

The Millennium Maze

Why a Correct Understanding of Christ's Kingdom is Crucial for Every Christian

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A Word of Introduction by David Rosenthal

Millennium, by simple definition, is a period of 1,000 years. It is derived from the Latin word, mille, meaning "thousand." From a biblical perspective, the "millennium" is the period of time associated with the establishment of Christ's kingdom and His reign over the earth.

There are three distinct views held by scholars and students of Scripture regarding this period of time – Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism. These three views will be explained further on in this article, but by way of introduction, it's important to realize that those who identify as "Pre-", "Post-", or "A-" millennialists have divergent views of the millennium which bear tremendously upon their systematic approach and understanding of theology and eschatology (the study of last things).

Since scholars stand on various sides of this crucial issue, many Christians have thrown their hands in the air declaring that the subject of the "millennium" is too confusing. Sadly, some have put their heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich, ignoring the millennium entirely. They proudly proclaim, "I am not a premillennialist, postmillennialist, or amillennialist: I am a panmillennialist – it will all 'pan out' in the end."

That kind of response is not a "pan out," but a "cop out" that dishonors the Lord. It is not an overstatement to say that your view of Christ's Millennial Kingdom will have a dramatic impact on your understanding of God's character, His purpose for the Church, the ongoing culture war, current events in the Middle East, and the central role of Israel in biblical prophecy. To treat the subject with a cavalier attitude is, therefore, a terrible mistake.

Postmillennialism

This millennial view proclaims that the Gospel will one day permeate the entire world and bring in the Kingdom – that man, unaided by direct divine intervention, will usher in the golden age, and that following man's achievement, through the spread of the Gospel, Christ will physically return to the earth. At least 6,000 years of history cry aloud boldly – IMPOSSIBLE!

Notwithstanding some past postmillennial theologians such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge, as well as some present advocates, Postmillennialism is fatally flawed. Nowhere does a proper exegesis of the Word of God teach that the Gospel will successfully permeate the world.

Such an optimistic view is biblically unwarranted and historically naïve. The very concept of the Church is that it is an assembly of believers called out of the world and placed by the Spirit into the Body of Christ – not an instrument to live within the world to make it suitable for Christ’s return.

Man’s scientific and technological advances have been impressive. In space, he can place a man on the moon. On Earth, he can “bypass” the heart, “transplant” the heart, and “counterfeit” the heart, but man will never learn how to make a “bad heart” good and equip it for Heaven. And the overwhelming majority of men will never accept the Gospel.

Notwithstanding all of man’s advances in every area of physical endeavor, in the spiritual realm, he has not moved himself one inch closer to Heaven, nor has he become a more moral being. This world is no friend of grace; this world is under divine judgment.

The Gospel will not transform the world and bring in the Kingdom to which Jesus will one day give His stamp of approval and then return to rule. Even if it could be successfully argued that the Gospel is going to permeate the world, it must be remembered that Christians are sinners saved by grace, still possessing a sinful nature. Believers have problems enough trying to bring unity and tranquility to the local church, where turmoil and splits too frequently occur, let alone trying to establish the glorious, worldwide Kingdom of which the prophets spoke (Isaiah 11-12), and to which Christ will one day return to establish and rule (Revelation 20:1-6).

Postmillennialism, in the final analysis, is simply a veiled form of humanism. It is man supposedly doing through the Gospel what only the Son of Man can do at His return and assigning to the Church a task (bringing in the Kingdom) which God never assigned.

Amillennialism

By its very designation, this viewpoint cries, “no millennium.” The letter “A” negates, and prefixed to the word millennium says “no millennium.” According to this view, there will be no literal, physical, visible, 1,000-year Kingdom on the earth established by Christ and over which He will rule.

Amillennialism teaches that the Kingdom of God exists now in the hearts of redeemed men. Originally and fundamentally, Amillennialism was a reaction against Premillennialism rather than a conclusion reached through exposition of the Word of God.

First, to reach such a conclusion, amillennialists suggest that the myriad of future messianic blessings promised to Israel were preconditioned promises. The nation did not keep the preconditions and thereby forfeited the promises. Such a view flies callously in the face of the vast amount of biblical truth stretching from Genesis to Revelation, authenticating the unconditional character of the Abrahamic Covenant and its future Kingdom-blessing components.

