

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

A0631 – July 30, 2006 – Rev 19-20 – Millennial Views In Biblical Prophecy

In Rev 20 John introduces the phrase “a thousand years” six times in the first seven verses. Yet, numbers in the Book of Revelation are the subject of much disagreement. In such a symbolic book how should such numbers be interpreted? Should they be interpreted literally or allegorically? The phrase is so controversial and has generated so much debate that last weeks lesson centered on the tools needed to do sound Bible study and resolve the controversy;

- hermeneutics
- exegesis
- systematic theology

First, hermeneutics is the rules of interpreting language. There are six basic rules;

1. the rule of literal, normal, plain sense
2. the rule of context
3. the rule of authorial intent
4. the rule of single meaning
5. the rule of progressive revelation
6. the rule of analogy of faith

Second, exegesis is the application of these rules to Bible study. The goal of which is to draw out the meaning of the passage. This meaning will serve as the basis for making application to our own lives. Third, systematic theology is the correlation of all the exegesis of God’s special revelation into a total picture. Within systematic theology there are twelve basic divisions; Angelology, Anthropology, Bibliology, Christology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, Hamartiology, Israelology, Missiology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, and Theology Proper. In each division the believer is responsible to exegete all the passages accurately and then do the work of correlating each division with each other division into a total picture. As the believer does this work he is responsible to undergo life-change so that his life is in accordance with God’s word.

This is the work we must do with Rev 20:1-6 in order to understand the thousand years. I assure you what one does with the thousand years affects one's life in the present. Dr John Walvoord said, "Even the purpose of God for the present age and our philosophy of Christian life and service are largely determined by our view of the millennial kingdom."ⁱ So, I want to take the time to introduce the basic millennial views in Bible prophecy.

I. DEFINITION OF MILLENNIUM

The word "millennium" comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word *chilias* in Rev 20 which is translated "a thousand years". The Latin roots are *mille* meaning "thousand" and *annus* meaning "year". So, "millennium" is simply the Latin term for "a thousand years". The Greek word for "thousand" in Rev 20 is *chilias*. So, both "millennium" and "chiliasm" refer to the "thousand years".

II. 3 VIEWS OF THE MILLENNIUM

Some take it that we are in the millennium now; others expect it to come to pass in the future before Christ comes; still others expect that Christ must return first before this kingdom can come. These three views are called 1) a-millennialism, 2) post-millennialism, and 3) pre-millennialism respectively.

A. PRE-MILLENNIALISM

Most of the early church fathers and Jewish rabbis held to pre-millennialism, or, as it was called then, chiliasm (e.g. Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Tertullian). It is the oldest of the three millennial views. Pre-millennialism derives its meaning from the belief that the second coming of Christ will occur *before* the millennium.



All pre-millennialists interpret the thousand years as a literal thousand years and most try to interpret all Scripture with a consistent literal hermeneutic. Even opponents of pre-millennialism "admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us

just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures”.ⁱⁱ When a literal interpretation is followed the following picture emerges. The present age is the Church which will follow the downward trend of apostasy. After the Church is raptured out of the world, resurrected and taken to heaven, the seven year tribulation will begin where God will punish the nations and purge the nation of Israel to belief in the Messiahship of Jesus. After this seven year tribulation Christ will return and a 75-day interval will take place, during which, Satan will be bound for the thousand years which follow (Rev 20:1-2).

During the 75-day interval Christ will also judge the living Jews (Ezek 20:34-38) and living Gentiles (Matt 25:31-46) who survived the tribulation. Those who survive the judgment will enter and re-populate the millennial earth. OT saints (Dan 12:1, 13) and Tribulation saints will also be resurrected for the thousand years on earth. Then Christ will establish the Theocratic Kingdom on earth which will last for a literal one thousand years. In this view God’s program for the Church and God’s program for Israel are kept distinct.

B. POST-MILLENNIALISM

Post-millennialism originated in the writings of Daniel Whitby (1638-1726AD). Post-millennialism derives its meaning from the belief that the second coming of Christ will occur *after* the millennium. The thousand years are taken as a symbolical number that simply refers to a long period of time



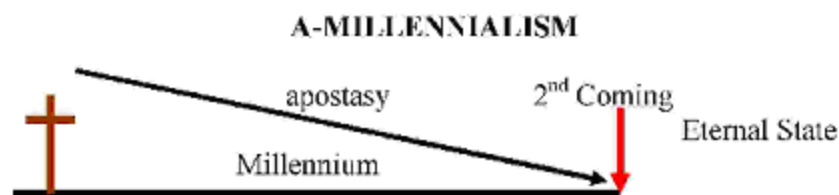
It teaches that the millennium is “a period in the latter days of the church militant when” the Holy Spirit shall revive the members of Christ’s churches to such an extent that they shall triumph over the powers of evil and bring the entire human race to submit to the gospel *before* Christ returns. During this time of revival there will be great spiritual blessing corresponding to the OT kingdom promises. When this long period of time is complete the Church will hand the kingdom over to Christ. The resurrections of men and final judgments of men and angels are all essentially one event. Once these are complete the eternal state will begin. The throne that Christ is prophesied to sit upon is the Father’s throne in heaven.

