

End Times Conundrum

I. Introduction

Eschatology is the branch of theology that has to do with future things such as the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement, and the eternal state. The affirmation of these events has been part of the great creeds of the church for 2000 years. To deny these events is to be less than orthodox. The problem: there has never been a consensus about the exact order of these events. There are no charts in the Bible giving us the details. In reality, this state is similar to the prophecies concerning Christ's first coming. The scribes correctly discerned that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mt.2:5), but the timing of His coming, and the nature of His career were greatly misunderstood.

Over two millennia since the founding of the Church, 3 main theories about the order of the final events in God's plan of redemption have found popularity at one time or another.

II. The Three Main Theories

A. **Postmillennialism:** In general: A PM believes that Christ will come again *after* a "millennium," or golden age. After He returns, there will be a resurrection of the dead, a final judgement, and then Christ will establish a new heaven and a new earth.

1. More detail:

- a. PM generally interpret the 1000 years of Rev. 3 as figurative for an indefinite period, i.e., the interadvent period from Christ's ascension to His return. They believe the millennium is the period where the Gospel is preached throughout the world, the Kingdom of God is being advanced, Christ is on the throne now, and Satan is restricted from hindering the church's advance. The best defense of this view may be found in an article by Greg Bahnsen in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* (Winter of 1976-77), and in the book by John Jefferson Davis: *Christ's Glorious Kingdom*.
- b. PM are optimistic that the preaching of the Gospel, and the change in individual lives, will in turn change culture (The Reformation is often used as an example). Over time, there will be an increase in righteousness, peace and prosperity as a result of the preaching of the Gospel, and the victory of the church is inevitable!
- c. At some point, when the church is victorious, and when the Christian worldview has encompassed the world, Christ will bodily return to earth. All the dead will then be resurrected for a final judgement, some to eternal life, and some to eternal damnation.
- d. After the judgement, Christ will then inaugurate the eternal state by recreating the heavens and the earth.

2. Scripture:

- a. PM believe the 1000 years of Rev. 3 is to be taken figuratively as are other numbers in The Revelation (the number 7 and *one third*). The Hebrew mind saw special significance in some numbers: e.g., 6, was a number of incompleteness; 7, a number of completeness; the cube of 10, $10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1000$ is an indefinite number. Other examples in Scripture where the number 1000 is obviously proverbial for a long time: Ps. 50:10; 84:10; 90:4; II Pet.3:8.
- b. They also invoke many of the parables of Jesus (Matt. 13:31-33). It (the church) will start small and spread to the whole world.

- c. They believe Jesus predicted that the church would be victorious when he said *the gates of hell will not prevail against it* (Matt. 16:18).
 - d. They cite several NT passages where Satan is defeated, i.e., bound: Lk. 10:18; Jn. 12:31; Rev. 12:9.
 - e. Christ is on the throne now according to Matt. 28:18: *All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.*
 - f. It interprets the so-called millennial passages in the OT as referring to the Eternal State when evil is ended and the curse removed.
3. Advocates: Some of the great teachers and theologians of the church held this position: Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, and most of the Puritans. In America, it was the view of Jonathan Edwards, the great Princeton theologians, C. Hodge, A. Alexander, A. Hodge, B. Warfield, and most of the others, until the 20th Century. In more recent times, this view has seen a remarkable revival with such advocates as G. Bahnsen, G. North, K. Gentry, R. Rushdoony, J.D. Davis, L. Boettner, I. Murray, and John Murray. Also, note: many of the great hymns of the faith, in particular, those of Isaac Watts, have very strong PM themes.
4. Strengths: One cannot ignore the number of great Christian scholars that advocate for this position! They had a reputation as great exegetes of Scripture. That their systematic case was made from the entirety of Scripture is impressive. Not only is their optimism admirable, most of the adherents of PM believe that the Gospel was meant to redeem all of life.
5. Weaknesses:
- a. After two world wars in the 20th Century, it just did not seem empirical that the church was advancing. With the overwhelming presence of evil from the wars and the threat of nuclear annihilation, it is not too convincing that in some way Satan is bound and Christ is now ruling. If Satan is bound, why did Peter say Satan goes around seeking whom he may devour (I Pet.5:8.)? This pessimism resulted in great changes in end times thinking (an understatement!).
 - b. It seems to neglect passages in the NT that seem to indicate that conditions will get worse before Christ returns (II Tim. 3ff.; I Thess. 2ff.). They would reply that these verses may apply to conditions in Jerusalem before the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.
- B. **Amillennialism:** PM for several hundred years was known as the non-millennial view. In more recent times the term *Amillennial* came into use, and made some distinctions between it and the former historical PM. The main difference after a bloody 20th Century, was its pessimism that the world would progressively get more Christian, and the Church would ultimately be victorious. AM believes the world will become more and more godless and more corrupt.
- 1. The order of events for an AM is basically the same as the PM. They both believe the second coming, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgement will occur at the same time followed by the recreation of heaven and earth, i.e., the eternal state. AM, however, believe the end-times will be characterized by lawlessness, and apostasy just before Christ's return to earth. At the end, there will be a great tribulation, and an antichrist figure who will attempt to establish a world government.
 - 2. Scripture: AM as with the PM, believe the many so-called millennial texts in the OT, mainly in Isa. Jer, Zech, and the Psalms, are better interpreted as the eternal state rather than an earthly millennium where death still occurs and the curse is only partially lifted (as with the following premillennial view).

