

Introduction to Eschatology

A Simple Evaluation of the Doctrine of The Second Coming of Jesus Christ

Why is this controversial doctrine important?

It is a vigorous, relentless theme of the New Testament. It pre-occupied the vision of the early Christians and provided a strong motivation to give their lives to the service of the gospel.

Statistics

- Of the 27 NT books, 24 have references to the second coming.
- Of 270 chapters, 216 refer to it.
- One verse in every 25 refers to it (7975 verses, 319 refs.).
- Paul's two earliest letters deal with (1Thess 4:16-17, 2 Thess)
- The last book of the NT is full of it (e.g. Rev 22:20).
- The second coming was clearly taught by Jesus and the apostles.

Purpose

- Is not to escape a dying world and a defeated church but is a motivation to serve God, seek rewards in heaven and prepare for judgment. (2 Cor 5:2,9-10,11a).
- It leads to hope in the consummation of Jesus' victory, the triumph of his reign as king.
- It leads to hope that we will be like Jesus (1 Jn 3:2, Jn 14:2-3).
- It leads us away from flirting with this world and adopting a pilgrim attitude (Phil 3:20, Heb 11:10, 1Thess 1:10).

Clear facts regarding what will happen at the end

It is important in studying this subject the one avoids the sort of excess in interpretation that has dogged this doctrine. Study those passages in the New Testament that are clear first. Get a general picture of what will happen before any obscure New Testament or Old Testament passages are studied. Do not rely on frameworks provided by other people at first, study the New Testament for yourself. Don't allow yourself to be dominated by a particular stream of dogmatic thought. If you finally decide on a particular viewpoint, do not disparage other views. This is an important teaching, but it is not a sufficiently cardinal doctrine to cause separation from other believers. Be at peace about what you believe to be the truth and be open to listen to others.

Basic Programme

The same events are revealed in Matt 24, Rev 11 (the two witnesses) and Rev 20 (the dragon), i.e.

1 Preparatory (Matt 24:3-13 is preparatory, we are in the last days now, i.e. since the cross. NB v6-8 don't be alarmed, all occurred during 60-80 AD. False Christs, wars, earthquakes indicate not the end but the beginning. The end of Jerusalem is not the end of the world.)

2 Preliminary Signs (To show that the end is near)

The proclamation of the gospel and witness of the church (Matt 24:14 testimony of gospel to all nations).

Growing opposition and persecution (Matt 24:15-28)

