

Permit me some time to clarify what my intention was in closing class the way I did last week. I watched the recording of last week's class to make sure I could reference specific things that I said and see where the confusion may have happened. I think I found one of those points when I said: "Be careful listening to the spiritual advisors of Trump."

A lot of what the advisors to the President say is good and biblical (marriage and family, abortion, etc.); I have no issue listening to those things! However, that's not true of everything they teach and believe, especially when it has to do with the end times. From that standpoint, they reek of the "golden age on earth" mentality that postmillennialism promises. Recall the bullet points that summarize this supposed prosperous age:

- The world will be gradually Christianized
- Evil will be reduced to negligible proportions
- Righteousness and peace will flourish
- Material prosperity will increase

Postmillennialists believe that if we can accomplish those things—mostly through politics, but they can certainly come through other means—we can usher in Christ's coming. However, that does not agree with what the Bible teaches. Our lives on earth are very much the opposite: we talked last week about how we will have trouble in this world (John 16:33). We are guaranteed persecution and a cross by Jesus. Postmillennialism promises peace and glory on earth for Christians.

So, my comments about Trump were unduly focused on just him and his advisors. For that, I apologize. I wasn't trying to demean anyone or put down our President, Republicans, or those who vote Republican—that would not be good pastoral practice. I pray I would never speak in such a way about anyone, regardless of political views. Nor was I trying to "make your blood boil," which is another phrase I used in the very last remarks of the Bible class. That was not a wise thing to say, either.

Ultimately, I wanted to highlight some of the postmillennialist ideas I have heard from some religious people who are close to the President. Still, it became obvious that I caused confusion. It was brought to my attention that many came away from the class thinking that I was either for or against a certain political party. That was not my intention. I do not publicly share my personal political views. I only share the things the Bible tells us about our lives as Christians in this world, including how God wants us to interact with our government.

The reason I brought up the political conversation in the first place is because the idea that, through political outcomes or otherwise, Christians will experience a golden age on earth poses a significant threat to our comfort and our life in Christ. If we get caught up in millennialist ideas—even in the smallest way—we run the risk of putting our hope in the things of this world, and not in God's promises and the hope of the eternal gospel.

I was not wise in my choice of words last week. I apologize for causing confusion, pain, and anger.

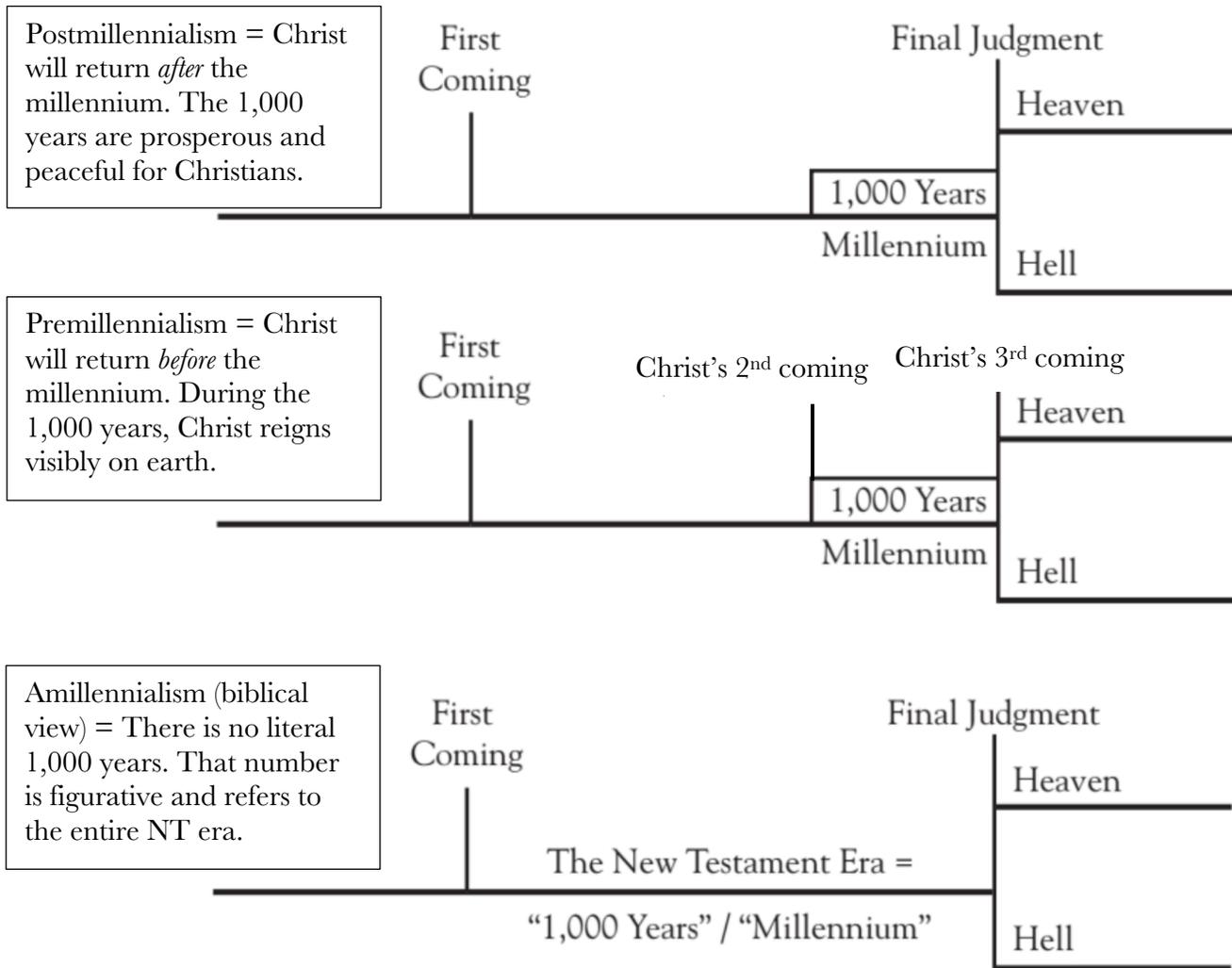
*What comments and questions do you have?*

