

A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times

Chapter One: Defining Our Terms

By [Kim Riddlebarger](#)

The following excerpt of [A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times](#) (copyright 2013), by Kim Riddlebarger, is used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group (<http://www.bakerpublishinggroup.com>).

Whenever discussing theological topics about which so many Christians disagree, it is helpful to define important terms which will be used throughout the discussion. Theologians have developed an extensive vocabulary regarding this subject, and rather than avoiding the use of technical terms, I think it better to use them and thereby gain clarity from the precision of language. What follows is a discussion of the primary theological terms associated with this area of study.

ESCHATOLOGY

Eschatology is a combination of two Greek words, *eschatos*, "last," and *logos*, "the word," meaning "the doctrine of last things." Most often eschatology is understood as referring to events which are still future, both in relation to the individual Christian and the course of world history. With regard to the individual, eschatology is concerned with physical death, immortality, and the intermediate state—the state of a person between death and when all people will be resurrected at the end of the age. In terms of world history, eschatology deals with the return of Christ, the bodily resurrection at the end of the age, the final judgment, and the eternal state.¹

In much of contemporary evangelicalism, the study of eschatology is often devoted to the timing of the rapture, the role that Israel plays in Bible prophecy, and the period of time popularly known as the tribulation. Many Christians understand the tribulation to be a future seven-year period of unsurpassed political and spiritual turmoil in which those who remain on earth suffer at the hands of the antichrist. Those left behind also endure the frightening images of God's judgment that appear throughout the Book of Revelation (c.8, the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments).

¹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 1.

In much of popular literature about Bible prophecy, eschatological matters are read through the lens of current events, with Bible-prophecy experts correlating biblical texts to current geopolitical crises. This not only gives the Bible great relevance, we are told, but also ensures a never-ending stream of prophecy books designed to show how the Bible explains that a particular current event was foretold by the Hebrew prophets.

Historically, however, Christian theologians wrestled with the biblical text by itself, doing the more challenging but less sensational work of comparing Scripture with Scripture. The historic Protestant understanding of eschatology has a number of emphases that are different from what many evangelicals are accustomed to discussing under the heading of Bible prophecy. This study will not attempt to find biblical texts that explain current events in the Middle East. I will not evaluate potential antichrist candidates. Nor will I discuss how rapidly developing technology is preparing the way for a totalitarian world government. Rather, this book's focus will be on biblical teaching about things future, and we will explore different biblical themes to develop a full understanding of the millennial age as taught by biblical writers.

With this in mind, we consider the following reminder that a study of eschatology concerns not only the future but the present:

We must insist that the message of biblical eschatology will be seriously impoverished if we do not include in it the present state of the believer and the present phase of the kingdom of God. In other words, full-orbed biblical eschatology must include both what we might call "inaugurated" (present or realized) and "future" eschatology.²

This is why theologians often remind us that God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures and his mighty acts in redemptive history are necessarily connected. There is no proper way to discuss what God will do in the future unless we have our feet firmly planted in biblical teaching about what God has done in the past. Looking back at the history of redemption, we see what God has done for his people to rescue them from the guilt and power of sin. This in turn helps us to understand how God's promises regarding the future will come to fruition.

It will become clear that a truly biblical expectation for the future is centered in the Christian hope of Christ's second coming. This means the Christian faith is thoroughly eschatological, and the subject of a millennial age must be considered from the perspective of the past, present, and the future.³ Until Jesus Christ returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new, Christians will always be concerned with the future and the unfolding course of history. Our redemption draws near as the days tick away before our crucified, risen, and

² *Ibid.*

³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 80.

ascended Savior returns. But the second coming makes sense only in light of what God has already done on Calvary and in the garden tomb. Therefore, developing these biblical and theological themes is critical to evaluating millennial views.

