

Christian End of Time Beliefs

Vocabulary Terms:

Eschatology is a Christian term that means the study of the end of history from a religious perspective.

The **Millennium**: Revelation describes an important interval lasting for 1000 years when Christ rules. This is a golden era; a time of universal peace. (Concept first proposed by Zoroastrianism.)

The **Tribulation**: This is a 7 year interval when a world religious-political leader called the Antichrist takes power.

Armageddon is a terrible war provoked by the Antichrist. Most people on earth will die. God's anger, hatred, and wrath are poured out over mankind and the earth at this time. A series of violent events will occur.

The **Rapture**: Christ will descend from the heavens towards the Earth. The faithful "*born again*" Christians who have previously died will be resurrected, rise from their graves, and ascend to meet Jesus in the sky. Immediately afterwards, "*born again*" Christians who had not died will also ascend into the air. They will abandon cars, airplanes, factory jobs, homes, families, friends etc. Since the vast majority of humans are not "*born again*," most people will remain behind on earth. The Roman Catholic Church and most mainline and liberal denominations do not have expectation that a Rapture will occur in the way anticipated by many fundamentalist and other evangelical faith groups.

End times beliefs among Protestants:

Various Protestant denominations and organizations promote one of six main systems of prophecy concerning the "*end times*."

Historical Premillennialism: This belief was held by a large percentage of Christians "*during the first three centuries of the Christian era*. The Antichrist first appears on earth and the seven year Tribulation begins. Next comes the Rapture. Christ and his Church return to earth to rule for a Millennium. The faithful will spend eternity in the New Jerusalem. It is a gigantic cubical structure, some 1,380 miles height, width and depth, which will have descended to Earth. The forces of evil will have been conquered. The faithful will live during this thousand years of peace in Jerusalem, while occupying spiritual bodies. After this period, all people are judged.

Christianity became the official religion of Rome in the fourth century CE and premillennialism was declared a heresy at the Council of Ephesus (431).

Amillennialism soon became the prevailing doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and premillennialism was suppressed.

Dispensational Premillennialism: (a.k.a. Dispensationalism)

Premillennialism was declared a heresy in ancient times, but was reintroduced circa 1830. Premillennialism received general acceptance by most Fundamentalists and other Evangelical Christians after the publishing of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. The Tribulation is believed to precede the second coming of Christ, and the subsequent establishment of the millennial kingdom -- a thousand-year golden age on Earth. The *Final Judgment* follows the millennium. But, theologians are divided over the timing of the Rapture. Many Premillennialists search world events and signs in the heavens for some indication of the Tribulation, which they anticipate will arrive at any time.

Doctrines have been proposed about the timing of the Rapture, but all appear to contradict at least some passages in the Bible. Current beliefs include:

Pre-Tribulation Rapture: (or "**pre-trib**") The Rapture happens just before the Tribulation, so that believers will not have to experience any of its disruption and pain. The main difficulties with pre-trib are contained in the *Olivet Prophecy* of Jesus, where he describes the terrible destruction and loss of life of the tribulation period. The disaster is believed to be so intense that no human (Christian or non-Christian alike) would remain alive, except that God shortens the duration of the disaster for the sake of the believers. Jesus then continues by describing his return towards earth immediately after the terrible devastation. From this passage, it is believed that the rapture will follow the Tribulation. The supporters of the "pre-trib" position suggest that Jesus will have a total of three comings: the first during the first century CE; the second at the start of the tribulation, and a third at the end of the tribulation.

Pre-wrath Rapture: Marvin Rosenthal wrote that the pre-trib rapture was of Satanic origin and unheard of before 1830. The church must experience most of the Tribulation, and then be raptured towards the end of the Tribulation period.

