

How the Amillennial Conception of the Kingdom is Developed

-Sam A. Smith

Amillennialism views the millennial kingdom as a present reality, while in some cases acknowledging that some elements are still future. Thus, amillennialists view the age between the first and second advents of Christ as fulfilling the prophecies of both the tribulation and the millennium. Typically amillennialists view Satan as having been bound at the cross, the resurrection in connection with the kingdom as having occurred when the graves of some of the saints were opened at the resurrection of Christ, Pentecost as being the sign of Christ's kingdom come on earth, and the persecution of the early church as fulfilling, at least in part, the prophecies of the tribulation.

There are two major forms of amillennialism—those who believe the kingdom is exclusively present (C.H. Dodd), and those who believe it is both present and future (G. Vos, H. Ridderbos, A. Hoekema). In both of these forms there is a failure to make the distinction between the initial spiritual aspect of the kingdom, which was indeed inaugurated with the proclamation of the gospel by Christ, and the physical/millennial aspect beginning with the millennium and extending into eternity. The confusion of these aspects of the kingdom leads to the incorrect conclusion that the millennial kingdom is now present. The question is: By what process does the amillennialist confuse these two distinct aspects of the kingdom program? That will be the focus of our discussion in the following paragraphs.

Obviously, there could be no physical kingdom unless it began as a spiritual kingdom. The reason is that there can be no physical kingdom unless there are spiritually regenerate people to whom the promises of the kingdom can be fulfilled; thus it should be evident that any promise of a visible physical kingdom made in the Old Testament implied an initial preparatory spiritual phase. In fact, this idea is explicit in a number of Old Testament passages (Isa. 44:1-5; 21-23; Jer. 3:15; 23:14-18; 31:1, 27-34; Ezek. 11:19-20; 20:1-44; 36:25-32; 37:11-14, 21-28; 43:6-9; Hos. 6:1-3; 14:4-8; Joel 2:12-17, 28-32; Mic. 7:18-20; Zech. 13:7-9). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the initial step in Christ's work of establishing his kingdom was spiritual, and consequently the initial manifestation of the kingdom was thus to be spiritual in nature. Of course, this initial work was rejected by Israel; hence the spiritual aspect of the kingdom, while present and available, and to some measure appropriated by the Gentiles, has yet to be appropriated by Israel. Since the physical aspect of the kingdom cannot be implemented until the prerequisite spiritual aspect has been received, the physical/visible aspect is in abeyance awaiting the spiritual regeneration of Israel. Thus, the picture of the kingdom presented in the gospels almost exclusively concerns the initial spiritual aspect since the kingdom program did not advance beyond that point during Christ's earthly ministry.

Amillennialists characteristically begin with the gospels in building their view of the kingdom. This is a critical error since the gospels do not present a fully developed theology of the kingdom. The theology of the kingdom begins in Genesis, with the Abrahamic covenant, and is developed from that point forward throughout the entire Old Testament (see, *The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism*, by the author at www.biblicalreader.com). When we come to the gospels there is an assumption that the reader is already aware of the Old Testament antecedent theology. The nation to which Jesus came was not a particularly spiritual (righteous) nation, as is evidenced both from their Old Testament history, and by the nation's rejection of their Messiah. It is apparent that a sinful nation, though elect, could not enter into the physical/millennial kingdom without first undergoing a spiritual conversion. In other words, there was a spiritual aspect of the kingdom (regeneration and conversion) that had to be experienced before the physical/political/visible aspect of the kingdom could be implemented. It is the spiritual aspect of the kingdom that Jesus came announcing and stating that it was "at hand" (Matt.3:2). It is a tragic mistake (owing to replacement theology and the spiritualization of prophecy) that amillennialists misidentify the initial, preparatory spiritual aspect of the kingdom with its full millennial expression.