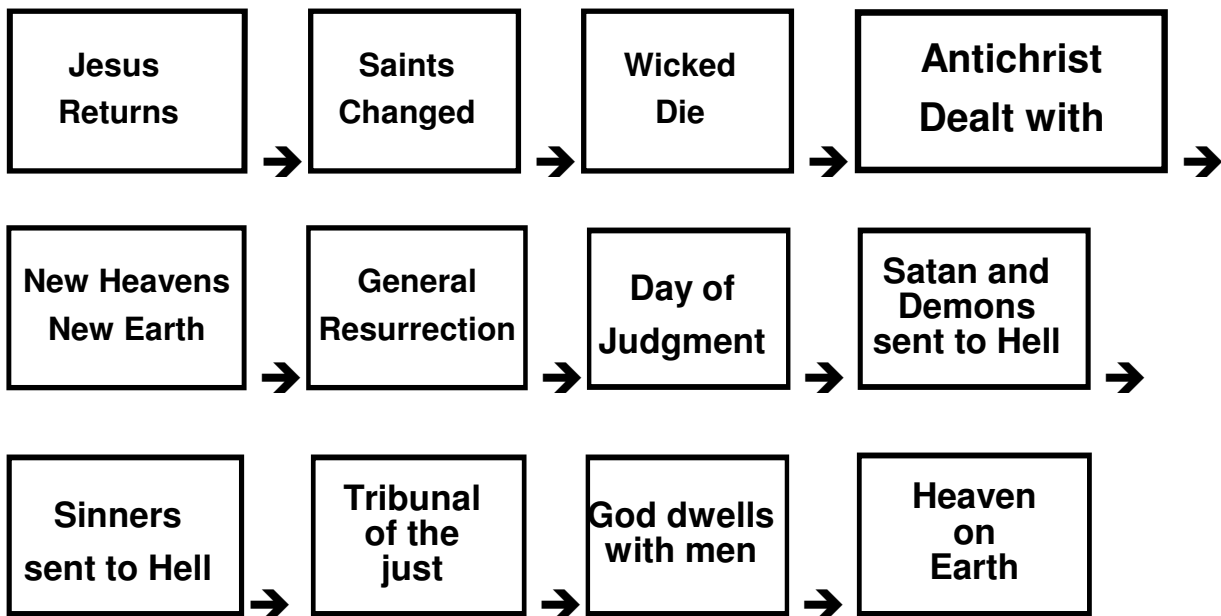
3 Final Sign

Natural Disorder (immediately after the great tribulation, Matt 24:29, Sun, moon, stars and heavens shaken, men fear but don't perish Lk 21:25-26)

The coming of Jesus (Matt 24:30)

The Actual Coming of Jesus

- 1 Open and clear, (Matt 24:26-27)
Audible (1 Thess 4:16, 'The heavens will pass away with a loud noise' 2 Pt 3:10)
Physical (Acts 1:11, Matt 13:41-43)
Glorious (2 Thess 1:7, Matt 16:27,24:30, 2 Cor 4:17, Lk 9:26, 21:27-31
Rev 19:11-21)
Seen by everyone (Rev 1:7)
Sudden (2 Pt 3:10)
- 2 The dead in Christ receive resurrection bodies (1 Cor 15:42ff)
Living Christians are changed (1 Cor 15:51-52, 1 Jn 3:2)
Both meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess 4:17)
The full number of the elect is now complete (Matt 24:31)
- 3 The lawless one is revealed and destroyed (2 Thess 2:8)
- 4 The Heavens and the Earth are burned up (2 Pt 3:7-12)
A new heaven and earth is created (2 Pt 3:13)
- 5 The resurrection of the unjust (Matt 25:31-32)
- 6 Judgment (Matt 25:41-46, Rev 1:7, 6:16-17)
Of unbelievers sentenced to hell (Rev 20:11-14)
Of Satan and his angels sentenced to hell (lake of fire) (Rev 20:10)
Believers appear before God's tribunal to evaluate service and apportion rewards (1 Cor 3:12-15)
- 7 The wedding feast (Rev 19:9)
Saints always with the Lord (Rev 21:1-4)
God dwells with men
Heaven is on earth



Four different interpretations of the last things

Christians are divided in their understanding as to the order of events at the end. This largely arises from different interpretations of Revelation chapter 20 which speaks about the binding of the Devil for a 1000 years. Two versions believe that Jesus will return before this binding which then issues in a millennial golden age (pre-millennialism), one version believes that Jesus will return after this millennium (post-millennialism), and one version believes that this 1000 years is a symbolic reference to the gospel age, the period between the cross and the second coming (a-millennialism or non-millennialism).

A complete examination of each of these theories would take far too much space for our purposes here. I will endeavour to fairly summarise each position and note some objections. For further reading:

- The Momentous Event by W Grier, Banner of Truth, is a slim paperback which explains each position clearly and favours the a-millennial viewpoint.
- The Meaning of the Millennium (Edited by Clouse), IVP, is a compilation of articles and mutual criticisms of each viewpoint by protagonists of each position.

HISTORIC PRE-MILLENNIALISM

Originally based upon Jewish ideas and expounded, for example, by Irenaeus .

The world lasts for 6000 years (= 6 days of creation), i.e. ends 2000 AD. Towards the end persecution increases, peaking with the Antichrist and apostasy. After seating himself in God's temple, Jesus returns to triumph over him. Then the saints are resurrected and the kingdom of God is established on the earth for a 1000 years (7th day). Jerusalem is rebuilt, the earth is fruitful. peace and righteousness reign. After 1000 years there is the final judgment and a new creation.

