such an important part in determining the form of theology as a whole. Instead of being simply a way of interpreting prophecy, millennialism now is seen to be a determining factor in any system of theology. Premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism each influence the system of theology of which each is a part. The controversy between amillennialism and premillennialism for this reason has taken on a new and sharper antagonism and its outcome is now seen to assume significant proportions.

It is the purpose of the present discussion to trace some of the influences of amillennialism upon theological systems. In the nature of the case, it will be necessary to survey a large field rather than analyze its parts, and to form general rather than particular conclusions. While it is not always easy to determine causal factors in doctrine, it can be shown at least that the amillennial approach is in harmony with certain theological ideas and is conducive to certain trends. The important fact which stands out in

this field of investigation is that amillennialism is more than a denial of premillennial eschatology; it is an approach to theological interpretation which has its own characteristics and trends.

Amillennial Bibliology

While the influence of the amillennial theory upon bibliology has seldom been recognized by its own adherents, it is, in fact, one of the important results which accrue from its relation to Biblical interpretation. In the previous discussion of amillennialism as a method of interpretation,[1] "Amillennialism as a Method of Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March 1950, pp. 42-50. the use of figurative interpretation of the Bible by the amillennialians was found to be the basic concept of their system and that which distinguished it from premillennialism. While amillennialians reject the figurative method of interpreting the Bible as a general method, it is used extensively not only in the interpretation of prophecy but in other areas of theology as well. It was shown that the only possible rule which could be followed by the amillennialian was hopelessly subjective--the figurative method was used whenever the amillennialian found it necessary to change the literal meaning of Scripture to conform to his ideas.

The dangers of this type of figurative interpretation should be apparent to anyone who respects the inspiration of Scripture. By it, any passage of the Bible can be construed to mean something other than its plain, literal meaning. The danger is well recognized by the amillennialians themselves as is witnessed by their strenuous rejection of the allegorical method and their earnest attempts to safeguard their method by various rules and guiding principles. It has already been shown how impossible it is to form any safe boundaries for the use of the spiritualizing method. The modernist who spiritualizes the resurrection of Christ does so by almost the same techniques as are used by the amillennialian B. B. Warfield[2] *Biblical Doctrines*, pp. 643-664. who finds heaven described in Revelation 20:1-10. Further, the history of modern liberalism has demonstrated that its adherents are drawn almost entirely from amillennial ranks.

What then is the amillennial influence on bibliology as a whole? The answer is already apparent when the diverse theological systems of Roman Catholic, modern liberal, and modern conservative writers are found to be all using essentially the same method. To be sure, the modern liberals who no longer hold to verbal inspiration do not need to spiritualize the Scriptures to arrive at their interpretation. They can simply declare the Scriptures in error and go on. But the first inroad of liberalism in the church historically in Origen, and in modern times as well, has been by subverting the meaning by spiritualizing the words. While no doubt other errors are found in these three widely differing theological positions, their respective theologies could not have the variance that exists if each interpreted the Scriptures literally. The one factor which would correct everything would be a return to the literal meaning of the Bible. The introduction of the spiritualizing method in bibliology has opened the door for every variety of false doctrine according to the whims of the interpreter.

Amillennialism clearly, then, offers no defense against modern liberalism. While this conclusion may be disputed by amillennialians, the widespread defection of amillennialians to liberalism is an obvious fact in modern theology. It becomes all the more significant when it is realized that there has been practically no defection to modernism from those who were consistently premillennial. In fact, it is almost a byword in modern theology that a premillennialian is identified with Bible-believing conservatives who have resisted the modern trend of theology. Premillennialism has gone hand in hand with conservative belief in the inspired Word of God, while amillennialism has no consistent testimony in this regard.

One of the obvious problems of amillennialism in the field of bibliology is that their method of interpretation leaves large areas, particularly of the Old Testament, without any generally accepted meaning. As the spiritualizing method is by its nature almost entirely subjective, it is impossible to find any considerable measure of agreement on the spiritualized interpretation of great Old Testament prophecies which are taken literally by the premillenarian. When approaching the more difficult task of interpreting a New Testament book like Revelation, the utter bankruptcy of the common historical interpretation of this book becomes evident. There are literally scores of interpretations of the book of Revelation by the amillenarians who have attempted to interpret this book by the historical setting which was contemporary to them. The history of interpretation is strewn with the wreckage of multiplied schemes of interpretation which are every one contradictory of all the others. The writer has personally examined some fifty historical interpretations of Revelation all of which would be rejected by any intelligent person today. The literal method which regards the bulk of Revelation as future is the only consistent approach possible. The spiritualizing method of interpretation is a blight upon the understanding of the Scriptures and constitutes an important hindrance to Bible study.