THE MILLENNIUM

Another key term used throughout this study is millennium, which is derived from the Latin words mille, meaning a "thousand," and annus, meaning a "year." The term refers to a thousand-year period.⁴

Revelation 20:1-10 discusses this period of time, and it is characterized by the following: (1) it includes the binding of Satan (verses 1-3) and (2) the testimony of the witnesses, the beheaded souls who have not worshiped the beast (verses 4-5); (3) those who participate in the first resurrection reign with Christ because the second death has no power over them (verses 4-6); (4) those who do not participate in the first resurrection do not live until after the millennium (verse 5); (5) Satan will be loosed for a brief period at the end of the millennium only to be thrown into the lake of fire (verses 7-10); and (6) the thousand years ends with a great apostasy and the rebellion of nations led by Gog and Magog (verse 7).

The three major viewpoints regarding the millennium are premillennialism, which claims that the return of Christ precedes the millennium; postmillennialism, which holds that Christ returns after the millennium; and amillennialism, which holds that the millennium is not limited to a thousand years but includes the entire period of time between the first and second comings of Christ.

A related term is chiliasm, which comes from the Greek term (chilia), literally meaning "thousand years." Historically, Protestants used this term to deride those who believed in a literal earthly millennium. As Richard Muller has pointed out,

The Protestant orthodox, both Lutheran and Reformed, denied the notion of an earthly millennium to dawn in the future and viewed the text (Revelation 20) as a reference to the reign of grace between the first and second coming of Christ, the age of *ecclesia militans* [church militant]. The orthodox did distinguish between the *chiliasmus crassus* [gross millennialism], as taught by the fanatics, and *chiliasmus subtilis* (subtle millennialism), as found among the pietists.⁵

The Protestant orthodox also used the more polemical term *chiliasmus crassimus*, the grossest millennialism," regarding those who stressed the earthly and Jewish elements of the millennial age, much like contemporary

⁴ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 173.

⁵ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 66-67.

dispensationalists.⁶ Most Protestants regard chiliasm as incompatible with Reformation orthodoxy. This may come as a surprise to many American evangelicals, who assume that Bible-believing Christians throughout the centuries have held to premillennialism.

THE RAPTURE

Another important term is rapture. "Though the word 'rapture' does not occur in our English translations of the Bible, it is derived from the [Latin] Vulgate rendering of the verb 'caught up' (*harpagesometha*) in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, *rapiemur*.⁷ The rapture conveys the idea of the transporting of believers from earth to heaven at Christ's second coming. When used by dispensational writers, the term refers to Christ's secret coming when all believers are suddenly removed from the earth before the great tribulation.

Those who believe this sudden, secret event takes place seven years before Christ's bodily return to earth hold to a premillennial, pretribulational view of the rapture. This is the position taken by dispensationalists.

Many Protestants have historically seen this event as one aspect of the general resurrection at the end of the age (1 Cor. 15:50-55; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11). The rapture, therefore, refers to the catching away of believers who are living at the time of Christ's bodily return to earth. When they are caught away in the resurrection, they join those who have died in Christ. While these two resurrection passages are often used by dispensationalists as biblical proof texts for a sudden and secret rapture, historically Protestants have believed that both texts speak instead of the resurrection of believers from the state of life or death to glorification at the return of our Lord.

Those who place this event at the visible return of Christ to the earth hold to a posttribulational view of the rapture. Historic premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism are all committed to this view. Christ returns at the end of the tribulation period, which is understood to be the entire church age (amillennialism) or the time of great apostasy that occurs immediately before the return of Christ, marking the end of the millennial age on the earth (postmillennialism).

⁶ According to Heinrich Schmid, "The following are mentioned as chiliasts: The Jews, Cerinthus, Papias, Joachim (Abbot of Floris), the Fanatics and Anabaptists, [and] Casp. Schwenkfeld... A distinction is also made between gross and subtle chiliasm. The former estimates the millennium as happy, because of the illicit pleasure of the flesh, the latter, because of the lawful and honorable delights of both body and soul. But both are rejected." See Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 650.

⁷ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 164, n. 3.

PRETERISM AND FUTURISM

In addition to the pre, post, and a millennial terminology, several other important terms relate to how one interprets the Book of Revelation. Though these terms most often refer to events in the first century or future events, they have a much broader application as well.

