

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE ENTRANCE OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM:
AN EVANGELICAL CASE FOR REALIZED MILLENIALISM

JOEL JUPP

D-488

DEERFIELD, IL

DECEMBER 8, 2009

Eschatology should not be reserved for academia, nor should it be reduced to the purpose of predicting the future. When Scripture presents a prophecy regarding the future, the primary purpose is to affect our lives right now, in the present.¹ Our understanding of God's promises affect how we live today, which is what makes "the last days" relevant for readers. The book of Revelation is meant to be applied to our lives. So for believers today, it is incredibly important to seek understanding in this area of Christian doctrine.

Unfortunately, debates about eschatology have often led to unnecessary schism within the Christian Church, to the point where some have been excluded some from ministry or membership. For example, back in 1530, the Augsburg Confession condemned the belief in millennialism, while today, there are evangelical denominations that reject those with an amillennial perspective. This need not be the case, however, for it is certainly possible to affirm the basic tenets of Christian faith, yet have a different view of the millennium.²

That being said, this paper will argue for realized millennialism, or what is often called amillennialism.³ This view strongly affirms the reality of the millennium, understood as Christ reign during our present age. In addition, realized millennialism prefers a greater emphasis upon Christ's present fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy regarding the kingdom of God. Written from an evangelical perspective, this paper will outline hermeneutical, exegetical, and theological reasons for this position.

Hermeneutical Basis

Our view of the millennium largely depends upon our interpretation of the book of Revelation, as well as our hermeneutical approach to the Bible as a whole. Realized millennialism is often accused of not taking a "literal" approach to the Bible, but this can be terribly misleading. It is very possible for an evangelical Christian to affirm the literal-nature of Scripture, yet also recognize metaphors within a text and recognize that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. The debate concerns not our commitment to Scripture, but our *interpretation* of Scripture.

¹ Grenz, Stanley. *The Millennial Maze*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 192.

² Grenz, 39.

³ Realized millennialism, a term introduced by Jay E. Adams, is preferred over "amillennialism" because the "a" prefix can be horribly misleading.

Because Revelation is the only book in the New Testament that talks about the millennium, it is essential to interpret Revelation 20 in light of the whole counsel of God. As Charles Hodge suggests, “It is a sound rule in the interpretation of Scripture that obscure passages should be so explained as to make them agree with those that are plain.”⁴ In other words, we should interpret confusing passages (especially the prophetic or poetic) in light of clear passages that are more easily understandable.

As John himself states, the book of Revelation is an Ἀποκάλυψις. The very title communicates that is apocalyptic literature, or that it is revelatory communication of hidden truth.⁵ This genre of literature was common during the inter-testamental period, but can also be seen in parts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. As modern readers, we must be aware of this and not simply read every sentence as if it were all the same, but notice that different genres must be interpreted within the limitations of that genre. Jesus did not always speak literally, but figuratively through parables to communicate truths; in a similar way, apocalyptic literature uses symbolism to communicate spiritual truths.⁶

Esoteric symbolism is another clue that Revelation is meant to be understood as apocalyptic literature, meaning that is not meant to be interpreted at a surface level. It is not difficult to interpret, given that we are not trying to find literal equivalents to places or beasts, but understanding them as the author intended them – as symbol. In order to be fair, we must recognize that nearly everyone sees some degree of symbolism within the book. Even the most literal interpreters among us do not view the bottomless pit in Revelation 20:3 as a physical bottomless pit in the middle of the earth.⁷

Exegetical Basis

When read in its entirety, the book of Revelation seems to be organized according to progressive parallelism. In other words, the book consists of “seven sections running parallel to each other, each depicting the church and the world from the time of Christ’s first advent to His second

⁴ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 3:842.

⁵ Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 276.

⁶ Osborne, 278.

⁷ Grenz, 167.

coming.”⁸ While this may seem odd to us in our modern day, this structure would have been evident to those in the first century who were more accustomed to reading apocalyptic literature.

As Osborne argues, repetition was a common characteristic of apocalyptic literature. Common to apocalyptic literature, there is often the recurrence of themes or “discourse cycles.” As Osborne helpfully points out in *Hermeneutical Spiral*, Revelation consists of such cycles.⁹ Once the organizational structure is observed, it becomes clear that Revelation 20 does not chronologically follow chapter 19. Instead, following the cycles seen throughout the book of Revelation, chapter 20 speaks of the church age rather than a future age.

Regarding Satan’s binding in Revelation 20:2, John certainly would have recognized that Jesus’ reign began while Jesus was on earth. As evident in passages like Matthew 12:28, Mark 1:14-15, Mark 9:1, Mark 12:34, and Luke 17:20-21, Jesus communicated that He was ushering in His kingdom, but in a much different sense than the disciples expected. Furthermore, John would have been familiar with the occasion when Jesus cast out the demon and said that Satan was bound in Matthew 12:29. In fact, as Hoekema helpfully points out, the same word used by Matthew to describe the binding, is the same word used by John in Revelation 20.¹⁰ Thus, the Church cannot ignore the fact that in some sense, whether it seems like it or not, Satan has been bound by Christ.

