

# Part 8: Amillennial Ecclesiology

by John F. Walvoord

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*Amillennial ecclesiology views the church as the continuation of Israel, with a focus on the spiritual and invisible aspects of the church, and denies a literal fulfillment of promises made to Israel.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 12:12, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 1:22, Colossians 1:18, 1 Peter 2:9

**Topics:** "Church Government", "Ecclesiology"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the doctrine of the church, emphasizing its central role in the Christian faith. He explores the influence of amillennialism on Roman ecclesiology, tracing its historical development and impact on the church's nature and structure. Walvoord discusses how amillennialism shaped the Roman Church's view of itself as the spiritual continuation of Israel, leading to a focus on the external aspects of the church and its authority over the secular state. He contrasts the ecclesiology of the Reformation with that of the Roman Church, highlighting the Protestant movement's corrections while acknowledging its continued external emphasis influenced by Roman ideas.

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## Transcript

Few doctrines are more central in the Christian faith than the doctrine of the church. The teachings concerning its nature, form of government, its sacraments, the priesthood of the church, its essential duties, its rights, and its relation to the world and to the state combine to form an important segment of Christian truth. Given the doctrine of the church, the rest of a theological system can almost be deduced.

It is the purpose of this aspect of the study to trace the influence of amillennialism in the field of ecclesiology and to form some estimate of its importance and results. There has been growing realization that some relation exists and that those who differ on the millennial issue usually hold differing concepts of the church itself.

### The Influence of Amillennialism on Roman Ecclesiology

As amillennialism had its rise historically in the Roman church and developed as an integral part of the Roman system, significant facts appear in the history of the period from Augustine in the fourth century to the Reformation. The Roman Church, first of all, regarded itself as the continuation of Israel as a spiritual entity. The political or theocratic character of Israel as well as its religious life was considered as continuing in new form in the Roman Church. Like Israel the Roman Church was a combined political and spiritual society. Just as Israel had power under God to legislate, to govern itself politically and religiously,

so the Roman Church claimed for itself similar power. As the spiritual is higher and more important than the political, so the church claimed authority over the secular state.

The amillennial interpretation of Scripture was, of course, essential to this Roman viewpoint. Only by denying fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel and by spiritualized interpretation transferring them to the Roman Church could any vital connection between Judaism and Christianity be established. The church had to be the successors and inheritors of Israel's promises. This is essentially the amillennial system of interpretation. The premillennial interpretation, for instance, would never have issued into the Roman system if consistently applied. The amillennial approach was essential to the Roman system of doctrine. Apart from it, the Roman system would have been without authorization in its use of truth committed to Israel only.

In the period before the Reformation, the Roman Church tended to emphasize the external nature of the church. Its organization, authority, sacraments, and religious rites were for the most part external, and adherence and submission to the external Roman Church were the indispensable prerequisites for salvation and fellowship in Roman Christianity. The Roman Church did not deny that there existed the so-called invisible church, but they defined this as a fellowship of believers derived from being a part of the visible, that is, the Roman, Church. They held that there is no church invisible which is not a part of the visible Roman Church, and the important question was whether one was a part of this visible church. As Berkhof summarizes the Roman position, "From the days of Cyprian down to the Reformation the essence of the Church was sought ever increasingly in its external visible organization. The Church Fathers conceived of the catholic Church as comprehending all true branches of the Church of Christ, and as bound together in an external and visible unity, which had its unifying bond in the college of bishops. The conception of the Church as an external organization became more prominent as time went on." [1] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 562. The modern Roman Church also identifies the mystical with the visible church. Pope Pius XII in an encyclical letter issued in August, 1950 denounced those in the Roman Church who hold "they are not bound by the doctrine...which teaches that the mystical body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same things...and reduce to a meaningless formula the necessity of belonging to the true church in order to gain salvation." Cf. *Time*, Sept 4, 1950, pp. 68, 71.

The tendency of ecclesiology in the Roman Church before the Reformation and to a large extent ever since has been an emphasis on the external character of the church. This had its rise in the idea that the church is essentially theocratic, a continuation of God's purpose toward Israel. This in turn was built on the spiritualizing system of interpretation fostered by Augustinian amillennialism. While amillennialism does not lead necessarily to the conclusions drawn by the Roman Church, the conclusions that were reached would have been impossible without the amillennial viewpoint.

Some of the more particular conclusions of the Roman Church are traced to appropriation of Jewish promises in the Old Testament. The sacramental idea received much of its impetus from the Levitical rites and the Aaronic priesthood. From the Protestant point of view, of course, much of Romanism is derived unabashed from paganism, and for this, amillennialism is not responsible. On the other hand, a literal interpretation of the prophetic Word would have ruled out paganism as well as the ritualism. The complicated religious rites and ceremonies for the most part did not come into the church until amillennialism had become the dominant viewpoint.