Since amillennialists form their conception of the kingdom from the gospels, and since the kingdom program in the gospels never moved beyond the initial spiritual phase, due to the nation's rejection of Christ, amillennialists have incorrectly assumed that the spiritual aspect of the kingdom is the totality of the kingdom idea, though some like Vos and Hoekema point out that some physical aspects of the millennial kingdom are yet to come. Since amillennialism's allegorical picture doesn't conform to the picture given in the Old Testament, amillennialists are forced to argue that the Old Testament concept of the kingdom must be reinterpreted (allegorized) in the light of the "clearer" New Testament revelation (*i.e.*, the picture of the kingdom presented in the gospels, which as we have said is incomplete). This essentially redefines the Old Testament idea of the kingdom to conform to the amillennialist's view derived from reading the gospels in isolation from their antecedent Old Testament theological background. Of course the book of Revelation is problematic for amillennialists in that it was written after the statements made in the gospels, and still presents a picture of the kingdom that in every respect is the same as that presented in the Old Testament. The Amillennial approach to dealing with the inconsistency between their view of the kingdom, and Revelation, is to insist that "unclear" prophetic portions of Scripture (*i.e.*, any portions that presents a different picture of eschatology than amillennialism, such as Old Testament prophecy and the book of Revelation) must be understood in the light of "clearer" passages (*i.e.*, the spiritual aspect of the kingdom presented in the gospels). Thus to the amillennialist, the spiritual aspect of the kingdom derived from the gospels is the starting place in their view

of the kingdom, rather than an element of the progressive program revealed throughout the Old Testament.

Three amillennial assumptions will be challenged here: first, the primacy of the New Testament in the interpretation (or reinterpretation) of the Old Testament; second, the accuracy of amillennialism's spiritual conception of the kingdom; and third, amillennialism's disregard of the message of the book of Revelation. I have dealt with the underlying covenant theological assumptions separately in *The Problem With Covenant Theology* (www.biblicalreader.com).

The reinterpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament is theologically and hermeneutically unsound.

Amillennialists insist that Old Testament eschatology is framed in “pre-messianic” terms and must be translated into messianic terms (see, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, by Kim Riddlebarger. p.37). In other words, “Israel” in the Old Testament must be understood as the Church, and the physical kingdom pictured in the Old Testament must be understood as the spiritual kingdom referred to in the Gospels. Thus, according to amillennial rationale, the spiritual dimension of the kingdom seen in the gospels is the antitype of the physical kingdom archetype of the Old Testament (*i.e.*, the Old Testament prophecies of the coming physical kingdom predict the spiritual kingdom presented in the gospels.)

The concept of the reinterpretation of the Old Testament by the New ought to be highly disturbing to those that think about it, and it indicates that covenant theology is eventually headed toward a crisis in its understanding of biblical inspiration and canonicity. Why? Because if one must reinterpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, it is implicit that the Old Testament revelation, at face value, is inconsistent with the New Testament—otherwise why the need to “reinterpret” it? However, one of the principal considerations for the inclusion of the New Testament books into the canon of Scripture in the first place was that their teachings are thoroughly consistent (at face value) with the truths previously taught and accepted from the Old Testament. When the amillennialists claims that the Old Testament must be reinterpreted to conform to the New Testament (or what he conceives that teaching to be), he is calling into question the inspiration of the New Testament canon. One can't have it both ways. Either the New Testament books have the same concept of the kingdom as the Old (in so far as the Old Testament speaks), or those books don't belong in the canon. Since it has already been determined that the New Testament books belong in the canon, we may correctly assume that the very early church—which did not have the benefit of either amillennialism or covenant theology to guide them—viewed those books as literally conforming (doctrinally) to the teachings of the Old Testament.

If the historic criterion upon which the New Testament canon was received is valid, (*i.e.*, that all subsequent writings for which inspiration is claimed must be doctrinally consistent with all prior writings already received as inspired), then it stands to reason that the Old Testament cannot be reinterpreted in light of the New Testament without invalidating the New Testament claim to inspiration. This does not mean the New Testament may not shed further light on a subject, or introduce additional truths—as long as the original truth is conserved in the process. Historically and theologically the Old Testament is not dependant on the New; rather, it is determinative. That is to say, New Testament truth must conform in every respect to Old Testament truth. On the other hand the New Testament, as a subsequent revelation, is dependant—which explains why the New Testament writers were so careful to link their teachings to the determinative truths of the Old Testament (which is the principle use of the Old Testament in the New). When amillennialists state that the New Testament must be seen as the final authority in the interpretation of the Old, what they actually wish to do is to disconnect the New Testament from its antecedent Old Testament theological context (which determines its meaning), so they can then interpret New Testament eschatology according to their own amillennial (and covenantal) assumptions, and then pour that reformulated eschatology backwards into the Old Testament, and forward into the book of Revelation.