This was further developed over the centuries and a common view would be:

- The parousia (second coming) is near. It will be visible and glorious.

- It is preceded by evangelisation of all nations, conversion of Israel, a great apostasy (falling away), great tribulation and the man of sin (antichrist).
- At the parousia, dead saints are raised, the living transformed and together meet Christ in the air.
- Antichrist and his allies are slain.
- Jews will repent and be saved and restored to Israel.
- The kingdom of God is established in a changed world.
- Gentiles turn to God and are added to the kingdom.
- Peace and righteousness on earth.
- After this earthly rule of Christ, the rest of the dead (i.e. wicked) are raised and then comes the final judgment, and a new heaven and earth.

Advocated (with some differences) by Bengel, Lange, Alford, Ellicott, Guinness, Kellog, Trench, Ladd.

Differences to Dispensational Pre-millennialism:

- No secret rapture
- The church passes through tribulation on earth during the reign of antichrist.

DISPENSATIONAL PRE-MILLENNIALISM

Introduced in the last century by the Irvingites (around 1830) and popularised by Brethren leader JN Darby (around 1860), then Kelly, Trotter and also Bullinger, Gaebelien and Scofield (especially important in its spread was the Scofield reference Bible).

This is really a new philosophy with Israel taking a leading role and the church is an interlude. This results in a division in the Bible, that which refers to the kingdom and that which refers to the church.

There are a number of covenants, dispensations, judgments, two second comings and two peoples of God (Israel and the church). Its principle of history is negative in that each dispensation (i.e. an administration of history) ends in failure and judgment. Thus the church will see no widespread revival at the end. It also takes prophetic statements literally i.e. as referring to Israel not the church.

Timescale

- **There is a general apostasy** (i.e. a falling away from faith)
- **Christ's return is imminent** since there are no predicted events to precede it
- **Jesus comes twice separated by 7 years.**
 - a) **'Parousia'** (a secret coming) to appear in the air to meet saints.
 - * The righteous dead are raised, living saints are changed.
 - * They celebrate the wedding of the lamb and are forever with the Lord. This is called the 'secret rapture'.
 - b) **Interval of 7 years.**
 - * Christ, the church and the Holy Spirit are gone from the earth.
 - * Gospel preached by a believing remnant of Jews.
 - * Large conversions.
 - * Jews converted.
 - * Then terrible tribulation, Antichrist revealed.
 - * The vials of God's wrath poured out.

c) 'Revelation'

- * the coming of Jesus (not 'for' but) with the saints.
- * Nations judged (sheep and goats).
- * Saints killed in the tribulation are raised.
- * Antichrist destroyed.
- * Armageddon fought.
- * Satan bound for a 1000 years.
- **The millennial kingdom is established:**
 - * a material, terrestrial kingdom of the Jews. The theocracy of Israel is again established. David's kingship is re-established.
 - * The saints reign with Christ (Jews are natural citizens, Gentiles are adopted citizens).
 - * The throne of Christ is established in Jerusalem.
 - * The temple is rebuilt, the altar, sacrifices (even sin-offerings) are introduced.
 - * Sin and death still operate but there is prosperity and prolonged life.
 - * In this time the world is converted.
- **After the millennium**
 - * Satan is loosed.
 - * Hordes of Gog and Magog attack Jerusalem but are destroyed by fire from heaven.
 - * Satan is cast into the bottomless pit with the beast and the false prophet
 - * The wicked dead are raised
 - * Judgment
 - * New heaven and earth

There are several variations of this!

Objections

1 The literal interpretation of prophecy is untenable.

- Isa 54:13, 61:6; Jer 3:16, 31:31-34; Hos 14:2; Mic 6:6-8 for instance point to a spiritual fulfilment
- The contention that 'Zion' and 'Jerusalem' always refer literally to a mountain and a city is not true: Isa 49:14, 51:3, 52:1-2 both refer to Israel as the OT church also see Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22; Rev 3:12, 21:9

2 There is no indication in the NT of the re-establishment of the OT theocracy by Jesus, but there are many promises of a spiritual fulfilment.

