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AMILLENNIALISM: A BRIEF, CRITICAL EVALUATION

BY

MATTHEW CAYCE

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INSTRUCTOR: MATTHEW MCAFFEE

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There is no doubt that the study of eschatology is and has been a very intimate and heated debate among theologians and everyday Christians alike throughout the history of the church, and it continues to be so through the present day. The anticipation of the Lord's Second Coming is no doubt the fire that ignites such passion from all these who call upon His name.

Unfortunately, the expectation of His arrival is not enough to quell the desires of many, if not all (in one way or another), from attempting to discern the nature and timing of His coming, and what exactly will transpire at the consummation of history that His coming brings. Several schools of thought have in turn presented themselves that have attempted to solve this mystery in totality. And, generally, all these views are the product of different interpretations of one minute passage of the New Testament, Revelation 20:1-6. Specifically, the key tenets of each side revolve around how the binding of Satan (vv. 1-3), the nature of the resurrections (vv. 4-5), and the nature of the kingdom reign of a thousand years (vv. 4, 6) are understood from this lone passage of the *Apocalypse*. There are of course underlying nuances of doctrine from various other passages of the canon, as well as varying hermeneutical approaches that have added considerably more material to the discussion. Also, as each side has set about defining its solution, they most often have presented it as a critique or attack on the other views, and each has consequently allowed their passion to overrule objective reasoning in their defenses. This has

perpetuated a number of misunderstandings, and this is especially true concerning *amillennialism*.

Amillennialism as far as the name is concerned is fairly young, and the term has only been current presumably since the 1930s, and it is unknown who first attributed it to the position it represents.¹ Some of the tenets of the position however, in rudimentary form, have been around since the time of Augustine, and amillennialism has been the predominate eschatological view of Christianity since that time.² Of course this does not mean that the position is very well understood by those who do not already hold to it. Particularly the term itself is misleading as it literally means “no millennium,” which is surely not the belief held by those who claim this eschatological system. Common misunderstandings that arise because of its name, such as this, or the assumption that this school of thought emphasizes spiritual or non-literal interpretations of the Bible, has kept many sincere Christians from examining the view altogether.³ In fact amillennialists do believe in a millennium, however it is quite distinct and contrary to the millennium of premillennialists and postmillennialists, and in a way amillennialism’s misnomer helps to distinguish it from these other views.⁴ This is particularly beneficial because at times amillennialism has been hard to distinguish from postmillennialism, and in fact many current amillennialists were formerly postmillennialists.⁵ Technically speaking concerning the assumed time of Christ’s return, amillennialists believe that it will be after [their view of] the millennium

¹ Robert B. Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 83.

² Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 31.

³ Ibid., 32. William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), 3.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 73.

is past, meaning they are surely *post*-millennialists in this regard.⁶ Millard Erickson says of this that it makes one wonder whether or not they are actually dealing with a new view, or if amillennialism is indeed a subtype of postmillennialism.⁷ Technicalities aside, there is another reason that amillennialism has not received fair consideration and evaluation amongst evangelicals in the recent past—the predominance of premillennialism, and even more that of the dispensational variety. Why premillennialism is so prevalent in the church one can only wonder. Potentially the ridiculous amounts of successful media, both film and literature, on the subject is mostly responsible for the rise of its popularity in present-day evangelicalism. Another contributing factor could well be the rise of and fascination with apocalyptic motifs within pop-culture that has inundated the minds of premature and mature Christians alike, as well as the rest of [especially American] society. Whatever the cause may be, a plethora of “conservative” Christian groups have come “to equate any denial of the tenets of this system with the denial of the faith of the Bible itself.”⁸ This has consequently left no room for any alternative view—such as amillennialism—to step into the arena and engage a modern audience. Despite the often overemphasized, external travails of amillennialism in the presence of its opponents in reaching a wider Christian audience presently, there is much to be said about the soundness found within its understanding of the three aforementioned stumbling stones of *The Revelation*. To this end, the *amillennial* position will be evaluated and critiqued, without partiality, in its method and interpretation, while also outlining some practical implications this position has both for the individual believer and the church.

