

## Amillennialism

The doctrine of Amillennialism is a popular belief regarding last things or *eschatology*. It is generally held by those of a reformed and covenant persuasion.

### Definition of Amillennialism

The word *amillennialism* is not found in the Bible. By etymology, we understand that it is the view that there is no (*a-*) millennium, that is, no thousand year reign of Christ on earth. That is a negative definition. Perhaps more helpful is how Ligonier Ministries defines the system both positively and negatively: “the belief that the millennium is a present reality centered in Christ’s heavenly reign, not a future hope of Christ’s rule on earth after his return.”<sup>1</sup> It teaches the current reign of Christ, however long the present church age may be.

So in fact, amillennialism teaches that there is a millennium in the present age, not the literal 1,000 year kingdom commonly thought of in dispensational circles.

So how precisely is Christ reigning presently? According to one explanation, the present reign of Christ means that He is ruling over the world today. His government is increasing in size and scope. The people of God are presently ruling in the midst of their enemies, and in fact that is their commission. Satan is presently bound so that he cannot lead nations into total idolatry, though he can still tempt individuals.<sup>2</sup>

In the amillennial understanding, there are two relevant ages or periods of “time.” The first is the present age and the second is the new heaven and earth. The present age will transition into the heavenly age immediately upon the return of Christ. This is why amillennialism is sometimes called the “two-age model.”

Amillennialism includes the view that the future age casts a long backward-in-time shadow so that Christians, though not yet living in that future era, already do so in a sense. This is the *already-not yet* tension proposed by the view called *inaugurated eschatology*. Since the kingdom is already in operation in some ways, the believer already lives in the kingdom, but not yet in its complete fulfillment.

The amillennial view is not held by dispensationalists, or the broader view of *premillennialism*. *Pre-millennialism* is the belief that Jesus Christ will return to earth *before* the millennium begins, and will in fact rule over the 1,000 year kingdom. In the premillennial understanding of Scripture, there are three ages relevant to today’s believer. The first is the present age, the second is the millennial kingdom, and the third is the heavenly era. The Tribulation marks the ending of the present age.

The third common viewpoint is called *postmillennialism* teaches that Christ will return after the millennium has been completed by the sanctifying work of the church in the society.

### Justification of Amillennialism

The two-age argument for amillennialism is the primary **exegetical argument** that supports the view. It explains that the Bible sees time in two ages: “this age” and “the age to come.” These ages run sequentially one right after the other, with no third or intervening era. We read this language in a number of passages of Scripture. A quick search for verses with *age* and *come* in them finds Matthew

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/store/a-case-for-amillennialism-paperback/>.

<sup>2</sup> This explanation be found at <http://truthinhistory.org/the-present-reign-of-jesus-christ.html>. Author Robert Caringola further criticizes, “if you believe it to be a literal thousand years in the future, you are still in eschatological infancy.”

12:32, Mark 10:30, Luke 18:30, and Ephesians 1:21. When the search is expanded some, we also find Luke 20:34–35 mentions both ages, as does 1 Timothy 6:17 and 19.

There are also synonymous phrases in other verses that mention only one of the ages. For instance: *this age* or *this present age*: Romans 12:2<sup>3</sup>, 1 Cor. 1:20, 2:6, 2:8, 3:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2, 6:12 (NKJV), Titus 2:12. *The age to come*: Hebrews 6:5.

There are also some texts that refer to the end of the age, indicating a kind of dividing line between the two ages. These are Matthew 13:39–40, 13:49, 24:3, 28:20.

There are also **hermeneutical arguments** given in support of amillennialism. The first is this: clear passages of Scripture must be used to interpret unclear ones. This is a principle recognized by most if not all conservative interpreters of Scripture. However, the difficulty arises as to the determination of which passages are clear and which are unclear. The two-age passages cited above are generally thought to be clear, while amillennialists consider the key premillennial passage of Revelation 20 to be difficult and obscure. This difficulty is underscored by the genre of Revelation: it is apocalyptic and highly symbolic, and thus very difficult to interpret. This precludes any interpretation which takes Revelation 20 literally, for if that were to be so, the supposed uniform testimony of the entire Bible would be forced into contradiction with this single obscure passage.

The second hermeneutical support for amillennialism is related to the first in that the two-age model is used as the “hermeneutical grid” to understand the rest of the eschatological passages of Scripture. This understanding is prioritized above other considerations. Anything that could be construed to weigh against the two-age model is a problem text that must be interpreted in such a way as to be in agreement with the two-age model.

The same kind of hermeneutical principle is used in practice by some dispensationalists. They learn a seven-fold model, and this becomes the hermeneutical and theological grid that is laid over the Scripture and through which all Scripture is seen. This is so much the case that teachings that are thought to be relevant to one box of the grid are not allowed to leak over into the adjacent boxes, or any other boxes. For example, teachings about discipleship in the gospel are not thought by these interpreters to be relevant to the church age. Thus, they split being a disciple from being a believer.

### **Critique of the Hermeneutics of Amillennialism**

A critique of the amillennial position must include an evaluation of the principles of interpretation used to arrive at the view.<sup>4</sup> If nothing else, this is justified because in Storms’ book, he spends the very first chapter expressing five hermeneutical principles that are foundational to the approach.

