



The All-Encompassing Return of Christ

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THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING RETURN OF CHRIST

AN INTRODUCTION
TO AMILLENNIALISM

MICHAEL
CARPENTER



NASHVILLE

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The All-Encompassing Return of Christ

An Introduction to Amillennialism

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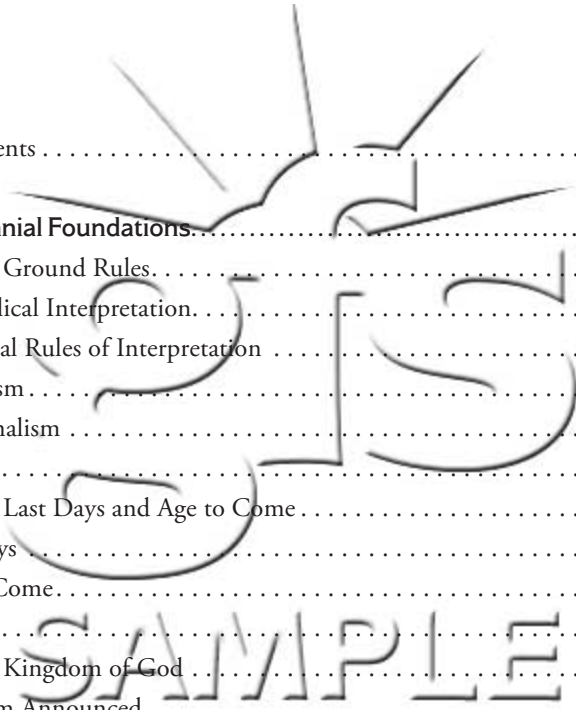
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For the saints of Reformation Christian Fellowship, Newport News, Virginia



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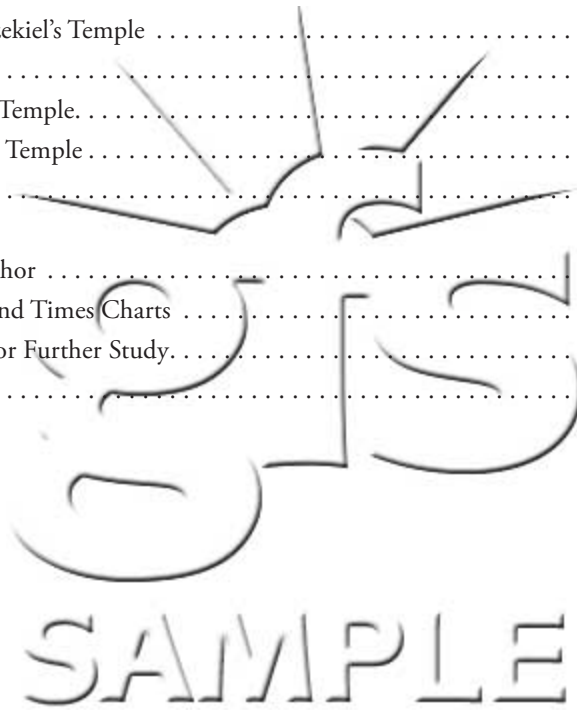
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PART 1:

AMILLENNIAL FOUNDATIONS

When presenting a case for a particular position on a debatable subject, how the position was formulated is as important as what is presented. The first three chapters present foundational considerations for amillennialism.

SAMPLE



Chapter 1

THE GROUND RULES

In October 1982, I moved from my hometown, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to Las Vegas, Nevada. I was newly commissioned as an Air Force officer and stationed at Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas. In God's providence, this move began a season of significant change—much more than a change in location, much more than leaving the humidity of the southeast for the aridness of the southwest, and much more than transitioning from civilian life to military life. My move to Las Vegas proved to be a thorough spiritual renewal.

I grew up in a Christian home and knew nothing other than being actively involved in church. So, when I moved to Las Vegas, I immediately found a new church family. I joined one I had met two years earlier when I was with my father on a mission trip. Even though I quickly became active in my newfound church, I was not growing in my walk with Christ. But over the years I spent in Las Vegas, God used personal trials, depression, and godly friends to wake me from my slumber. Through his Word and his Spirit, he transformed me from one who rarely read the Bible to one who could not get enough of the Bible.

Given my thirst for God's Word, I listened faithfully to the local Christian radio station that broadcast teachings from various pastors and Bible teachers. One of the series aired was an exposition of Revelation. I listened with great interest, and what I heard was fascinating. I had never heard Revelation interpreted in this manner. No secret rapture? No seven-year tribulation? No future millennium? No "partial return" of Christ on the clouds before his final return as a Warrior King? These were all aspects of the second coming of Christ I had been taught in my church back home—ones the

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radio preacher in Las Vegas proclaimed as incorrect. This preacher presented an alternative to my upbringing. He spoke of one return of Christ that would wrap up the current age and usher in the new heavens and new earth. He taught an all-encompassing return of Christ, which would include believers and unbelievers being resurrected in a single resurrection, a single final judgment, the demise of Satan and all evil, and the ushering in of the final state of the new heavens and new earth. He was teaching Revelation from an amillennial perspective.

Premillennialism, and dispensationalism in general, were all I had ever known, but I had never truly embraced either. My attitude when taught dispensational premillennialism was “Well, if you say so.” Before my Las Vegas growth, I hadn’t known any different, and I had no interest in seriously studying the Bible. But now, my new desire to study the Scriptures and this new perspective about the end times led me not only out of dispensationalism but also into a covenantal understanding of the Bible and reformed theology. The Air Force eventually moved me from Las Vegas, but I left a different Christian than when I had arrived. My ground rules for approaching the Bible had changed.

Rules of Biblical Interpretation

Ground rules are important. Just as an athletic competition requires an agreed-upon set of rules, biblical interpretation must have the same. Disagreements over what the Bible says can often be traced back to differences in how to approach the Bible. Therefore, before we go further, let’s define some terms and establish the method of interpretation.

Terminology

- Eschatology—the study of the last things. The word *eschatology* comes from two Greek words: *eschatos* and *logos*. *Eschatos* means “last,” and *logos* means “word or speech”; therefore, eschatology literally is a word or speech about the last things. The field of eschatology encompasses more than the second coming of Christ, but it includes the second coming of Christ.
- Millennium—one thousand years. In biblical eschatology, the millennium refers to the one thousand years found in Revelation 20.
- Amillennialism—the position that the one thousand years of Revelation 20 represent the time between the first advent of Christ and the second advent of Christ. Thus, the millennium is not exactly one thousand years and does not begin in the future. Since the millennium spans the period between the cross and the return of Christ, Christ will return after the millennium.

