

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMILLENNIALISM

The view which today is known as Amillennialism has a long history of advocacy going back to the beginning of the Christian era. Since the fourth and fifth centuries, it has been the predominant position within the Christian church. Though Premillennialism has had its advocates throughout the history of the Christian church and has enjoyed a resurgence recently among conservative evangelicals in North America, it is safe to say that Amillennialism has been the consensus position of the largest portion of the Christian church. Louis Berkhof is correct when he remarks as follows regarding Amillennialism:

Some Premillenarians have spoken of Amillennialism as a new view and as one of the most recent novelties, but this is certainly not in accord with the testimony of history. The name is new indeed, but the view to which it is applied is as old as Christianity. It had at least as many advocates as Chiliasm among the Church Fathers of the second and third centuries, supposed to have been the heyday of Chiliasm. It has ever since been the view most widely accepted, is the only view that is either expressed or implied in the great historical Confessions of the Church, and has always been the prevalent view in Reformed circles)¹

Though Berkhof does not mention the claim of many present-day postmillennialists that Amillennialism, not Postmillennialism, is the relative newcomer, his observations are applicable to this claim.

It is generally agreed that though the view known today as Amillennialism was already present in the earliest period of the Christian church, the great church father, Augustine, was instrumental in establishing this view as the predominant one. By treating the millennium of Revelation 20 as a symbolical description of the church's growth in the present age, Augustine gave impetus to the amillennialist contention that the millennium does not follow chronologically the early history of the New Testament church. With the exception of some exponents of Premillennialism, the tenets of amillennialist teaching prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and during the Reformation. The Reformers were aligned with this broad tradition, though soon after the Reformation advocates of Postmillennialism arose especially within the Reformed tradition.

However strong the influence of Postmillennialism may have been within the Reformed churches, especially in North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the predominant view today is that of Amillennialism. Though advocates of Postmillennialism are found among the Reformed churches, and though the majority of conservative evangelicals in North America are premillennialists, the prevailing view among the Reformed churches and the Christian church, broadly conceived, remains that of Amillennialism.² Where the historic creeds and confessions address themselves to the subject of the future, they are more congenial to an amillennialist view than to the other major millennial views. This is true of the Reformed confessions, though they do not explicitly address some of the differences between Amillennialism and Postmillennialism.³

1. *Systematic Theology*, p. 708. The following sources offer representative presentations of the amillennial view: A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*; idem, 'Amillennialism', in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, pp. 155-88; G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*; William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972); William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1939); and Robert B. Strimple, 'Amillennialism', in

Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond, ed. Darrell L. Bock, pp. 81-129.

2. Though the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches do not have a dogmatic position on the millennium, their traditions have commonly identified the kingdom of Christ with the church during the present age. If the term applies, therefore, they are amillennial in outlook.

3. The one exception to this pattern may be the *Second Helvetic Confession* of 1566. This confession was first written by Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor and an influential Reformer in his own right, and later adopted by the Swiss Reformed churches as a confession of their faith. Next to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, it has been the most popular Reformed confession among the international family of Reformed churches. This confession seems to condemn Postmillennialism when it declares: 'Moreover we condemn the Jewish dreams that before the day of judgement there shall be a golden age in the earth, and that the godly shall possess the kingdoms of the world, their wicked enemies being trodden under foot; for the evangelical truth (Matt. 24 and 25, Luke 21), and the apostolic doctrine (in the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians 2, and in the Second Epistle to Timothy 3 and 4) are found to teach far otherwise' (Chap. 11; quoted from *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff (1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), III: p. 853.