So, what is the relationship of the New Testament to Old Testament eschatology? Is the New Testament the final authority in interpreting the Old? Yes—in theory. I say “in theory” because the New Testament seldom interprets the Old Testament. The usual use of the Old Testament in the New is as proof-texts (which implies that the meaning of the Old Testament is apparent at face value, and explains why so often quotations are made without any explanation of the quoted material at all). Let me state it this way: If one finds an actual interpretation of an Old Testament passage in the New Testament, that interpretation is definitive—and it will always be literal (never a “spiritualization”). There simply are no instances where the New Testament spiritualizes the face value meaning of the Old Testament. Of course there are many passages in the New Testament that allude to Old Testament texts simply to illustrate a concept or support an element in the premise of an argument, or by way of allusion, illustration, or analogy, but such uses do not constitute interpretations, and generally have no bearing on the actual grammatical and historical interpretation of the Old Testament text. In a much overworked example, some amillennialists point to Peter’s use of Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:16 as proof that since Peter declared the Joel prophecy to be fulfilled at Pentecost, some elements of the prophecy must have been fulfilled non-literally, since none of the celestial signs associated with Joel’s prophecy occurred at Pentecost; and thus the true meaning of the Joel passage can only be understood when is “spiritualized” in light of the New Testament. However, the flaw in this reasoning is that Peter

did not say, nor did he imply that the prophecy of Joel was completely fulfilled at Pentecost. Peter, in an effort to explain the phenomena of tongues simply said that “this” (*i.e.*, the tongues phenomenon, cf. v.15) was the same thing Joel described; thus, validating the use of tongues based on a literal understanding of the statements in Joel. To suggest that the other elements of Joel’s prophecy (blood, fire, smoke, *etc.*) are to be understood allegorically because they were not literally fulfilled at Pentecost is to forget that sometimes the fulfillment of some elements of a prophecy may be separated in time—just as the first and second advents of Christ were separated in time—though often viewed within the same prophecy from the Old Testament perspective (cf. Isa 61:1-3). [We must bear in mind that the coming of Christ, viewed from the Old Testament perspective as a singular event, actually unfolds as two comings, with a parenthetic age between them. This means that Old Testament prophecies that combine elements of the two advents fall into a special case, as far as understanding the temporal relations of the various prophetic elements. To construct a general principle of hermeneutics (*i.e.*, the validity of allegorical interpretation) on such a special case, as amillennialists seek to do with the Joel 2:28-32 passage, is simply not sound. General principles of hermeneutics must be based on general observations, and there is no general support in the New Testament for the allegorization of the Old Testament. Even Paul’s statement in Galatians 4:24 is not an allegorical interpretation of Old Testament, but simply the telling of an allegory based upon Old Testament material—a considerable difference. If the New Testament provides evidence of the validity of the allegorical interpretation of Old Testament passages, there should be significant general evidence of that; however, such is not the case. In justifying allegorical interpretation, amillennialists can only make their case by twisting a handful of examples of the use of the Old Testament in the New, while ignoring the overwhelming body of evidence that the New Testament writers understood the meaning of the Old Testament to be the literal meaning.]

Does the use of Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:16 justify the reinterpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New? Absolutely not. In fact, it confirms to us the literal understanding of Old Testament prophecy by the New Testament speakers and writers. Take another look at Peter’s argument. His argument is that the literal statements in Joel’s prophecy explained the literal phenomenon of tongues. Did you notice the fact that Peter didn’t “spiritualize” or “reinterpret” Joel’s prophecy in any way? In fact, Peter assumed that merely quoting this passage with its obvious literal meaning—and completely without any further explanation—would suffice as Old Testament validation of the Pentecost phenomena. If anything, Peter’s use of the Joel passage illustrates that the New Testament is build upon a common literal understanding of the Old Testament—including prophecy.

