

## 1308 Kingdom of God Extra Notes: The History of Millennial Thought

### Introduction

The term “millennium” refers to the period of 1,000 years mentioned in Rev. 20:2—7 as the time of the reign of Christ and the saints over the earth. Three main views of the millennium are usually distinguished (premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism), but these views as they have emerged in the history of Christianity can be best understood as five traditions of interpretation:

#### 1. Premillennialism (or chiliasm) in the early church

Many Jewish apocalyptic works write of a two-phase eschaton consisting of a temporary messianic age followed by an eternal state. For example, 1 Enoch 91-107 (beginning of the second century B.C. – early first century A.D.?); 4 Ezra 7: 28 -36 (c. 70 A.D.); 4 Ezra 12:34; 2 Baruch 24:1-4; 30:1-5; 39:3-8; 40:1-4; Jubilees 1:4-29; 23:14-31; *b. Sanh.* 99a.

Many of the early fathers, including Epistle of Barnabas (c.100?), Papias (c.60—c. 130), Justin (c. 100—c. 165), Irenaeus, Tertullian, Victorinus of Pettau (d. c. 304) and Lactantius (c. 240—c. 320), were premillennialists, i.e. they expected the personal coming of Christ in glory to inaugurate a millennial reign on earth before the last judgment. This belief was not only an interpretation of Rev. 20, but also a continuation of Jewish apocalyptic expectation of an interim messianic kingdom. The framework of Rev. 20 was filled with content derived from Jewish apocalyptic and especially from OT prophecies, with the result that the millennium was understood primarily as a restoration of paradise. Amid the abundant fruitfulness of the renewed earth and peace between the animals, the resurrected saints would enjoy 1,000 years of paradisaic life on earth before being translated to eternal life in heaven. The 1,000 years were explained either as the originally intended span of human life on earth or as the world’s sabbath rest at the end of a 7,000-years’ ‘week’ of history. However common, it was not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion and there is an acknowledgement that the view is not universal e.g. Justin *Dialogue* 80.

One of the reasons for the decline of premillennialism was its support by the Montanists, an apocalyptic and charismatic group seeking to revive the church in the second century. They prophesied the imminent outpouring of the Paraclete and the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem upon their native region of Phrygia. Montanism was declared heretical by A.D. 200.

It was the materialistic nature of this millennialism which made it objectionable to others of the fathers (Origen c. 185- c. 254; Caius c. 200; Dionysius of Alexandria c. 190- 265; Eusebius c. 260- c 340; Jerome 342 – 420). Origen allegorised and spiritualised scripture, turning the focus to the manifestation of the kingdom of God in the soul. Augustine (354 - 430) drew a connection between the feasting of the Donatists and their earthly eschatological expectation. His vigorous and highly influential rejection of it led to the virtual disappearance of premillennialism until the 17th century.

The Protestant Reformers opposed premillennialism as taught by various Anabaptist and Hussite groups who continued a tradition of revolt against Catholic political hegemony. The civil violence associated with the occupation of Munster led to a violent reaction. The Confessions of the Reformation condemned chiliasm as Jewish fiction.

Protestant premillennialism originated in the early 17th century, especially under the influence of Joseph Mede (1586—1638). It expects the personal advent of Christ and the bodily resurrection of the saints to precede the millennium, and therefore tends to stress the discontinuity between the present and the millennial age. Various Puritan writers and pietists such as Bengel (cf. Isaac Newton) embraced these views. Many Christian leaders in colonial America promoted premillennialism, including beliefs in the restoration of Israel and the conversion of the Jews.

From 1790 to the mid-19th century, premillennialism was a popular view among English Evangelicals, even within the Anglican church. The social and political climate in Europe, especially the French Revolution, stimulated premillennial thought. Throughout the 19th Century, premillennialism continued to gain wider acceptance in both the US and in Britain, particularly among the Irvingites, Plymouth Brethren, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians and Seventh-day Adventists.

It enjoyed a major revival in England in the 1820s, from which its modern forms derive. Premillennialism gained popularity in circles whose view of the current situation was deeply pessimistic. Not the influence of the church, but only the personal intervention of Christ could establish his kingdom on earth.

Premillennialists have taken many views on the character of the millennial reign, but 19th-century premillennialism tended towards a literal interpretation of prophecy, including prophecies applied to the millennium. This tendency reached a climax in the dispensationalist theology pioneered by J. N. Darby (1800- 1882), in which a 'secret rapture' of the church, preceding the coming of Christ, is to bring the age of the church to an end, while the millennium functions as the time of fulfilment for the OT prophecies to Israel.

In the US, the dispensational form of premillennialism was propagated on the popular level largely through the Scofield Reference Bible (3 million copies in 50 years) and on the academic level with Lewis Sperry Chafer's eight volume *Systematic Theology*. (Biola, Moody Bible Institute, Dallas Theological Seminary, Grace Theological Seminary.)

More recently dispensationalism has been popularized through Hal Lindsey's 1970s bestseller, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and through the *Left Behind* Series by Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins. Popular proponents of dispensational premillennialism are John F. MacArthur, Phil Johnson, Ray Comfort, Todd Friel, Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord (d. 2002), Tim Lahaye, Charles Ryrie (in the notes for the *Ryrie Study Bible*) and Charles Feinberg.

