

A simple introduction to eschatology

Many Christians, even ardent Bible students, complain that they find the morass of end-time doctrines complex and confusing; and indeed many of them are. However, it is possible to strip them back to reveal the basics of what they teach. This is my purpose here. Clearly, this is a primer and not a full examination of these doctrines, but it does seek to include all key issues.

Essential Bible facts about the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ

Advice for study

Search the clear, undisputed, simple doctrinal statements in the NT to get an overall picture of the end before you look at obscure, prophetic, symbolic debated passages.

Characteristics of the Gospel Age in general from 30AD to today

- The Gospel Age is from the first Coming of Christ to the glorious Return of Christ in power. It is from the resurrection of Christ to the resurrection of Christ's body, the church. This is the period of the New Covenant and the Gospel proclamation.
- The kingdom of God, announced by John the Baptist and Christ, is both present and future. It is present in that the reign of Christ in authority as a glorified man began at the resurrection and ascension (Matt 28:18); but this reign is currently heavenly (Jn 18:36). This rule is presently in abeyance in the world until Christ returns (1 Cor 15:27-28). God is long-suffering regarding man's rebellion at the moment.
- The enjoyment of the kingdom for Christians is currently spiritual and heavenly. It becomes material only after the Last Judgment and the restoration (regeneration) of the earth.¹ It is both false to deny that there are spiritual kingdom benefits for the church now; as it is to claim that material benefits of the kingdom are applicable now.²
- This period is called 'the kingdom' in the Gospels. It is seen as the reign of Christ in the apostolic letters. It is symbolised as a millennium reign in Rev 20. It is also called 'the Last Days' (Heb 1:2).
- The chief characteristic of believers now is suffering (2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 1:8); that of believers in the resurrection is victory and rule with no suffering (1 Cor 15:53-57). Heretics apply the future to the present.

Signs of the very end period of the Gospel Age

- Increasing contrasts: wheat and tares come to fulness together. Man's sin becomes complete in an antichristian world system; the elect are fully gathered in.
- The Gospel is proclaimed to the whole world (Matt 24:14).
- Many in the church fall away in a period of great deception (2 Thess 2:3, 9-11).
- The man of sin, the lawless one, is revealed (2 Thess 2:3-4, 8-10). [This may be an individual, 'Antichrist', but it may be corporate mankind.] There is a wicked world government led by Satan.

¹ Which is when believers are given a new spiritual body to enjoy the full benefits of salvation.

² Charismatics generally teach that 'the kingdom is now' and that miracles, healing, prosperity and the church's rule over the nations are evidences of the kingdom for the church. This is false in this age. Some call this a 'realised eschatology'.

- The church is ruthlessly persecuted (Matt 24:9).

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ

The Appearing

- Is personal, clear to all (Matt 24:26-27); seen by all (Rev 1:7); audible (2 Pt 3:10); physical (Acts 1:11, Matt 13:41-43).
- Is Glorious (2 Thess 1:7, Matt 16:27,24:30, 2 Cor 4:17, Lk 9:26, 21:27-31).
- Is sudden (2 Pt 3:10). Occurs when there is peace and safety (1 Thess 5:3).

Associated events

- 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).
- The lawless one is destroyed (2 Thess 2:8).
- The Heavens and the Earth are burned up (2 Pt 3:7-12). A new heaven and earth is created (2 Pt 3:13).

Judgment

- The resurrection of the unjust (Matt 25:31-32).
- Judgment (Matt 25:41-46, Rev 1:7, 6:16-17). Unbelievers are sentenced to hell (Rev 20:11-14). Satan and his angels are sentenced to hell, the lake of fire (Rev 20:10), the second death (Rev 2:11, 20:6, 14, 21:8).
- Believers appear before God's tribunal to evaluate service and apportion rewards (1 Cor 3:12-15).

Fulfilment of the divine purpose

- The wedding feast (Rev 19:9).
- Saints always with the Lord (Rev 21:1-4).
- God dwells with men. Heaven is on earth.

