

Amillennialism: Part III – A Brief Sketch of Amillennial Eschatology

by

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A common criticism of amillennial eschatology is that it is too negative, spending its strength primarily in opposing and refuting eschatological systems with which it does not agree. Leaving aside the question of whether this criticism is true or false, I would like at this point to counteract the negativism of some amillennial eschatologies by sketching briefly some positive affirmations made by amillennialist theologians. In this way we shall be able to see amillennial eschatology in its totality, rather than just as a certain interpretation of the millennium of Revelation 20.

This sketch will cover two areas:

First, what amillennial eschatology teaches with regard to *inaugurated eschatology*, and,

Second, what it teaches with reference to *future eschatology*.

By *inaugurated eschatology* I mean that aspect of eschatology which is already present now, during the gospel era. The term *inaugurated eschatology* is preferred to realized eschatology because, while the former term does full justice to the fact that the great eschatological incision into history has already been made, it does not rule out a further development and final consummation of eschatology in the future. When we speak of “inaugurated eschatology” we are saying that for the New Testament believer significant eschatological events have already begun to happen while other eschatological occurrences still lie in the future.

*As regards inaugurated eschatology, then,
amillennialism affirms the following:*

1. *Christ has won the decisive victory over sin, death and Satan.* By living a sinless life and by dying on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement for our sin, Christ defeated sin. By undergoing death and then victoriously rising from the grave, Christ defeated death. By resisting the devil’s temptations, by perfectly obeying God, and by his death and resurrection, Christ delivered a deathblow to Satan and his evil hosts. This victory of Christ’s was decisive and final. The most important day in history, therefore, is not the Second

Coming of Christ which is still future but the first coming which lies in the past. Because of the victory of Christ, the ultimate issues of history have already been decided. It is now only a question of time until that victory is brought to its final consummation.

2. *The kingdom of God is both present and future.* Amillennialists do not believe that the kingdom of God is primarily a Jewish kingdom which involves the literal restoration of the throne of David. Nor do they believe that because of the unbelief of the Jews of his day Christ postponed the establishment of the kingdom to the time of his future earthly millennial reign. Amillennialists believe that the kingdom of God was founded by Christ at the time of his sojourn on earth, is operative in history now and is destined to be revealed in its fullness in the life to come. They understand the kingdom of God to be the reign of God dynamically active in human history through Jesus Christ. Its purpose is to redeem God's people from sin and from demonic powers, and finally to establish the new heavens and the new earth. The kingdom of God means nothing less than the reign of God in Christ over his entire created universe.

The kingdom of God is therefore both a present reality and a future hope. Jesus clearly taught that the kingdom was already present during his earthly ministry: "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt. 12:28, NIV). When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, he replied, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk. 17:20-21). But Jesus also taught that there was a sense in which the kingdom of God was still future, both in specific sayings (Mt. 7:21-23; 8:11-12) and in eschatological parables (such as those of the Marriage Feast, the Tares, the Talents, the Wise and Foolish Virgins). Paul also makes statements describing the kingdom as both present (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:19-20; Col. 1:13-14) and future (1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 2 Tim. 4:18).

The fact that the kingdom of God is present in one sense and future in another implies that we who are the subjects of that kingdom live in a kind of tension between the "already" and the "not yet." We are already in the kingdom, and yet we look forward to the full manifestation of that kingdom; we already share its blessings, and yet we await its total victory. Because the

exact time when Christ will return is not known, the church must live with a sense of urgency, realizing that the end of history may be very near. At the same time, however, the church must continue to plan and work for a future on this present earth which may still last a long time.

Meanwhile, the kingdom of God demands of us all total commitment to Christ and his cause. We must see all of life and all of reality in the light of the goal of the redemption not just of individuals but of the entire universe. This implies, as Abraham Kuyper, the renowned Dutch theologian and statesman, once said, that there is not a thumb-breadth of the universe about which Christ does not say, “It is mine.”

This total commitment further implies a Christian philosophy of history: All of history must be seen as the working out of God’s eternal purpose. This kingdom vision includes a Christian philosophy of culture: Art and science, reflecting as they do the glory of God, are to be pursued for his praise. The vision of the kingdom also includes a Christian view of vocation: All callings are from God, and all that we do in everyday life is to be done to God’s praise, whether this be study, teaching, preaching, business, industry or housework.

