

THE MILLENNIUM IN REVELATION

Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism.

Have we been debating the wrong thing?

It may surprise many to learn that the greatest issue of controversy related to the book of Revelation, from earliest times to the present, has not been over the identity of the two witnesses, the meaning of the number "666," or the timing of the Rapture in relation to the Tribulation. Already in the second century, the watershed issue in the interpretation of the Apocalypse was defined in terms of one's understanding of the meaning of the "thousand years" in Revelation 20. The term "Millennium" (from the Latin: mille = thousand, and annus = years) has generally been adopted to refer to this period. In all the Bible, only this one chapter near the end of Revelation mentions the thousand-year reign of the saints with Christ, and those acquainted with the history of interpretation (see discussion below) will realize that it is no exaggeration to call this the most controversial chapter in the Bible. Most Christians have believed that this chapter refers to the same period as that depicted in the many Old Testament passages describing the golden age of the Messiah (e.g., Ps. 72; 110; Isa. 2:1-4; 11:1-11; Ezek. 34; Dan. 2; etc.).

However, the question of the chronological relation of this period to Christ's Second Coming, and whether these passages are to be understood literally or in a spiritual sense, have never been answered with unanimity by the church. Three Christian views on the Millennium may be distinguished from one another:

1. premillennialism, 2. postmillennialism, and 3. amillennialism.

1. Premillennialism

(once known as chiliasm) is the belief that the second coming of Christ will precede the millennial kingdom. Taking a mostly literal approach, pre-millenarians expect a period of one thousand years' duration, during which Christ will reign with his saints here on earth prior to the establishment of the eternal new heavens and new earth. The millennial reign will be characterized by international peace and justice resulting from the universal enforced rule of Christ over saved and unsaved alike. At the end of this time, Satan's brief period of freedom will put humanity to one final test just before the final judgment. There are two principal varieties of premillennialism: historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism or, simply, dispensationalism. The latter differs from the former in its emphasis on the continuing centrality of national Israel in God's eschatological program and in anticipating a Rapture[^] of Christians to heaven before the beginning of the Tribulation.

Premillennialism has been accused by its critics of promoting a pessimistic outlook for the temporal future though, if this is what Scripture teaches, premillennialists can hardly be faulted for such pessimism. This view is most likely to be held by those adopting a futurist approach to Revelation (e.g., Walvoord, Ryrie, Gaebelien, Ironside, etc.).

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2. Postmillennialism

teaches that Christ returns after the millennial period. According to this camp, the millennial kingdom will be established through the evangelistic mission of the church. This enterprise will be so successful that all or most people will become Christians, resulting in a thousand years of peace on earth before Christ's second coming. Many great evangelical leaders, including Benjamin B. Warfield and Jonathan Edwards, were postmillennialists, as are a growing number of modern evangelicals, known as Christian Reconstructionists. Postmillennialists are often (though not always) inclined toward the preterist approach to Revelation (e.g., Chilton, Gentry, though not Rushdoony), since their optimistic view of the future works better if the disasters described in Revelation are seen as belonging to a time now past, rather than to the end of history.

3. Amillennialism

understands the thousand years of Revelation 20 to symbolize an indefinitely long period of time, which happens to correspond to the entire span of time from the first coming of Christ until his second coming. Most aspects of chapter 20 (like most aspects of the rest of Revelation) are believed to be symbolic. The binding of Satan happened spiritually at the Cross; the reign of the saints is the present age; the loosing of Satan is a final period of deception coming on the world in the end of the age; the fire from heaven that devours the wicked is the second coming of Christ. Those of this persuasion have included virtually every theologian from Augustine through the Reformation, and there are many adherents today. Amillennialists have been found among adherents of several of the various approaches to Revelation, including the historicist (e.g., Martin Luther), the preterist (Jay Adams), and the spiritual (William Hendriksen), but only rarely of the futurist (Abraham Kuyper).

It should be remembered that the various approaches to Revelation are not linked inseparably to any particular millennial position, so that one's eschatology does not necessarily dictate which approach to Revelation is to be preferred.