

The Rise of Posttribulational Interpretation

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord explores the historical development and interpretations of eschatology, focusing on posttribulationism and its implications for the church today.

Scripture: Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:21, Romans 11:25, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 3:10, Revelation 20:1

Topics: "Eschatology", "Systematic Theology"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the development of systematic theology in the history of the church, focusing on the controversies and major divisions that have shaped theological understanding. He highlights the early theological controversies related to the Scriptures, the doctrine of the Trinity, the Protestant Reformation's impact on soteriology and ecclesiology, and the ongoing debate surrounding eschatology. Walvoord delves into the different interpretations of eschatology throughout history, from premillennialism to postmillennialism, and the varying views on the millennium and the second coming of Christ.

Transcript

Eschatology As A Developing Science

In the history of the church, systematic theology has been a developing science. In this historical development, controversies in various areas of theology have followed, to some degree, the major divisions of systematic theology. In the early centuries the most important theological controversy related to the Scriptures themselves. Some in the postapostolic period, like the Montanists, claimed to have the same inspiration and authority as the apostles who wrote the Scriptures. The early church quickly recognized this as a heresy, and at the Council of Laodicea in 397, the canon was considered closed even though some apocryphal books were later recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

With the establishment of the Scriptures as the basis of systematic theology, attention soon turned to the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Trinitarian controversies occupied the center of the stage. In 325 the approval of the Nicæan Creed, recognizing the full deity of Jesus Christ as a distinct person from the Father, set the stage for recognition of the doctrine of the Trinity as it is normally held in orthodoxy today. It was not until the Council of Constantinople in 381 that the Holy Spirit was given His rightful place. Subsequently, the church turned to the doctrine of sin and man, although the decision was less decisive as evidenced in the findings of the Council of Orange in 529.

It was not until the Protestant Reformation that the Augustinian concept of justification by faith was restored. With the withdrawal of the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church, not only was soteriology, the doctrine of salvation by grace, firmly established, but important doctrines related to ecclesiology, such as the priesthood of the believer and the right of every Christian to be his own interpreter of Scripture under the guidance of the Spirit, became cardinal tenets of the Protestant Reformation.

In the history of the church, however, eschatology continued to be an unsettled doctrine. Although the early church for the first two centuries was predominantly chiliastic and held that the second advent of Christ would be followed by a thousand-year reign on earth, this interpretation was soon challenged with the rise of the Alexandrian school of theology in Egypt led by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. An attempt was made to harmonize systematic theology with Platonic philosophy. As this was possible only by interpreting Scripture in a nonliteral sense and regarding Scripture as one great allegory in which the apparent sense was not the real sense, much of the literal meaning of the Scripture was lost, including the doctrine of a literal millennium following the second advent.

The early church, as well as orthodox theologians since, regarded the Alexandrian school as heretical and outside the mainstream of biblical theology. The practical effect of the rise of this school of interpretation, however, was to destroy the premillennial interpretation of Scripture.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, however, with the rise of Augustine a consolidation of theology was achieved by separating eschatology from other areas of systematic theology. Two principles of interpretation were adopted by Augustine—a literal, historical, and grammatical interpretation of noneschatological passages,[1] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Co., 1950), p. 10. and a nonliteral or figurative interpretation of prophetic Scriptures.[2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), p. 3. The result was that while the Roman Church maintained many of the teachings of the Bible, it continued to use a nonliteral method of interpreting eschatology. Thus amillennialism became the accepted doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. With the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers returned to Augustine and built on his method of interpretation of prophecy. The Protestant Reformers accordingly were amillennial and opposed premillennialism. Similar views had been held by various individuals earlier, postmillennialism as it is held in modern times is usually attributed to Daniel Whitby (1638-1726).[6] Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 7th ed. (Philadelphia: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1902), p. 1014. This new view considered the rise of the church and the preaching of the gospel as eventually being triumphant and ushering in a golden age of a thousand years in which the church throughout the world would flourish. This thousand-year period would climax with the second advent of Christ, much as is taught in amillennialism.

After Whitby, varieties of postmillennialism arose, some being relatively biblical as illustrated in the nineteenth-century theologian, Charles Hodge,[7] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 3: 790-880. and others identifying the optimism of postmillennialism with organic evolution which was espoused by liberal theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl,[8] Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1966). Washington Gladden,[9] Richard D. Knudten, *The Systematic Thought of Washington Gladden* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), pp. II R 17. and Walter Rauschenbusch.[10] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922), pp. 131-66. In some cases, postmillennialism became indistinguishable from

amillennialism and the terms became almost interchangeable. In general, however, postmillennialism usually adopted a more literal view of the millennium and regarded it as a realistic golden age of spiritual triumph for the church on earth.