The Abrahamic Covenant was no more conditioned, once inaugurated, than the message of salvation by grace through faith is conditioned, once appropriated.

Though the Mosaic Law was added to the Abrahamic Covenant as a way of life, it never annulled the promises sovereignly bestowed in divine grace to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to their descendants, in perpetuity.

Secondly, amillennialists have historically brought chaos to an understanding of the doctrine of the Church. To confuse ancient Israel with the true Church, which began at Pentecost, is to obscure and confuse a great body of biblical truth. Promises made to Israel are for Israel; promises made to the Church are for the Church.

Blend these two divinely instituted, separate entities into one; deny a literal future Kingdom established by Christ and over which He will one day rule; and the Old Testament prophets, the Gospels, portions of Romans and Acts and the books of Galatians, Hebrews, and Revelation, in particular, become a patchwork of illogical, unrelated, often non-cohesive facts. Thus, God's outworking of human history is totally distorted.

Thirdly, amillennialists are inconsistent in their adherence to the laws of biblical interpretation. They normally interpret the Word of God historically, grammatically, and literally, as indeed they should.

But when the text relates to Israel and her future Kingdom blessings, they withdraw from normative interpretation to allegorization.

Thus, when convenient, Israel does not mean Israel; Jerusalem does not mean Jerusalem; the throne of David does not mean the throne of David; Christ's future rule on the earth becomes His present rule in the hearts of men; and a 1,000-year Kingdom Age becomes a hodgepodge of conflicting interpretations.

Certainly there are figures of speech in the Bible, but to support amillennial doctrine, amillennialists take figures of speech to an extreme, unfounded position. What good, then, is an inspired Word from God if men allegorize those words to fit their preconceived theological system?

It is a strange irony that when a text condemns Israel it is interpreted literally. Israel broke the Law – that is literal Israel. Israel had their chance – that is literal Israel. Israel rejected Christ – that is literal Israel. But when God says that Israel is

the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8), somehow that becomes the Church. When it is said that Israel will be the head of the nations and not the tail, that is interpreted as the Church. When God declares, “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel” (Jeremiah 31:31), amillennialists say the covenant is with the Church.

With amazing, unfounded consistency, they blur the distinctions between physical Israel (the natural posterity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), physical-spiritual Israel (the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – Jews who accepted Christ), and the Church, Jews and Gentiles together.

There are glorious and eternal promises given to the Church, but they are distinct and separate from those given to Israel.

To interpret Israel’s promises for the Church or the Church’s promise for Israel does irreparable harm to the Word of God and the divine character itself. It should not be inferred by the statement which follows that amillennialists are consciously anti-Semitic, but it is strongly and uncompromisingly stated that Amillennialism has its fountainhead in Roman theology, which is irrefutably anti-Semitic. Therefore, it sought to separate Israel from any promise of restoration at the end of the age and ultimate divine blessing, and at the same time to place on her head all of the divine cursings. By the 4th century, emerging Roman theology sought to distance itself from all Jewish culture and custom when interpreting the Word of God.

Thus, for instance, the date of Easter was set in A.D. 325 at the Church Council of Nicene so that it would not coincide with the Jewish Feast of Passover for centuries. It wasn’t until the 16th century that the Reformation fathers broke with Rome over justification by faith and other doctrines.

So enmeshed were the Reformers in the battle over these life and death issues that they paid little attention to prophetic matters. And Amillennialism, as a system of interpretation forged in the crucible of an anti-Semitic Roman environment, continued largely uninterrupted on into Protestantism. These views are reflected in many of the old classical commentaries and parroted in many of the new ones. Clearly, few doctrines taught within the Church have done more harm to the cause of Christ.

Premillennialism

This millennial viewpoint is a system of theology which teaches that Jesus will return at the end of this age to both initiate and rule a 1,000-year, literal and physical Kingdom on the earth. Satan will be bound; the ravages of sin upon the earth will be lifted; life expectancy will be increased; animals will become benign; the Earth will give her full bounty; and peace will at last become a reality in the earth.

The word “millennium” comes from two Latin words, mille meaning

“thousand” and annus meaning “years”; thus, the concept of a 1,000-year Kingdom Age.

