

What's a Thousand Years Between Friends?

Why amillennialism makes a whole lot more sense than premillennialism

Without a doubt, most American evangelicals are firmly committed to premillennialism—the belief that an earthly millennial age of one thousand year’s duration will begin immediately *after* our Lord Jesus Christ’s Second Advent. Since premillennialism is so dominant in American church circles, many who encounter Reformed theology for the first time are quite surprised when they discover that all of the Protestant Reformers, as well as virtually the entire Reformed and Lutheran traditions (along with their confessions), with a few notable exceptions, are *amillennial*. Amillennialism is that understanding of eschatology which sees the millennium as the present course of history between the first and second Advents of our Lord (the age of the church militant), and not as a future golden age upon the earth as is taught in premillennialism and postmillennialism. In the case of both “pre” and “post” millennialism, the millennium is thought to be the age of the church triumphant, not the age of the church militant.

I am convinced that the reason why so many people reject amillennialism is simply that they do not understand the basic end-times scenario taught throughout the New Testament. Part of the problem is that dispensational premillennial writers have completely dominated Christian media and publishing for the last fifty years. There are literally hundreds of books, churches, and parachurch ministries, all devoted to taking premillennialism, dispensationalism, and the so-called “pre-tribulation” rapture idea to the masses. Many of these teachers and ministries are very effective and compelling in their presentations. Look at the sales of Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, which was the best-selling book in the USA in the 1980's. And then there is the *Left Behind* series of novels, and the accompanying videos, journals, games, and whatever else LaHaye and Jenkins have cranked out, which have cumulatively sold well over 50 million units.

I can only lament the fact that my own tradition has done so little to produce popular books

introducing and defending amillennialism. It is my guess that a number of you have never heard the case for the classical position held by Reformed Christians regarding the return of Christ and the millennial age.

Yet another problem encountered when discussing this subject is that there is often a great deal of heat without very much light. One prophecy pundit (Chuck Missler) once quipped that the people in heaven with the lowest IQ's will be amillennial. Hal Lindsey goes so far as to label amillennialism as anti-Semitic, demonic and heretical. Jack Van Impe called A-millennialism (to use his characteristic emphasis upon the A) the greatest heresy in church history. When I was growing up, it was not uncommon to hear prophecy experts label amillennial Christians as theological liberals who were a bit embarrassed by the bold supernaturalism required to believe in a sudden and secret rapture. Furthermore, amillennial Christians are often accused of not taking the Bible literally and of teaching so-called “replacement theology.”

The result of such rhetoric is that American Christians cannot help but be prejudiced by such unfortunate comments and many reject outright (without due consideration of the other side) the eschatology of the Reformers and classical Protestantism—an eschatology which is amazingly simple, Biblical, and Christ-centered.

I'd like to turn our attention to the biblical case for amillennialism. Unfortunately, it is all too fashionable to interpret the Bible in light of the morning newspaper and CNN. Yes, it is interesting to read the Bible through the grid of every geo-political crisis that arises in our modern world. This adds relevance to the Bible, we are told. It most assuredly sells thousands and thousands of books and provides for slick programs on Christian TV and radio documenting every move by the European Union, the political powers in the Middle East, and every possible technological breakthrough that may prepare the way for the coming mark of the beast. These sensational end-times dramas heighten the sense of urgency regarding the coming of our Lord. They supposedly give the church missionary zeal. But

however fascinating these schemes may be, I do not believe that they accurately reflect the Biblical data.

In addition, there is a very serious side-effect produced by this approach to Bible prophecy. The Bible no longer speaks for itself, since it is so easily twisted by each of its interpreters, doing their best to make sure that the upheaval of the nations described in the Book of Revelation has nothing whatsoever to do with the original reader in the first century struggling under Roman persecution, but is instead somehow related to the morning headlines. In the minds of the dispensational prophecy pundit, the Book of Revelation speaks more to us living at the end of the age, than it did to those Christians in the seven churches to whom John's vision is actually addressed (i.e., Revelation 1:3).

