Views of the Millennium

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 9 of 10

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Everything the course said about Israel and the church now comes due: the last two sessions turn to the last things. This one takes up the single most divisive question in modern evangelical eschatology, the millennium of Revelation 20, and walks all three great answers through history and Scripture with the course's trademark fairness. Listen for which position owned the church's first two centuries, which one owns its scholars today, and how strongly the teachers hold their own view when the honesty bill comes due.

STUDY SHEET

1. Entering eschatology

The course saved eschatology for last because its foundations were laid at the beginning: your position on Israel and the church has already been quietly shaping your view of the end. Only two sessions are needed now, because dispensationalism, the great crossover doctrine between ecclesiology and eschatology, has been covered. The teachers name the market forces honestly: seminars on the end times fill rooms, and books mapping the future sell, but this class is not laying out the chart of what will happen; it is laying out the ways the church has understood what will happen, and the arguments for each. All traditions have always confessed that Christ is coming; the creeds say so while deliberately declining to define the scheme. And a ground rule: this is not an essential; those who disagree with you have read all the same passages, so no one is going to proof text a way out of this one.

2. What eschatology covers, and why prophecy matters

Eschatology, the study of the last things, spans death and the intermediate state, already treated in the humanity course, the resurrection, rewards, the punishment of the damned, the coming kingdom or millennium, and the new heavens and the new earth. The scale surprises people: of Scripture's thirty one thousand and more verses, over eight thousand contain prophecy, roughly twenty seven percent of the Bible, most of it already fulfilled, in the prophets' own times or at Christ's first coming. And prophecy is God's own apologetic: in Isaiah 40 through 48 he stakes his deity on it, challenging the gods of the nations to declare the end from the beginning as he does, a claim no other religion's scriptures can survive.

3. Eschatomania and eschatophobia

Two failure modes, named from Millard Erickson's Christian Theology, frame the right approach. The eschatomaniac studies nothing but prophecy: every sermon a scheme, every conversation a rapture position, charts with arrows implying an objectivity the author does not possess, and a polemical edge that judges orthodoxy, and sometimes salvation, by one's prophetic chart, as one television preacher does over the pretribulational rapture. The eschatophobe overcorrects: skip Revelation, avoid the sensationalists, reduce eschatology to the bare affirmation that Christ is coming. The teachers refuse both: God evidently wanted his church to know more than the bare minimum, or Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation would not exist, and the task is balance.

4. Four ways to read the prophecies

Before the millennial views come the interpretive models, the philosophies that produce the schemes. The historicist reads the great eschatological events, millennium, tribulation, antichrist, as fulfilled or being fulfilled across church history since the apostles: Nero an antichrist, later figures antichrists, the seven churches of Revelation as seven epochs, the book itself as repeated overviews of the whole church age. It is an ancient habit with a long record of embarrassment: every generation names its candidate, Hitler in the last century, and Patton describes his own research exercise proving categorically, from the writings of the day, that Napoleon III was the antichrist, after which history simply carried on. John, the teachers note, never tells the church to hunt the Antichrist; he tells it to watch for the small a antichrists already among us.

5. Preterists, futurists, idealists

The preterist locates fulfillment in the past: the partial preterist holds that the tribulation, Matthew 24, and most of Revelation through chapter 19 were fulfilled in AD 70, when the temple whose stones the disciples admired was thrown down exactly as Christ said; R. C. Sproul is a well known partial preterist, and the position sits within orthodoxy. The full preterist goes further: every eschatological event, the second coming included, is already fulfilled, resting on the nearness sayings; Patton admits he cannot yet represent the position well, notes its visible presence at the theological societies, and hangs a question mark over its orthodoxy, given John's warnings about denying the coming of Christ. The futurist holds that the millennium, tribulation, and antichrist, though foreshadowed in history, await literal future fulfillment. And the idealist reads Revelation as timeless principles of the struggle between good and evil, the common road of liberal eschatology.

6. Revelation 20: the passage at the center

The class then reads the text the whole controversy orbits: Revelation 20:1 through 9. An angel binds the dragon, the serpent of old, the devil, for a thousand years, shutting and sealing the abyss so that he deceives the nations no longer until the thousand years are completed. Thrones, and the souls of those beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, who had not worshiped the beast or taken his mark, coming to life and reigning with Christ a thousand years, the first resurrection, over which the second death has no power, while the rest of the dead wait. Then Satan released, the nations deceived, Gog and Magog gathered like the sand of the seashore, the camp of the saints surrounded, and fire from heaven devouring them. The teachers quote Donald Bloesch's judgment that perhaps no doctrine has more divided modern evangelical Protestantism, and add their own: were this passage absent, most of the controversy would be too. Everything turns on how you read it, and the counsel is not to choose a view first and bend the text after.

