

A Survey of the Major Millennial Positions

(excerpted from Michael Pahl, *Last Things*, Prairie Distance Education)

Historic Premillennialism

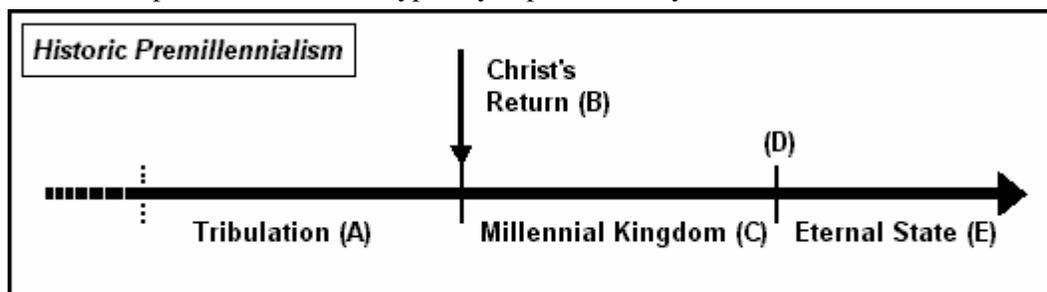
Historical Roots

While no millennial view of any kind appeared in any creedal formulations during the early period of the church, the dominant view during the first three centuries was a form of premillennialism known as “chiliasm” (from the Greek word for “thousand”). This belief was that Christ would personally return to reign on earth, delivering His people from their suffering and tribulation. This reign would be a time of great abundance and fertility, in which the earth would gradually be renewed and a glorified Jerusalem would be rebuilt. This perspective is a “posttributational premillennialism”: *post*-tributational because it holds that Christ will return *after* a time of tribulation; *pre*-millennial because it holds that Christ will return *before* an earthly millennial kingdom. One scholar has stated this, a fact generally recognized among historical theologians:

*Every church father who deals with the subject expects the Church to suffer at the hand of Antichrist. God would purify the Church through suffering, and Christ would save her by His return at the end of the Tribulation when He would destroy Antichrist, deliver His Church, and bring the world to an end and inaugurate His millennial kingdom. The prevailing view is a posttributational premillennialism (George Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 31).*

Basic Overview

Many evangelical scholars today hold to the essential features of this historic view. The key elements of historic premillennialism as typically expressed today look like this:



- The kingdom of God is a present reality in the lives of believers, but it will only find its fulfillment in a direct, personal reign of Christ on earth.
- There will be a time of general tribulation and suffering which the church will go through, a tribulation which may be seen throughout church history or perhaps in a specific time of intense difficulty at the end. (A)
- The suffering and tribulation of this present age will be halted by the personal coming of Christ, at which time believers will be resurrected, Satan will be bound and thrown into the abyss, and the evil forces who have followed Satan will be destroyed. (B)
- Christ will reign directly and personally on earth during his millennial kingdom, with believers co-reigning, bringing peace, prosperity, and blessing on the world for this time. (C)
- At the end of the millennium, Satan will be loosed and will deceive people, leading one last battle against Christ and his followers. Again, Christ will win a decisive victory over Satan. This will lead to the resurrection of all the rest of the dead, and to the final judgment. (D)
- From that judgment, the eternal state begins. (E)

Biblical Support

The primary evidence for any premillennial view comes out of Revelation 20, the only passage in Scripture that mentions a *thousand year* reign of Christ. It is argued that the most natural reading of this chapter clearly demands a premillennial position: Christ has returned (described in 19:11ff.); Satan is bound for a “thousand years” (20:1-3); faithful believers are resurrected in the “first resurrection” and reign with Christ during this “thousand years” (20:4-6); and when the “thousand years” are over, Satan is released and finally defeated, the rest of the dead are resurrected in a second resurrection, and all are judged (20:7-15). It is further maintained that the words for “resurrection” and “came to life” require a literal, bodily resurrection, and therefore there will be two resurrections: one for believers before the millennium, and one for the rest of the dead after the millennium. The resurrection of believers clearly takes place at the personal return of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:23, 52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16), and so this passage points to a premillennial return of Christ.

