

THE MILLENNIUM IN THE EARLY CHURCH: CERTAIN HOPE TO NON-EXISTENCE

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Introduction to Premillennialism

April 21, 2016

## Introduction

In the course of Christian history no other age was as formative or foundational to Christian theology as the early centuries from apostolic times to the post-Nicene age (1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). Christian theologians during this time grappled with the reality that God had walked among men as a Man, Jesus Christ, as well as explicating that salvation came by His death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection. Inarguably, the person and work of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith. It is not surprising then that the first major controversies in the church capturing the spotlight in the early centuries of Christianity were Christological and Trinitarian.

At the same time as these great and unquestionably important controversies unfolded, one area of doctrine was eclipsed and for the most part completely overlooked, namely the doctrine of eschatology, particularly Chiliasm. Eschatology went under the radar of major theological discussion finding itself, as Louis Berkhof notes, as being “one of the least developed doctrines.”<sup>1</sup> To clarify terms, chiliasm comes from “the Greek word *chilias* meaning *one thousand*, [and] is the teaching that Christ will reign on earth for one thousand years following His second advent. Premillennialism as a term derives its meaning from the belief that the second coming of Christ will be before this millennium and therefore pre-millennial. Both terms refer to the same doctrine.”<sup>2</sup> The early church appears to have firmly believed in chiliasm, that there would be a thousand year reign of Christ on earth after His second advent, but by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century this was no longer the leading eschatological view.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1976), 259.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1959), 5. Italics original.

The major question then is: what would constitute such a radical shift in doctrine? What influences would take the church from believing in an actual thousand year kingdom where Christ reigns on earth to the belief that this thousand year kingdom would in fact would not come to pass? This is best answered by focusing on the early church's belief in chiliasm and following its development through into the fifth century tracing how the view shifted from premillennialism to amillennialism (or non-literal interpretations of the millennium).<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this discussion will be twofold. First, to get a picture of the development and historical belief of chiliasm, the history of Chiliasm will be traced through its main proponents during the first four centuries of Christianity. Second, this paper will evaluate if amillennialism was a legitimate theological development based on sound exegesis uninfluenced by human philosophy or personal preferences. On this second point, this examination will argue that amillennialism developed because of anti-materialistic biases, allegorical interpretation, and the favored status of Christianity, which was the result of the merging of church and state, therefore not because of legitimate biblical influences or sound hermeneutics.

### **Select Proponents of Chiliasm in the First Three Centuries of Christianity**

**Papias (ca. 70-150 AD)** Papias' testimony is valuable because of his historic proximity to the apostles, his familiarity with the early church's teaching, and his interaction with church leaders who were acquainted with direct apostolic teaching, possibly even the apostle John himself.<sup>4</sup> Papias was bishop of Hieropolis who attempted to collect and record the early

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<sup>3</sup> Amillennial, which literally means "no millennium" will be used as such in the course of this paper. This accurately describes present day forms of amillennial doctrine, although the amillennial conception of the millennium has changed over time.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity (A. D. 100-325)*, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1952), 693. Henceforth *ANC*.

teachings and traditions of the church in his work *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*.<sup>5</sup> His works have been lost to us today, but the early church historian Eusebius (ca. 260-340 AD) records that Papias believed in chiliasm, a view which Eusebius evidently did not agree with:

The same historian [Papias] also gives other accounts, which he says he adds as received by him from unwritten tradition, likewise certain strange parables of our Lord and of his doctrine, and some other matters rather too fabulous. *In these he says there would be a certain millennium after the resurrection, and that there would be a corporeal reign of Christ on this very earth*; which things he appears to have imagined, as if they were authorized by the apostolic narrations, not understanding correctly those matters which they propounded mystically in their representations.<sup>6</sup>

Eusebius's bias against the chiliasm is apparent here, but with his historical and theological bias notwithstanding, what comes out of this evidence is the very clear voice of Papias attesting to the view of Chiliasm during the apostolic age.

