

## **REVELATION- Four Views of “The Millennium”**

### **St. Paul Lutheran, Caledonia Sunday Adult Class**

Revelation 20:1-7 is one of the most controversial passages in the bible. The reason for this is the occurrence of the phrase "thousand years", which appears six times in Rev. 20:1-7, and only twice outside of Revelation, both in 2 Pet. 3:8. This little phrase has been, and still is, hotly debated among Christian theologians. Do the "thousand years" refer to a literal period of time or a figurative period of time? When does this period of time take place? What happens during the "thousand years"? How does it relate to Christ's Second Coming? Throughout history, theologians have struggled with how to answer these questions. Their struggles have led to four major, diverse interpretations of the millennium: 1) Historic Premillennialism; 2) Dispensational Premillennialism; 3) Postmillennialism; 4) Amillennialism.

#### **1. Historic Premillennialism**

Historic premillennialism receives its title from the undisputed fact that there have been theologians throughout history who interpreted the "thousand years" in Rev. 20 as a literal, one-thousand year, reign of Christ on earth, which will begin at His Second Coming. Christ's Second Coming will occur before (pre-) the "thousand years" (millennium). According to this view, the chronology of End-Time events is as follows:

1. The "binding of Satan" and the "first resurrection" of believers occurs at Christ's Second Coming, which is His visible, glorious descent from heaven to earth.
2. Christ and His Church (consisting of all believers, both Jews and Gentiles) reign gloriously over the unbelieving nations still on earth for one thousand years. This will be a time of peace and prosperity, in which sin and evil is restrained, though not eliminated.
3. Satan is released for his "little season" to deceive people and to lead the unbelieving nations in a final assault against Christ and His Church.
4. Christ and His Church are victorious over Satan's assault and Satan is cast into the "lake of fire."
5. The "second resurrection" occurs, consisting of all dead unbelievers.
6. The Great White Throne Judgment takes place, in which all people of all time receive their final judgment. Unbelievers are cast into the "lake of fire" to suffer eternal punishment; believers are granted access into the eternal kingdom to enjoy eternal peace, comfort, and glory.
7. The "new heavens and earth" are created, which is the glorious eternal kingdom where believers dwell with the Lord in paradise.

Historic premillennialism has drawn much attention over the years because it was the view held by numerous early church fathers. Indeed, one cannot escape the fact that early church fathers such as Papias (ca. 60-ca. 130), Melito of Sardis (died ca. 180), Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200), Hippolytus (ca. 170-ca. 235), Justin Martyr (ca. 100-ca. 165), Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 225), and others, were premillennialists (or, chiliasts). However, that there were many

Fathers who were premillennialists does not mean that this was the uniform, or even prevailing, view of the early church. As Steve Gregg aptly points out:

“In his *Dialogue With Trypho*, Justin wrote: I am not so miserable a fellow, Trypho, as to say one thing and think another. I admitted to you formerly, that I and many others are of this opinion (premillennialism), and (believe) that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; but on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise.”

Gregg rightly concludes from this quote, "It is clear that there were 'many' whom Justin regarded as 'true Christians' and 'who belong to the pure and pious faith' who did not hold to his premillennialism." Thus, to conclude, as many premillennialists today do, that the early church was uniformly premillennial in thinking is simply untrue.

## 2. Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialists are in agreement with Historical Premillennialists in interpreting the thousand years of Rev. 20 literally, believing that Christ will return prior to this literal, thousand-year earthly kingdom. That is where the agreement ends. In fact, dispensational premillennialism (a.k.a., Dispensationalism) is really based on an entirely different system of theology than that of historic premillennialism. Millard J. Erickson explains it this way:

“Dispensationalism is more than a view of the relationship of Christ's coming to the tribulation. It is a whole system of theology, of which eschatology is but one part. Further, it is a method of interpreting the Bible, therefore affecting one's understanding of even nondoctrinal portions of Scripture.”

This is the first point that must be made when beginning a summary of dispensational premillennialism, that it is a **system of theology**. While a detailed analysis of this system of theology lies beyond the scope of this introduction, the following key points are offered as a summary: 1)Dispensationalists believe that the Scriptures are divided into distinct periods of time called "dispensations," in which God deals with mankind in different ways. During each dispensation, God provides a specific test for mankind. When mankind fails, God ushers in a new dispensation with a new test. We are currently living in the sixth dispensation, the "dispensation of grace," in which God is testing mankind's faith in Jesus. The seventh dispensation will be the millennium.

2. Dispensationalism is based upon three key theological principles: a) The clear distinction between Israel and the church, b) The absolute literal interpretation of Scripture, and c) The emphasis on God's glory as His underlying purpose in the world.

3. Their three key principles lead dispensationalists to develop a unique and radical eschatology, which will be summarized below.

