

# Part 9: Amillennial Eschatology

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the complexities and contradictions within amillennial eschatology compared to premillennial views.*

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 20:33, Matthew 25:31, 2 Corinthians 5:9, 2 Peter 2:4, Revelation 20:4, Revelation 20:11

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Millennial Kingdom"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the influence of amillennialism on eschatology, highlighting the stark contrast it poses to premillennial eschatology. He discusses the diverse systems within amillennialism, such as modern liberal theology, Roman Catholic theology, and conservative Reformed theology, emphasizing the lack of unity within amillennialism on major issues. Walvoord explores modern liberal eschatology's rejection of a future millennial kingdom on earth and its spiritualizing approach to Scripture, contrasting it with Roman Catholic eschatology's more literal interpretation of judgment, resurrection, and ultimate bliss for the saints.

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## Transcript

While amillennialism has its influence in all areas of theology, it is natural that it should affect eschatology more than any other. As a form of denial of a future millennial kingdom on earth, it stands in sharp contrast to premillennial eschatology.

In previous discussion of amillennialism, it has been brought out that amillennialism is by no means a unified theology, including within its bounds such diverse systems as modern liberal theology, Roman Catholic theology, and conservative Reformed theology. It is therefore impossible to generalize on amillennial eschatology without dividing it into these major divisions. Aside from various small sects who include within their tenets the premillennial concept, premillennialism for the most part presents a united front on eschatology in all major areas. Amillennialism, however, disagrees within itself on major issues.

### Modern Liberal Eschatology

Modern liberal eschatology almost without exception follows the amillennial idea. Modern liberalism usually disregards postmillennialism, or the idea of a golden age of righteousness on earth, as well as premillennialism which advances such an age after the second advent. For them, all promises of ultimate righteousness are relegated to the life after death.

Homrighausen has called the idea of a millennium on earth "a lot of sentimental heavenism." [1] Elmer G. Homrighausen, "One World at a Time," Contemporary Religious Thought, Thomas S. Kepler, editor, p. 372. He goes on to denounce both millennial otherworldliness and the idea that this world is heaven as well: "Millennialists are right in their basic discoveries that this world is fragmentary and needs re-creation. They are right in their insistence that this is an 'end' world; things here come to an end and have a limit. They are right in their insistence upon the other world, and in their emphasis upon the pull of God's power of resurrection. But their abnormal interest in the other world, their reading of eschatology in mathematical terms of time, their otherworldliness and consequent passivity as regards this world, is wrong. But Christians need to be saved, too, from that modern dynamic materialism which romantically sentimentalizes this world into the ultimate. This identifies the time world with the eternal world. This paganism is a hybrid attempt on the part of man to make the creature into the creator. In Christian circles it makes the Kingdom of God a blueprint for a world order. We admire this vehement realism, but we absolutely reject its presumptions that this world is a self-contained and a divine heaven. We live on earth! One world at a time." [2] Loc. cit. In other words, there will be no millennium of righteousness on earth either before or after the second advent.

In modern liberalism, there remains a form of postmillennialism which believes that the kingdom of God in the world is advancing and will be ultimately triumphant. In one sense this can be regarded as amillennial in that it denies any real fulfillment to millennial promises. It is dyed in bright hues of optimism and visionary idealism. Its doctrinal background is postmillennialism rather than amillennialism even though amillennialism often has an optimistic note as well. In modern liberal eschatology, the idea of progress and improvement is treated with some skepticism even as it is in modern philosophy. The trend is that indicated by Homrighausen--"one world at a time." spiritual terms, rather than in bodily terms. This is not to say that there will be no judgment, and no rewards or punishments awaiting us. Indeed, we are being judged all the while, and the rewards and punishments can be seen even now. Every day is Judgment Day." [6] Nevin C. Harner, I Believe, p. 83. In other words, Harner believes there will be no future judgment and no future resurrection of the body. The principle of spiritualizing Scripture is carried by the modern liberal to its ultimate extreme unencumbered with any idea of inspiration of Scripture and need for literal interpretation. Such is the legacy of spiritualization and unbelief as they combine in modern liberal amillennialism.

### Roman Catholic Eschatology

It is not within the scope of this discussion to treat the large area involved in Roman Catholic eschatology. The objections of Protestant theology to Roman eschatology have been the subject of voluminous writings ever since the Reformation. In general, however, it may be said that Roman eschatology tends to take Scripture more literally than modern liberal amillennialism. A vivid doctrine of judgment for sin after death, of resurrection of the body, and ultimate bliss for the saints are central aspects. Protestant objection has been principally to the doctrine of purgatory with all its kindred teachings and to the denial of the efficacy of the work of Christ on the cross, making unnecessary any purgatory or any human works whatever to qualify the believer in Christ for immediate possession of salvation, and security, and immediate entrance into heaven upon death. As in modern liberal amillennialism, however, Roman theology would be impossible if a literal method of interpretation of Scripture was followed. Roman theology concurs with amillennialism in denying any future kingdom of righteousness on earth after the second advent, and in its essential method follows the same type of spiritualization as modern liberalism. Amillenarians group together the judgment of the nations (Matt 25:31-46), the judgment of the church (2 Cor 5:9-11), the

judgment of Israel (Ezek 20:33-38), the judgment of the martyrs (Rev 20:4-6), the judgment of the wicked dead (Rev 20:11-15), and the judgment of the angels (2 Pet 2:4; Rev 20:10). It is not the purpose of the present discussion to refute the amillennial position on the judgments nor to sustain the premillennial, but the wide divergence of the two viewpoints is evident.

