

Why I Changed My Mind About the Millennium

By Sam Storms¹

Although I grew up in a Southern Baptist church and was regularly exposed to Scripture, I can't recall ever hearing anything about a "millennial" kingdom, much less the variety of theories regarding its meaning and relationship to the second coming of Christ. Like many of my generation, my initial exposure to biblical eschatology was in reading Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* during the summer of 1970.

Not long thereafter I purchased a Scofield Reference Bible and began to devour its notes and underline them more passionately than I did the biblical text on which they commented. No one, as I recall, ever suggested to me there was a view other than that of the dispensational, pretribulational, premillennialism of Scofield. Anyone who dared call it into question was suspected of not believing in biblical inerrancy.

Questioning Premillennialism

Upon graduating from The University of Oklahoma in 1973, I began my studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. My professors were a Who's Who of dispensational premillennialism: John Walvoord (then president of DTS), Charles Ryrie (author of *Dispensationalism Today* and *The Ryrie Study Bible*), and J. Dwight Pentecost (author of perhaps the most influential text on the subject at that time, *Things to Come*), just to mention the more well-known. Anything other than the dispensational premillennial perspective as found in Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* and taught in the many DTS classrooms was considered less than evangelical. The only thing I recall hearing about amillennialism, for example, was how dangerous it was given the fact that it was popular among theological liberals who didn't take the Bible very seriously.

Robert Gundry's book *The Church and the Tribulation* was released in 1973, the same year I began my studies at Dallas, and it fell like a theological atom bomb on the campus. Everyone was reading it, and more than a few were being drawn to its post-tribulational perspective on the timing of the rapture. Debates in the classroom, cafeteria, and elsewhere were abundant and quite heated. Someone obtained a copy of Daniel Fuller's PhD dissertation in which he critiqued the hermeneutics of dispensationalism, and more gasoline was thrown on the fire.

Upon my graduation from Dallas Seminary in 1977 I immediately immersed myself in a study of all aspects and schools of eschatological thought. Over the next few years, the two most influential and persuasive volumes I read were *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* by George Eldon Ladd (himself a historic premillennialist), and Anthony Hoekema's book *The Bible and the Future* (Hoekema was an amillennialist). It is worth noting here that the distinction between Israel and the church, on which dispensationalism is largely based, could not withstand either Ladd or Hoekema's relentless assault.

My Unpardonable Sin

It wasn't long before Ladd, Hoekema, and Gundry, together with a few others, had persuaded me that there is no basis in Scripture for a pre-tribulational rapture of the church. That was, in the eyes of many, bad enough. Indeed, I distinctly recall the horror (trust me, "horror" is by no means an exaggerated term to describe the reaction I received) in my church when I made it known that I could no longer embrace a pre-tribulation rapture. More than a few were convinced that I was well on my way into theological liberalism! But when in the early 1980s I abandoned premillennialism in all its forms, public reaction was such that you would have sworn I had committed the unpardonable sin. I'm not suggesting that all or even the majority of dispensational premillennialists feel this way today (I hope and pray that few do), but the atmosphere in the 1970s

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and 1980s was something less than amicable for those who departed from the accepted eschatological faith.

My departure from premillennialism and embrace of amillennialism was gradual and came as a result of two discoveries as I studied Scripture. First, I devoted myself to a thorough examination of what the New Testament said would occur at the time of Christ's second coming (or parousia). What I found was a consistent witness concerning what would either *end* or *begin* as a result of our Lord's return to the earth. Sin in the lives of God's people, corruption of the natural creation, and the experience of physical death would terminate upon the appearance of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, and the inauguration of the New Heavens and New Earth would ensue. But why is this a problem for premillennialism? Good question.

Scriptural Challenges for Premillennialists

If you are a premillennialist, whether dispensational or not, there are several things with which you must reckon:

- You must necessarily believe that physical death will continue to exist beyond the time of Christ's second coming.
- You must necessarily believe that the natural creation will continue, beyond the time of Christ's second coming, to be subjected to the curse imposed by the Fall of man.
- You must necessarily believe that the New Heavens and New Earth will not be introduced until 1,000 years subsequent to the return of Christ.
- You must necessarily believe that unbelieving men and women will still have the opportunity to come to saving faith in Christ for at least 1,000 years subsequent to his return.
- You must necessarily believe that unbelievers will not be finally resurrected until at least 1,000 years subsequent to the return of Christ.
- You must necessarily believe that unbelievers will not be finally judged and cast into eternal punishment until at least 1,000 years subsequent to the return of Christ.

So what's wrong with believing these things, asks the premillennialist? What's wrong is that these many things that premillennialists must believe (because of the way they interpret Scripture), the NT explicitly denies. In other words, in my study of the second coming of Christ I discovered that, contrary to what premillennialism requires us to believe, death is defeated and swallowed up in victory at the parousia, the natural creation is set free from its bondage to corruption at the parousia, the New Heavens and the New Earth are introduced immediately following the parousia, all opportunity to receive Christ as savior terminates at the parousia, and both the final resurrection and eternal judgment of unbelievers will occur at the time of the parousia. Simply put, the NT portrayals of the second coming of Christ forced me to conclude that a millennial age, subsequent to Christ's return, of the sort proposed by premillennialism was impossible.

The second factor that turned me from premillennialism to amillennialism was a study of Revelation 20, the text cited by all premillennialists in support of their theory. Contrary to what I had been taught and long believed, I came to see Revelation 20 as a strong and immovable support for the amillennial perspective.

My eschatological journey and biblical defense of amillennialism may now be examined in greater detail in my book, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Mentor, 2013).