- Matt 21:43; Acts 2:29-36, 15:14-18; Rm 9:24-26; Heb 8:8-13; 1 Pt 2:9
- A study of the OT shows that a restoration of the historical conditions of Israel's life is ludicrous. Ezek 42:13, 43:18-27 alone shows this since offerings for atonement would be necessary.

3 Missing link: the postponement theory

This link in the Dispensational scheme has no scriptural basis. It says that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom (i.e. a Jewish theocracy) was at hand, but the Jews did not repent and believe so Jesus postponed its establishment till his second coming. The pivotal point marking the change is said to be in Matt 11:20 by Scofield, Matt 12 by others. Before this time Jesus was not concerned with Gentiles, after this he did not preach the kingdom but predicted its future coming.

But this is not true:

- Jesus and the Gentiles: Matt 8:5-13; Jn 4:1-42
- Jesus and the Jews: Matt 13; Lk 10:1-11
- There is no proof that Jesus preached two different gospels containing first the gospel of the kingdom and then the gospel of the grace of God
- Jesus never intended to re-establish the OT theocracy which, in any case, was only a type of the spiritual reality: Matt 8:11-12, 13:31-35, 21:43; Lk 17:21; Jn 3:3, 18:36-37 cf Rm 14:17
- Jesus established the kingdom as a present reality: Matt 11:12, 12:28; Lk 17:21 cf Col 1:13. It is not of this world but spiritual: Matt 13:11-44; Jn 18:36; Rm 14:17 and is not confined to Jews: Matt 8:11-12
- At his ascension, Jesus sat on David's throne: Rev 3:7+; Acts 2:29-36, 3:13-15, 4:25-28, 5:29-31; Heb 10:12-13, therefore, the OT prophecies predicting this kingdom must refer to the present dispensation of grace, not a future reign of Christ on earth. Also note Jesus' rejection of kingly ideas (Jn 6:15).
- It breaks the unity of the scriptures which is:

<u>OT</u>	<u>NT</u>
TYPE	ANTITYPE
PROPHECY	FULFILMENT

Not

Theocracy predicted	Theocracy not restored
Church not predicted	Church established

- This theory says that: OT= the book of the kingdom, NT= (except gospels) the book of the church
- This theory says that there are two peoples of God, one natural, one spiritual, but the Bible says that there is one flock and one shepherd (Jn 10:16, Rm 11:17).
- Note : 'No purpose of thine can be restrained' Job.

4 The second coming, final judgment and the end of the world are synchronised events.

- 2 Pt 3:7-13; Rev 20:11, 21:1
- There is no indication that they are separated by 1000 years: Mt 13:37-43,47-50
- The separation of the good and evil is at 'the end' not a 1000 years before: Matt 24:29-31, 25:31-46; Jn 5:25-29; 1 Cor 15:22-26; Phil 3:20-21; Rm 2:5,6,16; 1 Thess 4:15-16; Rev 20:11-15. They all concur at the parousia. (The appeal to 2 Pt 3:8 that the resurrection of saints is in the morning of the 1000 years and the resurrection of the wicked is at the evening is no good since that passage could also prove that the 1000 years of Rev 20 are one day.)

5 The resurrection is single, not several events.

- nor are there 3 judgments Jn 5:28-29, 6:39,44,54, 11:24=12:48; Dan 12:2
- The first resurrection (Rev 20:5) is not physical (see context, it is the sharing of the saints spiritually in the resurrection power of Jesus, the first one raised) see also Dan 12:2; Jn 5:28-29; Acts 24:15

6 How can the Lord of glory establish his throne on an un-renewed earth?

- How can sinners stand in his glory? cf Paul and John Acts 26:12-14; Rev 1:17
- How can glorified saints commune with sinners?

- How can perfect people live in a sin-laden atmosphere?
- How can the new earth exist alongside the old earth?
- Rev 21 shows that God and the church dwell on earth after heaven and earth are renewed. How can they dwell there 1000 years before its renewal?

