



Augustine's Theology of the Future

Review

In the last chapter, I explored the teachings of Lactantius, a prominent early millennialist and important historian living at the time of Emperor Constantine. Like the rest of the early millennialists, he, too, believed the departed saints will inherit the 1,000-year messianic kingdom through the resurrection of their natural bodies. When this Edenic paradise comes to an end, the sons of God will experience a transformation and resurrection to eternal bodies at the final resurrection on the last day so they can inherit eternal paradise in the Father's kingdom. Lactantius taught that there are two resurrections because we are destined to inherit two kingdoms of God—one on the Son's restored earth as restored human beings who experience marriage and reproduction, and another on the Father's new earth as sons of God who will no longer experience marriage.

Millennialism Fell out of Favor

During the first few hundred years of the church, the Christian faith continued to grow, gaining credibility among all strata of Roman society, despite periodic persecution from the Roman Empire. Millennialism, however, gradually fell out of favor. There were obvious theological problems with this eschatology. Critics could easily refer to

Scriptures that taught that the second coming will be in conjunction with the resurrection of the eternal bodies of the saints, not of their natural bodies.

Critics also found fault with their emphasis on the pleasures of the body and the material world during the millennium. The Romans had a strong tradition of hedonism and some early millennialists from this background distorted the millennium by overemphasizing the earthly aspects of it. They envisioned it as an almost carnal period of intense pleasures of the flesh, with extravagant feasts bordering on gluttony. The produce of the earth would be so abundant that they would not have to work the fields; they could simply sit around all day feasting on the earth's bounty. Mature Christians in that day would naturally be repulsed by these distortions and excesses. Moreover, many Gentile Christians came from a more Neoplatonic background. They would have frowned upon views of a kingdom of Christ that focused on the pleasures of the body and not of the mind. Returning to this earth after tasting of the paradise of heaven was also considered retrogressive. As a result, many turned against the idea of an Edenic paradise before the eternal kingdom.

The dissolution of Israel also posed a problem for a future 1,000-year messianic kingdom. The Old Testament prophecies were framed around the restoration of Israel. The Messiah was supposed to rule all nations through the nation of Israel. But Israel had rejected their Messiah and as a result, Christ rejected them when he pronounced judgment on Jerusalem and its temple. In the First Jewish-Roman War (AD 66–73), the temple was destroyed. During the Second Jewish-Roman War (AD 132–135), the nation itself was dissolved by the Romans. So how could there be a Jewish-led messianic kingdom if the nation of Israel no longer existed?

The Rise of the Christian Emperors

Another pivotal event in the history of the understanding of the millennium was the unexpected conversion of some important Roman emperors. Emperor Constantine, who reigned from AD 306 to 337, converted to Christianity in AD 312, and he made Christianity the official religion of his army. He established another important precedent thirteen years later, in AD 325, when he convened the Council

of Nicaea to resolve a doctrinal dispute among the church fathers over the nature of Christ as fully human and fully God. Constantine presided over the council, and the rulings then became a form of state law. Bishops or pastors who continued to promote heretical beliefs were arrested and punished by the civil authorities. The emperor was now ruling over the beliefs and affairs of the church, as he had ruled over the pagan priests and temples.

Emperor Theodosius, who reigned from AD 379 to 395, also converted to Christianity. During his reign, he made Christianity the official religion of the empire. He condoned the tearing down of pagan temples and began banning many of the pagan rituals. He made the church a department of the state, and Roman taxes were collected to build churches and support bishops and pastors.

This was a remarkable turn of events. Christianity had once been regarded as an illegal religion, often persecuted by the state because its followers refused to worship the deified emperor and the pagan gods of the empire. Now it was the official religion of the empire! Amillennialism began to morph into postmillennialism, which asserts that Christ's reign over the nations begins when the nations are Christianized through effective evangelism and the work of the Holy Spirit. Pagan Rome was being Christianized, which led many theologians to believe that the messianic kingdom had begun.

Augustine (c. AD 354–430)

Augustine is one of the most brilliant and important theologians in church history. He lived during this period of the Christianization of the Roman Empire and was twenty-six when Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Before Augustine became a Christian, he had explored the heathen pleasures of the flesh, including sexual orgies. After he became a Christian, he rejected his former lifestyle and became celibate, frowning upon bodily pleasures. He considered that sex between married partners was only for procreation—sex for the sake of pleasure was sinful. He initially entertained millennialism, as taught by the early millennialists, but he found its emphasis on the pleasures of this world unspiritual.