And then how many times can we tell our hearers that Jesus is coming back soon (no we *really* mean it this time!), and then tie that warning to a passing despot like Saddam Hussein, or a passing political figure like Mikhail Gorbachev? How do we keep those who desperately need to hear about Christ's Second Advent from becoming increasingly cynical about the message of our Lord's return in judgment? But then again, this too is a sign of the end, for, as Peter warned us, scoffers will come and say "where is this coming that you promised (2 Peter 3:3-4)?" How tragic that prophecy speculators actually contribute to the very skepticism they themselves acknowledge as one of the key signs of the end.

But as with many other crises facing the church today, the classical Reformed tradition has helpful answers which by and large have been forgotten by today's Evangelicals.

The first thing we need to briefly consider is the question of Biblical interpretation. All of the Protestant Reformers, should they come back to give us counsel in these areas, would insist that we start with the notion that the Bible itself must be read with the *analogia fidei* (the analogy of faith). Holy Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture. In other words, we must inductively develop a Biblical model of eschatology by utilizing all of the biblical passages that relate to the return of Christ, the resurrection, the judgment, the millennium, and so on. We should never study eschatology by finding

Bible verses (often out of context) which we think describe current events. In utilizing the analogy of faith, we begin with the clear declarations of Scripture regarding the coming of our Lord. Following this method, we can clear up many of the bizarre mysteries fabricated by modern prophecy devotees, who insist upon making unclear and difficult passages the standard by which we interpret clear and certain verses. If this basic hermeneutical principle is followed, we will soon find that we can no longer read all of the Bible through the grid of dispensational presuppositions, which are: 1). That biblical prophecy must be interpreted literally (even when the NT writers “spiritualize” OT prophecies), and 2). That God has distinct redemptive purposes for Israel and for the Gentiles.

Instead, we must test all such presuppositions in the light of Holy Scripture. For example, historic Protestants would insist that Revelation interprets the book of Daniel and not vice-versa. The New Testament must be allowed to interpret the Old. There is nothing particularly difficult or profound in this, but following this basic principle of Bible study takes us a great distance in coming to a clearer understanding of Bible prophecy.

If we begin with clear passages of Scripture, we can construct a very simple, basic model to help us with the tougher passages. One such approach is known as the “two-age” model. Both Jesus and Paul, for example, speak of “this age” *and* the “age to come” as distinct eschatological periods of time. In Matthew 12:32, we read, “anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, will be forgiven, but any one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age, or in the age to come.” According to Luke 18:29-30, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.” Later in the same Gospel, Luke 20:34-35, we read (in a key passage) that Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.” Not only does Jesus speak of two eschatological ages, so does the Apostle Paul. In the first chapter of his

letter to the Ephesian churches (1:21) we read that Christ's rule extends "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

For both our Lord and the apostle Paul, there are two contrasting ages in view. Neither Jesus nor Paul are millennialists, "pre" or "post." The first age (spoken of as "this age" in the New Testament) is the present period of time before the Second Coming of Christ. A second age, a distinctly future period of time, is also spoken of and is referred to as "the age to come." Placing these two ages ("this age" and "the age to come") in contrast with each other, enables us to look at the qualities ascribed by the Biblical writers to each in such a way that we will be able to answer questions about the timing of the return of Christ, and the nature and timing of the millennium.

When we look at the qualities ascribed to "this age" by the Biblical writers, we find that the following are mentioned: "homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, fields and persecutions" (Mark 10:30); "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage" (Luke 20:34); the scholar, philosopher and such wisdom are of this age (I Cor. 1:20); secular and religious rulers dominate (I Cor. 2:6-8); "the god of this age [Satan] blinds the minds of unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:4); this age is explicitly called "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4); ungodliness and worldly passions are typical of it (Tit. 2:12). All of these qualities are temporal, and are certainly destined to pass away with the return of our Lord. "This age" is the age in which we live and is the age in which we struggle as we long for the coming of Christ and the better things of the age to come.