The Ecclesiology of the Reformation

The Protestant movement begun in the Reformation was in large measure corrective of the abuses which had become prevalent in the Roman system. The sacraments were overhauled and reduced to New Testament Biblical formulas. The priesthood was restored to all believers. The hierarchical system was changed in most of Protestantism to Biblical patterns. Justification became a work of God in true believers instead of a work mediated through the church. The Protestant movement, however, was not able to extricate itself completely from Roman influence. This is evidenced in eschatology, in the long disputes over transubstantiation, and more particularly in continuing to a large extent the emphasis on the external church. While most of the Reformers did not limit the church to its external form and recognized the true body of believers as such, the tendency to organization and attempts to enter the political arena early were in evidence.

The Reformation did not change essentially the concept of the church. For most Reformers it was still largely a visible entity with its roots in Judaism and its boundaries including all the saints. The church was thought of as the logical successor of Israel, the inheritor of its spiritual promises. Indeed, the church was considered to have begun in the Old Testament, sometimes with Adam, and by others with Abraham. Calvin refers to the saints of the Old and New Testament under the one title of the "Church." [2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), I, 503.

Calvin further states explicitly: "The covenant of all the fathers is so far from differing substantially from ours, that it is the very same; it only varies in the administration.... Moreover, the apostle makes the Israelites equal to us, not only in the grace of the covenant, but also in the signification of the sacraments.... Wherefore it is certainly and clearly proved, that the same promises of an eternal and heavenly life, with which the Lord now favours us, were not only communicated to the Jews, but even sealed and confirmed by sacraments truly spiritual." [3] *Ibid.*, I, 466, 468, 470.

Calvin held that the New Testament church differed from saints in the Old Testament principally in degree of revelation. In the Old Testament they had the shadows, but the realities were revealed in the New Testament. Essentially Calvin along with many of the Reformers continued the basic Roman conception that the saints of the Old and New Testament belong to the same entity, the church. In order to achieve this end, however, the Reformers had to deny to the Jews all their distinctive promises and had to nullify the hope of Israel for an earthly kingdom of righteousness.

Calvin, for instance, refers to "the folly of the whole nation of the Jews in the present age, in expecting any earthly kingdom of the Messiah..." [4] *Ibid.*, I, 488. His conclusions were an outgrowth of amillennial theology and its method of interpretation. It is quite clear that the leaders of the Reformation continued in the main the basic Roman idea of the church as the successor of Israel as well as being one with Israel. The church, in their viewpoint, varies in details and in administration, but is essentially the same in both Testaments. somewhat to the position of Augustine.

This is defined by Berkhof as a denial of the Roman position that the kingdom of God is identical to the visible church, and a return to the concept that it is identical to the invisible church, i.e., the whole company of believers. [6] *Loc. cit.* This is essentially the position of amillennial conservatives today. Liberal theologians following the lead of Ritschl have regarded the kingdom of God not as a congregation of believers but a system of ethical ideals. The advance of the kingdom for them is the advance of ethical principles.

Augustine, Rome, the Reformers, and the modern liberal agree, however, in denouncing that the kingdom of God is essentially Messianic, the rule of Jesus Christ as the Son of David following the second advent. They emphasize that the kingdom of God is on earth now, and its advance and ultimate triumph is the advance and triumph of the church.

#### Amillennial Ecclesiology in Relation to Israel

The most obvious fact of amillennial ecclesiology is that it denies any millennial period following the church age in which righteousness and peace will flourish on earth. All the prophetic anticipations of such a period are either considered conditional and therefore uncertain, or are to be fulfilled in the church in the present age. The denial of a future millennium is based on the method of giving a spiritualized interpretation to Old Testament kingdom prophecies. While all amillenarians are not agreed on the details of the interpretation of the Old Testament kingdom promises, the same general principles are usually recognized by all of them.

The amillennial ecclesiology denies to Israel any future as a nation. Israel is never to be a political entity in the world in fulfillment of the promises of a glorious kingdom-period. Promises in the Old Testament such as Jeremiah 31:35-37 which assure Israel's continuance as "a nation before me forever," are interpreted merely in the racial concept or as fulfilled spiritually in the sense that the church shall continue forever. Allis, while he does not seem to expound the passage directly, links it with the new covenant with the teaching simply that "the prophet is picturing the ultimate and final state of God's people." [7] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 238. The interpretation stultifies any hope of Israel for a national future. Their only hope is spiritual, by entering into faith in Christ in the present inter-advent age.