Other lines of evidence are also put forward to point to a generally premillennial view. First, there are several passages which describe a future, messianic kingdom of God in very earthly terms (e.g. Isaiah 2:2-4; Psalm 72; Matthew 20:20-23; Matthew 26:29; possibly Acts 1:6-7). Second, it is argued that the personal return of Christ to earth, which is a recognized truth from Scripture, is superfluous if he has no business to attend to on earth. Third, there are passages that point to non-ideal conditions at Christ’s personal return, indicating that only his return can change the world’s state of affairs (e.g. Matthew 24-25; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2:1-12; 2 Peter 3:3-13). Fourth, there are passages that link Christ’s coming with his kingdom (Matthew 24-25; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Corinthians 15:50 (in context); 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2 Timothy 4:1). Fifth, there are passages which point to Christ being personally present in his future kingdom (Matthew 20:20-23; 26:29). And finally, it is argued that the direct, personal rule of the Messiah is a theological necessity, since Adam failed as the representative of humanity and the mediator of the kingdom on earth, but Christ must succeed in that capacity.

These point to a generally premillennial view, but two other main arguments are put forward as well for a specifically posttribulation view. First, it is claimed that Scripture teaches that believers will be present during future tribulation, and do not have a promise of being taken out of it. For example, it is the Church which Jesus describes as going through the tribulation in Matthew 24, for the term “elect” most naturally refers to Christians. Also, the terms for “tribulation” in the NT are consistently used to describe the tribulation of Christians (e.g. John 16:33; Revelation 1:9; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3). Even if there is a period of divine wrath upon humanity, it is maintained that believers will be present on the earth. Believers are promised immunity from divine wrath (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1:10), but this does not necessitate personal removal from its presence. For example, God’s wrath is currently being poured out on humanity for its sin (Romans 1:18), yet believers are present in the world. It is reasoned that God will spare believers from the effects of his wrath much as he spared the Israelites from the effects of the ten plagues, even though they were present among the Egyptians (Exodus 7-12).

A second primary argument for posttribulationism is that it is the most natural reading of the main tribulation and second coming texts. In Matthew 24-25, we read of a period of tribulation (24:4-28), then the coming of Christ and “gathering” of the elect (24:29-31), followed by a description of Christ in his kingdom (25:31ff.). In Revelation, we have a period of tribulation and wrath (6-18), then the coming of Christ (19:11ff.), followed by a millennial kingdom (20:1-6). And in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, we see the coming of a “man of lawlessness” during a time of general apostasy, then the coming of Christ and “our being gathered to him.” This last passage in particular is used in conjunction with 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11. In this passage Paul has paralleled the coming (*parousia*) of Christ with the “day of the Lord,” giving the following order: on the day of the Lord, Christ will come, dead believers will be resurrected, and living believers will be “caught up” (raptured) together with them to be with Christ. In 2 Thessalonians 2, because of a misunderstanding of the nearness of this event, Paul then clarifies his previous words by saying that the “day of the Lord,” including the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord and believers being “gathered” to him, would not happen until *after* a time of rebellion and tribulation involving a “man of lawlessness.”