**Epistle of Barnabas (ca. 70-135 AD)** An important testimony to early church's thinking about the reign of Jesus Christ on the earth comes in the non-canonical *Epistle of Barnabas*. It reads,

Observe, children, what "he finished in six days" means. It means this: that in six thousand years the Lord will bring everything to an end, for with him a day signifies a thousand years. And he himself bears me witness when he says, "Behold, the day of the Lord will be as a thousand years." Therefore, children, in six days—that is, in six thousand years—everything will be brought to an end. "And he rested on the seventh day." This means: when his son comes, he will destroy the time of the lawless one and will judge the ungodly and will change the sun and moon and the stars, and then he will truly rest on the seventh day.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently the author of Barnabas attempted to draw inferences from the creation account and the reference of a thousand years in Peter's epistle to interpret the ages before the

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<sup>5</sup> Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. by Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2007), 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius bishop of Caesarea, *An Ecclesiastical History: To the Twentieth Year of the Reign of Constantine being the 324<sup>th</sup> of the Christian Era*, vol. II of *The Greek Historians of the First Six Centuries of the Christian Era*, trans. by S. E. Parker (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, n.a.), 143-144. Italics added.

<sup>7</sup> Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., "The Epistle of Barnabas," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 426-29 (15:4-5).

kingdom of Christ on earth and its duration (Gen. 1:1-2:3; 2 Pet. 3:8; Rev. 20:1-7). Although his scheme of viewing ages as consisting of thousand year blocks parallel to the creation week has not come to pass, it is apparent that this still follows a straightforward rendering of thousand year durations from the biblical text as it pertains to eschatological reckoning. The *Epistle of Barnabas* is not conclusive,<sup>8</sup> but it at least contains the chiliastic category that was common in the eschatological thinking of the early church.

**Justin Martyr (ca. 100-166 AD)** Justin was a prominent apologist during the second century who was ultimately martyred for his faith.<sup>9</sup> In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (an educated Jew), we find his clear statement of chiliasm:

For I choose to follow not men or men's doctrines, but God and the doctrines [delivered] by Him. For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit this [truth], and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians, even as one, if he would rightly consider it, would not admit that the Sadducees, or similar sects . . . , or Jews (do not hear me impatiently when I tell you what I think), but are [only] called Jews and children of Abraham, worshipping God with the lips, as God Himself declared, but the heart was far from Him. But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a *resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.*<sup>10</sup>

This excerpt from the *Dialogue with Trypho* evidences several things. First, Justin considered belief in Chiliasm as a doctrine from God, which would be strong language if Chiliasm was not well grounded in Scripture and considered a standard doctrine in the church. Second, he considered Chiliasm as “orthodox” in the sense that it was widely held teaching at the

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<sup>8</sup> Nathan Busenitz, “Did the Early Church Believe in a Literal Millennial Kingdom?” in *Christ's Prophetic Plans for the Church*, ed. by John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 193, footnote 27.

<sup>9</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:713-721.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” ch. 80 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, n.a.), 1:194-270. Italics added. Henceforth *ANF*.

time, as he himself was clearly a strong advocate. Lastly, even though Justin was influenced by Platonism<sup>11</sup> and utilized allegorical interpretation at times,<sup>12</sup> he interpreted prophecies in the Old Testament predicting a restored Israel and the thousand years in Revelation 20 as being actual physical realities yet to come.

**Irenaeus (ca. 125-202 AD)** The testimony of Irenaeus is astounding in light of the fact that he grew up at the feet of Polycarp who was a disciple of John the Apostle.<sup>13</sup> It is recognized that he does not directly mention the length of the kingdom of Christ as being a thousand years, but it is clear that there is an age after the tribulation period in which Christ reigns with the saints in an earthy heavenly kingdom. First, there is clearly a kingdom after the “first resurrection” which is called the “resurrection of the just”:

Inasmuch, therefore, as the opinions of certain [orthodox persons] are derived from heretical discourses, they are both ignorant of God’s dispensations, and of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the [earthy] kingdom which is the commencement of incorruption, by means of which kingdom those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually to partake of the divine nature (*capere Deum*: or gradually comprehend God); and it is necessary to tell them respecting those things, that it behooves the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised to the fathers, and to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renovated, and that the judgment should take place afterwards.<sup>14</sup>

After describing the Antichrist reigning during the tribulation Irenaeus writes that Christ will return “bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day.”<sup>15</sup> After writing this he states,

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<sup>11</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:722. Calls Justin “in a loose sense, a Christian Platonist.”

<sup>12</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishing, 1998), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:751.

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.32 (*ANF*, 1:526-567).

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.30.4 (*ANF*, 1:560).

