

"AMILLENNIALISM: AN OVERVIEW"

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Ever since the publication of Hank Hanegraaff's book, *Apocalypse Code*, the evangelical world has been reminded once again of the great divide that exists between those who hold to an amillennial view of Scripture and those who do not. In his book, Hanegraaff the so-called "*Bible answer man*" hurls a blistering diatribe toward a number of premillennialists including Tim LaHaye, author of the highly popular "*Left Behind*" book series. He charges him with blasphemy because he differs with him and other notable dispensationalists regarding the course of future events. Hanegraaff, a preterist believes that most of the events of the Book of Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman commander Titus conquered Jerusalem, destroying its temple. LaHaye on the other hand, is a futurist who takes the position that most of the events of the Book of Revelation are yet to be fulfilled. Perhaps the only thing that Hanegraaff's book did accomplish was to accentuate the difference between the amillennial and premillennial viewpoints – a difference so wide that one Christian would have the audacity to claim that another brother is guilty of blasphemy.

WHAT IS AMILLENNIALISM AND WHAT DOES IT TEACH?

Despite the fact that it has been around for centuries, amillennialism continues to grow in certain theological circles. Without question, it is the predominant end time view of most of Christendom – some of whom are evangelical and most of whom are not. As the name implies, amillennialists purport that there is no biblical substantiation for a future, literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth, despite the fact that Rev. 20 makes reference to it six different times and that both OT and NT allude to this great event. Instead, they claim that this period is currently being fulfilled *symbolically* and that much of the Scriptures should be interpreted as such. They hold that Christ's kingdom is in heaven where He is reigning now and that when He comes again it will *not* be to usher in a literal kingdom, but instead to bring about an end to world history, precipitating a general judgment of believers and non-believers alike. According to this view, God has permanently cast away His ancient people Israel because they rejected their Messiah, the Lord Jesus. Therefore, the promises made to them have a fulfillment in the Church, which has now replaced Israel. For this reason, this view has come to be known as "replacement theology" or "supercessionism" since the Church from their standpoint has superseded Israel and has become an historic continuation of it, inheriting many of its promises. Consequently, they hold that these promises to Israel in the past have no bearing upon the nation today, who are nothing more than an ethnic group among the nations of the world. In short, amillennialists would say that Israel no longer has a place in God's divine plan and program.

HOW DOES PREMILLENNIALISM DIFFER FROM AMILLENNIALISM?

In contrast, premillennialists would argue that the Bible clearly presents a literal, future thousand year reign of Christ on earth in accordance with prophetic Scripture. It sees in the OT promises made to Israel, especially in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants the basis for making such a claim. Premillennialism teaches that when Christ returns again, it will be in two stages; the first stage when He comes *for* His Church just prior to a seven year period of tribulation on earth (1 Thess. 4:13-17) and then again when He returns in glory *with* His Church just before His millennial reign as the name implies. Premillennialists reject the idea that the Church has replaced Israel, but rather see a distinction between the two and staunchly maintain that God has a separate plan and program for each. The basis for their convictions they claim are due to a *literal* interpretation of Scripture advocating that the Bible

should always be interpreted in this way unless the context and common sense dictate otherwise. Herein lays the fundamental reason for the difference between these two main theological positions—whether or not the Bible should be interpreted literally or symbolically.

HOW AND WHEN DID AMILLENNIALISM START?

Amillennialism first emerged approximately between the second and third centuries AD. Origen was apparently the first prominent Christian who introduced the concept of allegorization or the figurative interpretation of Scripture. This concept was further promulgated by his protégé, Dionysius of Alexandria. However, the main person credited with developing this school of thought was Augustine of Hippo. Up to that point, premillennial thinking was the overriding conviction of the early Church. Certainly it had been with the disciples who had asked the Lord the question just prior to His ascension “*Is this the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). Further persecution under the Roman Empire only solidified the conviction of the early Christians that there was a bright and glorious kingdom yet to come when Christ would personally return to earth to establish His worldwide kingdom in fulfillment of prophetic Scripture, thus alleviating the severe persecution experienced under the Roman Empire. But with the so-called “conversion” to the Christian faith of the Roman Emperor Constantine who united the “church” with the world that persecution was immediately lifted, creating a false impression in the minds of many that Christ’s kingdom in some way had arrived, though He was not personally present, but considered to be reigning in heaven. This event, coupled with the underlying shift to the allegorical approach to Bible interpretation further contributed to the development and acceptance of amillennial thinking. Though evidence exists that premillennialism had always remained the firm conviction of many Bible-believing Christians, its prominence waned in the subsequent centuries from the medieval period through the Reformation, as amillennialism increased and become the dominant view of Christendom.