- Premillennialism—the position that the one thousand years of Revelation 20 will occur in the future and will be exactly one thousand years.¹ The *pre-* prefix indicates Christ will return before the millennium begins.
- Postmillennialism—the position that the one thousand years of Revelation 20 will occur in the future and may or may not be exactly one thousand years. The *post-* prefix indicates Christ will return after the millennium.
- Dispensationalism—the position that the history of redemption is revealed through dispensations. A dispensation is a period of history when God related (or will relate) to man differently. Since a dispensation is based on a change in how God is working in redemptive history, dispensations cannot overlap.
- Covenantalism—the position that the history of redemption is revealed through covenants that show the unity of the people of God across all history. Covenants overlap because there is one redemptive plan, and the covenants are fulfilled in Christ in the New Covenant.

These are broad definitions that I will clarify as we proceed, and I will define other terms as needed.

Hermeneutics

Second, let's consider hermeneutics. Hermeneutics are the collection of principles we use to interpret Scripture. While this is not a book on principles for interpreting the Bible, we need a few ground rules for biblical hermeneutics because much disagreement over what the Bible means is due to prevailing principles of interpretation. Many who read the Bible fail to consider what principles to use when interpreting Scripture. Without saying it, many adhere to the principle that "The Bible means whatever I think it means." We want to avoid this approach to interpreting the Bible.

I subscribe to three major principles of interpretation. The primary principle is *Scripture interprets Scripture* (also known as the analogy of faith). First and foremost, we should use the Bible to interpret the Bible. Positively, this means other passages of Scripture help us understand the passage we are studying. Negatively, this means no interpretation of a

¹ Most premillennialists believe the millennium will span one thousand years, but there are some historic premillennialists who do not take the one thousand years of Revelation 20 to be literal.

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portion of Scripture can conflict with what is clearly taught in other portions of Scripture. There are some corollaries to the analogy of faith.

- Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament.
- Interpret the unclear in light of the clear.
- Interpret the implicit in light of the explicit.

The second major principle for interpreting the Bible is *interpret according to the literal sense*. Interpreting according to the literal sense does not mean interpreting the Bible in a strictly literal manner that ignores the normal rules of literature. It means we interpret according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, genre, and context. This principle restrains us from speculation, and it requires we know the literary genres and forms of Scripture (narrative, poetry, etc.).

The final major principle is *interpret considering the grammar and history of the text* (often called grammatical-historical interpretation). This principle is closely related to the literal-sense principle and focuses on the grammatical constructs and historical contexts of Scripture. Grammatical structure determines whether a specific passage should be considered a question (interrogative), command (imperative), or declaration (indicative). It seeks to understand the original meaning of the text to prevent us from reading into Scripture our thoughts from the present.

There are certainly other important factors to consider when interpreting the Bible (i.e., considering narrative passages in light of declarative passages), but these three overarching principles are the most foundational.

Does everyone who prioritizes these principles agree with my conclusions about the end times? No. These principles are vital, but even those who use these principles may still disagree with my position on eschatology. This disagreement doesn't invalidate the three principles. It simply demonstrates our fallibility. While I am confident in my interpretation of the end times, I cannot be prideful. None of us are infallible interpreters of Scripture.

Eschatological Rules of Interpretation

Now that we have established the rules for biblical interpretation, let's narrow the focus to eschatology. During my time of growth in Las Vegas, that radio Bible teacher made three points in his lectures about the book of Revelation that transformed my thinking about eschatology:

- Revelation must be interpreted according to its genre.
- Revelation must make sense to the original recipients.
- The Church is the true Israel.

As I continued to study, I came to realize these three issues are critical in how one understands not only the millennium but all of eschatology. Other important issues exist, but these three moved to the forefront for me. In fact, if you and I disagree on these points, I doubt we will see eye to eye when it comes to many of the aspects of the return of Christ. We can certainly agree Christ will return to “judge the living and the dead” (2 Timothy 4:1), but we will diverge on the details. To be clear, my primary goal is not agreement but understanding. Yes, I hope this book will encourage many to study amillennialism further, but I also desire this introduction to amillennialism will bring understanding where confusion often reigns.

The first two of the above items relate to the New Testament book of Revelation. This book is not a study of Revelation, but no look at the return of Christ can ignore the last book of the New Testament. The millennium is in Revelation, so how we interpret Revelation impacts how we understand the millennium.

The third item—the Church is the true Israel—is important to eschatology because dispensationalists believe the millennium is a time when God resumes his plan for Israel. However, the relationship between Israel and the Church transcends eschatology.

Respect the Genre

First, when studying Revelation, we must respect the genre. This relates directly to the second principle of interpretation: Interpret according to the literal sense, which includes considering the genre. Fortunately, there is no need to guess the genre of Revelation since the author declares it from the start. The first verses identify Revelation both as “apocalypse” (or “revelation,” 1:1) and as prophecy (1:3). (See also 10:11; 22:7, 9, 10, 18, 19.)

“Apocalypse” is derived from the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, meaning “revelation, disclosure, unveiling”—that is, the disclosure of unseen heavenly or future realities. Revelation, therefore, is in the same category as New Testament texts as Jesus’s Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24–25) and Paul’s discussion of the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2).² Furthermore, the first verse of Revelation says, “He made it known by sending his angel.” The KJV translates this phrase as “He sent and signified it by his angel.” “Made it known” (ESV) and “signified” (KJV) translate the Greek word *semaino*, which is related to the noun *sema* (*sign*). It means, “to give a sign, signify, indicate” or “make known, report, communicate.” Signs point us to reality but are not the reality. A sign that says, “New York City” is not the city of New York but is pointing us to or reminding us of New York City.

2 “Introduction to The Revelation to John,” *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2453–54.

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This means we shouldn't take the signs in Revelation literally, but we should see the reality behind the signs. Revelation uses symbolism from beginning to end. However, we can't abandon our hermeneutics and arbitrarily decide what the signs and symbols mean. We must hold fast to the principle, Scripture interprets Scripture. Every chapter has allusions to the Old and New Testaments; thus, we have the whole of Scripture to guide us in our interpretation.

