

WHAT WE BELIEVE

A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON #20 – LAST THINGS

Baptist Faith and Message Article 10

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.

Isaiah 2:4; 11:9; Matthew 16:27; 18:8-9; 19:28; 24:27,30,36,44; 25:31-46; 26:64; Mark 8:38; 9:43-48; Luke 12:40,48; 16:19-26; 17:22-37; 21:27-28; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; 17:31; Romans 14:10; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 15:24-28,35-58; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Philippians 3:20-21; Colossians 1:5; 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18; 5:1ff.; 2 Thessalonians 1:7ff.; 2; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1,8; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:27-28; James 5:8; 2 Peter 3:7ff.; 1 John 2:28; 3:2; Jude 14; Revelation 1:18; 3:11; 20:1-22:13.

MEMORY VERSE

When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:4, ESV).

LAST THINGS

What happens after death? What events surround the return of Christ and the establishment of His earthly kingdom?

Eschatology is the study of last things or the end of time, when Christ will return. As created beings living in God's time/space continuum, we cannot understand life without time. The biblical worldview of the present age includes a timeline of past, present, and future. But our hope is tied to God's promise when time will be no more and we will experience eternal life. Our Christian hope is built upon God's redemptive work in the past, comforted by God's providence in the present, and ultimately looks to the future unveiling of Christ in all His glory and our glorification with Him (Col 3:1-4).

I. PERSONAL ESCHATOLOGY

1. Until Christ return, every person will die and experience conscious existence beyond the grave. What does the Bible teach happens to a person after death? Heb 9:27; John 5:28-29; Rev 20:11-15; Rev 22:12

2. What about believers who are still alive at Christ's coming? 1 Thess 4:15-18

The majority of Americans still believe in heaven and hell, and most Americans believe themselves to be heaven-bound because, according to them, they are at least as good as their neighbors, if not better.

3. What does the Bible teach about heaven? John 14:2-3; Phil 3:20; Rev 4:8,11; Rev 21:1-7; Rev 22:1-5

4. What does the Bible teach about hell? John 3:36; Matt 10:28; Mark 9:43-48; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Rev 14:10-11; Rev 20:14-15; Rev 21:8,27

II. COSMIC ESCHATOLOGY

1. Read the Baptist Faith and Message article on Last Things. What does it say about when the world will end?

2. Describe the manner in which Christ will return to earth.

3. List four things that will take place when Christ returns.

4. Did Christ and His apostles teach His bodily return? Luke 21:27; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor 1:7; 1 Thess 2:19

5. What does God's Word say about the end of history and the future existence? Isa 65:17; Rev 21:1

6. Does the Bible encourage us to speculate about the timing of Christ's return? Matt 24:36; Matt 24:37-44; Acts 1:6-7

7. What function should the promise of Christ's return have on our daily lives? 2 Pet 3:1-13; 1 Cor 15:50-58; 1 John 3:2-3

"Since the New Testament speaks in broad terms about last things, it is to be expected that problems would arise as to the interpretation of details. For instance, interpreters differ as to the number of comings, resurrections, judgments, and the millennium, along with certain other details as to the end of the age. . . . It is sufficient to say that one's position as to the details has never been a test of orthodoxy among Baptists."

Herschel Hobbs, 1907-95

Pastor, First Baptist Church; Oklahoma City, OK; president, Southern Baptist Convention, 1961-63

"The new heaven and the new earth described by John in Revelation 21:1-22:5 is the resolution of all conflict, suffering, and meaninglessness in life. There can be no longer any deficiencies in the relationship between God, man, and the created order. The overlap of the ages ceases as this present world order in which we live is removed with all the evil that characterizes it. Through resurrection and glorification the believer is brought fully into the regeneration of all things. This new age alone becomes the reality of his existence. This is the realm in which the effects of Christ's life and death are perceived and experienced in all their fullness."

Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, p. 315.

The Millennium¹

The idea of the millennium is the most controversial and debated in the study of eschatology. Countless articles, books, and blogs have been written on the topic and many debates and small group studies have taken place about it. The idea of the millennium comes from Revelation 20, especially verses 1-6. On this subject there are three main positions held: premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. In these groups, there are subgroups and disagreements on issues such as the tribulation and if the thousand years are literal, but these will not be discussed in detail under the major headings of each position for lack of space.

