



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist

Church

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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

The Millennial Maze

I once heard someone define the millennium as a thousand-year period of time during which Christians fight over the proper interpretation of the book of Revelation. While amusing, that definition is obviously incorrect. Christians have been fighting over the proper interpretation of the book of Revelation for two thousand years. In all seriousness, however, all of the fighting has led some Christians to adopt despairingly a position they call panmillennialism (we don't know which view of the millennium is correct, but we know it will all pan out in the end).

The word millennium refers to the “thousand years” mentioned in Revelation 20. Because this chapter is found in one of the most difficult books of the New Testament, its proper interpretation is disputed. As a result, there are four main views of the millennium held within the church today: historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism. The prefixes pre- and post- before the word millennium have to do with the timing of the second coming of Christ in relationship to the millennium itself. The term premillennialism refers to the belief that the Second Coming will occur before the millennium. The term postmillennialism refers to the belief that the second coming will occur after the millennium. Strictly speaking, amillennialism is a version of postmillennialism in this sense because amillennialists believe Christ's second coming will occur after the millennium. There are other differences that distinguish amillennialists from postmillennialists. An understanding of what proponents of each of these views have taught historically provides a helpful context for current discussions of Revelation 20.

Historic Premillennialism

Historic premillennialism teaches that at the end of the present age, there will be the great tribulation followed by the second coming of Christ. At Christ's coming, the Antichrist will be judged, the righteous will be resurrected, Satan will be bound, and Christ will establish His reign on earth, which will last for a thousand years and be a time of unprecedented blessing for the church. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released and he will instigate a rebellion, which will be quickly crushed. The unrighteous will at this point be raised for judgment, after which the eternal state will begin.

Historic premillennialism has had its proponents in the church from at least the second century AD onward. It was taught, for example, by Irenaeus (140–203) and Justin Martyr (100–165), and may have been taught in the late first century by Papias (80–155). Some within the Reformed tradition, such as James Montgomery Boice, have taught this view. The most notable proponent of historic premillennialism in the twentieth century was George Eldon Ladd, whose commentary on the book of Revelation argues strongly for this position.

Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialism offers the most complex chronology of the end times. According to dispensationalism, the current church age will end with the rapture of the church, which, along with the appearance of the Antichrist, marks the beginning of the seven-year great tribulation on earth.



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist

Church



The Millennial Maze - Cont'd

Dispensational Premillennialism

The tribulation will end with the battle of Armageddon, in the midst of which Christ will return to destroy His enemies. The nations will then be gathered for judgment. Those who supported Israel will enter into Christ's millennial kingdom, and the rest will be cast into Hades to await the last judgment. Christ will sit on the throne of David and rule the world from Jerusalem. Israel will be given the place of honor among the nations again. The temple will have been rebuilt and the temple sacrifices will be reinstated as memorial sacrifices. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be released and lead unbelievers in rebellion against Christ and the New Jerusalem. The rebellion will be crushed by fire from heaven, and Satan will be cast into the lake of fire. The wicked will be brought before the Great White Throne, judged, and cast into the lake of fire, and at this point the eternal state will commence.

The dispensationalist version of premillennialism originated in the nineteenth century within the Brethren Movement. Its distinctives first appear in the writings of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Dispensational premillennialism caught on rapidly in the United States through the Bible Conference Movement. It was popularized by C.I. Scofield in the notes to his reference Bible and was systematized by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary and the author of an eight-volume dispensational systematic theology text. In the twentieth century, this view was taught on a more scholarly level by men such as John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost, and it was popularized by authors such as Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism teaches that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 occur prior to the second coming of Christ. Until recently, most postmillennialists taught that the millennium would be the last thousand years of the present age. Today, many postmillennialists teach that the millennial age is the entire period of time between Christ's first and second advents. As we will see, this means that contemporary versions of postmillennialism are very close in many ways to contemporary amillennialism. The main difference between the two is not so much the timing of the millennium as the nature of the millennium. In general, postmillennialism teaches that in the present age, the Holy Spirit will draw unprecedented multitudes to Christ through the faithful preaching of the gospel. Among the multitudes who will be converted are the ethnic Israelites who have thus far rejected the Messiah. At the end of the present age, Christ will return, there will be a general resurrection of the just and the unjust, and the final judgment will take place.

Postmillennialism was widely held among the Puritans. It was also the dominant view among Reformed theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was taught, for example, by men such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, James Henley Thornwell, A.A. Hodge, and B.B. Warfield. Because liberals adopted a humanistic version of this eschatology, postmillennialism suffered a decline in the twentieth century, but it has seen a resurgence in the last twenty to thirty years. Books supporting this view have been published by men such as Loraine Boettner, J. Marcellus Kik, Kenneth Gentry, John Jefferson Davis, and myself.



