

Theological Presuppositions and the Interpretation of Revelation

Steve Lewis

High Peaks Bible Fellowship, Parker, Colorado

In today's culture most evangelical Christians do not understand why theologians, denominations, Bible colleges, seminaries, and missionary organizations make such a commotion about issues of prophecy. The common reasoning is that the Church should focus its efforts on presenting the gospel to the unsaved rather than arguing internally about the so-called "trivialities" of how future events will unfold. They insist that there is more agreement than disagreement among evangelicals about issues of prophecy. Robert Lightner surveys some of these areas of agreement.

We have seen that despite differences over details, evangelicals agree on several major issues regarding prophecy of things to come. They all agree mankind lives on after death and that heaven as well as hell will be occupied by humans. There will be a new heaven and a new earth in the future. All of God's creatures will face Him in judgment. The dead, small and great, will be raised to spend eternity either with God in heaven or with the devil in hell. Christ is coming back to this earth again and His future coming will be just as literal as when He came as a babe in Bethlehem's manger.¹

While it may be true that there is common ground among evangelical Christians regarding some areas of Bible prophecy, the important question is, "What is the underlying cause for the *differences* on points of prophecy?" Whatever accounts for the differences may be more significant and far-reaching than the fact that there is agreement on some issues.

What is not commonly understood by evangelical Christians today is that one's views on eschatology reflect or mirror one's basic presuppositions in other important areas, including comprehensive systems of doctrine that are tenaciously held as fundamental truths. The exercise of exploring different views on eschatology is often a useful way to uncover faulty presuppositions that arise from or impact other areas of theology. Determining what accounts for the differences in prophetic viewpoints can provide an opportunity to discover doctrinal errors that can be corrected to bring one's beliefs more in line with the truths of the Word of God. Lightner makes the following profound statement regarding the differing views on prophecy: "Whatever else may be said of these views, one thing is sure: They cannot all be right."² Therefore, it is the on-going quest for determining what is *right* and what is *true* that motivates this examination of different systems of eschatology. With this larger context in mind, the definition of terms is a helpful starting point.

Millennialism. The word *millennium* means "one-thousand years" and the significance of this term has become the focus of various views in the study of prophecy. "Today more than ever questions are being raised concerning what the Bible teaches about a millennium on earth. Are we in the millennium now? Or, can we expect such an age in the future?...While the word itself never occurs in the Bible, it refers to the thousand years mentioned six times in Revelation 20. By both Jews and Christians this period of one thousand years is often identified with the many promises of the Old Testament of a coming kingdom of righteousness and peace on the earth in which the Jews would be leaders and in which all the nations would have great blessing, both

¹ Robert Lightner, *The Last Days Handbook*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 42.

² Lightner, 23.

spiritual and economic.”³ There are three basic views regarding the millennium. *Premillennialism* asserts that Christ will return to institute a thousand-year kingdom of righteousness and peace, so His return will be previous to the millennium. *Postmillennialism* teaches that the efforts of the Church during the inter-advent period will constitute the prophesied kingdom of peace and righteousness, and that Christ will not return until after the Church has Christianized the world. *Amillennialism* holds that the eternal state will begin when Christ returns, so there will be no distinct millennium or thousand-year kingdom of peace and righteousness on earth prior to the eternal state.

One can easily see that these three views of the millennium are mutually exclusive positions. Lightner remarks that, “Wrongly, the three views of the future have often been set forth as primarily the result of one’s interpretation of the references to the ‘thousand years’ in Revelation 20:1-7. This is far too simplistic an answer. Instead of one’s interpretation of this phrase determining his millennial view, it is really the other way around. One’s millennial system arrived at on *other* biblical grounds determines how Revelation 20:1-7 will be interpreted.”⁴ In the following paragraphs, the two predominant millennial systems (amillennialism and premillennialism) will be investigated to examine their hermeneutical and theological presuppositions.

Amillennialism. The basic tenets of amillennialism include the following points as summarized by Zuck.⁵ 1) The kingdom is in existence now between Christ’s two advents. Since Christ is ruling now from heaven, He will not reign on the earth for 1,000 years. Whatever millennium there will be is occurring now. 2) The kingdom is either the church on earth (the view of Augustine and others) or the saints in heaven (the view of Benjamin Warfield and others). There will be no future reign of Christ on the earth, and 1,000 is a symbolic number designating a long period of time. 3) The promises to Israel about a land, a nation, and a throne are being fulfilled now in a spiritual way among believers in the church. 4) God’s promises to Israel were conditional and have been transferred to the church because the nation did not meet the condition of obedience to God. 5) Christ is ruling now in heaven where He is seated on the throne of David, and Satan is now bound between Christ’s two advents.