Premillennialism

Simply put, those who hold to the premillennial position believe Christ will return before his thousand year reign and when He does He will establish the millennium. Dispensationalists as well as some others in this system believe that Christ will have two returns before the millennium, first a secret return or what is known as the rapture, and secondly, what is commonly known as the second coming. Charles Ryrie, a defender of this position describes his beliefs saying:

At the close of this age, premillennialists believe that Christ will return for His church meeting her in the air (this is not the Second Coming of Christ), which event called the rapture or translation, will usher in a seven-year period of Tribulation on the earth. After this the Lord will return to the earth (this is the Second Coming of Christ), to establish His kingdom on the earth for one thousand years during which time the promises to Israel will be fulfilled.²

“A Christian’s eschatology does not consist in his prophecy charts but in his funeral service. At a funeral”, he says, “the church is perhaps at its most theological. Our crying reminds us that death is not natural but a horrible curse to be abhorred. Our recitation of Psalm 23 and John 11 reminds us that in Christ we have already been delivered from the power of death, that His story is our story. Our placing the body in a casket reminds us of the metaphor of sleep used often in scripture to convey to us that the one who sleeps will also wake. Our burying the body in the earth reminds us that we are only creatures, formed from the clay, but creatures who will one day be called forth from the dust again. At a funeral our hymnody is the most theological, the most resistant to the fads and trends of Christian music. We sing of looking across ‘Jordan’s Stormy Banks,’ and of understanding things better, ‘by and by, when the morning comes.’ That’s because all of Christian theology points to an end, an end where Jesus overcomes the satanic reign of death and restores God’s original creation order.”

Dr. Russell Moore
Dean of the School of Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary, in *A Theology for the
Church*, Daniel Akin, editor)

¹ From a paper by Boyce College student Daniel Seidelman, April 2010.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), 12.

Besides dispensational premillennialism, a more prominent view is historical premillennialism. Men such as Millard Erickson and Wayne Grudem subscribe to this view. Historical premillennialists believe that before Christ returns the world will be evangelized, a great tribulation will come about, and a great tribulation with the appearance of the antichrist will

“The reality of Christ’s return is grounded in the overall purposes of God. The central themes of the Christian message accompanying the proclamation of Jesus’ lordship include His sinlessness, death, resurrection, ascension, and His return. These assurances brought hope to the early church as they do to us today. From the beginning, the preaching, echoing the words of Jesus Himself: ‘And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory’ (Mark 13:26). Wherever the apostles preached, they preached the reality of this announcement.”

Dr. David Dockery
Southern Baptist theologian
President of Union University

occur. In Christ’s return, believers who have fallen asleep will rise and those still alive will be glorified. These believers will rule with Christ in the millennial kingdom. After this reign the final judgment will come, followed immediately by the eternal state.³

There are many different streams of premillennialists but they all hold many of their major doctrines in common. Mainly, they agree that the covenants made with Israel both to Abraham (Gen 12) and David (2 Sam 7) will be fulfilled by the earthly reign of Christ. Furthermore, when Christ does return in glory, the eternal state of new heavens and new earth will not be immediate, they will be preceded by a thousand year earthly rule of Christ.⁴

Arguments for premillennialism. Wayne Grudem, a historic premillennialist, gives three main arguments for this position. First, he appeals to the numerous Old Testament passages that “indicate some future stage in the history of redemption which is far greater than the present church age but which still does not see the removal of all sin and rebellion and death from the earth.” These passages include Isaiah 11:6-11, 65:20, Psalm 72:8-14, and Zechariah 14:5-17.

All of these passages claim that the Lord is king but the world has not yet been perfected. Another argument appeals to the New Testament texts, in addition to Revelation 20, that suggest a future millennium. The main pericope cited here is 1 Corinthians 15:23-25 with emphasis on the two words translated then with the meaning of “after that.” The final argument for this position appeals to Revelation 20. The binding of Satan and faithful that will come to life described seem to point to something that has not happened yet. Furthermore, following Luke 19:17, 19; 1 Corinthians 6:3; Revelation 2:26-27, and 3:21 Christians will rule with Christ in a future age that is not currently taking place.⁵

Postmillennialism

Those who consider themselves postmillennialist believe that Christ will return after a thousand year reign of his kingdom defined by peace on earth. This was the view of great men such as Jonathon Edwards and Charles Finney and it fueled their desire to evangelize.⁶ Since

³ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1979), 180-2.

⁴ Robert P. Lightner, *The Last Days Handbook* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 57.

⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1127-31.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 472-3.

the millennial kingdom will be inaugurated but Christ will still be in heaven at that time, He will rule through His Spirit and the church. This will still be His kingdom under His rule, though, because the gospel will be believed and honored in such a way that it transforms societies and governments. A small portion of postmillennialists believe that this current age between Christ's ascension and His return is the millennium. Mainline postmillennialists believe that the millennium is still to come; as the earth gradually increases into a world defined by gospel response the millennium draws nearer.⁷

Arguments for postmillennialism. A significant argument for the postmillennial position comes from the Great Commission; since Jesus claims He has all authority over heaven and earth, it seems logical that His kingdom would in fact cover the entire world before Jesus' return. The parables of Jesus give a similar argument. These stories in Matthew 13:31-33 seem to indicate that God's kingdom will grow in such a way that it will permeate and transform the world.⁸ Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that the "gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). Postmillennialists use this verse to confirm that the Kingdom will extend to the ends of the earth before Christ's return.⁹ When interpreting Revelation 20, postmillennialists believe that verses 1-6 deal with the millennium, 7-10 describe the postmillennial period, and finally in verses 11-15 Jesus returns; John gives these events in chronological order. Some may argue that these five verses are not a very good description of the second coming, but dispensationalists reply that "the Bible nowhere gives us much description of it."¹⁰

Until recent years, a practical, observational argument of the growth of the Church and Christian influence on society had been used to promote the postmillennial position. This especially was used during times of great evangelism and Christian growth such as during the Great Awakenings and 1950s. Recent trends in church attendance and Christian influence have hindered this argument; however this need not be the case because the growth that eventually leads to the Kingdom of the millennium before Christ returns should be seen as a trajectory and not as a constant. Christ said He will build His church (Matt 16:18) and the postmillennial position is most optimistic that this will indeed happen in the church age.

Amillennialism

Amillennialism is the simplest of the three views on the millennium. This position holds that the thousand year reign spoken of in Revelation 20 is literary, figurative language for the present church age where Christ is ruling in Heaven. Consequently, there will be no defined millennium separate from the present age.¹¹ The progression of epochs goes directly from church age to eternal state when Christ returns, unlike the premillennial and postmillennial views.

Millard Erickson helpfully points out four main pillars of amillennialism and how they relate with the other positions. First, the final, eternal stage for both believers and unbelievers

⁷ Dennis E. Johnson, "Introduction to the Revelation to John," *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2459.

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1122-3.

⁹ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology*, 63.

¹⁰ David S. Cook, *The Message from Patmos* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 125-35.

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1109-10.

will be inaugurated when Christ returns in rapid sequence with no earthly, personal reign of Christ. Second, like postmillennialists believe, the one thousand years spoken of biblically are symbolic. Third, unlike the view of premillennialists, the two resurrections will not both be physical. Amillennialists agree that the first resurrection is completely spiritual but disagree on whether the second is physical or spiritual. Finally, the amillennial position sees Old Testament prophecies as less literal than the other positions and believes they are fulfilled either within the history of the church or in the new earth.¹²

Arguments for amillennialism. Hermeneutically speaking, it is unwise to base a major doctrine such as the millennium on one obscure passage. Since Revelation 20:1-6 is the only place in the Bible where the millennium is mentioned, they use this argument to deny a future millennial reign of Christ. Amillennialists interpret this passage as referring to the present epoch, verses 1-3 occurred during Jesus' earthly incarnation, verse 4 takes place in heaven, and the resurrection and coming to life spoken of in verses 5-6 refer to going to Heaven to be with God after one dies. The idea of one resurrection is supported throughout scripture (Dan 12:2, John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15), yet the other two positions say there are two separate resurrections.

Another argument is based on the implausibility of the millennium. This is shown by four main assumptions. First, it is difficult to believe the idea of glorified believers and sinners cohabitating the earth. Berkhof, with Acts 26:12-14 and Revelation 1:17 in mind asks "how will sinners and saints in the flesh be able to stand in the presence of the glorified Christ, seeing that even Paul and John were completely overwhelmed by the vision of Him?"¹³ Second, it seems unlikely that when Christ is reigning in glory people will still reject Him and live spiritually dead in their sin. Third, the millennium seems to be purposeless; after the end of the church age and Christ's return why would there be a delay before the eternal state? Finally, amillennialists interpret the whole of scripture to say that all the future events happen simultaneously before the eternal state, ruling out the possibility for a millennium.¹⁴

A Defense of Premillennialism

Out of the three major positions on the millennium, the premillennial view, specifically the historical premillennial view, seems to offer the most compelling arguments and has the most biblical evidence. One can prove this position to be most thoughtful through both logical and scriptural arguments. Though the arguments for amillennialism and postmillennialism seem persuasive, they can be examined and determined not to stand against the biblical evidence. In defending this position it is best to first show how the other two positions fail, then answer objections to the premillennial view, since the main arguments for premillennialism have already been given.

A Critique of Postmillennialism

The biggest argument against postmillennialism is that the scripture passages cited for it are misinterpreted and that the philosophical, observational arguments do not have authority

¹² Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 74.

