

THE224 Christian Narrative 2 Redemption

Unit 6 Reading 1

Wright, “Amillennialism”

Presented by the



For Use by the

Blue Letter Bible Institute

[Web: Study.Bible](http://Study.Bible)

A Ministry of the

Blue Letter Bible

[Web: BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org)

Amillennialism: Millennium Today

Augustine changed his mind—and that of the church in the West for the Next 1,500 years.

By: David Wright

Copyright © 1999 by the author or Christianity Today/Christian History magazine.

One of the interesting things about Augustine of Hippo, the famous North African who converted in A.D. 386, is how and why he changed his views during his 45-year writing career as a Christian. Perhaps his most influential change is found in *City of God*, Augustine's greatest work. Its massive length (about a thousand pages in modern translations) took him a dozen years to complete.

There, in book 22, Augustine sets out his mature understanding of the "thousand years" of Revelation 20:3-6. His new position—which is often called *amillennial*—became the view of most Christians in the West, including the Reformers, for almost a millennium and a half.

Millennium now

Augustine had previously followed the view of most earlier Christians, which was known as *chiliasm* (from the Greek word for a thousand years). He translated this into Latin as *millenarianism*.

Now, in *City of God*, Augustine viewed the thousand years of Revelation 20 not as some special future time but "the period beginning with Christ's first coming," that is, the age of the Christian church. Throughout this age, the saints reign with Christ—not in the fullness of the coming kingdom prepared for those blessed by God the Father, but "in some other and far inferior way."

In fact, if God's people did not now reign with Christ, Augustine said, the church would not now be the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of heaven (though he does distinguish different meanings of *kingdom* in Scripture).

So what about the evil that people experience in Christ's kingdom? Augustine said, "The devil is bound throughout the whole period, from the first coming of Christ to the end of the world, which will be Christ's second coming." This does not mean the devil is incapable of enticing Christians away from Christ, but rather that "he is not permitted to exert his whole power of temptation, either by force or by guile to seduce people. ..."

Even when the devil is unloosed for "a little while" at the end of the church millennium, his assault will reveal not only the depth of "his malign power" but also the marvelous endurance of Christian people: "The Omnipotent will unloose him, so that the City of God may behold how powerful a foe it has overcome, to the immense glory of its Redeemer, its Helper, its Deliverer."

Augustine said the "first resurrection" of which John speaks is a spiritual resurrection, and it takes place throughout the church's history as the spiritually dead "hear the voice of the Son of God and pass from death to life." They continue hereafter "in this condition of new life." Those who have not come to new life in this era will, at the second resurrection, pass into the second death with their bodies.

Augustine never left a problem unsolved if he could help it. He took the thrones of Revelation 20:4 as "the seats of the authorities by whom the church is now governed." The judgment they exercise is what Jesus spoke of when he said, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."

This interpretation, coupled with his emphasis on the church as the kingdom, led to notions that Augustine could not have envisaged: in the Middle Ages, the church was viewed as the place where God's rule was exercised on earth through a papal monarch.

Heaven's the thing

This was a new way of understanding last things, and the question naturally arises: Why would Augustine abandon the dominant interpretation of Christians, many of whom he deeply respected?

First, Augustine owed a lot to a remarkable African Christian writer named Tyconius, who died around A.D. 400. We know too little about him, but enough to be sure that his writings shaped Augustine's beliefs.

Second, Augustine increasingly focused on the life of heaven, both now and hereafter. Earthly and historical realities were less and less important to him. True fulfillment lay beyond this world. The idea of a literal Millennium on earth after Christ's return was, to him, too crass.

Third, Augustine was wrestling with reactions to the sack of the "eternal city" of Rome by the Goths in 410. Too many Christians, in his view, had invested too much spiritual capital in the permanence of the Roman Empire—and hence had been distraught when the city fell. Augustine wanted to cut all secular history down to size. All that mattered was the story of the City of God.

Fourth, Augustine had come to see the whole period between the first coming of Christ and his second coming as a single era—uniform and uninterrupted by any special events initiating new eras in salvation-history. Thus, he showed remarkably little interest in "the Constantinian revolution."

Augustine believed God's purposes were always being fulfilled, the gospel was always advancing into "the nations at the four corners of the earth." The saints who had been spiritually raised to life were always reigning with Christ—and always suffering from demonic hostility.

The decisive historical events had happened at Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem, and these would reach fulfillment only when Christ came again. Christ's first coming had begun "the last times" of earthly history. The consummation lay beyond this world, when Christ will fully reign in the midst of his restored people, when the struggles and ambiguities of this age are past.

David Wright is professor of church history at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He is also an adviser for Christian History.

Resources:

Both the [1985](#) and the [1958](#) translations of Augustine's City of God are still in print.

Broadman and Holman recently published an excellent [reader's guide](#) to City of God for Christians.

Links:

[City of God](#) is also online at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Augustine's many other [works](#) are online, too, and there's a great [Augustine](#) home page. There are also loads of Augustine [images](#) online.