The two-age model is used as a controlling hermeneutical tool because it is supposedly more clear than Revelation 20. But this is not warranted because Revelation 20:1–15 is a text which is neither difficult nor symbolic. In fact, it is notably less reliant upon symbols than some earlier parts of the book. It is extremely clear, coming after the lengthy tribulation section and then the explanation of the return of Christ with His saints. It describes how Satan will be bound, the saints will reign with Christ, and there will be two resurrections. The first resurrection is followed by believers reigning in the kingdom and (as premillennialism understands it), the eternal state. The second resurrection, which clearly follows the 1,000 year period, is followed by the Great White Throne Judgment. Instead of subordinating this text to the other clear texts in the gospels and epistles and thus effectively dismissing

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<sup>3</sup> For readers of most English translations: ‘this age’ is translated ‘this world.’

<sup>4</sup> Waymeyer, p. 8 agrees.

it, it is much more reasonable to set it *alongside* those texts as a peer, and then to harmonize all the texts. This is precisely what the premillennial understanding does.

Another hermeneutical problem with “two-age priority” is that it does not properly recognize the role of the progress of revelation. As chronologically later revelation unfolds, God can use it to disclose new details, previously unforeseen delays between prophetic events, and nuances that were not seen before. Sometimes, God uses new revelation to disclose facts that were entirely unknown, as with the mystery of the church that is a body of Jews and Gentiles in unity. Certainly a future program for the Gentiles was revealed, but not of the sort that is demonstrated in Ephesians 3:5. Later revelation adds to or clarifies earlier revelation, though not in a controlling fashion that changes the meaning of earlier revelation. This is true even of the gospel writings, as they reflect teaching of the Lord from before He guided them by His Spirit into all truth (John 16:12–13).

A third hermeneutical problem with amillennialism is that its interpretive approach is far from what would be considered the normal or original meaning of the words of the text. Example: Micah 4:1–3 and Isaiah 2:1–4 say that nations will come up to Jerusalem to seek knowledge about the Lord, and God will guide them in terms of decisions of judgment between nations. There will be peace on earth at that time. The author’s intention certainly seems very clear. Yet the amillennialist argues that people coming to Jerusalem to see the king is fulfilled in people coming to faith in Christ to become citizens of heaven. Beyond the obvious allegorization in this method, there is the problem that people are not streaming to the Lord to be saved in the present day. The nations are not at peace with one another. War departments have not disappeared.

### Critique of Exegesis of Amillennialism

The two-age model initially appears very strong. Yet there are weighty arguments against it.

The strongest argument against amillennialism and its two-age exegesis is the three-age model of premillennialism. The first age is the present age; the second is the millennial kingdom, and the third is the eternal state.<sup>5</sup> The crux of the disagreement revolves around this second or intermediate age. Michael Vlach has conclusively demonstrated that there *must* be an intermediate age. His proof revolves around the fact that there are some qualities ascribed to a period of the future that clearly do not match those of the present age, and just as clearly do not match those of the heavenly age. Of necessity, then, there must be an intermediate age between the two well-known ages.<sup>6</sup>

For example, there will be very long life spans, but also death, according to Isaiah 65:20. The new heaven and earth language in 65:17 leads many to believe that this all refers to the heavenly state. But it is not so easy as that, because “a child shall die one hundred years old.” That simply doesn’t fit the heavenly state, where there is no more death (Rev. 21:4). Amillennialists address this difficulty by suggesting that the language of the text is poetic in its description of infinitely long life. In this way,

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<sup>5</sup> I would be satisfied to call this a **modified two-age model** where the first age is part of “history,” i.e. the time prior to the new heavens and new earth, and the second age is that eternal state. This can work so long as it is recognized that the first age, history, ends with a preparatory period in which the Lord readies the old earth by bringing it into total subjection to Himself and the Father, such that it is then in order to give to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24–28). This preparatory period at the end of the age is the millennial kingdom. Said another way, the present age has two parts: part (a) which is the church age and part (b) which is the millennium. The age to come is what is popularly known as “heaven,” but in reality is the new heaven and new earth, with the new earth where all the “action” is (Revelation 21–22).

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Vlach, “Premillennialism and the Kingdom: A Rationale for a Future Earthly Kingdom.” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 29/2 (Fall 2018): 207–32. See pages 213ff.

God accommodated the language to fit the experience of the listeners. But it should be obvious that the first readers would certainly have the imagination and mental capability to understand the concept of eternal life without requiring accommodationist language, which would make it even *more difficult* to grasp the plain idea of eternal life. Every generation of humans has the capacity to understand the idea of the removal of death, and in plain language, because they have eternity set in their hearts (Eccl. 3:11). They also understand the tragedy of dying young, and of not living a long time. Isaiah couldn't be more clear—not poetically, but literally—that life will be extended but not everlasting during the kingdom of Christ. Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 25:8 speak of resurrection. The earlier-written Job 19 does as well.<sup>7</sup>

Vlach also marshals Zechariah 8:3–8 and 14 which speak of old people and young in a peaceful Jerusalem, and nations who will come up to Jerusalem to worship and others who will be punished. Neither of those conditions prevail in the present age, and they certainly do not fit the perfection of the eternal state (age discrepancies? national punishments?). Simply put, when we read that the Lord will return to Zion to reign, we believe that is exactly what He means. It is not an allegorical statement with a hidden meaning (having to do with the church).