John is not a careless or schizophrenic writer. As we interpret the Bible, we can be aided by looking at his previous writing. Earlier, in John 12:31-31, John wrote that Jesus said, “Now is the time for judgment on the this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” In addition to the similar wording found in Revelation 20:3, it is incredibly important that John links the casting out of Satan with the drawing of all men. Obviously, the former refers to Jesus’ death on the cross, so the former would also seem to draw our attention to Christ’s victory over Satan on the cross.¹¹ This importance of this should not be overlooked. Such a reading recognizes the unsurpassable power displayed in Christ!

⁸ Enns, Paul P. *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), 380.

⁹ Osborne, 278.

¹⁰ Hoekema, Anthony in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977.

¹¹ Along with other New Testament passages, Revelation 5:5-10 speaks to the fact that Christ has conquered the enemy through his blood.

The resurrection in Revelation 20:4 refers to the “first” resurrection, or the soul’s ascension to heaven after physical death. This is made clear by the reference to souls, as well as to the clarification of “first” made in verse 6. Clearly, *psuchai* could refer to an individual person (as in Acts 2:41), but because of the genitive that follows, the word refers to “souls” in a spiritual sense. In other words, this refers to the intermediary life of those who have been faithful to Christ while on earth – including those who have been martyred for their faith. Of course, this in no way negates the reality of an actual physical resurrection (1 Cor. 15), for both verses 5 and 6 imply that a second, more complete resurrection is to come.

Scripture teaches that the physical resurrection involves both believers and nonbelievers (John 5:28-29), occurs at the same time, and precedes the final judgment. Some premillennialists would disagree and argue that Revelation offers progressive revelation into the end times than we have elsewhere in Scripture. However, considering that John wrote both books, it seems odd that he would not have made the distinction clearer between John 5:28-29 and Revelation 20:4-6. It seems that John viewed them as congruent.

Responses to Objections

A common critique of amillennialism is that it is not based in history, but drastically revises Scripture into a spiritualized interpretation. While this may be the case for some theological liberals (e.g., Bultmann), this need not be the case for evangelical Christians. Realized millennialism does not *need* to be ahistorical, but rather understands Revelation as a description of the spiritual reality of the cosmic battle between Christ and evil. Apocalyptic writing reminds us that God is just as sovereign in the present as He is in the future.¹² Thus, there is a definite historical dimension to the spiritual truths found in Revelation.¹³

Others criticize that realized millennialism places too much emphasis on the present reality rather than the future. However, there is more balance with realized millennialism than with either post- or pre-millennialism. With realized eschatology, there truly is an embrace of “now, but not yet” understanding of God’s Kingdom. Christ has brought the Kingdom, but there is still more that

¹² Osborne, 282.

¹³ Osborne, 281.

we wait for, which will be clearly evident in the age to come. God's victory is already realized through the blood of Christ, while the Second Coming will move us towards an even greater fulfillment of His kingdom.

Still others disagree with the idea of a spiritual resurrection. Yet this critique presents a false dichotomy. As Hodge points out, the Bible speaks of both "a spiritual, or figurative, as well as of a literal resurrection."¹⁴ Evidence of this can be found in Romans 6 and Ephesians 2. While Paul is speaking in a different context, the point here is that idea of a spiritual resurrection does not negate the possibility of a real physical resurrection. As an evangelical, it is certainly possible to affirm a sense of spiritual resurrection in Revelation 20, while also affirming the physical resurrection that is discussed in 1 Corinthians 15.

What We Gain

Realized millennialism offers us much more than we may initially realize. To begin with, realized millennialism is congruent with the rest of the New Testament and offers a much simpler understanding of the end times. Many Christians simply give up trying to understand the book of Revelation because of the complicated timeline that is sometimes suggested. For those with an amillennial perspective, however, the book of Revelation teaches the same message that we find in the Gospels and Pauline writing. While Revelation offers us further insight into God's unfolding revelation, it does not contradict what was previously revealed.

More importantly, this view proudly affirms the reality of Christ's reign within the present. This is not a distant hope, but a present reality. Realized millennialism is very Christocentric in that it emphasizes the authority of Christ that He currently has and exhibits within our world today. Because Satan is already bound, we can be confident to expand our efforts in evangelism and missions. Realized millennialism should be even more motivated than pre-millennialism or post-millennialism because we can be assured of Christ's authority within our present day.

¹⁴ Hodge, 3:842.

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