Augustine interpreted Revelation 20 as follows. The first resurrection is not of the actual body; rather, it is of the regenerated spirit of

the believer upon conversion.³⁰ Satan is already bound, so God can now rescue pagans from bondage to sin, and they can be resurrected from spiritual death and be brought into Christ's kingdom. With the emergence of Christian Rome, the millennium had begun. The Christian rulers and church leaders are those sitting on thrones to reign with Christ over this earth. As John taught, "Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed" (Rev. 20:4). These Christian Roman rulers have the "authority" of Christ to judge or rule the Christianized nations on his behalf. From Augustine's perspective, Israel could not become the center of the messianic kingdom because the nation of Israel no longer existed. But the Romans had accepted Christ, and Rome was already a world empire ruling over the nations.

The Roman Empire was evolving into a Christian empire ruled by Christian emperors, so the Old Testament messianic prophecies that described the Messiah as ruling all nations was being fulfilled. But they were being fulfilled through Christian Rome and the Gentile church instead of through Israel and the unrepentant Jews. The messianic kingdom would be a theocratic kingdom, with Christ ruling the world through his agents sitting on these thrones.

To understand Augustine's view of church and state during Christ's reign over the world through Rome, it is important to understand the concept of the Jewish theocracy. Through Moses, God had established a spiritual-civil covenant with the Jewish people that made Israel a religious state, or theocracy. This covenant was much like a constitution in that it laid out Israel's form of government. The Jewish state was to rule over both the civil *and* spiritual affairs of the Jewish people to ensure that only the one true God was worshiped. The Jewish kings were to enforce with the sword the religion of Judaism by tearing down any pagan temples and punishing any false teachers or false prophets that arose. Judaism was to be the only religion allowed in Israel. Israel was a religious state, not a secular state. There was no religious freedom in Israel. The first part of the Ten Commandments was indeed an establishment clause:

³⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), 20.6.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. (Deut. 5:7–9)

Judaism, with its worship of Yahweh, was the established religion in this spiritual-civil covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel.

Israel struggled to remain faithful to this covenant in an age of unrighteous humanity. The messianic kingdom, however, is structured around the concept of a restored Israel worshipping the true God in an age of righteous humanity. All the nations will be theocratic states during the millennium. With Satan removed, Israel and the whole world will worship its Creator. All the nations will be true Christian nations. Until then, the church best operates under a secular or civil government where religious freedom is a civil right.

Religious Liberty in a Secular State

In stark contrast to the Jewish covenant, the U.S. Constitution created a secular state among its citizens without any established religion:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.³¹

Whereas Israel was a religious state ordained by God, the U.S. federal government has no role to play in regulating the religious thought and behavior of its citizens. Religion operates in a free marketplace of ideas, and different religions can compete for the hearts and minds of the people. “We the People” are free to decide for ourselves what is the truth and can assemble into our own congregations of like belief (freedom to assemble). We have the freedom to preach what we believe

31 U.S. Constitution, Amendment I.

(freedom of speech). And we have the freedom to publish our beliefs (freedom of the press). The U.S. federal government is a secular or civil state that is responsible for the material well-being of its citizens—not for their spiritual well-being. Christians do not have to fear the government accusing them of heretical beliefs and prosecuting them in court for their faith. The government will neither punish them with fines, imprisonment, or execution for their faith; nor will it tear down their places of worship. This seminal freedom of religion forms the basis for civil liberties for other civic groups, such as political parties. They, too, can freely assemble, speak, and publish their beliefs in a free marketplace of ideas.

Roman Theocracy

Augustine was operating from a very different worldview. The Gentile rulers and their people had accepted the Jewish Messiah, and the Christian rulers had established Christianity as the official religion of the state. The *Christian* empire in Rome, therefore, was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies, not Israel. These rulers should govern Christ's kingdom in much the same manner as the Jewish kings and priests had governed the theocratic nation of Israel. Augustine made this claim in his famous book *The City of God*:

But while the devil is bound, the saints reign with Christ during the same thousand years . . . in the words, "And I saw seats and them that sat upon them, and judgment was given." It is not to be supposed that this refers to the last judgment [after the millennium], but to the seats of the rulers and to the rulers themselves by whom the Church is now governed [by the Christian emperors and church leaders]. And no better interpretation of judgment being given can be produced than that which we have in the words [to Peter], "What ye bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what ye loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."³²

According to Augustine, the millennial reign of Christ had begun. The Christian civil and religious rulers are those seated on the thrones

32 Augustine, *The City of God*, 20.9.

described by John in Revelation 20. They now have the authority to reign with Christ over the state *and* the church in Christ's earthly kingdom. They are to rule as judges over his kingdom. Jesus' prophecy to Peter had predicted a day when Christ would rule the world through Rome.