Of major importance in arriving at the respective doctrines characterizing the amillennial and premillennial concept of the judgments is the determining factor of spiritualizing versus literal interpretation. The amillenarian can deal lightly with the various Scripture passages involved, and with no attempt to explain them literally. The difference in character between the church being judged in heaven and the living nations being judged on earth as in Matthew 25 is glossed over and made the same event, even though there is no mention whatever of either the church or of resurrection in Matthew 25. The judgment of martyrs before the millennium and the judgment of the wicked dead after the millennium as outlined in Revelation 20 is brought together by the expedient of denying the existence of the millennium after the second advent.

It is obvious that the amillennial viewpoint is a combination of spiritualizing and literal interpretation. While they believe in a literal second advent and a literal judgment of all men, they do not apply the form of literal interpretation to the details of the many passages involved. It is because the premillenarians insist on literal interpretation of the details as well as the event that they find the various judgments differing as to time, place, and subjects.

The extent of spiritualization being used by amillenarians in eschatology is highly significant, as has been noted in previous discussions. The spiritualizing principle has been excluded so far as robbing eschatology of any specific events such as the second advent or a literal resurrection of the dead. On the other hand the spiritualizing method has been used whenever the literal method would lead to the premillennial viewpoint. It is precisely on the points at issue between them that the spiritualizing method is used by the amillenarians. The premillennial interpretation is thus waved aside as inadequate, confused, or contradictory not by sound exegetical methods but by denial that the passages in question mean what they seem to mean if taken literally. It is for this reason that the controversy between the millennial views often has more sound and fury than facts, and in the minds of many scholars the matter is settled before it is fairly examined.

Even Louis Berkhof who is notably lucid and factual in his treatment of theological disputes writes concerning premillennialism: "In reading their description of God's dealings with men one is lost in a bewildering maze of covenants and dispensations, without an Ariadne thread to give safe guidance. Their divisive tendency also reveals itself in their eschatological program. There will be two second comings, two or three (if not four) resurrections, and also three judgments. Moreover, there will also be two peoples of God, which according to some will be eternally separate, Israel dwelling on earth, and the Church in heaven." [7] Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 710.

We can hardly expect those who admittedly are bewildered and confused to be able to debate the issues, though Berkhof does much better than most amillenarians. The attitude of Berkhof, however, is significant. To him it is transparent that any doctrine other than the amillennial interpretation is simply impossible. But should amillennialism be taken for granted? Why should there not be three or four resurrections instead of one? What is wrong with there being two peoples on earth? Why on the face of it should we dispute the distinction between the rapture and the second coming? The answer is simply that it contradicts amillennialism, but it does not contradict the Bible literally interpreted. Certainly if one is to reject a doctrine

because it is complicated, no theologian could for a moment accept the doctrine of the Trinity or debate the fine points of the relation of the two natures in Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of the eternal state, however, is for the most part one of agreement rather than disagreement. Those who distinguish the program of God for Israel and the church find them fulfilled in the eternal state in the respective spheres of the new earth and the new heavens. While this is rejected by the amillenarians who merge all the saints of all ages into one mass of redeemed humanity, it is not of the same importance theologically as other points of divergence. Reformed amillenarians and premillenarians unite on the important point of a literal eternity, in which both heaven and hell will be peopled.

The millennial controversy can only be dissolved by a careful analysis of the details of premillennialism. The amillennial contention is, in brief, that premillenarians do not have a case, that their interpretations are confused, contradictory, and impossible. The answer to these charges has, of course, already been made in the abundant premillennial literature available today. It is the purpose of the discussion which will follow, however, to take up the mainsprings of the premillennial interpretation of Scripture and to establish the important and determining interpretations of Scripture which underlie premillennialism as a system of theology. Amillennialism has failed to present any unified system of theology or eschatology. Within its ranks, consistent with its main principles, are the widest divergences on every important doctrine. The purpose of the further discussion of premillennialism is to show that a consistent premillennialism can be erected with principles embedded in its system of interpretation. These at once are determining and corrective so that a premillennialist is always properly a conservative and Protestant theologian. The issues raised briefly in the survey of amillennial theology which is here concluded will be considered again seriatim as they come in conflict with tenets of premillennialism.

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