In marked contrast however, "the age to come" has an entirely different set of qualities ascribed to it: There will be "no forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 12:32); it is preceded by signs (Mt. 24:3); it is characterized by eternal life (Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30); is also denoted as a time when there is no marriage or giving in marriage (Lk. 20:34); and it is an age which is characterized by "life that is truly life" (I Tim. 6:19). These qualities are all eternal and are indicative of the state of

affairs and quality of life *after* the return of Christ. In other words, these two ages, the present (“this age”) and the future (the “age to come”) stand in diametrical opposition to one another. One age is temporal, the other is eternal. One age is characterized by unbelief and ends in judgment. The other is the age of the faithful and is home to the redeemed. It is this conception of Biblical history that dominates the New Testament.

It is also imperative to see that the same contrasts which Jesus and Paul make between these two ages are in turn related to the one event that forever divides them, the return of Christ. This line of demarcation is expressly stated in Scripture in the explanation of the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, beginning at verse 37:

Jesus answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (v. 43) Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. . . . (v. 49) This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous.

Such statements by our Lord are the type of clear and unambiguous texts we were talking about above. Notice, that according to this clear and unambiguous text, judgment occurs *immediately* at Christ’s return, not after a one-thousand year millennium (as in the premillennial scheme).

This is not the only line of Biblical evidence however, for in addition to this, we can find other such statements about the coming of Christ that fit very clearly into the two-age model. The resurrection of both the just and the unjust occur at the very same time in the Scriptures. Jesus expressly stated that he will raise believers up on the “last day,” as a number of texts in John’s gospel makes clear:

John 6:40: For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:44: No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:54: Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 11:24: Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

John clearly tells us that the resurrection of the just occurs on the last day, at the end of this age. In addition, Jesus also proclaimed that "there is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the *last day* (John 12:48)." Notice that the very same event is also said to be the time of judgment upon those who reject Christ.

Add to these important passages those additional verses which relate the trumpet of God to the "last day" and to the return of Christ. The return of Christ will occur "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Cor. 15:52 cf. I Thessalonians 4:16, where Paul declares: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first"). See also 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8, where Paul writes, "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

It is vital to notice that there are no gaps of time indicated between the resurrection and the judgment as premillennarians must insist. These texts collectively speak of the resurrection, the judgment, and the return of Christ as distinct aspects of but one event, occurring at precisely the same time. This is plain from the account of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. . . . (v.41) "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . . (v. 46) "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Premillennialists, who often chide amillennial Christians for supposedly not taking the Bible “literally” and who champion what they call the “literal” interpretation of Scripture, must now insert a thousand year gap between the second coming of Christ (and the resurrection) and the final judgment to make room for the supposed future millennial reign of Christ! And this, ironically, when the clear declarations of Scripture do not allow for such gaps and when your own hermeneutic insists upon a literal interpretation of the text!

Thus, we can conclude that “this age,” the period of time Luke calls the “last days,” (Acts 2:17), and which Jesus characterizes as a period of birth pains of wars, earthquakes, famine and distress (Mt. 24, Mk. 13), ends with the return of Christ, the resurrection and the judgement on the “last day.” An event which, by the way, is described by Peter in the most amazing of terms (cf. 2 Peter 3:3 ff):

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this `coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

It is only after this, that the age to come will be a present and visible reality. Notice that the focus is not upon a half-way and somewhat improved temporal age on the earth, i.e., a future millennium when lions supposedly become herbivores and children play with poisonous snakes. Instead, the biblical focus is upon the consummation, and the summing up of all things with the creation of the New Heavens and the New Earth!

This means that the return of Jesus Christ is *the* key event in Biblical prophecy. For when our

Lord Jesus Christ returns, the end of the age, the resurrection and the judgment and the creation of the New Heavens and the New Earth are at hand! This stands in sharp contrast with premillennialism, which insists upon a half-way redeemed earth with people in natural bodies still procreating—something Jesus declares an impossibility (Luke 20:34).

Therefore, the two-age model is very simple in its structure and is based upon such texts as can only be described as clear and straight-forward and enables us to make the following conclusions about the nature of the New Testament's teaching regarding the return of Christ and the timing of the so-called "millennial age."