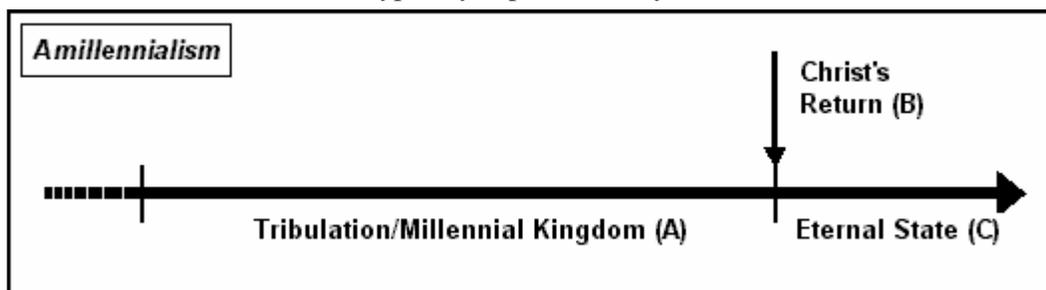
Amillennialism

Historical Roots

While the first centuries of the church saw a predominantly premillennial eschatology, that all changed in the early fifth century with Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430), whose ideas formed the bedrock of all theological thought for nearly the next thousand years. The suffering and persecution of the church which had nurtured a premillennial emphasis was no longer a reality, and with the general political and cultural acceptance of Christianity a new understanding was developed. Augustine popularized a millennial view which maintained that the millennium began with Christ's first coming and would continue until his second. While some scholars have called Augustine's view postmillennial, it was more accurately a form of amillennialism, emphasizing the heavenly "city of God" as occurring parallel to the earthly Christianized Roman Empire, but not equated with it. This view dominated the church with little opposition right through the Reformation and even into the eighteenth century.

Basic Overview

This view is called "a-millennialism" not because it does not believe in a millennial kingdom, but because it denies that this millennial kingdom will be manifested on earth in any visible manner with political and cultural influence. Many mainline evangelical churches today continue to endorse this view. The key elements of amillennialism as typically expressed today look like this:



- The kingdom of God will not involve a direct, personal reign of Christ on earth; rather, this kingdom is manifested now as Christ reigns in heaven and in the hearts of believers, bestowing his salvation blessings upon them.
- The resurrection and ascension of Christ inaugurated his reign at the right hand of God, his millennial kingdom; and while this reign certainly has implications for believers on earth as we enjoy the blessings of salvation, the present world will still be characterized by tribulation and suffering. (A)
- The suffering and tribulation of this present age will be halted by the personal coming of Christ, at which time Satan and his followers will be destroyed, and all the dead will be resurrected to judgment. (B)
- From that judgment, the eternal state begins. (C)

Biblical Support

Amillennialists use two main lines of argument to support their view. First, they claim that the "earthly language" used in describing a future kingdom of God is simply symbolic, as it appears in prophetic and apocalyptic passages which are by nature very figurative. Second, it is argued that the need for an earthly "intermediate kingdom" simply "muddies up the waters" of eschatology. It is clear from Scripture that we have kingdom realities available now as the blessings of salvation (e.g. Colossians 1:13-14), and it is much simpler to see these present kingdom references as simply speaking of a spiritual kingdom. Any future kingdom references are only referring to the future eternal state (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:50). Thus, it is claimed that to try and discern an intermediate earthly kingdom from Scripture is unnecessary. The simplest view is the correct view.

Postmillennialism

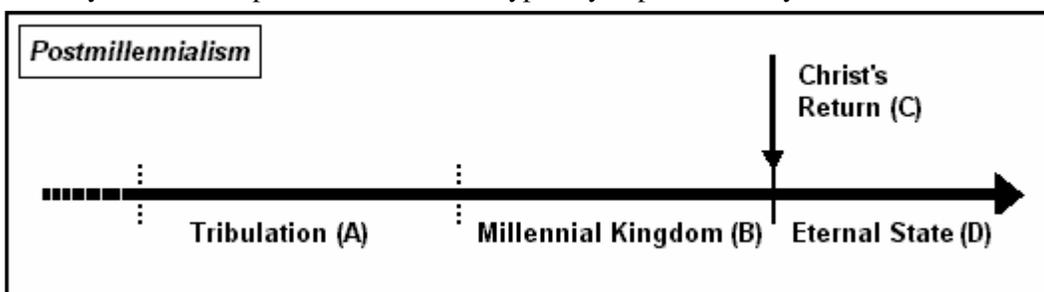
Historical Roots

Until the eighteenth century, the eschatology of the church tended to be virtually unified, first in favor of chiliastic premillennialism, and then from Augustine on in favor of amillennialism. But during the early eighteenth century this near uniformity began to disappear, and has not been achieved since. While amillennialism continued to be very popular and premillennialism persisted among a few peripheral groups, a distinct postmillennialism emerged in Britain and western Europe as church expansion through revivals and missions and societal progress through industrialization occurred.

