



## Eschatology Precedes Everything

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This is Part Two of a book review written in 2009 of the book, *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life Between the Already and Not Yet*. [Part One can be found here](#).

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In the “Preface” to *Dual Citizens*, Jason Stellman approvingly quotes Dutch theologian Geerhardus Vos, who “famously said that ‘eschatology precedes soteriology.’” “But,” Stellman continues, “I would go so far as to say that eschatology (looking at the present from the standpoint of the future) precedes everything.” There is plenty of truth in this statement, not just in the fact that I think Stellman is absolutely correct in his belief that our view of the future colors everything we think and do in the present, but also in the fact that everything in Stellman’s book is indeed an outworking of his own view of eschatology. In other words, the “Preface” is a disclaimer of sorts, one that should be included in the “Preface” of every theological work. Stellman admits that he sees the world as he does because of his view of the future; and it should be added that I do too, and so do you. Eschatology indeed “precedes everything.”

It is Stellman’s eschatological view—amillennialism—which forces him to make some of the strange divisions that he does. For instance, speaking of the situation immediately following Adam’s Fall in the Garden of Eden, Stellman writes: “Once man declared his rebellious sovereignty, his kingdom became distinct from God’s kingdom, causing an unnatural separation between cult and culture” (p. xx). Apart from the fact that this a physical impossibility—God’s kingdom includes the entire created order—it seems to indicate that man’s kingdom was now somehow outside of God’s jurisdiction, a truly crazy notion. Stellman knows that this is not the case, because God still commanded men to live by His rules, and judged them when they disobeyed. If man’s kingdom was truly distinct, God would have no say over how men lived in “their” kingdom. But it is this kind of divided thinking—what Stellman calls cult and culture, but what could also be referred to as sacred and secular, or spiritual and physical—that is forced by the “already but not yet” of amillennialism.

Although this review is not meant to be a primer on eschatology, a short summary of amillennial thought is necessary at this point. Although it is difficult to say exactly what flavor of amillennialism Stellan holds, I think he would basically agree with Anthony Hoekema, who summarized his own views this way:

[Amillennialists] eagerly look forward to the new earth as part of a renewed universe in which God's good creation will realize finally and totally the purpose for which he called it into existence: the glorification of his name. All this implies that regarding world history, amillennialists adopt a position of *sober or realistic optimism*. Belief in the present rule of Christ, in the presence of God's kingdom and in the movement of history toward its goal is accompanied by a realistic recognition of the presence of sin in this world and of the growing development of the kingdom of evil. Amillennial eschatology looks for a culmination of apostasy and tribulation in the final emergence of a personal Antichrist before Christ comes again. Amillennialists do not expect to see the perfect society realized during this present age. [1]

Read Hoekema's last sentence again and I believe you will begin to see where amillennialism's biggest problem lies. Hoekema tries to throw a positive light on it by saying, "Amillennial eschatology, therefore, gives us a realistic, yet basically optimistic world-and-life view." That's exactly what amillennialism is: "basically optimistic." But, it is difficult to build a worldview on "basic optimism." This is why Stellan has such a difficult time commending activities in this world as being good, right, and proper. His "basic optimism" only takes him so far.

Stellan, like all amillennialists, believe that no matter how much progress the Church and individual Christians make, this world is still facing a tyranny from the "kingdom of evil." In fact, Hoekema claims that amillennialists are actively looking for the "culmination of apostasy and tribulation" in an Antichrist figure. How can one possibly claim optimism is the face of this? Only by retreating into the "spiritual" things, where Christ has "already" won the victory, even though His ultimate victory over evil is "not yet." Because living in the midst of these two realities is such a paradox (for amillennialists at least), Stellan subtitled his book: *Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet*.

This is why *Dual Citizens* is such a frustrating book to read. On one hand, Stellan seems to be annoyed that he is still here on earth, when all of the "real action" is in heaven with God. This attitude is understandable and even commendable to some degree. All Christians should have a longing, like the Apostle Paul, to "depart and be with Christ" ([Philippians 1:23](#)), but the mere fact that we are still here indicates that we have God-ordained work to do. It reminds me of the title of David Crowder's book, *Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven, but Nobody Wants to Die*. This is where we find ourselves—hungry for heaven but commissioned with a job here. And because amillennialism offers nothing in the way of good news for this earth—unless the fact that it is going to be

subject to the kingdom of evil for a time before it is destroyed and re-made is somehow comforting for you—Stellman’s chapters in Part Two, where he discusses life in the here and now, ring a bit hollow.