Respect the Audience

Second, when studying Revelation, we must respect the audience. The book of Revelation has the general form of an epistle (letter). There is a greeting (1:4–5b), and it is written to seven historical churches. Therefore, it is an apocalyptic prophecy written in the form of a letter.³ Revelation was written in the latter part of the first century, and this was a time of persecution. Christians were under attack. John says in Revelation 1:9 that he is on the island of Patmos “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” He was exiled because he had been preaching Christ. Chapters 2 and 3 contain the letters to the seven churches, and, in each letter, Jesus makes a promise “to the one who conquers” (or overcomes). In the fifth seal in chapter 6, John “saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Revelation 6:9). Chapter 12 describes the persecution of the Church like this:

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.
(Revelation 12:11)

Then we read in verse 17,

Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Finally, Revelation 20:4 addresses the present reality for the first-century readers, not a future persecution:

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999, 2013), 186.

The souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.

Revelation would bring much less comfort to the persecuted believers if most of the book is set in the far future. Futurism is an interpretive method that assigns chapters 4–22 to the future—a very distant future from the original recipients.

The opposite end of the interpretive spectrum is preterism. Preterism believes all or most of the prophecies concerning the return of Christ were fulfilled in the first century, by AD 70. Full preterism is not considered orthodox (within the realm of acceptable Christian doctrine) since it denies the future return of Christ, while partial preterism is orthodox because it affirms the future, visible, personal return of Christ. Looking at Revelation through the lens of preterism certainly makes Revelation applicable to the seven churches, but it has less value for those of us far removed from the first century.

Historicism views chapters 4–22 as describing historical events from the early church up to and including the new heavens and new earth. However, the problem with historicism is determining what historical events are revealed.

What we need is a way of interpreting Revelation that is meaningful to the early church and to every generation that follows. Also, we need a method of interpretation that relies on the sixty-five books that precede Revelation in the canon of Scripture. That method is idealism.

Idealism holds to an ongoing conflict between Christ and Satan, which is seen in the conflict of the Church with the world and the evil realm. Apart from events related to the first or second coming of Christ, particular historical events are not described. Instead, Revelation describes the type of events each generation of believers can expect. The conflict that characterizes the gospel age will intensify shortly before Christ returns, but his return will eliminate all evil. Believers under persecution in the seven churches and all believers that are persecuted until Jesus returns see the throne room of God described in Revelation 4–5 and are comforted that he rules over all things, including their trials.

Respect the Unity of God's People

The last truth—one that transformed my thinking—is the Church is the true Israel. (Many would not call this a truth but rather a serious error.) This is important because how one understands the relationship between Israel and the Church is tied to how one understands the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Also,

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it is tightly tied to the purpose of Christ's first coming and what he accomplished. Which Old Testament promises and prophecies did Christ fulfill in his first advent? The corollary hermeneutical principle, to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, guides us in answering that question.

The New Testament presents Christ as the fulfillment of all that God has promised. Look at 2 Corinthians 1:19–20:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. *For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.* That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

Paul did not say, “For *most of* the promises of God find their Yes in him.” No, he said *all of* God's plans and purposes for redemption are wrapped up in Christ. The argument, “But there are promises to Israel unfulfilled,” does not withstand the teaching of the New Testament. Jesus said in John 15:1, “I am the true vine.” If Jesus is the true vine, who is the false vine? In Isaiah 5:1–7, Judah is presented as the vineyard of the Lord, but this vineyard only produced wild grapes. Because of this the vineyard will be trampled and destroyed. Verse 7 says,

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!

Furthermore, Jeremiah writes this of Judah,

Yet I planted you a choice vine,
wholly of pure seed.
How then have you turned degenerate
and become a wild vine? (Jeremiah 2:21)

In these verses, the nation of Israel is presented as the false vine. However, God also promised to restore his vineyard (Isaiah 27:2–6). But how? Through Christ. Thus, when Jesus says he is the true vine, he is proclaiming he is the true Israel. Jesus is the true first-born Son of God (Exodus 4:22; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:6). All of God’s people now find their identity in Christ.

What about Jews today, though? If all God’s promises to Israel are now fulfilled in Christ and his church, what is left for them? Have they been shortchanged? Never. Paul expresses it this way:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. (Romans 11:1–2a)

God has not rejected the Jewish people. Paul is proof of that. The people of Israel are now offered Christ through the gospel, and “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 8:26). For this reason, we should not tell Jewish people that one day God will fulfill his promises to them in a future millennium. Instead, we should tell them he has fulfilled his promises to them in Christ.

There is no need to wait for God to reinitiate his plan for the Jews. Christ is the only plan for Jews and Gentiles. As Paul said in Romans 10:1 concerning his fellow Israelites, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that *they may be saved*.” It is interesting that in Paul’s longest passage about Israel (Romans 9–11) he focuses on salvation in Christ, not on a future plan for Israel.

Paul’s focus is on the Church because the Church is the full realization of the people of God and will be for all eternity. Paul’s doxology in Ephesians 3 states this:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20–21)

Notice Paul ascribes glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus. This glory is an eternal glory. Since Paul writes this glory extends “throughout all generations,” you could argue that God’s glory in the Church is just until Jesus returns. However, he adds “forever and ever,” which takes us well past the return of Christ. The Church is God’s eternal plan, not a plan B or a parenthesis while he puts his purposes for Israel on hold.

The Church being one with the Old Testament saints is not unique to amillennialism and is not even tied directly to the second coming of Christ. However, God's plan for the Church being distinct from God's plan for Israel is a key tenet of dispensationalism—and drives much of the eschatology of premillennialism. Thus, if the Church and Israel are one people of God, then much of the basis for dispensational premillennialism unravels.

