

Three Views on Eschatology

By
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Christians generally hold various views concerning the end of the age. Before we examine some of these different views on eschatology, I will share what we all believe in common. First of all, Christians agree with the immortality of the soul, acknowledging that man is composed of material and immaterial components. At death, the physical body dies but the immaterial essence of man, comprised of his soul and spirit, lives in an eternal and conscious state either in heaven with Christ or in Hell, eternally separated from Him.

Secondly, the immaterial essence of man exists in an intermediate state awaiting the resurrection of the physical body, which will occur at a future time. Thirdly, the Bible teaches that at some appointed time, the physical body will be resurrected, transformed into its eternal state and united with the soul and spirit of the individual.

Fourthly, the Bible teaches that there will be a divine judgment at the end of the age when the righteous will receive their rewards and the unrighteous will be sentenced to the Lake of Fire. Furthermore, Christians agree that Christ will one day return physically to rule over the earth. Finally, all Christians look forward to the eternal state. Christ will one day create a new heaven and a new earth and judge evil once and for all. Afterwards, we will enter into the eternal state as described in Revelation 22.

These are some basic beliefs all evangelical Christians share in agreement. However, differences occur when attempting to interpret the millennial kingdom mentioned in Revelation 20:1-3. Questions such as whether the thousand-year rule of Christ should be interpreted literally or symbolically begin to arise. This leads to an even bigger issue of how the book of Revelation should be explained. Are we to interpret the prophecies literally or allegorically? Are these future prophecies or do they describe events in church history?

As we approach this study, we must understand that these are in-house debates among Christians. Nevertheless, our diverging eschatological views should not divide the body of Christ. We should encourage and challenge one another to study the Scriptures and present reasons underlying a given theological position. In this investigation, it is my desire to present a fair overview of the three major positions in eschatology: premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.

Premillennialism

The hallmark of premillennial eschatology is the literal interpretation of prophecy. Premillennial theologians teach that there will be a series of key events that occur before the millennial rule of Christ on earth. These events include the rapture of the church, a seven-year time of tribulation and the return of Christ to establish a thousand-year rule on earth.

Premillennialists often adopt one of the three distinct rapture positions of pre-tribulation, post-tribulation or mid-tribulation.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennial theology teaches that the Church will be triumphant as a result of the Church Christianizing the world. After this, Christ will then return, upon which believers will enter the eternal state. Postmillennialists, therefore, apply a more allegorical approach to their interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Amillennialism

Amillennialism can be deciphered by its title. “A” preceding millennium means this view teaches there is no future millennial earthly rule of Christ sitting on David’s throne. This stance also employs an allegorical interpretation and non-literal approach to prophecy. The events mentioned in the book of Revelation is being played out presently in the church age. Revelation reveals that the situation in the world will worsen before Christ returns. According to the amillennialists’ beliefs, Christ will one day return not to establish a millennial rule on earth but to usher in the eternal state.

Historical Development of Eschatology

Early Church

The early church taught what appears to be the beginning doctrines of premillennial eschatology. The Apostles expected the imminent return of Christ (Acts 1). The early church expected a time of great trial and tribulation followed by the return of Christ. From the Hellenistic Judaism of Antioch, Syria and Ephesus there arose a prominent group that taught the seven days of creation equal seven millennial ages in earth’s history, which reflects on 2 Peter 3:8. They also believed Christ’s incarnation occurred in the 6th millennium, and the 7th millennium would harbor in the return of Christ.

Premillennial teachings are reflected in the writings of the early church fathers. Papias, an early second century church father, wrote of a literal thousand-year rule of Christ on the earth following the resurrection of the dead. He quoted passages from Isaiah to describe the millennial rule of Christ.

Justin Martyr, another second century church father, held teachings consistent with premillennial theology. He did not make eschatology an essential of the faith. Irenaeus (130-200 A.D.) held to premillennial ideas of his predecessors and added the three and a half year rule of the Antichrist. This would be followed by the return of Christ who then sends the Antichrist into the Lake of Fire and rules for one thousand years. After the millennial rule of Christ, the final judgment would occur, followed by the eternal state.