In sum, dispensationalism is a unique system of theology that differs completely from historic Christian theology, for it teaches multiple plans of salvation and relegates the work of Christ to a minimal position. It teaches that justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, was not the original plan of God. Christ came to earth to establish His glorious earthly kingdom among the Jews. But, the Jews rejected Him, so God sent Christ to the cross in order to establish a new people for himself, i.e., the church. However, God will remain faithful to the promises He made to the Jews and will reestablish His relationship with them when Christ returns. Meanwhile, the current church age is a "parenthesis" in God's plan. It is like a "time out." God has temporarily stopped the "prophetic clock" from ticking and will not start the clock again until Christ returns. Thus, the return of Christ at the End is primarily for the Jews, not for Christians. The dispensational chronology of End-Time events is as follows:

1. The Rapture: This will be the first "phase" of Christ's Second Coming, in which He will secretly remove all Christians from the earth in an instant. The Rapture is the "first resurrection." All dead believers will be resurrected and all believers who are raptured will receive their glorified bodies, as they are changed "in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:51-52). It is also the first "phase" of the "first judgment," called the "Believer's Judgment," in which all believers are rewarded according to their faithful service during their earthly lives. Now that the church has been removed, the "prophetic clock" will start ticking again, as God resumes His plan for the Jews.

(This theory of the rapture of the church was invented in the early nineteenth century under the direction of John Nelson Darby, a leader in the Plymouth Brethren movement. The key text for the doctrine of the rapture is 1 Thess. 4:13-18. In this passage, dispensationalists believe Paul is describing a secret "snatching away" (from the Greek word, *arpagasometha*, which is translated "caught up together," translated in Latin as *rapere*, which is where the English "rapture" comes from) of the Christian church from the earth so that God may resume His plan for the Jews. As we discussed above, the dispensationalist believes that God is working out two plans for two separate people, the Jews and the church. God will remove His heavenly people from the earth so that He can resume His plan for the Jews, which was put on hold at the first advent of Christ.)

2. The Seven Year Tribulation: Soon after the Rapture, this literal, seven year period of tribulation will commence when the Antichrist appears on the scene and confirms a covenant with many for "one week" (seven years). It is called the Tribulation because during this period God will send many judgments upon the earth, resulting in great pain and suffering, and because the Antichrist will bring a reign of terror upon the earth, especially during the last 3 1/2 years, which is called the "Great Tribulation." To battle the Antichrist, God will raise up 144,000 literal Jews (Rev. 7), who will spread His Gospel of the Kingdom throughout the world. Those who heed the message of these Jews and refuse to worship the Antichrist will be saved.

3. The Glorious Appearing: When the seven-years have transpired, Christ will return visibly to the earth (the second "phase" of His Second Coming), along with His saints and the angels. He will judge (the "second judgment") those who inhabit the earth and divide the "sheep" from the "goats" (Matt. 25:31-36) and those who are found worthy will enter into the millennial kingdom and Christ will be their Ruler. Those who are found unworthy will be slain and their souls will be cast into the lake of fire. The second "phase" of the "first resurrection" takes place at this time as well, which consists of the resurrection or transformation of all those who accepted the Gospel of the Kingdom during the Tribulation and were put to death.

4. The Binding of Satan: Like historic premillennialists, dispensationalists believe that Satan will be bound immediately preceding the millennium.

5. The Millennium: The one thousand year reign of Christ on earth. Like historic premillennialists, dispensationalists see this period as one of peace and prosperity, where sin and evil are restrained. However, the manner of Christ's rule during the millennial kingdom is much different in the dispensational scheme. The millennial kingdom is decidedly Jewish in nature. Historic premillennialists see this period as a time when Christ and His Church rule; dispensationalists claim that it is Christ and the Jews who rule. In their view, the Church hovers over Jerusalem, while the Jews occupy the earth with Christ and share in His reign.

6. The Loosing of Satan: Satan is released for his "little season" to deceive people and to lead the unbelieving nations in a final assault against Christ and His Church.

7. The "Second Resurrection" and the "Third and Final Judgment (Great White Throne): Christ defeats Satan and throws him into the "lake of fire." The dead unbelievers are raised ("second resurrection"), judged, and thrown into the "lake of fire." Those who came to faith during the millennium will have their bodies transformed (part of the "second resurrection") and will be permitted to enter into the glorious, eternal kingdom with the rest of the saints.

8. The "new heavens and earth" are created, which is the glorious eternal kingdom where believers dwell with the Lord in paradise. At this time, God's two plans will both finally come to ultimate fulfillment and the distinction between Israel and the Church will be erased, as both dwell with the Lord forever in paradise.

I realize that this summary of dispensational eschatology barely scratches the surface. Hopefully it provides enough of an overview to gain a preliminary understanding of the system. Once one understands the material principle of dispensationalism, i.e., God is working out two distinct plans (one for the Jews, the other for the Church), one will have little trouble grasping their eschatology, for it is driven solely by this principle. It is also this material principle that makes dispensationalism absolutely unacceptable from a Biblical perspective, "because it does not see all of Scripture and all of salvation history as a unity centered in the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and it extends false hopes of other means of salvation." The cross of Jesus Christ is but one means of salvation in dispensationalism, which makes it a heresy.