Covenantalism

Earlier I mentioned my transition from dispensationalism to covenantalism (also called Covenant Theology). Covenant Theology views redemptive history from the perspective of the covenants revealed in Scripture and sees unity across redemptive history. The covenants revealed in the Bible are

1. The Covenant of Redemption—established among the persons of the Trinity to accomplish redemption. This covenant is the basis for the trinitarian nature of salvation.
2. The Covenant of Works—established with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam's obedience would ensure righteousness and life for him and all his progeny. Adam's disobedience would ensure sin and death for all his progeny.
3. The Covenant of Grace—established after Adam sinned to provide redemption to fallen humanity. This covenant undergirds all the remaining covenants.
4. The Covenant with Noah—established with Noah and his descendants that God will not destroy the earth again by water. This is not a redemptive covenant but serves redemption through God's common grace toward man.
5. The Abrahamic Covenant—established with Abraham. This covenant promises that the offspring of Abraham will bless the nations.
6. The Mosaic (or Old) Covenant—established with Israel after leaving Egypt. This covenant prescribes laws for obedience, sacrifice for atonement, and priests for intercession.
7. The Davidic Covenant—established with David. God promises to build David a forever kingdom, and David's son will rule over this kingdom.
8. The New Covenant—the fulfillment by Christ of all the covenants. Jesus fulfilled the Covenant of Works as the obedient last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). He is the seed of the woman who bruised the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15) as promised in the Covenant of Grace. In fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, Jesus is the offspring of Abraham who blesses all the nations, and through Jesus, we are Abraham's offspring (Galatians 3:15–29). Jesus fulfilled all aspects of the Mosaic Covenant. He satisfied the requirements of the law (Matthew 5:17),

accomplished atonement (Hebrews 9:26), and is our great high priest (Hebrews 8:1). He is the Son of David who sits on David's throne (Acts 2:29–36). All of God's promises are "Yes" in him (2 Corinthians 1:20).

There are differences among covenant theologians regarding the number of covenants and the level of continuity between some of the covenants established in the Old Testament and the New Covenant. But a unifying factor is all previous covenants are fulfilled in Christ. There is one people of God because all God's people are in Christ. The Old Testament expression of God's people was Israel, and the New Testament expression of God's people is the Church. All the Old Testament was leading to and pointing to Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:46).

Dispensationalism

Another primary theological perspective is dispensationalism. It has its roots in the theology of John Nelson Darby. In the early nineteenth century, Darby was an Anglican who left the Church of England and associated with the Plymouth Brethren, a nondenominational group formed by those who had left established denominations. He didn't fully develop dispensationalism, but his ideas about the rapture, tribulation, millennium, and the different histories of Israel and the Church were foundational for the development of dispensational theology. Darby traveled to the United States, where his theology was eventually picked up by C. I. Scofield who went on to publish the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. That Bible was the most important tool in spreading dispensationalism. Also, dispensational schools emerged and helped to spread this theology.⁴

The key concept in dispensationalism is seeing biblical history as defined by different eras. Charles Ryrie, a prominent twentieth-century dispensationalist, gives this description of dispensationalism:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the out-working of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations.⁵

4 Cornelis P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 206–7.

5 Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 31.

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Just as you may run your household differently from the way I run my household, dispensationalism says God has run his household, that is the world, in different ways throughout different parts of history. A dispensation, then, marks a period in which God administered his redemptive plan in a way different from other periods of time. Dispensationalism does not ignore the biblical covenants, but the covenants are secondary to the dispensations and are often interpreted in light of them. Just like covenantalists are not unified in their understanding of the covenants, dispensationalists are not unified in their understanding of the dispensations. There are two general categories of dispensationalism: classic and progressive.

Classic Dispensationalism

One of the core beliefs of classic dispensationalism is the separation between Israel and the Church. God has two plans—one for the Church and one for the nation of Israel. This is important because dispensationalists believe God will resume his plan for Israel during the millennium. Traditionally classic dispensationalism has divided biblical history into seven dispensations.

1. The Dispensation of Innocency or Freedom (before the Fall)
2. The Dispensation of Conscience or Self-Determination (after the Fall until the Flood)
3. The Dispensation of Civil Government (after the Flood until Abraham)
4. The Dispensation of Promise or Patriarchal Rule (Abraham until Moses)
5. The Dispensation of Mosaic Law (Moses until Jesus's first coming)
6. The Dispensation of Grace (Jesus's first coming until Jesus's second coming)
7. The Dispensation of the Millennium (Jesus's second coming until the final judgment)⁶

Progressive Dispensationalism

Today, many dispensationalists, especially in academia, are progressive dispensationalists. As with classic dispensationalists, they see a separation between the Church and Israel, and God fulfilling his promises to Israel during the millennium, but ultimately all the people of God, Jews and Gentiles, will share in the same blessings. Progressive dispensationalism also has seven dispensations, but they differ in how they are named, and the final dispensation has no end. The final dispensation begins with the millennium and continues into eternity.

1. The Dispensation of Creation: At Home in the Garden (before the Fall)
2. The Dispensation of the Fall: Exiled from the Garden (after the Fall until the Flood)

⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 57–64.

3. The Dispensation of after the Flood: The Rise of Nations (after the Flood until Abraham)
4. The Dispensation of the call of Abraham: Blessing of All Nations (Abraham until Moses)
5. The Dispensation of the Exodus: The Giving of the Law (Moses until Jesus's first coming)
6. The Dispensation of the Spirit: Blessing of All Nations (Jesus's first coming until Jesus's second coming)
7. The Dispensation of the New Heavens and Earth: Redemption Completed (Millennium, final judgment, new heavens and earth)⁷

Summary

Now that we have set the ground rules, we can begin. We have established some definitions along with principles of biblical interpretation.

- Interpret Scripture with Scripture
 - Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament
 - Interpret the unclear in light of the clear
 - Interpret the implicit in light of the explicit
- Interpret according to the literal sense
- Interpret considering the grammar and history of the text

Also, we considered some rules for interpreting eschatology.

- Respect the genre of Revelation (apocalyptic)
- Respect the original audience of Revelation (persecuted believers)
- Respect the unity of God's people (the Church is the true Israel)

Finally, we contrasted a covenantal approach to the Scriptures with a dispensational approach. As we look at each aspect of the return of Christ, we will carry forward what we established here. This is the foundation for our continued study.

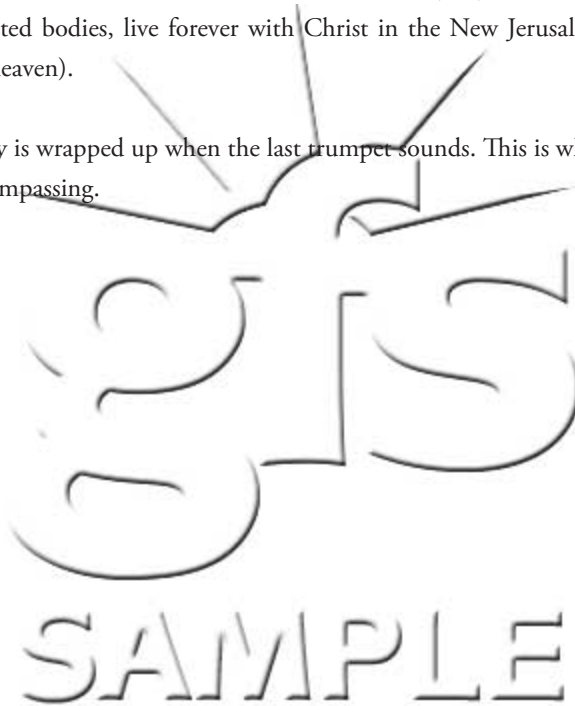
⁷ Glenn R. Kreider, "What Is Dispensationalism? A Proposal," in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, eds. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 28–36.