## **Premillennialism**

Another type of millennialism is premillennialism. The prefix *pre-* means "before." The main feature of premillennialism is that the second coming will take place *before* the millennium and that the final judgment will take place after the millennium. In effect, they claim that there will be two second comings of Christ.

Premillennialists believe that when Jesus returns in his second coming to set up the millennium, he will raise the bodies of dead believers and glorify them to live with him in the millennium. Believers who are alive at the second coming will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord and their bodies will be glorified. Then all believers will live with him in the millennium—still a golden age of prosperity, peace, and righteousness. The difference from postmillennialism is that premillennialists believe Jesus will reign visibly on earth during the 1,000 years. Unbelievers who are alive at Jesus' initial second coming will continue to live with their natural bodies throughout the millennium. At the end of the millennium, Jesus will appear again (a third coming) for the final judgment and there will be a second resurrection in which the bodies of unbelievers will be raised.

Here are three timelines to give you a brief layout of each teaching we've covered so far:



### Where do premillennialists get these ideas?

Again, we go to Revelation 20. This time, verses 4-6: *Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.* <sup>5</sup> *(The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection.* <sup>6</sup> *Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years.*

Not only do premillennialists take the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 literally but they also find in this chapter their idea of a resurrection of believers prior to the millennium and the subsequent final judgment with a second resurrection. They focus on the words "first resurrection."

### How do Lutherans interpret those verses?

The difficult passage above, in keeping with proper biblical interpretation, must be understood in light of the clear passages that deal with the same subject matter. In these verses, John is writing about believers who die during the so-called millennium and says that they will live and reign with Christ during that time. Since we know the "millennium" is the New Testament era, John is saying that believers who die during this era go to live with Jesus in heaven. The term "first resurrection," then, is a term John uses to refer to the change these believers experience when they die and their souls are raised to heaven. The second resurrection, then, is the bodily resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day. The "first death" is physical death on earth. The "second death" is the torment of hell. This explanation is in complete harmony with the rest of Scripture.

One could also say that the first resurrection takes place when a believer comes to faith and is spiritually risen from the dead (Romans 6:4 - *We were therefore buried with him by this baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life.*). Either way, the millennialist interpretation does not fit with what the Bible says.

1. While there are a number of issues we could touch on in these paragraphs, look at **John 5:28-29** and comment on the premillennial teaching of two more comings of Christ and two separate resurrections.