⁶ Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 63.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:1-6, NKJV)

Before the amillennial position can be examined concerning the three points of contention in the passage above, something must be noted about the diversity of literary elements that compose it, and the whole of *The Revelation*. This is because these elements have the greatest influence regarding the methods of interpretation that should be used if one is to correctly realize the author's intended meaning of what he has written. Foremost, *The Revelation* is an epistle,⁹ which means that the human and Divine authors had a very specific intent for which the text was composed concerning the *ecclesia* within history. A portion of this intent will be discussed briefly at a later advent, but for the current agenda the *immediacy* of the epistle is to be noted—"for the time is near (1:3)." This unassuming epithet of John's immediately signifies that *everything* within this epistle plays a role within the immediate setting in which John and his audience are currently living.¹⁰ This is not say that the epistle does not have significance for the church today, but it is unlikely that its significance is to be in any way

⁹ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 195.

¹⁰ Ibid., 197.

contrary to what it was in the first century.¹¹ Beyond being an epistle, this text is also prophetic,¹² meaning there is an actual dichotomy existing between the aforementioned immediacy of the text and the *not yet, futurist* intents of the text in describing persons and events. Such prophetic literature as this that is found within the Bible is often riddled meticulously with types of poetic metaphors and allusions, meaning that a strictly *literal* interpretation of *all* of its parts is to be avoided. To complicate matters even more, it is quite possible and highly probable that metaphors and allusions accurately describe the details of literal, historical events from God's perspective. Because of this, it is necessary to examine any such metaphors and allusions that may be unclear against those that are clearer in other canonical works. Thirdly, the text is also apocalyptic,¹³ which means that potentially there will be elements of symbolism, as well as idealist, or timeless, aspects of the text that may seem appropriate for any historical context, whether realized or not. This can often lead to false assumptions regarding the fulfillment of certain eschatological events within history, as well as interpretations that deny the epistle meaning for its audience in the first century, which would be incredulous considering what John has said about the matter. This means that any conclusions drawn in the interpretative process must be consistent with one another if they are to be trusted at all. Although these factors do complicate the interpretative process, they do not make it altogether impossible. Amillennialists have generally been able to keenly balance these tensions while keeping their conclusions consistent throughout, which lends credibility to what they assert.

¹¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 157.

¹² Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 195.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 195.

In light of these facts, how then do amillennialists understand the binding of Satan in vv. 1-3, and is there any biblical evidence to support their position? Firstly, the language used to describe this event is figurative and symbolic of an actual limit on Satan's powers to *deceive the nations*.¹⁴ Satan has been *bound* in that he is subservient to the power of the Gospel, meaning he cannot prevent the spread of the Gospel throughout the nations.¹⁵ This is true because Christ commands the discipling of the nations in the Great Commission, and clearly He is giving a command that is possible, in the first century, as even now (Matthew 28:18-20).¹⁶ And no one would deny that the Gospel has been spreading itself around the world since this time either. Scripture also clearly teaches that there has been victory over Satan already at Christ's first advent of redemption (Colossians 2:15; John 12:31; Luke 10:17-20; Luke 11:17-22).¹⁷ Even more specifically, Christ even alludes to the fact that He has bound Satan and plundered his house while He was performing a healing miracle during His earthly ministry (Matthew 12:25-29).¹⁸ No other places in the Scriptures refer to Satan being bound specifically, other than this passage of *Matthew* and this passage of the *Apocalypse*. It is highly unlikely then that the two are unrelated, and this gives clear reason to believe that this binding has already taken place, and is therefore a present reality at the time of the composition of this epistle. And though Satan has been defeated already, there is clear indication that he awaits a further, complete defeat at

¹⁴ Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 59. Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 123.

¹⁵ Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 163. Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 211, 208. Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 122.

¹⁸ Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 163.