There are many more such texts. One is Psalm 72 in which David speaks about the universal reign of the Messiah, in which there will be peace, prosperity for the poor and oppressed, nations serving the Israelite King, and agricultural prosperity. No such conditions existed in history. As well, poverty and oppression won't even be “things” in heaven for the Lord to save people from. Therefore, David must be talking about an intermediate age.

There are also the parallel prophecies of Isaiah 2:1–3 and Micah 4:2–4. Isaiah 2 was mentioned above, with the comment that some amillennialists take this to be an allegorical reference to the present age. Other amillennialists understand this to refer to the future heavenly state. Yet both interpretations are wrong. The hard reality of life on this earth, with wars and persecutions abounding, and people *not* streaming to any source of spiritual knowledge, much less the Lord in Jerusalem, make this interpretation untenable. Understanding the prophecies as fulfilled in the heavenly future is somewhat easier, but even this cannot work. The need for people to learn the ways of the Lord is not consistent with the heavenly state. Further, the need for judgment between conflicting nations indicates that sin is still present. This does not fit the heavenly state.

Isaiah 11:1–16 is another remarkable prophecy that finds its fulfillment in an intermediate age between the present and the new heaven and earth. The conditions given are marvelous. But we don't see them operational today: For example, animals do not behave peacefully toward one another. Mothers do not let their children play near snake holes. The earth is not full of the knowledge of the Lord. Israel is not completely gathered and assisted by other nations. And these conditions do not match

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<sup>7</sup> The prophecy does merge some ideas from eternity and the kingdom stage of history. This is perhaps confusing to the modern reader, but it simply indicates that there are interconnections and a flow of history from the initial state of the kingdom to its final form in the new heaven and earth. This idea is called prophetic conflation, which means that far future events (from the prophet's perspective) are difficult to distinguish. The oft-used illustration of seeing mountains at a distance is helpful. If you look at a mountain range from a distance, you may see two peaks, one after the other, but not be able to discern that there is a valley between them a mile or more wide. It is similar with prophecy of future events. The prophets saw the suffering of Christ and the glory to follow, but did not realize there was a distance of time “hidden” between those two events. That distance of time contains the church age and Tribulation. Similarly, to them were revealed future conditions of the millennial kingdom, and future conditions of the eternal state, but the exact arrangement of that was not clarified until later revelation, even as late as Revelation 19–22.

the heavenly state: The Lord will slay the wicked—wicked don't exist in heaven. The Lord will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth. He will judge with righteousness—another activity that is unnecessary in heaven. These features of the future also cannot be squared with the present. God is sovereign over all things, but it simply cannot be believed that the Lord is reigning over the affairs of the earth at the moment, for there is no iron-rod rule that is straightening out the unbelief, idolatry, and wickedness of the nations.

There is also Isaiah 24:21–23. This passage is interesting because it speaks about a gathering of the kings of the earth for punishment, *followed* by a period of many days. After that they would be actually punished. It appears that after that time, the Lord will reign in Jerusalem, probably referring to the eternal state when the sun and moon are no longer necessary. The period of many days is the millennial kingdom. This is confirmed by a correlation between Isaiah 24:21–23 and Revelation 19–20 specifically<sup>8</sup> and between Isaiah 24 and Revelation 6–22 more generally.<sup>9</sup> Amillennialism would have to see the many days as the present, as they see the kingdom being present. Yet the events that are specified prior to the “many days” have manifestly not occurred yet. So this doesn't fit.

Waymeyer in *Amillennialism and the Age to Come* (p. 19–83) demonstrates that in each of the above passages, the amillennial interpretation is stretched beyond credibility. In many cases, the amillennial approach is to claim a partial fulfillment in the present and a completed fulfillment in the future. This “already/not-yet” solution offers a partial explanation, but all it does in the end is to dissolve the coming intermediate age so that some of its flavor is attached to the present age, and the rest into the heavenly age, but in a way that does not do justice to the complete situation.

Furthermore, there are several NT texts that speak of the *future* reign of the saints in a kingdom (Revelation 5:10, 1 Corinthians 6:2–3, 2 Timothy 2:12) where they will reign with the Lord while using a rod of iron (Revelation 12:5, 19:15). That reign is not present today. And there will be no need for such an imposing reign in the new heavens and earth, because there will be no rebellious nations that need to be subjugated. There must therefore be an intermediate kingdom age between the present age and the eternal age.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, we do not need to take “this age and the age to come” as a hard-and-fast rule of interpretation that indicates an immediate change from earth to heaven. In fact, “this age” and “the age to come” language could be used at any time in earth history. Moses could have used it just like Jesus or Paul. “This age” refers to the pre-eternal state earth, with all that entails, including the future kingdom reign of Christ. “The age to come” refers to the heavenly or eternal state.