A common source of tension among evangelicals today is the question of whether the church should be primarily concerned with evangelism or social and political action. A proper kingdom vision, it seems to me, will help us to keep our balance on this question. Needless to say, evangelism — bringing people into the kingdom of God — is one of the essential tasks of the church. But since the kingdom of God demands total commitment, the church must also be vitally concerned about the implementation of Christian principles in every area of life, including the political and the social. Evangelism and social concern, therefore, must never be thought of as options between which Christians may make a choice; both are essential to full-orbed kingdom obedience.

3. *Though the last day is still future, we are in the last days now.*

This aspect of eschatology, which is often neglected in evangelical circles, is an essential part of the New Testament message. When I say, “we are in the last days now,” I understand the expression “the last days” not merely as referring to the time just before Christ’s return, but as a description of the entire era between Christ’s first and second comings. New Testament writers

were conscious of the fact that they were already living in the last days at the time they were speaking or writing. This was specifically stated by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost when he quoted Joel's prophecy about the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh in the last days (Acts 2:16-17). He was thus saying in effect, "We are now in the last days predicted by the prophet Joel." Paul made the same point when he described believers of his day as those "upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). And the Apostle John told his readers that they were already living in "the last hour" (1 Jn. 2:18). In the light of these New Testament teachings, we may indeed speak of an inaugurated eschatology, while remembering that the Bible also speaks of a final consummation of eschatological events in what John commonly calls "the last day" (Jn. 6:39-40, 44,54; 11:24; 12:48).

The fact that we are living in the last days now implies that we are already tasting the beginnings of eschatological blessings—that, as Paul says, we already have "the first fruits of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:23). This means that we who are believers are to see ourselves not as impotent sinners who are helpless in the face of temptation but as new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) and as those who have decisively crucified the flesh (Gal. 5:24), put off the old self and put on the new (Col. 3:9-10). All this involves having an image of ourselves which is primarily positive rather than negative. It also involves seeing fellow Christians as those who are in Christ with us and for whom we should therefore thank God.^[1]

4. As far as the thousand years of Revelation 20 are concerned, we are in the millennium now. Earlier in the chapter evidence was given for the position that the thousand years of Revelation 20 extend from the first coming of Christ to just before his Second Coming, when Satan will be loosed for a short time. The amillennial position on the thousand years of Revelation 20 implies that Christians who are now living are enjoying the benefits of this millennium since Satan has been bound for the duration of this period. As we saw, the fact that Satan is now bound does not mean that he is not active in the world today but that during this period he cannot deceive the nations — that is, cannot prevent the spread of the gospel. The binding of Satan during this era, in other words, makes missions and evangelism possible. This fact should certainly be a source of encouragement to the church on earth.

Amillennialists also teach that during this same thousand-year period the souls of believers who have died are now living and reigning with Christ in heaven while they await the resurrection of the body. Their state is therefore a state of blessedness and happiness, though their joy will not be complete until their bodies have been raised. This teaching should certainly bring comfort to those whose dear ones have died in the Lord.

As regards future eschatology, amillennialism affirms the following:

1. *The “signs of the times” have both present and future relevance.* Amillennialists believe that the return of Christ will be preceded by certain signs: for example, the preaching of the gospel to all the nations, the conversion of the fullness of Israel, the great apostasy, the great tribulation and the coming of the Antichrist. These signs, however, must not be thought of as referring exclusively to the time just preceding Christ’s return. They have been present in some sense from the very beginning of the Christian era^[2] and are present now.’^[3] This means that we must always be ready for the Lord’s return and that we may never in our thoughts push the return of Christ off into the far-distant future.

Amillennialists also believe, however, that these “signs of the times” will have a climactic final fulfillment just before Christ returns. This fulfillment will not take the form of phenomena which are totally new but will rather be an intensification of signs which have been present all along.

2. *The Second Coming of Christ will be a single event.* Amillennialists find no scriptural basis for the dispensationalist division of the Second Coming into two phases (sometimes called the *parousia* and the revelation), with a seven-year period in between. We understand Christ’s return as being a single event.

