

MILLENNIAL VIEWS

Some have joked that with so much confusion concerning premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism, they prefer panmillennialism, trusting that it will all “pan out” in the end. The truth in this humor is that none of us can control the future, but the corollary that what we believe doesn’t matter is wrong. Though one’s millennial position is technically an “eschatological” (end times) view, it has a major impact on how we read the Bible and how we live today.

BRIEF DEFINITIONS OF MILLENNIAL VIEWS

The names for the views come from the timing of Jesus’ return in relation to the millennium, but this is much more than a chronology debate.

Premillennialism: Jesus will return *before* (pre) the millennium. He will rule over the present earth for 1,000 years in order to fulfill all of God’s unfulfilled promises.

Postmillennialism: Jesus will return *after* (post) the millennium. The present age is the “millennium” (though it is not 1,000 years long) during which “God’s kingdom” is expanding in the world through the mission of the church. When Jesus comes, history (time) will come to an end and the eternal state will begin in a new heavens and new earth.

Amillennialism: There is *no* (a) millennium. Adherents reject this designation because they believe that there *is* a millennium and we are living in it now (though it is not 1,000 years long). Jesus is building his kingdom today through the church (the present spiritual kingdom) and at the end of the age, he will return, destroy the earth, and establish the new heavens and new earth.

SIMILARITIES AND DISTINCTIONS

Post- and a- agree that the thousand years is not to be taken as signifying 1,000 years of 365 days. Like most of the numbers in Revelation, the millennium is not taken as a literal number but as a symbol.

Post- and a- agree that Revelation is not to be read as a chronological account of future events.

Post- and a- agree that Jesus’ rule is spiritual not earthly and that the promises made for Israel are fulfilled in the church.

Post- and a- generally agree that the millennium began in the first century and we are living in it today. Some post- believe that the millennium will only begin in the future when the world is Christian.

Post- and a- agree that there will be no future seven-year tribulation. Tribulation occurs whenever the church is persecuted.

Post- and a- agree that the rapture occurs at the same time as Jesus’ return to earth.

Post- and a- agree that Satan is currently bound and Christians are currently reigning over the earth with Christ.

Post- and a- agree that Jesus is now reigning, but a- believes that Jesus is reigning in heaven while post- believes that Jesus is reigning on earth through the gospel.

Pre- and post- agree that the millennium is a time of great earthly blessing.

Pre- and (some) post- agree that the millennium is a time of glory after the tribulation and not mixed with tribulations.

Pre-, post-, and a- agree that trials are occurring on the earth today, but they differ on whether these are what are predicted as the tribulation.

POPULARITY OF THE VIEWS

Premillennialism was the predominant view of the early church. **Amillennialism** became the majority view following the merging of the church and state at the time of Constantine. The Reformers (Luther, Calvin, and others) rejected much of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church but continued to hold to amillennialism. **Postmillennialism** grew popular at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century as the world seemed to be becoming more like God's kingdom, but it was nearly wiped out with the evil atrocities of World War I. **Dispensational premillennialism** has been on the rise since the late 1800s and is the majority view of evangelical churches in the US today. **Historic premillennialism** may be on the rise today, in part due to some poor presentation and misconceptions about dispensationalism.

FAMOUS ADHERENTS

Dispensational Premillennialism: C. I. Scofield, Dallas Seminary, Hal Lindsey, John MacArthur, J. M. Boice, Tim LaHaye

Historic Premillennialism: George Ladd, John Piper, Wayne Grudem

Postmillennialism: B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, R. C. Sproul

Amillennialism: Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, J. I. Packer

PREMILLENNIALISM: TWO VERSIONS

Historic premillennialism sits on the eschatological spectrum between amillennialism and dispensational premillennialism. It shares with dispensationalism the belief that Jesus will return *before* the millennium to establish his kingdom on earth. It shares with amillennialism the belief that Israel's future is solely as part of the church.

Dispensationalism makes the divide between church and Israel sharper by (1) emphasizing the literal fulfillment of OT promises to ethnic, national Israel; (2) seeing Daniel's 70th week as part of God's purpose for Israel and thus (3) placing the rapture of the church before the 70th week (the 7-year tribulation).

Historic premillennialism agrees with amillennialism in uniting the rapture with Jesus' return: the church is called up to heaven in order to greet King Jesus and usher him back to the earth to rule. Dispensationalism separates the rapture from Jesus' descent because of (1) the belief that the church

will not face God's wrath on earth; (2) the belief that during the tribulation God will work directly with Israel without the intermediate agency of the church; (3) the belief that a rapture only in order to return immediately to earth is unnecessary.

Historic premillennialism is so called because this view was held in the early church. Dispensational premillennialism is alleged to have only begun in the early 1800s. It is poorly named because (1) every view acknowledges dispensations in history; (2) the presence and character of dispensations is *not* a central feature of the view. Dispensational premillennialism has one major tenet that distinguishes them from all other views: Scripture is to be interpreted literally according to the author's intention in a consistent fashion. This accepts the presence of figurative language and symbols, but it requires textual evidence for such.