In the last century a new variation of millennial doctrine defined the millennial reign of Christ as referring to the intermediate state. This is usually attributed to the Continental theologians, Duesterdieck (1859) and Kliefoth (1874).[11] B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 643-64. It introduced the new view that the millennium is fulfilled in heaven, not on earth. This interpretation was especially applied to Revelation 20. In the light of various views of amillennialism and postmillennialism, which were evidence of dissatisfaction with these interpretations, premillennialism emerged as a live option.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Darwinian evolution began to penetrate the ranks of postmillenarians. Liberals hailed the theory of evolution, with its easygoing optimism, as the true divine method for bringing in the predicted golden age. Recognizing this as a departure from the faith, more conservative postmillenarians and amillenarians attempted to refute the new evolutionary concept. One of the means used was the calling of great prophetic conferences which were held in the last part of the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth.

As amillennialism and postmillennialism have little to offer by way of refutation of the concept of evolutionary progress, these prophecy conferences soon became dominated by premillennial interpreters. Many of the doctrines which later became an essential part of premillennial theology were introduced into the discussion, such as the restoration of Israel to the land, a coming time of literal tribulation and trouble on earth, a literal bodily return of Jesus Christ to the earth in His second advent, and a literal kingdom of a thousand years following the second advent. The renewed study of eschatology brought out in the open more than ever before the problem of principles of interpretation of Scripture.

The major question was whether Augustine was right that prophecy should be interpreted in a nonliteral sense. Premillenarians held that the point of departure which had led to amillennialism and postmillennialism was a faulty system of interpretation in which prophecy was made a special case and interpreted in a nonliteral sense. Accordingly, they went back to the early church Fathers who had been predominantly premillennial as their starting point and claimed to be the restorers of the true biblical faith of the early centuries of the church.

The Hermeneutics Of Eschatology

The crucial issues which separated premillennialism from amillennialism soon became apparent. The question was whether or not the Bible meant to prophesy literally a restoration of the nation Israel. Was Israel literally once again to return to their ancient land and be restored as a nation? Were the prophecies that heresy would increase, that evil would predominate at the end of the age, and that a great tribulation would ultimately emerge, to be interpreted literally?

Most important was the question as to whether or not the many Old Testament prophecies describing a glorious kingdom on earth where all nations would be under subjection to Christ and Israel would be prominent as a nation were destined to be literally fulfilled. Was there to be actually a thousand years during which Christ would reign on earth beginning with the second advent and the resurrection of saints and climaxing with the divine judgment on rebels? Was Satan actually going to be bound and inactive for the thousand years? If so, the premillenarians claimed, Christ must come before such a thousand-year

period rather than at its end. Conservative amillenarians often conceded that if the prophecies were interpreted literally it would lead to such a doctrine, but they continued to insist that prophecy could not be taken literally.

In the process of discussing premillennialism as an emerging doctrine of the church, it is only natural that other questions should be raised, including the relationship of prophecies pertaining to a rapture or translation of the church and the question as to where this fits into the prophetic program. Amillenarians and postmillenarians merged this with the second advent of Christ, but a view soon surfaced among premillenarians that the coming of Christ for His church was a distinct event which, as a matter of fact, would occur before the time of great tribulation instead of at its close. Divergent views of pretribulationism and posttribulationism became major issues in prophecy which accompanied the new consideration of premillennialism as the proper view.

Varieties Of Posttribulationism

In eschatology as a whole as well as in the controversies relating to the place of the rapture of the church in the sequence of events in the prophetic program, posttribulationism continued to be the majority view. It was universally held by liberal theologians who tended to take prophecy in a nonliteral sense. It also coincided with all forms of postmillennialism and amillennialism as their principle of interpreting prophecy in a nonliteral sense naturally led to this conclusion. It was only in premillennial interpretation that opposition to posttribulationism arose.

Within posttribulationism, however, a variety of explanations and interpretations have characterized the history of the doctrine. Although the early church in the first two centuries was premillennial, the postapostolic Fathers tended to identify their contemporary persecutions with the great tribulation immediately preceding the second advent. Although they usually linked this with the view that Christ's coming could occur at any time, they do not seem to have contemplated a period between the translation of the church and the second advent of Christ to set up His thousand year kingdom.[12] Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 1: 168. Accordingly, although their posttribulationism is quite different from most forms of posttribulationism that are current today, their view of the rapture of the church seems to have combined it with the second advent.