### **The Reign of Christ: Present or Future?**

A key aspect of amillennialism is that Jesus Christ is reigning in his kingdom now. But is Christ reigning today? That is the view of amillennialism, progressive dispensationalism and most if not all variations of inaugurated eschatology. It is probably the most common view among Christians throughout the world. It is simply assumed that since Christ is King, He therefore must be exercising that role now by reigning presently. Any suggestion to the contrary is treated as laughable or even blasphemous. But is it true that Christ is reigning today as human king *in the Davidic role over Jerusalem and the globe as promised in both Testaments*? Is it true that Christians need not pray that the Lord's kingdom will come (Matthew 6:10) since it already has?

<sup>8</sup> Vlach, “The Kingdom of God and the Millennium,” p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> Waymeyer, *Amillennialism*, p. 73–74.

<sup>10</sup> Waymeyer summarizes this thoroughly in *Amillennialism*, p. 81–83.

### **Present Sovereignty**

Certainly the triune God reigns in the sense of His overarching sovereignty over all things, as He always has and always will. There is no question about that. But it doesn't *appear* that Christ is reigning in any direct way, with all of the rebellion, murder, wars, crime, and corruption going on throughout the planet. If we assumed that He is reigning presently, we could easily imagine a better way to do it. I grant that this sounds arrogant. But the imagination I am talking about is not the atheistic kind of vision of a better world. Instead, I am thinking of His reign in the way that we read about in so many Old Testament prophecies—like those mentioned above. In other words, the Biblically informed mind knows that there is something better than what we are experiencing right now, and we get that idea from the prophetic Scriptures. That seems to be far better than what the world is experiencing today.

It is necessary to note at this point that the generally peaceful and prosperous conditions in the West, particularly in the United States and other western nations, must not be allowed to blind us to the fact that a huge segment of the world's population lives under oppression and economic lack which would simply be unacceptable to many of us in the west. Even so, death is all-too prevalent in every society, including the West. We are not experiencing what could be in a direct, iron-rod rule of Christ where even the enemy death is greatly subdued.

### **Present Sitting**

To see if Scripture teaches Christ's kingdom reign during the church age, we must visit a number of texts concerning that reign to see if any explicit information or clues about its relationship to the present are revealed. Such texts include Hebrews 10:13, 1:13, Ps 110:1, Matt 22:44, and 1 Cor. 15:25.

We turn first to Hebrews 10:13. It is the best explanation of Psalm 110:1 in terms of the present activity of the Lord. In this verse, the author explains that Jesus has sat down at the right hand of God, "waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet."<sup>11</sup> The key word is "waiting." It explains the action that Christ is now taking at the right hand of God. The sitting of Psalm 110:1 (יָשָׁב) is equated here not to *reigning*, but *waiting*. According to BDAG, the word means "to remain in a place or state and await an event or the arrival of someone, expect, wait." It has the nuance of waiting not only in terms of time, but waiting with an expectation to receiving something. That correlates well with the truth of Luke 19:11–27, which informs us that the Lord will travel to a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and then to return. The Lord is awaiting the time when the Father has determined that the enemies of Christ will be subjugated to the point that it is time for Christ to return and take the direct reins of power over the world as a perfect almighty king.

Hebrews 1:13 is a more direct quotation of Psalm 110:1 (see also Matthew 22:44, Mark 12:36, Luke 20:42–43, Acts 2:34–35). A simple reading of both texts indicates that the Father directs the Son to sit down for a specified time. That sitting is to be terminated when God creates a situation in which the Lord's enemies are His footstool. The sitting sounds passive, not active. Again, sitting is the equivalent of *waiting*, not *reigning*. This is true of the other "sat down at the right hand" texts such as Matthew 26:64, Ephesians 1:20, Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, and Hebrews 12:2. In support of this point, notice who the active agent is in the text, that is, who precisely is putting the enemies down? It is the first LORD of Psalm 110:1, that is, God the Father. He is the "I" who will make your [=Messiah's] enemies your [=Messiah's] footstool.

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<sup>11</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

1 Cor. 15:25 is another crucial text in the question of whether Christ is reigning today. It calls to mind Psalm 110:1 with its language about putting enemies underfoot. This has caused some interpreters to jump to the conclusion that this text, with its emphasis on Christ's reign, must be exactly correlated to Psalm 110:1. But this confuses a couple of key points.<sup>12</sup> To see this, we first must highlight the textual differences of the verses:

Psalm 110:1— The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand,  
 until **I** make **your** enemies **your** footstool."

1 Cor. 15:25— For he must reign until **he** has put all **his** enemies under **his** feet.

Notice the highlighted pronouns. In Psalm 110:1, the *Father* is the actor who subjugates the enemies of Christ and puts them under the footstool on behalf of His Son. In 1 Cor. 15:25, *Christ* is the actor who puts his own enemies under his own feet. We can explain this in one of two ways. Either there are two phases of the subjugation of enemies, with the Father first and the Son second. I prefer this understanding, as I will outline below, because it treats Psalm 110:1 as referring entirely to the present seated session of Christ. Alternatively, the Father could be subjugating the enemies through the work of the Son. This necessitates seeing the first part of Psalm 110:1 as presently fulfilled (the sitting part), and the second part (the "until I make your enemies" part) as fulfilled throughout the millennial kingdom. In neither interpretation is the present "sitting" equated to present "reigning."

