

PROPHETIC TRUTHS FOR TODAY

Unveiling the End-Time Events

by

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

AMILLENNIALISM—ITS INFLUENCE

HISTORICALLY there have been three major groups with reference to millennial teaching: the premillennialists, the postmillennialists, and the amillennialists. The oldest of these views is the premillennial, which dates back to the first century. While the doctrine may have been more systematized in recent generations, yet the return of Christ prior to the millennium was held, nevertheless, by some of the greatest church leaders of the first few centuries.

Amillennialism goes back to Augustine in the fourth century. He was the leading exponent of this school of thought. Postmillennialism is the latest of these concepts, and it may be dated from the 17th century, and was introduced by Daniel Whitby of Britain. It is therefore relatively new as a historical development of doctrine pertaining to eschatology.

It should be pointed out, I think, that great controversies emerged to plague the early church. Arianism was particularly a serious matter, and its spread led to the convening of the great church council at Nicea in the year 325 A.D. Arianism had to do with doctrinal concepts concerning the person of Christ. A great creed was set down, usually referred to as the Athanasian creed. Arianism was rejected, and Arius, its great exponent, was branded as a dangerous man.

Not long after this controversy in the early church there appeared one of the permanently great personalities in history, namely Augustine. He is the one who introduced amillennialism as a distinct teaching. While it should not be classified as a heresy, it must be regarded, nevertheless, as a totally inadequate method in the treatment of Bible prophecy.

HISTORICAL POSITION OF EARLY AMILLENNIALISTS

It is completely correct to say that amillennialism was born out of Roman Catholic theology because the Latin Church regarded itself as the spiritual continuation of Israel. In other words, it believed the Church was the inheritor of Israel's promises. As one might expect, the Roman Church denies that God has a distinct purpose with Israel for the future. The historical theology of that church has consistently denied that God has an earthly plan involving His ancient covenant people for the end-time.

As expected, the Roman Church says that God is through with Israel and that the unbelief of that nation forfeited any claims for an earthly glory in the days that lie ahead. Amillennialists follow the same trend of reasoning in that they assert the promises made to Israel were conditional on obedience, and because of that nation's failure, any such earlier promises by God have been terminated.

Not only have amillennialists failed to recognize God's special purpose with Israel in the future, but they also fail to see the special distinction God has given to the New Testament Church in this dispensation. In other words, *amillennialists fail to grasp the greatness of Paul's teachings with regard to the Church*. The peculiar distinction for the Church in God's economy seems to be ignored by this group.

While it is true that the Protestant Reformation overhauled much of the medieval theology, it did not, however, throw out the long prevailing concept that the church was the logical inheritor, or successor, of Israel. Amillennialism therefore continued in Protestantism. Even John Calvin believed that the Old Testament saints and those of the New Testament belong to the same company, namely the Church. As we follow the historical development of theology, we find that amillennialism has been an ongoing concept for a very long time.

IDENTIFICATION MARKS OF AMILLENNIALISM

If we are to single out one point which takes precedence over others with this group, it is unquestionably *the spiritualization of the Bible*. It seems to me this is not much better than the old medieval method of allegorizing the Scriptures, or the insistence that the Bible should be recognized as an allegory. By an allegory we mean an extended metaphor. The great Church father *Origen introduced the allegorical method formally*. And the well known Alexandrian school regarded all Scripture as allegory. This school extended greatly the allegorical method of interpretation of the Bible. By the later medieval period allegory became a dominant method of scriptural interpretation.

In order to be completely objective and fair in our historical analysis of this theological concept, it should be said that *some leading amillennialists have admitted that spiritualization of the Bible would be dangerous unless it be limited to prophecy*. Augustine held, e.g., that only prophecy should be spiritualized. Let me ask, "Why single out prophecy, a most wonderful area of Scripture, and subject it to such a shabby treatment?" It is quite arbitrary, I think, to select certain areas for spiritualizing, and not apply the same principle to other parts of the Bible.

Historically the allegorical school and the amillennialists have this in common: *they follow no true guidelines or principles of interpretation of the Scriptures*. If the prophetic area may be spiritualized why not apply the same principle to miracles, the death of Christ and His resurrection, also His Second Coming? It should be stated openly that amillennialism has not risen through an objective study of the Scriptures, but rather through a fundamental failure in a proper study of God's Word. It is always well to stick to the grammatical, literal, and direct method of exegesis. Dr. Bernard Ramm, who does not always give his support to fundamentalist scholarship, has this good word in his book, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, page 172:

“Interpret prophecy literally unless the evidence is such that a spiritual interpretation is mandatory.”

In almost every case the context will govern the matter whether the passage should be taken literally or not.