¹³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 715.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1115-6.

compared to the Bible. To answer the Great Commission argument, Jesus never said that His authority meant that all will come to believe in Him. This claim of all authority does not mean that cultures and societies will be transformed by the Gospel. Jesus' claim here is simply another way of saying that God's power and dominion is infinite. Of course, one can speculate that He will use this power to transform people and cultures, but in the end this is only speculation based on nothing specific in this passage or any other. Likewise, the Kingdom growth described in the parables of Matthew 13 simply describes the growth of the church, not the inauguration of the millennial Kingdom because of this growth.¹⁵

The argument for postmillennialism based on the growth of the church a cultural phenomenon, not a biblical argument. Looking at today's culture, one can not argue that the world is becoming more Christian. Even in recent days and weeks, many pieces of legislation have been passed in this country and worldwide that move society away from Christian values. Many men have studied this trend, especially in America. George Barna states "I have written several books in recent years that have warned that America was approaching an era of moral and spiritual anarchy, defined as a time when people would essentially be impervious to external influence...but in which people would do what they want, when they want, for whatever reasons they want, regardless of the prevailing mores."¹⁶ This description crushes the argument that the world is becoming more Christian. At the risk of sounding overly pessimistic, one must point out that it does seem the world is heading for something, but it certainly is not a Christianized society. Scripturally, this seems to be the case as well. Passages such as Matthew 7:13-14, Luke 18:8, and especially 2 Timothy 3:1-5 suggest that the world will be increasingly filled with evil, not good. Furthermore, Matthew 24:21-30 describes a time of unprecedented suffering preceding the return of Christ. Postmillennialists try to explain these events as symbolic and referring to the destruction, but when looked at in a biblical context, these arguments cannot stand.¹⁷

A Critique of Amillennialism

The problem with the arguments for amillennialism is that they are based in speculation and logic rather than scripture. Yes, it is a basic hermeneutic guideline to not use single passages of scripture to form major doctrines, but the millennium may be an exception to this. The Bible needs only say something once for it to be true. Furthermore, Revelation 20 is not obscure as amillennialists claim; it only becomes obscure when trying to avoid the obvious, literal meaning.¹⁸

The arguments based on the implausibility of the millennium are not based in Scripture. God, being all powerful, can certainly bring about an age of glorified believers and sinners living together. One only has to look to the 40 days after Jesus resurrection for an example of this already happening; the resurrected and glorified Jesus lived in a world with sinners. Surely people after seeing the Glory of God will still reject him. Judas lived with Jesus and betrayed Him, Satan was a servant of God who fell, Pharisees saw Jesus' miracles and plotted against Him, and as Matthew 28:17 records, some disciples doubted after seeing Jesus' resurrected body. To answer the third line of argument given by amillennialists, one must realize that though man may not see

¹⁵ Ibid., 1123-4.

¹⁶ George Barna, *A Fish out of Water* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2002), xxv.

¹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1124-7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1117.

purpose in the millennium, God still can. God works all things to reveal His glory; the millennium serves this purpose in a way that man cannot yet understand.¹⁹

To say that the whole of scripture portrays all the events of the eschaton happening at once is certainly a weak argument. Many passages clearly do not teach this. Erickson explains this from 1 Corinthians 15:22-24 saying:

Paul uses the adverbs *επειτα* (eipta-v. 23) and *ειτα* (eita-v. 24), which indicate temporal sequence. He could have used the adverb *τοωτε* (tote) to indicate concurrent events, but he did not do so. It appears that just as the first coming and resurrection of Christ were distinct events separated by time, so will there be an interval between the second coming and the end.²⁰

In this same thread, to believe all scripture points to there not being a millennium, one has to disregard Revelation 20 which clearly states there will be a millennium.

Answering Objections to Premillennialism

Most of the objections raised against the premillennial have already been answered in dealing with those positions that raise them, including all those that Hoekema, a prominent amillennialist raises in his book *The Bible and the Future*.²¹ Still, there are a few issues that need to be explained. Some amillennialists say the binding of Satan has already happened in order that the church may grow (Mark 3:27). Revelation 20:1-3 describes a stronger prison of Satan, the sealed off pit. Therefore, this is a separate event and no longer a problem for the premillennialist. Those who are not premillennialist also argue that the premillennial position interprets Revelation 20 incorrectly; however, this position gives the most logical, literal interpretation.

Concluding Arguments

Overall, historical premillennialism is the best position to hold because it has stronger arguments than the other positions biblically, logically, and practically. Biblically, there are no passages of scripture that cannot be reconciled with this position. Those that are said to speak of only one resurrection (Dan 12:2, John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15) do not limit it to a single resurrection. In fact, John 5:28-29 actually implies two separate resurrections, one of the righteous and another of the wicked. Logically, everything in the historical premillennial view works together without contradiction. Practically, while looking at the state and history of the world one can easily see that it is on a trajectory toward tribulation and not toward cosmic peace.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1120-1.

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1223.

²¹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 183-6.