First, the "last days" began with the coming of Christ and will continue until Christ returns (Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2). This period of time, "this age" is destined to pass away, and is characterized by war, famine, environmental distress, persecution and even the martyrdom of God's people. While there is every likelihood that this distress will increase in the period immediately before the return of Christ, no man knows the day or the hour of our Lord's return. Jesus' birth pain imagery most likely means that we should expect alternating periods of peace and intensifying evil which will cause many to unduly speculate about the immanent return of Christ. These are sharp, stabbing birth pains, but they are not the end itself. Our preoccupation should not be with signs of the end therefore, but instead we must be consumed with the task assigned to the church in the "last days," the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom.

Second, the return of Christ clearly marks an end to the temporal nature of life as we know it - "this present evil age." Jesus will raise the believing dead, judge all men, and send the wicked into the fires of Hell at his return. The elements of this Earth burn up and the new Heavens and Earth will be established. This scenario completely destroys much of contemporary evangelical prophetic speculation, which advocates a "secret" coming of Christ and the rapture of believers (and what text can be adduced to argue that Jesus comes back secretly?), a full seven years before the final judgement at Christ's bodily

return. Does Jesus come back once or twice, with one of them being secret? Such speculation is nonsense when viewed in light of the clear gospel texts cited above, which universally describe the return of Christ, the resurrection of dead, and the judgment of believers and unbelievers as parts of *one* event.

This also destroys the idea of a future Earthly millennial reign of Christ, *after* he returns in judgement. Since this supposed thousand year reign occurs after the eternal destiny of all men and women is forever settled in the judgment, the very thought of Jesus ruling over a world wherein there are still men and women in natural bodies re-populating the Earth is simply not supported by clear texts (i.e. Luke 20:34). If the millennial reign described in Revelation 20 is actually referring to a future period of time, another even more significant problem arises (cf. Rev. 20:1-10):

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth -- Gog and Magog-- to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

At the end of this thousand years, John tells us that there is a great apostasy, (a second-fall if you will), *while* Jesus himself is physically ruling the nations (Revelation 20:7-10). This sounds much more like something that would happen in this age, and when viewed against an often overlooked parallel passage such as 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, the case for a present millennium becomes even stronger. According to Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1ff;

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you,

brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Since a great apostasy occurs before the man of sin is revealed (v. 3), there are a number of striking parallels with Revelation 20. Evil is restrained until the time when the Man of Sin appears. This seems to parallel the revolt described by John in Revelation 20:7-10. Since there can be no people on earth in natural bodies after the judgment (which occurs when Christ comes back according to the clear texts we have seen above), these apostates can only be those same believers that Jesus raised from the dead at his return. In other words, if premillennialism is correct, then it is glorified saints who follow Satan and revolt against Christ! But are we really to believe that evil is not finally conquered at Christ's return - even where Jesus is physically reigning and judgment has *already* occurred? This is self-evidently refuted by the analogy of faith, which expressly tells us that Jesus will destroy all of his enemies, and hand the kingdoms of the world over to his Father (I Cor. 15:24) *at* his second coming.

Upon closer investigation, we see that the events in Revelation 20:1-6 do not take place upon the Earth at all, for the thrones described in that passage are in Heaven, and not on the Earth. Furthermore, in a book such as Revelation, where numbers are always used symbolically, it makes much more sense to argue that the one thousand years are symbolic of the period of time between the first and second comings of Christ, rather than see them as a literal future period with a second fall during Jesus' kingly rule after the judgment. Thus the problem of evil and the supposed apostasy of glorified believers in a

future millennial age is a very difficult problem for all forms of premillennialism.

Third, and most importantly, the two-age model places its entire focus upon Jesus Christ and his second coming, and not upon idle speculation regarding world events. On the classical Reformed amillennial model, the next event on the prophetic calendar is the return of Jesus Christ to Earth, even though that coming is paradoxically said to be preceded by signs. In fact, Jesus may even return before you finish reading this lecture! The eschatological cry of Protestant orthodoxy has always been “Maranatha, Come quickly Lord Jesus!” As with many other things in life the simplest approach may be the best. The two-age model is clear, Biblical and Christ-centered. This model refuses to allow undue speculation about current events to overturn the clear teaching of Scripture.

It is a shame that it has been lost to so many Christians. It does have one major drawback, however, it won't sell as many books!