

Are We Living in the Last Days?

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Introduction

Bryan Chapell presents a balanced approach to the four leading views of eschatology within Christianity. The author's work, "Are We Living in the Last Days?" is an attempt to bring Christians together to understand where different points of view are coming from as well as what from God's Word can be mutually agreed upon as common ground. I will give a summary of each of these four views listed by Chapell and then will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each view. I will offer my personal view as well as give a practical reflection on how to navigate the topic of eschatology in the ministry.

Four Major Views of Eschatology

1. Premillennial Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is unique in its view that is shaped by seven dispensations of human history. A dispensation is a period of time which man is tested by God in respect to obedience of a specific revelation from God according to the Scofield Reference Bible.¹ All seven dispensations of innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace and tribulation are to occur prior to the promised thousand year reign of Christ thus the term premillennial dispensationalism.² The second unique characteristic of this view of eschatology is that there are two plans of salvation: one for the church and one for the nation of Israel. The doctrine here is that even though Christ is the source of redemption, this has been offered to the church which is overwhelmingly gentile (non Jewish), yet God's promises to Abraham in Genesis are irrevocable and will be fulfilled by the nation of Israel. Premillennial Dispensationalist believe the prophetic stopwatch stopped ticking for Israel when the church age began 2,000 years ago. When the church is "raptured" the stopwatch of prophecies will resume for the nation of Israel.

John Nelson Darby's Secret Rapture

In the 1830s an Exclusive Brethren Minister from England developed a unique doctrine concerning 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Darby taught that the church will be "caught up",

¹ Scofield Reference Bible, 1909

²Chapell, Bryan, "Are We Living in the Last Day?", Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2024, Page 65

from the Latin “raptus”, before the millennial reign of Christ. This secret disappearance of the church on earth in the 1830s is the first occurrence of such teaching in the history of the church, but the obscurity of this doctrine would not remain so.

Scotfield Reference Bible

During the early 1900s the Scofield Reference Bible was widely distributed in America equipped with reference notes presenting the doctrines of premillennial dispensationalism as the biblical view of eschatology. This strategy influences many Christians to this day to be Christian Zionists: the doctrine that the nation of Israel must physically fulfill the prophecies of the Bible to trigger the return of Christ. This doctrine affects the foreign policy of the United States government to this day.

Hal Lindsey

In the 1970s a best-selling book by Hal Lindsey was entitled, “*The Late Great Planet Earth*”. The book gave a premillennial dispensational explanation for all of the political turmoil and social unrest in the world. While bringing some non believers to Christ, this book further popularized the unique teaching of a secret rapture as well as Christian Zionism in America.

Tim LaHaye

For the past 25 years, Tim LaHaye’s “*Left Behind*” series of books and movies has entertained Christians worldwide further spreading the view of premillennial dispensationalism.

2. Historic Premillennialism

The rapture of the church is no secret with the historic premillennialism view of eschatology but will occur before the millennial reign of Christ.

The clock for historic premillennialism is not a stopwatch that stopped during the church age, but rather an atomic clock which has never stopped. There is only one family of God.

This view does not promote two plans of salvation, but rather only redemption through Jesus Christ.

3. Amillennialism

Amillennialism believes spiritual blessing of Christ's reign are already in effect. The view of the thousand-year reign of Christ is a spiritual reality, not a physical reality. Amillennialism does not believe Christ will physically reign of earth for one thousand years but Christ will ultimately return and all people will be judged and a new heaven and new earth will exist for all of the redeemed in Christ.

Christ preached the Kingdom is at hand Mark 1:15

Christ has delivered us from the domain of darkness Colossians 1:12

Amillennials teach the King of Christ is here now and will continue to be on earth until Christ returns.

4. Postmillennialism

Many of the theologians and preachers who led the Great Awakening and Second Great Awakening held the view of a growing optimism for the future of the Kingdom of Christ

Often this idea was known as Christian Progress: the church would continue to influence the world to improve until the coming of Christ.

The church will be taken up after the glorious millennial reign of Christ followed by a brief tribulation period just before the second coming. The second coming of Christ and the church being caught up is after the millennium.

Matthew 28:18-20 recorded Christ's Great Commission, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to be. Therefore, go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you and I will be with you always to the end of the age.*" Postmillennials teach a hill climb idea in that the church will progressively improve society and the millennial reign of Christ will be the zenith of this fulfillment of Christ's Great Commission.