The question must be asked as to where this view of the millennium originated. How did this particular cluster of beliefs come to be? After extensively surveying the history of interpretation in the early church, Pentecost provides the answer to this question. “While Origin had laid the foundation in establishing the non-literal method of interpretation, it was Augustine who systematized the non-literal view of the millennium into what is now known as amillennialism....In his famous work, *The City of God*, Augustine set forth the idea that the church visible was the Kingdom of God on earth....Out of this basic ecclesiology, which interpreted the church as being the kingdom, Augustine developed his doctrine of the millennium.”⁶ [emphasis added] As cited previously from Lightner, it was not the study of eschatology that produced this view; it was arrived at on *other* grounds. Augustine’s presupposition concerning *ecclesiology* gave rise to amillennial *eschatology*. Over the course of time, this assumption led to others, and a new doctrine of the millennium was born. The amillennialist Oswald Allis elaborates on Augustine’s teachings: “He taught that the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian Church. He held that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord (Lk. 10:18), that the first resurrection is the new birth of the believer (Jn. 5:25), and that the millennium must correspond, therefore, to the inter-adventual period or Church age. This involved

³ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 3-4.

⁴ Lightner, 23-24.

⁵ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*. (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1991), 231.

⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 381-382.

the interpretation of Rev. 20:1-6 as a ‘recapitulation’ of the preceding chapters instead of as describing a new age following chronologically on the events set forth in chap. 19.”⁷ Here it is clearly seen that presuppositions in other areas of theology, by logical inference, led to the complete system of amillennial interpretation of Revelation.

Augustine proposed the method of interpreting Revelation using a series of ‘recapitulations,’ and this method has been preserved and refined down through the centuries. A modern-day proponent of amillennialism, Anthony Hoekema, in his well-known essay defending modern amillennialism, explains how the ‘recapitulation’ method of interpreting Revelation has evolved into the approach called ‘progressive parallelism.’

To see the background for the amillennial view of the millennium, we should first of all concern ourselves with the question of the interpretation of the book of Revelation. Let us assume, for example, that the book of Revelation is to be interpreted in an exclusively futuristic sense, referring only to events that are to happen around or at the time of Christ’s Second Coming. Let us further assume that what is presented in Revelation 20 must necessarily follow, in chronological order, what was described in chapter 19. We are then virtually compelled to believe that the thousand-year reign depicted in 20:4 must come after the return of Christ described in 19:11. But if we see Revelation 20:1-6 as describing what takes place during the entire history of the church, beginning with the first coming of Christ, we will have an understanding of the millennium of Revelation 20 which is quite different from the one just mentioned....According to this view, the book of Revelation consists of seven sections which run parallel to each other, each of which depicts the church and the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to the time of his second.⁸

Hoekema⁹ and others define the seven ‘recapitulations’ of Revelation as follows: Rev 1-3 = Principles, commendations, and warnings that have value for the *Church* of all time. Rev. 4-7 = The *Church* suffering trial and persecution against the background of the victory of Christ. Rev. 8-11 = The *Church* avenged, protected, and victorious. Rev. 12-14 = The continued opposition of the dragon, Satan, to the *Church*. Rev. 15-16 = The final visitation of God’s wrath on those who remain impenitent. Rev. 17-19 = The fall of Babylon, which stands for the forces of secularism and godlessness which are in opposition to the *Church*. Rev. 20-22 = The doom of the dragon and the complete overthrow of the *Church’s* enemies. As is shown by the emphasized words, according to this view the *Church* is the subject of each of the seven ‘recapitulations,’ and the entire history of the Church age is surveyed within each cycle. Hoekema explains that these sections are not only parallel to each other, but they also contain some degree of movement or advancement in revealing the future. “Note that though these seven sections are parallel to each other, they also reveal a certain amount of eschatological progress. The last section, for example, takes us further into the future than the other sections. ...Though the final joy of the redeemed in the life to come has been hinted at in 7:15-17, it is not until we reach chapter 21 that we find a detailed and elaborate description of the blessedness of life on the new earth (21:1-22:5).”¹⁰

Specifically regarding the passage in Revelation 20 where the millennium is repeatedly mentioned, Hoekema says:

Chapters 20-22 comprise the last of the seven sections of the book of Revelation and therefore do not describe what follows the return of Christ. Rather, Revelation 20:1 takes us back once again to the beginning of the New Testament era. That this is the proper interpretation of these verses is clear not only from what has been developed above, but also from the fact that this

⁷ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), 3.