7. Premillennialism: the map and the two families

Premillennialism holds that Christ will return and then reign on earth for a thousand years, the church and Israel remaining distinct to some degree, the tribulation a future apocalyptic judgment. Two families divide the camp. The historic premillennialist knows one coming of Christ: the church passes through the tribulation, and at its end Christ returns and establishes the kingdom; there is no separate secret coming. The dispensational premillennialist holds that before God's wrath is poured out, Christ raptures his church, before the tribulation, or at its midpoint, or on some partial scheme, and returns visibly at the tribulation's end. On the history chart, premillennialism runs solid as the majority view to the fourth century, survives in fringe groups, and surges again in the nineteenth; and the teachers are precise about what is old and what is new: the pretribulational and midtribulational rapture positions do not exist until the nineteenth century. For most of church history, the trumpet, the archangel's voice, and the catching up of 1 Thessalonians 4 simply were the second coming; a secret coming would have struck the fathers as, if not fanciful, simply not there.

8. The fathers and the seven thousand years

The early evidence is remarkable. The majority of the fathers of the first two centuries, Papias, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, expected a future earthly millennium. Justin appeals directly to a certain man named John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied a thousand years in Jerusalem followed by the general and eternal resurrection and judgment, two resurrections, exactly the structure of Revelation 20. Tertullian confesses a kingdom promised on earth, after the resurrection, for a thousand years, in the divinely built city of Jerusalem let down from heaven. Many fathers held the septamillennial scheme: as God worked six days and rested the seventh, history runs six thousand years and then a thousand year sabbath rest, and by their count, a thousand years each from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to David, David to Christ, the rest would begin roughly, the teachers observe with a smile, about now. A published study by Larry Crutchfield surveying the fathers, included in the course notes with full references, documents the pattern figure by figure. The premillennial chain of custody is its proudest argument: Irenaeus learned from Papias, Papias knew the apostle John, and John wrote the Revelation.

9. Postmillennialism: working for the kingdom

Postmillennialism holds that the church ushers in the millennium through the triumph of the gospel: the world is won to Christ, the kingdom arrives gradually rather than by cataclysm, Satan is bound, righteousness governs, and at the millennium's end come the second coming, resurrection, and judgment, with the new heavens and new earth. On this view the church has replaced Israel, and the great tribulation is either past, in AD 70, as the mostly postmillennial preterists read it, or the present struggle with evil. Its adherents are giants: Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Charles Finney; its history begins, despite claims on Augustine that the teachers reject, in the nineteenth century, born of an optimistic age. The teachers coin the mnemonic that organizes all three views: premillennialists are waiting for the millennium, postmillennialists are working for it, and amillennialists are enjoying it. And they honor the position's heart: its hope is not that the world is getting better, but that the church can make it better by winning souls and nations, a profoundly missionary posture.

10. The postmillennial case weighed

For: the Great Commission carries Christ's own claim of all authority, so the mission must finally succeed. The growth parables of Matthew 13, the mustard seed that becomes the greatest of plants and the leaven that works through the whole lump, picture a kingdom that grows slowly until it overtakes everything, and the teachers candidly admit that neither premillennialists nor amillennialists have an interpretation of that passage that satisfies them. The church has in fact grown to the largest faith on earth, with more Christians alive today than in all previous ages combined, though the statistics of past centuries are unknowable, and the puzzle of the seven churches, all in present day Turkey with no gospel presence now, shows how hard won and lost even is to define. And the gates of Hades text of Matthew 16 is read with real force: gates do not attack, they defend, so the picture is hell trying to hold its ground while the church advances and overpowers it. Against: the New Testament suggests things grow worse before the end, not better, from Matthew 24 to Paul's bad to worse in 2 Timothy 3, which postmillennialists must assign to AD 70 or to the ongoing struggle; the position is a child of its times, flourishing in the optimism of Edwards' America and collapsing in the century of the world wars, Stalin, and Hitler; and its direct scriptural support is thin.

11. Amillennialism: the case from the kingdom

Amillennialism holds that there is no literal future millennium: the thousand years symbolize the present age, Christ reigning now from heaven and in the hearts of believers, with the second coming and the new heavens and new earth the next events, and, in most forms, no separate future for ethnic Israel. It has been the majority view of church history: Origen, whose Platonism read Christ's real reign as heavenly and spiritual, first turned from the millennial hope, Augustine made the turn definitive, and the position reigned unnamed until the nineteenth century finally coined its label; today it remains the view of most covenant and reformed theologians, even while the evangelical pew is largely premillennial. Its opening argument is the kingdom's presence: if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you, in Matthew 12; the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, in Mark 1; you are not far from the kingdom of God, said to the wise scribe as we would say not far from being saved; and the kingdom of God is in your midst, in Luke 17, not coming with signs to be observed. Add Christ's claim of all authority and his session at God's right hand, and the reign, they argue, is now.