For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in which the righteous shall reign in the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

Two things are prominent in the writings of Irenaeus on the topic of chiliasm, which is described by him as the kingdom coming after the “first resurrection” and before the final judgment. First, it is clear that he holds to a coming kingdom of Christ which is both earthy and heavenly having the restoration of Jerusalem at the center. Second, Irenaeus interprets Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming kingdom in a very straightforward manner, as well as taking New Testament passages at face value as well.<sup>17</sup> Larry V. Crutchfield remarks “Irenaeus was emphatic and thorough in his support of premillennialism as he gave the doctrine its fullest expression to that time. In addition, he stated in the strongest possible terms that premillennialism was traditional orthodoxy (*Ag. Her.* 5.32.1).”<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus is an invaluable voice who affirms from both apostolic tradition and passages found in Scripture to the reality of Christ’s earthly reign after his second coming for one thousand years.

**Tertullian (160-220 AD)** is considered the “father of the Latin theology and church language, and one of the greatest men of Christian antiquity.”<sup>19</sup> The strongest evidence of his view of chiliasm is found in *Against Marcion* where he declares:

*But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely built city of Jerusalem, “let down from heaven” (Rev. 21:2), which the apostle also calls “our mother from above” (Gal. 4:26); and, while declaring that our ... citizenship, is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), he*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5.35.1 (*ANF*, 1:565).

<sup>17</sup> Larry V. Crutchfield, “Irenaeus,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. by Mal Couch, 181-82 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:819.

predicates of it that it is really a city in heaven. This both Ezekiel had knowledge of (Ez. 48:30-35) and the Apostle John beheld (Rev. 21:10-23).<sup>20</sup>

He also explains the end of the millennial age writing,

*After its thousand years are over, within which period is completed the resurrection of the saints, who rise sooner or later according to their deserts, there will ensue the destruction of the world and the conflagration of all things at the judgment: we shall then be changed in a moment into the substance of angels, even by the investiture of an incorruptible nature, and so be removed to that kingdom in heaven of which we have now been treating, just as if it had not been predicted by the Creator.*<sup>21</sup>

Overall, Tertullian lays out in no uncertain terms the first resurrection, the millennium, the heavenly yet earthy state during this time period, the last judgment, and eternity which follows. Interpreting prophecy in a straightforward manner, Tertullian wrote about Chiliasm at some length and held to its existence wholeheartedly.

**Lactantius (ca. 240-325 AD)** Lactantius held to chiliasm as found in his *The Divine Institutes*, where he writes,

*He [Jesus Christ] shall have destroyed unrighteousness, and executed His great judgment, and shall have recalled to life the righteous, who have lived from the beginning, will be engaged among men a thousand years, and will rule them with most just command.*<sup>22</sup>

In the next paragraphs Lactantius speaks of Satan being imprisoned and then judged at the end of this period.<sup>23</sup> Hans Von Campenhausen evaluates how Lactantius handled eschatology writing, “The astonished reader realizes with what enthusiasm our seemingly enlightened author clings to the particulars of the cosmic eschatological drama. He is far from interpreting spiritually the statements of John’s apocalypse, and even adds further apocalyptic

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<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 3.25 (ANF, 1:321-344). Italics added.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., (ANF, 1:343). Italics added.

<sup>22</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 7.23 (ANF, 7:195-223).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



material.”<sup>24</sup> The evidence is clear that Lactantius took Revelation 20 as describing a thousand year kingdom where Christ reigned between the first resurrection and the final judgment.

### **Chiliasm in the First Three Centuries**

In a powerful summation of this evidence for Chiliasm in the early church historian Philip Schaff states,

*The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.*<sup>25</sup>

The view that premillennialism was the consensus in the early church is the majority conclusion of historians and theologians on both sides of the millennial issue.<sup>26</sup> The historical evidence and the consensus of historians is strong that the church from its inception to the end of the third century believed in a thousand year earthy reign of Jesus Christ with the saints after the first resurrection and before the final judgment.

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<sup>24</sup> von Campenhausen, *The Father's of the Latin Church*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Schaff, *ANC*, II:614.

<sup>26</sup> Donald Fairbairn, “Whose Side Was the Early Church On?” in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, ed. by Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 110-13; Busenitz, 177-79.

## History of Amillennialism: Focus on Founding Proponents

In light of the preceding survey, this discussion now turns to the historical basis and development of amillennialism in the early centuries of Christianity as a doctrine.

**Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 AD)** Clement was a leader of the church in Egypt, was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and was Origen's instructor.<sup>27</sup> His main writings on eschatology come in *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*. Evidence is lacking concerning his view of the millennium, but it is clear that he did not hold to the immanence of Christ and can be considered either amillennial or a Postmillennial Preterist. Clement quotes Daniel 9:24-27 (seventy week prophecy and abomination of desolation) and then states,

That the temple accordingly was built in seven weeks, is evident; for it is written in Esdras. And thus Christ became king of the Jews, reigning in Jerusalem in the fulfillment of the seven weeks. And in the sixty and two weeks the whole of Judaea was quiet, and without wars. And Christ our Lord, "The Holy of Holies," having come and fulfilled the vision and the prophecy, was anointed in His flesh by the Holy Spirit of His Father. In those "sixty and two weeks," as the prophet said, and "in the one week," was He Lord. The half of the week Nero held sway, and in the holy city Jerusalem placed the abomination; and in the half of the week he was taken away, and Otho, and Galba, and Vitellius. And Vespasian rose to the supreme power, and destroyed Jerusalem, and desolated the holy place. And that such are the facts of the case, is clear to him that is able to understand, as the prophet said.<sup>28</sup>

The support for amillennialism in the writings of Clement is then by implication rather than by explicit statement. It is clear though that he saw many prophecies as being fulfilled during the time of Christ which are seen as still awaited in the futurist view, which puts the tribulation before the millennium. On the basis that there is no evidence that he was awaiting the imminent return of Christ or the millennial kingdom, and that he interpreted the prophecies in

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<sup>27</sup>Mike Aquilina, *The Fathers of the Church* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), 102; von Campenhausen, 32; Drobner, 132.

<sup>28</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, 1.21 (*ANF*, 2:299-341).

Daniel as happening during the first century in line with Preterism, it is safe to say that Clement was amillennial, having no strong hope of the future millennial kingdom of Christ on earth.

**Origen (ca. 185-255 AD)** Origen's main writings concerning eschatology appear in his groundbreaking systematic theology *De Principiis* and in his polemical work *Against Celsus*. In both works his use of allegory and Platonic dualism is apparent, as almost every topic concerning the end times is spiritualized. He did not hold to a physical resurrection, as D. H. Kromminga writes he believed,

That we have our bodies temporarily as a measure of discipline in consequence of our fall in a former purely non-somatic existence, and he inclined to the view that our bodies will ultimately disappear. It is this kinship with Gnosticism, which constitutes Origen's spiritualization a type all by itself: he explains the physical and material away from the eternal and abiding scheme of things without making it inherently evil as the Gnostics did.<sup>29</sup>

His anti-materialistic inclinations come out in *De Principiis* where he states:

If it is true that this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality, and that death is swallowed up at the end; *this shows that nothing else than a material nature is to be destroyed*, on which death could operate, while the mental acumen of those who are in the body seems to be blunted by the nature of corporeal matter. If, however, they are out of the body, then they will altogether escape the annoyance arising from a disturbance of that kind ... *[there will be a] gradual disappearance of the material nature ... [and when the kingdom appears] then also the need of bodies will cease. And if it ceases, bodily matter returns to nothing, as formerly also it did not exist.*<sup>30</sup>

Along with his denial of the bodily resurrection and spiritualization of eschatology,

Origen also flatly denied any future hope for the Jews. He writes:

And we say with confidence that they [Jews] will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind, in conspiring against the Savior of the human race in that city where they offered up to God worship containing the symbols of mighty mysteries. It accordingly behooved that city where Jesus underwent these sufferings to perish utterly, and the Jewish nation to

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<sup>29</sup>D. H. Krommoniga, *The Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1945), 104. This statement is derived from Origen's *De Principiis*, 2.3.3.

<sup>30</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.3.3 (ANF, 4:268-300).

be overthrown, and the invitation to happiness offered them by God to pass to others—the Christians, I mean ...<sup>31</sup>

Being such a watershed figure, Origen began the tradition of non-literal (spiritual) interpretation in regards to eschatology. Few would adopt his radical Platonic views, but his approach to eschatology would permeate the consciousness of the church and would be a strong influence away from Chiliasm.