⁸ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, in Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977), 156-157.

⁹ Hoekema, 157-158.

¹⁰ Hoekema, 158.

chapter describes the defeat and final doom of Satan. Surely the defeat of Satan began with the first coming of Christ, as has already been clearly spelled out in chapter 12:7-9. That the millennial reign described in verses 4-6 occurs before the Second Coming of Christ is evident from the fact that the final judgment, described in verses 11-15 of this chapter, is pictured as coming after the thousand-year reign....This being the case, it is obvious that the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:4-6 must occur before and not after the Second Coming of Christ.¹¹ [emphasis added]

As the emphasis in the previous quote shows, Hoekema believes that his interpretation of Revelation 20 is clear and sure and evident and obvious. However, the only way his interpretation would have the slightest possibility of being detected in these verses is if the readers were previously clued in to his view and were deliberately looking for something resembling his interpretation. Otherwise, the ordinary reader would not have come up with this interpretation by a natural reading of the text itself. Couch has creatively stated the problem in the following way: “If one were on a desert island and read Revelation for the first time, how would he normally interpret the book? The answer would be ‘actual and literal,’ unless there was an amillennialist and allegorist around to say, ‘No, No, these events are not real! They have some hidden meaning that no one is sure of, but don’t let that bother you!’ The literal meaning, with comparative language, must be accepted unless there are other indicators that require that one read the verses some other way.”¹² And in the case of the methods of ‘recapitulation’ and ‘progressive parallelism,’ there is nothing in the text itself that could possibly indicate such an interpretive scheme. Why seven cycles? Why not three or ten? And why would each cycle return historically to the beginning of the Church age? There is no indicator in the text of Revelation that can answer these questions. The amillennial method of ‘progressive parallelism’ is an artificial grid or template that has been laid down upon the text, with no clues from the text itself that this is the way the author intended the readers to understand the message that was being presented. Paul Tan explains the problem with such an arbitrary method of interpretation:

Our Lord mentioned, ‘Daniel the prophet’ (Matt. 24:15) and then inserted a parenthetical statement -- ‘Whosoever readeth, *let him understand*’ (v. 15). This dramatic parenthesis points out the fact that God wants prophecy to be understood....A person is said to ‘understand’ another when both of them fix the same meaning to that which is being spoken or written. This is the basic rule of human communication. For the speaker to say one thing and mean another is to immediately cut off communication and comprehension. If God really wants man to understand prophetic revelation, He must have had it written in words that are subordinated to this elementary rule of communication. As Charles Lee Feinberg observes: ‘God intended His revelation in prophecy to be understood as much as other parts of the Word. In that case He must have embodied His ideas in exact and specific terms which would accurately convey the meaning He originally intended when interpreted according to the laws of grammar.’¹³ [emphasis added]

Floyd Hamilton, another amillennialist, outlines the simplicity of his theological system and then shares the *motivation* behind this method of interpretation, as recorded by Tan: “‘When Christ comes, the dead are all raised, the righteous raptured, the wicked destroyed by fire, the great judgment occurs, and the new heavens and new earth follow immediately.’ Such a greatly simplified scheme of the future is possible only through spiritualization. Hamilton in the final page of his book *The Basis of the Millennial Faith* tells how this is done: ‘By eliminating the alleged millennium, putting the two resurrections into one, the different judgments into one, and declaring that when Christ comes, He comes to end this age and judge the world, we get rid of all the difficulties that beset both premillennialism and postmillennialism.’”¹⁴ Notice the admission that the

¹¹ Hoekema, 159-160.

¹² Mal Couch (gen. ed.), A Bible Handbook to Revelation. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 49.

¹³ Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy. (Dallas: Bible Communications, Inc., 1974), 59-60.

¹⁴ Tan, 126.

amillennialists themselves are trying to somehow “get rid of all the difficulties” in other interpretive schemes, and they propose to accomplish this by using a lens of their own making for viewing the text of Scripture.