3. Advocates: Most of the defenders of this position are found today in the Reformed tradition: R. Sproul, S. Storms, A. Hoekema, B. Waltke, H. LaRondelle, B. Witherington, O. Allis, G. Beale, and W. Grudem, R. Crouse, et.al.
 4. Strengths: As with PM, men of great stature and faith defend this position, and as with PM, they hold that both Peter and Paul affirm an AM order of last days events. It is a relatively simple explanation, and maybe Occam's Razor applies here (*the simplest explanation is generally the correct one*).
 5. Weaknesses: As with PM it is hard to believe giving the evil in the world, that Satan is now bound. The main criticism raised against this view by the PrM is they fail to take literally the figure 1000 years of Rev. 20.
- C. **Premillennialism:** In general: PrM takes the thousand years of Rev. 20 as literal years and believes Christ will return bodily before establishing a literal 1000 year reign on earth. PrM originated very early in the history of the Church, and the belief was held by such stalwarts as Papias, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus. The PrM view, however, was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 as superstition. Later, there was great expectation that Christ would come around 1000-1033 and establish a literal millennial on earth. When this failed to occur there was a move away from the position. Throughout Church History the PrM view has waxed and waned.

The above description of PrM is known as historic or classical Premillennialism, however, in the mid 19th Century a variant arose known as dispensational premillennialism. After the Civil War and the disasters of the 20th Century it's popularity exploded in the U.S. due to the notes embedded in the Scofield Reference Bible, Moody Correspondence courses, the bible conference movement, and the popularity of such books as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the *Left Behind Series* of novels later made into a movie.

1. More detailed order:
 - a. The Dis. PrM believes that the next event will be an imminent, secret removal of the saints (the church) called *the rapture*. This will involve a resurrection of the deceased believers and those that are alive being caught up into heaven.
 - b. Immediately following the rapture there will be a *great tribulation* of exactly 7 years described in detail in the book of Revelation. According to this view, this is a fulfillment of the 70th Week of Daniel 9.
 - c. Sometime at the end of days an antichrist figure will attempt to form a one-world government. At the end of a 7 year tribulation Christ will return bodily and conquer all enemies including the antichrist. He will then resurrect the OT saints and set up a literal Kingdom on earth where He will reign for exactly 1000 years. During this time Satan will be bound (Rev 20:2). Some advocates of this position believe the Millennium is largely for God to fulfill all the promises to Israel. Hence the temple will be rebuilt, animal sacrifices will be reinstated, a resurrected David will be the Prime Minister of Israel, etc.
 - d. After the 1000 years, there will be a resurrection of the unrighteous dead, the great White Throne judgement, followed by Christ re-creating heaven and earth, i.e., the eternal state.
2. Advocates: The advocates of classical PrM in addition to many of the early church fathers mentioned above are: G. Ladd, A. Mohler, C. Bass, F. Schaeffer, C. Henry, D. Carson, J. Piper, G. Clark, B. Chapell, et.al. The advocates of the dispensational variety, the most prominent being J. Darby, C.I. Scofield, D.L. Moody, L.S. Chafer, C. Ryrie, D. Pentecost, A. McClain, H. Hoyt, J. Walvoord, et.al.
3. The strength of the PrM view rests primarily on the one Revelation 20 passage; for the dispensationalists, their argument might rise and fall on their interpretation of the 70 week of Daniel 9. It is definitely pivotal.

4. Strengths: That PrM began very early in the history, hardly a generation from the Apostles, cannot be ignored.
5. Weaknesses:
 - a. As noted above, it makes the case for a literal earthly millennium primarily on that one passage in Rev. 20, the only NT passage which mentions it.
 - b. The Disp. variety fails to reckon with the Galatians passage which says Christ fulfilled all the promises made to Israel (Gal. 3:16), and that Paul now refers to the Church as *the Israel of God* (Gal. 6:16).
 - c. During the millennium the curse is not totally removed. Death continues and sin will still continue to exist.
 - d. The dispensational variety believes an OT economy will be installed where a temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem and animal sacrifices will again be practiced. This seems to go against the clear teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews that animal sacrifices have ended.
 - e. The dispensational variant teaches there will be 3 comings of Christ: His birth, a rapture where He comes and removes the church from the earth, and a third, when He comes to conquer His enemies and set up his kingdom. The Scripture passages used for the rapture are also interpreted by others as referring to Christ's second advent. Note: The main passage quoted for the rapture, I Thess. 4:16ff. could be a military metaphor as it was written to many who had retired from the Roman army. The way Christ's return is described in this passage does not seem to be silent or secret!
 - f. The dispensational variant also teaches multiple resurrections: first at the rapture, then at Christ's second coming, those who die during the millennium, then again at the end of the millennium. Scripture does not seem to support this.

III. Some Concluding Observations

- A. The study of end times is important because our view will have a direct bearing on how we live.
- B. An important principle to follow when studying prophecy is to start with *What do we know absolutely for certain*. We know Christ is going to return bodily to the earth, there will be a resurrection, a judgement and an eternal state.
- C. All three views described above have plausibility, are defended ably from Scripture, and deserve the respect of the adherents.
- D. A great deal of humility is involved in a study of end times and dogmatism must be avoided.
- E. How one interprets the 10th horn of the beast of Rev. 17 should not be the basis of Christian fellowship!
- F. We must avoid sensationalism such as date-setting and interpreting biblical events in the light of current events which some have called *newspaper exegesis*.

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