

Millennialism

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With the new millenium fast approaching there is a heightened interest in matters dealing with the end of the world. Among Christians, this interest is often focused on the teaching of “millennialism.” It’s hard to explain what millennialists believe since even they themselves cannot agree on a “correct” understanding of millennialism. The one thing that both premillennialists and postmillennialists agree on is a literal interpretation of Revelation 20, the foundation of their millennialistic teachings.

For centuries, confessional Lutherans have called millennialism “Jewish opinions” (Augsburg Confession Art. XVII, 51), and have not interpreted Revelation 20 literally. In response to this, millennialists have charged confessional Lutherans with allegorizing, while claiming that they are the ones that uphold sound hermeneutics by interpreting Scripture literally.

Are orthodox Lutherans missing out on a grand revelation concerning the end times because we allegorize Revelation 20? The crux of the matter is this question. “How are we to interpret Scripture?” In this paper I will show that while millennialists claim to follow sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting Revelation 20 they not only fail to carry out their own rules of interpretation, they are influenced by post-modern views of Scripture.

Millennialism is not a new teaching, the Jews during Jesus’ time believed that their Messiah would come to set up rule on earth and usher in an era of peace.

This calculation was arrived at by a literal interpretation of Ps. 110:4, ‘A thousand years are in They sight as one day.’ It was further argued that as the world was created in six days, so it would last six thousand years, the seventh thousand would be a period of repose, a sabbath on Earth to be followed by the destruction of the world (Neander’s History of Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I, p. 248 quoted in Gawrisch, 1).

It seems that even Jesus’ disciples had bought into this millennialistic idea as they asked him before he ascended into heaven whether or not he was going to restore the kingdom of God on earth at that time (Acts 1:6).

Today, there are two basic views of millennialism: postmillennialism, and premillennialism (LC-MS, 4, 5). (I am not including amillennialists since they don’t fit into our discussion of people who believe in a literal thousand-year rule.) Postmillennialism teaches that Christ will return after a thousand years of peace and bring prosperity on earth. During this time society will continue to advance and the gospel win victory after victory.

Premillennialists on the other hand teach that things will go from bad to worse until Christ returns to usher in his golden earthly reign of one thousand years (LC-MS, 4, 5). While there are many different kinds of premillennialists we will not take time to look at their varied teachings since their view on how to interpret Scripture is the same.

Here are the premillennialist's rules of interpretation: interpret grammatically, interpret according to context, and compare Scripture with Scripture (Ryrie, 36, 37). These rules of interpretation sound pretty good don't they? However, as we keep reading, the premillennialist explains what he means by interpreting "grammatically". "That premillennialism interprets grammatically, that is, literally, is undisputed, for this is the major point of difference, readily admitted between premillennialism and amillennialism" (Ryrie, 38).

While it may sound "orthodox" to interpret literally, we must interpret literally only if Scripture demands it. There are parts of Scripture where God has chosen to communicate to us in symbolic language and so we should interpret it as such. Context will determine how we are to interpret. Take Revelation 1 for instance. In Revelation 1 John sees seven stars and seven lamp-stands. In 1:20 he is told that the seven stars represent the seven angels (probably pastors) of the seven churches in Asia Minor which were symbolized by the seven lamp-stands. The speaker in the first chapter of Revelation therefore lets us know that the stars and lamp-stand were symbols. Therefore we know that we are dealing symbolic literature and should understand and interpret the book as such. Failure to do so will do injustice to the text and intended meaning.

These same rules of interpretation apply to Revelation 20. As we read verse 2 we see that we are in the realm of symbolic literature because John explains that "the dragon, the ancient serpent" whom the angel binds with a chain is really the devil. We also know that this section is symbolic because the devil cannot be bound literally with a chain because he is a spirit. To say that the devil was chained is simply a symbolic way of saying that the devil will be put in check.

But how should we interpret the thousand years in verse two? Should we take this number literally? As we have determined from the context, this section is part of symbolic literature. Therefore to take everything else symbolically except this number is to do injustice to the text. As we look at the wider context of the book of Revelation we see that numbers for the most part are used symbolically (i.e. 7:5ff).

As the premillennialists insist on interpreting every part of Scripture literally they conveniently overlook the last two premises of interpretation. They stated that in order to interpret Scripture correctly one must not only interpret literally but also interpret according to context, and compare Scripture with Scripture (Ryrie, 36, 37). In their fervor to interpret literally they throw out the last two premises coming up with interpretation that does not agree with the rest of Scripture. For example, although Jesus speaks about how things in this world will go from bad to worse until he returns to judge the world (Matthew 24:12), premillennialists believe that the millenium will be a time of peace and prosperity with Jesus as their earthly king. "God's kingdom will be characterized by peace and equity, and by universal spirituality and knowledge of the lord. Even the animals and reptiles will lose their ferocity and no longer be carnivorous. All men will have plenty and be secure. There will be a chicken in every pot and no one will steal it" (Hal Lindsay quoted in Gawrisch, 31).

