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Teaching Notes

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The Millennium

Definition: What is “millennialism?”

Millennialism is the doctrine that Jesus Christ will reign physically on earth for a thousand years in fulfillment of prophecy. This reign will be characterized by a great improvement of conditions on earth, but less than the perfected world of the Eternal State.

Why I am a millennialist

1. The millennial reign of Christ seems to be taught plainly in Revelation 20:1-6. It is the burden of those who reject it to prove this passage to be figurative.
2. The (seemingly) chronological presentation of Revelation 19-22
3. The binding of Satan described in Revelation 20 goes far beyond the freedom Satan appears to have in the NT
4. Key passages in the Old Testament
 - a. They speak of an order of life much higher than we presently experience
 - b. But they cannot be reconciled with the Eternal State

i. Example #1:

Isaiah 11:6-9 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Key Issue: the infants and young children mentioned here do not fit in the eternal state:

Luke 20:34-36 Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, ³⁶ and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.

ii. Example #2:

Isaiah 65:20-25 "Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. ²³ They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

Key issues: this passage also mentions infants born and children growing up; but it also mentions people dying. This does not fit at all with the eternal state:

Revelation 21:4 There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

5. It seems to fit God's progressive plan of revealing the sinfulness of man and God's grace as the only answer to that problem

Why I am an uneasy millennialist

1. There are many difficulties with understanding details about the millennial life
2. It is difficult to understand how the resurrection at the Second Coming taught in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:23 can fit into the following millennium, especially with the question about unregenerate children and people
3. The only passage that openly teaches the Millennium is in the Book of Revelation, a very difficult book to interpret with certainty because of its apocalyptic genre and its symbolic use of numbers
4. The amillennial system is cleaner and simpler, avoiding most of these pitfalls
5. One of the passages that seem to be teaching the Millennial life introduces the topic by mentioning the New Heavens and New Earth!!

Clear example from above... Isaiah 65:17ff

Isaiah 65:17-20 "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my

*people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. ²⁰
 "Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.*

I. Review: Three Basic Approaches to the Millennium

A. Premillennialism

1. There will be a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth
2. Christ's Second Coming will occur before this thousand year reign
3. Various types of Premillennialism: most noteworthy are "Historic Premillennialism" and "Dispensational Premillennialism"
 - a. Most significant different between them: the dispensational premillennialists posit a radical separation between the church and Israel; the millennium is focused on the fulfillment of literal promises made to the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews
 - b. Corollary of this: the disp. Premill. Folks seek an abundance of details in OT passages, especially in the prophets, for a description of life in the millennium
4. General description

"The premillennialist believes that the return of Christ will be preceded by signs including wars, famines, earthquakes, the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, the appearance of Antichrist, and the great tribulation. These events culminate in the second coming, which will result in a period of peace and righteousness when Christ and his saints control the world. This rule is established suddenly through supernatural methods rather than gradually over a long period of time by means of the conversion of individually. The Jews will figure prominently in the future age because the premillennialist believes that they will be converted in large numbers and will again have a prominent place in God's work. Nature will have the curse removed from it, and even the desert will produce abundant crops. Christ will restrain evil during this age by the use of authoritarian power. Despite the idyllic conditions of this golden age, there is a final rebellion of wicked people against Christ and his saints. This exposure of evil is crushed by God, the non-Christian dead are resurrected, the last judgment conducted, and the eternal states of heaven and hell are established." [*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 715]

B. Amillennialism

"Amillennialism states that the Bible does not predict a period of the rule of Christ on the earth before the last judgment. According to this outlook, there will be a continuous

development of good and evil in the world until the second coming of Christ when the dead shall be raised and the judgment conducted. Amillennialists believe that the kingdom of God is now present in the world as the victorious Christ rules his church through the Word and the Spirit. They feel that the future, glorious, and perfect kingdom refers to the new earth and life in heaven. Thus Revelation 20 is a description of the souls of dead believers reigning with Christ in heaven.” [Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 715]

C. Postmillennialism

“Postmillennialists emphasize the present aspects of God’s kingdom which will reach fruition in the future. They believe that the millennium will come through Christian preaching and teaching. Such activity will result in a more godly, peaceful and prosperous world. The new age will not be essentially different from the present, and it will come about as more people are converted to Christ. Evil will not be totally eliminated during the millennium, but it will be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual influence of Christians is increased. During the new age, the church will assume greater importance, and many economic, social, and educational problems can be solved. This period is not necessarily limited to a thousand years because the number can be used symbolically. The millennium closes with the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment.” [Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 715]

II. Key Passage: Revelation 20:1-10

Revelation 20:1-10 And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. ⁴ I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

⁷ When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth-- Gog and Magog-- to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹ They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

All commentators agree: there is no explicit mention of the millennial reign of Christ on earth anywhere else in Scripture. Amillennialists make much of this; premillennialists downplay it, saying that the millennium is *described* in other places in Scripture without being explicitly mentioned

