

1.2.5 Premillennialism

The simplest definition of premillennialism is the belief that after a period of severe tribulation of the earth, the Lord Jesus Christ will visibly and bodily return to earth (His Second Coming/Advent or *Parousia*) and will then rule and reign on the earth for a period of one thousand years (millennium) of peace and prosperity. The scripture reference most often given for this order of events is Revelation 19:11- 20:6. Premillennialism can be subdivided into two groups: historicism and futurism.

Historicism is the belief that the prophecies concerning the End Times provide a symbolic history of the Church period leading up to the Second Advent; past and present Church history is examined to seek fulfillment of specific prophecies. Futurism, on the other hand, is the belief that none of the End Times prophecies will be fulfilled until a short period before the *Parousia*. The futurists can be further subdivided into three groups based on their belief of when the Rapture (or catching away) of the Church will take place: pretribulationists (the Rapture takes place before the seven-year tribulation on earth), midtribulationists (the Rapture takes place midway through the seven-year tribulation, before the “Great Tribulation” or wrath of God is poured out), and posttribulationists (the Rapture is not a separate event and takes place in conjunction with the Lord’s Second Coming) (Hebert 2006c:5-6).

Other names for premillennialists are millenarians and chiliasts—taken from the Greek word for thousand (Torrey 1913:145). As mentioned in the Introduction Section, premillennialism was the prevailing view of the Early Church for about the first three centuries, up to and including the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325, and until Origen and his allegorical interpretation of Scripture began to take hold and Augustine postulated the concept of amillennialism. Premillennialism then receded in prominence (eschatologically speaking) to

amillennialism and postmillennialism until the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, with the rise of dispensationalism.

Amillennialists (taken from “a” millennium, meaning “no” millennium) believe that the references to the Millennium in Scripture are figurative or allegorical and take place in the believer’s heart, thereby creating heaven on earth in the Body of Christ. Although similar in belief to the postmillennialists, the amillennialists also believe that there is no literal reign of Christ on earth; that the Great White Throne Judgment occurs immediately following the Second Coming of Christ; and that there is only one, not two, resurrections addressed in Revelation 20. This view was initiated by Origen and propagated as the orthodox eschatological view of the Catholic Church by Augustine. Augustine also taught that the period of this spiritual millennium in the Church or Body of Christ was from the Cross to the *Parousia*, commonly called the Church Age by other theologians.

Postmillennialists believe that Jesus will return after the Church has established the Millennium on earth by the faithful completion of the Great Commission. It will be a period of peace and righteousness and may or may not be a literal one thousand year period but will definitely conclude with the Lord’s Second Coming. Postmillennialists are considered optimists and teach that the kingdom of heaven/God is here and now on earth and things will get better and better until the Church ushers in the Second Coming of Christ. This belief started during the Age of Enlightenment (seventeenth century), most probably by Daniel Whitby (1683-1726), a Unitarian (Van Hoogen 2002:123). Most Reformed Theology teaches postmillennialism (which includes the Puritans, founders of the American Church) and it was the majority view of the Church in the late-seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, after the rise of dispensationalism in the mid-nineteenth century and the turmoil, strife, World Wars, and overall

increase in evil and Satan's kingdom of the twentieth century, postmillennialism faded into the background and premillennialism once again moved to the forefront (Weber 1979:9-11; Erickson 1998:1212-1222; Hart 1999:453-462; Geisler 2005:547-551).

As stated in the Introduction Section, this thesis is based on a premillennial-futurist, pretribulational frame of reference. This view has received much attention lately and has become the popular view in America in the mid-to-late twentieth century, carrying over into the twenty-first century. However, there still remains much discussion and disagreement over when the Rapture of the Church will take place (For more information on the Rapture of the Church, see the Rapture Section below and Hebert 2006c).