The context of Psalm 110:1 is clear that it is God the Father speaking to the Lord of David, namely the Messiah. The identification of the subject of the sentence may not be so obvious in 1 Cor. 15:25 because of all the pronouns in the prior verse and this one. But carefully tracing the pronouns yields the following:

1 Cor. 15:24—Then comes the end, when he [Messiah] delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.

1 Cor. 15:25— For he [Messiah] must reign until he [Messiah] has put all his [Messiah's] enemies under his [Messiah's] feet.

This brings us to the second key point, and that is the general chronology of the 1 Corinthians 15 passage. The situation is that Christ is presently sitting and waiting, not reigning. While sitting, at some point the Father will subjugate the enemies to a sufficient place that it will be time for the Messianic Kingdom to commence. This subjugation will occur by the end of the Tribulation. Messiah will arise from His seated position, receive the investiture of the kingdom from the Father, come to the earth to reign over it. Later, he will hand the kingdom over to the Father. This sequence of events fits 1 Cor. 15:23-25. In verse 23, Christ's coming is mentioned. Verse 24 says, "then comes the end," suggesting the passage of a notable amount of time—a millennium to be precise. At that time He will deliver the kingdom to the Father, at which point he has put an end to all opposing rule and power. Verse 25 is explanatory, starting with the word *for* (Greek: γὰρ), indicating that this verse explains something about the prior. Christ puts an end to all rule and authority and power *because* God's foreordained plan is that he must put every enemy down, even the ultimate enemy, death.

The objection might be raised that the Father already subjugated the enemies; how is it that Christ must do so again? The answer is simply that God sets the initial stage for the kingdom. But over a thousand year period, various forms of opposition could arise in a world where sinners are still present. All of these must be subjugated throughout the world and in a generally orderly situation before the Son

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of this confusion, see <http://www.dbts.edu/2014/02/24/is-jesus-presently-reigning/>.

delivers the kingdom back to the Father. So both subjugations must occur—the short-term initial one by the Father, and the long-term rule of Christ over the earth’s nations.

In short, Psalm 110:1 highlights Christ’s sitting, which is waiting. 1 Cor. 15:25 highlights Christ’s active reign, which is not characterized by the passive idea of sitting, but rather the idea of reigning. These texts should not be immediately conflated to suggest that sitting = reigning.

### **Future Reigning**

An abundance of texts indicate the reign of Christ is yet future to the time of this writing. Besides the model prayer (Matt. 6:10), there are a number of “future entry” texts. These include Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 4:1, 4:8; John 3:5; 2 Peter 1:11; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5.

It is clever to suppose the debate can be solved by an appeal to an already/not-yet paradox. But a clear-eyed view of the mess of a world in which we live, along with a plain reading of the text of Scripture, indicates we are in a waiting mode until the kingdom arrives. In fact, we are waiting with Christ, who is awaiting His time to intervene in the kingdoms of this world and take them over.

It is not for the disciples, nor for us, to know the time or seasons which the Father has fixed by His authority (Acts 1:7). We can know for certain that God will restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). We can know for certain that the saints will reign with Christ (Rev. 20:6, 2 Tim. 2:12). We can pray for the kingdom to come. But we cannot know the time of its coming, other than it is future. Setting aside the reign of God in terms of His omnipotent sovereignty—which is always true—there is a different sense of reign as taught in the Old and New Testament Scriptures that Jesus Christ will exercise at some point in the future.

### **Application to the Modern Believer**

What good does it do for the Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to grapple with all of this? **First**, we are reminded that there is a lot of revelation in the Bible concerning the future. We are not justified therefore to be agnostic or uncaring about what the Scripture says. We may not know what our view is, but we can hardly say that it does not matter. If for nothing else, it matters in that the certainty of the future resurrection, kingdom, and eternal state demands a holy ethic today.

**Second**, we may be forgiven for thinking that eschatology is a complex matter such that it matters far less than the gospel or other central Christian truths. But what this study reveals is that a premillennial interpreter of Scripture looks at many things in the Bible much differently than an amillennial interpreter. This should catch our attention. For example, the amillennial interpreter says that Revelation 20 is unclear. Most faithful readers who are coming to the text for the first time would not agree in the least with this conclusion. It is abundantly clear what is written. The amillennial interpreter says there is no such thing as a 1,000 year reign of Christ. But the text says there is—and six times it repeats the number 1,000! What it means is unmistakable. Therefore, since the amillennialist reads Scripture so differently, I encourage us who are of a literal persuasion to treat with caution the other interpretations of the amillennialist. Those interpretations may be fine; *or* they may be tainted with the same presuppositions and reading method that we have run into above.

**Third**, it reinforces in our minds the need for careful exegesis and correlation of all the Biblical data on this subject—or any subject for that matter. We cannot settle for explanations that stretch the imagination in pursuit of a sophisticated system. The general dispensational approach (or broader premillennial approach, if you prefer), is not infantile at all. Rather, it takes literally and seriously what God says in the Word, and correlates it all together in a systematic whole. It does not at all intend to be carnal or simple-minded, but rather faithful to the text and intention of the Author of the text.