AMILLENNIALISM STEMS OUT OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

First of all, we need to recognize that *Covenant theology is opposite to dispensational theology*, and particularly so in the field of eschatology. We concede that in many areas those who adhere to Covenant theology are in agreement with dispensationalists. It must be pointed out, however, that amillennialists believe the covenant was conditional and hence was terminated through the unbelief of Israel. *Those who take the dispensational view hold that many parts of God's covenant with Israel were unconditional, and not dependent on Israel's obedience. And these unconditional promises of God must have a complete fulfillment in the due course of time.* It seems to me that it is completely unsound to place the Church in the same relationship that Israel held before God. Balanced dispensationalists have never found in their study of Scripture that the Church is the inheritor of the promises which God gave to Israel in the Old Testament economy.

Without going into the many covenants of Scripture, which, by the way, is an interesting study by itself, I wish to point out that the adherents of Covenant theology believe all dispensations are part and parcel of a continuous stream of revelation. In other words, God's purposes are ongoing and must be regarded as fused into one major stream of scriptural truth. Even the well known Charles Hodge, whose textbook is used so extensively in many seminaries, spiritualized God's purposes through the ages.

Broadly viewed; *Covenant theology* (embraced by amillennialists) *hold that God's major purpose was the salvation of men.* This is something to which we may agree, but we object when Covenant theology does not give proper consideration to other great purposes of God beyond that of salvation of men. Amillennialism is an attempt at over simplification of Bible exegesis. I must agree that the dispensational method of approach to Scripture involves much more study, but it is a rewarding quest indeed. Unquestionably it simplifies all Bible study if you can accept one general resurrection and one final judgment. But passages of the Scripture cast in a literal setting forbid such a sweeping inclusion as that usually followed by the amillennialists. **To insist that the millennium of the Scriptures is fulfilled in the Church is to literally abandon the proper method of Bible exegesis, and it also violates the laws of hermeneutics altogether.**

Amillennialists have no room for a 1,000-year period of rule by Christ on earth. In order to arrive at such a conclusion you simply have to go roughshod over hundreds of passages in the Bible which are placed in a literal setting. There are a great many of such concrete passages which offer a blessed future on earth for God's covenant people.

Before I leave this point, let me also state that there are various shades of amillennialists, just as you find several distinct views held among the premillennialists. Not all amillennialists spiritualize the whole Bible in the same sweeping fashion.

Some do as we have already mentioned, limit their spiritualizing to the prophetic area, while others apply the principle along a much wider front in their Bible study.

THE WEAKNESS OF AMILLENNIALISM

While it is true that even many evangelical people unfortunately accept the amillennial view, it is equally true that even a larger number of liberals adhere to identically the same concept with respect to millennial truths. It is not very desirable to be in their company. Certainly it can be said that amillennialists offer no defense against liberalism. Even the most dedicated man within that group will fail successfully to combat modernism. It may be further stated that amillennialism serves as a springboard, which makes it convenient for those who wish to leap out to even more dangerous concepts with reference to the Scriptures.

Indeed, amillennialists need not hold any prophetic conferences; their formula of spiritualizing the Bible is one that is very flexible. *Their approach demands no exhaustive study of the Word.* As a student of the Bible for many years I am fully aware of the great dangers which result when men deviate from the literal, direct and grammatical paths in the interpretation of the Scriptures.

As was pointed out earlier in this message, I am aware also of the fact that *some parts of the Bible must be taken symbolically, and not literally or physically.* Again, it should be said *the context usually determines* which path one is to follow in dealing with certain Bible passages.

Amillennialists are making considerable inroads in this generation. All one needs to do is to check current theological literature. It is clear, I think, that the number who follow the road of spiritualizing the Bible is greater than the dispensational people. One needs to be aware of the extreme refinement with which the amillennialists touch upon such terms as, e.g., the Church, Kingdom, and even Israel. It is certain, however, they do not mean what dispensationalists do in dealing with these vital scriptural terms.

Usually amillennialists make it almost a hobby of accusing dispensationalists of substituting the spiritual kingdom for some kind of physical domain for the earth. This is a sweeping charge and too often it is made very unfairly. In my extensive travels in this country and elsewhere, I have not found Bible-believing fundamentalists adhering to a materialistic view at all. It is quite opposite, and is anything but materialistic. If Bible prophecy, however, reveals a kingdom period for the earth, one should accept such Biblical teachings and not be guilty of circumventing them. If such truths are taught both in the Old and the New Testaments, namely, that there is a distinct period, apart from the Church age, it should not be difficult to accept at face value. Many of us do get sick at heart to see very good people accepting the nebulous position of the amillennialists. Their approach is an antecedent to the more dangerous position of Neo-orthodoxy, and this we have reserved for a later treatment in this volume.

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