Strengths and weaknesses

Premillennial Dispensationalism

Many evangelicals hold this view: Dr. David Jeremiah, John Hagee, Ambassador Mike Huckabee, etc. Tim LaHaye popularized this view for the past 25 years in books and movies greatly expediting the popularity of this view of eschatology.

Unfortunately, the doctrine of a secret rapture is absent in the scripture. I will have much more to say about this view in my personal view section.

Historic Premillennialism

One can make the argument this is an improved premillennial view when compared to premillennial dispensationalism in that there is no secret rapture for the church and no separate plan of salvation for Israel. Jews must come to Christ to be saved. All Christians will be taken at the same time. However, the timing of this view is still before the tribulation which is not necessarily promised by the New Testament which promises suffering for following Christ.

Amillennial

Reformers such as Luther and Calvin pointed to Augustine of Hippo of having this “orthodox” view of eschatology. Christ and His apostles taught the spiritual nature of the kingdom and much scripture seems to support this view. However, many critics of the Amillennial view are quick to point out it is unlikely the millennial reign of Christ is already in progress with all of the war, suffering and strife in the world.

Postmillennialism

Many popular theologians have defended this view of eschatology such as Johnathan Edward of Yale University in the 1700s as well as Archibald Alexander who founded Princeton Theological Seminary taught this view in during the 1800s giving much traction to postmillennial eschatology.

Much like critics of amillennialism, critics of postmillennial eschatology disagree that the world is becoming a better place and point to many of the areas which still seem to inflict suffering humanity. Postmillennialism is optimistic about the future of humanity while premillennialism is pessimistic about the future of humanity.

Personal View

The most dangerous view on the list is Premillennial Dispensationalism. Here are my reasons why I make such a bold and unsavory statement. 1. The secret rapture is not Biblical. This is a misinterpretation of scripture. 2. When the secret rapture does not happen and a time of suffering manifests it is going to be difficult for premillennialists to keep their hope in Christ when they have been taught, they would escape tribulation. 3. Christian Zionism is dangerous. Many powerful people believe all the United States' resources should be used to expedite the return of Christ by helping Israel fulfill prophecies that have already been fulfilled. Christians with this view have a deeply emotional connection and defend it at all costs. When another Christian questions Christian Zionism the non Zionist is often labeled an antisemite.

Alexander Campbell was a post millennialist as were most with a presbyterian background, yet I have always admired his optimism for the kingdom of God on earth. Campbell and many others believed Christian unity was possible on earth, thus the Restoration Movement has thrived these past 200 years. While I acknowledge the world is full of sin and turmoil because of sin, I do believe Christ is the answer to these problems and when the church fulfills the Great Commission of Christ society as a whole will prosper. In this respect, I share Campbell's optimism and wish to be a Millennial Harbinger of encouragement and edification to my Christian brothers and sisters, no matter their personal view of eschatology.

Navigating in ministry

Over the past 26 years of ministry, I have had many encounters with people who want to argue their eschatological beliefs. I make it a common practice to avoid confrontations. People come to church with their "guns a blazing" to make everyone agree with their personal view. I refuse to argue with people who are emotionally connected to their view of eschatology. Of course we can all have our opinions, but in the end that is all they are.

Many wish to make their personal view a test of fellowship. It is foolish to believe Christians must agree on everything to have fellowship with one another. In the Restoration Movement we say, "In essentials unity, in opinions liberty and in all things love."

I find it helpful to teach all views in a class and/or briefly list all views when preaching eschatology. It is important just as Bryan Chapell displayed, to help Christians understand where each view is coming from.

Always follow up with what we have in common. Most evangelicals believe in the reliability of the scripture, that Christ was born of the virgin Mary, that He lived a life free of sin, ministered with compassion and miracles, taught with authority, went to the cross to redeem us from sin and rose after 3 days defeating sin and death. All Christians can agree Christ is returning as He promised.

Conclusion

Let us agree to love one another as Christ commanded us in John 15:12-13 and fulfill Christ's prayer the night before He went to the cross to redeem us all, John 17:23 records Jesus praying that His disciples would have unity so that world would know the Father sent the Son into the world.³

³ New American Standard Bible 1995