Most of the early church Fathers, however, made little effort to refine the doctrine and solve the seeming conflicts of their point of view. The problem of imminency of the rapture when events before the second advent remained unfulfilled does not seem to have caused concern. Quite a few of the early church Fathers in the first two centuries were silent on the whole problem, and it does not seem to have been a major issue. With the rise of amillennialism in the third century, there was little incentive to study the problem of posttribulationism, and there was little or no progress in the study of eschatology until the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant Reformers, returning to Augustine, delivered the church from the doctrines of purgatory and other Roman inventions but do not seem to have raised any questions about the rapture of the church as a separate event. It was only when premillennialism began to demand a literal interpretation of prophecy and reexamine the prophetic program of Israel and other aspects of premillennialism that the question began to be raised whether or not the rapture, as a matter of fact, could be harmonized with the doctrines that declare that Christ will return to set up His kingdom.

In the last century a number of varieties of posttribulationism have emerged, some of them quite recent in their major tenets. In general, they cover the-gamut of the possibilities.

Alexander Reese, in his *The Approaching Advent of Christ*,^[13] Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1937). presents the most comprehensive classic defense of posttribulationism. He offers evidence that the resurrection of the church occurs at the same time as the resurrection of Revelation 20. Major emphasis is placed on terms like "appearing," "the day," "the end," and "revelation" as technical terms that relate the rapture to the second coming as the terminus of the present age. Reese's arguments have not been surpassed by other posttribulationists, but later writers offer other approaches.

J. Barton Payne, in his *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*,^[14] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962). advocates a return to what he says was the position of the early church, that is, a premillennial and posttribulational point of view which spiritualizes the tribulation and identifies it with the contemporary problems of Christianity. Comparatively few have followed Payne, however, although a tendency to spiritualize the period of tribulation is a general characteristic of posttribulationism.

A more popular form of posttribulationism has as its key doctrine that the church is the true Israel and includes the saints of all ages as is advocated by Alexander Reese^[15] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*. and Oswald Allis.^[16] Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. As the Scriptures, even from the premillennial point of view, clearly picture saints or a redeemed people in the period of future tribulation, this form of posttribulationism concludes that it is unquestionably true that the church will go through the tribulation. A variation of this makes both Israel and the church one as a covenant community who share the same eschatology.

In posttribulationism it is common to identify the doctrine with orthodoxy because it was held by the Protestant Reformers and the Roman theologian, Augustine. Holding that posttribulationism is the historic position of the church, posttribulationists label any other view as a departure from historic Christianity.

All the views previously mentioned consider the church already in the tribulation and identify the trials of the church through the centuries as the fulfillment of prophecies of a time of trouble preceding the second advent of Christ.

A futuristic school of interpretation among posttribulationism, however, has also emerged. One of the most prominent is George Ladd whose work, *The Blessed Hope*,^[17] George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). promotes the view that the great tribulation is still future. While other views of posttribulationism could conceivably be harmonized with the idea that Christ could return any moment, Ladd considers it inevitable that at least a seven-year period (described in Dan 9:27) separates the church today from the rapture and the second advent of Christ which are aspects of the same event. Although Ladd's argument builds largely on the fact of the history of the doctrine and extols posttribulationism as the norm for orthodoxy thro'ugh the centuries, he introduces a new realism into the picture in adopting a literal future tribulation. His views have somewhat been qualified by his later writings, but in general he seems to retain a futuristic view of the great tribulation with its corresponding doctrine that Christ's return could not be any day, but that it can only follow the years required to fulfill prophecies relating to the tribulation.

The most recent theory of posttribulationism has been advanced by Robert Gundry in his work, *The Church and the Tribulation*.^[18] Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973). Gundry, following the lead of many premillenarians, distinguishes Israel and the church as separate entities and attempts a literal interpretation of many of the prophecies that deal with the end times. In advancing his theory he refutes most of the posttribulationists who have preceded him. Working with these premises he endeavors to establish a new doctrine of posttribulationism which he tries to harmonize with a literal interpretation of prophecy.

Gundry's work poses a number of theological problems both for other posttribulationists and for contemporary pretribulationists. Because his arguments, in the main, are new and establish a new form of posttribulationism never advanced before, his work is a milestone in the variety of interpretations which have characterized posttribulationism through the centuries and creates further need for study of posttribulationism in the history of the church. The articles which follow in this series will attempt to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of these various views of posttribulationism and the arguments advanced in support of conflicting posttribulational interpretations of prophecy.

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