AMILLENNIALISM IN THE LIGHT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

As mentioned previously, amillennialism builds its case upon the figurative interpretation of Scripture. Rather than viewing the OT promises made to Israel as literal, amillennialists see them as symbolic and applicable to the Church. It cannot be overstated just how important the Abrahamic covenant is in understanding God’s ultimate plans and purposes in the world and how it invalidates the amillennial viewpoint. It is foundational to many of the other covenants of Scripture and to the unfolding of biblical revelation. When God called Abram from the Ur of the Chaldees as recorded in Gen. 12:1-3, He promised him seven different things: 1) that He would make him a great nation, 2) that He would bless him, 3) that He would make His name great, 4) that Abram would be a blessing to others, 5) that He would bless those who would bless Abram, 6) that He would curse him who cursed Abram, and 7) that all the families of the earth through Abram would be blessed. At first, this covenant basic in its details. But what God meant and how this would be accomplished is further explained and expanded upon in subsequent chapters. In time, God did indeed make of Abram a great nation and He did *literally* bless him, both spiritually and materially and He did *literally* make His name great, and made him a blessing to others and *literally* blessed those who blessed him and cursed him who cursed Abram. All these things God did *literally*. Consequently is not unreasonable to assume that they in time would be fulfilled literally. In Gen. 13:14-18, God specifically promised a land for Abram’s descendents *forever*. In Gen. 15 in answer to Abram’s shrinking faith, God again promised a land to Abram (v. 7) and confirmed it unilaterally (vv. 8-17), thus making it unconditional and according to grace and not Abram’s own performance. Then in vv. 18-21, God further outlines the dimensions of the land and how it would go to his descendants *forever*. Finally in Gen. 17, this covenant is referred to as an *everlasting covenant* (v. 7, 19) and the land as an *everlasting possession* (v. 8), validating that these would always remain in effect come what may, until fulfilled. God stated five times “*I will*” when He first gave this promise and afterwards confirmed it with an oath (Gen. 22:16). God confirmed that it

would come through Isaac and not Ishmael (Gen. 17:19-21; Gen. 26:3-5) and eventually through Jacob (Gen. 28:13-14) and not Esau, further substantiating that the literal, *everlasting* promises made to Abraham ultimately flow down to Israel. Years later in Egypt, God remembered the covenant that He had made to them (Ex. 2:24), thus validating that these everlasting promises definitely applied to Israel. Knowing their future and eventual failure to maintain a faithful witness through the centuries, God further stated in Deut. 30:3 that He would have compassion on them and eventually bring them back to the land—a land whose dimensions given in Gen. 15, but has never been fully occupied even in the days of King Solomon. Furthermore, when God made a covenant with King David (2 Sam. 7), He promised him a place for Israel where they would be planted “*to move no more*” (v. 10), verifying that Israel had never yet entered into the reality of this covenant even in the days of King David. In addition, God promised to David *unconditionally*, a royal dynasty and a throne that would last forever. David understood it to be a literal “*forever*” promise (vv. 18-29), for which he gave thanks to God and which Scripture substantiates would be assumed by the Lord Jesus, both prophetically (Isa. 9:6-7) and historically (Luke 1:31-33) which still awaits a future fulfillment.

HOW DOES AMILLENNIALISM SQUARE WITH SCRIPTURE?

In a word, it doesn't. Because of its symbolic approach to interpreting Scripture, amillennialists fail to see the promises that God made to Abraham and David as literal and unconditional. Instead they predicate the keeping of these covenants upon Israel's faithfulness rather than upon God's own inviolable will and character. They disregard the weight of the word “*forever*” as stated many times by God but erroneously conclude that these promises were temporary to the nation and ultimately transferred to the Church. They falsely conclude that God has permanently cast away Israel even though Rom. 11:1 clearly affirms to the contrary when the Apostle Paul, himself a Jew loudly proclaims with divine authority: “*I say then, hath God cast away His people? God forbid!*”.

Amillennialism also fails to see the distinction between the Church and Israel as implied and directly indicated in both the OT and NT. The Apostle Paul's reference to “*the Jew, the Gentile and the Church of God*” (1 Cor. 10:32) is *prima facie* evidence of this truth. The fact that the Church is referred to as a “*new man*” (Eph. 2:15) and not as some erroneously conclude, the “*Israel of God*” further substantiates a distinction as does the description of the city four square in Rev. 21 whose gates are named after the tribes of Israel and foundations after the twelve apostles—a powerful proof that God makes a distinction between the two and will throughout eternity! Consequently, amillennialism leads to inconsistency in the understanding and the application of the Word of God and forfeits a deep appreciation of how God will yet restore the wayward nation through His own wisdom and power (Rom. 11:33). It *can* lend itself to an anti-Semitic attitude among those who do feel that Israel has deserved rejection by God.

CONCLUSION

There are many more important aspects of Amillennialism teaching that could be considered. But suffice it to say, God indeed has a plan and a program for the nation of Israel which He will bring about in the course of time, though it will involve a time of great sorrow and tribulation (Jer. 30:7). He also has a separate plan and program for the Church as He calls many people out of the world (Acts 15:13). Understanding God's work in the world today toward Israel and through the Church underscores again the significance of the words of 2 Tim. 2:15: “*Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*”