The rule of the Christian Roman authorities over the affairs of the church included the state convening church councils, as Constantine did, and writing laws based on sound Christian doctrines. The state would enforce these binding laws by punishing heretics and false teachers who violated these doctrines. This is similar to the way the Jewish kings opposed pagan worship and enforced Mosaic law by punishing false prophets and false teachers who led the nation astray. Augustine taught:

But these emperors [civil authorities], whatever the occasion of their becoming acquainted with the crime of your schism [heresy] might be, frame against you such decrees as their zeal and their office demand. For they bear not the sword in vain; they are ministers of God to execute wrath upon those that do evil. (*Letters* 87.1.7–9)³³

The evil in this case is not criminal behavior, like burglary. Rather, it is heretical beliefs that are harmful to the spiritual well-being of the nation. The Christian emperors are the ministers of God's wrath against anyone who would corrupt the Christian empire with their heretical teachings.

Augustine's assumption that the state possessed the power to regulate the affairs of the church was extraordinary. Can you imagine the U.S. Congress convening theologians to a special council to define orthodox Christian doctrine and then making those doctrines the law of the land? Or the Department of Justice prosecuting and punishing any professor or pastor who deviated from those doctrines? It is hard to imagine, but that is precisely what Augustine advocated. Just as King David was a minister of God in Israel, so, too, the Christian emperors were to be ministers of God's wrath against false teachers who might corrupt the Christian empire.

³³ Henry Paolucci, *The Political Writings of St. Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 192.

Augustine received opposition from some fellow Christians for his assertion that the state had jurisdiction over the affairs and teachings of the church. These Christians argued that Paul and the apostles did not set out on their missionary journeys to turn the pagan Roman Empire into a Christian theocracy modeled on Israel. Their gospel focused on the heavenly kingdom, not on the earthly kingdom of Christ. The apostles set out to establish the church as a peaceful assembly of God's people, not a theocratic state ruled by Christians. They hoped and prayed that the church would be granted some religious liberty by the pagan Roman authorities so that they would be free to assemble and to spread the gospel to all peoples and nations. The apostles never intended to establish Christ's kingdom on this earth until the Father determined it was the right time.

Augustine's rebuttal to their argument was that Christ's reign over the nations did not occur during the time of the early church because Rome had not yet become a Christian kingdom. Once the pagan Gentiles and their rulers received Christ, his reign described by the prophets had begun. In the following quote, Augustine connects the thrones described in Revelation 20 to these messianic prophecies, which describe the kings ruling the world on Christ's behalf:

But as to the argument of those men who are unwilling that their impious deeds should be checked by the enactment of righteous laws [by the state], when they say that the apostles never sought such measures from the kings of the earth, they do not consider the different character of that age, and that everything comes in its own season. For what emperor had as yet believed in Christ [the emperors were still pagan], so as to serve Him in the cause of piety by enacting laws against impiety [false teachings], when as yet the declaration of the prophet was only in the course of its fulfillment [the messianic kingdom had not yet begun], "Why do the heathen rage, . . . and their rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His Anointed;" and there was as yet no sign of that which is spoken a little later in the same psalm: "Be wise now, therefore, O ye kings; be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling [during the messianic kingdom]." How then are kings to serve the Lord with fear, . . . he serves Him by enforcing with suitable rigour

such laws as ordain what is righteous [Christian rulers enforce Christian thought and behavior during the reign of Christ], . . . Even as Hezekiah served Him, by destroying the groves and the temples of the idols, and the high places which had been built in violation of the commandments of God [the Gentile messianic kingdom is modeled on Israel's theocracy]. (*Letters* 185.19–36)³⁴

According to Augustine, the messianic kingdom did not occur in Peter's day, but with the Christianization of Rome, Christ's reign had begun. The rulers had the authority and the God-given responsibility to reign with Christ over the state and the church during Christ's earthly kingdom. Christian kings were to serve the Lord with fear as they enacted laws to establish an age of righteousness on this earth during his reign. Just as Judaism was the established religion of the nation of Israel, so, too, Christianity was to be the established religion of the Christian state of Rome. The Roman king under Christ's reign was to act in the same manner as the God-fearing Jewish kings by destroying the pagan temples and killing the false teachers. There would be no religious freedom in the messianic kingdom, just as there was none in Israel.

