

Final Paper:
The Millennium Kingdom:
A Historical Analysis of Millennialism

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Introduction

One of the most anticipated and hotly debated events in terms of its timing in Christian eschatology is the coming of the millennium kingdom, or as it is most known, the millennium. The millennium is a one-thousand-year period when Jesus Christ establishes his reign on this present earth, his saints, the Church will reign with Him over the nations, and Satan is chained and bound in the bottomless pit, “And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:2).¹

There are several popular views of the millennium, Amillennialism, Premillennialism, and Postmillennialism, and with neither do I completely agree, because they each misinterpret scripture to support their own view. There is a view of the millennium that is accurate and true to scripture – the biblical view. I believe the Bible is clear in its communication of eschatological events but is complicated by well-meaning theologians who interpret scripture based on a biased hermeneutic. The biases of which I speak are largely based on organizational and denominational doctrines held by religious organizations, primarily of the Christian persuasion.

This paper is not intended to debate millennial positions, so my personal views will go no further than this introduction. This paper is somewhat of a chronological narrative detailing the prevalent views of the millennium over the course of time from the human perspective. I will simply attempt to demonstrate the millennial mindset of the general populations of people during the early, medieval, reformation, post-reformation, and modern eras. It is my prayer that the information presented in this paper is a blessing to whomever reads it, and that it will propel each reader towards more diligent personal Bible study regarding the topic.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ *The Companion Bible*, The Authorized Version of 1611 (KJV), Notes and Appendixes by E. W. Bullinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1922).

Millennialism In General

Millennialism is the Christian belief that Jesus Christ will return to earth in what is known as the Second Coming, establish an earthly reign, and rule with a rod of iron in righteousness, peace, and prosperity for one thousand years (Revelation 19:15). During this one-thousand-year period, Satan will be bound with a great chain and locked in a bottomless pit until the one-thousand years have concluded; at which time he will be released for a short time. The basis for this period of biblical history is found in Revelation 20:1-8, and there is more to this futuristic eschatological account, but for now, this explains the basics of what the millennium is. For most Christians, the millennium is a most anticipated event on the eschatological timeline, because it will be a time of peace on earth with Jesus ruling on the throne.

Not all Christians have the same understanding of when and how the millennium will take place. Since the time of the early Church, the details of the millennium have been a source of ongoing debate and disagreement among believers, so much so, that several popular views of the event have surfaced. The first of these millennial views is *Premillennialism*, next there is *Amillennialism*, and lastly there is *Postmillennialism*. Each of these eschatological views provide varying perspectives of the details surrounding the millennial kingdom and the one-thousand-year reign of Jesus on the earth.

The millennium and its associated kingdom under the leadership of the Messiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stands as a hallmark of hope, justice, and vindication for believers. In his encyclopedic, eschatological article *Millennialism*, Richard Landes agrees, “Millennialism offers a version of the fundamental eschatological belief that at the end of time (the “End,” or “Endtime”) God will judge the living and the resurrected dead. This belief in ultimate divine justice provides a rationale for theodicy, the reconciliation of God’s goodness with the existence

of evil in the world.”² Though the author’s Christian faith is somewhat suspect to me, his article provides some good insight into the topic of millennialism in general over the course of church history.

Millennialism and the Early Church

During the first century, the Apostolic Period which came after the birth of the Church on the Day of Pentecost, the millennial kingdom was taught, but was not a prevalent subject. Perhaps this was due to the rise of persecution beginning to take place at the time, a grim reality that may have distracted the Church from eschatological subjects other than the basic idea of being absent from the body and being present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Despite the general lack of focus on the millennium during the Apostolic period, the subject was not ignored, and when it was taught, the perspective taken was known as *Chiliasm*, which is another term for *Premillennialism*.³ According to the book, *Bible Doctrine*, “The reason this view is called premillennialism is because Jesus returns before (pre-) the millennium. The millennium, therefore, is future and earthly. It is future in that the millennium is not occurring in this present age, and it is earthly in that the millennium is a kingdom reign on the earth.”⁴

The second and third centuries introduced a major increase in the hunger for eschatological knowledge, and the Premillennial, Chiliasm view of the millennium was the prevalent teaching of the time. The New World Encyclopedia suggests, “Perhaps the first Christian leader to express the premillennial faith was Papias (c.60-130), bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, who described the millennial rule of Christ upon earth as characterized by miracles

² Landes, Richard. *Millennialism* (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998).

³ Contributors, New World Encyclopedia, *Millennialism* (New World Encyclopedia, October 2018).

