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**What's All the Confusion About the Millennium?**

By Tal Davis

The Second Coming of Christ is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. Historically all Christian denominations and traditions have affirmed that teaching. A key sentence in the Apostles' Creed states, "On the third day he (Christ) rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, **and will come again to judge the living and the dead.**" The study of the Second Coming and end time events is what theologians call "eschatology." One important aspect of eschatology is what is referred to as the Millennium. That English term is derived from the Latin word *mille* (thousand). The Latin word translates two Greek words in Revelation 20:1-7, *chilia ete*, meaning "thousand years."

*20 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. 2 And he took hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; 3 and he threw him into the abyss and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.*

*4 Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their foreheads and on their hands; and 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 completed. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with Him for a thousand years. 7 When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison. (Rev. 20:4-7 NASB)*

As interpreters studied that passage, the thousand year period mentioned came to be referred to as The Millennium. That is, it will be a future thousand year period of peace and justice on earth under God's rule. However, throughout church history, Bible believing Christians have taken decidedly different approaches to how they interpret eschatological passages. Just how this "thousand years" period is to be understood has been the focus of a major theological debate among Christian, and especially evangelical, scholars for centuries.

Even today various evangelical interpreters take four different positions on the meaning of The Millennium. In this article we will examine those different points of view. Before we do so, it is important that we remember a key principle: though evangelicals may disagree on this particular doctrine, most do agree that it should not be a matter that affects fellowship between Christians. The Second Coming is a key doctrine that all believers share, but the details of the events before His coming can be debated without letting it separate brothers and sisters in Christ.

That being said, let's briefly examine the four major Millennial positions that evangelicals believe based on their interpretations of Scripture.

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The first view is called "**Historic Premillennialism**." There are actually two subgroups of Premillennialists. Some are "Historic Premillennialists" who believe Jesus' Second Coming will occur sometime in the future immediately before a literal thousand year period when He will rule the world directly. When He comes, the dead in Christ (those who were saved before they died) will be raised and accompany Him to the earth. Those believers still alive at His coming will meet Him in the air. During the thousand years, Satan will be bound and then released for a short time at the end. That will be followed by the final judgment of Satan and of all humanity. Those who are saved will go to heaven and Satan, his minions, and the lost of humanity will be cast into eternal hell.

The other Premillennial view is "**Dispensational Premillennialism**" – which is probably the most popular viewpoint among American Christians. Dispensational Premillennialists expect a two-stage coming of Christ. The first stage will be "the rapture" when Jesus secretly takes up from the earth all the saved people to spare them from the coming time of the Tribulation. "Rapture" in English is derived from the Latin term *rapio*. That word translates a Greek word *harpagesometha*, meaning "caught up" or "snatched up." It comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 (note vs. 17).

*13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as indeed the rest of mankind do, who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. 15 For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who*

*are alive and remain 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 shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who remain, 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, comfort one another with these words. (NASB)*

According to this view, the rapture will be followed by a seven year period when the saved are gone and the lost are left behind on earth. Some dispensationalists see the seven years divided into two 3½ year stages. The first stage will be a time of relative peace on earth for the Jewish people in which many of them will accept Jesus as their Messiah. The second stage will be the Great Tribulation, a period of terrible trouble including war (Armageddon) and persecution by the antichrist. Then, after the Tribulation, the Lord will come a second time accompanied by the raptured believers and all those Christians already dead before it occurred. At that time, Jesus will end the Tribulation and institute His literal thousand year reign. It will be followed by the final judgment (see comments above).

Another millennial viewpoint is "**Post-millennialism**." This view was very popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It lost a lot of support during and after the horrors of two World Wars. Nonetheless, those holding this viewpoint assert that Christ will not return at all until after the Millennium. They maintain that the worldwide growth of Christianity and the church will eventually bring about an extended time of peace and harmony on earth, i.e.: The Millennium. It may or may not be literally a thousand years, but only after that time, when the world is ready, will Jesus return and institute the final judgment.

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The last approach to the Millennium is called "**Amillennialism**." The prefix "A" (not) indicates that those with this perspective believe that no literal thousand year period will occur at all before or after Jesus returns. They interpret the passages in Revelation 20, and others, implying a thousand year earthly kingdom before the judgment, entirely in spiritual or symbolic manners. It is their belief that the book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John in apocalyptic code. They contend he wrote that way in order to disguise its meanings from Roman persecutors in Asia Minor where he had resided before his exile on the island of Patmos.

Hopefully this brief survey of the various Millennial views will help you get a better grasp of this subject. Many Christians are confused when they read one book or article and then another which takes an entirely different perspective. If you are interested in further research as you seek to determine just where you stand on this doctrine, a good resource is: *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert Clouse (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1997). It contains chapters and responses by four prominent proponents – one from each perspective. In any case, remember, we should not let our disagreements on this issue affect our relationships with other believers in Christ. Ultimately, regardless of how it all

works out, all of us who put our faith in Him will end up in the same place.

*"He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."* Rev. 22:20

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