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My goal is to present an introduction to amillennialism. The key premise of amillennialism is Christ returns once and only once at the end of the age. There are events associated with the second coming of Christ.

1. Just prior to the second advent, there will be great tribulation for the Church. Jesus returns when the situation is most dire for the Church.
2. At his return, all the dead are raised, judgment occurs, Satan along with unbelievers and all evil are cast into the lake of fire (hell), and believers, in their resurrected bodies, live forever with Christ in the New Jerusalem on the new earth (heaven).

All of history is wrapped up when the last trumpet sounds. This is why the return of Christ is all-encompassing.



Chapter 2

THE LAST DAYS AND AGE TO COME

One of the challenges of theological study is clarifying terms. More important, however, is knowing that a careful examination of the Scriptures is how to clarify anything related to theology. How the Bible references a particular word or concept must guide our study.

Therefore, before we study the return of Christ, we need to consider the last days. In order to properly interpret the Scriptures concerning the last things, we need to understand how the Scriptures present the last days.

The Bible refers to the last days using a variety of wording: the last days, the last day, the day, the day of the Lord, the age to come, the end of the age, and the latter days. Do all these time references refer to the same period? Let's look at some examples.

First, 2 Timothy 3:1 gives us a clear reference to “the last days”:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.

In John 6:44 we find “the last day”:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

Hebrews 10:24–25 speaks of “the day”:

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And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The phrase “the day of the Lord” is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Look at Isaiah 13:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:2:

Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come! (Isaiah 13:6)

For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 Thessalonians 5:2)

In Matthew 12:32 we have “the age to come”:

And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Jesus references “the end of the age” in Matthew 24:3:

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

Finally, in the Old Testament, we find the expression “latter days,” such as in Isaiah 2:2:

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it.

How do we make sense of all this? Briefly, “the last day,” “the day,” and “the Day of the Lord” all refer to the time and events associated with Christ’s return, specifically the judgment of the wicked. “The age to come,” “the end of the age,” and “the latter days” all refer to the time period associated with the coming of the Messiah, which overlaps with

“this age.” With this in mind, there are two questions we will consider: When are the last days, and what does the Bible mean when it refers to “this age” and “the age to come”?

The Last Days

A biblical understanding of the last days is important. Some believe when the Bible speaks of the last days it is referring to the period of time just before the return of Christ. If this is true, then many New Testament passages that speak of the last days would apply only to the final generation of believers. However, such an interpretation falls apart when we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. When we interpret Scripture with Scripture, we find the “last days” are a much longer period. The last days include the time between the first coming and the second coming of Christ. Thus, in a sense, all of the New Testament is eschatological (all of the New Testament is concerned with the end).

Five New Testament passages in the ESV use the phrase “last days.” Let’s look at each.

Acts 2:17

Acts 2 tells of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost when tongues of fire appeared and those waiting in the upper room were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in foreign languages. The people were amazed, but some claimed those filled with the Spirit were drunk. Peter stood up and began preaching. He let the crowd know that neither he nor the others were drunk, but what the crowd was seeing and hearing was the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken by the prophet Joel. In Acts 2:17–21 Peter quoted from the prophet Joel:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
 that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
 and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
 and your young men shall see visions,
 and your old men shall dream dreams;
 even on my male servants and female servants
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
 And I will show wonders in the heavens above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
 the sun shall be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood,
 before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

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And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Peter took this quote from Joel 2:28–32. Verse 28, in particular, says,

And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Notice Joel uses the time reference “afterward.” The Lord is promising that after a period of judgment against his people, he will bestow his Spirit on all people. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaimed Pentecost as the beginning of those “afterward” days, what Peter calls “the last days.” The last days have continued into the present. These are the last days because the Lord has fulfilled what he promised his people; they would be blessed with the Holy Spirit. So, from our perspective, the last days began over two thousand years ago.

2 Timothy 3:1

Next, let’s consider 2 Timothy 3:1–5:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

This passage is often quoted by those who believe the last days are primarily the days just before Christ returns. You will hear them say the return of Jesus is just around the corner; after all, this passage describes what our world looks like more and more. Our nations, cities, and neighborhoods are filled with ungodly people—and things are only getting worse. Surely, they say, this is a sign that we are in the last days.

Well, the decline of our world is a sign we are in the last days but notice the end of verse 5. Paul tells Timothy, “Avoid such people.” If Paul is concerned only about the time just prior to the return of Christ, why would he tell Timothy to avoid these kinds of people in the first century? Paul knew the people he described are not limited to the very end. Timothy needed to know there will always be people who are hostile to the gospel. There will always be people who scoff at God’s law and promises. This is a sign we are in the last days, but the last days began a long time ago.

Hebrews 1:1-2

The first two verses of Hebrews also clearly show the last days began with Pentecost:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

In the Old Testament, God spoke to His people in many ways and through many different prophets. Pay close attention to what characterizes “these last days.” In the last days, God spoke through his Son. We are living in the last days because God has sent his Son. God’s final word comes through Jesus. Therefore, the coming of Jesus began the last days.

James 5:3

James 5 references the last days:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. (James 5:1–3)

James condemned the rich who are hoarding earthly wealth. Instead of laying up treasure in heaven during the last days, they were treasuring things that have no lasting value, things that will perish. This warning applied when James wrote his letter, and it still applies today. James, along with the other New Testament writers, understood he was living in the last days.

2 Peter 3:3

Finally, let's consider 2 Peter 3:1–4:

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

In this passage, Peter addressed those who said Jesus would not return. Scoffers will exist in the last days. As with 2 Timothy 3:1, some try to limit Peter's reference to the last days to the days just before the return of Jesus. But Peter warned the recipients of his letter to beware of those who are skeptical about Jesus's promise to return.

We know from Scripture, from history, and from experience that, ever since Jesus promised he would return, there have been those who have doubted that Jesus would fulfill that promise. Scoffers still abound.