Amillennial bibliology by its use of the spiritualizing method has departed from the proper objective interpretation of the Scriptures according to the ordinary grammatical sense of the terms, to a subjective method in which the meaning is to some extent at the mercy of the interpreter. Its subjective character has undermined amillennial theology as a whole. To the extent the spiritualizing method is used, to that very extent their theology loses all uniformity and self-consistency. In fact, as far as amillennialism itself is concerned, there is neither principle nor method to erect a self-consistent system of theology. The only consistent amillennial theologies which exist today are those which have most resisted the spiritualized method of interpretation and have to the greatest extent isolated its use. The ranks of modern amillenarians are almost completely dominated by the liberals in theology. While amillennialism can hardly be blamed for destructive higher criticism which has undermined faith in the Bible, it can also be said that it had no defense against it as far as its method and attitude are concerned. After all, if Scripture which teaches something contrary to a preconceived theory can be altered by spiritualizing it, of what importance is the concept of inerrancy? If amillennialism did not furnish the material of modern liberalism, it at least provided the atmosphere. While there have been a number of outstanding conservative theologians who were amillennial, the institutions in which they taught and the denominations of which they were a part have for the most part left the fold of conservatives. The spiritualizing method of interpretation has proved the Achilles' heel of amillennial conservatism. The amillenarian who wants to forsake conservatism for liberalism needs no change in method and the transition is not difficult. On the other hand, a premillenarian if enamored of modern liberalism would have to forsake all he had formerly stood for in order to adopt liberalism.

Amillennial Theology Proper

Amillennialism as such does not profoundly influence the area of theology proper except indirectly by giving comfort to modern liberalism. Conservative amillenarians have differed little from premillenarians on essential doctrines relating to God. The major differences in doctrine in regard to the Godhead continue to be controversies between Calvinists, Arminians, and Socinians and their modern representatives.

A comparison between amillennial and premillennial theologies will reveal an important difference, however, in their respective views of the meaning of the incarnation. While the amillennial view confines itself to the limited perspective of fulfillment of the soteriological purposes of God, the premillenarian notes the frequent reminders in the Gospels that Christ came also to fulfill the Davidic covenant, promising a

king and a throne forever and the fulfillment of the strictly Jewish Messianic hope. Likewise the concepts of the second advent of Christ as well as the significance of the present advocacy of Christ are somewhat different. The amillenarian tends to put less stress on the present ministry of Christ in heaven and to simplify the significance of prophecies regarding the second advent. Among some amillenarians the spiritualizing method of interpretation has robbed the second advent of its prophetic significance as a single future event. It has become only a process or symbol of divine providence in daily Christian experience. The historic creeds, while essentially amillennial, have resisted this tendency.

While agreeing on the person of the Holy Spirit, disagreement exists on the nature of the ministry of the Third Person in the various dispensations. The tendency of amillennial theology is to treat the work of the Holy Spirit as essentially the same in all ages. For this reason amillenarians usually reject the dispensational distinctions in the work of the Holy Spirit ordinarily held by premillenarians. Amillenarians usually hold that the Spirit indwelt saints in the Old Testament, regenerated them, and empowered them in much the same manner as in the New Testament. By contrast premillenarians normally view the present work of the Holy Spirit in the church as distinct from all other ages, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit as unique.

The influence of amillennialism on theology proper can be said, then, to be relatively unimportant as compared to other fields. The major difficulty here, as elsewhere, arises when the spiritualizing method of interpretation is applied, and to the extent this is resisted the difficulties subside.

Amillennial Angelology

While conservative amillenarians and premillenarians agree in general on the doctrine of angels including the area of Satanology and demonology, only premillenarians present a united front in interpreting the Scriptures in this division of theology. The fact that amillennialism includes the diverse elements of conservative and liberal theology results in sharp differences in their teaching concerning angels. Liberal amillenarians tend to deny the existence of angels and relegate it all to pagan mythology, thereby denying also the Scriptural revelation.