This view is called “*post*-millennialism” because of its basic belief that Christ will return *after* the millennial kingdom, which is brought about on earth by the expansion and influence of the church. Many historical theologians have maintained that postmillennialism has been found in only one form, dominated by liberal theologians. However, from its inception (and certainly today) postmillennialism has been present in two related but fundamentally distinct forms, sometimes called “secular” and “biblical” postmillennialism. Both forms hold to the basic belief described above, but the former is based primarily on the recognition of societal progress and advancements made in technology and industry, while the latter is based on the interpretation of Scripture and the integration of biblical ideas. It is important that these two forms be distinguished, as a growing number of evangelical scholars today hold to a biblical postmillennialism.

Basic Overview

The key elements of postmillennialism as typically expressed today look like this:



- The kingdom of God is a present reality as Christ reigns through the church in the world; this kingdom will increase in extent and influence in the world, growing into a millennial kingdom of peace and prosperity mediated by the church.
- Most current postmillennialists are also preterists in their interpretation of such passages as Matthew 24 and Revelation; thus there was a time of intense tribulation during the first century around the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), as described in those passages. (A)
- The resurrection and ascension of Christ inaugurated his reign at the right hand of God, a reign which grows into the millennial kingdom as Christ reigns through the church, influencing society and culture and bringing about a period of peace and prosperity on the earth. (B)
- At the end of the millennial kingdom, Christ will personally return, at which time Satan and his followers will be finally destroyed, and all the dead will be resurrected to judgment. (C)
- From that judgment, the eternal state begins. (D)

Biblical Support

First, postmillennialists would agree with premillennial arguments which point to an earthly messianic kingdom (see above). However, they would see these biblical passages as not indicating a direct, personal reign of the Messiah, but rather a reign mediated through his people. Second, postmillennialists emphasize the passages of Scripture which point to a present kingdom of God, particular the parables of Jesus which indicate that this kingdom will increase and spread in this present

age until the end (e.g. Matthew 13). Third, current postmillennial arguments also emphasize the certainty of the growth of the church in the world, as promised by Christ and founded upon his authority (e.g. Matthew 16:18; 28:18-20). We must, it is argued, take seriously Christ's delegation of authority and his promises to build his church in a way that not even "the gates of *hades*" can overcome.

But the most prominent argument used by postmillennial scholars today relates to a preterist interpretation of the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24) and Revelation. It is maintained that these texts find direct and complete fulfillment in the Jewish war of A.D. 66-73; we do not need to look to a future fulfillment for these passages. Thus the "coming of the Son of Man" in the Gospels was not Christ's personal coming (which is described elsewhere), but is rather a divine coming in judgment on the Jews for rejecting the Messiah. Also, the millennial kingdom of Revelation 20 was inaugurated in the first century, and Christ's personal return will occur after this period of time. The basis for this interpretation of these passages is quite complex, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into greater detail.

Dispensational Premillennialism

Historical Roots

The early nineteenth century brought another millennial view into the mix. This view was founded among Brethren Christians in Britain who held to a theological system known as *dispensationalism*. Notable early proponents included J. N. Darby, G. Campbell Morgan, Harry Ironside, and C.I. Scofield. It is this last man who, more than any other, popularized early dispensational theology, through his "Scofield Reference Bible" which included his comments alongside the text of Scripture. This view has become even more dominant in North America through the founding of many dispensational educational institutions (most Bible institutes, and most notably Dallas Seminary), leading to a prevalence of dispensational pastors and Bible teachers and a flood of dispensational publications. In fact, it can be safely said that most evangelical churches and institutions in North America have dispensational roots, and many of these continue in this tradition without being aware of any other.

While dispensationalism is a complex system of interpretation and theology, its basic tenets are these:

- *The Bible must be interpreted quite literally*, not allegorized like much medieval interpretation or "demythologized" like much modern liberal interpretation. Modern dispensationalists (especially a group known as "progressive dispensationalists") will certainly recognize literary genres and figures of speech in Scripture, but still tend toward a literal interpretation.
- *God has worked in history in different ways, among different groups of people, in different periods of time called "dispensations."*
- *There is a sharp and definite distinction between Israel and the church.* God works differently among Israel than he does in the church, and in different dispensations. We are now in a dispensation in which God is exclusively working in and through the church; God has in the past and will again in the future exclusively work in and through Israel.