A. Context is King

1. Revelation 19-22 seems to be chronologically arranged

a. Revelation 19: the Second Coming of Christ

- i) Christ returns to earth in glory to destroy His enemies
- ii) The Beast and the false prophet condemned to the Lake of Fire
- iii) BUT Satan is not... his doesn't come till Revelation 20:10

b. Revelation 20:1-6: the Millennium

- i) The binding of Satan
- ii) The resurrection of saints

c. Revelation 20:7-10: the final rebellion after the Millennium

d. Revelation 20:11-15: the final judgment

e. Revelation 21-22: the Eternal State

- i) the New Heaven and New Earth
- ii) the New Jerusalem
- iii) life in heaven described

2. This chronological unfolding of future history makes the most sense of these chapters

3. It is not ironclad, since other sections of Revelation do not follow such an order

a. Revelation 11: the Two Witnesses

b. Revelation 12: the birth of the Male Child who will rule the nations

B. Exegesis of Revelation 20:1-6: the Millennium

1. the Angel coming down from heaven

Revelation 20:1 And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain.

2. Satan seized, bound, and locked up for a thousand years

Revelation 20:2-3 He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

- a. Binding is effective; it apparently prevents all movement
 - b. It at least clearly prevents his deceiving of the nations any more
 - c. He is thrown into a bottomless pit—Greek word *abyssos* means “having no bottom”
 - d. The words “locked and sealed over him” imply completely effective incarceration
 - e. Reason given: prevents his deceiving of the nations any more
 - f. However, Satan’s history is not over... he will be set free at the end of the thousand years “for a short time”
3. the “first resurrection”

Revelation 20:4-6 I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

- a. Not explicitly stated that this scene is set on earth, which is key to the millennial position
- b. However, the understanding that Christ has come to earth in Revelation 19 means that He clearly intends to do something with the earth... to rule over it
- c. Therefore, the saints reigning on earth with Christ is the most natural understanding of this passage in context

d. Key word: resurrection

- i) Amillennialists say this is referring to the spiritual resurrection when the saints come to faith in Christ
- ii) They cite Ephesians 2 and John 5 to support this view

Ephesians 2:4-6 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

John 5:24-29 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵ I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

- iii) However... the same word “came to life” is used twice in this passage... and it’s very difficult to suggest a changed meaning for the word in one passage

Revelation 20:4-5 They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection.

Henry Alford: “If, in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned, where certain *psychai ezesan* (souls lived) at the first, and the rest of the *nekroi ezesan* (dead lived) only at the end of a specified period after the first,—if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from the grave;—then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.” [quoted in Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium*, p. 37-38]

The best way to interpret this is bodily resurrection from the grave in both cases... before and after the millennium

- 4. note what is said about those taking part in the first resurrection
 - a. they were beheaded during the reign of the antichrist for their testimony to Christ
 - b. they didn’t receive the mark of the beast

- c. they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years
 - d. they are blessed and holy
 - e. the second death (hell) has no power over them
 - f. they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him a thousand years
5. the rest of the dead are raised after the thousand years
- a. it is not clear from this passage alone whether good people will be raised in the second resurrection... nothing bad is said about the second resurrection, but bad is implied
 - b. the specificity of the manner of death (“beheaded”) and of the focus on the mark of the beast leads us to wonder if these are the only ones resurrected at this point
 - c. BUT 1 Thessalonians 4:16 states the resurrection happens for all the dead at the Second Coming of Christ

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

d. 1 Corinthians 15 seems to teach the same thing:

1 Corinthians 15:20-24 Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

Note the three stages: first, Christ’s resurrection; after that (when He comes), the resurrection of all believers; then the end, when Christ finally crushes His adversaries. The Millennium occurs between stage two and three. According to 1 Corinthians 15:26, the final enemy is death.

1 Corinthians 15:25-26 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

- e. Putting it altogether, it seems that every believer will be resurrected then and will reign with Christ then, despite the specificity of Revelation 20:4-6

C. Exegesis of Revelation 20:7-10: the Final Rebellion

Revelation 20:7-10 *When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth-- Gog and Magog-- to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹ They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰ And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*

1. Satan released to deceive the nations once more
2. he is effective in stirring up a final rebellion against Christ
3. an incredible display of human sinfulness, in that these folks have been living in the world's only perfect government, a government that's been going on for a thousand years!
4. they are destroyed by fire from heaven
5. the devil is thrown into the Lake of Fire to be tormented forever

III. Issues with Dispensational Premillennialism

A. Strengths

1. faithfulness to the inspiration and authority of Scripture
2. strong in faith to believe whatever the Lord has promised
3. attentive to details of Scripture's teaching
4. everything in common with Historic Premillennialism

B. Weaknesses

1. separation of church and Israel as distinct entities in God's sight

I do not embrace Dispensationalism's strong distinction between the church and Israel. Ephesians 2:11-22 clearly teaches that Christ's death on the cross has abolished the spiritual distinctions and restrictions between the two

Ephesians 2:14-16 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Also Romans 11 speaks of one “olive tree” (representing the “People of God”) and of branches grafted in or cut off of that one tree:

Romans 11:23-24 And if they (i.e. the Jews) do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ After all, if you (i.e. Gentile believers) were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree (i.e. Abraham’s lineage), how much more readily will these, the natural branches (i.e. the Jews), be grafted into their own olive tree!

