

# ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

## HERMENEUTICS, PART 2

A man named Michael Azkoul wrote a book entitled *The Influence of Augustine of Hippo on the Orthodox Church* that I think reflects the truth of Augustine's theology and its effect on Christianity through the ages. "In the case of Augustine...his attraction to Platonism—specifically Plotinus of Lycopolis (204-270) and his school (Neo-Platonism)—was very serious, perhaps fatal. He did more than accessorize his theology with it. From this Greek philosopher and his *Enneads* [the *Enneads* were Porphyry's compilation of the Plotinus writings], more than any other, Augustine borrowed the principles to develop his Christian version of Greek philosophy [p. 129]. "[Augustine's] philosophical religion is a perversion of the Christian revelation. He is also responsible, in large measure, for the division between East and West; and, indeed, even for the Occident's loss of the patristic spirit.... There is good reason that Orthodoxy has never recognized him as a Father of the church—his latter-day champions notwithstanding; and certainly not a 'super-Father,' as he has been known in the West since the Carolignian period. He is surely not the apex of the patristic tradition; in fact, he was the beginning of something new" [pp. ii-iii]. What this Orthodox priest is writing here is very important for understanding the history of not only Augustine's theology but Christian theology in total because Augustine's doctrines are the foundation for much of the church's theology and, in particular, amillennial eschatology. This man is emphatically charging that Augustine's theology was not based on biblical revelation but was instead Greek philosophy dressed up in Christian clothing. This has important ramifications for understanding how the church came to adopt amillennial eschatology.

A man named W. R. Inge wrote an entry on "Plotinus" in the 1955 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and he wrote this in that entry. "... Even Augustine recognized the differences between Platonists and Christians were slight, and the church gradually absorbed Neoplatonism almost entire [sic].... It is no paradox to say with Eucken that the pagan Plotinus has left a deeper mark upon Christian thought than any other single man." "While Inge no doubt overstates his case, nevertheless we cannot be hasty in dismissing his claims. For many would ascribe such sweeping influence to Augustine, and if Augustine's primary source was Plotinus, then the implication is obvious." [David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 347].

The impact of Augustine's theology is important for its impact on all of theology but in terms of Eschatology, it has had a profound impact as well. Amillennialism is the predominant, prevailing understanding of prophetic, eschatological history. This doctrine destroys God's historical framework for world history. It is, first and foremost, replacement theology which claims that God is done with Israel, the church is the New

Israel, and there are no further plans in God's historical program for Israel as a nation. Secondly, it destroys the literal understanding of the Messianic Kingdom that is the culmination of history. A few weeks ago in his study on the book of Matthew, our pastor commented that the Gospel cannot be detached from the Kingdom. Amillennial Eschatology does exactly that. In fact, in this system, the literal Kingdom is entirely eliminated and replaced by some spiritual kingdom that exists now in the hearts of believers. We will go into more detail later about doctrine of amillennial Eschatology.

Augustine's ascetic inclinations led him to amillennialism; however, it may surprise you to know Augustine was in his early Christianity theologically premillennial in his Eschatology and a dispensationalist in his theology. Augustine originally taught two New Testament dispensations: the Church Age and the Millennial Kingdom [he taught this in his *Sermon*]. When his Eschatology changed his Soteriology changed as well. The premillennial, dispensational theologians who claim, in a spirit of being nice and getting along with nondispensational theologians, that amillennialists and others who hold to aberrant eschatological hermeneutical methods only affect prophecy are being far too charitable and they are mistaken; the hermeneutics used to change Eschatology also affect every other area of theology as well. When Soteriology changes chaos results with deadly results, because the gospel is the key to eternal life.

Several historical events converged to cause Augustine to change his theology from premillennial to amillennial. One was the bacchanal celebrations [Bacchus was the Greek god of wine] of a Christian sect in North Africa called the Donatists. Apparently, this sect had some pretty drunken celebrations. Remember, Augustine was thoroughly disgusted by his pre-conversion behavior and that was reinforced by the asceticism of the Manichean pagan cult and Neo-Platonic Greek philosophy in which he became involved.