## Revelation 20 and the Amillennial View

This passage is undoubtedly at the center of the debate over eschatology. We will examine the key matters in the following sub-sections.

### When is Satan bound?

It is evident that Satan is not bound today in 2019. Any glance at the nightly news or your favorite news site on the Internet would demonstrate that fact conclusively to most Christians, even those who are not given to conspiracy theories or who try to find the Devil behind every evil act in the world. Who could be blamed for thinking that Satan, while not behind every evil act conjured up by depraved humans, *is* behind the grand movements of rebellion against God, whether those of sexual perversion, abortion, persecution of believers, government-level corruption, etc.

I grant that this understanding can be criticized as an experiential argument. After all, perhaps Satan *is* bound today and it is just some demons and human depravity that is to blame for all the sin in the world.

In response, we can turn to Scripture and find this: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8 ESV). The imperatives in this verse are “be sober-minded” and “be watchful.” They indicate an ongoing responsibility of the believers in Peter’s readership. Furthermore, the indicative verb describing the devil as “walking about” is present tense. For the readers in Peter’s day, the Devil and his demons were a very present danger, and they were required to pay careful attention. Peter wrote *after* the cross when the prince of this world was judged (John 12:31, 16:11). Judgment, though complete, has not been fully executed or implemented as of yet. Peter wrote during the early part of our present church age, and we can find no reason why it does not apply today just as well as it did then.

We know the Devil was not bound during the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1, cf. Rev. 20:2); nor during the days of Job (1:7); nor during the life of David (1 Chronicles 21:1); nor during the post-exilic period (Zechariah 3:1-2); nor during the life of Jesus (Matt. 4:10); nor even during the ministry of the apostle Paul. Notice what Paul says:

- Satan exercises dominion over unbelievers – Acts 26:18
- Satan tempts believers to be unfaithful to their spouses – 1 Corinthians 7:5
- Satan blinds the minds of those who don’t believe – 2 Cor. 4:4
- Satan transforms himself into an angel of light – 2 Cor. 11:14
- Satan harassed Paul – 2 Cor. 12:7
- Satan hindered Paul from seeing the Thessalonians – 1 Thess. 2:18

It is eminently reasonable to conclude based on experience *and (most of all)* Scripture that Satan is not bound today in the church age. He is busy about his work of deceit and murder in the world. He sows tares (Matt. 13:39) and even takes away the word of the gospel from some people among whom it is preached (Mark 4:15). That is not passive; that is not bound; that is very dangerous activity.

Revelation 12:9 shows us that the Devil always is about deceiving the nations. That is his ongoing practice all the time.

But Revelation 20 teaches of two times in history when this will not be the case: a one-thousand year period of the reign of the saints; and then afterward in eternity in the new heavens and earth.

Prior to the end times, Satan most definitely will be active during the Tribulation, as we read in Revelation 6–19. Premillennialists, such as the author, place these events in the future during a seven-

year period that corresponds to the timeline of Daniel 9 and the days, months, and “times” of Revelation. The church will be raptured before the Tribulation.

Amillennialism teaches differently—that the true church will pass through the Tribulation. One difficulty with the Amillennial view is that it teaches Satan is presently bound; yet the description of the Tribulation makes clear that Satan is very active during that time (Revelation 12:9, 12:12). Amillennialists cannot have both—Satan bound now *and* Satan free to act during the Tribulation time for the church, whenever that time is (present? or future?).

### **What are the first and second resurrections?**

Amillennialism teaches that the first resurrection is when the martyrs die and they enter the presence of God, so it is a spiritual resurrection. The second resurrection is bodily when final judgment redemption occurs (Revelation 20:12–13).<sup>13</sup>

To the contrary, the first and second resurrections spoken about in Revelation 20:4–6 are bodily resurrections, like Christ’s resurrection, and just like that promised in the gospel (Acts 24:15; 1 Cor. 15:22; John 5:28–29). This is clear because verse 4 speaks of people who had been beheaded. They “lived and reigned with Christ.” The fact that they “lived” means they overcame beheading somehow, and it is necessarily consequent that they were resurrected. The argument that it was “souls” sitting on thrones<sup>14</sup> is inadequate, because the text says there were people who sat on thrones who were given the responsibility of judgment. These could be a different group of believers than the tribulation martyrs, which are mentioned next. *Then* there were “souls who had been beheaded” (by the beast) who lived and reigned. Yes, these were also seated upon kingly thrones, but that was only after they were resurrected.

The intermediate state is held by many to be the bodiless existence of the saints after they die and go to be with Christ and reign with Christ. The amillennial argument that Revelation 20 speaks of an intermediate state between death and resurrection is impossible, because their intermediate state happens *prior to* bodily resurrection while the 1,000-year reign of Revelation 20 happens *after* bodily resurrection.<sup>15</sup>

These tribulation martyrs (and other saints not as clearly mentioned) take part of the first resurrection. It is these that are pronounced blessed and holy. The second death has no power over them. This refers to all believers, who will be raised prior to the millennial kingdom. They will reign with Christ and will be priests of God and of Christ (20:6).