How well have they succeeded in this attempt? The amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 turns out to have many difficulties of its own. For example, Tan points out that, “Amillennialists spiritualize the ‘first’ resurrection of Revelation 20 to mean the second birth of Christians (i.e. salvation), while accepting the second resurrection in the same verse to mean the literal raising of dead persons (i.e. resurrection). These interpreters also see the second advent of Christ as a literal advent and spiritualize away the worst aspects of the tribulation to make it more palatable to the church allegedly passing through it. *Inconsistency* clearly becomes a virtue and a help.”¹⁵ Based on these and other difficulties, Millard Erickson reaches the following conclusion regarding the amillennial system of interpretation:

The issue comes down to the biblical references to the millennium -- are they sufficient grounds for adopting the more complicated premillennial view rather than the simpler amillennial conception? It is sometimes contended that the whole premillennial conception rests upon a single passage of Scripture, and that no doctrine should be based upon a single passage. But if one view can account for a specific reference better than can another, and both views explain the rest of Scripture about equally well, then the former view must certainly be judged more adequate than the latter. We note here that there are no biblical passages with which premillennialism cannot cope, or which it cannot adequately explain. We have seen, on the other hand, that the reference to two resurrections (Rev. 20) give amillennialists difficulty. Their explanations that we have here two different types of resurrection or two spiritual resurrections strain the usual principles of hermeneutics. The premillennialist case appears stronger at this point.¹⁶

In summary, it has been shown that the amillennial view is indeed based on other than eschatological grounds. Presuppositions in other areas of theology and hermeneutics have led to the construction of a system of eschatology which conceives of the Church as the one ‘people of God,’ the salvation of people in all ages as the continuous ‘program of God,’ the physical promises given to Israel as now being spiritually applied to the Church because of Israel’s disobedience, and the standard method of interpreting prophetic Scriptures becomes the spiritualizing or allegorizing method which is the only method that can make them applicable to the Church today.

Premillennialism. One of the classic statements of the tenets of premillennialism is provided by Charles Ryrie in his book *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*:

Premillennialists believe that theirs is the historic faith of the Church. Holding to a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, they believe that the promises made to Abraham and David are unconditional and have had or will have a literal fulfillment. In no sense have these promises made to Israel been abrogated or fulfilled by the Church, which is a distinct body in this age having promises and a destiny different from Israel’s. At the close of this age, premillennialists believe that Christ will return for His Church, meeting her in the air (this is not the Second Coming of Christ), which event, called the rapture or translation, will usher in a seven-year period of tribulation on the earth. After this, the Lord will return to the earth (this is the Second Coming of Christ) to establish His kingdom on the earth for a thousand years, during which time the promises to Israel will be fulfilled.¹⁷

This statement points out that premillennialism was the view held during the earliest period of Church history, and that it is based on a consistently literal method of hermeneutics which recognizes that specific promises for the future were made to Israel that have not yet been fulfilled. The characteristics of this future kingdom are

¹⁵ Tan, 268.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1216.

¹⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*. (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), 12.

described in many passages in the Old Testament, “In its simplest form, the premillennial view holds that Christ will return to earth (this return is also known as the Second Coming), literally and bodily, before the millennial age begins and that, by His presence, a kingdom will be instituted over which He will reign. It is during this reign that Israel will see the fulfillment of its covenants that were unconditionally promised in the Old Testament. Other aspects of the kingdom are found in various Old Testament books. It will be a time of *peace* (Mic. 4:2-4), *joy* (Isa. 61:7, 10), and *no poverty or sickness* (Amos 9:13-15; Isa. 35:5-6). Premillennialism holds that Christ’s reign will last one thousand years, as recorded in Revelation 20.”¹⁸

Even amillennialists admit that a normal reading of Revelation 20 would lead to a premillennial interpretation. For example, Hoekema writes, “Let us assume, for example, that the book of Revelation is to be interpreted in an exclusively futuristic sense, referring only to events that are to happen around or at the time of Christ’s Second Coming. Let us further assume that what is presented in Revelation 20 must necessarily follow, in chronological order, what was described in chapter 19. We are then virtually compelled to believe that the thousand-year reign depicted in 20:4 must come after the return of Christ described in 19:11.”¹⁹ In addition, regarding the prophecies of the Old Testament, Allis admits, “The Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this present age.”²⁰ And Hamilton remarks, “Now we must frankly 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 premillennialists picture.”²¹ It appears, then, that the main point of variance which accounts for the differing viewpoints of amillennialism and premillennialism is the application of the literal method of interpretation to the prophetic passages of Scripture, and these differing methods are used in order to maintain a particular set of theological presuppositions.