Essential facts of the main eschatological systems

The basic options

History demonstrates that there are three basic positions on the end. These are:

- Jesus comes before a millennium (premillennialism).
- Jesus returns after a millennium (postmillennialism).
- There is no millennium (amillennialism).

There are some historic variations within these basic positions.

The cause of these variations

Different interpretations of Rev 20:1-6, the only mention of a thousand years in connection with the end. It refers to a period when the devil will be bound and restricted before the final end comes, Christ returns and judgment follows.

Note that there is no apostolic didactic teaching on a future millennium 'golden age' whatsoever. Such an important doctrine needs a divine explanation; there is none.

Historic Premillennialism

- This system is ancient, going back to Jewish ideas and is found in some Church Fathers (e.g. Irenaeus). It virtually died out and was rare in Reformation times when it was called Chiliasm (after the Greek word for a thousand).

Key teachings:

- The world lasts for 6000 years (= 6 days of creation).
- The end is preceded by the evangelisation of all nations, conversion of Israel, a great apostasy (falling away), great tribulation and the man of sin (Antichrist).
- Towards the end persecution increases, peaking with the Antichrist and apostasy. After seating himself in God's temple, Jesus returns to triumph over him; Antichrist and his allies are slain..
- Jesus' return is visible and glorious.
- Then the saints are resurrected and the kingdom of God is established on the earth for a 1000 years (7th day). Jews will repent and be saved and restored to Israel. Jerusalem is rebuilt, the earth is fruitful, peace and righteousness reign. The kingdom of God is established in a changed world.
- Gentiles turn to God and are added to the kingdom.
- After 1000 years of an earthly rule of Christ, the rest of the dead are raised, there is the final judgment and a new creation.

Differences to Dispensational Pre-millennialism: no secret rapture; the church passes through tribulation on earth during the reign of antichrist. The first part of Historic Premillennialism, before the millennium, is very close to Amillennialism.

Advocates

John Bengel, JP Lange, Henry Alford, Charles Ellicott, HG Guinness, SH Kellog, RC Trench, GE Ladd, Millard Erickson. The best modern articulator of this position is Ladd. Some Reformed theologians hold a covenantal form of this view, such as: JO Buswell, J Barton Payne, R Laird Harris.

Books

GE Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom, The presence of the Future, The Last Things*. J Barton Payne, *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Prophecy*. Donald Campbell & Jeffrey Townsend (eds.) *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*.

Key objections

- How can the glorious Christ come to earth and rule over sinners? They would be obliterated by his glory.
- The NT teaches that the restoration of the earth occurs immediately after the return of Christ; there is no 1,000-year gap.
- There is no clear NT teaching on the end being associated with a sudden mass conversion of Jews, rebuilding of Jerusalem and a Jewish kingdom.

Dispensational Premillennialism (Dispensationalism)

The original Dispensational movement has fragmented into a number of variants.³ I will ignore these and focus on the most widespread Classic Dispensationalism, such as that found in the original Scofield Bible and propounded by Darby and Kelly.

This system of doctrines is modern and has no ancient history. Its final teaching about a secret rapture did not appear until 1830 with the ravings of a sick teenage girl, then adopted by a heretical, later scandalised, church associated with Edward Irving. It was only later (1860) adopted by Darby and Kelly.

Key teachings:

- The fundamental teaching is the focus upon Israel. God's purposes are centred upon Israel and the church is a mere interlude. This results in a division in the Bible: that which refers to the kingdom and that which refers to the church.
- It relies on a literal interpretation of OT prophetic scriptures.
- History is divided into dispensations (usually seven) that end in failure and judgment.
- There are a number of covenants, dispensations, judgments, two second comings and two peoples of God (Israel and the church).
- There is a general apostasy at the end.
- 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 (the 'Great Tribulation'). 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!

Advocates

JN Darby, William Kelly, CH Mackintosh, EW Bullinger, (most Brethren), RA Torrey, AT Pierson, Harry Ironside, Arno Gaebelein, FE Gaebelein, Scofield Bible, Hal Lindsey, Charles Ryrie, LS Chafer, John F Walvoord, Norman Geisler, Henry Thiessen, J Dwight Pentecost, Charles Swindoll, Dave Hunt, Jack Van Impe, Chuck Smith. Pre-Tribulationists include: John F Walvoord, Leon Wood. Mid-Tribulationists include: Gleason L Archer.