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist

Church



The Millennial Maze - Cont'd

Amillennialism

Amillennialism sees Revelation 20 as a description of the reign of Christ with the saints throughout the entire present age. Some amillennialists emphasize the reign of Christ with the saints in heaven, while others teach that this reign is also connected with the church militant here on earth. Amillennialists tend to argue that the growth of Christ's kingdom has few if any visible manifestations. The focus is more on the suffering that Christ has indicated the church will undergo. According to amillennialism, the present millennial age, which is characterized by suffering, will be followed by the second coming of Christ, the general resurrection, the last judgment, and the new heavens and new earth.

Amillennialism also has its origin in the early church. Augustine (354–430) taught a version of amillennialism that influenced the church throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation. Within the Reformed tradition, the contemporary version of amillennialism began to distinguish itself from older forms of postmillennialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The nineteenth-century theologian Herman Bavinck, for example, was a staunch proponent of amillennialism. In the twentieth century, the view has been taught by Reformed theologians such as Geerhardus Vos, Louis Berkhof, Anthony Hoekema, Cornelis Venema, Kim Riddlebarger, and Sam Storms. Some contemporary amillennialists do not like the term amillennialism because the prefix *a-* literally means “no,” so amillennialism literally means “no millennium.” One amillennialist, Jay Adams, has suggested the term “realized millennialism” instead.

Conclusion

Those versions of postmillennialism that recognize the millennium to be symbolic of the entire present age differ in only a few respects from amillennialism. Historic premillennialists, such as George Ladd, who understand that the kingdom of Christ has already been inaugurated in connection with the events of Christ's first advent are closer than they may realize to these forms of postmillennialism and amillennialism. All of us should take the time to understand the views of those with whom we differ and understand the biblical arguments they use. We may not agree yet. There is much more exegetical work to be done before any hope of consensus is possible, but the work being done by biblical and systematic theologians should encourage us. Despite the remaining disagreements, we can rejoice that we all agree that Jesus is risen and that He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison - Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla.**

Grace-Fueled Obedience Is Absolutely Necessary for Christlikeness

Can you imagine a Christian couple actually praying about living together before marriage? Can you fathom a young woman who professes Christ even bothering to pray about whether she should marry an unbeliever? Can you grasp a Christian businessman having to pray about whether he should tell the truth in a transaction? When the Word of God is so clear, praying to discern God's will becomes a convenient excuse—or even a prolonged filibuster—to avoid doing what Scripture commands.



West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



Grace-Fueled Obedience Is Absolutely Necessary for Christlikeness - Cont'd

Many who profess Christ today emphasize a wrong view of grace that makes it a free pass to do whatever they please. Tragically, they have convinced themselves that the Christian life can be lived without any binding obligation to the moral law of God. In this hyper-grace distortion, the need for obedience has been neutered. The commandments of God are no longer in the driver's seat of Christian living, but have been relegated to the backseat, if not the trunk—like a spare tire—to be used only in case of an emergency. With such a spirit of antinomianism, what needs to be reinforced again is the necessity of obedience.

For all true followers of Christ, obedience is never peripheral. At the heart of what it means to be a disciple of our Lord is living in loving devotion to God. But if such love is real, the acid test is obedience. Jesus maintained, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*” (John 14:15). Genuine love for Christ will always manifest itself in obedience.

This does not mean that a Christian can ascend to sinless perfection. This will never be realized this side of glory. Neither does it imply that a believer will never disobey God again. Isolated acts of disobedience will still occur. But the new birth does give a new heart that desires to obey the Word. In regeneration, God says:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

In this heart transplant, God causes the believer to pursue Spirit-energized obedience. The Apostle John agrees when he writes, “*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments*” (1 John 2:3). In the new birth, the elect are granted saving faith, and they immediately begin to walk in “*the obedience of faith*” (Romans 1:5). There is no time lapse between the time of conversion and when one begins to obey Christ. The exercise of saving faith is the first step of a life of obedience. When Jesus preached, “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15), this was issued as an urgent imperative. The gospel is more than an offer to be considered—it is a word from God to be obeyed. John writes, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life*” (John 3:36). In this verse, believing in Christ and obeying Him are used synonymously. Simply put, true faith is obedient faith. Our obedience of faith is not the grounds upon which God declares us righteous, but it reveals our faith to be genuine.

At the moment of conversion, we transfer our allegiance from our old master, sin, to a new Master, Jesus Christ. Paul explains, “*Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*” (Romans 6:16). Here, the Apostle quotes a general axiom in life, namely, that slaves live in obedience to their ruling master. In conversion, there is an exchange of masters, a relinquishing of our old bondage to sin for a new loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul further stresses this truth: “*You who were once slaves of sin have became obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, became slaves of righteousness*” (Romans 6:17–18). Everyone is a slave, either of sin or of righteousness. Before conversion, we were slaves of sin and lived in obedience to sin. But in conversion, we became slaves of Christ and live in obedience to Him.



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist

Church



Grace-Fueled Obedience Is Absolutely Necessary for Christlikeness - Cont'd

Throughout one's Christian life, John claims that genuine believers will continue to "keep his commandments." "Keep" is in the present tense, indicating an ongoing obedience throughout the entirety of a believer's life. Here is the perseverance of the saints. All who are born again will pursue obedience to the end. "Commandments" is plural, indicating obedience to the full spectrum of the divine requirements. Following Christ does not allow for selective obedience. Rather, we must obey all the commandments of God, not merely the convenient ones.