Conclusion

What we find in all these passages is the arrival of Jesus inaugurating the final phase of redemptive history. During these last days, we have the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17), God has spoken his final word through his Son (Hebrews 1:2), there will be all kinds of ungodliness (2 Timothy 3:1–5), there will be those who strive to gain earthly treasures (James 5:3), and there will always be those who question the return of Christ and the final judgment (2 Peter 3:1–4).

We will discuss this more when we study the second coming of Christ but, realize this: Even though the last days cover the period from the first coming to the second coming of Christ, there is also an expectation of the imminent return of Christ throughout the last days. James 5:8 says, “The coming of the Lord is at hand,” and verse 9 says, “The Judge is standing at the door.” In Romans 13:11, it is written that our “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.” Paul, in Philippians 4:5, says, “The Lord is at hand,” and Peter says in 1 Peter 4:7, “The end of all things is at hand.” Therefore, in these last days, we are always to eagerly expect the return of Christ.

The Age to Come

In addition to “the last days,” there is also “the age to come,” which is contrasted with the present age in Matthew 12:32:

And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in *this age* or in *the age to come*.

This verse gives us two time periods: this age and the age to come.

Mark 10:29–30 also mentions these two ages:

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in *this time*, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in *the age to come* eternal life.”

However, these two different ages are not just in the New Testament. They originate in the Old Testament. The great expectation of the Old Testament saints was the arrival of the Messiah. The time before the Messiah was a time of trouble and eventually exile, but the exile was not the end of the story. Whenever God proclaimed judgment against his people, he also proclaimed restoration (for example, Jeremiah 29:10–14). The Jews that returned from exile saw a partial fulfillment of God’s restoration promise. The ultimate fulfillment would be realized in the coming of Messiah. Even the Samaritan woman at the well said to Jesus, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things” (John 4:25). All will be well because the old age will have been replaced with the age of the Messiah (the age to come).

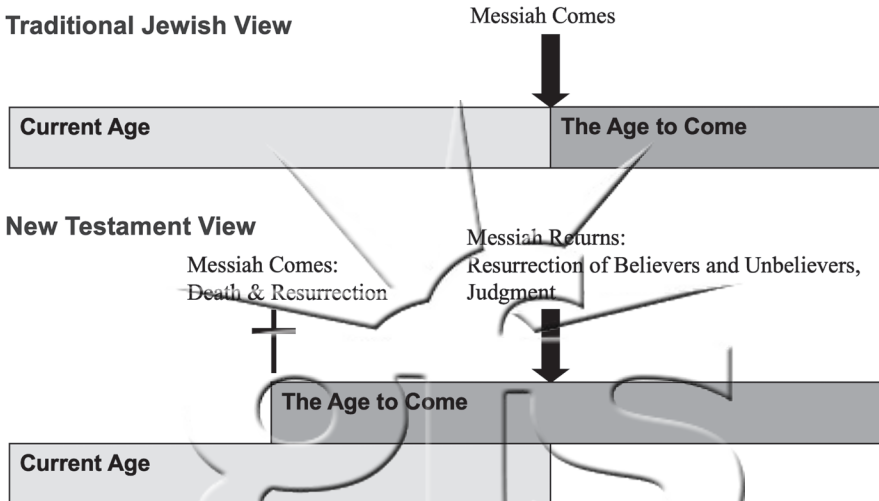
The New Testament modifies the two-age framework found in the Old Testament. The coming of the Messiah (Jesus) did usher in “the age to come,” but it did not end “this age.” There is an overlap between the two ages. In other words, this present age and the age to come overlap during the time between the first and second comings of Christ. The current age will end and the latter days, or the “age to come,” will arrive in fullness at the consummation of all things when Christ returns.

This is why Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that begins small and grows into the largest plant in the garden (Matthew 13:31). It is why, although the new creation has begun in Jesus and our hearts (2 Corinthians 5:17), we still await

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its fullness at the return of Christ (Revelation 21:1–3). With Christ’s first coming, many dimensions of the latter days became reality, but when Christ returns, we will experience them in full measure.⁸

This diagram shows the difference between the perspective of the Old Testament and the perspective of the New Testament:⁹



The Old Testament proclaims the golden age begins when the Messiah arrives. However, the New Testament shows there is an overlap between the current age and the age to come. Kim Riddlebarger explains it like this:

[The time between Christ’s resurrection and his return] is marked by the presence of the age to come in some provisional but not fully consummated sense. For example, the presence of the Kingdom of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit are pledges and guarantees of the glorious blessings of the age to come, which will be the inheritance of believers. Christians live in the eschatological tension during the partial overlap of the two ages as they await the arrival of the age to come in its fullness.¹⁰

8 “The Plan of the Ages: Are We in the Last Days?” *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, ed. Richard L. Pratt Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 1988–89.

9 Adapted from “The Plan of the Ages,” *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, 1989.

10 Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 103. Excerpt from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger, copyright © 2013. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

This perspective is taught by both Jesus and Paul. This age consists of things that are temporary because they pass away when Christ returns. The age to come consists of things eternal. Riddlebarger gives a helpful summary of each age.¹¹

The Temporal Characterizes the Current Age

- Matthew 12:32—There is no forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
- Matthew 24:3—The end of the age will be preceded by signs.
- Matthew 28:20—Christ will be with us until the end of the age.
- Mark 10:30—The present age is an age of homes, fields, and families.
- Luke 18:30—Material rewards are given to us in this life.
- Luke 20:34—The people of this age marry and are given in marriage.
- Romans 12:2—We are not to be conformed to the pattern of this world (age).
- 1 Corinthians 1:20—Philosophy is the wisdom of this age.
- 1 Corinthians 2:6–8—(Man's) wisdom and rulers are of this age.
- 2 Corinthians 4:4—Satan, the god of this age, blinds people's minds to the truth.
- Galatians 1:4—The present age is evil.
- Ephesians 1:20–21—Christ reigns in this present age.
- Ephesians 2:2—The ways of this world (age) are evil.
- 1 Timothy 6:17—Those who are rich in this age are not to hope in their wealth for the next.
- Titus 2:12—We are to live godly lives in this present age.

The Eternal Characterizes the Age to Come

- Matthew 12:32—There is no forgiveness for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
- 2 Timothy 4:18—The Lord will bring us to the kingdom of God.
- Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30—Eternal life is a reward.
- Luke 20:35—There will be no marriage or giving in marriage.
- Ephesians 5:5—Immoral people will not inherit the kingdom of God.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:5—Our faith will make us worthy of the kingdom of God.
- 1 Timothy 6:19—The coming age has life that is truly life.
- Ephesians 1:21—Christ will reign in the age to come.
- 1 Corinthians 6:9–10—Evildoers will not inherit the kingdom of God.