³ Such as Pre-tribulationist (Christ returns before the tribulation), Mid-tribulationist, post-tribulationist, Hyper-Dispensationalism and the more recent Progressive Dispensationalism which denies many aspects of the original formulation.

Post-Tribulationists include: Robert H Gundry, Alexander Reese. Supposed (confused) Reformed teachers that are Dispensational include John MacArthur.⁴

Books

J Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*. Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*. John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom, The Rapture Question, Major Bible Prophecies*. Plus multiple Brethren works.

Objections

- The constant literal interpretation of prophecy is untenable. The NT repeatedly demonstrates that prophecy must be interpreted allegorically and spiritually as well as literally, according to apostolic precedent and context. See Isa 54:13, 61:6; Jer 3:16, 31:31-34; Hos 14:2; Mic 6:6-8 which point to a spiritual fulfilment.
- 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). The OT theocracy 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).
- The idea that Jesus postponed an initial Jewish establishment of the kingdom has no Scriptural basis at all. This is the idea 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. 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 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).
- 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).
- 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.
- The resurrection is single, not several events. Nor are there 3 judgments.
- 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?
- Revelation 20:1-6 must be interpreted according to its symbolic character; literal interpretations are not consistent (e.g. chain v1, binding v2 are seen as figurative by all). There is no other reference to a millennium elsewhere. A literal millennium is contradicted by the rest of the NT, which is not obscure. There is no mention here of Israel, Jerusalem, the temple, Jews, the claimed citizens of the millennial kingdom.
- 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).

⁴ In fact, the main premises of Dispensationalism are inimical to Reformed Theology. It is only possible to hold both while in a state of confusion.

- The idea of a secret rapture has no foundation in Scripture.

Historic Postmillennialism

- Rare in ancient times but grew after the Reformation finding favour with some Puritans.
- The essential position is centred upon the hope that a growing church will have great success in the world becoming the major position and ensuring a golden age before Christ returns. It was based on idealism and a misinterpretation of some prophetic scriptures.
- Some centred upon a sudden conversion of Israel.
- It grew with the advance of modern technology and prosperity in Victorian times but it declined after the appearance of modernism, evolution, liberalism and especially a world war when hopes for utopia faded.
- It made a comeback after 1960 with the appearance of Reconstructionism and the Charismatic movement, but in a new form.

Key teachings:

- 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.
- This 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.

Advocates

Lorraine Boettner, David Brown, WGT Shedd, BB Warfield, Jonathan Edwards, Matthew Henry's Commentary, Adam Clarke, A H Strong, Charles Hodge, AA Hodge, J Marcellus Kik. Dutch theologians, such as Coccejus, Witsius, à Brakel and many others, regarded the millennium to be in the past.

Books

L Boettner, *The Millennium*. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*. David Brown, *Christ's Second Coming: Will it be Premillennial?*

Objections

- Developed in times of revival, but history is also full of persecution and small things
- Ignores the clear teaching that there is a church apostasy at the end along with a growing wickedness of mankind in general. 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.
- There is no clear teaching on a golden age before the return of Christ and the new world.
- 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?
- Apart from the golden age idea, it is very similar to Amillennialism and it was held by many good Reformed theologians.

Modern Postmillennialism: Reconstructionism / Theonomy⁵ / Dominion Theology

Theonomy or Reconstructionism arose in the 1970s, which sees a future world run by Christians and the re-establishment of the Mosaic Law in society in fulness.