Historic, or Classic Premillennialism is distinctively non-dispensational. This means that it sees no theological distinction between Israel and the church. It is often post tribulational meaning that the rapture of the church will occur after a period of tribulation. Historic premillennialism maintains chiliasm because of its view that the church will be caught up to meet Christ in the air and then escort him to the earth in order to share in his literal thousand year rule. Proponents of the view include Charles Spurgeon; George Eldon Ladd; Millard Erickson and Wayne Grudem.

## 2. Augustinian amillennialism

The interpretation of Rev. 20 which held the field for most of the medieval period and remained influential down to the present was pioneered by the 4th-century Donatist Tyconius, whose ideas were taken up by Augustine. He likely was influenced as well by the era of peace instituted for Christianity by Constantine. According to this view the millennial reign of Christ is the age of the church, from the resurrection of Christ until his parousia. Augustine took the figure 1,000 itself to be symbolic, not the actual length of time. Moreover, the millennium of Revelation 20 became for him “symbolically representative of Christ’s present reign with the saints.” His became the official doctrine of the church in the medieval period.

This interpretation of Rev. 20 is often called amillennialist, because it rejects belief in a future millennium. For the earthly kingdom expected by the chiliasts, it substituted a twin emphasis on the present rule of Christ and other-worldly eschatological hope.

The Protestant Reformers adopted a modified form of Augustine’s view. Amillennialism is found in the major Lutheran and Reformed Confessions. They took the millennium to be an actual period of 1,000 years in the past (variously dated), during which the gospel flourished. Satan’s release at the end of this period (Rev. 20:7) marked the rise of the medieval papacy. For the future, the Reformers expected the imminent coming of Christ, leading at once to the last judgment and the dissolution of this world.

Amillennialism has been widely held in the Eastern Orthodox Church and by Anglicans and is the official position of Reformed theology. The Catholic Catechism teaches an overt amillennial position, “Already they [the saints] reign with Christ; with him ‘they shall reign for ever and ever.’” (Article, 12. II. 1029).

## 3. Joachimism and Protestant postmillennialism

The ideas of the 12th-century abbot Joachim of Fiore (c. 1132 -1202) inspired a new form of eschatological expectation which in the later Middle Ages and the 16th century was the major alternative to the Augustinian view. Before the end of history there would be an age of the Spirit (age of the Father = law, OT; age of the Son = grace, NT/ ending 1260 A.D.), a period of spiritual prosperity and peace for the church on earth, which was identified with the millennium of Rev. 20, though not primarily derived from that text.

This expectation can be called postmillennialist, since it held that the millennium would be inaugurated by a spiritual intervention of Christ in the power of his Spirit, not by his bodily advent, which would follow the millennium.

Joachimism appealed to some early Protestants, who saw in the success of the Reformation gospel the dawning of a new age of prosperity for the church. Joachimist influence, Protestant optimism about the trends of history, and exegesis of Revelation combined to produce Protestant postmillennialism, whose first influential exponent was Thomas Brightman (1562—1607) and which first flourished in the 17th century. In this view, the millennium would come about through the Spirit-empowered preaching of the gospel, resulting in the conversion of the world and the world-wide spiritual reign of Christ through the gospel.

The 18th century was the great age of post millennialism, which played a key role in the development of missionary thinking. Daniel Whitby (1638- 1726) influenced Jonathan Edwards who was at the centre of the First Great Awakening in colonial America. He believed that the world would become Christianised through the preaching of the gospel and America had a key role in this transformation. John Wesley anticipated the end of human conflict. The revivals were seen as the first ripples of the movement of conversion which would engulf the world, and a view which gave human activity a significant role in God's purpose of establishing his kingdom was a major stimulus to missionary activity.

In the United States, after the Second Great Awakening (Charles Finney etc.), the civil war, non-Protestant immigration and growing secularism turned people away from the optimism of postmillennialism to the more pessimistic and apocalyptic premillennialism.

In the 19th century, postmillennial expectation increasingly approximated to the secular doctrine of progress and merged into liberal theology's identification of the kingdom of God's with moral and social improvement. Protestant theology in America (manifest destiny) equated the millennium with the spread of democracy, technology and other benefits of Western civilisation. The modern decline of postmillennialism coincides with the loss of Christian credibility that doctrines of progress have suffered.

A form of postmillennialism has been revived in the Reconstructionist school of "dominion theology" in the United States. This is Calvinistic. Alternatively, Kingdom Now theology is a strain of Dominion Theology operating as a small minority within the Charismatic movement. The church, under the leadership of restored apostles and prophets, must take over the world and put down all opposition to it before Christ can return.

#### 4. The influence of Historical Circumstances

In the days of early Rome, the idea of an imminent parousia followed by an era of peace after the persecutions of a fierce Antichrist was very plausible and brought hope comfort to believers.

In Augustine's day, with universal peace already evident, it seemed the millennium had already begun.

In the days of the Reformers, the scene changed again. Now, with the papacy seemingly fulfilling the role of the Antichrist, the millennium was forgotten: what was important was dealing with the present apostasy. This however required the support rather than the overthrow of the state, as in state religion. Hence apocalyptic scenarios were rejected.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the progress of the gospel was so impressive through the nation-wide revivals that were being experienced everywhere, it seemed only a matter of time until the millennium was ushered in simply through the proclamation of the word of God.

The disillusionment of the twentieth century with its wars and revolutions brought about a resurgence of the view of the early Church - our only hope was the return of Christ. This was also fuelled by the terrorist and ecological crises of this century.

Whenever the U.S. has faced a time of crisis e.g. 9/11, some have revived a civil postmillennialism as a means to encourage and comfort its citizens. This has become increasingly vague biblically as the society has become more pluralistic.