

Apocalypse Not Now:¹

The Church, The Millennium & The Rapture

ISSUE: Rev. 20 speaks of Satan being bound and Christ reigning with His saints for a thousand years (a millennium). Many Protestants understand this 1,000-year reign literally and believe that it will occur on earth in the future. They also cite 1 Thess. 4:17 and try to make an historical connection between something called “the rapture”—when Christians are “taken up”—and this millennium. What does the Church teach regarding millennialism and the rapture?

RESPONSE: There are three basic interpretations regarding Rev. 20 and “the millennium.” The Church has traditionally taught one commonly known as “amillennialism,” which means that the reign of God began with Christ’s death and resurrection and the “thousand years” is a figurative number to describe the reign of His Church (2 Pt. 3:8-10; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 664, 668-682).

In the past two centuries, two other interpretations have become popular among Protestants. One is called “postmillennialism,” which was big in the 19th century and teaches that the world is being Christianized over time and that Christ’s return will follow a long period of peace on the earth called “the millennium.” The second is “premillennialism,” which is the most popular among Protestants of this century and is also called “millenarianism” and “*chiliasm*.” Premillennialists believe that Christ is going to establish a literal reign of 1,000 years on earth between the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. Properly understood, the “rapture” refers to Christ’s gathering His followers at the end of time. Catholics believe that this event will happen at the general resurrection and Last Judgment, but they do not refer to the event as “the rapture.”

DISCUSSION: Postmillennialists, as noted, believe that the world is being Christianized over time and that Christ’s return will follow a long period of righteousness and peace on the earth called “the millennium.” This was a very popular view in the 19th century when people had an optimistic view of world history, believing that everything was getting better and better. This view, however, lost favor among its proponents this century, after two World Wars and many atrocities provided substantial evidence of a moral decline, not an advance. Though postmillennialists do not necessarily interpret the number 1,000 literally, they do interpret the “reign of Christ” to mean that the earth will have a “paradise-like” period before Christ’s Second Coming and the Last Judgment.

This position is problematic for many reasons. The chief reason is that Scripture does not depict a period of worldwide Christianization before the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. Many scriptural passages portray the time between the two comings of Christ, i.e., the age we live in, as a time of trial and tribulation for Christians. For example, the Gospel of Matthew portrays *both* wheat (righteous men) and weeds (evildoers) living together in a field (the world) until the final harvest of the Last Judgment (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43).

Premillennialism

This interpretation is currently the most popular one among Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants. Like the postmillennialists, they believe in an earthly paradise of Christianization before the end of the world. Unlike the postmillennialists, though, they believe that this paradise will take place *between* the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, two events which actually occur on the same day as will be shown. But for premillennialists, Jesus will literally be a worldwide King on earth in the future. Many also believe that this “reign of Christ” will last, literally, one thousand years.

This position is also scripturally problematic because the Bible does not depict a 1,000-year period *between* Christ's Second Coming and the Final Judgment.² Scripture speaks of "this age" (in which men marry, etc.) and "the age to come" (in which Christians receive eternal life, etc.), but not of a third period between those ages.³ If Jesus refers to only two "ages," and the Last Judgment occurs at the end of this age (Matt. 13:39), where is the premillennialists' millennium? The Last Judgment happens on the "last day" at the end of this age (Jn. 12:48; Mt. 13:39); the resurrection of the righteous—which some call "the rapture"—occurs on the "last day" at the end of this age (Jn. 6:54; Mk. 10:30); and these both happen on the day of Jesus' return, i.e., "the day of the Lord."⁴

In the 1940s, the Vatican declared that "millenarianism," another term for "premillennialism," cannot be safely taught (see Catechism, no. 676).

Premillennialists have spent countless hours and pages debating *when* the rapture will occur, such as before, during, or after "the tribulation." The problem with most of the views—with the exception of the one called "post-tribulation"—is that Jesus will only return once, not two or three times. The Church teaches that Jesus will return once, and that the general resurrection and Last Judgment, in which Christ gathers His faithful, will follow—just as the Bible indicates.