"But it was the drunken feasts celebrated by the 'cult of the dead' which offended Augustine. He associated this kind of behavior with the Jewish apocalyptic emphasis on grand feasts of celebration during the kingdom of the saints on earth. His platonic leanings influenced him to view such materialistic gorging with a jaundiced eye. Augustine's revulsion at his own pre-Christian debauchery left him with an ascetic bent. For example, married men who indulged in sexual pleasure after procreation were guilty of venial sins. For Augustine this revelry for the dead was *carnalis ingurgitation*. Through Plato's eyes he understood the material flesh to be flawed, imperfect, defective—especially when compared to the spiritual world with its perfect forms and ideals [this was Plato's dualism]. The human spirit is tortured in its carnal prison; it longs to be set free. The pilgrim can hasten its release by fleshly self-denial. Therefore, along with his growing disdain for the carnal *Laetitia* (joy) of the saints was an increasing desire to understand the Millennium in a spiritual instead of a material light." [David R. Anderson,

*Free Grace Soteriology*, pp. 314-315]. To Augustine the material was bad and the spiritual was good so indulging the flesh was bad and asceticism was good. This is a doctrine that is founded in Greek philosophy and not in the Bible.

Another issue that changed Augustine's thinking was the thought among early church theologians that the Lord was going to return in 500 A.D. Using the "one day is like a thousand years" Scriptures (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8) combined with the image of the Genesis 1 creation week, and the 1,000 years of Revelation 20, two theologians named Hippolytus and Julius Africanus decided that the 6,000 years of world history would end in 500 A.D. and Christ would return for the final 1,000 year Millennial Kingdom. "[A]s A.D. 400 rolled around, anticipation of the coming Millennium added to the ardor and excitement of the Donatists in their celebrations. Augustine's anti-materialism motivated him to deflate this millennial balloon of material emphasis. He could do this if he could use the Scriptures to prove that the Millennium was spiritual instead of physical, and if he could discredit the 'cosmic week' chronology [meaning 7,000 years of world history] so widely accepted in his day." [David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 315]. Many people, including dispensationalists, still understand this doctrine of a "cosmic week" to be correct.

Psalm 90:4<sup>4</sup>For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.

2 Peter 3:8<sup>8</sup>But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.

The third factor that Augustine used to deny a literal Millennial Kingdom was a typological hermeneutic developed by Tyconius. "The primary tool of Tyconius was not allegory; it was typology. He used typology to avoid the ahistoricism of allegory while insisting that the time of the End could not be known. Through the use of the seven [typological] rules of Tyconius Augustine was able to turn numbers into symbols, to bind Satan in the sixth age of a thousand years rather than the seventh, and to have the saints rule with Christ spiritually in the sixth age rather than the seventh. The miracles of the saints proved [according to Augustine] that they were reigning with Christ in the Church Age, the sixth dispensation. He found the Antichrist, Gog and Magog, and the first resurrection—all in the age in which he lived. ...For him it was a tragic waste to try to superimpose a time line on God's redemptive plan, if for no other reason than the fact that Christ Himself did not know when it would end. God's medium of salvation was not history, but rather the individual. Individuals will be raised with corporeal bodies, but these bodies will live in the heavens, not in some kingdom on earth. There will be no food, no procreation, no social relations in God's kingdom. Instead, perfected beings in their thirties will stand around gazing at God. What, then, is the seventh age of a

thousand years for Augustine? Although the first six ages were indeed historical, the seventh age is the saints themselves: 'After this present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day; and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find our rest in him'" [David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Sovereignty*, pp. 316-317].