There is one work, one people of God, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...”

2. overall literal hermeneutic of OT prophecy focused on this separation of Jews and Gentiles

Many other NT quotations of OT passages including Gentiles in blessings which, in the OT context, seem to be talking only about Israel

Romans 9:23-26 What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory-- ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? ²⁵ As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," ²⁶ and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

In the OT context. the quotation from Hosea is clearly talking about the apostasy of Israel from God, her spiritual husband; Paul applies it to the Gentiles AND Jews coming to faith in Christ.

3. Ezekiel’s Temple: Ezekiel 40-48

I especially repudiate the literal interpretation of Ezekiel’s Temple in Ezekiel 40-48 as a future Millennial Temple, since the sacrificial system described there was made obsolete by Christ’s death

Hebrews 8:13 By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

Hebrews 10:4 it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The Temple in Ezekiel 40-48 is founded on blood sacrifices:

Ezekiel 44:15-16 the priests, who are Levites and descendants of Zadok and who faithfully carried out the duties of my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me, are to come near to minister before me; they are to stand before me to offer sacrifices of fat and blood, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ They alone are to enter my sanctuary; they alone are to come near my table to minister before me and perform my service.

My friends, this cannot be!!

IV. The Strengths and Weaknesses of Amillennialism

A. Strengths

1. The attractiveness of simplicity
2. the focus on the eternal state
3. The explanation of the purpose of the binding of Satan coupled with Christ's statement of the same

Revelation 20:1-2 And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

Amillennial interpretation: this is Christ in His first coming;

Christ himself seems to bear this out. Christ defended His ministry of casting out demons with these words:

Mark 3:27 In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.

This seems on the surface to fit with Revelation 20:1-3 in that Satan is "bound" specifically in the area of keeping the elect from coming to faith in Christ:

Matthew 16:18 I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

But we need to look at the language a little closer. More in a moment!

4. the unity of Jew and Gentile
5. the heavenly, spiritual triumph of the saints

B. Weaknesses

1. Poor handling of the seemingly chronological unfolding of events in Revelation 19-22

2. Poor explanation of the details of the binding of Satan compared with his obvious freedom in the NT

How do you compare these two passages?

Revelation 20:2-3 *He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³ He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.*

1 Peter 5:8-9 *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

And also these:

2 Corinthians 4:4 *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

Ephesians 2:1-2 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*

3. Poor handling of the resurrection in Revelation 20
 - a. Like the quote above, to spiritualize the first resurrection is to stretch language to the breaking point
 - b. They do not make an adequate distinction between the first and second resurrections in the key passage

V. The Millennium vs. the Eternal State

- A. Similarities: In both the millennium and the New Heavens and New Earth...
 1. Christ will reign physically, visibly on earth
 2. The earth will be renewed and in a greatly improved state
 3. Nations will exist and will do productive work; the fruits of that labor will be brought to the throne of Christ in a stream of “commerce”
 4. There will be peace on earth between nations
 5. Jews will be in positions of favor and influence

Note: because of these (and other) similarities, it is very difficult to zero in on Old Testament prophecies that are clearly talking about millennial life and not life in the New Heavens and New Earth

Note #2: I have noticed a tendency among premillennialists to downplay the eternal state and talk a great deal about the millennial kingdom. This makes very little sense to me, since the eternal state is our desired goal in glory, when at last sin is finally defeated

B. Differences

1. the millennium will come to an end! The eternal state is... eternal!
2. there will unregenerate people in the millennial kingdom; there will be only glorified people in the eternal state
3. millennial people will have babies, who will grow up
4. millennial people will still sin
5. millennial people will still grow old and die
6. the destruction of the elements by fire and the creation of a New Heaven and New Earth marks the end of the physical existence we now know; the millennium takes place before that happens
7. in the eternal state, the creation will be fully liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God... ; the millennium sees a natural world only partially restored from sin

C. Questions

1. Will the resurrected saints living in the millennium have fully glorified bodies?
2. If every believer is resurrected at the coming of Christ and receives a glorified body, where do the children come from for the Millennium?
3. Do some non-believers survive the Second Coming?
4. What will life be like with glorified and non glorified people living side by side?
5. How will Christ repair all the damage done to the earth during the great tribulation without completely recreating the earth as in the New Heavens and New Earth? It seems as though everything is almost totally destroyed... especially the heavenly bodies!

VI. Tentative Descriptions of Life in the Millennial Kingdom

- A. Christ on the Throne of David in the “Old Jerusalem”
- B. The Harmony of Nature
- C. Peace Between the Nations
- D. Fruitful Labor