An important thing to remember, when dealing with "dispensationalist" premillennialists, is that they do not recognize the New Testament Church as the fulfillment of Old Testament Israel. They consider the "Church Age" as one period in a string of otherwise unconnected dispensations in history, and not the continuous unfolding of a single divine plan for salvation. Unfortunately, such are the theories conceived to compensate for a lack of continuous Christian history from Christ's day to the present.

In contrast, Catholics believe that the Church is the new Israel,⁵ the Body of Christ,⁶ and the seed of the Kingdom⁷ to which the faithful of all covenants with God belong. In Rom. 11, Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree. A single olive tree is the Israel of God, from which natural and wild branches (Jews and Gentiles) may be cut and to which natural and wild branches (Jews and Gentiles) may be grafted. There are not two separate trees. As Christ is the fulfillment of all previous covenants (Mt. 5:17), the Church (His Body) is the fulfillment of Israel.⁸

Amillennialism

"The Church of today, of the present, is the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven"
—St. Augustine

Amillennialism, which corresponds to the Catholic understanding, interprets the thousand year reign of Christ in Rev. 20 more symbolically. (After all, when John refers to binding a spirit like Satan with "chains," the language can only be figurative.) According to this view, the millennium is not an earthly golden age of total Christianization, but rather the *present* period of *Christ's rule through His Church*: "Behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk. 17:21). Christ reigns right now with His saints in Heaven,⁹ and the Church on earth participates in that reign in a way that will be fulfilled—fully realized or completed—at the Second Coming. The Church, the Kingdom, the Israel of God, and the millennium all refer to the same thing. Until the fulfillment of the Kingdom already planted (Lk. 13:18-19), the righteous and the evildoers will remain on earth.

It has clearly been more than a thousand years since Jesus' reign through the Church began. The number "1,000" is often used figuratively in scriptural writings to show a vast number conveying completeness. For example, Ps. 50:10 tells us God owns "the cattle on a thousand hills," but we know that in reality God owns all cattle everywhere, which would be a number much bigger than a thousand hills. Remember also the words of St. Peter: "[W]ith the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (cf. 2 Pt. 3:8-10). To God in eternity all time is present, and we must understand "1,000" figuratively, remembering the popular phrase "God works in His Own time."

But what of Satan being "bound" during this period? Amillennialists believe that Satan is already "bound" in a sense because he cannot prevent the spread of the Gospel—which liberates people from his control—throughout the world. Although Satan can tempt us as individuals, he is unable to *force* anyone's will away from God (Rom 8:38-39), which means he is already hindered in "deceiving the nations." Jesus says that the "strong man" (Satan) must

be bound before his house can be plundered, i.e., before Jesus can rescue souls from Satan's grip. He further says, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then *the Kingdom of God has come upon you*" (Mt. 12:28-29, Lk. 11:20). So the binding of Satan and the coming of God's Kingdom must have already taken place in some sense. The Kingdom's full inauguration came through Christ's death and resurrection, and that reality became more manifest to the world on Pentecost through the Church (Catechism, no. 1076).

Although Catholics do not generally call their eschatological view "amillennialism," which is somewhat of a misnomer, this is the Church's teaching regarding Rev. 20, a teaching, as always, in harmony with the scriptural data (Catechism, nos. 668-682).

¹ The title is a good-natured play on the movie "Apocalypse Now" and the belief of Premillennialist Christians, who believe that the apocalypse (end of the world) will only come after Jesus Christ returns someday and reigns for a thousand years (a millennium) on earth.

² Mt. 16:27, 25:31-46.

³ See Mk. 10:29-30 and Lk. 20:34-35.

⁴ 2 Pet. 3:10; Mt. 16:27, 25:31-46.

⁵ Gal. 6:16, Eph. 2:11-13, Rom. 9:6-8.

⁶ Col. 1:18, 1 Cor. 12:12-13.

⁷ Lk. 13:18-21.

⁸ See CUF FAITH FACT: "The Catholic Church: Merely Man-made or Divinely Ordained?" This FAITH FACT explains clearly and in detail how the Church is the new Israel, the prophesied restoration of the House of David.

⁹ Rev. 20 does not say Christ will reign as an earthly King.

The books below contain information on topics which appear in this FAITH FACT, especially those marked with an asterisk.

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