In sum, while both of the premillennial positions presented above have some similarities, in the end they are completely different. Historic premillennialism is based on historic Christian theology, but with a faulty interpretation of the thousand years, while dispensationalism is based on an entirely new and different system of theology that is not in line with historic Christian theology at all.

### 3. Postmillennialism

In contrast to the above [premillennial views], the less common postmillennial view places Christ's second advent *after* (post) the millennium. Only then will the rapture, the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the eternal states occur. The millennium is not understood to involve a visible reign of Christ in the form of an earthly monarchy, nor is the millennial period to be taken literally as necessarily 1000 years long. In these respects, postmillennialism corresponds closely to the amillennialist position. But the postmillennial view does insist upon a recognizable millennial period, a golden age of prosperity and peace among all at the end of which Christ will return. The millennium will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity, leading to the pervasive reduction of evil and to greatly improved conditions in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. In fact, the entire world will eventually be Christianized to the point that the Christian belief and value system will become the accepted norm for all nations. Matthew 28:18-20 will become a reality. Here is an expanded postmillennial chronology of End-Time events:

1. The Binding of Satan: Satan was bound by Christ at His first advent in His earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. Since Satan has been bound, he can no longer "deceive the nations," which means that he cannot accuse sinners before God, nor can he prevent the Gospel from going out to all nations. It is because the Gospel can be freely preached to all nations that the gradual Christianization of the world will occur, ushering in the Millennium.
2. The Millennium: The golden age of worldwide Christianity; the "thousand years" is symbolic for this golden age, which will occur gradually as the Christian Church becomes more influential in the world.
3. Satan's "little season": At the close of the Millennium, Satan will be released for a short time to deceive the nations into making a final assault on the Christian Church.
4. Christ's Second Coming: The visible and glorious return of Christ on the Last Day. Christ will defeat Satan and cast him into the "lake of fire."
5. The Bodily Resurrection and Final Judgment: When Christ returns, all the dead will be resurrected, those who are living on the earth will be transformed, and the Final Judgment will take place. Unbelievers will be cast into the "lake of fire," and believers will enter into the eternal kingdom.
6. The "new heavens and earth": The eternal kingdom, in which all believers dwell with the Lord in paradise.

The postmillennial view is by far the least prominent view among theologians and churches. It enjoyed a place

of prominence in the theological arena during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (due to the Enlightenment), but began to die out early in the twentieth century due, in large part, to World War I (1914-17). From that point on, theologians began to be much less optimistic about the future and postmillennialism has all but disappeared as a major eschatological view, though there are still some who hold to it.

#### 4. Amillennialism

Amillennialism is the view that sees the "thousand years" as symbolic, referring to the entire New Testament era (from Christ's first advent to His second advent). Christ ushered in the "last days" at His incarnation and, during His earthly ministry, He established His kingdom, i.e., the church. He came to redeem the world from sin and accomplished complete and total victory over sin, death, and the devil by means of His entire redemptive work, culminating in His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. He is now seated at the right hand of God and all authority over heaven and earth is His. He reigns now, and His reign is shared by all believers throughout the millennium, which will continue until He returns in glory on the Last Day.

The title given to this eschatological view is a little misleading, for it seems to imply that amillennialists reject, or do not believe in, the millennium -- or the "thousand years" . As Lois Brighton notes:

“The term "amillennialism" is somewhat of a misnomer, for those who hold this view *do believe in the millennium as it is defined by the Scriptures*, but it is not one that consists of a literal thousand years, nor one in which Christ establishes a visible kingdom here on this fallen earth.”

Amillennialism is the clear teaching of Scripture. It is the only eschatological view that maintains a thorough Christological perspective and allows Scripture to interpret Scripture. The amillennial chronology of End-Time events is as follows:

1. The Binding of Satan: Accomplished by the redemptive work of Christ during His first advent, culminating in His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.
2. The Millennium: The entire New Testament era, in which believers in Jesus Christ live and reign with Him.
3. Satan's "little season": Just prior to Christ's Second Coming, Satan will be loosed and permitted to deceive the nations and make one final, futile attack against the Church.
4. Christ's Second Coming: The visible and glorious return of Christ on the Last Day. Christ will defeat Satan and cast him into the "lake of fire."
5. The Bodily Resurrection and Final Judgment: When Christ returns, all the dead will be resurrected, those who are living on the earth will be transformed, and the Final Judgment will take place. Unbelievers will be cast into the "lake of fire," and believers will enter into the eternal kingdom.
6. The "new heavens and earth": God will recreate and establish His eternal kingdom, in which all believers dwell with the Lord in paradise. In order to do this He will have to remove all of the resurrected/restored people (1 Thess. 4:17)

The amillennial view is the only eschatological (End Times) view that agrees with Scripture!