It is not for lack of trying though. Stellman valiantly calls on Catholic thinkers like G.K. Chesterton and Peter Kreeft for a few encouraging words. He includes this quotation from Chesterton: “Sin is in a man’s soul, not in his tools or toys.” Taking Chesterton to heart, Stellman writes this: Whether we are beholding the majesty of Mount Rainier, rejoicing over the birth of our first child, or simply savoring a good pale ale or single-malt Scotch, a world-affirming Christianity does more justice to both the incarnation of Christ and the *imago Dei* [image of God] in man than does the world-avoidance of much of the American church" (p. 128). I couldn’t agree more. The problem with this quotation though, is that earlier in the book (a mere eight pages earlier to be exact), Stellman castigates modern evangelicals for having a “fixation” with earthly things:

As hesitant as we may be to admit it, when we compare contemporary evangelicalism’s fixation with earth to contemporary paganism’s frustration with it, the seemingly inescapable conclusion is that, sometimes at least, the latter does a much better job of imaging the God it denies than the former does of imaging the one it confesses. (p. 120)

I understand what Stellman is trying to say, but, again, it is his eschatology that causes him to write contradictory things like this. On one hand, “enjoy the world and its simple pleasures,” but on the other, “But don’t let your enjoyment become a fixation.” Well that should pretty much go without saying. The problem is that Stellman sets heaven and earth up as somehow antagonistic to each other; but they are not. Because of his amillennial view of the world, Stellman can’t understand—like Chesterton could—that a full-on love and enjoyment of this world is completely compatible with a longing for and a full-on expectation of the next. Hating the earth, or at least throttling our enjoyment of it to a respectable level, will not make us love heaven more, but it will make us miserable.

Imagine a father who teaches his children to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” ([Micah 6:8](#)), and then on the day that they strike out on their own tells him that all of that “justice, kindness, and humbleness” stuff will have no effect. “In fact,” the father says, “you will not succeed at all. All of your work and life will be meaningless, because we will one day be subject to the kingdom of evil. Now go enjoy your lives!” It may be extreme, but this is effectively what amillennialism teaches.

Stellman gives an analogy on page 121 that marks the ultimate example of the entire book. Paraphrasing an article by Kreeft, Stellman writes:

The charge that heavenly-mindedness diminishes earthly goodness is not necessarily true...who is more likely to quit smoking during pregnancy, the

mother who plans for an abortion or the one who plans to give birth? The answer should be obvious. Roads that actually lead somewhere are usually maintained better than dead-end ones, and likewise, when we see our earthly sojourn as just that—a sojourn on the way to our heavenly home—it is reasonable to assume that we will take this pilgrimage with great seriousness and care. If death is not the end of the road, but actually ushers us into the presence of the God who gave us life and demands an account of how we lived it, is it not to be expected that the pilgrim with an eye on his destination will live more purposefully than will the tourist, the goal of whose is to get as much bang for his buck as possible? (p. 121-122)

This clever rhetoric glosses over the fact that Stellman’s eschatology makes him the tourist on the dead-end road and the mother planning for an abortion. Stellman believes that this world is bound for destruction: an abortion, not a birth. He can’t square his pessimistic view of the earth with his “basically optimistic” view of the future. Stellman’s book is confused because his eschatology is confused.

Christians are not dual citizens, we do not live in two worlds; Jesus said as much when he told Pilate that His kingdom was not of this realm ([John 18:36](#)). We are citizens of heaven who have been given an earthly job to do. We are stewards of God’s property, not citizens of it. Because we serve a higher Authority, we obey the laws of men only insofar as they do not contradict the laws of God. We obey our heavenly King by obeying (or disobeying if necessary) the earthly king. Because we have been born again (or “born from above” [[John 3:3-8](#)]), we are heavenly expatriates, not dual citizens.

In what we refer to as the “Great Commission,” Jesus told His disciples: “All authority has been given to Me **in heaven and on earth**” ([Matt. 28:18](#)). Since His resurrection, Jesus is the King of earth and heaven. Christians are not dual citizens, but singular citizens; we are citizens of the Kingship and Kingdom of Jesus Christ, whose rule and power and authority knows no boundaries. Our life lived on earth is merely a reflection of our willingness to submit to our King—in all we think, say, and do. Because He is King, and because all authority has been given to Him, Jesus commands us to “go.” Our earthly work is not subject to frustration, but coronation; Jesus will receive the glory for both our earthly and our heavenly obedience to Him. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” ([Revelation 11:15](#)).

[1] Anthony A. Hoekema, “Amillennialism,” as found in Robert G. Clouse (Ed.), *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977), 187.

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