⁴ McArthur, Dr. John, and Richard Mayhue. *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

and natural blessings.”⁵ The article goes on to inform that several renown church figures were also Premillennial, such as, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian.⁶

The early, Apostolic Church faced many challenges throughout the first century which caused the Saints to be more focused on day-to-day survival, than theological debate about the millennial kingdom. The general understanding and hope of eternity with Christ, must have been sufficient eschatological awareness, especially under the dire circumstances of church persecution. That there would be a millennial kingdom, provided hope for future justice and peace among believers, and the theological details of when it would occur was not of much import at the time as was basic survival as Christians.

Millennialism and the Medieval Era

The Church of the Medieval period was not far removed from the problems of persecution and trial as experienced during the early period, but improvements were made. Specifically, Christianity had graduated from being a rogue sect of followers of Christ, to a legalized religion by mandate of Constantine the Great.⁷ Though Premillennialism was running at full throttle during this time, the view met some resistance from those who held competing views of the millennium, both in terms of timing and substance. Despite Premillennialism’s ongoing condemnation and eschatological competitors, a Premillennial undercurrent in the Church ensured its place as the prevailing view of the millennial kingdom during that time.

According to the New World Encyclopedia article, Premillennialism found its way into European Christian culture as well, “Premillennial sentiments developed in Europe also due in

⁵ Contributors, New World Encyclopedia, *Millennialism* (New World Encyclopedia, October 2018), “The Early Church”.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

no small measure to momentous events such as the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century as well as the gradual disintegration of the continent's religious unity reflected in the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1309-1377) and its aftermath.”⁸ As with the trials and tribulations of the early Church period, the medieval period also presented challenges that became a catalyst for Christian yearnings for a better world, and their Premillennial hopes fulfilled those desires.

Millennialism and the Reformation

16th Century Europe was a transformational time for the Church. The religious and political problems many had with Roman Catholicism had taken a spiritual toll on believers, and the essence of change, even revolution was in the air. The result of this desire for change and revolution was the protestant reformation of the Roman Catholic church, which was essentially a split which produced protestant Christianity. Leading the reformation movement was Martin Luther, whose Ninety-Five Theses was the catalyst for religious change that would forever alter the face of Christianity.

Competing millennial views became more pronounced during the reformation period. According to the *Millennialism* article, “The Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) continued to hold the Augustinian view of the millennium, which was amillennialism. They disliked premillennialism perhaps because they did not like the activities of certain Anabaptist groups who were premillennialists.”⁹ Here we see that amillennialism had taken root, and by virtue of the personalities of Luther and Calvin, acceptance of this view must have been fairly widespread. Amillennialism is the belief that Christian hope is in heaven as opposed to being on earth during an earthly reign of Christ. The

⁸ Ibid. See “The Taborites”.

⁹ Ibid. See “The Reformers”.

belief also maintains that the first resurrection is figurative of the conversion experience instead of the rapture of the Church, and that the millennium itself is symbolic of the Christian era.¹⁰

Millennialism and the Post-Reformation

Though Amillennialism had gained quite a foothold during the reformation, its impact was not enough to remove the undercurrent of premillennial acceptance after the reformation period was in full motion. The reformation and the consequential rise of Protestantism from Catholicism opened the door for Christians to reveal their true millennial views. The veracity of this point is clear in that the eschatological sentiment of the Church during the English Civil War of 1642, which took place during the reformation period was largely postmillennial.¹¹ This supports the idea that the three primary millennial views in general had begun to expand in the Church significantly by the end of the reformation period and leading into the modern era.

Millennialism and the Modern Era

The modern era roughly spans the 18th Century to the present time, and there is no shortage of views concerning any aspect of the eschatological question in this period. Despite the wide acceptance of each of the primary millennial views, postmillennialism in the early modern era was very popular according to the *New World Encyclopedia* article, “During the first two Great Awakenings in the United States, postmillennialism almost supplanted premillennialism.”¹² The two great awakenings referred to are 1) The First Great Awakening led by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), and 2) The Second Great Awakening led by Charles Finney (1792-1875).¹³ Additionally, there was a Third Great Awakening in the late 19th Century which occurred during the Great Depression, and during this time, the postmillennial view remained a

¹⁰ Ibid. See “The Early Church”.

¹¹ Ibid. See “The English Revolution: Postmillennial”.

¹² Ibid. See “The Rise of Postmillennialism”.

¹³ Ibid.

force to be reckoned with among the millennial points of view. I think it is important to parenthetically suggest that history seems to imply a connection between socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions, and the prevalent millennial view of the same period.

