

Overview of Premillennialism

There are three broad schools of thought regarding eschatology:

Premillennialism believes that the return of Christ will be prior to the reign of Christ on earth. This view believes in a future period of tribulation and a rapture of the church.

Amillennialism believes that there is no earthly kingdom.

Postmillennialism believes that as the coming of Christ approaches, Christ through the church will be bringing a long period of peace and righteousness.

The word "millennium" comes from the Latin words "mille" (thousand) and "annus" (year). So it is apparent how each system is named, depending upon when the millennium occurs.

Definition of Premillennialism

Premillennialism, teaches that the second coming of Christ will occur before the millennium in which Christ will establish His kingdom for 1,000 years, after which will be the eternal state.

Premillennialism is sometimes called "chiliasm", after the Greek word *chilioi* meaning a thousand.

Doctrinal Distinctives of Premillennialism

Premillennialism is usually rejected by liberal scholars and therefore those who hold to this view tend to be conservative evangelicals, holding a high view of Scripture. Premillennialists use the literal method of interpretation.

While there are differences, all premillennialists believe there will be a 1,000 year millennium on earth, with Christ reigning as King and fulfilling all the Old Testament promises regarding the earthly kingdom.

History of Premillennialism

Premillennialism was the dominant belief in the early church. Leaders such as Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian affirm premillennial ideas. However, they did not appear to teach extensively on eschatology.

After opposition by Augustine (d.430), premillennialism was overtaken by amillennialism. The reformers came out of the Roman Catholic Church and took amillennialism with them. Only the smaller reformation movements held to premillennialism, such as the Anabaptists, the Moravians and the Mennonites.

Over the last century, premillennialism has seen a resurgence. Today it is the most commonly held millennial position among evangelicals, being strongest in Bible churches, among the majority of Baptists, Evangelical Free churches, and the para-church movements. In addition, most mission boards are either exclusively or primarily premillennial.

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Argument for Premillennialism

As mentioned, premillennialism is based upon the the literal method of interpretation. This method can be seen in the two major arguments used to support premillennialism:

- The Old Testament promises of a future glorious age will be established on the earth (cf. Isaiah 4; 11; 32; 34; 52; 61; 66; Amos 9:11-12; Zechariah 12:8-9; 14:16). We look more at what God has promised and its fulfillment under our discussion of the Biblical covenants.
- Revelation 20:4-6, which speaks directly to a reign of Christ for 1,000 years. It is a difficult passage for non-premillennialists to deal with, and their attempt is as follows:

Non-premillennialists say the reign of Christ is in heaven, not on earth.

However:

- The earth is the setting for Christ's return (Revelation 19:1-16; Acts 1:11; Matthew 24:15-51) and the saints reign with Him (Revelation 20:4).
- At the conclusion of the thousand years the saints are still on the earth when Satan comes to attack them (Revelation 20:9).
- Revelation 5:10 claims the saints will reign on earth.
- OT Messianic prophecies look to an earthly kingdom (Psalm 2:8; Isaiah 11:1-10; Daniel 7).

Non-premillennialists say the one thousand years is not literal but is symbolic of a long period of time, that the nature of prophetic literature refers to completeness, not a period of time.

However:

- Note the frequent mention of the time frame in Revelation 20:2-7 (six occurrences of "thousand years").
- In the Bible whenever a Greek or Hebrew word for "year" is used, the reference is always to a literal meaning for year.
- Prophetic literature is not entirely symbolic but uses symbolism. There must be evidence before concluding that a figure is being used.
- 1 Peter 3:8 states that a thousand years is as one day with God but it does not deny that it is actually a thousand years with man.

Non-premillennialists say the occurrence of the thousand years is not future but present.

However,

- The events of Revelation 19-20 are a natural chronological sequence beginning with the second coming of Christ. Note phrases like "and I saw" and "when". Since the text shows that the second coming precedes the thousand years, the thousand years are still future.

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- Revelation 20:1-3 is future since it depicts Satan as bound. While Satan has been judged (1 John 3:8; Gen. 3:15; Isaiah 53:12), he is not presently bound (1 John 5:19; 1 Peter 5:8; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4) as that judgment is yet to be executed.

Non-premillennialists say the resurrection which occurs first in Revelation 20:4 is a spiritual resurrection occurring at salvation while the second resurrection of Revelation 20:5a is an actual bodily resurrection. Therefore, there are not two separate future resurrections but those who are regenerated will be raised from the dead after thousand years.

However, the first resurrection of 20:4-5 is a literal bodily resurrection and is one thousand years before the second bodily resurrection because:

- The use of the verb "came to life" is used elsewhere in Revelation 2:8; 13:14; Matthew 9:18; and Romans 14:9 to refer to a bodily resurrection.
- The verb "came to life" should be taken in the same sense in verse four as it is in verse five. To change the meaning of the verb from spiritual resurrection in verse 4 to bodily resurrection in verse 5 requires a compelling reason. Alford states, "If, in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned ... the first resurrection may be understood to mean spiritual raising with Christ, while the second means literal raising from the grave; then there is an end to all significance in language, and the Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything."
- Of the over forty occurrences of "resurrection", all are bodily resurrections with the exception of Luke 2:34.
- From the context, the two resurrections involved different groups. The first resurrection is for the saints who enter the millennium and the second is a resurrection to judgment (cf. John 5:29).

While the premillennial system does not rest solely upon one text, nevertheless Revelation 20 poses a very substantial problem for amillennialism and postmillennialism.

Types of Premillennialism

Within premillennialism there exist differing views regarding the time of the rapture. The term "rapture" comes from the Latin translation of the Greek for "caught up", from 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It refers to the translation of the church from mortality to immortality (cf. John 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

Note there is no specific verse in Scripture that teaches the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation. Therefore, we must seek to integrate the Biblical evidence together, like we do with the doctrine of the Trinity.

There are several types of premillennialism (in order of their popularity): pretribulationism, posttribulationism, midtribulationism, the pre-wrath view and the partial rapture view. This will be studied in our next section.

Summary of Premillennialism

While the various approaches in millennial views are based upon different systems of Biblical interpretation, the views within premillennialism are based upon different interpretations of certain passages. Therefore, the distance between other millennial views and premillennialism is much greater than the distance between differing views of the rapture.