An examination of conservative theologies dealing with angelology will, however, demonstrate that in general they minimize the importance and significance of angels in theology while premillenarians magnify the doctrine. The important point of departure is the disagreement regarding the binding of Satan during the millennium. On this point amillenarians are at variance with themselves. Augustine held that Satan was bound at the first coming of Christ. This, of course, is a flagrant spiritualization both of Revelation 20 and of all other passages dealing with the power of Satan in the world. It is characteristic of modern amillenarians to have a low view of the present power and activity of Satan. The obvious disagreement of Augustine's view with the facts of the history of the world and the church have in recent centuries helped to spark the new type of amillennialism, which finds the millennium in heaven and limits the binding of Satan to inactivity in heaven itself rather than on earth. Amillenarians to this day have no united testimony on the real meaning of the binding of Satan and usually ignore it, except when attacking premillennialism.

The attitude of amillenarians to the binding of Satan is another illustration of how the spiritualizing method in regard to prophecy affects other areas. The amillenarian concept of the present binding of Satan, which is a future event to the premillenarian, results in a definite underestimating of the present power of Satan. Modern amillenarians such as Allis and Berkhof still embrace fundamentally the view of Augustine that Satan was bound at the first advent. But how can the Scriptures be harmonized with such a view? The

answer is that they can be harmonized only by spiritualizing plain and factual statements of the Bible which obviously were not intended to be spiritualized. A survey of important Scripture references makes this clear.

Acts 5:3 records the words of Peter to Ananias: "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thy heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back part of the price of the land?" Again in 1 Corinthians 7:5 Satan is spoken of as "tempting" Christians. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Satan is revealed as one blinding the mind of all unbelievers. According to 2 Corinthians 11:14, Satan is often fashioned as an angel of light. Paul speaks of a messenger of Satan which buffeted him (2 Cor 12:7). Satan hindered Paul in coming to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:18). The future lawless one is said to come "according to the working of Satan with all power and lying wonders" (2 Thess 2:9). Hymenaeus and Alexander are delivered to Satan (1 Tim 1:20). 1 John 3:8 declares as a present truth, "He that doeth sin is of the devil." Children of God are contrasted to children of the devil (1 John 3:10). In 1 Peter 5:8, the direct statement and exhortation is made: "Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." How can anyone hold to the impossible theory that Satan is bound now when the Scriptures expressly state that Satan tempts, deceives, blinds, buffets, hinders, works lying wonders, and that he is walking about seeking whom he may devour? Such a theory is possible only when the spiritualizing method is used in interpreting the plain and literal statements of Scripture.

Amillenarians have escaped some of the force of the difficulty by minimizing and limiting the meaning of the binding of Satan itself. Calvin and Luther, for instance, while amillenarians, gave due recognition to the power of Satan in the world. They identified the binding of Satan with the idea that God is sovereign and that Satan has only a restricted area in which he is free to work. Berkhof, who carefully avoids the issue of the binding of Satan in his chapter on angelology, seizes upon the explanation of Calvin that fallen angels "drag their chains with them wherever they go."^[3] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 149. By this means a middle position is taken which on the one hand recognizes the binding of Satan and on the other escapes the difficulty of contradicting the plain meaning of Scripture on the present power of Satan. In general, the fact remains that the amillennial view of angelology tends to have a doctrine of sin and Satan which is less realistic than that of the premillenarians.

Amillennial Anthropology

Amillennial anthropology, including as it does conservative, liberal and Roman Catholic viewpoints, has more variance within itself than with premillennial anthropology. This area of theology is probably less affected by the millennial controversy than any other. The differences that do exist do not seem to connect directly with the millennial issue. Certain tendencies, however caused, can be noted.