Teachings

- Followers believe that every area dominated by sin must be 'reconstructed' according to the Bible; a reconstruction of society along Biblical lines.
- Dominion Theology: derives from Gen 1:26 which most Calvinists interpret as a rule over the earth and animal kingdom. Dominionists see it as a command to bring all societies under the rule of God's word. Reconstructionists plan to establish the kingdom of God worldwide to have dominion over all.
- Institution of Theonomy, or the Mosaic Law, over all men. The moral laws of Moses are unchangeable and binding on all people unless rescinded by the NT. This includes civil laws. Thus anything against OT ethics is to be criminalised and punished accordingly. Blasphemy, idolatry, prostitution, adultery and homosexuality would be capital crimes and convicted people executed by stoning or burning. Followers seek to peacefully convert US laws to harmonise with the Mosaic Law.
- Primacy of the OT.
- Opposition to inter-racial marriages.
- Oppression of false religions by a Christian dominated government.

Advocates

Rousas Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, Gary North, David Chilton, Gary DeMar, Kenneth Gentry, Larry Pratt, Andrew Sandlin.

Books

Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law, The Roots of Reconstructionism*. G North, *Was Calvin a Theonomist?* G Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. K Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*.

Objections

- Fails to see that the Mosaic Law has been cancelled and was only temporary until Christ came as the fulfilment of God's law.
- Fails to understand the spiritual nature of the kingdom now.
- Fails to see the NT prophecy that there is a widespread apostasy at the end, not a reconstructed society.
- Fails to appreciate the authority of the final words of Christ through the apostles as having priority.

Modern Charismatic Postmillennialism

This is very unlike the historic Reformed form and developed from the heretical Latter Rain Pentecostal ideas of the late 1940s. It is basically a radical, dominionist, triumphalism, however, there are variations within different Charismatic groups.

⁵ I.e. 'God's law'.

Key teachings:

- Its essential teaching is the physical / material triumph of the church at the end before Christ returns. The Charismatic Movement binds Satan so that the 'Spirit-filled' church can claim material possession, wealth and power.
- Commonly it is taught that there will be a global revival whereby the church will be filled with spiritual power to do miracles. The church will be led by apostles and prophets who will not only rule the church but will rule the world; thus the church rules the world. This is largely influenced by Latter Rain heretical doctrines.
- Radical Latter Rain leaders affirm that faithful believers in this church will be able to fly, be invulnerable and walk through walls. This Manifest Sons of God sect of Latter Rain doctrine calls these people names such as: 'the Dreaded Breed', 'Joel's Army', the 'Manifest Sons of God' etc.

Advocates

Most modern radical Charismatics that follow Latter Rain ideas. Noteworthy are: William Branham, Paul Cain, Bob Jones, John Wimber, Rob Joyner, Earl Paulk, David Yonggi Cho.

Amillennialism (Non-millennialism)

- This has been the majority evangelical church viewpoint for centuries.
- It was the position of Calvin, most Puritans and most Reformed theologians.
- It is a simple eschatology because it teaches that there is no future golden age millennium. Rev 20 is simply referring to the Gospel Age, the period between the two comings of Christ, often called 'the last days'.
- Some (such as Jay Adams) have questioned the title preferring 'Realised Millennialism'. Amillennialism is really a form of Postmillennialism (and used to be called that until the 20th century) but the millennium is the Gospel Age.

Teachings

- 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 golden age on earth before or after the Second Coming.
- The Second Coming is preceded by apostasy and tribulation climaxed by the Antichrist or an anti-Christian spirit.
- 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.)
- The growing rebellion of sin is overthrown at the Lord's coming. There is a resurrection of dead believers and a transformation of living believers.
- 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.

Advocates

Most Reformed theologians, e.g. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, A Hoekema, JG Vos, Jay Adams, OT Allis, W Hendriksen, W Grier, L Berkhof, Abraham Kuyper, Leon Morris, JI Packer, Michael Horton, Herman Hoeksema, RC Sproul.

Books

A Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*. OT Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. William E Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, *Biblical Studies in Final Things*. G Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*.