Both premillennialists and postmillennialists believe that there will be a widespread and final conversion of the Jewish people before the end comes. They base that belief off of Paul's words in **Romans 11:25b-27**, which says: *There has been a hardening of part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written:*

*The Deliverer will come out of Zion;  
he will remove ungodliness from Jacob.  
<sup>27</sup> And this is my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.*

2. Turn to **Romans 9:6,27**. In what way will "all Israel be saved," as Paul wrote?
3. According to millennialism (both pre- and post-), not only will all Jews be saved, but most unbelievers who are alive during Jesus' millennial rule on earth will also be converted and saved. What effect does that have on things like mission work and personal repentance?
4. Opinion: what teaching of millennialism (pre- or post-) poses the biggest threat to life as a Christian?

*What thoughts, comments, and questions do you have?*

Depending on discussion, we may end here on 1/10. If there is ample time, we might be able to discuss dispensationalism up to "the Great Tribulation." If not, we will pick up dispensationalism on 1/17.

If we do have to end here, the words of a closing prayer are here for us to use:

**O God, how sin's dread works abound! Throughout the earth no rest is found,  
And falsehood's spirit wide has spread, And error boldly rears its head.**

**In these last days of sore distress Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness  
That pure we keep, till life is spent Your holy Word and sacrament. Amen.**

(CW 541 vs. 2,3)

# Dispensationalism

(*End Times*, pages 291-325)

## Goals

1. Gain a basic understanding of dispensationalism and some of its teachings
2. Show that while the teachings of dispensationalism are widely accepted by others, they are not in harmony with the truth of the Bible and are therefore a danger to immortal souls.

## Introduction

We just briefly looked at premillennialism, the false teaching that the second coming of Christ will take place before a millennium, a supposed thousand-year period in which Jesus will rule visibly on earth. According to this false belief, Christ's second coming is separate from the final judgment, which takes place after the millennium, when a "third coming" of Christ takes place. Now we turn to dispensationalism, a complicated and bewildering type of millennialism filled with outlandish ideas. Although this is a fairly new teaching that first infected the church in the 1830s, its spread has been both astonishing and sad. Dispensationalism teaches that God has had different ways of dealing with people in different time periods. These different systems or ways of dealing with people are called dispensations. Traditionally, dispensationalists have identified seven such dispensations:

1. Innocence—from creation to the fall of Adam
2. Conscience—from the fall of Adam to the flood
3. Government—from the flood to Abraham
4. Promise—from Abraham to Moses
5. Law—from Moses to the first coming of Jesus
6. Grace—from the first coming of Jesus to the second coming
7. Kingdom—from the second coming into eternity

## Fingerprints of Dispensationalism

### A Hyper-literal Interpretation of Prophecy

Dispensationalists pride themselves on reading the Bible literally. This includes finding literal fulfillments of almost all Bible prophecies. As a result of this approach to the Scriptures, dispensationalists misinterpret the prophecies of the Old Testament. Rather than reading the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, dispensationalists tend to exalt the Old Testament over the New. They say that the Old Testament is not dependent on the New for illumination or interpretation.

1. As one example, consider words that we heard in Advent from Isaiah 40:4 - *Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The rugged ground will become level, and the rough places will become a plain.* What would have to happen for a dispensationalist to believe this prophecy has been fulfilled?

- Based on **Luke 3:3-6**, whose ministry has already fulfilled these words?

We've already talked about this to some extent with our discussion on postmillennialism. Dispensationalists take their literal interpretation to a whole other level!

### Old Testament Israel ≠ New Testament Church

The rigidly literal reading of the Bible leads dispensationalists to another foundational conviction. They insist that the Church and Old Testament Israel are two separate programs or dispensations. The New Testament church, they maintain, is not a continuation or fulfillment of God's Old Testament Israel but merely a temporary, provisional program. In the millennium, God's original plan with Israel will come back to the foreground as he establishes a glorious earthly kingdom with the focus on the Jews. The city of Jerusalem will be the headquarters for the earthly reign of Christ. The land of Israel will be divided according to a literal reading of Old Testament prophecy, with each tribe of Israel having one 7-mile strip of land. The Jerusalem temple will

be rebuilt with the literal dimensions spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel in chapters 40-48—about one mile square. Old Testament ceremonies and animal sacrifices will be reestablished in connection with the temple.

2. What would it mean for us if dispensationalism was correct and the New Testament Church is not a continuation or fulfillment of God's Old Testament Israel?
3. Look up **Galatians 3:7,28-29**. In what way do Paul's words negate this dispensationalist view?
4. Read **Hebrews 7:25-27**. If Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices would be reestablished, what impact would that have on the importance of Christ and his sacrifice?