Millennialism began to take on various forms of itself during the modern era. Specifically, premillennialism found a new opportunity to develop through the variant of Dispensationalism by the Anglo-Irish evangelist John Nelson Darby, who was a member of the original Plymouth Brethren.¹⁴ This eschatological view posits the idea that, “God deals with human history through a series of seven distinct periods called dispensations: innocence (before the fall), conscience (the fall to Noah), human government (Noah to Abraham), promise (Abraham to Moses), the law (Moses to Christ), the church (Christ to his return), and the millennium (after the return of Christ).”¹⁵

One dispensationalist of note to me is Clarence Larkin, an architect and engineer who received and responded to his calling into the Gospel ministry. Larkin is known for his monumental work entitled, *Dispensational Truth*, a book that not only discussed the topic of eschatology from the premillennial point of view, but also incorporated amazing end times charts that details the various aspects of eschatology.¹⁶ Larkin’s charts are very graphic and outlines eschatological information from the prophecies of the Old Testament to the chronology of the book of Revelation. Chapter 2 of his book is entitled, *Premillennialism*, and in this chapter, Larkin sets the stage for his literary, dispensational performance, “The time of the second coming of Christ is the key that unlocks all dispensational truth. The vast majority of Christians

¹⁴ Ibid. See “Dispensationalism: The Rebound of Premillennialism”.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Appendix A: Dispensational Charts.

believe in the personal return of the Lord, but they differ as to the time.”¹⁷ This is one of the first books added to my theological library over thirty years ago, and to this day, I rely upon its chapters and charts to aid in my preaching and teaching ministry.

The modern era not only breathed new life into the primary eschatological views, but it also gave birth to new churches, some of questionable theological foundation. The Seventh-Day Adventist church is one of the newest religious organizations classified as a church, but its doctrines are aberrant to mainstream Christian church organizations. In terms of its millennial views, the Seventh-Day Adventist church falls between pre- and postmillennialism, and they believe, “Christ will return before the millennium, raising all the righteous dead into heaven so that they may bear witness to the spectacle of the end times. In contrast to other millennial beliefs, it posits that the thousand years will occur in heaven and will allow the saints there to prepare for eternity on the restored earth beyond the millennium.”¹⁸

Lastly, the modern era is marked by the coming of the year 2000. The significance of the coming date fueled a millennial craze so intense, that Christians around the world, mainly premillennialists, made pilgrimages to Jerusalem in 1999, in hopes of being in the holy land at the return of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ I personally remember the year 2000 events because as a computer software consultant, I was prepared to assist businesses with what was thought to be an inevitable mass failure of computer technology at the turn of the century – the failures never happened.

¹⁷ Larkin, Clarence. *Dispensational Truth: God's Plan and Purpose in the Ages* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2021).

¹⁸ Contributors, New World Encyclopedia, *Millennialism* (New World Encyclopedia, October 2018), “Seventh-Day Adventism”.

¹⁹ Ibid. See “The Year 2000”.

This reminds me of what the Apostle Paul told the church at Thessalonica in his second epistle, that they did not need to fret themselves over the return of the Lord because there would be clear signs indicating that the time is at hand. I remember telling my customers not to worry, that their systems would not fail, and that there would not be any technological chaos. As an IT professional, I was more than qualified to make that assessment, but unfortunately, it did not make any difference. Companies paid us millions of dollars to prepare for “the end”, but there would be no end, only a new beginning of a new year as usual – the modern false prophets were wrong. The parallel between the pandemonium I saw in the year 2000 and what Paul warned the Thessalonians about is staggering. In the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, the authors confirm my suggested comparison, “Paul warned his readers against believing the false teaching that was shaking their spiritual equilibrium and triggering their fears... The erroneous message which all these voices echoed was that the day of the Lord had arrived; the Thessalonians were in it.”²⁰

Conclusion

Since the start of the early Church in the 1st century, and through our current day and time in the 21st century, millennialism has not only been of major eschatological import to the Church, but its importance over time has been a motivator of its evolution. I am most impressed with how some millennial views have persisted while others vacillate on the pendulum of importance based on the socio-political and religious landscapes of the period.

I have been able to demonstrate the various millennial views in effect during specific periods of time, and eras of the past, but what does the future hold? What millennial view will be prevalent in the mid-21st century and beyond? The answer, based on the results of this brief study is a resounding “it depends”. Yes, it depends on what is happening in culture, politics, society,

²⁰ Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. (Dallas, TX: Cook Communications Ministries, 1983).

and even religion. It depends on what the general spiritual temperature of the Church is at the time of the evaluation. People change, religious organizations change, the winds of spiritual evolution changes, but we must all be grateful for the fact that God never changes. I say this because there is so much ado about when the rapture will take place, and when the millennium will occur, and when the judgements will be conducted. I say, very simply, whenever these things come into our reality by virtue of God's own timing, just make sure you are ready.

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Appendix A: Dispensational Charts