They argue that just because a number may have symbolic value (e.g., 7 and 12 have significance throughout history), this does not necessarily mean that the number is not also literal. (For example, the 7 churches of Revelation may represent the church as a whole, but they also refer to 7 specific congregations.) 1,000 years may refer to a complete period of time, but there is no *textual* evidence that it is not actually 1,000 years long. Dispensationalists fault the other views for being *inconsistent* in their interpretation of Scripture and allowing logic and theology to *change* the meaning of texts.

THE EFFECTS OF ESCHATOLOGY

One's view of the millennium affects more than the way one would draw an end-time chart. As you can see from the views above, some see "end times" events as occurring right now whereas others believe they are yet future. This has a significant impact on what one believes about God's work in the world today and the role of the church in society.

Amillennialism: If you believe that we are living in the millennial kingdom today, you see the spread of the gospel as bringing God's kingdom to more people. The church is now fulfilling God's promises to bless the world. Your future hope is in heaven in eternity, not in the fulfillment of God's purposes on this earth.

Postmillennialism: If you believe that society will ultimately become entirely Christian, you view the church's mission as one of permeating society in order to bring it in submission to God. The return of Jesus is dependent upon the transformation of this world into what God originally intended in the Garden of Eden.

Dispensational Premillennialism: If you believe that society will ultimately unite against God and the people of Israel, you will focus on personal evangelism so that individuals are saved before God's wrath falls upon this earth. Because you believe in a pretribulational rapture, you do not fear the awful days predicted in Revelation. Israel is usually treated with kid gloves because God's promises to bless his people will be fulfilled in the future.

Historic Premillennialism: If you believe that only Jesus can establish a righteous kingdom on earth, you will not put great efforts in transforming society through politics. Though you do not believe that the rapture will occur before the tribulation, you trust that God will keep his believers from apostatizing during the outpouring of his wrath. Israel has no future as an entity but individual Jews who trust Jesus will be saved in the church.

SOME COMMON MISREPRESENTATIONS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Perhaps without exception, dispensationalism is not accurately understood or described by those who do not accept it. One common failure is to emphasize features that were articulated by one person 100 years ago but which are not widely held today. Opponents often stress aspects that dispensationalists do not believe. This includes:

1. The significance of dispensations. Dispensationalism no more needs dispensations than any other view. (All believe that God's ways of working have changed with time; for instance, no one believes sacrifices are required today.) Proposals about "tests" and "failures," as well as the number (4, 5, 6, 7, 8), are at best peripheral to the view.

2. A distinction in salvation. Dispensationalists do *not* believe that Israel and the church are saved in different ways. They insist that all people in all times are saved through faith in God's provision of the death of Jesus on the cross.

3. A contrast between earthly people and spiritual people. Israel is just as earthly as the church and just as spiritual. Both Israel and the church live on the earth and will live on the earth in the future kingdom. Both Israel and the church are spiritual to the degree that they are submitted to God's will and living by his Spirit.

4. A claim that the church is outside of God's original plan. God always planned to bless the nations (Gentiles) through Israel. But God did not reveal *prior to Israel's rejection of their Messiah* that he would establish a single body of Jews and Gentiles in order to provoke Israel to jealousy. This lack of revelation in the OT is why Paul called the church a *mystery* (Eph 3). It's not surprising that God would not reveal this reality given the sincere desire that Israel would embrace its Messiah.

5. The escape from all trials. Dispensationalists do not believe that Christians will not face tribulations and even suffer martyrdom. They do believe that the Church will not be on earth when God pours out his just wrath on an unbelieving world during a seven-year Tribulation prior to Jesus' return to establish his kingdom.

6. A wooden literalism in the interpretation of Scriptures. Dispensationalists accept figures of speech and symbols according to the *author's intention*. They deny that what all would have understood as literal in the OT *became symbolic* because of NT revelation. They believe that NT revelation is consistent with the OT and no *change* is necessary or permissible. (For example, Ezekiel's temple should be understood as a physical building in Jerusalem and not as some spiritual symbol of the church or New Jerusalem.)

7. An inherent preoccupation with timelines and date-setting. Because the dispensational view takes Scripture literally there are lots of *details* which they believe God has revealed. (By spiritualizing these details, the other views know very little about the future.) This provokes greater study in an effort to understand God's plan correctly. Some untrained or unbalanced individuals have made sensational claims but these are not intrinsic to dispensationalism.

8. The newness of the system. Opponents frequently try to bias others against the view by claiming that dispensationalism was only first begun in the early 1800s. But it is very similar to the writings

of the early church. And a similar charge could have been made by the Catholics against the Reformers in the 16th century. The real issue is whether it is correct to interpret the Bible according to the author's intention or whether some passages must be re-interpreted (changed) in light of later revelation.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLE

<http://bibchr.blogspot.com/2006/11/twenty-five-stupid-reasons-for-dissing.html>