When John says believers "keep" the commandments, this pictures a guard or watchman watching over a priceless treasure. In like manner, the one who knows God will keep a sharp watch over all that His Word requires. "*And his commandments are not burdensome*" (1 John 5:3), but they are a blessing (Psalm 1:1). Every step of heart-prompted obedience leads to experiencing abundant life in Christ. Conversely, every step of disobedience takes us away from the joy of divine goodness.

Far from being optional, grace-fueled obedience is absolutely necessary for Christlikeness. Is there any need to pray about whether or not to obey God's Word? You just need to obey. ~ **Dr. Steven J. Lawson - One Passion Ministries**

God in a Manger

Many people gladly celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas, only to ignore, shun, and reject Him the rest of the year. They don't mind celebrating the birth of a baby, but they don't want to hear about the Lord of lords. They sing of His nativity but brazenly reject His authority. They adore Him as an infant but will not pay homage to Him as the God-man. They can tolerate the trappings of Christmas—a manger, shepherds, wise men, and Joseph and Mary—but they cannot bear the advent of God in human flesh. Consequently the world ignores the core of all Christmas truth. And instead of honoring Jesus at Christmas, they are actually mocking Him.

The enemy must love the world's Christmas celebration. He must revel in the blatant sin and blasphemy and rejection of Christ—all by people who suppose they are celebrating His birth! He must glory in the way people inoculate themselves against the truth of Christ by commemorating His birth with lip service while ignoring the point of it all—that Jesus is almighty God.

The Incarnation

Christmas is not about the Savior's infancy; it is about His deity. The humble birth of Jesus Christ was never intended to be a façade to conceal the reality that God was being born into the world. But the modern world's version of Christmas does just that. And consequently for the greater part of humanity, Christmas has no legitimate meaning at all.

I don't suppose anyone can ever fathom what it means for God to be born in a manger. How does one explain the Almighty stooping to become a tiny infant? It was, of course, the greatest condescension the world has ever known or will ever know. Our minds cannot begin to understand what was involved in God's becoming a man. We will never comprehend why He who was infinitely rich would become poor, assume a human nature, and enter into a world He knew would reject Him and kill Him.



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist

Church



God in a Manger - Cont'd

Nor can anyone explain how God could become a baby. Yet He did. Without forsaking His divine nature or diminishing His deity in any sense, He was born into our world as a tiny infant.

People often ask me if I think Jesus cried, or if He needed the normal care and feeding one would give any other baby. Of course He did. He was fully human, with all the needs and emotions that are common to every human.

Yet He was also fully God—all wise and all powerful. How can both things be true? I don't know. But the Bible clearly teaches that it is so. In some sense, Jesus voluntarily suspended the full application of His divine attributes. He didn't give up being God but He willingly gave up the independent use of the privileges and powers that were His as God (Philippians 2:5-8). He chose to subordinate His will to His Father's will (John 5:30; 6:38). Through all that He remained fully God.

Humanity and Deity

For nearly two thousand years, debate has been raging about who Jesus really is. Cults and skeptics offer various explanations. They say He is one of many gods, a created being, a high angel, a good teacher, a prophet, and so on. The common thread of all such theories is that they make Jesus less than God.

But let the Bible speak for itself. John's gospel begins with a clear statement that Jesus is God: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being*" (John 1:1-3). Who is "the Word" spoken of in these verses? Verse 14 removes any doubt: "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*"

The biblical evidence is overwhelming that this child in the manger was the incarnation of God. For one thing, He was omniscient. John 2:24-25 says that, "*Jesus, on His part . . . knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.*" Nathanael was shocked to discover that Jesus knew all about him before they ever met. It was enough to persuade him that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:48-50). John 4 describes Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. He knew everything about her (John 4:17-19, 29).

He also did the works of God, saying, "*Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves*" (John 14:11). Jesus' works are convincing proof that He is God. He began His miraculous ministry with a simple act—He created wine at a wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). Only God can create. Moreover, He healed people who were hopelessly ill. He gave a blind man eyes. He opened ears that had never heard. He restored withered limbs. He created enough fish and bread to feed thousands. He raised the dead simply by command.

While the glory of the Lord was shrouded by His human form, His power was on display throughout His ministry, bearing abundant witness to His deity. And yet, the world still works hard to deny Christ's true nature. They'd prefer to keep the baby confined to the manger for all time. Jesus' true nature cannot be ignored, suppressed, or concealed. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church



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Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - January 2020

Birthdays

Rick G. (1)
Marcie S. (9)
Cheyenne W. (17)
Muriel R. (24)
Stephen H. (26)

Anniversary

None to Report

Please welcome to our church a new member of the Twilley Family. He is Auden Douglas Twilley born December 12, 2019 at 5:57 AM. He weighed in at 7 lbs 14 oz and was 21" long.



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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or its leadership.

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