Christ's second coming.¹⁹ Satan has also been prevented from gathering all the enemies of Christ to battle against the church until a later time.²⁰ This is the battle referred to in 20:7-10 where Satan has been unbound and allowed to deceive the nations one last time before finally being defeated completely. Were this binding of Satan referring to something that was yet to take place in the future, then this would essentially mean that there are three defeats of Satan taking place at different times—at the cross, then at the beginning of the millennium, and finally at the end of the millennium.²¹ It would also mean that the nations are still being deceived and that the power of the Gospel in leading to salvation is nonexistent within the world. It would seem more appropriate to assume that the *New Testament* only emphasizes two climatic points in Christ's victory over Satan, and does not introduce a third here in this last text of the canon.²² The *thousand years* that Satan is bound for does not represent a literal thousand years, according to the amillennialist, but instead represents an indefinite amount of time between Christ's first and second comings known as the church age.²³ It would hardly seem appropriate to take these thousand years to refer to a literal period of one thousand years, simply because all the other language of this passage is figurative.²⁴ Further corroborating with this idea is *Strong's* assertion that the Greek word for thousand, *chilioi*, is of uncertain affinity, meaning that it could quite possibly refer to any amount of time. Knowing that biblical evidence suggests this first binding of Satan happened while Jesus was on the earth, and knowing that almost two thousand years

¹⁹ Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 123.

²⁰ Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 162.

²¹ Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 123.

²² *Ibid.*, 123.

²³ Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 162.

²⁴ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 210.

have passed since that time, it would be logically consistent to consider the thousand years of this passage as not denoting a literal thousand years. To be clear, all these propositions are consistent within themselves and command consideration.

This approach to vv. 1-3 and its logical consistency also provide support for how amillennialists understand the nature of the kingdom described in vv. 4 and 6. Oddly enough, there is no mention of the word *kingdom* within this passage. However, there are allusions to such through the use of the words *thrones*, *judgment*, and *reign(ed)*, and this sounds the alarm that once again figurative language is being used by John to describe a literal truth. Clearly the kingdom has been presented as part of Christ's dominion, but what exactly is this kingdom that is being depicted? Also, what are these references to a thousand years? Are these the same thousand years that are mentioned in vv. 1-3? Suffice it to say, for the amillennialist, the kingdom depicted in this passage is nothing less than God's kingdom as represented by the ministry of Christ.²⁵ This seems awkwardly figurative at first glance, especially in light of the vague details of these few verses, but in fact this is a quite literal interpretation with regards to how Christ spoke about Himself and His ministry as recorded in the *Gospels* (Matthew 4:17, 12:28; Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20).²⁶ This is not easily comprehended though, and much like the Jews in Jesus' day, many are still confused presently as to what this kingdom is and how it operates. The Jews anticipated that the Messiah would bring salvation to them, and consequently judgment on those nations who oppressed Israel. They also believed that the Messiah would rule from David's throne, and would liberate them from the oppression of the Romans.²⁷ Many critics of amillennialism have a very similar conception in mind as that of the Jews, and they

²⁵ Ibid., 104.

²⁶ Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 122.

²⁷ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 106.

expect and proclaim that this literal Jewish-Messianic kingdom spoken of in vv. 4 and 6 is the fulfillment of those misguided hopes that will materialize at still a yet future time. Clearly Jesus portrayed the kingdom to be something contrary to what the Jews anticipated from their readings of the *Law* and *Prophets*. Jesus understood the kingdom to be of a spiritual nature that had as its designed purpose to free humanity from the guilt and power of sin.²⁸ Jesus' kingdom did not involve tangible signs of political and social restoration as the Jews had hoped.²⁹ Because this is clear in the Scriptures, it means that most likely it does not involve tangible signs of political and social restoration of the Jews at a later time either.³⁰ This kingdom is also presented as a present reality that started in the first century when Jesus' ministry began.³¹ It should be noted too that in the same passage where Jesus alludes to binding Satan that is mentioned above (Matthew 12:25-29), Jesus also says that the kingdom of God was present at the time that He performed this healing and that the healing itself represented the kingdom. If both the binding of Satan and the presence of the kingdom are a present reality according Jesus in the first century, then the period of a thousand years in these verses is to be understood as the same period of time mentioned in vv. 1-3.³² This would indicate as well that there is a parallel between Satan being bound and the kingdom being ushered in by the workings of the Gospel. These two events were taking place at the same time, which means they are both present realities. Further supporting evidence for this idea is the fact that John says at the beginning of the epistle that he is a companion in the kingdom with his contemporaries, meaning he knows the kingdom is a present

²⁸ Ibid., 106.