12. No interval, no second text, and the number itself

The argument continues. The kingdom's final form is the new heavens and the new earth, so no millennium is needed even to satisfy promises to Israel, which can be fulfilled in the new earth, where, after all, a New Jerusalem descends. Other Scriptures allow no interval between the coming and the judgment: in 2 Peter 3 the day of the Lord comes like a thief, and in the same breath the heavens pass away with a roar and the elements are destroyed, and how does a thief arrive in the middle of a publicly running millennium?; in 2 Thessalonians 1 the Lord is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, bringing relief to the afflicted and eternal destruction to the disobedient at the same coming. No millennium is mentioned anywhere outside the highly symbolic Revelation. And the number itself may be idiomatic: the class works through how ancient languages used large round numbers, a thousand as the culture's biggest figure, the way we once said million to mean vast, so that the text may simply mean an immense age, a point the teachers stress is conceded even by some premillennialists, who grant the reign could run long past a literal count; the background material gathered in Craig Keener's Bible background commentary shows Jewish tradition dividing history into ages, applying the psalm's thousand years as a day to the days of Genesis, and reaching for round numbers, all sufficient to explain the figure.

13. The strong man, the first resurrection, and the amillennial weaknesses

Two hard texts remain for the amillennialist. The binding of Satan they identify with Christ's binding of the strong man in Matthew 12:29: one binding, accomplished at the cross, so that Satan can no longer deceive the nations in the decisive sense, he cannot stop the gospel's advance to all peoples; what warrant, they ask, is there for two separate bindings except a premillennial pre understanding? The first resurrection of Revelation 20 they read as the martyrs coming to life in God's presence in heaven, since John 5 knows only one general resurrection of the just and the unjust. Here Patton's fairness turns blunt: that interpretation, he says, strikes him as frankly silly, because resurrection carries a technical, bodily meaning in the New Testament, and there is no reason to read it otherwise except an amillennial bias; it is the view's weakest joint. The summary weaknesses: the thousand years can perhaps be spiritualized, but the two resurrections resist it; a Satan bound, locked, and sealed in the abyss is strong imagery for an age with this much evil in it; and the system usually leaves no future for ethnic Israel. Its strength remains what it has always been: the weight of the church's majority tradition, which no one should overrule without very good reason.

14. The premillennial case, its weaknesses, and a two out of ten

For premillennialism: it is the most natural reading of Revelation 20, which on its face demands a reign of Christ on earth between his coming and the last judgment, whether the thousand years be literal or long; the objection that the doctrine hangs on one passage meets the answer of progressive revelation, for one resurrection in John unfolding into two in Revelation is not contradiction but detail, and Revelation is exactly the book you would expect to detail the end. It was the view of virtually all the fathers before 250, with the chain running Irenaeus from Papias, Papias from John, John from Jesus. And history's abandonment of it, the premillennialist argues, was reactionary and driven by sub Christian currents: the Montanist embarrassment, whose founder claimed to be the promised paraclete and whose condemnation tarred millennial hope by association; Origen's Platonism, spiritualizing the physical; Constantine's triumph, which made an apocalyptic end implausible to a church now ruling the world; and Augustine, a converted premillennialist, whose own words the teachers read, rejecting interpreters who promised the risen saints limitless banqueting beyond all decent restraint, an interpretation acceptable only to the carnal minded, the era's suspicion of everything physical doing the arguing. The dispensational argument that the millennium is required for Israel's promises Patton declines to lean on, since the new earth could satisfy them. Stronger, to him, is the kingdom's already and not yet: in Acts 1 the disciples ask about restoring the kingdom to Israel and Jesus corrects their calendar, never their premise, and the Lord's own prayer still teaches the church to ask, your kingdom come. Weaknesses: the doctrine really does rest on one chapter of a highly symbolic book, and other texts really do suggest no interval between the coming and the judgment. Then the close the whole course has been building toward: Patton is a premillennialist, in conjunction with everything he argued about the church, and on the scale of certainty he is a two, adding that no one claiming more than a two on this question is being intellectually honest. God, for his own reasons, was not very clear here. So be unified, he asks, not on the scheme but on the coming of Christ, and refuse to let this become the divisive test it has too often been.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Psalms 90 · Isaiah 46 · Matthew 6 · Matthew 12 · Matthew 13 · Matthew 16 · Matthew 24 · Mark 1 · Mark 12 · Luke 17 · John 5 · Acts 1 · 1 Thessalonians 4 · 2 Thessalonians 1 · 2 Timothy 3 · 2 Peter 3 · Revelation 20

KEY TERMS

Eschatology

: The study of the last things: death, the intermediate state, the resurrection, rewards, the punishment of the damned, the coming kingdom or millennium, and the new heavens and the new earth. Over a quarter of Scripture is prophecy, most of it already fulfilled.

