

Millennium, Views of the.¹

The word “millennium” is derived from the Latin word for a thousand (at times the word “chiliasm,” taken from the Greek and meaning the same thing, is used). It denotes a doctrine taken from a passage in Revelation (20:1–10) in which the writer describes the devil as being bound and thrown into a bottomless pit for a thousand years. The removal of Satanic influence is accompanied by the resurrection of the Christian martyrs, who reign with Christ during the millennium. This period is a time when all of humankind’s yearning for an ideal society characterized by peace, freedom, material prosperity, and the rule of righteousness will be realized. The vision of the OT prophets who foretold a period of earthly prosperity for the people of God will find fulfillment during this era.

Millennialism addresses problems that are often overlooked in other eschatological views. Although most Christian theologians discuss death, immortality, the end of the world, the last judgment, the rewards of the just, and the punishment of the damned, they often limit themselves to the prospects for the individual in this world and the next. In contrast, millennialism is concerned with the future of the human community on earth. It is concerned with the chronology of coming events, just as history is involved with the study of the record of the past.

Millennialism has appeared within both Christian and non-Christian traditions. Anthropologists and sociologists have found millennialist belief among non-Western people, but they have debated as to whether or not these appearances of the teaching are based upon borrowing from Christian preaching. Most Christian theologians believe that millennialism is based on material written by Judeo-Christian authors, especially the books of Daniel and Revelation. The ideas, events, symbols, and personalities introduced in these writings have reappeared countless times in the teachings of prophets of the end of the world. Each new appearance finds these motifs given fresh significance from association with contemporary events.

Major Varieties of Millennialism. For purposes of analysis and explanation Christian attitudes toward the millennium can be classified as premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial. These categories involve much more than the arrangement of events surrounding the return of Christ. The thousand years expected by the premillennialist is quite different from that anticipated by the postmillennialist. The premillennialist believes that the kingdom of Christ will be inaugurated in a cataclysmic way and that divine control will be exercised in a more supernatural manner than does the postmillennialist. The premillennialist believes that the return of Christ will be preceded by signs, including wars, famines, earthquakes, the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, the appearance of Antichrist, and the great tribulation. These events culminate in the second coming, which will result in a period of peace and righteousness when Christ and his saints control the world. This rule is established suddenly through supernatural methods rather than gradually over a long period of time by means of the conversion of individuals. The Jews will figure prominently in the future age because the premillennialist believes that they will be converted in large numbers and will again have a prominent place in God’s work. Nature will have the curse removed from it, and even

¹Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 770.

the desert will produce abundant crops. Christ will restrain evil during the age by the use of authoritarian power. Despite the idyllic conditions of this golden age there is a final rebellion of wicked people against Christ and his saints. This exposure of evil is crushed by God, the non-Christian dead are resurrected, the last judgment conducted, and the eternal states of heaven and hell established. Many premillennialists have taught that during the thousand years dead or martyred believers will be resurrected with glorified bodies to intermingle with the other inhabitants of the earth.

In contrast to premillennialism, the postmillennialists emphasize the present aspects of God's kingdom, which will reach fruition in the future. They believe that the millennium will come through Christian preaching and teaching. Such activity will result in a more godly, peaceful, and prosperous world. The new age will not be essentially different from the present, and it will come about as more people are converted to Christ. Evil will not be totally eliminated during the millennium, but it will be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual influence of Christians is increased. During the new age the church will assume greater importance, and many economic, social, and educational problems will be solved. This period is not necessarily limited to a thousand years, because the number can be used symbolically. The millennium closes with the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment.

The third position, amillennialism, states that the Bible does not predict a period of the rule of Christ on earth before the last judgment. According to this outlook there will be a continuous development of good and evil in the world until the second coming of Christ, when the dead shall be raised and the judgment conducted. Amillennialists believe that the kingdom of God is now present in the world as the victorious Christ rules his church through the Word and the Spirit. They feel that the future, glorious, and perfect kingdom refers to the new earth and life in heaven. Thus Revelation 20 is a description of the souls of dead believers reigning with Christ in heaven.