Amillennialism’s view of the kingdom is admittedly inconsistent with the Old Testament, as well as with the book of Revelation. The Amillennial conception of the kingdom is derived from a combination of covenant theological

assumptions about the nature of the Church and a reductionistically flawed concept of the kingdom as essentially spiritual. This tragic mistake made by amillennialists could have been avoided had they observed the simplest of all principles of biblical theology: that antecedent truths are determinative, and subsequent statements must always be understood in light of the truth that has already been established. However, amillennialists have turned the process of biblical theology on its head, and as a result they have reaped and continue to perpetuate great theological error.

Amillennialism's spiritualized conception of the kingdom is incorrect.

The fact that amillennialists concede they must reinterpret or “spiritualize” Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom is *prima fascia* evidence that their conception of the kingdom is fundamentally at odds with the plain statements of the Old Testament (and with the New Testament book of Revelation). As we have seen, the amillennial concept of the kingdom is based entirely on the preparatory spiritual aspect of the kingdom presented in the Gospels. The fallacy amillennialists make is in misidentifying “the part” (in this case the initial, preparatory element) as “the whole.” It is true that the gospels and the New Testament letters say virtually nothing about the physical kingdom. However, the prophetic expectation of the physical kingdom was so well established in Old Testament theology as to have been axiomatic in Jesus’ time. Jesus clearly had no interest in the establishment of the physical kingdom at his first coming because to have done so would have precluded redemption on the cross—which was, in itself, a pre-requisite to regeneration, and thus to the establishment of the kingdom. (The promise of the kingdom could never be fulfilled to an unregenerate people, and if Christ had not been rejected and died on the cross there would have been no redemption, and no regeneration—thus no kingdom.) However, to base one’s view of the broader kingdom idea on the perspective of the gospels alone, completely disconnected from their Old Testament context, is incredibly shortsighted, particularly in light of the fact that Revelation, written after the discourses of the Gospels took place, teaches precisely the same concept of the physical kingdom as does the Old Testament.

Amillennialism disregards the message of the book of Revelation.

In considering Revelation, it is worth remembering that it was Christ who was the Revealer in this book, and his revelation is thoroughly consistent with the material presented in the gospels. While there are symbols employed in the book, it is unreasonable to suppose that the underlying structure of the book itself is symbolic, especially since it comports in every detail with both the Old Testament and Christ’s teaching in Matthew 24. The sequence of future events presented in Revelation is this: the tribulation prophesied in Daniel 9:24-27, the second coming of Christ, the destruction of opposition to him, the resurrection of the

dead, and the rule of the resurrected saints with Christ during the millennium. Whatever symbolism may be employed in describing the particulars of these events, the underlying reality of the events and their sequent relationships cannot be symbolic—otherwise there would be no underlying reality to which the symbols in the book could be correlated, and the book would be completely devoid of doctrinal meaning. In other words, whether we completely understand the symbols or not, the events they represent are real and their sequent relationships are clear, and it is highly significant that with respect to the events in common, the relationships are precisely the same as given in both the Old Testament, as understood literally, and in Christ’s Olivet discourse in Matthew 24-25, as understood literally. Any theology that fails to adequately account for this fact is turning a blind eye to the truth—and this is certainly the case with amillennialism. Even supposing that due to the symbolic nature of the book we knew nothing about the particulars of the tribulation, the second coming, the resurrection, and the millennium, we would at least know that the millennium follows the second coming and the associated resurrection, and only the premillennial view is consistent with this observation.

The fact that Revelation presents a solidly premillennial picture of the future is all the more significant when we realize that it is the final prophetic statement of the New Testament, and in terms of its basic eschatological structure it is unchanged from the picture presented in the Old Testament. What is the implication here for amillennialism? Simply this: Amillennialists have misunderstood the general nature of the kingdom, because they have rationalized the nature of a part (the spiritual aspect) for the whole (which includes both the spiritual and the physical aspects). This has led to the need to deny the patently premillennial teachings of both the Old and New Testaments, and to allegorize those teachings so as to conform them to erroneous amillennial, and covenantal assumptions.

For more information on this topic see: *The Problem With Covenant Theology*, *The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism*, and *What The Bible Says About the Future*, by Sam A. Smith, available at www.BiblicalReader.com

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