Paul dealt with this issue in Galatians 4:9-11 – *But now that you know God, or rather are known by God, why are you turning back again to the basic principles that are weak and miserable? Do you want to be enslaved by them all over again?*<sup>10</sup> *You carefully observe days, months, seasons, and years.*<sup>11</sup> *I am fearful about you, that somehow my labor for you was wasted.*

#### A Fascination with the Modern State of Israel

Due to the first two facets above, dispensationalists are very concerned about modern Israel because they believe it plays a vital role in God's timetable for the end. Many dispensational writers will connect Bible prophecies to current political events. For example, John F. Walvoord wrote a book in 1990 entitled *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible Says About the Future of the Middle East and the End of Western Civilization*. Other similar interpretations exist, such as Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38) being fulfilled in Russia and the Roman Empire being revived by the formation of the European Union (Daniel 7:23-27).

5. Consider the two passages given below:
  - Genesis 17:8 – *I will give the land where you are living as an alien, all the land of Canaan, to you and to your descendants after you as a permanent possession. I will be their God.*
  - 2 Chronicles 7:19-20 – *But if your people turn away and forsake my statutes and my commands which I have given them, and they go to serve and worship other gods,*<sup>20</sup> *I will uproot them from my soil I have given to them. This house, which I have consecrated to my Name, I will toss away, out of my sight. I will make it proverbial as an object of ridicule among all the peoples.*
  - On what was God's covenant with Israel based?

Plainly stated, the modern state of Israel is not a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Israel threw away the covenant God had made with them. Today, Christians can freely support the state of Israel on the basis of reason and governmental interests. However, they ought not feel obligated to do so for religious reasons. The same stands for Christian politicians. Here are a few reasons why:

- Jesus, along with all the New Testament writers, never talk about the nation of Israel being made into a political power or rebuilding the temple. In fact, Jesus says quite the opposite in Matthew 23:37-38 (O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate).
- "Israel being inhabited forever" can be seen as either pointing ahead to Jesus or being fulfilled spiritually.
- Not every prophecy is meant to be taken literally. Surely, there are some literal fulfillments—but they are clearly spelled out or fulfilled in the pages of Scripture (soldiers casting lots for Jesus' clothes—Psalm 22:18 fulfilled in John 19:24; Jesus' body did not see decay—Psalm 16:10 fulfilled in Acts 2:31)

What questions and comments do you have?

## **The Great Tribulation** (this might be the most confusing part...hang on to your hats)

This false teaching is based on Daniel 9:24-27, printed here:

*Seventy sevens are determined concerning your people and your holy city: to end rebellion, to finish sin, and to atone for guilt, to bring everlasting righteousness, to seal up prophetic vision, and to anoint a most holy one. <sup>25</sup> You should know and have insight. From the going out of a word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until an anointed one, a ruler, comes, there will be seven sevens and sixty-two sevens. Jerusalem will be rebuilt with public squares and a moat, but during troubled times. <sup>26</sup> Then after the sixty-two sevens, the anointed one will be cut off and have nothing. Both the city and the holy place will be destroyed by the people of a ruler who is coming, and its end will be with a flood. There will be war until the end, and desolations have been decreed. <sup>27</sup> He will confirm a covenant for the many during one seven. In the middle of the seven, he will cause sacrifice and offering to cease. On the wing of abominations is one who causes desolation, until the decreed end is poured out on the one who causes desolation.*

On the basis of Daniel chapter 9, dispensationalists believe that there will be a seven-year period of tribulation immediately prior to the second coming of Christ and the millennium. This period is sometimes called the “great tribulation” on the basis of Matthew 24:21 in the King James Version.

In this very difficult prophecy of Daniel, dispensationalists see a reference to 490 literal, calendar years (the 70 “sevens”) that begin with the decree to rebuild Jerusalem. However, according to dispensationalists, this is not a reference to the well-known decree of the Persian King Cyrus in 538 B.C. but to some otherwise unknown decree of King Artaxerxes in 445 B.C. or 458 B.C. After 483 years (7 “sevens” and 62 “sevens”), the Anointed One, Jesus, “will be cut off”—a reference, according to dispensationalists, to the death of Christ or some other event during his earthly ministry. The culmination of the 490 years—when everlasting righteousness will be brought in—is the millennium. The final “seven” will come immediately prior to the millennium and will be broken into two periods of three and a half years each. This final seven-year period, yet to come, will be one of horrifying and gruesome tribulation that, according to dispensationalists, has been chronologically outlined in Revelation 4-19.