Eschatomania and eschatophobia

: Erickson's two failure modes: obsession with prophetic schemes, charts, and polemics that judge orthodoxy by one's chart; and the overcorrection that skips Revelation and reduces eschatology to a bare second coming. The right approach is balance.

The four approaches

: The interpretive models behind every scheme: the historicist reads the events as unfolding across church history; the preterist as fulfilled in the past, chiefly AD 70; the futurist as awaiting literal future fulfillment; the idealist as timeless principles of good against evil.

Full preterism

: The claim that every eschatological event, the second coming included, was fulfilled by AD 70. Distinct from the orthodox partial preterism of writers like R. C. Sproul; the teachers hang a question mark over its orthodoxy.

Premillennialism

The belief that Christ will return and then reign on earth for a thousand years, the tribulation lying in the future. The majority view of the church's first centuries and of today's evangelical pew.

Historic and dispensational premillennialism

The camp's two families: the historic form knows one coming, the church passing through the tribulation, as the fathers held; the dispensational form, born in the nineteenth century, adds a rapture of the church before or during the tribulation.

Postmillennialism

The belief that the church ushers in the millennium through the triumph of the gospel, Christ returning at its end. The view of Edwards, Hodge, and Warfield; born of an optimistic age and wounded by the twentieth century. Its mnemonic: working for the millennium.

Amillennialism

The belief that there is no literal future millennium: the thousand years symbolize the present age, Christ reigning from heaven and in believers' hearts. The majority view of church history and of reformed theology; its mnemonic: enjoying the millennium.

The septamillennial tradition

The early church's scheme of history as six thousand years of labor followed by a thousand year sabbath rest, on the pattern of creation's week, which by the fathers' own count placed the rest roughly in our own era.

The binding of the strong man

The amillennial reading of Revelation 20's bound Satan: one binding, accomplished by Christ at the cross per Matthew 12:29, so that Satan can no longer stop the gospel's advance to the nations.

The first resurrection

Revelation 20's watershed: premillennialists read two bodily resurrections separated by the thousand years, as Justin Martyr already did; amillennialists read the first as the martyrs alive in heaven, a reading Patton candidly calls the view's weakest joint.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. Why does the course need only two sessions on eschatology?

A. Because eschatology is unimportant

B. Because its foundations were laid at the start: the Israel and church question, and dispensationalism, the great crossover doctrine, were covered early

C. Because the creeds settled every question

D. Because Revelation is too symbolic to study

2. How does prophecy serve as God's own apologetic?

A. By remaining entirely unfulfilled

B. By appearing only in the New Testament

C. In Isaiah 40 through 48 God stakes his deity on declaring the end from the beginning, a challenge no other religion's scriptures can survive

D. By being limited to the book of Revelation

3. What are eschatomania and eschatophobia?

A. Two ancient heresies condemned at Nicaea

B. Two views of the rapture

C. Two names for the same balanced approach

D. Erickson's failure modes: obsession with schemes and charts that judge orthodoxy by prophecy, and the overcorrection that skips the subject entirely

4. What lesson does Patton draw from his Napoleon III exercise?

A. That Napoleon III truly was the antichrist

B. That the historicist habit of naming the antichrist has a long record of embarrassment: the writings of the day proved it categorically, and history simply carried on

C. That antichrist speculation began in the twentieth century

D. That John commands the church to identify the Antichrist

5. What distinguishes partial from full preterism?

A. Partial preterists locate the tribulation and most of Revelation in AD 70; full preterists claim every event, the second coming included, is already fulfilled, a position over which the teachers hang a question mark

B. Partial preterists deny AD 70 matters

C. Full preterists await a future millennium

D. There is no difference between them

6. Why does Revelation 20 sit at the center of the controversy?

A. Because it is the only chapter about Christ's return

B. Because the creeds quote it directly

C. Because it alone describes the thousand year reign, the binding of Satan, and the first resurrection; without it, most of the controversy would not exist