Two forms of interpretation seem to prevail among the amillenarians in regard to the form in which Israel's promises shall be fulfilled. The traditional Reformed position as illustrated in Calvin is that the church takes Israel's place as its spiritual successor. Calvin regarded Israel's hopes of a future kingdom as without warrant--in fact, he held that this hope was a result of their spiritual blindness imposed as a judgment because of their rejection of Christ. Calvin stated, "And the folly of the whole nation of the Jews in the present age, in expecting an earthly kingdom of the Messiah, would be equally extraordinary, had not the Scriptures long before predicted that they would thus be punished for their rejection of the gospel." [8] Calvin, *op. cit.*, I, 488. Calvin's interpretation is based partially on the idea that Israel had erroneously interpreted the promises of a future kingdom on earth literally, and partially on the thought that Israel had forfeited these promises by disobedience. He seems to put most of his argument on the former point, however. Calvin wrote, "The point of controversy between us and these persons, is this: they maintain that the possession of the land of Canaan was accounted by the Israelites their supreme and ultimate blessedness, but that to us, since the revelation of Christ, it is a figure of the heavenly inheritance. We, on the contrary, contend, that in the earthly possession which they enjoyed, they contemplated, as in a mirror, the future inheritance which they believed to be prepared for them in heaven." [9] *Ibid.*, I, 490. Calvin held, then, in the main, that the literal interpretation of Israel's promises was wrong in the first place. They were intended to teach Israelites their prospect in heaven rather than in earth.

Allis, while an ardent Calvinist, places most of his argument on the point that the promises were conditional, and not fulfilled because of Israel's disobedience and rejection of Christ. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant according to Allis is conditioned upon obedience. Allis states, "It is true that, in the express terms of the covenant with Abraham, obedience is not stated as a condition. But that obedience was presupposed is clearly indicated by two facts. The one is that obedience is the precondition of

blessing under all circumstances.... The second fact is that in the case of Abraham the duty of obedience is particularly stressed." [10] Allis, op. cit., p. 33.

Allis agrees with Calvin, however, in regarding the New Testament church as the true Israel, the organic continuance of the church of the Old Testament. He denounces in unsparing terms those who hold that Israel must mean Israel: "Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel." [11] Ibid., p. 218.

Allis is guilty, in this instance, of a serious misrepresentation. It so happens that there is considerable opposition to Calvin's view not only among premillenarians but among postmillenarians and even amillenarians. Charles Hodge, for instance, a representative postmillenarian, regards practically all the New Testament references to Israel as referring to those of that race, i.e., not the church as such. Hodge states in regard to Romans 11:26, which Allis takes for granted is allusion to the church: "Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and all Israel, the whole nation." [12] Charles Hodge, Commentary on Romans, p. 589.

William Hendriksen, Professor of New Testament Literature at Calvin Seminary, a well-known amillenarian, in expounding Romans 11:25-26 also holds that Israel means Israel--the elect of Israel as he puts it. [13] William Hendriksen, And So All Israel Shall Be Saved, p. 33. Allis' "unprecedented extreme" turns out to be somewhat normal even among fellow amillenarians. The Roman Catholic idea that the church is the true Israel in fact is fading from contemporary amillenarians. The essentially postmillennial idea that Israel will be incorporated in the church and her promises fulfilled to her in a spiritualized sense seems to be gaining popularity.

While considerable difference of opinion exists among amillenarians regarding the best method of disposing of the mass of Old Testament prophecies which seem to indicate a future earthly kingdom for Israel, they agree in the main principle, that is, that these promises will not be fulfilled to Israel in a kingdom age to follow the present dispensation. Whether cancelled because of rejection of Christ as Messiah or spiritualized according to Calvin's formula, amillennialism with one voice condemns any literal fulfillment of these promises.

#### Amillennial Ecclesiology in Relation to Dispensational Distinctions

In addition to nullifying most of the meaning of Israel's promises, amillennialism does not seem to grasp many of the distinctive New Testament revelations concerning the church. While amillenarians do not deny the concept of the church as an organism in contrast to the church as an institution, they do not find much distinctive in this form of revelation. It is simply the contrast between reality and profession, or between the church visible and invisible. It is not something new, distinct, and unique.

Dispensational distinctions such as the mystery character of the entire present age are definitely denied by amillenarians. For them the present age is clearly anticipated in the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament. Premillenarians, on the other hand, usually regard the present age as hid from Old Testament prophets, and constituting a new and unrevealed development in the plan of God. All along the line of important doctrines relating to the church, the amillenarians ignore or minimize the distinctive truth relating to the church. The fact of the new creation in which the church is related to the resurrection of Christ, the doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as forming the church into the body of Christ, the unique ground

of justification based on being "in Christ," the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer in this age, and the distinctive prophetic hope of the church are qualified or denied by amillennial ecclesiology. Many precious truths are lost in the broad generalizations which characterize the amillennial treatment of ecclesiology.

## Conclusion

Taken as a whole, it is clear that amillennialism does not yield the same type of ecclesiology as either premillennialism or postmillennialism. The millennial issue is far more pointed in ecclesiology than is generally recognized. In fact, it is not too much to state that many of the millennial issues such as the question of fulfillment of promises to Israel are the touchstones of theology as a whole as well as of ecclesiology. Outside of eschatology itself, no area is more vitally related to millennialism than ecclesiology.

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