3. *At the time of Christ’s return, there will be a general resurrection, both of believers and unbelievers.* Amillennialists reject the common premillennial teaching that the resurrection of believers and that of unbelievers will be separated by a thousand years. They also reject the view of many dispensationalists that there will be as many as three or four resurrections (since, in addition to the two resurrections just mentioned, dispensationalists also teach that there will be a resurrection of tribulation saints and a resurrection of believers who died during the millennium). We see no

scriptural evidence for such multiple resurrections.^[4]

4. *After the resurrection, believers who are then still alive shall suddenly be transformed and glorified.* The basis for this teaching is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—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 shall be changed” (NIV).

5. *The “rapture” of all believers now takes place.* Believers who have just been raised from the dead, together with living believers who have just been transformed, are now caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:17). That there will be such a “rapture” the Bible clearly teaches. But I have put the word rapture between quotation marks in order to distinguish the amillennial conception of the rapture from the dispensationalist view. Dispensationalists teach that after the rapture the entire church will be taken up to heaven for a period of seven years while those still on earth are undergoing the great tribulation.

Amillennialists see no scriptural evidence for such a seven-year period or for a transference of the church from earth to heaven during that period. Risen and glorified bodies of believers do not belong in heaven but on the earth. The word translated “to meet” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (*apantesis*) is a technical term used in the days of the New Testament to describe a public welcome given by a city to a visiting dignitary. People would ordinarily leave the city to meet the distinguished visitor and then go back with him into the city.^[5] On the basis of the analogy conveyed by this word, all Paul is saying here is that raised and transformed believers are caught up in the clouds to meet the descending Lord, implying that after this meeting they will go back with him to the earth.

6. *Now follows the final judgment.* Whereas dispensationalists commonly teach that there will be at least three separate judgments, amillennialists do not agree. The latter see scriptural evidence for only one Day of Judgment which will occur at the time of Christ’s return. All men must then appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

The purpose of the final judgment is not primarily to determine the final destiny of men since by that time that final destiny has already been determined for all men except those still living at the time of Christ’s return.

Rather, the judgment will have a threefold purpose:

First, it will reveal the glorification of God in the final destiny assigned to each person;

Second, it will indicate finally and publicly the great antithesis of history between the people of God and the enemies of God; and

Third, it will reveal the degree of reward or the degree of punishment which each shall receive.

7. After the judgment the final state is ushered in. Unbelievers and all those who have rejected Christ shall spend eternity in hell, whereas believers will enter into everlasting glory on the new earth. The concept of the new earth is so important for biblical eschatology that we should give it more than a passing thought. Many Christians think of themselves as spending eternity in some ethereal heaven while the Bible plainly teaches us that there will be a new earth. When the book of Revelation tells us that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, will come down from heaven to the new earth (21:2), that God will now have his dwelling with men (21:3) and that the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the new Jerusalem (22:3), it is teaching us in figurative language that in the life to come heaven and earth will no longer be separated but will have merged. In the final state, therefore, glorified believers will be both in heaven and on the new earth, since the two shall then be one.

When one keeps the vision of the new earth clearly in mind, many biblical teachings begin to form a significant pattern. As we have seen, the resurrection of the body calls for a new earth. The cosmic significance of the work of Christ implies that the curse which came upon creation because of man's sin (Gen. 3:17-19) shall some day be removed (Rom. 8:19-22); this renewal of creation means that there will indeed be a new earth. The Bible also contains specific promises about the new earth. We have already looked at Isaiah's prediction of the new earth in 65:17 (see 66:22). Jesus promised that the meek shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5). Peter speaks of new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness shall dwell (2 Pet. 3:13). And the elders and living creatures whom John sees in the heavenly vision recorded in Revelation 5 sing a song of praise to the victorious Lamb which includes these words, "You have made them [those whom you purchased with your blood] to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10, NI V).^[6]