Amillennialists often object to the concept of a literal Kingdom on the grounds that a 1,000-year Kingdom is only mentioned in one chapter of the Bible; namely, Revelation, Chapter 20. And to that they hasten to add the observation that Revelation is a symbolic book. However, the words “thousand years” are mentioned six times in Revelation Chapter 20 (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). And of paramount importance, the concept of a Kingdom Age permeates the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Revelation Chapter 20 simply adds to the already highly and repetitively established fact of a golden age – its duration of 1,000 years.

The ultimate overriding purpose of human history is the glory of God. God was not created for man; man was created for God. Men are not saved primarily so that they can enjoy God in Heaven forever, although, to be sure, that is why most people initially trust the Savior.

Rather, they are redeemed through divine grace so that God’s glory will be manifested through men throughout the endless ages. God’s glory is the sum total of His intrinsic, eternal perfections. Holiness, justice, truth, love, goodness, mercy, longsuffering, faithfulness, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence – these are some of the divine perfections. When these attributes are displayed, God receives glory.

God’s glory was manifested in creation: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Psalm 19:1). God’s glory was manifested in redemptive history. Thus, Moses besought God: “Shew me thy glory” (Exodus 33:18). God’s glory was manifested in the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Thus, Israel would learn that their God was a consuming fire (Exodus 24:17). God’s glory was manifested in the Church. Jesus died on Calvary because God is holy and hates sin. Jesus died because God is just and must judge sin. Jesus died because God, who is truth, declared that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). Jesus died because God is love and, though He hates sin, He loves the sinner. Jesus died because God is good and merciful and longsuffering. Calvary, properly understood, is a manifestation of the glory of God; and the true Church has, by faith, been to Calvary.

Now the Church is called upon to reflect His glory, to proclaim with words and to demonstrate by actions the intrinsic, eternal perfections of God. Paul wrote to the Church: “Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

God’s glory was manifested, above all else, in the person of the Son of God. The apostle John wrote, “No man hath seen God at any time; [but, in marked contrast] the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father [the place of intimacy], he hath declared him” (John 1:18). Men can see the invisible God through the visible Son. Jesus himself said to His Father, “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4).

God's glory is manifested in still another way, and this bears strongly on the subject of this article. Speaking through His prophet Isaiah, the Lord proclaimed, "I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory" (Isaiah 46:13). Israel is God's glory, and if men want to see and know what God is like, they should watch how He deals with Israel. God calls Israel His "crown of glory" and His "royal diadem" (Isaiah 62:3).

When the patriarch Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, was about to leave the land of promise, God said to him:

And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places wither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of (Genesis 28:15).

And in those five promises, the entire history of the nation of Israel was kaleidoscoped:

The Divine Presence –

"I am with thee"

The Divine Protection –

"I will keep thee"

The Divine Promise –

"I will bring thee again"

The Divine Pledge –

"I will not leave thee"

The Divine Guarantee –

"until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of."

If God does not keep His word to Israel, He is not true. If God does not have power to fulfill His purposes, He is not omnipotent. If God does not know certain things are going to occur and gets caught off-guard, He is not omniscient. If God has wearied of Israel, He is not longsuffering.

If God has changed His mind, He is not immutable. And in this we must be clear— if God has changed His mind in relation to His purpose for Israel, perhaps He will change His mind concerning His purposes for the Church. Perhaps we do not have a home in glory. Perhaps He is going to rescind His grace toward us.

Enough! God is holy, just, true, loving, good, longsuffering, faithful, omnipotent, immutable, and infinitely more. In the first instance, the millennial issue is not prophetic, it is theological. It is not so much a consideration of what will happen tomorrow, it deals with what God's character is like today. Because He is a faithful God, He will keep His promises to Israel – this requires a literal, millennial Kingdom established by the Lord Jesus Christ. God will keep His promises to the believer – this requires a home in glory in His presence forevermore.

POSTMILLENNIALISM detracts from God's glory by attributing to the Church a purpose God never intended – man through the proclamation of the Gospel will bring in the Kingdom.

AMILLENNIALISM infringes in God's glory by calling into question His attributes – there will be no literal Kingdom.

PREMILLENNIALISM acknowledges God's glory by taking God at His word – Jesus will rule – on the earth – for 1,000 years. Believe it! Put it in the bank! Live in the glorious reality of it!