A summary of key mistakes made that prompt false eschatology

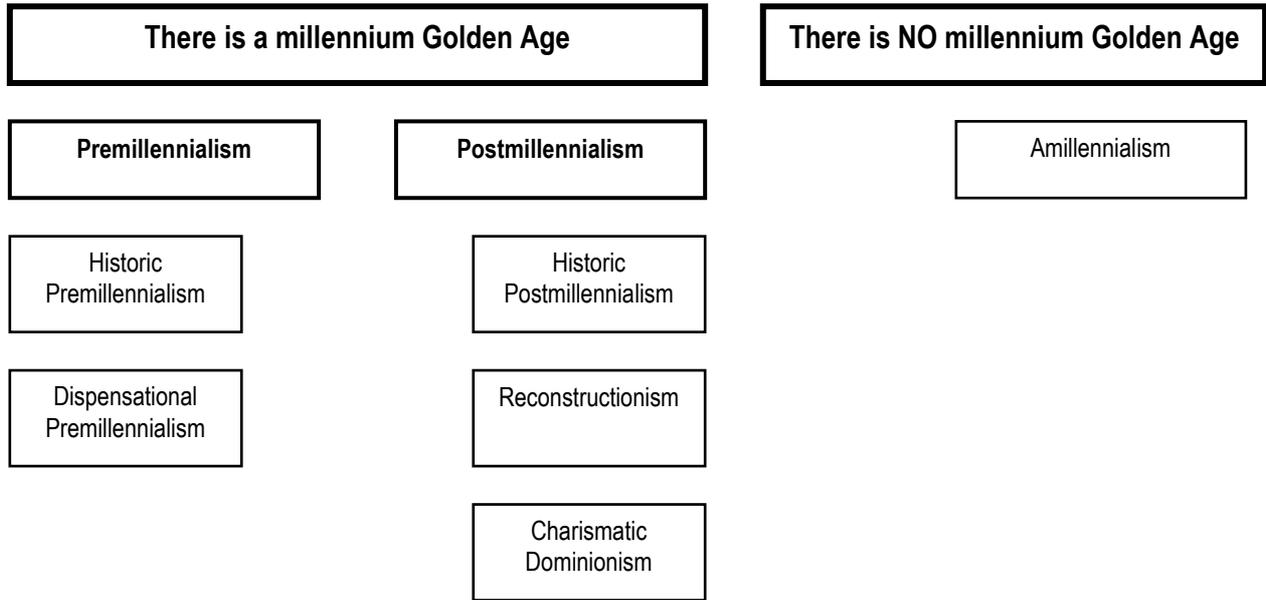
- Denial of the clear scriptures that affirm a church falling away amidst great deception at the end.
- Denial of a time of tribulation at the end.
- Denial that the current experience of the kingdom is spiritual not materialistic.
- Failing to see the spiritual, symbolic nature of Rev 20:1-6. The 1,000 years is a symbolic statement meaning the fulness (10x10x10) of God's kingdom.
- Failure to see that there is no clear NT teaching on a future golden age.
- Failing to understand the primary authority of the NT over the OT, the reality over the shadow, the antitype over the type.
- Failing to see New Covenant implications, e.g. that the Old Covenant is cancelled.
- Failing to understand God's purpose with Israel and his condemnation of natural Jews after the cross. There are not two types of covenant person, Jew and Gentile. There is no separation of Jewish and Gentile believers.
- Failing to understand that many prophetic statements about victory and the restored world are applicable to the time after the Second Coming. They do not apply now.
- Failure to understand the heresies in Charismatic theology.
- Advocating the false idea of a secret rapture.
- Advocating the constant literal interpretation of OT prophecies, which contradict apostolic interpretations.
- Claiming that there are two resurrections, two extant covenants, two comings of Christ, two kingdoms, two peoples of God, two (or three) judgments etc.
- Failure to appreciate the glory and majesty of Jesus (such as having Jesus reign on an un-renewed earth over sinners).