In the light of biblical teaching about the new earth, many Old Testament prophecies about the land of Canaan and about the future of the people of God fall into place. From the fourth chapter of the book of Hebrews we learn that Canaan was a type of the Sabbath-rest of the people of God in the life to come. From Paul's letter to the Galatians we learn that all those who are in Christ are included in the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). When we read Genesis 17:8 ("And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" [ASV]) with this understanding of the New Testament broadening of these concepts, we see in it a promise of the new earth as the everlasting possession of all the people of God, not just of the physical descendants of Abraham. And when, in the light of this New Testament teaching, we now read Amos 9:15 ("And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given them, saith Jehovah thy God" [ASV]), we do not feel compelled to restrict the meaning of these words to national Israel and the land of Palestine. We understand them to be a prediction of the eternal dwelling of all God's people, Gentiles as well as Jews, on the new earth of which Canaan was a type. Amillennialists therefore feel no need for positing an earthly millennium to provide for the fulfillment of prophecies of this sort; they see such prophecies as pointing to the glorious eternal future which awaits all the people of God.

When premillennialists therefore charge amillennialists with teaching a future kingdom which is only spiritual and which has nothing to do with the earth, they are not representing the amillennial view correctly. Amillennialists believe that Old Testament prophecies which predict that the land of promise shall be the everlasting possession of the people of God, that the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and that the earth shall be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, shall be fulfilled not just for a thousand-year period but for all eternity! This interpretation, we believe, gives us a richer, wider and more relevant understanding of those prophecies than that which restricts their meaning to a description of an earthly millennium which shall precede the final state.

Some Implications of Amillennial Eschatology

What, in conclusion, are some of the implications of amillennial eschatology

for our theological understanding? Let me mention four of them:

1. *What binds the Old and New Testaments together is the unity of the covenant of grace.* Amillennialists do not believe that sacred history is to be divided into a series of distinct and disparate dispensations but see a single covenant of grace running through all of that history. This covenant of grace is still in effect today and will culminate in the eternal dwelling together of God and his redeemed people on the new earth.
2. *The kingdom of God is central in human history.* That kingdom was predicted and prepared for in Old Testament times, was established on earth by Jesus Christ, was extended and expanded both in New Testament times and during the subsequent history of the church, and will finally be consummated in the life to come.
3. *Jesus Christ is the Lord of history.* This means that all of history is under Christ's control and will ultimately prove to have been subservient to his purpose. We must therefore be concerned not just with enjoying the blessings of our salvation but also with joyfully serving Christ as Lord in every area of our lives.
4. *All of history is moving toward a goal: the total redemption of the universe.* History is not meaningless but meaningful. Though we are not always able to discern the meaning of each historical event, we know what the ultimate outcome of history will be. We eagerly look forward to the new earth as part of a renewed universe in which God's good creation will realize finally and totally the purpose for which he called it into existence: the glorification of his name.

All this implies that regarding world history, amillennialists adopt a position of sober or realistic optimism. Belief in the present rule of Christ, in the presence of God's kingdom and in the movement of history toward its goal is accompanied by a realistic recognition of the presence of sin in this world and of the growing development of the kingdom of evil. Amillennial eschatology looks for a culmination of apostasy and tribulation in the final emergence of a personal Antichrist before Christ comes again. Amillennialists do not expect to see the perfect society realized during this present age.

Yet, since we know that the victory of Christ over evil was decisive and that Christ is now on the throne, the dominant mood of amillennial eschatology is

optimism — Christian optimism. This means that we view no world crisis as totally beyond help and no social trend as absolutely irreversible. It means that we live in hope — a hope that is built on faith and that expresses itself in love.

Amillennial eschatology, therefore, gives us a realistic, yet basically optimistic world-and-life view. It is an eschatology which is exciting, exhilarating and challenging. It is an eschatology which gives us an inspiring vision of the lordship of Christ over history and of the ultimate triumph of his kingdom.

Notes:

- [1] See Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Christian Looks at Himself* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975).
- [2] Note, for example, how John tells us that the spirit of the Antichrist is already in the world in his day (1 Jn. 4:3).
- [3] G. C. Berkouwer, in his recent book, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), shows how Scripture requires us to think of the “signs of the times” as having relevance throughout the entire Christian era (pp. 235-59).
- [4] Scripture proof for a single general resurrection has been given above in the exposition of Revelation 20:1-6. For additional evidence against a multiple resurrection, see L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 724-27.
- [5] Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), I, 380-81.
- [6] See the excellent chapter on the new earth in Berkouwer, pp. 211-34.

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