In a statement that would well be rendered as parenthetical, 20:5a says, “(But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.)” This refers to “then comes the end” of 1 Corinthians 15:24 which is the final resurrection, that of unbelievers to judgment. Next on their docket is the Great White Throne judgment of 20:11–15.

The text of Revelation 20:1–6 speaks of the intermediate *age*, to be sure, but not the intermediate *state*.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/first-and-second-resurrection/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.prca.org/articles/amillennialism.html>

<sup>15</sup> The Amillennial solution is to say, “the taking up to heaven of the soul of the believer at death is, indeed, resurrection” (<https://www.prca.org/articles/amillennialism.html>). This is a bodiless resurrection, which causes us to wonder what do we call it when the believer’s soul is later reunited with his body? We call *that* resurrection, but the amillennialist divides the resurrection into two stages: the resurrection of the soul, and the resurrection of the body. It appears that either the resurrection has to be two-staged, or the second-coming has to be two-staged. The reader can decide for himself which is more straightforwardly supported by the text of the Bible.

**How long is one thousand years?**

Simply put, the “one thousand years” mentioned six times in Revelation 20 is one thousand solar years long. It is not, as amillennialists claim, a symbolic representation of the new covenant era. Supporting arguments about powers of 10, numbers of completeness, and accommodations to the ignorance of the contemporary audience amount to nothing more than verbal disguise of a non-literal approach to the Scriptures.

There are several places in the Bible where time measurements are very literal. One is in Genesis 1–2 and Exodus 20 with respect to the days of creation and the days of the week. Here again at the end of Scripture, the time measurements are most simply taken to be literal. There is no difficulty in supposing that a 1,000 year golden age can be on the docket for the world’s future. In fact, an age like the one described in Rev. 20:1–6 is required by the texts that we examined earlier from both testaments that speak of an intermediate age different from the present and the eternal future, and for other reasons capably outlined by Vlach.<sup>16</sup>

To support this point, we must note that the symbols and figures of the book of Revelation are used to different extents in different portions of the book. They are almost entirely absent from chapters 1–5. John uses them pervasively in chapters 6–17 and begins to taper off in chapters 18–19. Figurative or symbolic language is largely absent once again at the end of the book, where chapters 20–22 are essentially predictive or prophetic prose that describes future events. By chapter 20, gone are the references to ten-horned and seven-headed beasts that represent kingdoms, like the highly symbolic representations of kingdoms in Daniel 2, 4, 7, and 8. It is not accurate to broad-brush the entire Apocalypse as “figurative” as a justification for interpreting every individual part as a non-literal figure.

**When is the one thousand years?**

A simple reading of the text indicates that it follows a chronological arrangement. Certainly the order of the visions is chronological (20:1 “then I saw”, 21:1 “now I saw,” 22:1 “And he showed me”). The content of those visions indicates that the events were seen in the order that they will in fact occur in the future.

The answer to the question in the heading of this section is “future to 2019,” but more precisely, it is after the second coming and initial subjugation of world kingdoms (Revelation 19), and before the eternal state. It happens after the first mass resurrection of believing Jews and Gentiles (see above). It happens before the resurrection and judgment of unbelievers.

On the amillennial view that the thousand years represents the present age, and the saints are reigning in heaven, there is a problem. All those who are reigning with Christ reign for the entire period of 1,000 years. But if they die in the middle or toward the end of the church age, there is no way they can live and reign for a thousand years. “Thousand years” then takes on different meanings within this single context: Satan is bound “the entire present age” and Old Testament saints reign “the entire present age,” but New Testament believers reign “only part of the present age.” Yet all the time periods listed in double-quotation marks are called “a thousand years” in the text of Scripture. On the premillennial view there is no such difficulty, for all the saints are raised prior to the 1,000 years, and they reign during the exact same 1,000 year period that Satan is bound.

**Alleged Weakness of the Premillennial View**

Justin Taylor expresses what he believes to be a fatal weakness of the premillennial system:

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<sup>16</sup> Vlach, *Premillennialism and the Kingdom: A Rationale...*

Sam Storms make the case that when Christ returns, the NT is clear that a number of things will end at that time (sin, corruption, death) and a number of things will begin at that time (our physical resurrection, final judgment, new heavens and new earth). In other words, when Christ returns, it's "curtains" on sin and death. But in Premillennialism, there are still a thousand years of sin and death and corruption... the consistent testimony of the NT leads one to confidently expect that judgment, resurrection, and the death of sin and physical death will all happen at the blessed and glorious return of Christ. I know others will disagree, but this strikes me as a fatal weakness of Premillennialism.<sup>17</sup>

Reading the NT with Amillennial lenses will certainly lead to the conclusions that Storms and Taylor embrace. But the plain revelation of Scripture *both in and after* the Old Testament, as well as revelation *both in and after* the gospels, is that the future is more involved than just "Jesus comes and that's it...heaven begins." Nay, rather, Isaiah 65:17-20 indicate that death will still occur during a future golden age, though at a much lesser severity than today. 1 Corinthians 15:26 indicates that the last enemy to be defeated is death, and that is a termination point to the reign of Christ which is after His second coming in order to reign.