Third century church father Cyprian (200-258 A.D.) taught that a period of tribulation will precede the return of Christ. His belief in an imminent return of Christ was present in his writings.

Post-Constantine Church (325 – 596 A.D.)

One of the most significant events in church history is the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine which occurred in 325 A.D. Upon his conversion to Christianity, the persecution of the Christians came to an end and Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. Instead of facing a time of tribulation, the Church became dominant in the Empire. The Church did not seem to need a future deliverance and vindication but would flourish and spread throughout the world.

Premillennialism’s supremacy ended with the teachings of Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.). He rejected premillennialism because of its emphasis on enjoyment of physical pleasures on earth. He felt that only the carnal would embrace such a theology. He is credited by historians as the one who introduced allegorical interpretation to prophetic literature. He viewed the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20 as the current church age. Satan was being restrained by God in the bottomless pit from unleashing his full force of evil. The Church embraced his interpretation, and by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, teaching on a literal millennial kingdom was condemned as superstition.

Medieval Church (596-1517 AD)

Christianity at this time had spread throughout the old Roman Empire and the church enjoyed an influential role in society. Postmillennial teachings begin to gain popularity and the millennial kingdom in Revelation 20 was interpreted to be Christ’s Church on the earth. The situation appeared to support the notion that the Church would be triumphant and usher in a golden era before Christ’s return. In order for this to finally occur, the Church needed to reform and purify itself so that it would become the holy and righteous kingdom on earth. This reform would come, but only through tribulation. The antichrist symbolized those who opposed reform. Some saw reform coming in the person known as the angelic Pope. His coming would be opposed by the Antichrist. Premillennial teachings were mostly embraced by those outside the mainstream.

Reformation (1517-1648)

During the Reformation, the Church continued their Medieval teachings on the millennium with one exception. Reformers such as John Wycliffe and later Martin Luther began to identify the antichrist with the papacy. Reformers were primarily postmillennial in their views but saw the corruption in the papacy blocking the church from triumphing over the world. Reformers viewed the millennium beginning with patristic fathers and concluding with the triumph of the purified papacy.

Church in England

The Church of England broke from the Catholic Church in 1534 under Henry the VIII. The Church of England identified the Catholic Church as the antichrist. The Millennium was believed to be the church age, a time in which the purified church would usher in a golden age of Christianity. This remains consistent with postmillennial teaching. Premillennial teachings continued and grew mostly among groups that broke away from the Church of England.

American Church

The New England colonies primarily taught postmillennial theology due to the Puritan influence. Many believed the new nation would establish a reformed and purified church which would influence the worldwide church. The Great Awakening was an indication of Christ's coming. Jonathan Edwards, one of the powerful preachers of the Great Awakening, is considered by many to be the father of American Postmillennialism. Postmillennial fever grew as the Civil War ended the evil of slavery and the Church appeared to be marching forward in establishing just and righteous laws for the young nation. This new nation would be the city on the hill that would influence the world.

Postmillennial hopes came to an end with World War I and II. These wars awakened many to the realization that the world was degrading and growing colder to God's message. Postmillennialism's reign as the dominant theology ended and amillennialism and premillennialism emerged to the forefront. With the influence of modern ideas, liberalism swept across the country. In response to liberalism, there arose the evangelical movement which brought a return to Biblical teaching and authority. Among evangelicals in America, premillennialism became the dominant view.

Among the evangelicals, dispensationalism, a branch of premillennialism evolved. Dispensationalists taught a literal interpretation of the Bible, including the book of Revelation and prophecies of Daniel. This theology made a distinction between the Church and Israel and reintroduced Israel as central to prophecy. Dispensational teaching dominated conservatives. Eventually, schools such as Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary were established to replace the seminaries that had gone liberal. These schools were tremendously successful in training leaders, distributing publications, and encouraging evangelism. Dispensationalism further gained popularity with Israel returning to the land in 1948, the rise of the Middle East, and the European Common Market.

Conclusion

There are various views regarding the millennium and the return of Christ. Despite differences, Christians have always understood that one day Christ will return to judge evil and establish His glorious kingdom with His saints. The world will not continue in its present state forever, as one day Christ will come and establish His everlasting kingdom in which death and sin will be no more. This is the great hope Christians of every age can embrace.