

A Brief Biblical Defense of Amillennialism

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1 Four Views of Revelation

Historicism is the view that Revelation describes the whole church age. This view is almost completely defunct. Historicist interpreters tend to assume that Jesus is coming back within their lifetimes which affects how various symbols are interpreted.

Futurism is the view that Revelation describes events in our future. Today, this is most commonly found among dispensationalists.

Preterism is the view that Revelation was largely fulfilled either in the fall of Jerusalem or the fall of Rome. In other words, most of the events described in Revelation are understood to be in our past, but John's future. Of course, certain events are understood to be future, such as the final return of Christ.

Idealism is the view that Revelation describes a spiritual battle between good and evil.

Personally, I take an idealist perspective with some preterist elements. Revelation describes a timeless spiritual battle, but this battle manifests itself in history. G.K. Beale, the foremost scholar on Revelation, summarizes this perspective in this way:

“The Apocalypse symbolically portrays events throughout history, which is understood to be under the sovereignty of the Lamb as a result of his death and resurrection. He will guide the events depicted until they finally issue in the last judgment and the definitive establishment of his kingdom. This means that specific events throughout the age extending from Christ's first coming to his second may be identified with one narrative or symbol. We may call this age inaugurated by Christ's first coming and concluded by his final appearance ‘the church age,’ ‘the interadvental age,’ or ‘the latter days.’ The majority of the symbols in the book are transtemporal in the sense that they are applicable to events throughout the ‘church age.’”¹

1. G. K. (Gregory K.) Beale, *The Book of Revelation : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 48.

2 Principles of Interpretation

A natural question that follows is why idealism is preferred over alternatives. The answer is in our doctrine of Scripture. We believe that Scripture is our final authority over all matters, including the interpretation of Scripture. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9 reminds us:

“The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”²

This is especially important in our interpretation of Revelation. Revelation is the last book in our canon, but it was also the last book written. In writing Revelation, John assumes an awareness of at least the entire Old Testament and large portions of the New Testament. Any Bible with good cross-references will note the copious references to the Old Testament, particularly the prophets. **In fact, nearly every symbol employed by John in Revelation has already been used in some other portion of Scripture.** The importance of that fact cannot be understated.

Of the four approaches listed above, the idealist approach is the one that relies most heavily on prior revelation. The other three each rely on various extra-biblical, and therefore, fallible sources. Idealism, on the other hand, attempts to first understand the meaning of earlier prophetic texts to understand how John is appropriating them. Of course, extra-biblical sources may be helpful and clarifying, but we must never let them control our interpretation of the text as it is presented to us. Remember, *sola Scriptura!*

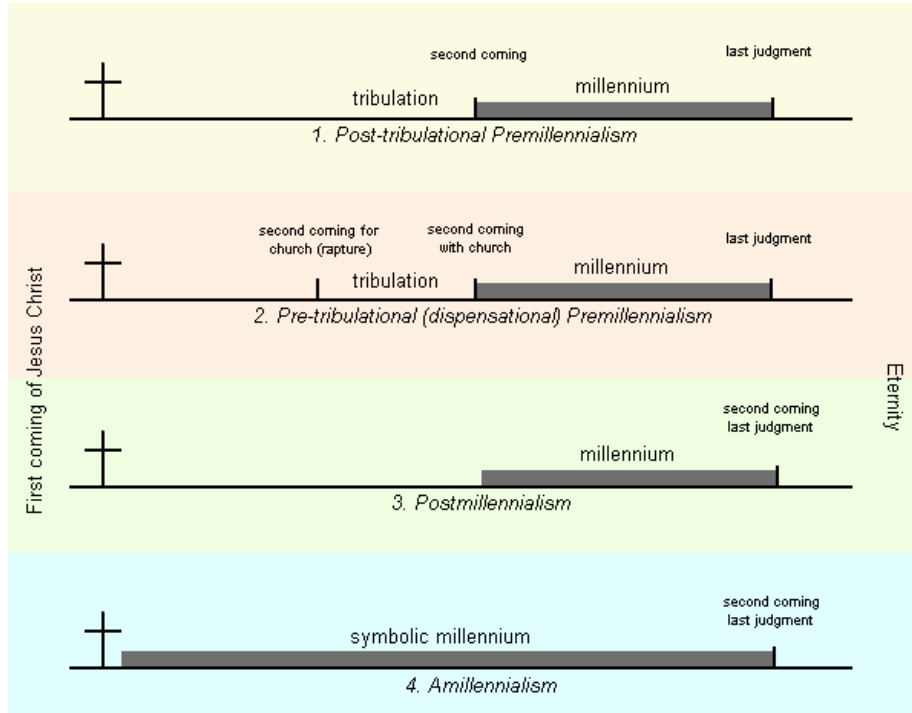
3 Views on the Millennium

The chart below shows the four basic views of the millennium. Most American evangelicals since about 1950 have been dispensational premillennialists, but this view is fading. Most dispensationalists have softened from their views and moved toward a more historic premillennialism (view 1 on the chart below). This is largely due to the fact that dispensationalism has been found lacking in fidelity to Scripture.