Amillennial theology of the conservative Protestant kind has become identified in the last two centuries with the covenant theory of theology as contained in the covenant of works, covenant of redemption, and covenant of grace.^[4] See L. Berkhof, *ibid.*, pp. 211ff. While some premillenarians attempt to combine the covenant theory with premillenarianism, it has been more common for premillenarians to follow a dispensational emphasis founded upon recognition of the Biblical covenants. The covenant theory has affected anthropology to the extent that the covenant of works becomes related to the fall. As usually explained, the covenant of works postulates a covenant between God and Adam in which for being obedient in the test of the forbidden fruit Adam is promised eternal life. While recognizing the reality of the test involved for Adam and Eve, premillenarians have tended to confine their view to the more explicit statement of Scripture, questioning the promise of eternal life for obedience, which is nowhere mentioned

in the Bible, and weakening the force of the covenant idea. In place of the covenant of works as such, premillenarians often offer the Edenic covenant in its place. This covenant includes all the aspects of man's responsibility before the fall, including the prohibition of the forbidden fruit. As understood by the premillenarians, this covenant ceased to exist when the fall occurred and was succeeded by the Adamic covenant providing the basic conditions for man's life on the earth after the fall, some of which conditions continue until the end of the present world order. While the issue is not to be minimized, it can be traced only indirectly to the millennial controversy. Many amillenarians also question the covenant of works. It introduces, however, the covenant theory as principally an amillennial influence and as opposed to the dispensational viewpoint of Scripture which is normal premillenarianism.

In regard to the depravity of man, premillenarianism normally embraces the concept of total depravity, taking a serious view of the sinful state of man and finding him totally unable to commend himself to God or effect his own salvation. In this regard amillennialism again has no certain voice, the conservatives generally accepting the doctrine of total depravity as expressed in Calvinism, but the Roman Catholic and modern liberal amillenarians having different views. While this can be related to the method of spiritualizing the Scriptures, other factors seem to outweigh the millennial influences, and for all practical purposes this aspect of anthropology does not figure in the millennial controversy. Taken as a whole, anthropology is not directly related to the millennial issue.

Amillennial Soteriology

The question of millennial influence on the doctrine of soteriology has been raised in recent years by the amillenarians themselves, and they have attempted to distinguish the soteriology of premillenarians from that held by amillenarians. In this area of theology, as in previous ones, amillenarians would do well to unify their own theology. The concepts of Roman theology and modern liberal theology, both amillennial, are in striking contrast to the views held by the Protestant Reformers. In both the Roman and modern liberal view human works play a large part in salvation. In both, the work of Christ on the cross is not considered a final dealing with sins or "finished" in the Reformed understanding of the term. In the conservative amillennial as well as the premillennial view, eternal security, assurance of salvation, complete justification, and regeneration issue from simple faith in Jesus Christ. It follows that there is more difference between various schools of amillennial thought than there is between conservative Reformed amillennialism and premillennialism.

The present controversy between amillenarians and premillenarians is not on the factors mentioned, however. Instead, the difference of opinion has arisen from the conflicting systems of theology resulting from covenant theology as opposed to dispensational theology. The respective merits of these opposing schools of interpretation will be given attention in a later discussion which will take up the controversy in detail.

For the purpose of the present survey the two approaches to theology may be distinguished in general terms. Covenant theology is the view that all the dispensations from Adam to the end of human history are aspects of God's soteriological program. In other words, the dispensations are different presentations of the way of salvation in a gradually unfolding progression. The tendency of this viewpoint is to regard God's general purpose as essentially that of saving the elect, to blend the various Biblical revelations regarding Israel, the Gentiles, and the church into one stream, and to minimize the differences between the various dispensations. In contrast, the dispensational theology while not disputing the view of the unity of God's plan of salvation, finds in the various dispensations periods of stewardship which are not directly related to

salvation. In a word, the dispensationalist does not consider the program of God for salvation as the sole purpose of God, and in fact denies that some of the dispensations are soteriological. The Mosaic law under the dispensational approach, while a way of life, is not considered a way of salvation. Heaven was not among its rewards nor was hell among its punishments.

The amillenarian who follows covenant theology will accordingly have a decidedly different viewpoint of the meaning of Scripture than the dispensationalist. There is difference of opinion on the essential meaning of some of the dispensations. While agreeing on the ground and in general on the terms of salvation, there is conflict on the relation of God's plan of salvation to the revealed character of the Biblical dispensations. The importance of this issue is obvious, and deserves a more extended treatment which will follow later.

Amillennial Ecclesiology

Next to the field of eschatology itself, ecclesiology offers the greatest contrast between the amillennial and premillennial views. Here exist some basic conflicts which arise in the nature of the case from the differing views of the nature of the present age. As this will be given attention later in a special treatment, it will be sufficient to outline the problem.