²⁹ Ibid., 110.

³⁰ Ibid., 104.

³¹ Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, 151.

³² Hoekema, *Amillennialism*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 164. Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 121.

reality for them all at that time (1:9). There is still some tension though that the kingdom, although being present, is yet to be fully consummated, similar to how Satan's defeat is awaiting completion. It would seem appropriate that since final defeat of Satan takes place at the end of the church age [thousand years] then the consummation of the kingdom takes place at the end of the church age too. And most logically this is represented by the re-creation of the heavens and the earth and the arrival of New Jerusalem. Amillennialists are often criticized as not believing that there is ever a literal kingdom of God within history on the earth, but that it is reserved only as a *spiritual* reality. This is a misunderstanding though, and amillennialists do believe that not only is the kingdom as it is presented by Jesus a literal reality even now, it will also be fulfilled within history on the earth, only in the new creation and the new earth. Amillennialists do not believe that there is any support for the idea that a future kingdom of God's *must* manifest physically on the earth before the eternal state. It would seem more appropriate to be looking for the consummation to be the transition into the eternal state since the kingdom is already somewhat present now. It is only when one considers the kingdom in a like manner as the Jews misunderstood it to be that the *need* for an intermediary, utopian kingdom on the earth within this present age is created. Therefore it would seem more appropriate to avoid such a conclusion. This understanding is consistent with the approach and interpretation of vv. 1-3, and this adds considerable weight to the validity of the amillennial argument both there and here.

If the binding of Satan represents that he is unable to stop the spread of the Gospel to the nations, and if the millennial kingdom is understood to be the power of the Gospel, and if both these things are present realities—could these saints that are mentioned as being resurrected and reigning with Christ through the thousand years be a present reality too? This is the logical amillennial conclusion in light of what has been shown above. There seems to be disagreement

among scholars as to what type of reign is being described here in vv. 4 and 6, and some disagreement as to what types of resurrections are mentioned in vv. 4-6.³³ Either the reign mentioned is a spiritual reign of believers with Christ after they have become regenerate, or it's the reign of believers with Christ in heaven after they physically die.³⁴ In either case, the resurrection described is spiritual in nature and does not represent a physical, bodily resurrection.³⁵ It is either spiritual in that it represents regeneration, or it is spiritual in that it represents the dead who are spiritually alive in heaven but not yet in a physical, resurrected body.³⁶ There is biblical evidence that supports all sides in varying degrees and this is not easy to reconcile. However, taking a closer look at the terms *first resurrection* and *second death* lead to an interesting conclusion. A first resurrection implies a second resurrection, and a second death implies a first death.³⁷ What then is the relationship between each? Some amillennialists see the first resurrection as a spiritual leaving of the body to go be with Christ in heaven that takes place immediately after the first death, which is the death of the physical body.³⁸ The second resurrection then would be the resurrection of the dead body to a glorified, living state, and reunited with those reigning in heaven who participated in the first resurrection only.³⁹ This means then that the second death would be the eternal death of those who participated in the first

³³ Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, 151.

³⁴ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 217.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 214-217, 221.

