

Jesus is Coming Back When?

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If you expect Jesus to return within the next forty years, does that make you an optimist or a pessimist?

The Pew Research Center released a survey in 2010 about what events Americans believe will unfold in the next forty years. One interesting question asked about the return of Jesus Christ:

As expected, predictions about whether Jesus Christ will return to earth in the next 40 years divide along religious lines. Fully 58% of white evangelical Christians say Jesus Christ will definitely or probably return to earth in this period, by far the highest percentage in any religious group. Only about a third of Catholics (32%), and even fewer white mainline Protestants (27%) and the religiously unaffiliated (20%) predict Jesus Christ's return to earth.

In addition, those with no college experience (59%) are much more likely than those with some college experience (35%) and college graduates (19%) to expect Jesus Christ's return. By region, those in the South (52%) are the most likely to predict a Second Coming by 2050.

But what does it mean? How does this fit into the overall views of Christians in America?

Not surprisingly, there are few areas of Christian theology more contentious or confusing than eschatology, the study of the end times. Should the Book of Revelation be interpreted literally or metaphorically? Will Christ establish his Kingdom on earth or has his millennial reign already begun? Within evangelicalism there are four general points of agreement and four general perspectives on eschatology.

The four points of agreement are:

1. Jesus Christ will physically return to earth one day.
2. There will be a bodily resurrection of all people who have ever lived.
3. Satan will be defeated and constrained forever.

4. There will be a final judgment in which believers join Christ for eternity while nonbelievers are separated from God's presence.¹

How this occurs, though, is an issue of great debate. One of the central issues involves the millennium, the thousand-year period during which Christ is said to rule the world. (Revelation 20:1-10). The four most popular views in evangelicalism are dispensational premillennialism, historical premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism. (Note: Hundreds (thousands?) of books have been written on each of these views. They are complex and any attempt to provide a basic explanation for them will be unsatisfactory, particularly to those who have strong opinions on the subject. What follows is meant to be merely the beginning of a general examination of views held by evangelicals for those who are confused about the differences.)

Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational Premillennialism is the view that Jesus will return to remove the church from the world in an event known as the rapture. Theories differ on whether the rapture will occur before, in the middle of, or after a seven year period called the tribulation (pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib). These events will culminate in a literal thousand year rulership of Christ when peace will reign, the natural world will no longer be cursed, and evil will be suppressed. A final rebellion, however, will break out which will end in God crushing evil forever, judging the resurrected, and establishing heaven and hell.

The following beliefs are features of dispensational premillennialism:

Christ offered to the Jews the Davidic kingdom in the first century. They rejected it, and it was postponed until the future.

The current church age is a "parenthesis" unknown to the Old Testament prophets.

God has separate programs for the church and Israel.

The church will ultimately lose influence in the world and become corrupted or apostate toward the end of the church age.

Christ will return secretly to rapture his saints before the great tribulation.

¹ Summary found in Boyd and Eddy, *Across the Spectrum*.

After the tribulation Christ will return to earth to administer a Jewish political kingdom based in Jerusalem for one thousand years. Satan will be bound, and the temple will be rebuilt and the sacrificial system reinstated.

Near the end of the millennium. Satan will be released and Christ will be attacked at Jerusalem. Christ will call down judgment from heaven and destroy his enemies. The (second) resurrection and the judgment of the wicked will occur, initiating the eternal order.²

Well-known proponents of this view include: Dallas Theological Seminary, Tim LaHaye (author of the Left Behind series), and Cyrus I. Scofield (editor of the Scofield Reference Bible).

Historical Premillennialism

Historical Premillennialism is the belief that Christ will return “before the millennium” in order to resurrect the saints (the “first resurrection”), establish his rule from Jerusalem over the rebellious nations (the battle of Armageddon), and usher in a thousand year period of material peace and prosperity; at the end of this period the nations (still in unresurrected, natural bodies) will rebel and make war against Christ and the resurrected saints (the battle of Gog and Magog), who will be saved by fire from heaven, followed by the second resurrection—now of unbelievers—and the final judgment.

The following are features of historic premillennialism:

The New Testament era Church is the initial phase in Christ’s kingdom, as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets.

The New Testament Church may win occasional victories in history, but ultimately she will fail in her mission, lose influence, and become corrupted as worldwide evil increases toward the end of the Church Age.

The Church will pass through a future, worldwide, unprecedented time of travail. This era is known as the Great Tribulation, which will punctuate the end of contemporary history.

Christ will return at the end of the Tribulation to rapture the Church, resurrect deceased saints and conduct the judgment of the righteous in the “twinkling of an eye.”

² All points listed as features are from R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*.

Christ will then descend to the earth with His glorified saints, fight the battle of Armageddon, bind Satan, and establish a worldwide, political kingdom, which will be personally administered by Him for 1,000 years from Jerusalem.

At the end of the millennial reign, Satan will be loosed and a massive rebellion against the kingdom and a fierce assault against Christ and His saints will occur.

God will intervene with fiery judgment to rescue Christ and the saints. The resurrection and the judgment of the wicked will occur and the eternal order will begin. (pgs 199-200)

Well-known proponents include the late theologian George Eldon Ladd, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and the early church fathers (e.g., Irenaeus, Polycarp, Justin Martyr).

Amillennialism

Amillennialism is the belief that the millennial kingdom is indeterminate in length and fulfilled by Christ currently ruling in heaven. At the end of this reign Christ will come back to gather the church and judge the nations.

The following are features of amillennialism:

The church age is the kingdom era prophesied in the Old Testament, as the New Testament church takes the role once assigned to Israel.

Satan was bound during Jesus' earthly ministry, restraining him while the Gospel is being preached in the world.

Insofar as Christ presently rules in the hearts of believers, they will have some influence on culture while living out their faith.

Toward the end evil's growth will accelerate, culminating in the great tribulation and a personal antichrist.[^]

Christ will return to end history, resurrect and judge all men, and establish the eternal order. The eternal destiny of the redeemed may be either in heaven or in a totally renovated new earth.

Some amillennialists are preterists, believing that many of the prophecies (including the one about the antichrist) have already been fulfilled (usually around a.d. 70). Well-known proponents of this view include Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism is the belief that Christ's second coming will follow the millennium, which will itself be ushered in by the spiritual and moral influence of Christian preaching and teaching in the world. The following are features of postmillennialism:

The Messianic kingdom was founded on earth during the earthly ministry of Christ, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and making the New Testament church the transformed Israel.

The kingdom is essentially redemptive and spiritual rather than political and physical.

The kingdom will transform society and culture during history.

The kingdom of Christ will gradually expand in time and on earth through Christ's royal power as King reigning in heaven not on earth.

The Great Commission will succeed bringing about the virtual Christianization of the nations.

At this point there are two types of postmillennialists. Pietistic postmillennialists deny that the postmillennial advance of the kingdom involves the total transformation of culture through the application of biblical law. Theonomic postmillennialists (e.g., Christian Reconstructionists) affirm this.

An extended period of great spiritual prosperity may endure for millennia, after which history will come to an end by the personal, visible, bodily return of Christ accompanied by a literal resurrection and a general judgment, which ushers in the final and eternal form of the kingdom.

Postmillennialism was popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is still popular with many mainline denominations. Relatively few evangelicals, however, subscribe to this view of eschatology.

One last group that could be included is "panmillennialists"—folks who simply believe "whatever happens, it will all pan out in the end."

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