**Augustine (354-430 AD)** Augustine develops his view on the millennium in *The City of God*. To begin his eschatology, Augustine affirms that “first, that judgment will come; second, that it will be accompanied by the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>32</sup> He interprets the “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:6) as that which “is temporal and spiritual and allows no second death, while the other is not spiritual but corporeal and is to be at the end time. This resurrection, through the last judgment, will send some into the second death, others into that life which knows no death.”<sup>33</sup>

Concerning Revelation 20:1-6, Augustine admits to having been chiliastic, mainly changing his view and developing another because of the carnal descriptions of the activities of the saints during the millennial kingdom made by other theologians.<sup>34</sup> Reacting against such carnal descriptions, he redefined the binding of Satan and the millennium. In regards to Satan and his binding, he writes:

To conclude: The Devil is bound throughout the entire period covered by this Book—from Christ’s first coming to His second coming at the end of the world—but not bound in such a way that this special binding during the period which St. John calls the ‘thousand years’ implies his powerlessness to deceive the Church ... The Devil is

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<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.22 (ANF, 4:497-541).

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 20.5, vol. 8, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh & Daniel J. Honan (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), 257. Based on the verses Matthew 13:37-43.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, ch. 7 (8:264).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, (8:264-66).

bound whenever men are converted to the faith from the infidelity in which he possessed them, and there will certainly be conversions until the end of time.<sup>35</sup>

In line with his interpretation of Satan being bound, he states “During the ‘thousand years’ when the Devil is bound, the saints also reign for a ‘thousand years’ and, doubtless, the two periods are identical and mean the span between Christ’s first and second coming.”<sup>36</sup> Thus the millennium became equated with the “Church Age” to be completed with the second coming of Christ which would be followed by eternity. Interestingly, Augustine’s blending of both the literal sense and non-literal sense is evidenced in that he still believed that the church age would be one thousand years followed by eternity; this has not come to pass.<sup>37</sup> Overall, Augustine was the main developer of the major elements still present in the amillennial view today and the main proponent who caused the church to abandon Chiliasm and to embrace other millennial viewpoints.

### **What Happened to the Millennium?**

The following influences can be seen in the lives and works of those who developed a non-literal view of the millennium providing the basis for the shift from Chiliasm to amillennialism.

#### **A. Platonic Anti-Materialism & Personal Anti-Materialistic Bias**

Evidence supports that the view of Chiliasm was rejected by those who developed the non-literal view of the millennium because of deprecatory views of matter arising either from the

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<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, ch. 8 (8:270, 272). In that order.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 9 (8:274).

<sup>37</sup> Walvoord, 53-54.

philosophy of Platonism<sup>38</sup> or from a personal anti-materialistic bias influenced by ascetic tendencies. Philosophers and theologians J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae write that in “Platonic dualism, the body is inferior to the soul in value, and more generally the material world is inferior to the immaterial word.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, according to the philosophical ideas of the time, a millennium characterized by both physical matter and spirit, earthy yet heavenly, was found to be repulsive to the founders of amillennialism because of their negative views of physical matter arising from philosophical proclivities and personal ascetic preferences. This is clearly the case with Clement of Alexandria, as W. H. Rutgers writes,

Clement, engrossed and charmed by Greek philosophy, applied this erroneous allegorical method to Holy Writ. It was a one-sided emphasis: opposed to the real, the visible, phenomenal, special, and temporal. A Platonic idealistic philosophy could not countenance carnalistic [and] sensualistic conceptions of the future as that advanced by chiliasm. It shook the very foundation of which chiliasm rested. Robertson observed that ‘it loosed its [chiliasm’s] sheet anchor—naïve literalism in the interpretation of Scripture.’<sup>40</sup>

In regards to asceticism, “He [Clement] does not run into the excesses of asceticism, though evidently under its influence.”<sup>41</sup>

Origen clearly “followed an ascetic mode of life.”<sup>42</sup> In regards to the influence of philosophy on Origen, he was “educated in the milieu of emerging Neo-Platonism ... and his

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<sup>38</sup> See Michael J. Vlach, “Platonism’s Influence of Christian Eschatology,” on [theologicalstudies.org](http://www.theologicalstudies.org/files/resources/Platonism_and_Eschatology_article_(PDF).pdf), [http://www.theologicalstudies.org/files/resources/Platonism\\_and\\_Eschatology\\_article\\_\(PDF\).pdf](http://www.theologicalstudies.org/files/resources/Platonism_and_Eschatology_article_(PDF).pdf) (accessed 4-9-2016).