Conclusion

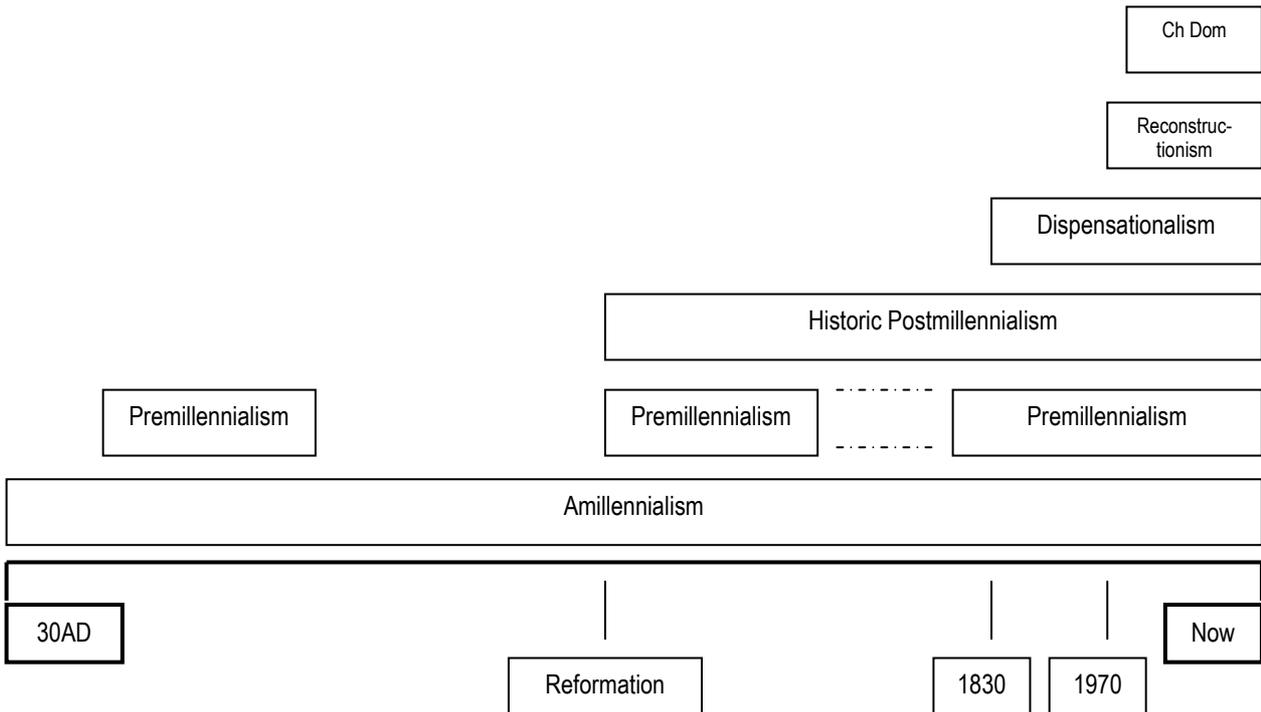
Yes the consideration of eschatology can be confusing, especially if you read certain books from a heretical school. What is important is to get the overall picture of Bible eschatology first. Understand the principle events that are clearly taught. Only then can you try to fathom obscure prophecies, which must fit into the clear principles. The big mistake is that false teachers begin with obscure prophecies, draw up a scheme and then contradict the clear teachings of the apostles.

You have enough information here to do your own study effectively. May God bless you in it.

Summary



Timeline



Further study

W Grier, *The Momentous Event*, Banner of Truth, a slim paperback which explains each position clearly and favours the a-millennial viewpoint.

Robert G Clouse (ed.), *The Meaning of the Millennium*, IVP, is a compilation of articles and mutual criticisms of each viewpoint by protagonists of each position.

William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, Baker. A sane interpretation of Revelation.

Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, Eerdmans. A solid groundbreaking hardback of the Reformed position.

Samuel E Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press. A modern, simple, but ample, paperback with many useful diagrams.

Some other very simple papers by Paul Fahy:

- *Concise Eschatology.*
- *Eschatology Chart Texts.*
- *All the Key New Testament Words On The End.*
- *A Concise and Very Simple Breakdown of the Different Views on the End.*
- *The Signs of the End in The Olivet Eschatological Discourse.*
- *The Order of Events in the End Times Denoted by Clear Scriptures.*

There are hundreds of other useful books, but these will be enough.

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