This last point became the foundation for the premillennial view attached to dispensationalism, for it was argued that God still needed to literally fulfill his promises to Israel, and that the church needed to be taken out of the world for this to happen. Thus, a "pre-tribulational" rapture was proposed, an invisible first phase of Christ's coming in which he would resurrect and rapture believers at the beginning of a seven-year tribulation period. The precise origins of the doctrine of a pretribulational rapture of the church are somewhat disputed; many historians claim that it actually originated from a vision which a young girl had around 1830. Regardless, through a series of circumstances and in spite of some internal opposition, the doctrine quickly became popular among most in the dispensational movement, spreading rapidly to North America.

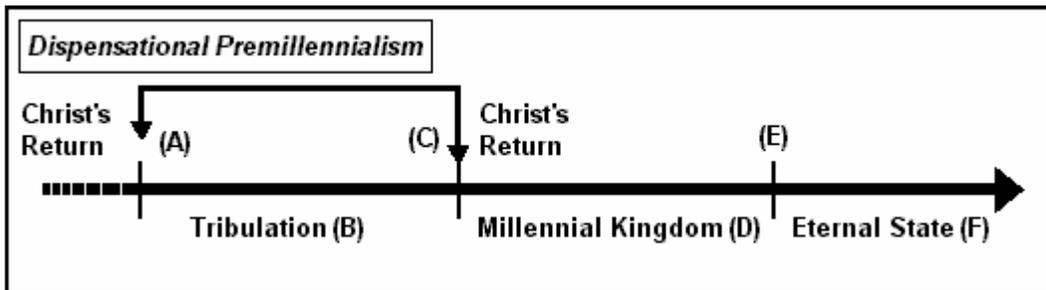
In the early twentieth century, the pretribulational view began to take on creedal status among many North American fundamentalists. This was in response to the secular postmillennialism of the day

held by mostly liberal theologians, to distinguish “Bible-believing fundamentalists” from “heretical liberals.” Thus, belief in a pretribulational rapture became for many a “litmus test” of true Christianity, a quick way of determining the legitimacy of a person’s faith. While most North American evangelical organizations have softened their stance on this issue, some remain solidly opposed to any other millennial view than that of dispensationalism.

Dispensational premillennialism has undergone some profound changes in recent years, having diversified considerably. There continues to be a strong majority who hold to a very detailed eschatological scheme including a pretribulational rapture, seen especially at the popular level (see, for example, the many bestselling books by Hal Lindsey, or the popular *Left Behind* novel series by LaHaye and Jenkins). There is, however, a growing number who see the rapture happening at some point within the seven-year tribulation, and not at the beginning of it (two prominent examples are the “midtribulational” and “pre-wrath” views). Also, especially at the scholarly level, there has been a growing awareness of the legitimacy of some aspects of other millennial views, leading to a “progressive dispensationalism” which allows for a little more “blurring” of traditional distinctions between the church and Israel.

Basic Overview

The key elements of dispensational premillennialism as typically expressed today look like this:



- The kingdom of God is a present reality in the lives of believers, but it will only find its fulfillment in a direct, personal reign of Christ on earth.
- There will be two phases to Christ’s personal return. The first phase will take place at the beginning of an intense period of tribulation, when Christ will come invisibly in the air, dead believers will be resurrected, and all believers will be raptured to be with him in heaven during the tribulation. A growing number of dispensational premillennialists believe this first phase will instead take place at some point during the tribulation, either at the midpoint or sometime in the second half. (A)
- There will then be a seven-year period of severe tribulation on the earth, including at some point the direct outpouring of God’s wrath. (B) Most would divide the tribulation into two equal periods, according to something like the following schedule of events:

During the <i>first 3½ years:</i>	During the <i>second 3½ years:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The antichrist signs an agreement with Israel, providing protection for them (Dan 9:27). ▪ The antichrist suffers what looks like a fatal wound, yet still lives (Rev 13:3). ▪ 144,000 Jews are sealed as believers and act as evangelists (Rev 7:1-8). ▪ The false prophet arises, promoting worship of the antichrist and doing great miracles on behalf of the antichrist (Rev 13:11ff.). ▪ The judgments of God are poured out upon the world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The antichrist commits the abomination that causes desolation in the rebuilt Jerusalem temple, starting an intense persecution of Israel and believers (Dan 9:27; cf. Matt 24:15ff.). ▪ The two witnesses minister in Jerusalem, are killed, and 3½ days later are raised to life and ascend into heaven (Rev 11:1-14). ▪ More judgments of God are poured out upon the world. ▪ At the end of this tribulation, the war of Armageddon takes place (Rev 16:14, 16; 17:14; cf. Isa 34, 63; Jer 49; Joel 3; Zech 12, 14).

- After the tribulation Christ will return, Satan will be bound and thrown into the abyss, and the evil forces who have followed Satan will be destroyed. (C)
- Christ will reign directly and personally on earth during his millennial kingdom, with believers co-reigning, bringing peace, prosperity, and blessing on the world for this time. (D)
- At the end of the millennium, Satan will be loosed and will deceive people, leading one last battle against Christ and his followers. Again, Christ will win a decisive victory over Satan. This will lead to the resurrection of all the rest of the dead, and to the final judgment. (E)
- From that judgment, the eternal state begins. (F)

Biblical Support

First, dispensational premillennialists would wholeheartedly concur with the arguments of historic premillennialists for a premillennial return of Christ to set up an earthly kingdom (see above). Second, the arguments for dispensationalism as a whole also stand as arguments for its millennial view. Specifically, if the church and Israel are distinct entities in which God works differently at different periods of time, then it follows that the church must be somehow taken out of the way during the tribulation period while God works among Israel. Third, dispensational premillennialists will make much of a future “seventieth week” described in Daniel 9:25-27, claiming this is a seven-year period of tribulation just prior to Christ’s visible coming. This passage is combined with many others (including Matthew 24 and Revelation 6-18) to produce a precise schedule of events for this tribulation period (see above for this schedule).

Fourth, and more specifically, proponents of this view will point to passages which describe Christ’s return as imminent (e.g. Romans 13:11; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 4:5; James 5:8-9). It is argued that these passages refer to a first phase of Christ’s coming which could truly happen at any time, and could not be referring to his visible, glorious return which happens after a tribulation period which is obvious to all. Fifth, it is argued that Christians will not be present during this tribulation period. The church will not suffer the wrath of God (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:9; Revelation 3:10), and the tribulation is the outpouring of God’s wrath on the earth, so the church will not be present then. And sixth, several passages are seen as describing this secret rapture of the church prior to a tribulation period. For example, 1 Thessalonians 4:17 describes believers meeting the Lord in the air then being with him forever, with no mention of coming immediately back to the earth. Also, Matthew 24:40-41 describes people being taken away suddenly and secretly.

Summary

The subtleties of these four views can often be confused, making it especially difficult to distinguish between post- and amillennialism, or historic and dispensational premillennialism. The following comparisons, while simplistic, can be beneficial in helping to understand these views.

First, it is important to distinguish between pre-, post-, and amillennialism. This chart provides a basic comparison of their essential principles:

	<u>Premillennialism</u>	<u>Postmillennialism</u>	<u>Amillennialism</u>
<u>Timing of Christ’s Return</u>	Christ returns before the millennium	Christ returns after the millennium	Christ returns “in” the millennium
<u>Nature of Christ’s Reign</u>	Christ reigns personally and directly	Christ reigns through the church	Christ reigns in the church
<u>Location of Christ’s Reign</u>	On earth	On earth	In heaven/In human hearts

The most obvious distinguishing feature is in the timing of Christ’s return, as each of the views differ in this. However, notice also that postmillennialism and amillennialism essentially agree on the nature of Christ’s reign in the millennial kingdom, but that they differ from premillennialism on this issue. Notice

also that premillennialism and postmillennialism agree on the location of Christ's reign in the millennial kingdom, but that they differ from amillennialism on this issue. Once again, this comparison is quite simplistic, but can be helpful in distinguishing between these broad views.

