

THEOLOGY ROUNDTABLE

End Times



Peninsula Bible Church
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Introduction

The study of the end times has always been a fascinating topic for the church. We desperately want to know what is going to happen in the future. We are excited and intrigued by the idea that the Bible answers that question for us.

However, any study of the end times must happen within the tension of two biblical truths. The first is that some aspects of the future have not been revealed to us. Jesus declares that not even He knows the timing of certain end times events (Matthew 24:36). Church history is full of biblical interpreters who claim specific fulfillment of prophecies only to be humiliated when they are proven wrong. We do not want to be so presumptuous as to think that we have finally solved the riddle of the end times where so many others have failed.

At the same time, the New Testament clearly makes reference to future events with the expectation that this knowledge will change our current behavior (2 Thess 5:6). We must affirm the biblical revelation that God will once again act within history to consummate His kingdom. In addition, there are many details given as to how and why and what the result of God's actions will be. We must take these prophecies seriously and seek to understand them as best we can with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This roundtable discussion outlines several positions regarding the end times. At times, discussion among those who have different convictions has been divisive and of conflict and skepticism. Our goal is to understand differing positions and listen to those who hold to them in love and unity. Our own convictions may be changed or affirmed by the discussion. In either case, we can disagree with confidence and humility and love those who have different conclusions.

Ultimately, answers to these questions lie with God. Our primary attitude is to trust Him. We have faith that He is at work and His plans will be carried forth in His time and according to His intentions.

For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.

—Luke 8: 17

Definitions

Definitions of Relevant Terms:

Eschatology. The area of theology that seeks to understand how God will act in history during the end times.

Parousia. The theological term that refers to the second coming of Christ.

Rapture. The doctrine that believers in Christ will be reunited with Jesus prior to the remaining events of the end times. Among those who believe in the rapture, interpretations differ as to the timing and the nature of the reunion. This doctrine is developed primarily from 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Millennium. A thousand year period during which Jesus Christ reigns prior to the final judgment and future eternal state. Interpretations differ as to the precise duration of this period, its timing, who will experience it and whether it is a literal or metaphorical period. This doctrine is developed primarily from Revelation 20:1-6.

Great Tribulation. A period of time in which the world experiences tremendous conflict, suffering, and pain. In some views, this period is included as part of the sequence of events during the end times. Interpretations differ on the duration of this period, whether believers in Christ will experience it, and when it will occur. This doctrine is developed primarily from Jesus' words in the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) and some references in Revelation (Revelation 2:22, 7:14).

Antichrist. A powerful individual who will mount intense opposition Christ and/or Christians during the end times, according to some views.

Eternal State. The state of existence subsequent to Christ's second coming. This is often referred to as "heaven" or "the new creation" or "eternity."

Preterism. An interpretive position which suggests some or all significant prophecies in the New Testament have already been fulfilled in history. One common example is the belief that some of the events described during the Olivet discourse were fulfilled during the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Futurism. An interpretive position which suggests that all of the eschatological events described in the New Testament have yet to be fulfilled in history.

Selected Passages

This list of passages covers most of the major biblical references to the end times. Some of these passages are quoted in their entirety because they contribute in a significant or unique way to central doctrines.

Old Testament:

- Isaiah 24-27
- Ezekiel 38-39
- Daniel 7-12

New Testament:

MATTHEW 24:4-51 (MARK 13:1-37, LUKE 21:5-38)

Matthew 24:4-8 And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Matthew 24:15-25 “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, 18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. 19 And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! 20 Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. 22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. 23 Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand.

Matthew 24:36-41 “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. 37 For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left.

LUKE 17:20-37

ROMANS 11:25-32

ESV Romans 11:25: Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. 26 And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; 27 “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-55

1 Corinthians 15:50-55: I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-5:6

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:6: But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again,

even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

5:1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4 But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. 5 For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:1: Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? 6 And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and

false signs and wonders, 10 and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

2 PETER 3:3-13

2 Peter 3:3-13: knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” 5 For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, 6 and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

8 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! 13 But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

REVELATION 20:1-6 (thousand years)

ESV Revelation 20:1: Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Covenant and Dispensational Theology

In order to understand some of the details of specific end times views, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of two theological systems which have significant eschatological implications. These are Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology.

One of the primary differences between covenant theology and dispensational theology is the relationship between the church and ethnic Israel. In short, dispensational theology sees a **sharp distinction** between Israel and the church, while covenant theology sees a **continuity** between Israel and the church.

Dispensational Theology maintains that in the Old Testament, the ethnic group of Israel was the chosen people of God. They received certain promises from YHWH, their God. Jesus was sent to them as their Messiah, but they rejected Him. Consequently, God offered inclusion to a new group of people and the church was born. The church does not replace Israel as the people of God, it is merely a separate season (or dispensation) of God's work in the world. God's primary interaction with ethnic Israel is not complete, but temporarily suspended during the church age. During the end times, God's plans for ethnic Israel will re-commence and the original promises given to them in the Old Testament will be fulfilled.