Regarding the issue of consistency in the use of the literal method of hermeneutics, Walvoord comments that premillennialists “insist that one general rule of interpretation should be applied to all areas of theology and that prophecy does not require spiritualization any more than other aspects of truth. They hold that this rule is the literal, grammatical-historical method. By this it is meant that a passage should be taken in its literal sense, in keeping with the grammatical meaning of the words and forms. History is history, not allegory. Facts are facts. Prophesied future events are just what they are prophesied. Israel means Israel, earth means earth, heaven means heaven.”²² [emphasis added] As was previously discussed, it is the *inconsistency* of the amillennial method of interpretation that is the primary symptom of problems in that system. Walvoord goes on to say that, even though there are special problems in the interpretation of prophecy, the existence of these problems does not justify the rejection of the consistent, literal method of hermeneutics:

It may be admitted that there are problems in the interpretation of prophecy which are peculiar to this field. While the problems differ in character from the interpretation of history or theological revelation, they do not consist in the choice of spiritual or literal interpretation. It is not so much a question of whether prophecy will be fulfilled, but rather concerning the unrevealed details of time and circumstance....Interpreting Scripture on such subjects as predestination, the decree of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the person of the incarnate Christ, the sufferings of Christ on the cross, and similar doctrines is certainly difficult even though in the realm of specific revelation and historic fulfillment. The theologian should no more turn to spiritualization of Scripture to solve the doctrinal difficulties in these areas than he

¹⁸ Mal Couch (gen. ed.), Dictionary of Premillennial Theology. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 311.

¹⁹ Hoekema, 156.

²⁰ Allis, 238.

²¹ Hamilton, The Basis of Millennial Faith, cited in Pentecost, 2.

²² Walvoord, Millennial Kingdom, 129-130.

should spiritualize prophecy to fit a denial of a millennial kingdom on earth. Difficulty or even seeming contradiction is not sufficient justification for spiritualization.²³

Evangelical theologians ordinarily consider the grammatical-historical method to be the foundation for orthodox systems of doctrine. It has been shown that the amillennial view of things to come had its origin in other theological presuppositions, and that the spiritualizing or allegorizing method of hermeneutics was employed in an attempt to make the prophetic Scriptures point in the desired direction. Walvoord provides an excellent concluding statement regarding the differences in these two systems for the interpretation of Revelation:

Evangelical theology generally recognizes that Scripture as a whole should be interpreted from the grammatical-historical point of view in which Scripture is taken as a factual declaration of truth. This has yielded the orthodox creeds of the church, including also the doctrine of the Second Coming. The idea that prophecy is an exception to this rule is an arbitrary decision motivated by unwillingness to accept what the Bible teaches about a future Millennium. Even in the interpretation of prophecy, the nonliteral interpretation is limited to doctrines that are not acceptable to amillennialism. The amillennial point of view may accept a literal Second Coming, a literal heaven, and a literal hell, but it rejects a literal millennial reign of Christ on earth. On the face of it, this viewpoint is arbitrary and without sufficient basis. The spiritualizing interpretation of prophecy is contradicted by the prophecies that have already been fulfilled....Accordingly, the history of prophetic fulfillment ought to be a guideline....Standard principles of interpretation lead to the premillennial, not the amillennial, interpretation."²⁴

²³ Walvoord, Millennial Kingdom, 131-132.

²⁴ John F. Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 135-136.

Conservative Theological Journal – August 2003

Bibliography

- Allis, Oswald T. Prophecy and the Church. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945.
- Couch, Mal (gen. ed.) A Bible Handbook to Revelation. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001.
- Couch, Mal (gen. ed.) Dictionary of Premillennial Theology. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996.
- Erickson, Millard J. Christian Theology. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985.
- Hoekema, Anthony A. *Amillennialism* in Clouse, Robert G. The Meaning of the Millennium. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977.
- Lightner, Robert P. The Last Days Handbook. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990.
- Pentecost, J. Dwight. Things to Come. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958.
- Ryrie, Charles C. The Basis of the Premillennial Faith. Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953.
- Tan, Paul Lee. The Interpretation of Prophecy. Dallas: Bible Communications, Inc., 1974.
- Walvoord, John F. Major Bible Prophecies. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991.
- Walvoord, John F. The Millennial Kingdom. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959.
- Zuck, Roy B. Basic Bible Interpretation. Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1991.