Augustine wrote in his book *The City of God* in his criticism of the thought the Millennium "should follow on the completion of six thousand years as of six days, a kind of seventh-day Sabbath in the succeeding thousand years; and that it is for this purpose the saints rise, viz., to celebrate this Sabbath. And this opinion would not be objectionable, if it were believed that the joys of the saints in that Sabbath shall be spiritual and consequent on the presence of God; for I myself, too, once held this opinion. But, as they assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink such as not only to shock the feeling of the temperate, but even to surpass the measure of credulity itself, such assertions can be believed only by the carnal. They who do believe them are called by the spiritual Chiliasts, which we may literally reproduce by the name Millenarians." [quoted in David Beale, *Historical Theology: In-Depth*, pp. 1:420-421]. In that time, there was some thought that the Millennium was going to be a huge feast of carnality with gorging on food and drunkenness on wine part of the wild celebrating. Some people thought that and it turned Augustine completely off to the concept of a literal Millennial Kingdom. It is unfortunate that he didn't attack those misguided ideas rather than the biblical concept of a literal Kingdom.

Augustine's line of reasoning to various degrees has been the predominate thinking of the church since the Roman Catholic Church adopted Augustine's theology. The Millennium became a dead issue and the men who began the Reformation did not concern themselves with eschatological issues. Luther and Calvin, both of whom grew up Roman Catholic, adopted amillennial Eschatology without challenge and without question.

Calvin denied a literal 1,000 year Kingdom because he thought that meant Christ's reign was limited to 1,000 years. "But a little later there followed the chiliasts, who limited the reign of Christ to 1,000 years. Now their fiction is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation. And the Apocalypse [meaning the book of Revelation], from which they undoubtedly drew a pretext for their error, does not support them. For the number 'one thousand [Rev. 20:4] does not apply to the eternal blessedness of the church but only to the various disturbances that awaited the church, while still toiling on earth. On the contrary, all Scripture proclaims that there will be no end to the blessedness of the elect or the punishment of the wicked [Matt. 25:41, 46]." [John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.25.5]. Apparently, Calvin simply accepted the amillennial explanation of the Kingdom. This is the only reference I could find in Calvin's *Institutes*

that references the Millennium; it is the only entry in the index under "Millennialists" and it is the only reference to "Chiliasm." He does have a number of references under "Kingdom" but for him the Kingdom is now. He claims that Christ's reign as the King is eternal and spiritual [2.15.3-4]. He criticizes Scriptures that proclaim the wonders of Christ's reign as King of the Messianic Kingdom. "If I should tarry long over refuting this shamelessness, I fear I might seem foolish. Therefore, I prefer not to waste words pointlessly. Still, I ask: If any Jew were to misuse these testimonies, what answer would they give? Sure, they would rebuke his stupidity, because he transferred to flesh and the world the things spiritually spoken of Christ's spiritual kingdom." [4.5.17]. He was criticizing a literal interpretation of Psalm 72:10-11; Isaiah 52:1 which is not a Millennial Kingdom verse, and Isaiah 60:6-7.

Psalm 72:10–11 <sup>10</sup>Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. <sup>11</sup>And let all kings bow down before him, All nations serve him.

Isaiah 60:6–7 <sup>6</sup>"A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. <sup>7</sup>"All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth will minister to you; They will go up with acceptance on My altar, And I shall glorify My glorious house.

Calvin said it is "a Jewish vanity to seek and enclose Christ's Kingdom with the elements of the world, let us rather ponder that what Scripture clearly teaches is a spiritual fruit..." [4.20.1].

Calvin simply accepted amillennial Eschatology without questioning it in any way. In fact, he ridiculed anyone who espoused a premillennial viewpoint.

"Augustine is well known among students of prophecy as the father of amillennialism. His view of the millennium was incorporated into Roman Catholic theology. Augustine rejected the literal millennium as too materialistic and carnal, and taught that 'the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian Church.' But for all his genius, Augustine never realized that the excessive materialistic elements then ascribed to the millennium were overstated and did not truly belong to the doctrine of the millennium. And so, the church father threw away the baby with the bath." [Paul Lee Tan, *A Pictorial Guide to Bible Prophecy*, p. 348-349].

Let me give you an example of where this kind of hermeneutic leads. Last Monday, I heard an Episcopal priest named Michael Yousef on his radio show teaching on Revelation 20. This man has a very large church in Atlanta and a worldwide ministry and

audience. He is amillennial in his Eschatology and it follows then that he is a replacement theologian. In the lesson I heard that day, he referenced the 144,000 Jewish witnesses in Revelation 7:4-8.