¹¹ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 103–4. Excerpt from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger, copyright © 2013. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

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- 1 Corinthians 15:50—Flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:12—We are encouraged to live lives worthy of the kingdom.
- Matthew 13:40—The weeds will be thrown into the fire.
- Galatians 5:21—Those who live evil lives will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We live in the time when the temporary things of this life overlap with the eternal things of our life to come. Paul makes this contrast clear:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18)

We live as a part of the current age and as a part of the age to come. The pleasures and struggles of this age are temporary, but the glory to come is eternal.

Already and Not Yet

The comparison and contrast between this age and the age to come is also expressed in terms of the already and the not yet. Through the Spirit, we already live in the age to come, but, because we are still in the fallen body, we do not yet experience the fullness of the new life we have. As Hebrews 6:5 says, we have “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,” but we still are plagued by sin, suffering, and death. A tension exists between what already is and what will be. However, what we have now in the Spirit is a promise of greater things in the future.

Summary

Recognizing that the last days refer to the time between Christ’s first and second comings is vital to properly interpret what the Bible says about the return of Christ. Furthermore, understanding the relationship between “this age” and “the age to come” brings clarity to the study of eschatology. Both restrain us from speculation and arbitrary assignment of “last days” passages to the end. What Christ accomplished in his first coming inaugurated the last days and the age to come. This is often called inaugurated eschatology. What is ours in Christ in the future is ours now by the Holy Spirit (inaugurated eschatology), yet it is not ours in fullness (completed eschatology).

Paul sums up this argument well in his epistle to the church at Ephesus:

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13–14)

We are still in bodies of fallen flesh, but because we have the Holy Spirit, we are guaranteed the inheritance to come.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



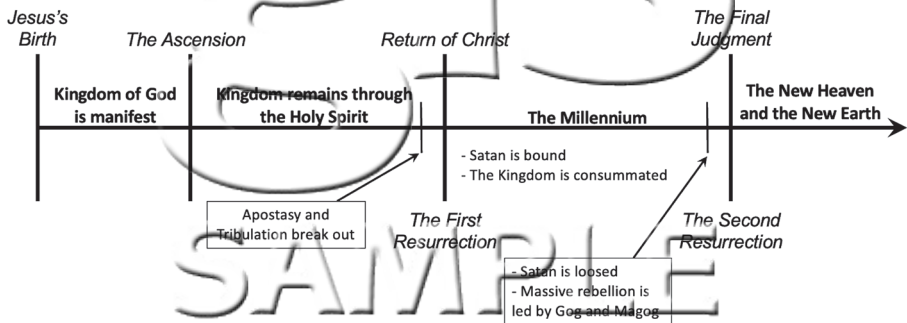
Michael Carpenter has been an elder at Reformation Christian Fellowship in Newport News, VA for over twelve years. He oversees theological education and has written courses for the church on various topics such as eschatology, the person and work of Christ, the atonement, and understanding the Bible. Michael has been married for thirty-seven years to his wife and they have three children and six grandchildren. He can be reached at reformedandtransformed.com.

Appendix A

END TIMES CHARTS

I have covered a lot of ground, and it is easy to get lost. Typically, when studying eschatology, end-time charts are prevalent. So here I include charts that summarize each of the millennial views. These charts include many of the topics I covered.

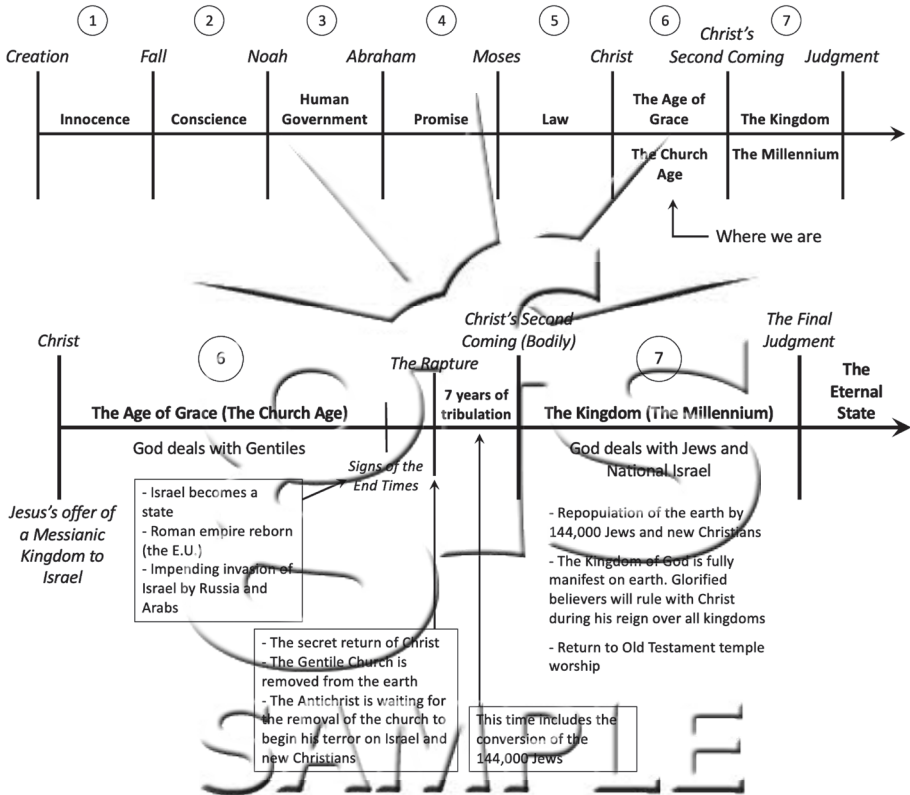
Historic Premillennialism



The first event is Jesus's birth, then the ascension after his death and resurrection. Between the ascension and the return of Christ, God rules his kingdom through the Holy Spirit. Sometime before Jesus returns, there is apostasy and tribulation. This is the time of the man of lawlessness. After the tribulation, Jesus returns and believers are resurrected. Then the millennium begins. Jesus reigns on the earth from a throne in Jerusalem. Both Jews and Gentiles constitute the people of God. During this period, Satan is bound, so evil is restrained but not eliminated. It will be a period of universal peace and prosperity among

the nations, even though sin still exists. At the end of the millennium, Satan is released, and he leads a rebellion. Jesus crushes the rebellion, unbelievers are resurrected, and the great white throne judgment occurs. Following that is the new heavens and new earth.¹⁶⁰