Covenant Theology argues that the church is the new people of God made up of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. The particular promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled to the church, either in a current spiritual sense or in a future sense when God's kingdom will fill the whole earth. Ethnic Israel does not have a future expectation that is different than that of the church. Whatever end times events occur will make no distinction between the church and Israel.

Covenant Theology



Dispensational Theology



Millennial Positions

The major positions regarding end times are largely based on different understandings of the millennial period in Revelation 20. These summaries are meant to characterize the most common and broad definitions of each position. Within each position, different details lead to nuanced understandings of the overall position.

These views each take different positions on when the Millennium will occur in reference to the second coming of Christ and the last judgment.

Premillennialism understands that Jesus will return before the millennial period, which will be an historical period on earth. During this period, Jesus Christ will reign on earth prior to the final judgment and new creation. Within the premillennial position, the understanding of the Rapture as it relates to the church and Israel creates two significantly different positions. The post-tribulation position is a typically covenantal view that does not believe that the church will be raptured prior to the second coming of Christ. The pre-tribulation position is a typically dispensational view that believes the church will be reunited with God prior to the tribulation, remain in heaven throughout the millennium and be reunited with believing Jews in the eternal state.

Postmillennialism understands that Jesus will return after the millennial period, which will be a period of peace and prosperity on earth realized through the efforts of the church. This period may or may not be literally one thousand years. As followers of Jesus work toward principles of righteousness, the quality of life on earth will improve as a result.

Amillennialism understands the reference in Revelation 20 to refer to a metaphorical period of time equivalent to the church age, which began at Pentecost. The reign of Christ is currently a spiritual reality that will be consummated in a physical kingdom when Christ returns.

Some further aspects of each position is detailed below:

Historic Premillennial

- Understands little to **no distinction between ethnic Israel and believers in Jesus Christ**. The millennial kingdom on earth will include both Christians and Jews who believe in Christ.
- Christians will not be exempt from the Great Tribulation.
- Second coming of Christ occurs prior to the millennial period.
- May or may not emphasize belief in a literal Rapture.
- Last judgment occurs prior to the eternal state.
- Adherents claim it as one of the primary interpretations of Revelation 20 throughout church history.

Dispensational Premillennial

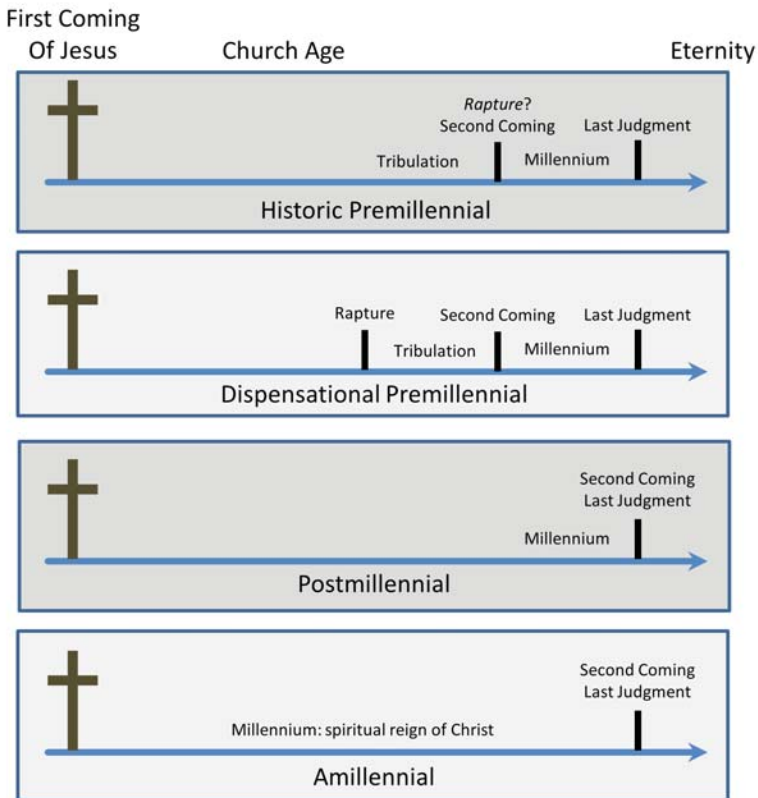
- Largely motivated by a literal biblical interpretation in regards to specific Old Testament promises to Israel that have yet to be fulfilled. These promises must be fulfilled for ethnic Israel in the future.
- Understands a sharp distinction between ethnic Israel and believers in Jesus Christ. The millennial kingdom on earth is where God's unfulfilled promises to Israel in the Old Testament will finally be realized.
- Emphasizes belief in the Rapture, by which Christians will be spared from the Great Tribulation.
- Last Judgment occurs prior to the eternal state.
- Theological origins date to the mid 19th century with John Nelson Darby, popularized in late 19th century through Scofield Reference Bible.

Postmillennial

- Teaches that the forces of evil will be gradually subdued by the Kingdom of God through the church until Christ returns to complete His work.
- Emphasizes works of justice performed by the church as the means of God's kingdom expanding on earth.
- Often popular with social movements: abolitionists, liberation theologians, and advocates for social justice.
- Rose to popularity in early 20th century with adherents of the social gospel.