Revelation 7:4 <sup>4</sup>And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

This verse clearly says the 144,000 will be Jewish men with 12,000 of them chosen from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Because this Episcopal priest's theology cannot allow him to acknowledge any role for Israel in the end times and he cannot acknowledge a literal Millennial Kingdom on earth, he has to come up with an alternate explanation for these people. He spiritualizes this Scripture by saying the 144,000 represent all the believers of all time. He arrives at this by multiplying the twelve tribes of Israel times the twelve apostles who then represent all believers, Old Testament and New. Twelve times twelve equals 144 so there has to be another multiplier in there and I may have missed exactly how he arrived at 144,000 but other amillennialists do have an answer for that. This is how false doctrine affects hermeneutics; the doctrine must be upheld at all costs; therefore, inventing, imagining, making up interpretations that accomplish that purpose assume primary importance over understanding the true intent of God's Word. His presupposition that amillennial Eschatology is biblical leads him to make some seriously unbiblical interpretations. Because he replaces Israel with the church, he sees the church in the Old Testament and he sees Old Testament believers as part of the church. That's why he thinks he can multiply the twelve tribes times the twelve apostles. To him, both groups represent the church in history. Israel has been replaced in God's historical program and there will be no literal Millennial Kingdom. The Kingdom is right now in the hearts of believers.

You can see how one man, Augustine, can come to a faulty conclusion as a result of his aberrant presuppositions that are based on his own personal situation and the conclusions and ramifications of his false doctrine are continuing to influence pastors, teachers, and theologians to this day. There have been theologians throughout church history, who have correctly understood God's plan for history, but they were few and they were often murdered by the Roman Catholic Church to silence their teaching. The Reformers, steeped in Augustinian doctrine from the Roman Catholic Church, accepted its Eschatology without question. It wasn't until John Nelson Darby that premillennial Eschatology and Israel's role in the end times was restored and properly understood, but it is still a minority of Christians who correctly believe and understand this doctrine.

I consulted numerous commentaries on the book of Revelation to see how other exegetes interpreted Revelation 7:4. Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton wrote *A Translator's Handbook on the Revelation to John* for the United Bible Societies. They also

concluded that the 144,000 represents the totality of God's people, but they did not resort to the mathematical gymnastics to reach that conclusion that Yousef used; they just made an emphatic declaration without any support for it. "A *hundred and forty-four thousand*: the number is symbolic, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes, indicating the totality of all of God's people. As is true of other numbers and symbols in this book, this is not meant literally."

Beale claims the 144,000 "are unlikely to be literal Israelites living at the very end of history during a severe tribulation, nor are they literal Israelites living during the desecration of Israel's second Temple in the first century, for in either case God's protection would apply only to ethnic Jews—and a limited number of them—rather than to His people redeemed from every nation, including Jewish believers in Jesus. Such a suggestion would be alien to the teaching of the NT (read Galatians, for instance). [He is referring to Galatians 6:16 which refers to the Israel of God which he thinks means the entire church rather than just believing Jews which is exactly what Paul was writing about.]... But why speak of a specific number? In [Rev.] 21:13-14, the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles together form the foundational structure of the new Jerusalem. Multiplying twelve by twelve equals one hundred and forty-four representing the entire people of God through the ages. Multiplying that figure by one thousand reinforces the notion of completeness." [G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, p. 149].

Another view claims the company of the 144,000 "represents the church as the true and spiritual Israel. Hobbs gives three reasons for not understanding this vision to apply to ethnic Israelites: (1) such a view imposes a canon of literalism upon a passage belonging to a very symbolic book, (2) the Book of Revelation does not elsewhere draw distinctions between Jewish Christians and their Gentile counterparts, and (3) the sealing of this group, contrasted with the multi-racial multitude in verses 9 through 17 would suggest that only Jewish believers, and not other Christians, are sealed by God for protection. Wilson expresses a further reason and speaks for many expositors: 'That ethnic Israel is not in view is confirmed by the irregular listing of the tribes...' The number 144,000 is symbolic, derived by multiplying 1,000, the basic military division in the camp of Israel, by 144 (twelve squared), symbolizing the faithful remnant of the Old Israel and the New Israel—thus forming the true spiritual Israel, the church." [Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*, p. 131].