<sup>39</sup> J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 22.

<sup>40</sup> W. H. Rutgers, *Premillennialism in America* (Holland: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre Goes, 1930), 64.

<sup>41</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:785.

<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), 43.

theological construction works with its philosophical concepts.”<sup>43</sup> Schaff gives the evaluation that he was:

[by] no means orthodox ... His leaning to idealism, his predilection for Plato, and his noble effort to reconcile Christianity with reason, and to commend it even to educated heathens and Gnostics, led him into many grand and fascinating errors. Among these are his extremely ascetic and almost docetistic conceptions of corporeity, his denial of material resurrection, his doctrine of the pre-existence and the pre-temporal fall of souls (including the pre-existence of the human soul of Christ), of eternal creation, of the extension of the work of redemption to the inhabitants of the stars and to all rational creatures, and of the final restoration of all men and fallen angels.<sup>44</sup>

It is obvious that he was influenced by Platonism with its negative view of matter leading him to utilize an allegorical approach to spiritualize texts which spoke of a future earthly millennium, bodily resurrection, and the restoration of the nation of Israel.

Lastly, Augustine in “His outward mode of life was extremely simple, and mildly ascetic.”<sup>45</sup> Women were excluded from seeing him, as he was clearly impacted by the ascetic movement from Eastern writings.<sup>46</sup> Further, his writings clearly show “how profoundly Neoplatonism ... had influenced him.”<sup>47</sup> He is considered a “Christian Platonist and biblical theologian.”<sup>48</sup> With such a background, it is not surprising how Augustine reacted to carnal descriptions of the millennium coming from some heretical groups during his time, but these carnal notions certainly did not accurately represent the time of spiritual blessedness during the millennium that the church fathers had in mind.

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<sup>43</sup> E. Ferguson, “Origen,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, 481-82 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 481.

<sup>44</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:791.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:993.

<sup>46</sup> D. F. Wright, “Augustine,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, 58-61 (Downers Grove, IN: InterVarsity, 1988), 58.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> D. F. Wright, 58.

## B. Allegorical Interpretation

Berkhof directly makes this point asserting “allegorical interpretation of Scripture, introduced by the Alexandrian school, and sponsored especially by Origen, also had a chilling effect on all millennial hopes.”<sup>49</sup> The point has already been made concerning Clement’s use of allegory which can manifestly be seen in all his works.<sup>50</sup> Origen clearly used and developed the allegorical approach, which he picked up from Clement and secular scholars. Mike Aquilina writes

Alexandria had, in the first century, been home to the great Jewish philosopher Philo, a Greek-speaking Platonist who interpreted the Old Testament allegorically. As Christianity arose in that city, Christian scholars took up the method of Philo and applied it to the Christian Scriptures, discerning both “literal” and “spiritual” senses. The spiritual sense was sometimes seen as operating on several levels; a text could simultaneously relate a historical event, foretell a truth about the Messiah, teach a moral lesson, and make a promise about heaven. Origen is usually credited with developing this method of scriptural interpretation into a science.<sup>51</sup>

Origen could be quite fanciful in his interpretations. With the allegorical approach delineating his boundaries for derived meaning, it is clear that he often let his speculative bent get the best of him, making his writings a mix of deep theological insights and shocking heresies. Michael J. Vlach writes “Origen (A.D. 185-254) popularized the allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture, and in doing so, laid a hermeneutical basis for amillennialism and its view that the promised kingdom of Christ was spiritual and not earthly in nature.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Berkhof, 262.

<sup>50</sup> E. Ferguson, 149.

<sup>51</sup> Aquilina, 105.

<sup>52</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *Premillennialism: Why There Must be a Future Earthly Kingdom of Jesus* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2015), 14.