In ecclesiology, several aspects of amillennialism converge to produce a distinctive doctrine of the church. From the covenant theology usually embraced by amillenarians comes the concept of the essential unity of the elect of all dispensations. The fact that all the saints of all dispensations are saved on the basis of the death of Christ is interpreted as a just ground for concluding that the term church is properly used of saints in both the Old and New Testaments. Hence Jews and Gentiles who were saved in the Old Testament period are considered as included in the Old Testament church on much the same basis as saints in the New Testament are included in the New Testament church. In fact, the usual tendency is to deny any essential difference in the nature of their salvation.

As amillenarians deny any future dispensation after the present age, they also deny any future to Israel as a nation. The many promises made to Israel are given one of two treatments. By the traditional Augustinian amillennialism, these promises are transferred by spiritualized interpretation to the church. The church today is the true Israel and inherits the promises which Israel lost in rejecting Christ. The other, more modern type of amillennialism holds that the promises of righteousness, peace, and security are poetic pictures of heaven and fulfilled in heaven, not on earth. This view does not necessarily identify Israel and the church. Some combine both viewpoints. It is obvious that the Augustinian view, in particular, has a tremendous influence upon ecclesiology. The Roman Church builds much of its claim for sovereignty on the inheritance from Israel of the combined political and religious authority revealed in the Old Testament. The concept of the church as an institution is enhanced, and ecclesiastical organization and authority given Scriptural sanction. By so much also, the New Testament revelation of the church as essentially a spiritual organism rather than an organization is often slighted and in effect denied. The great contrast between legalism as found in the Mosaic dispensation and grace as revealed in the present age is usually ignored. The effect is often a repetition of the Galatian error.

As contrasted to dispensational premillennialism, amillennialism tends to slight the doctrine of the body of Christ in ecclesiology as well as the distinctive basis of grace as the ground for the believer's walk before God in this age. Even a casual survey of amillennial theologies will reveal the tendency to limit discussion to the matters of church organization, church ordinances, and the means of grace. By contrast,

premillennial treatments of ecclesiology tend to enlarge the concept of the church as the body of Christ--an organism rather than an organization--and give extended treatment to the spiritual life of the believer. Ecclesiology in the nature of the case offers one of the principal areas of disagreement in relation to the millennial issue. While somewhat slow to realize it, amillenarians are fully aware of this and like the recent work of Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, are relating the millennial issue to the doctrine of the church. For this reason it is considered important to analyze the amillennial doctrine of the church and attention will be given to this special aspect of the doctrine later.

Amillennial Eschatology

In the field of eschatology, the principal differences occasioned by the millennial issue are found. Here again amillennialism does not present a united front and includes almost every variation not specifically classified as postmillennial or premillennial. The modern liberal rules out any specific scheme of eschatology according to his own ideas, denying usually the ordinary doctrines of the second advent, resurrection, and final judgment as held by the historic church. The Roman Church, of course, has its own complicated doctrine of future things which is quite foreign to that of Protestantism. The present analysis will need to be limited to the essential features of conservative Reformed amillennialism.

The doctrines of Reformed amillennialism in regard to eschatology are quite clear. They usually include as the essentials the doctrine of the second advent of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment of all, and the eternal state. A period of trouble corresponding to the predicted time of tribulation is usually assigned to the period just before the second advent, but in general terms. Under the amillennial viewpoint the portions of Scripture dealing with the rapture and judgment of the church, the resurrection of the righteous dead, the resurrection of the wicked dead, the judgment of the Gentiles, the judgment of Israel, and the judgment of Satan and angels are all combined in a closely knit sequence of events attending the second advent itself. The premillennial objection to this form of doctrine consists fundamentally in rejection of the spiritualizing of the many passages involved in order to make them conform to the pattern desired by the amillenarian. For instance, the amillennial view that the judgment of the Gentiles in Matthew 25:31-46 is the final general judgment is rejected by the premillenarian on the ground that the passage deals only with the living Gentiles, not any resurrected peoples, nor the church. Without doubt, the millennial controversy is largely settled by answering the question of the validity of the interpretation of these events in Scripture. The amillennial doctrine in this area demands a careful analysis and special attention will be given later to the major items of study.

Conclusion

In this general survey of the influence of the amillennial view on theology as a whole, it was shown that the principal areas of influence in order of importance are eschatology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. In these three areas, particular attention must be paid to the nature of amillennial influence, and the discussion to follow will take up these areas in turn, beginning with soteriology.

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