Post-millennialism accepts a more literal understanding of the Bible than a-millennialism because it believes in a literal fulfillment of the OT prophecies of a kingdom on earth characterized by righteousness and peace. However, postmillennialism bases most of its beliefs on the allegorical interpretation of prophecy which permits wide freedom in finding the meaning of difficult passages—a latitude which is reflected in the lack of uniformity in postmillennial exegesis. Postmillennialism has also been influenced by the belief in progress and as such is very optimistic about the future of Christianity. As such, it became very popular in the late 1800's and early 1900's at the time of the industrial revolution. However, its optimism was dashed by the first two world wars and its popularity waned. Recently there has been a resurgence of post-millennialism by such men as Gary North. Some great men of the past who have held this view were W.G.T. Shedd, Charles Hodge, A.A. Strong, and B.B. Warfield.

C. A-MILLENNIALISM

A-millennialism originated with two important figures in Church History, Origen and Augustine (354-430AD). It was subsequently propagated in the Roman Catholic Church. After the Reformation it was carried forward by Reformed and Covenant theologies.

A-millennialism derives its meaning from the belief that there will be no more millennium than what we have now. The thousand years are taken as a symbolical number. For example, amillennialist William Cox said, it is “a symbolic picture of the interadvent period...a poetic way of referring to this present age.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Walvoord said, “Its most general character is that of denial of a literal reign of Christ upon the earth...The present age between the first and second comings is the fulfillment of the Millennium. Its adherents are divided on whether the Millennium is being fulfilled now on earth (Augustine) or whether it is being fulfilled by the saints in heaven (Klieforth). It may be summed up in the idea that there will be no more Millennium than there is now, and that the eternal state immediately follows the second coming of Christ.”^{iv} Amillennialism also conceives of Satan as having been bound at the first coming of Christ.

Yet if this is true, how do they reconcile the fact that other passages present Satan as active in the world. For example, in 2 Cor 4:3-4 Paul said Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers. How can Satan do this if he is bound? What about Peter's teaching that "the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"? (1 Pt 5:8) Also see Acts 5:3, 2 Thess 2:8-9, Eph 6:11-12, 16. To reconcile these passages the amillennialist is forced to resort to "spiritualizing plain and factual statements of the Bible which obviously were not intended to be spiritualized".^v For example, one amillennialist wrote, Satan "though bound, still goes about like a roaring lion...The chain with which he is bound is a long one, allowing him much freedom of movement."^{vi} So, their basic solution is that Satan is bound on a long chain. However, this shows the lengths one will often go to harmonize Scripture with one's system of theology. Lastly, amillennialism conceives of a general resurrection of men and a general judgment of men and angels at the time of Christ's second coming. After this the eternal state will begin.

It is obvious that Amillennialism conceives of Israel and the Church as one people of God and does not distinguish between God's program for Israel and God's program for the Church. This conclusion also rests on allegorical interpretations of Scripture.

III. CONCLUSION

Pre-millennialism is a viewpoint quite different from either a-millennialism or post-millennialism. It assumes the inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility and authority of the Scriptures and consistently follows a literal hermeneutic. Even its opponents admit that taken literally the picture emerges exactly as the pre-millennialist suggests.

Pre-millennialism agrees with some forms of Post-millennialism in that there will be a time on earth of righteousness and peace. However, they disagree on when this time will be and how it will be established. Post-millennialism believes that the millennium will take place in the future but before the second coming of Christ and that it will be the Holy Spirit's revival of the Church's proclamation of the gospel which will result in the Christianization of the world. When this is complete the Church will turn the kingdom over to Christ.

Pre-millennialism believes that the millennium will take place in the future but after the second coming of Christ and that it will be Christ's presence which issues in the millennium.

Pre-millennialism agrees with a-millennialism that the present age will end in apostasy but they disagree with respect to the time of the millennium and Satan's binding. A-millennialism believes that there is no more millennium than there is now and Satan is bound on a long chain.

Pre-millennialism believes that the millennium is in the future after the second coming of Christ and that Satan will be bound then.

Now we are much better prepared to understand the confusion among Catholic and Evangelical teachings, to defend the truth of God's word, and to properly understand the controversies surrounding Rev 20:1-6.

ⁱ Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 259.

ⁱⁱ Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 38.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 262.

^{iv} John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 6.

^v John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 76.

^{vi} Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 262.

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