In regards to Augustine, from the point of his conversion, he was influenced by the spiritual or allegorical interpretation, which was utilized by his father in the faith, St. Ambrose.<sup>53</sup> His tendency toward allegory can be directly seen in how he reinterpreted the millennium: after deciding that the “literal” sense would not do, he proceeded to look for other meanings foreign to the text. In interpreting prophecy he spiritualized or rendered non-literal interpretations freely.<sup>54</sup> His interpretation of Satan being bound in the present time is strained, as it is clear that Satan is still quite influential during the church age (1 Cor. 5:5; cf. 1 Tim. 1:20; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14; 12:7).<sup>55</sup> He also reasons quite freely about the meaning of “thousand years” stating that it could “stand for all the years of the Christian era, a perfect number being used to indicate the ‘fullness of time’” (Gal. 4:4).<sup>56</sup> Thus, “thousand years” no longer meant a “thousand years” as Augustine searches Scripture to find some other explanation, which he found by equating the millennium with the church age.

Not only should it be noted that these are clear examples of allegory, but Augustine’s whole view which came about by his interpretation was completely new in the history of the church: no one before him had interpreted the binding of Satan nor the millennium as being the “present church age” in the same way that he did. *His conclusions were clearly derived from the application of an allegorical method of interpretation, which he used freely in reaction to carnal conceptions of the millennium, and when the direct meaning of Scripture clashed with his own philosophical predilections and personal preferences, he invented imaginative interpretations.*

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<sup>53</sup> D. F. Wright, 58.

<sup>54</sup> Walvoord, 51.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 51; cf. Matthew C. Waymeyer, “The Binding of Satan in Revelation 20,” *MSJ* (Spring 2015): 19–46.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, book 20, ch. 7, 8:266.

### C. Merging of Church and State and Favored Status of Christianity

The events of the Nicene Council (325 AD) along with the benefits the church now received from the imperial state constituted watershed turning points in the history and theological development of the church. Historical theologian Nathan Busenitz writes “in the fourth century, the beginnings of a Christian kingdom in Rome, under the reign of Constantine, was interpreted by many as the fulfillment of millennial promises.”<sup>57</sup> Schaff speaks with astounding clarity on this issue:

But the crushing blow [to Chiliasm] came from the great change in the social condition and prospects of the church in the Nicene age. After Christianity, contrary to all expectation, triumphed in the Roman empire, and was embraced by the Caesars themselves, the millennial reign, instead of being anxiously waited and prayed for, began to be dated either from the first appearance of Christ, or from the conversion of Constantine and the downfall of paganism, and to be regarded as realized in the glory of the dominant imperial state-church.<sup>58</sup>

Craig A. Blaising also notes the impact of the “Christianization” of the Roman Empire on the conception of the millennium:

It was now possible to argue that Christian experience had taken on a “millennial” character, thus removing the anomaly of a future Millennium from Christian hope. With the anomaly removed, nothing stood in the way of a full conversion of Christian eschatology to the spiritual vision model.

There were two ways in which the Millennium could be said to have been realized in present experience. One was the Constantinian or later Byzantine model, which saw millennial fulfillment in the imperial political order...

Many believed that the new Christian imperial order was the fulfillment of the Millennium. And this order functioned as a type of eternal spiritual reality. The trials and sufferings that in the text [Revelation] appear prior to the Millennium denoted the experiences of Christians under the old pagan Roman Empire. All that was past; the empire was now Christian. No future Millennium should be expected. Rather, Christians should fix their eschatological hopes completely on the beatitude of seeing God and Christ in heaven.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Busenitz, 188.

<sup>58</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:619.

<sup>59</sup> Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 171-72.

Historians on both sides of the millennial issue, or even without a millennial viewpoint, recognize the significance of the merging of church and state as a prime factor in the reinterpretation of Revelation and in the reversal of ancient Chiliasm.

### **Conclusion**

As the major Christological and Trinitarian debates raged in the church in the first four centuries, Chiliasm received little development, recognition, or defense as a doctrine that was considered central in Christianity, which would lead to its inclusion in any creed. It has been shown that the dominant view of the early church in the first three centuries was Chiliasm or the belief in an actual thousand year earthly reign of Jesus Christ following the first resurrection and preceding final judgment. Those who supported Chiliasm were by no means sideline figures in the church, but were men who were ardent defenders of the faith and developers of theology in their time. The testimony especially of Papias and Irenaeus, both of which were bishops, and both of which both traditionally are believed to have had a direct line of teaching to the apostle John, cannot be easily dismissed.<sup>60</sup>