Most Christians throughout church history have affirmed that the second coming occurs after the millennial kingdom. Some believe in a golden age at the end of history (postmillennialism), and others believe that the millennium extends throughout the church age (amillennialism). Of the two, amillennialism is more common, especially among Presbyterian and Reformed Christians. Personally, I am an amillennialist, although I appreciate some elements of postmillennialism.

2. WCF lists the following proof-texts: 2 Pt. 1:20-21; Acts 15:15; Jn. 5:46; Mtt. 4:5-7, 12:1-7.

Comparison of Christian millennial teachings



4 A Brief Commentary on Revelation 20:1-6

¹Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.

There are different views on who this angel is. It is possibly Christ, who himself is referred to as an angel throughout Scripture. ἄγγελος in Greek can either refer to the specific class of heavenly being we call angels, or more generally, a messenger (cf. Lk. 7:24-27, 2 Cor. 12:7, Jas. 2:25). Additionally, in the book of Revelation itself, there are several “angels” that are clearly not angels proper. Most notably, the angels of the seven churches in the opening chapters of Revelation most likely refer to these church’s pastors. Thus, I take the angel in v. 1 to refer to Christ, but if it is a regular angel, my view of the rest of the text still remains unaltered.

In any event, this angel has the key to the bottomless pit. This is the same key that Jesus has in Rev. 1:18: “the keys of Death and Hades.” In Rev. 9:1-2, Satan has this key. This seems to indicate that the events of Rev. 9 (the locust plague) occur *prior* to John’s visions. In other words, if we read Revelation from a futurist perspective, there must be a time between Jesus first and second advents when the keys are given back to Satan, but this is unscriptural. Jesus has the keys, and he only ever delegates the authority of the keys to the Church, not to Satan (cf. Mtt. 16:19).

²And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

This event seems to have occurred during the time of Jesus' ministry. The most striking texts are Mtt. 12:29 and Mark 3:27 where Jesus describes the binding of a strong man. Jesus says, that in order to plunder the strong man's house, he must first be bound. Furthermore, in Luke 10:17ff, we see that the demonic spirits are under the authority of the disciples as Jesus says, "I saw Satan fall like lightning." Again, this fall has already occurred which coincides with the idea that Rev. 9 ("I saw a star fallen from heaven") also describes a past event. But now that Satan has fallen, he is in the process of being bound. This process concluded with the death of Christ. See also Col. 2:15 and Heb. 2:14.

⁴Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed.

The ones sitting in judgment on the thrones are clearly the apostles (cf. Mtt. 19:28, Lk. 22:30). At the time of writing, John is the only apostle who is still living. The rest have been martyred.

Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.

Several things are notable here. First, John refers to the "souls" of the martyrs; i.e., these have not experienced the resurrection of the body. It is their souls that have come to life, not their bodies. Therefore, this millennial reign occurs prior to the final resurrection. This is also strikingly similar to the description of the kingdom of God as it presently stands in Hebrews 12:22-24 ("You have come...to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...").

Second, the New Testament consistently describes Christians as those who have passed from "death to life" (cf. Jn. 5:24, Rom. 6:13). Another biblical phrase describing the same thing is "born again" (cf. Jn. 3:3, 1 Pt. 1:3, 1 Jn. 3:14). We also have language of Christians being "raised," not only in the life to come, but in this life as well (cf. Eph. 2:6, Col. 2:12). In other words, the Bible describes a believer's coming to faith in Christ as his resurrection. This is what John refers to as the "first resurrection;" the second resurrection is the final resurrection of the body.

⁶Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Here, we see the benefits of the first resurrection. First, the second death (i.e., final spiritual death) has no power over the saints. This death lost its power through the death of Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-56, 2 Tim. 2:10, Heb. 2:14)

Second, those who participate in the first resurrection are described as priests and rulers in the kingdom. In chapter 1 of Revelation, John makes clear that this priesthood and kingship has already been conferred on the saints; Christ has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6). This comports with similar language in 1 Peter 2:9 which calls the Church “a royal priesthood.”

5 Summary

Here are the key takeaways from this passage:

1. The binding of Satan in vv. 1-3 has already occurred with Christ’s death.
2. The image of thrones and departed souls closely mirrors the present state of heaven described in Hebrews 12, indicating that vv. 4ff also describe the present state of heaven.
3. The benefits given to the participants in the first resurrection are the same benefits available to Christians presently.

Therefore, Revelation 20:1-6 describes a kingdom in the present church age. That kingdom will come to an end at the return of Christ and the inauguration of the new heavens and the new earth.