It is obvious that when allegorizing or spiritualizing the Scriptures, there can be no exegetical reason for arriving at any interpretive conclusions; the mind and the theology of the exegete are the controls rather than the Scriptures acting as the control. One expositor thinks multiplying by 1,000 refers to completeness while another thinks 1,000 represents the number of men in an Israelite military unit. Replacement theology is the root of these errors. Because they deny the Rapture of the church, these men all understand the church to be in the Tribulation. Apparently, the concept of the Day of Jacob's Trouble is lost on them. But it is lost on them because they think the church is now Jacob in the form of the new Israel. They believe that since Jew and Gentile are together as one body in the church, John could not have been referring to literal Israelite tribes. They believe the ten tribes of Israel have been lost to history after the Assyrian captivity. The genre hermeneutic of apocalyptic literature controls meaning for them. The Israel of God is the entire church. These very short examples that purport to interpret one verse of Scripture are overrun with error and it is all due to the denial of literal hermeneutics which also relates to Replacement Theology.

Those who subscribe to Augustine's theology do not accept literal hermeneutics and the fact is they affirmatively reject literal hermeneutics. It is not that they simply neglect to use literal hermeneutics; they think literal hermeneutics is wrong. They can't accept a literal hermeneutical system as the above example provided by the Episcopal priest informs us. Literal hermeneutics would lead them to conclude exactly what the premillennial dispensationalist has concluded all along—and some of them are honest enough to admit it. They still reject it but they know the truth and they will admit it even while rejecting it. I have a few examples of some amillennialists and some postmillennialists admitting that a literal hermeneutic does, in fact, present a premillennial understanding of the Scriptures.

“This disagreement [referring to premillennial vs. postmillennial Eschatology] arises primarily because of the different methods of interpretation. It is generally agreed that if the prophecies are taken literally, they do foretell a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine with the Jews having a prominent place in that kingdom and ruling over the other nations.” [Lorraine Boettner, “A Postmillennial Response” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. by Robert G. Clouse, p. 95].

Boettner dogmatically stated that Augustinianism is Calvinism. “...while this system, known in different ages as Augustinianism or Calvinism, has remained fundamentally the same in its basic principles. Is not this in itself a strong proof that it is the true system?” [Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 339]. In the context of



what Boettner is saying here, he is actually comparing Calvinism to Roman Catholicism because the Roman church is the religious system, Christian so-called, that represented Augustinian theology prior to the time of Calvin. Calvin based his theology on Augustine's theology. This is also a tacit admission that Calvinism is founded on the basis of Augustine's pagan influenced theology. I'm not saying that everything Augustine concluded is unbiblical but a little leaven spreads throughout the whole lump and that is exactly what Augustine's errors have accomplished. They have destroyed biblical Eschatology in their theological system and that has affected every other doctrinal position they hold including Soteriology. It is also noteworthy that he makes the claim that the historical use of this theology makes it true. Amillennialists make this same claim to this day. Their reliance on history to confirm their theology is invalid. If it is wrong in the beginning, it is still wrong today not matter how long it has been believed.

“Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of a Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Old Testament promises. That was the kind of a kingdom that the Sadducees were talking about when they ridiculed the idea of the resurrection of the body, drawing from our Lord the clearest statement of the characteristics of the future age that we have in the New Testament, when He told them that they erred ‘not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God’ (Matt. 22:29) . . . the Jews were looking for just such a kingdom as that expected by those premillennialists who speak of the Jews holding a preeminent place in an earthly Jewish kingdom to be set up by the Messiah in Jerusalem” [Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of the Millennial Faith*, pp. 38-39 quoted by J. Dwight Pentecost in *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, p. 2]. But for these theologians the Scriptures cannot be interpreted literally because the implication behind Replacement Theology is that the church has replaced Israel; therefore, Israel has no future historical presence except as the church is thought to be the new Israel.