The testimony of the early church and the patristic era to the question of a thousand year reign of Christ on earth is a resounding “yes.” Those who oppose Chiliasm often state that these early views of the millennium were often fanciful and nothing close to the doctrine of premillennialism today, and this is true, but it does not negate the fact that to the simple question of thousand years meaning a thousand years, the answer is a black and white “yes.” *Whatever speculation which follows from this supposition (literal thousand years) on the part of the church*

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<sup>60</sup> See Michael J. Vlach, “What Did Those Close to John Believe about the Millennium?” on [theologicalstudies.org](http://www.theologicalstudies.org/files/resources/Asiatic_Premillennialism2.pdf), [http://www.theologicalstudies.org/files/resources/Asiatic\\_Premillennialism2.pdf](http://www.theologicalstudies.org/files/resources/Asiatic_Premillennialism2.pdf) (accessed 4-9-2016).

*fathers should count against their view of the nature of the millennium, not against their confidence that they believed that the millennium would actually exist.*

It is also evident that many outside factors went into viewing the millennium differently from being an actual thousand year reign of Christ after the first resurrection. Greek philosophy had its impact, as Schaff directly states “We can trace it [Platonic philosophy] in Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and even in St. Augustine, who confessed that it kindled in him an incredible fire.”<sup>61</sup> Platonism as a philosophy plainly depreciates matter and exalts the spirit. This human philosophy gave those who began to develop non-literal views of the millennium an unhealthy revulsion of matter, and was the primary influence driving them to interpret the millennium in a non-literal manner. Christians should believe that a negative view of matter is unbiblical: evidenced by the fact that God called creation “very good” (Gen. 1:1-2:4), that all things are permissible and matter is not evil (1 Cor. 8:1-13), and because Christians have the hope of a bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 15; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Jn. 3:2). Once the proponents of the non-literal view decided to interpret Revelation 20 differently, they freely utilized the allegorical method of interpretation to come to drastically different theological conclusions than had ever been in the church before.

The newly found favored status of Christianity under Constantine also played a significant role on the eschatological consciousness of the church after 324 AD leading to various new conceptions of the millennium. Further historical evaluation of amillennialism from its founding proponents, along with the factors influencing its formulation, finds that it developed not out of sound biblical interpretation, but from non-literal interpretation motivated by manmade philosophies and the personal idiosyncrasies of its initial advocates. It may be fair to say that those who adopt the amillennial viewpoint arising from Revelation 20 in the present

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<sup>61</sup> Schaff, *ANC*, II:724-25.

day are perpetuating his errant exegesis (albeit in more sophisticated forms), even if they reject his principles of interpretation and philosophical groundings.

The picture of a kingdom acting as a transitional stage between earthy life now and eternity, earthy yet heavenly, finds Scriptural support from more passages than Revelation 20:1-7 alone. It answers the question of the unconditional land promises made to Abraham (Gen. 15:1-21); it fulfills numerous Old Testament predictions about a messianic age (Ps. 2:1-12; Is. 2:1-4; 9:6-7; 65:20-23; Jer. 23:5-8); it explains Jesus' promise that the apostles would reign on thrones in Jerusalem (Matt. 19:28); it is supported by Jesus' response to the disciples' question about restoring the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:5-7); and it is consistent with the promise the Israel will be restored (Zech. 14:1-21; Rom. 11:1-32).<sup>62</sup>

The near universal consensus of the early church fathers during the first three centuries, along with their straightforward interpretation of Scripture, presents a strong case that Chiliasm or the belief in premillennialism is the accurate and true teaching of the Bible. Granted, theological views should not be solely based on the testimony of the early church fathers; theology must be based on Scripture. Therefore the issue that has developed in the church carried forward to the present day should be viewed as an interpretive one and not solely a historical-theological debate. But in evaluating the historical-interpretive grounds it is clear that the amillennial interpretation of the millennium did not arise from sound hermeneutics uninfluenced by manmade philosophy that would lead to an accurate handling of the biblical text. Interpreting Revelation 20 according to an honest application of the literary-historical-grammatical method, which conservative evangelicalism largely adopts today, yields a thousand year reign of Christ

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<sup>62</sup> Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Church, Last Things*, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005), 548.

on the earth after His second coming and the first resurrection preceding the final judgment.<sup>63</sup>

The tradition of the early church and the church fathers interpretation and theological stance on Chiliasm should not be ignored in the millennial discussions which take place in the present day.

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<sup>63</sup> See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002); Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995); Matthew C. Waymeyer, *Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2004).

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