Second, having identified premillennialism, one can distinguish between the historic and dispensational versions:

	<u>Historic</u>	<u>Dispensational</u>
<u>Timing of Christ's Return</u>	Christ comes once, after the tribulation	Christ comes twice, once before (or during) the tribulation <i>for</i> the church, and once after it <i>with</i> the church
<u>Focus of Tribulation and Millennium</u>	The church	Israel

Conclusion

Toward a Solution?

These are the four main millennial views that have been considered throughout the church's history, and each of these continues to be held by sincere evangelical Christians today. Each position claims biblical support, and each position has its weaknesses. Which of these positions is correct?

Allow me now to suggest several things which, in my view, point toward an answer. First, Revelation 20 presents a sequence of events which is very difficult to avoid. Certainly the passage occurs in a highly symbolic form of literature (apocalypse), but that does not give the interpreter license to arbitrarily choose which items are symbolic and which form the referential anchors of the text. Given the nearly exclusive use of *anastasis* for bodily resurrection, and given the contextual descriptions of those resurrected as "the dead" and even "beheaded," it seems best to take this passage as referring to two resurrections separated by a millennial kingdom, and thus pointing to premillennialism.

Second, any millennial view must take into account the "already/not yet" element of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is already present in the world as God reigns through his people (e.g. Luke 11:20; 17:20-21; Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; Colossians 1:12-13; Hebrews 12:28). However, the kingdom of God is not yet fully realized, and thus remains future (e.g. Matthew 19:28-30; 20:20-23; 26:29; Luke 22:29-30; 1 Corinthians 15:50; Ephesians 5:5; 2 Peter 1:11).

And third, in attempting to answer questions about *sequence* of future events and not simply the *nature* of those events, we need to emphasize passages for which the *intention of the biblical author* was to outline sequence of events. The one passage that stands out in this regard is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, where Paul's entire purpose in providing this section is to clarify the sequence of events surrounding the "day of the Lord." Here Paul declares that the day of the Lord, together with the *parousia* of Christ and the gathering of believers to him, would not take place until after a tribulation period, including the blasphemous activities of the "man of lawlessness."

These broad strokes most closely resemble a historic premillennial view. They indicate the present reality, and even increasing influence, of the kingdom of God; the corresponding presence of tribulation; the future personal return of Christ to conquer evil; and the direct, personal reign of Christ upon the earth.

Some Cautions

Two major cautions are in order at this point. First, we must recognize the complexity of this topic. In order to handle this subject satisfactorily several important issues would need thorough biblical study: the proper interpretational approach to prophetic, apocalyptic, and other predictive passages in Scripture; the theological relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament; the nature, purpose, and scope of the "kingdom of God"; God's promises to Israel specifically, and the future of

Israel generally, within his salvation plan; and several others. Such study is beyond the scope of this paper, however.

Because the issues involved in this discussion are quite complex, we must be wary of any attempt which presents a simplistic, “the Bible is clear on this” kind of approach. Most popular presentations on this topic offer a “proof-text” method for understanding the Scriptural teaching which does not adequately take into account the context of the biblical statements or the primary intent or focus of the author. Many of these popular treatments also resort to “straw-man” arguments, where opposing views are inadequately portrayed so as to make the proposed view more appealing; or to arguments by false association, claiming that since some people who hold to a certain view are theologically liberal, the view itself is wrong. Even scholarly treatments of the topic are not immune to such tactics. These methods of presentation are inadequate. We must remember that any theological view, including any millennial view, stands or falls simply on the basis of its exegesis of Scripture and its overall argumentation.

Second, we must be cautious of any attempt to divide “true” believers from “false” on the basis of millennial views. While most of the North American evangelical church is premillennial, even dispensational premillennial, the majority of believers through history have not been such, but rather amillennial. One may believe others to be wrong on this issue, but that does not mean that they are not genuine believers. We must acknowledge the tentative nature of theology as opposed to the infallible nature of Scripture, and recognize degrees of certainty and importance in theology. Issues such as the timing of the Rapture and the nature of the Millennium are definitely not insignificant, but they are just as definitely not of the same degree of certainty or importance as the foundational beliefs of Christianity.