The preterist understanding of biblical prophecy sees Christ's predictions in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13) as referring to the Roman army's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Preter-ists also argue that the apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation before A.D. 70 and that it describes Nero Caesar's persecution of the church.⁸ The references to judgment on Babylon refer to Israel, not Rome. This means that virtually all the Bible's teaching about future things was fulfilled within the lifetimes of Christ's disciples. "Full" preterists contend that Christ's Parousia (the second coming) occurred in A.D. 70, along with the resurrection and final judgment.⁹ Moderate or partial preterists argue that the events of A.D. 70 fulfill the prophecies of the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation, but the general resurrection and the final judgment have not yet occurred.¹⁰

The opposite of preterism is futurism. A futurist is "one who centers his theological beliefs around national Israel, and believes that most prophecies concerning Israel are to have a literal fulfillment in the future, after the Christian church has been taken out of the world."¹¹ As with preterism, there are two types of futurism, a moderate approach and a more radical one. According to George Ladd,

The futurist view has taken two forms which we may call the moderate and the extreme futurist views. The latter is also known as Dispensation-alism. ... A moderate futurist view differs from the extreme futurist view at several points. It finds no reason, as does the latter, to distinguish sharply between Israel and the church.¹²

According to this definition, dispensationalists are thoroughgoing futurists, while historic premillennialists and progressive dispensationalists tend to be moderate futurists. The next chapter discusses these views in more detail. There are approaches to the Book of Revelation other than preterism or futurism, however. One

⁸ Cf. Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1998); idem, *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler, Tex.: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1994).

⁹ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 538-54.

¹⁰ See, for example, Kenneth L. Gentry, "A Postmillennial Response to Craig A. Blais-ing," in *Three Views*, ed. Bock, 237, R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 24-26.

¹¹ William E. Cox, *Biblical Studies in Final Things* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966), 1.

¹² George E. Ladd, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 12. This is also the position taken by "progressive dispensationalists." See Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

approach is the so-called historicist school, the traditional Protestant interpretation that stresses the identification of Babylon the Great with the city of Rome.

This perspective views Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church down to the return of Christ and the end of the age. The numerous symbols of the book designate various historical movements and events in the western world and the Christian church. ... One of the prevailing features of this interpretation has been the view that the beast is the Roman papacy and the false prophet the Roman Church. This view was so widely held that for a long time it was called the Protestant view.¹³

Few contemporary commentators hold this position, since, if true, it would mean that the apostle John was not speaking to his first-century audience but to Christians living centuries later.

A number of amillennial interpreters of Revelation (e.g., William Hendriksen) are idealists, contending that the Book of Revelation is structured along the lines of progressive parallelism. Recently, however, amillennial interpreters such as G. K. Beale and Dennis Johnson have set forth highly refined and improved versions of the approach taken by Hendriksen. Progressive parallelism is the idea that the series of visions in Revelation describe the course of history between the first and second comings of Christ, each from a different prophetic perspective, although these visions intensify before the time of the end. As such, Revelation contains both prophetic and apocalyptic material. John's visions are revealed against the backdrop of Roman persecution of the church, and the image of the satanic beast clearly draws upon the historical image of Nero Caesar as a reference to a series of anti-Christian empires and their leaders throughout the age.

According to this view, Revelation is more likely to have been written after AD. 70, John does not intend his reader to see Babylon as referring to apostate Israel but to an evil secular empire which persecutes God's people. Given the nature of apocalyptic literature, those holding this view contend that Revelation cannot be reduced to strict preterist or futurist interpretations. According to the idealist interpretation, the Roman Empire may be a figure of continual persecution of God's people throughout the church period. This means that Revelation is a combination of historicist, preterist, and futurist elements. To insist that the book be read through one particular lens to the exclusion of the others, says this view, is to miss an important aspect of the genre of apocalyptic literature, namely its complexity.¹⁴

¹³ Ladd, *Commentary on Revelation*, 11.

¹⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 3-49; Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 1-117.

Dr. Kim Riddlebarger is pastor emeritus of Christ Reformed Church (URCNA) in Anaheim, having served as senior pastor from 1995 until his retirement in December 2020. This article is an excerpt from his book, [A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).