

Eschatology Resource Paper

Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should not be considered a doctrinal stance in competition with your local church but an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues. Please seek out the counsel of the church under whose authority you have placed yourself as needed in responding to specific situations.

Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary. No topic competes with the message of the Gospel for primacy in the church. At the same time, the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel—the good news that we are far more sinful and God far more holy than we thought but the life and grace that God offers through Christ's death and resurrection is far greater than we dare to hope.

The term "eschatology" comes from two Greek words meaning "last" (ἔσχατος) and "study" (-λογία) and is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind". Briefly put, it is the study of last things, both individually and generally speaking.

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the distinctive of the four most widely-held, historical positions of general eschatology—those being the events leading up to and immediately following Christ's return. These positions are:

- Dispensational Premillennialism
- Historic Premillennialism
- Amillennialism
- Post-Millennialism

All eschatological camps use Scripture as the primary basis for their argument. For this reason, it's important to understand that the underlying question is one of hermeneutics. While the most widely-held position of the global Church is Amillennialism, the Western Church—namely the modern American Church—is largely dispensational in their interpretation of Scripture, thus also in their eschatological position (Dispensational Pretribulation Premillennialism.)

The distinctives and emphases of these differing positions are substantial, and are briefly detailed below.

Dispensational Premillennialism

- The Rapture of the Church before Daniel's 70th Week, commonly known as the "Tribulation Period." ¹
- Christ's return at the end of the Tribulation, before the beginning of the literal Millennial Kingdom.
- The Millennial Kingdom is a literal 1,000 year earthly and physical reign of Christ over the world with *Israel* in the leading position. The kingdom is a fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel.
- The two resurrections of Revelation 20 are separated by the Millennial Kingdom.
- At the end of the Millennial Kingdom, Satan will be released from his bondage, lead a rebellion of those who have been born during the kingdom era, but are yet unsaved. Christ will destroy the rebellion, and after the judgments Israel and the Church will enter the eternal state of heaven.

Members of this camp— John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, Norman Geisler and Charles Feinberg. Popular dispensational pastors and writers include; Jimmy DeYoung, Dave Hunt, Jack Van Impe, and John MacArthur.

Historic/Covenant Premillennialism

- Christ's return at the end of the Tribulation before the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom.
- The Millennial Kingdom is a literal 1,000 year earthly reign of Christ over the world, *the Church* being the focal point of His reign.
- The Jews will be converted nationally and restored to their land. They will occupy a special place in a national sense, but spiritually will be part of the Church. ²
- The two resurrections of Revelation 20 are separated by the Millennial Kingdom.
- Rejects the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture and the uniquely Jewish nature of the dispensationalist's millennial kingdom. Historic premillennialists generally do not accept the basic tenets of dispensationalism.

Members of this camp—The most influential historic premillennialist was George Eldon Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary. Through the work of Ladd, historic premillennialism gained scholarly respect and popularity among Evangelical and Reformed theologians. Other major historic premillennialists include Charles Spurgeon, J. C. Ryle, John Piper, and Jim Hamilton.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 1 Corinthians 15:50-54

² Ezekiel 37

Amillennialism

- Satan has been defeated and is currently bound.
- The Millennium is a metaphorical reference to the present church age which culminates in Christ's return.³
- The resurrections of the Just & Unjust occur simultaneously to the return of Christ.⁴
- There is no sense in which the millennium has reference to a material, earthly kingdom.
- The Church is the succession of Israel in God's plans.

Members of this camp—Leading contemporary amillennial theologians would include popular writers such as J. I. Packer, John Murray, Anthony Hoekema, and Sam Storms. In addition, all of the Reformers, as well as the Reformed and Lutheran confessional traditions, as a whole, have been amillennial.

Post-Millennialism

- The Gospel will ultimately be successful and the majority of the world will be converted.
- The millennium is a period of 1,000 years (some may view this number as symbolic) known as the “Golden Age”, in which the Church is triumphant in the world.
- Christ will return after this millennium and usher in the eternal state.
- Because of the steady advance of Christianity, the societal structures will continue get better and better.
- The Church has replaced Israel as the chosen people of God

Members of this camp—Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and B. B. Warfield. Modern Post-Millennial theologians include Douglas Wilson and R.C. Sproul. Also included in this camp are Theonomists such as Rousas J. Rushdoony and Kenneth Gentry.

Summary

While there are large differences between these camps, and a number of varying views even within each of them, we stand together in the Gospel and recognize that eschatology, while important, is a secondary issue. The debate of these things should be cordial and charity should be extended across the “eschatological aisle”. As previously stated, we should fight for the primacy of the Gospel rather than secondary issues. As for counseling students, follow these three principles:

- **Read the Scripture for yourself.** Many times we find ourselves aligning with “camps” and listening to men who we think read the Bible, rather than reaching a conclusion as the result of our own study. Encourage students to let the Holy Spirit be the one who brings clarity to these issues, rather than simply aligning to someone they like.
- **Focus on the hope of seeing Christ.** Sam Storms makes the point well, saying “We may be hours or millennia away from the return of Christ, so the way the Body of Christ should live is with expectation of the immanency of standing in the presence of our Risen Lord and Savior. It is the prospect of seeing Jesus and beholding His glory that ought to exert the greatest influence on the human heart. It should not be whether or not we can escape tribulation ... or the events surrounding the nation of Israel.”
- **Don't divide over secondary issues.** Asked whether church members should divide over the issue of eschatology, Albert Mohler points to an underlying problem of consumerism, saying “Far too many church members have become church shoppers ... which violates the integrity of the church and the meaning of church membership. When members leave for insufficient reason, the fellowship of the church is broken, its witness is weakened, and the peace and unity of the congregation are sacrificed. Tragically, a superficial understanding of church membership undermines our witness to the gospel of Christ.”

Resources for further learning:

<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/an-evening-of-eschatology>

John MacArthur / A.W. Pink, The Second Coming: Signs of Christ's Return and the End of the Age

George Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John

Sam Storms, Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative

Douglas Wilson, Heaven Misplaced: Christ's Kingdom on Earth

³ Revelation 20:1-6

⁴ John 6:39-54; 11:24;12:48