Amillennial

- Incorporates “realized eschatology”: the idea that some aspects of the end times have already begun during this period of history on earth.
- Emphasizes the contrast between **the already and the not yet**. Some aspects of the end times have already been enacted, while some aspects have not yet been enacted.
- Sees the role of the church as translating the spiritual reign of Christ into a physical reality during this age, but without the expectant optimism that its efforts will succeed as in postmillennialism.
- Often employs an **idealist** interpretative approach to prophetic passages such as those found in Revelation. This approach suggests that many images are best interpreted as symbols of spiritual reality rather than having a literal fulfillment in earthly history.



PBC Position

In its earliest years, Peninsula Bible Church held to a dispensational premillennial view of eschatology. Ray Stedman, the first pastor of PBC, was a vocal proponent of dispensationalism. Over its history, questions of eschatology were important and sometimes central issues. Emphasis has always been placed on seeking to understand the meaning of the biblical text. This has led to some middle ground positions and healthy dialog of different difficult interpretive texts.

In recent years, PBC has relaxed its view on eschatology. Many leaders felt that a particular view on end times should not be a defining aspect of the church. In response to that, the elders adopted a revised doctrinal statement in 2002. This statement does not specify one specific position on eschatology. Rather, it focuses on the general aspects that virtually all views have in common.

Today, members of the PBC community hold several differing views on this issue, mostly including dispensational premillennial, historic premillennial, and amillennial.

PBC Current Statement of Doctrine (regarding eschatology)

We look for the visible, bodily return of Jesus Christ to earth. This hope calls us to holy living, genuine witness and encouragement of heart. The return of Christ will bring His kingdom to completion, judge the world in righteousness and fulfill His promises to His people (Israel and the Church). His future work on earth will conclude with the destruction of all evil and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

We believe that all human beings will be raised from the dead, at their proper time, to participate either in eternal life prepared for those who have been redeemed, or to participate in eternal punishment reserved for the devil and his angels.

History of PBC Doctrinal Statement

The PBC doctrinal statement has gone through interesting changes over the course of the history of the church. The first doctrinal statement in 1958 included a statement of premillennial belief. In 1978, the doctrinal statement was revised into a single sentence regarding inerrancy of the Bible. In 1988, the doctrinal statement was revised again including an extensive section on dispensational premillennialism. In 2002, the current form of the doctrinal statement was adopted which did not specify a position on the eschatological issues discussed here.

PBC Statement of Doctrine as of 1988 (regarding eschatology)

1. We believe that Jesus the Christ (Messiah) will return to this earth in visible, human form in a cataclysmic series of events that will affect the world, the Church and the nation of Israel; judging the evil of the world, calling the Church into eternal companionship with Himself, and recalling Israel, through judgment and cleansing, into fulfillment of the prophetic promises of a restored kingdom of David upon the earth, lasting for 1000 years.
2. We believe that the prophetic predictions of the kingdom are intended to describe both the present spiritual blessings upon the Church and a future literal establishment of a kingdom for Israel, and that at the end of the millennium the earth and its inhabitants will experience a final resurgence of evil, which will be overcome by God, and a new heaven and earth created, in which righteousness shall eternally dwell.
3. We believe that all human beings will be raised from the dead, at their proper time, to participate either in the eternal life prepared for those who have been redeemed, or to participate in the eternal punishment reserved for the devil and his angels.

PBC Statement of Doctrine as of 1978

We believe that the 66 books of the Bible are the verbally inspired written word of God, totally inerrant in the original documents.

PBC Statement of Doctrine as of 1958 (regarding eschatology)

7. We believe in “that blessed hope,” the personal, premillennial and imminent return of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
9. We believe in the bodily resurrection of the just and unjust, the everlasting blessedness of the saved, and the everlasting, conscious punishment of the lost.

Additional Resources

Web Resources:

Excellent overview of eschatology in general and summary of major positions:

<http://bible.org/seriespage/eschatology-end-times>

A video featuring discussion and interaction of different positions, moderated by John Piper:

<http://youtu.be/wsovbT4Yu2s>

Print Resources:

Blomberg, Craig & Chung, Sung Wook, ed. *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, 2009.

Clouse, Robert G., ed. *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, 1977.

A compilation work engaging authors from each eschatological viewpoint to articulate their view and interact with other views.

Grenz, Stanley. *The Millennial Maze*, 2007.

Riddleberger, Kim. *A Case for Amillennialism*, 2003.

Pentecost, Dwight. *Things to Come*, 1965. A classic explanation and defense of dispensationalist eschatology.

PBC Sermon Resources:

Ray Stedman on Revelation 20, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/one-thousand-years-of-peace>

Scott Grant on the Olivet Discourse in Mark: <http://www.pbc.org/messages/labor-pains>, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/candles-in-the-night>

Scott Grant on Romans 11, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/mercy-for-all>