6. What issues exist in the dispensational interpretation of Daniel 9?

7. Dispensationalists view of Revelation as being a timeline of terrible events that haven’t happened yet (including the rise of the Antichrist and the persecution of believers). What danger does that bring to saving faith?

MLC Professor (and author of *End Times*) Thomas Nass offers an interpretation of Daniel chapter 9 that is Christ-centered and in harmony with the rest of Scripture. Nass writes on pages 318 and 319 of *End Times*:

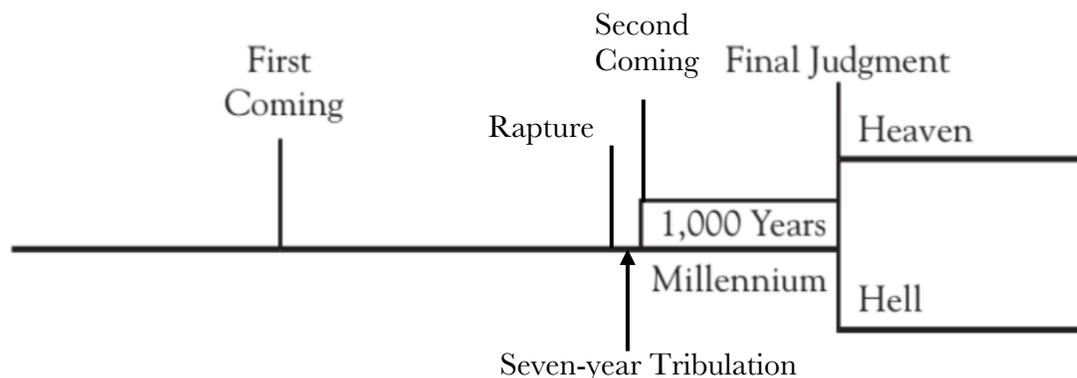
*Daniel 9:24-27 by everyone’s admission is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible. There have been countless different interpretations over the years. This fact alone indicates that it is not a good passage to provide the chronological framework for an entire system in the way done by dispensationalists. . . . The 70 sevens begin when the decree is issued to rebuild Jerusalem. This most naturally refers to the Edict of Cyrus in 538 B.C., when Cyrus sent the Jews back to Jerusalem. . . . According to the vision, the 70 “sevens,” or “weeks,” end when sin is done away with. I take that to be judgment day, when sin is totally removed for God’s saints in the glory of the New Jerusalem in heaven. . . . The Anointed One, or Messiah, most naturally refers to Christ. When Daniel said that the Anointed One will be cut off after 69 sevens, I take that to be a reference to Christ’s crucifixion. The covenant that the Anointed One confirms for the last seven, then, is the New Covenant of the New Testament era. When Daniel said that offerings will stop in the middle of the last seven, that could refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Then the last period of a half week, or three and a half days, would be the New Testament era from the destruction of Jerusalem until judgment day. . . . Needless to say, the “sevens,” or “weeks,” in this interpretation do not refer to literal seven-year periods. But that is to be expected in a figurative prophecy.*

## The Rapture

Let's turn to **1 Thessalonians 4:16-17**. Based on these verses, dispensationalists believe there will be a rapture—believers will be “caught up” in the air to meet Jesus. Most dispensationalists believe the rapture will happen at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation when all true believers will suddenly, secretly, and quietly disappear from the earth.

8. If that is true, how many comings of Christ can we expect?
  - How many comings of Christ are foretold in Scripture?
9. When do we believe these words to take place? In other words, when will believers meet the Lord in the air?

So, for those visual learners among us, here is a timeline of the end times according to dispensationalism:



10. What blessings exist from not believing in events like “the Great Tribulation” and “the Rapture”?

## Summary

Although unknown for 90 percent of the church's existence, dispensationalism has quickly found a home in many Christian communities. Its teachings attack the very heart of the Christian faith, minimizing the importance of Christ, the cross, and the church. These teachings discourage awareness of and preparedness for the tribulation that today's Christians must encounter in this fallen world, thereby posing a stealthy and devilish threat to saving faith. May we be ready to identify false dispensational teachings. Though under attack, may the saving truth of our Lord be preserved among us.

## Closing Prayer

**O God, how sin's dread works abound! Throughout the earth no rest is found,  
And falsehood's spirit wide has spread, And error boldly rears its head.**

**In these last days of sore distress Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness  
That pure we keep, till life is spent Your holy Word and sacrament. Amen.**

(CW 541 vs. 2,3)

Homework: Read Revelation 17:1-19:21