Augustine applied another messianic prophecy, Psalm 72, to the Roman emperors now reigning with Christ. This psalm describes Christ's reign in the future restoration, when he will rule the whole world:

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! . . . Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen! (vv. 8–19)

Quoting from this psalm, Augustine wrote:

. . . Christ from the kingdom bought with His blood, which extends from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth? Nay verily; *let the kings of the earth serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause.* (*Letters* 93.16–19)³⁵

34 Ibid., 211–212.

35 Ibid., 206.

Augustine believed the Christian kings were to serve Christ by “making laws for Him and for His cause.” They would rule with Christ over his earthly kingdom that, through Rome’s vast empire, extended from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth.

In stark contrast, the early millennialists, such as Justin and Irenaeus, linked the messianic prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah to the *future* millennium described by John. Christ’s reign will not occur until Satan is completely removed from this world and the earth is regenerated to its Edenic condition.

Rejecting these early millennial views, Augustine linked the Old Testament messianic prophecies to the theocratic kingdom of Christian Rome in his day. Satan was partially bound, so Christ could rescue sinners from his kingdom of darkness through the first resurrection of their spirits. But Satan was not completely removed from this world. He continued to influence unbelievers in a competing kingdom, and the curse remained on this earth. This was a radically different understanding of God’s endgame from that of the early millennialists.

I have often wondered how history would have been different if Emperors Constantine and Theodosius had been advised by millennialists, such as Irenaeus. They would have likely counseled the emperors to decriminalize Christianity and disestablish the pagan religions from the Roman state. They would have advocated for a truly secular state with no established religion. The church could then have competed freely for the hearts and minds of the Roman people. The pagan gods were devious, unloving, and unpredictable creatures. They were no match for the God of the Bible, who is all-powerful, personal, and loving.

Unfortunately, millennialism had fallen out of favor when these emperors became believers. Postmillennial theologians like Augustine persuaded the Christian rulers and church leaders to view the Christian Roman Empire as a fulfillment of the messianic prophecies. Augustine gave theological justification for this faulty eschatology. His brilliance and the sheer breadth of his writings carried the day. Augustine’s interpretation of Revelation 20 and his theory of the relationship between church and state became the paradigm for the Roman Empire and, subsequently, Medieval Europe, when Christ’s kingdom on earth became known as Christendom. The Catholic

Church was considered the one and only true universal church during Christ's reign. The pope, cardinals, and bishops, along with kings and princes, were those seated with Christ on the thrones described in Revelation 20.

Throughout this period, there was a great deal of wrangling over who was actually sovereign over matters of faith—the civil authorities or the church authorities. At times, the state had the upper hand and had the authority to appoint key church officials, such as bishops. At other times, the Catholic Church was responsible for appointing these key officials. The pope eventually claimed that he was the successor to Peter, who could bind anything on this earth related to matters of the faith. The pope even had the authority to excommunicate the civil king if he strayed too far from the faith.

Ironically, Augustine's flawed understanding of Revelation provided Satan the ideal opportunity to delude sinful church and civil rulers into believing that they were on the thrones set up to reign with Christ. Since these rulers could use the sword to rule over the spiritual affairs of their nations, this led to much tyranny and the tragic loss of religious liberty for centuries. The punishment by the theocratic state of those deemed heretical and unrepentant was considered a sacred duty of these civil authorities, and the punishment often included execution.

This view of eschatology also led to the loss of all civil liberties, including the freedoms of assembly, speech, and the press. Scientists, including Galileo, were required to get the pope's blessing before publishing any new theories on nature. When Galileo defied the pope's orders by announcing his proof that the earth moves around the sun, he was convicted of heresy and punished with house arrest for the rest of his life. He would have been burned at the stake had he not recanted his findings at the end of his trial.

Augustine's interpretation of Revelation 20 and the Old Testament messianic prophecies is obviously wrong, and it led to a seriously flawed view of the functions of church and state during this interim period leading up to Christ's millennial reign. Clearly, Satan is still operational in this world, and with a theocratic form of government all he had to do to corrupt the church was to influence a few key people at the top of this hierarchy. Until Christ removes Satan, however, the state has no right to rule this world on Christ's behalf.

Calvin and the Reformers corrected many of these unbiblical doctrines of the Catholic Church, but they did not reject the Catholic Church's eschatology. They largely accepted Augustine's understanding of the role of church and state during Christ's reign over this world.