³⁷ Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 127.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 81.

death, but not the first resurrection.⁴⁰ This would also seem to fit logically with the descriptions of either group of persons as being the *martyrs* or the *rest of the dead*. Clearly both groups represent those who have experienced the first death, the death of the body. The first resurrection however is only for those who have believed in Christ, and they therefore immediately enter the presence of God at their physical death and reign with Him a thousand years, which is understood to be the same thousand years mentioned in the discussions above. The idea here is that those who do not experience the first resurrection will also not experience the second resurrection. These will instead experience the first death (which is universally experienced by all) and then the second death, the eternal death, only. Neither the second resurrection nor the second death will take place until the end of the thousand years, which is the church age as has been asserted above. Though this is the most confusing and least understood topic of the amillennial position, it does logically complement its other parts.

There is definite biblical support for the tenets of the amillennial position. The position also appears to be logically consistent through and through. Still the question remains as to what the significance of this epistle was for those in John's immediate context, and what this means for the church today. Even though the amillennial argument may be logically consistent in its method and interpretation, if it does not also have a clear purpose for the church of every age, including its own, that is timeless, then its interpretation is not to be considered correct. There is no doubt that during the time that this text was composed that the early church was undergoing extreme persecution. Many were losing their lives for the sake of Christ and the propagation of the Gospel. The fact that Satan had been denied the ability to interfere with the spreading of the Gospel, the fact that the kingdom of God was already present among believers, and the fact that those who died for Christ's sake were currently reigning with Him in heaven, would have been

⁴⁰ Strimple, *Amillennialism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 127.

tidings of gladness during this time for the persecuted church.⁴¹ This would have provided them much needed encouragement as well to continue believing and continue witnessing for Christ because essentially there was no way that they could lose. God had the final victory over it all, and because of His victory, every believer would be victorious, even if the body died. In a defeated age, a revelation from the Lord about victory in the midst of His final judgment on wickedness was just what the church needed. Here is also where the timeless, or idealist, nature of this apocalyptic work comes into play. All these elements have been understood to be present realities for every generation of the church since the first century. Everyone has assumed that what is being described in *The Revelation* is happening in their present day. In fact it is! Satan is bound and growing angrier and angrier because people are coming to faith, in a world that is still under his control and still filled with those who do his bidding. He is awaiting the time when he can finally wage his last battle against the church. His final defeat is certain. And there surely is a battle going on now, just like there was in the first century, where the church is being persecuted and people are dying for their faith. These things have not stopped, but they are not the end—people are still getting saved, and people are still going to be with Christ, as John tells us. God’s kingdom is the church, the *ecclesia*, and nothing can change that, and His kingdom has been present since He came the first time. This is the earnest He has given until the end is come, and the consummation and final Kingdom are received. A Christian’s kingdom status is present as long as he is, dead or alive, and he will both live and reign, then and now, though he physically dies. And yet, he will physically live again. The significance of this text is exactly the same today as it was in the first century according to amillennial thought. This text continues to serve as reminder that there is a day coming when the Lord will bring everything to a

⁴¹ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 214.

complete and perfect end for His people, even though their suffering is sure and grievous in this world, as it is and has been. God's *Revelation* is timeless indeed, and yet prophetic of things to come, but also a testament to that which was and currently is. It must be interpreted as such if its truth is to be understood completely in light of its epistolary intent for the church then, the church now, and the church to come. Amillennialism has surely succeeded in this regard.

The amillennial position is logically consistent in every way it has been examined. There are no holes in its reasoning. Though some of its concepts are hard to realize, especially against the backdrop of other, more conversationally popular eschatological systems, it presents itself unified and true, both regarding method and interpretation, while still considering and explaining the biblical data. Under this system, other passages of the canon do not have to be reviewed and reinterpreted in order to support its positions. This approach takes the data at face value and lets Scripture interpret Scripture in a way that is logical and consistent within itself. All of this is done while at the same time taking into consideration the timeless, prophetic, and epistolary attributes of the millennial text, while remaining true to sound hermeneutical techniques that do not require long discourses or diagrams to explain. Amillennialism proclaims the kingdom is a reality, proclaims the Gospel is powerful, and proclaims eternal life for the saved is already a sure thing. Amillennialism proclaims victory then, victory now, victory to come!

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