

What We Believe – 12. The Return of Christ

We believe in: *“The personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory.”*

A) Introduction

The first of these studies focussed on the bigger picture concerning the manner, reason and timing of Christ’s return. This second study will focus on some of the particular “mechanics” and areas of disagreement among Christians. Whilst confusion and speculation often abound in this area of theology, it is important to hold firm to the essentials and remember that God gave us the book of Revelation to bring blessing to “those who hear, and who keep what is written in it” (Revelation 1:3).

B) Why can’t we all agree?

When it comes to the study of the last things there are various major camps of understanding and interpretation. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, whilst all the Bible is clear, it is not all equally clear. Secondly, every Christian interprets Scripture from their own context and background.

Thirdly, our position in history and the world events around us are bound to impact how we view the things to come. Fourthly, our differing personalities have an impact on our philosophy of Bible interpretation.

Fifthly, mystery is humbling and therefore good for us! The uncertainty reminds us that these secondary issues must always remain secondary. If our love for studying the end times exceeds our pursuit of holiness, commitment to the local church or love for the lost then our priorities need to change.

C) Premillennial views

There are four major views, organised and named with reference to the 1,000 year (millennium) reign of Christ described in **Revelation 20**. The first two to be considered teach that Jesus will return before (i.e. “pre”) the millennium.

1. Historic Premillennialism (HPM)

This view can be traced back to the earliest years of the church. It teaches that our current age will eventually deteriorate into a climactic time of

darkness and evil, when a wicked ruler (the “Beast” of **Revelation 13**, or “Man of lawlessness” of **2 Thessalonians 2**) will arise. God’s people will undergo terrible persecution but at the end of this “tribulation” Jesus will return from heaven. Unbelievers will be judged, Christians glorified, and Satan bound.

After this follows the 1,000 years (either literally or symbolically, a long time). This period is characterised by great peace and prosperity whilst Jesus reigns on the earth, yet there are still humans being born and dying (see **Isaiah 65:17-25**). Eventually some of these humans will rebel against Jesus, influenced by Satan who is released at the end of the 1,000 years. Jesus destroys this rebellion and we come to the final judgement and eternal state.

This view was believed by several early church leaders. It fell out of favour after the time of Augustine. Today it is a minority view, though increasing.

2. Dispensational Premillennialism (DPM)

This is the more commonly held premillennial view, especially in American Fundamentalism. Dispensationalism is a theological system espoused by J. N. Darby (the founder of the Brethren movement) in the 19th century. It teaches a stark discontinuity between Israel and the Church. Consequently, this view differs from its older cousin by teaching a “pre-tribulation rapture” of the church (**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**) in which all Christians are snatched away from the earth before the rise of the Beast and the time of terrible persecution. Instead, during the tribulation God refocuses His attention on Israel and there is a great revival among the Jewish people.

At the end of the tribulation Jesus returns with His “raptured” people (now glorified) to destroy the Beast and all non-Christians. We then come to the binding of Satan and the 1,000 year reign, final judgement and eternal state.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Both views seek to do justice to a straightforward reading of Revelation 20, to the significance of the binding of Satan and to the physical fulfilment of God’s promises. Additionally, HPM has been believed since the earliest days of the church.

However, a serious weakness is the splitting of Christ’s return and judgement. Passages such as **John 5:25-29** appear to teach that Christ’s return and the

final judgement are all part of the same event, not separated by a further long period. Another significant weakness is the presence of children born in the millennium. If all non-Christians are destroyed at the end of Revelation 19, and all Christians are glorified, who then could be having children?

DPM suffers from further weaknesses – the stark split between Israel and the Church goes against much of Paul’s teaching (ref. [Galatians 3](#), [Ephesians 2](#)), and before the 1820s no-one had ever taught the secret rapture.

D) Postmillennial views

The other two views hold that Jesus will return after (“post”) the 1,000 years.

1. Postmillennialism

Most postmillennialists hold that the entire NT was written by AD 70.

Therefore, the various descriptions of cataclysmic wrath and destruction (such as [Revelation 6-19](#)) have already taken place and the current age is anticipated to be one of ever-increasing gospel spread. Eventually this will reach such a point that the world becomes essentially “Christianised” and we enter the 1,000 years, an unparalleled time of peace and prosperity for the gospel. At the end of this time, Satan is released and leads a brief rebellion that is put down by the return of Jesus Christ and we come to the final judgement and eternal state.

Postmillennialism has been believed since the earliest days of the church. Although a less dominant view today, it was widely believed by the Puritans.

2. Amillennialism

This literally means “no millennium” which is misleading, since amillennialism teaches that the millennium is now – the period between Christ’s first and second comings. The gospel will spread and grow during this age, but alongside it will grow opposition and hostility to the gospel. Eventually this will reach a climactic point (corresponding to the release of Satan from the abyss) at which the Lord returns and we come to the final judgement and eternal state.

Amillennialism began with Augustine of Hippo in the 4th and 5th centuries. It became the dominant position in the church and remains the dominant view of Reformed Churches today.

Strengths and weaknesses

These views do justice to the return of Jesus being the culminating point of history – as clearly taught by the Lord in His parables. The postmillennial emphasis on the triumph of the gospel takes seriously the promises of **Isaiah 11:9, Daniel 2** and **Mark 4:30-32**.

But, how does the present binding of Satan (**Revelation 20**) cohere with Peter's warning in **1 Peter 5:8**? And how does the notion of a lengthy period between Christ's first and second comings fit with Paul's belief in the imminence of Christ's return (see **1 Thessalonians 4:15**)?

E) Implications

Whichever view one takes on the end times will work itself out in various areas of Christian life.

1. Christian psychology. Our general outlook and sense of expectations are hugely affected by our eschatology. The premillennial views are both inherently quite pessimistic, anticipating an inevitable decline in moral behaviour and church health. By contrast, the other views (in particular postmillennialism) are far more optimistic.
2. Understanding world events. Dispensational premillennialism has a tendency to encourage all manner of predictions and correlations between world events and passages in Scripture. This often leads to embarrassment.
3. Mission. The missionary movement that began in the 18th century was largely driven by postmillennial convictions – spreading the gospel to all nations would usher in the millennium and hasten the return of Christ. Hence eschatology became a dominant motivating force for sharing the gospel.

F) Conclusion

Our convictions concerning the future do shape our living today. Christians should therefore strive to study and understand God's Word. However, we must also keep things in balance, holding firmly to the essential primary doctrines, and maintaining charity and grace on secondary matters. Jesus Christ will return and nothing could be more wonderful or exciting.