7 Revelation 20:1-6

NB Rev is highly symbolical

- There is no other reference to a millennium elsewhere.
 - A literal millennium is contradicted by the rest of the NT.
 - Sound exegesis requires that obscure passages are read in the light of clearer ones, not vice versa.
 - Even a literal interpretation is not consistent (e.g. chain v1, binding v2 are seen as figurative by all).
 - The passage does not say that the classes referred to (martyred saints and those who did not worship the beast) were raised from the dead but simply that they lived and reigned with Christ, the first resurrection (i.e. it's spiritual).
 - There is no indication here that Christ and his saints are ruling on the earth. In the light of Rev 4:4, 6:9 etc., it is more likely to be in heaven.
 - There is no mention of Israel, Jerusalem, the temple, Jews, the natural citizens of the millennial kingdom.
 - There is no mention of two resurrections elsewhere.
 - The resurrection body is spiritual, not natural or flesh and blood (1 Cor 15:44).
- (For a Post-Millennial interpretation see A A Hodge, Outlines of Theology p 458)

8 It is not possible for people to be converted after Christ returns since he only comes when the full number of the elect are saved (Rm 11:25-26, Matt 24:31).

POST-MILLENNIALISM

Earlier Form

16-17th centuries: Some reformed theologians thought the millennium had occurred in the past; others thought of it as present; others looked for it in the future. The majority expected it toward the end of the world, just before the parousia.

- The gospel will gradually spread through the world and eventually become immeasurably more effective than it is now. Evil is restrained, Satan is bound, then the nations are won and transformed.
- It will usher in a period of rich blessings for the church: a golden age in which the Jews will share in the blessings of the gospel in an unprecedented way.
- After this time there will be a brief apostasy and conflict of good and evil (led by Satan) when Jesus will return with a general resurrection and final judgment.

Later Form

Much modern Post-millennialism is evolutionary and not evangelical, i.e. humanity is getting more civilised and improving. Other versions involve development and constructive world policies. Recently Theonomy or Reconstructionism has arisen which sees a future world run by Christians and the re-establishment of the Mosaic law in society. Also many charismatic streams have developed a very triumphal postmillennialism with their version of the church becoming a majority in the wake of revivalism and signs and wonders.

Objections

- The Bible does not speak of the conversion of the world, but that at the end of the age there is great apostasy, persecution, tribulation, the faith of many will grow cold etc.: Matt 24:6-14, 21, 22; Lk 18:8, 21:25-28; 2 Thess 2:3-12; 2 Tim 3:1-6; Rev 13. This is not ignored by postmillennial interpretation but is played down to insignificant proportions. Their positive expectation is based on figurative descriptions of the gospel dispensation or the eternal kingdom.
- The idea that the age will not end in great cataclysmic change but pass quietly into the coming age is not scriptural. Catastrophe and God's intervention will end Satan's rule and usher in the kingdom: Matt 24:29-31, 35-44; Heb 12:26-27; 2 Pt 3:10-13.
- Despite prevailing righteousness in the millennial kingdom, Satan leads a host to battle (Rev 20:8), where do they come from?

A-MILLENNIALISM

- Considers that Rev 20 is not earthly blessedness.
- It rejects the thought that there is an age in which joys are shared by sinners surviving the coming of Jesus.
- There is no ground for a millennium on earth before or after the second coming.

Scheme

1 The second coming is preceded by apostasy and tribulation climaxed by the antichrist or an anti-Christian spirit.

2 There will be a proclamation of the gospel to all people and widespread revival. (In other words, the end is a time of great contrasts, both the wheat and the tares come to fulness at the same time.)

3 The final rebellion is overthrown at the Lord's coming. There is a resurrection of believers and a transformation of living believers.

4 The wicked dead are raised for judgment, non believers having died at the appearance of Christ. The earth is destroyed by fire. A new heaven and earth appear.

Bibliography

L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p708 ff.
W. Grier, *The Momentous Event*.
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