D. Because it names the antichrist

7. What separates historic from dispensational premillennialism?

A. The length of the millennium

B. The identity of the antichrist

C. The date of the second coming

D. Historic premillennialism knows one coming, the church passing through the tribulation; the dispensational form adds a rapture before or during it, a position that does not exist before the nineteenth century

8. How did most of church history read the trumpet and catching up of 1 Thessalonians 4?

A. As simply the second coming, not a separate secret event

B. As a description of Pentecost

C. As fulfilled at the transfiguration

D. As a vision of the intermediate state

9. What was the septamillennial tradition?

A. A rule for dating Easter

B. History as six thousand years of labor and a thousand year sabbath rest, on creation's pattern, which by the fathers' count placed the rest roughly in our own era

C. A sevenfold division of the book of Revelation

D. The seven ecumenical councils

10. What is the premillennial chain of custody argument?
    A. Augustine received the view from Ambrose
    B. The view descends from the Council of Nicaea
    C. Irenaeus learned from Papias, Papias knew the apostle John, and John wrote the Revelation
    D. The view rests on the Septuagint alone

11. What mnemonic organizes the three views?
    A. Reading, praying, and fasting for the millennium
    B. Past, present, and future millennium
    C. Literal, spiritual, and mythical millennium
    D. Premillennialists are waiting for it, postmillennialists are working for it, amillennialists are enjoying it

12. How does the postmillennialist read the gates of Hades in Matthew 16?
    A. Gates defend rather than attack: hell tries to hold its ground while the church advances and overpowers it
    B. The gates represent death alone
    C. The verse concerns church architecture
    D. The gates prevail until the second coming

13. What honest admission do the teachers make about the growth parables of Matthew 13?
    A. That the parables were later additions
    B. That neither premillennialists nor amillennialists have an interpretation of the mustard seed and leaven that satisfies them
    C. That only postmillennialists misread them
    D. That the parables concern Israel alone

14. Why is postmillennialism called a child of its times?
    A. Because it was invented by children
    B. Because it changes with each pope
    C. Because it flourished in the optimism of Edwards' age and collapsed in the century of the world wars, Stalin, and Hitler
    D. Because it denies the second coming

15. What is the amillennial opening argument from the Gospels?
    A. That the kingdom was postponed at the rejection of Israel
    B. That the kingdom belongs only to the apostles
    C. That the kingdom is wholly future
    D. That the kingdom is present: demons cast out by the Spirit means the kingdom has come upon you, it is at hand, in your midst, and nearness to it is nearness to salvation

16. How does 2 Peter 3 serve the no interval argument?
    A. The day of the Lord comes like a thief and in the same breath the heavens pass away and the elements burn: a thief cannot arrive in the middle of a publicly running millennium
    B. It dates the second coming precisely
    C. It names the millennium explicitly
    D. It describes the rapture of the church

17. What might the number one thousand be, on the amillennial reading?

A. A cipher for the church of Rome

B. An idiom for an immense age, the culture's biggest round number, a possibility some premillennialists also grant

C. A literal count that could never be questioned

D. A scribal error for one hundred

18. What does Patton candidly say about the amillennial reading of the first resurrection?

A. That it is the strongest part of the system

B. That it resolves every difficulty

C. That it strikes him as frankly silly, since resurrection carries a technical bodily meaning, and only an amillennial bias reads it otherwise

D. That it originated with the apostles

19. How does Patton close the session on his own position?

A. A premillennialist at ten out of ten, with dissenters outside orthodoxy

B. An amillennialist by tradition

C. Undecided among all four approaches

D. A premillennialist at a two out of ten, judging that no one claiming more is being intellectually honest, and calling for unity on the coming of Christ rather than on the scheme

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 B · 5 A · 6 C · 7 D · 8 A · 9 B · 10 C · 11 D · 12 A · 13 B · 14 C · 15 D · 16 A · 17 B · 18 C · 19 D

TALK IT OVER

1. Which of the three views were you raised with, and had you ever heard the other two argued at their strongest before this session? What single argument from a view you do not hold gave you the most pause?

2. Patton holds his own position at a two out of ten and calls higher confidence intellectually dishonest here. Where in your theology are you carrying a two with the grip of a ten, and what would charitable certainty look like in conversations about the end times?

3. Premillennialists wait, postmillennialists work, amillennialists enjoy. Whatever your view, which of those three postures is weakest in your actual life, waiting with hope, working at the mission, or enjoying the reign of Christ now, and what would strengthen it this month?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Revelation 20 stands at the center of the whole discussion: the dragon bound for a thousand years, the souls of the faithful come to life to reign with Christ, the first resurrection over which the second death has no power.