Dispensational Premillennialism

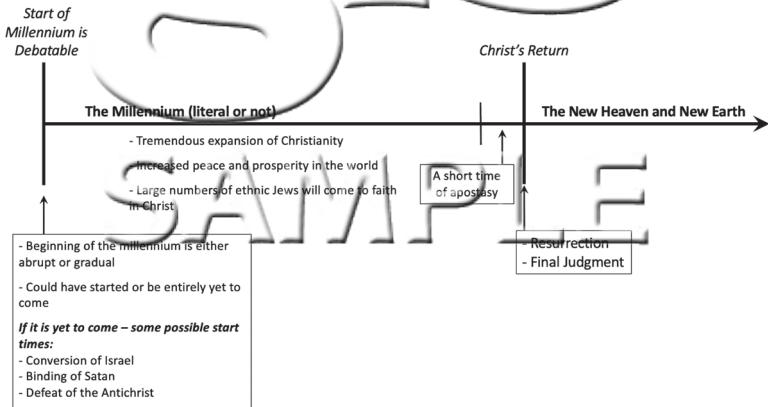


This diagram has two parts. The top diagram shows the seven dispensations. The bottom diagram expands on the dispensations of the Church Age and the Kingdom Age, which is the millennium. The Church Age is the period between the first coming of Christ and the rapture of the church. Before the rapture, Israel becomes a nation again, and the Roman empire is revived under the auspices of the European Union. Eventually, Israel is invaded by Russia and the Arab nations. All these signs indicate the rapture is imminent. Jesus then returns secretly and removes

160 Historic Premillennialism chart from Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 43. Excerpt from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger, copyright © 2013. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

the Church (the rapture). Believers are raised from the dead, and those alive at that time meet Jesus in the air and ascend into heaven with Jesus. The believers are judged at the judgment seat of Christ. Because the Church is absent from earth, so is the Holy Spirit. Nothing exists on earth to restrain the Antichrist. He begins seven years of persecution and tribulation against Israel. During this time, 144,000 Jews (possibly more) and other Gentiles are converted to Christianity. At the end of the seven years, Jesus returns bodily with his glorified saints, destroys the Antichrist, and establishes his millennial kingdom. Satan is bound, and Jesus, with his glorified saints, reigns from a throne in Jerusalem over the Jewish Christians and all those who survived the seven-year tribulation. The earth is occupied by both those in glorified bodies and those in perishable bodies. The temple is rebuilt, and the sacrifices are reinstated, but these sacrifices look backward to the sacrifice of Christ (as opposed to the forward-looking sacrifices of the Old Testament). All the unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies are realized during the millennium. At the end of the millennium, which is exactly one thousand years, Satan is released and gathers the nations for battle. Jesus crushes the rebellion, and unbelievers are resurrected and judged at the great white throne judgment. The final state then begins. Classic dispensationalism believes Israel will remain on the new earth, and the Church will be in heaven. Progressive dispensationalists see Jew and Gentile together as one on the new earth.¹⁶¹

Postmillennialism

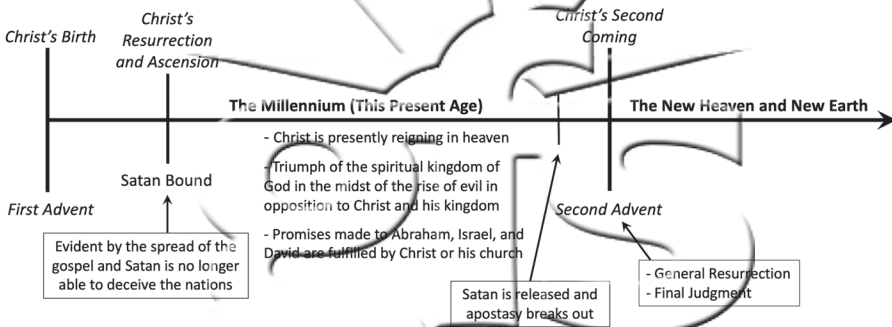


According to postmillennialism, when the millennium begins and how long it lasts are uncertain. As the gospel continues to spread, the world is transformed into a place with

161 Dispensational Premillennialism chart from Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 42. Excerpt from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger, copyright © 2013. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

less evil and more righteousness. Whereas all other millennial views see conditions getting worse as we approach the return of Christ, postmillennialism sees the world improving. The millennium may have already started, or it still may be in the future. If it is still in the future, its start could be signaled by a mass conversion of Jews, the binding of Satan, or the defeat of the Antichrist. During the millennium, Christianity is predominant throughout the world, and there is peace and prosperity. Not all are true Christians, though. At the end of the millennium, Satan is released and gathers the nations for battle. Jesus returns for the one and only time and crushes the rebellion. All people, saved and unsaved, are resurrected and stand in judgment. Then the new heavens and new earth are established.¹⁶²

Amillennialism



Satan is bound as a result of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. That Satan is bound, does not mean he is absent or powerless. It means Satan cannot stop the spread of the gospel. Because Satan is bound, the millennium has already begun and is already longer than one thousand years. The millennium is another name for the present church age. Christ is reigning in heaven, and his kingdom is expanding through the spread of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit. All the Old Testament promises are fulfilled through Christ and his church. At some point before the return of Christ, Satan is released. When Satan is released, he will consolidate the nations in opposition to the Church and bring great tribulation to God's people. This will be the time of the man of lawlessness. When the tribulation is at its worst and the nations are united against the Church, Jesus will return and destroy all evil. All people are resurrected and stand before the great white throne for judgment. The sheep are separated from the goats (Matthew

162 Postmillennialism chart from Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 44. Excerpt from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger, copyright © 2013. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

25:32). The wicked are sent to the lake of fire with Satan, his demons, death, and Hades. Those who have their names in the book of life live forever with Jesus on the new earth.¹⁶³

Notice the simplicity of amillennialism. There are not different events for different groups of people. Jesus returns once, and, when he returns, everyone is resurrected, the final judgment takes place, and the eternal state begins. However, we shouldn't believe amillennialism is correct just because it is simple. Rather, we can have confidence that amillennialism is also the most accurate way to account for and interpret the Scriptural passages that look forward to the return of Christ.




¹⁶³ Amillennialism chart from Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 45. Excerpt from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger, copyright © 2013. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

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