There are also clearly indications of sin after the coming of Christ, for He promises that His people will rule with him "with a rod of iron." The purpose of such an imposing instrument is to dash opponents to pieces like a potter's vessel. Evidently not everyone will be happy and well-adjusted to the reign of the saints with Christ. There will be sinners to rule over.

Amillennialist Sam Storms provides an outline of his objections to the premillennial (PM) view.<sup>18</sup> A point-by-point response follows. The bulleted items are his evaluation of what a premillennialist must believe. My comments follow each point.

- You must necessarily believe that physical death will continue to exist beyond the time of Christ's second coming.

Correct. Isaiah 65:20 indicates that death will occur. Storms is not correct, though, in suggesting that a PM must necessarily believe in death for believers during that time. They may or may not die, depending on whether the Lord is pleased to heal their diseases or if they are born toward the latter part of the millennium. Death certainly does occur after the second coming when Christ judges the lost upon His return.<sup>19</sup>

- You must necessarily believe that the natural creation will continue, beyond the time of Christ's second coming, to be subjected to the curse imposed by the fall of man.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-you-must-believe-if-you-are-a-premillennialist/>, published October 7, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> <https://eschatologystuff.wordpress.com/2007/03/13/problems-with-premillennialism-by-sam-storms/>

<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel 20:38 indicates this of the Jews when it says, "I will purge the rebels from among you...they shall not enter the land of Israel." The saved *will* enter the land of Israel. Matthew teaches the same thing of the Gentile nations in 25:41 when it says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire..." and verse 46: "these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." That life, we believe, will have its first phase in the millennium, and carry on into eternity after that.

Correct. Revelation 20:8 indicates that deception will happen at the end of the 1,000 years, so the curse is still present.

- You must necessarily believe that the New Heavens and New Earth will not be introduced until 1,000 years subsequent to the return of Christ.

Right. Revelation 20:11 and 21:1 seem to form a sequence, and 20:11 occurs after the Devil was thrown into the lake of fire, which 20:7 says occurred after the 1000 years were finished. The straightforward reading of the text leads to the premillennial conclusion.

- You must necessarily believe that unbelieving men and women will still have the opportunity to come to saving faith in Christ for at least 1,000 years subsequent to his return.

No problem here. See Isaiah 11:9-10 about the nations seeking God and God's people being gathered. I don't understand why Storms writes, "Are Premillennialists asking us to believe that upon their attaining to an age when they are capable of understanding and responding to the revelation of God and the personal, physical presence of Christ Jesus himself, that none of them will be given the opportunity to respond in faith to the claims of the gospel?" That is, I don't understand his statement unless he is setting up a straw-man version of the PM argument. No PM that I know of ever said there would be no chance for unbelievers in the millennium. So, no, PMs are NOT asking you to believe that ridiculous statement. One key point about the millennium is precisely that many people WILL be saved! This is just like how many came to Christ when he was on the earth the first time.

Perhaps Storms is mixed up with the idea that *some* Dispensationalists teach, that there is no "second chance" after the Rapture. That is an entirely different question from the question of whether someone born in the millennium (potentially centuries after the rapture) will have an opportunity to believe in Christ. Indeed he or she will have such opportunity. The fact that the world will be in relatively glorious, but not sinless, condition, does not constrain their choice. They still have a sin nature and must be born again.

- You must necessarily believe that unbelievers will not be finally resurrected until at least 1,000 years subsequent to the return of Christ.

You guessed it. This is right on. Revelation 20:5 says "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended" (ESV). Again, a straightforward reading of the text says precisely what Storms objects to.

- You must necessarily believe that unbelievers will not be finally judged and cast into eternal punishment until at least 1,000 years subsequent to the return of Christ.

Yes, a good argument can be made that it is after resurrection that judgment occurs. That is the flow of the text in revelation 20: 1,000 years of the reign of Christ; Satan released; rebellion; rebellion crushed; Devil thrown into the Lake of Fire; then the Great White Throne judgment.

There is no problem believing that the text will be fulfilled as it is presented to the reader.

Since Revelation 20 speaks about and is structured around the one thousand year period and mentions it six times, it seems quite a stretch to say there is NO one thousand year period. One might debate when Christ's coming will happen relative to that period of time (pre- or post-millennial), but to say that period does not exist is a too much of a stretch.

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## Amillennialists and Amillennial Organizations

Most of the authors listed in the references section (except Vlach and Waymeyer) are amillennial. There are also the following organizations and individuals who espouse the view.

Robert Caringola  
 Dean Davis, author of *The High King of Heaven*.  
 David J. Engelsma  
 Anthony Hoekema  
 Ligonier Ministries, [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org).  
 R.C. Sproul  
 Sam Storms  
 Robert B. Strimple  
 Cornelis Venema  
 Samuel Waldron

## Relevant Passages for Further Study

Psalm 72  
 Isaiah 2:1–3, 11:1–6, 24:21–23, 65:17–20  
 Daniel 9  
 Zechariah 8:3–8 and 14

Matthew 24

1 Corinthians 15

Romans 11

Revelation 20:1–6