From Matthew 24 we learn that no one knows when the end will come, only the Father in heaven (v. 36). Things will continually grow worse on earth for those who are still living and those days will be cut short lest even the elect be swept away in the tide of evil (v. 21, 22). Premillennialists, however, teach that judgment will not come until Christ

returns and ushers in his reign of a thousand years. They are setting a time for judgment as well saying that conditions will become better, not grow worse.

From Matthew 25 we learn that there will be one judgment (v. 31-33). Paul explains to Felix that this means there will be one resurrection at the end of the world (Acts 24:17). Premillennialists claim as that there will be two resurrections as they interpret the two resurrections mentioned in Revelation 20 literally.

While millennialists from a past generation claim that they interpret Scripture the right way, modern millennialists aren't so sure.

Which position then, is the correct one? The answer to this question is dependent on the level of the discussion of the millennium that we are querying. So long as our focus remains solely on the quest for the correct interpretation of the one thousand years of Revelation 20, it is unlikely that we will ever reach unanimity. We can at best only offer educated conjectures as to what exactly the seer was envisioning none of which is likely to win universal agreement. (Grenz, 209).

Another modern author suggested that when it comes to eschatology it is enough to believe what the Apostles Creed confesses. "From there he will come again to judge the living and the dead...in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." (Lewis, 128, 129). Such a view betrays a lack confidence in the clarity of Scripture. Instead of relying on God's word to tell us what we should believe we must rely on what the early church told us to believe.

These modern authors suggested that one's outlook on millennialism is not directed by what God's word teaches but colored by one's worldview. For instance, it was pointed out that in the age of the Great Awakening when rationalism swept the world with its view that man was basically good, people believed that there would be a gradual improvement in social conditions until Christ would return. This optimism was reflected in the general acceptance of postmillennialistic theology which taught that things would improve until Christ came (Kyle, 188).

However when rationalism didn't pan out and people came face to face with things like World War I, the trend in theology was to move towards premillennialism with the belief that things would get worse until Christ finally came to usher in his earthly kingdom (Grenz, 186). Perhaps this insight by the Puritan scholar Ian Murray, a premillennialist, best illustrates this point as he explains the difference between the content of his prayers from his father's who was a postmillennialist.

Our difference concerned the extent to which the success of the kingdom of Christ is to be expected in the earth. My father would pray of its universal spread and global triumph, for the day when 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,' and when great multitudes in all lands will be found numbered among the travail of Christ's soul. According to the teaching with which I was then in contact these petitions

were misguided, the product of a theological liberalism which believed in the upward progress of man and in the coming of a better world. Evangelical belief, so I thought, bound one to a contrary persuasion, namely, that growing evil must dominate the world-scene until Jesus Christ comes again in power and glory. Until then the gospel must be preached as a testimony unto all nations, though not with anticipation that large numbers of the human race will receive it. (Grenz, 186).

Not only are the modern scholars not sure which is the right interpretation, they don't think that it is important to establish which is correct. "It is important to remind ourselves of the true meaning and purpose of the doctrine of the Lord's second coming. Differences of interpretations and conviction have some time become the basis for separation of fellowship...A minute point of doctrine may become regarded as a requisite of orthodoxy and hence of fellowship" (Erickson, 183).

Are these scholars right? Does it really not matter what we believe when it comes to eschatology? Is there room for disagreement? There is no room for disagreement because Jesus' words from Matthew 24 are clear and no interpretation of Revelation 20 may go against it. Therefore we must continue to stand where we do. To move to the right or to the left is to give in to heresy. If we give in on this point where do we stop?

God gave us directives concerning the end times so that we will always be prepared for Christ's return. Postmillennialism with its teaching that Christ will not return until the conditions are "right" leads to lax living. Premillennialism with its teaching that after Christ returns the church will be given a thousand years to do mission work will grow lax in its outreach efforts now. These are just a few examples of what can happen to a Christian if he follows the millennialist's teachings. God gave us his directives about the end times to warn us, and to encourage us just as Jesus warned and encouraged the seven churches in the book of Revelation. We thank God for his word concerning the end times and to his return we say with confident hearts, washed clean in his blood, "Come Lord Jesus!"

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