Post-tribulation Rapture: (or "**post-trib**") The faithful experience the full horrors of the entire Tribulation and are raptured only at the end of the 7 years. The main problem with this theory is that there are many Bible passages which state that Christ's return will be at a time that cannot be predicted. But the Tribulation period starts with the arrival of the Antichrist and an interval of peace. Precisely 42 months later, a sudden shift occurs, a peace treaty is broken, and devastation begins. These would be well defined dates that would allow an accurate prediction of the end of the Tribulation.

Mid-Tribulation Rapture: (or "**mid-trib**") The Rapture happens 42 months into the Tribulation. Up to that time, the Antichrist brings peace to the world. After 42 months, events take a sudden turn for the worse. Some supporters of the "mid-trib" position suggest that there will be many mini-raptures.

Partial Rapture: The faithful born-again believers are raptured just before the Tribulation. Newly born again believers are raptured during or at the end of the Tribulation.

All of the Premillennialist beliefs teach that the Tribulation is followed by 1000 years of peace when all live under the authority of Christ. Afterwards, in a brief, final battle, Satan is permanently conquered.

Dispensational Premillennialism contains an internal conflict. Its advocates generally believe *"that the moral conditions of the world and the church are destined get increasingly worse. When they get almost unbearably bad, the Lord Jesus will return in the clouds to 'rapture' the living saints up to heaven."* By their opposition they are delaying Jesus' return to earth, the rapture and the 1,000 year millennium.

Amillennialism: The millennium is not an actual physical realm on Earth that will last 1,000 years. Rather it began at the time of Pentecost (circa 30 CE) and is currently active in the world today through the presence of the heavenly reign of Christ, the Bible, the Holy Spirit and the activities of Christian faith groups. Both good and evil will continue in the world during this time. Lawlessness, a falling away from the Church, and persecution of Christians will increase in magnitude. Finally, the current *Church Age* will end suddenly at Christ's second coming.

A type of Rapture will happen when Christ returns: believers will rise to meet Jesus in the sky. All will then shortly return to Earth. The Day of Judgment will then occur. Events described in *The Olivet Discourse* of Jesus and in most of the book of Revelation are seen as occurrences which have already happened, or which are symbolic in nature and not to be taken literally. The Antichrist is looked upon figuratively and not as a real person.

This belief was held by many leaders of the early Christian church during the first and second centuries CE. Simultaneously, other leaders -- perhaps the majority -- taught a version of premillennialism that is very different from today's dispensational premillennialism. Augustine (354 - 430 CE), often called the "Father of Amillennialism" was largely responsible for the establishment of amillennialism as the formal church belief. It remained the generally accepted system throughout Christianity until after the Reformation in the 16th century. Many Christian denominations -- including the Anglican Communion, Disciples of Christ, Lutheran, Orthodox, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and some Baptists continue to teach Amillennialism.

Postmillennialism: This belief arose during the early 19th century CE. The kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit. It is based on the perception of a gradual movement towards social perfection. They predicted that a massive religious revival, spiritual awakening and purification would occur. The entire human race is converted to Christianity, including the Jews. A millennium of peace and righteousness follows. After the millennium, Jesus returns to earth, resurrects the dead believers, and conducts the last judgment. The Rapture and Tribulation are largely ignored.

Preterism is a belief that the events prophesized in the New Testament have already happened. The great war of Armageddon in the book of Revelation occurred in the late 60's and early 70's CE when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, many Jews were killed and the rest were driven from Palestine. When Jesus talked about the end of the world, he did not mean that the physical world would be no more. He taught that the old worldview held by various contemporary Jewish groups was coming to an end, to be replaced by a new concept, the Kingdom of God. Thus, all of the major elements in the book of Revelation (Tribulation, Armageddon, Rapture, etc.) actually took place in the first century CE.

No Millennialism: The books of Daniel and Revelation as having no prophetic information for our future. The purpose of the book of Revelation was to stiffen resolve in the early Christian movement to withstand persecution by the Roman Empire. Thus, its purpose was to predict persecutions and other events that were to happen to the early Christian church. Daniel was written early in the 2nd century BCE, long after most of the events had actually happened. It was history recorded, not their future prophesized.

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