

Blessed Endurance

The message of Revelation

Lesson Eight: The Millennium (Chapter 20)

Part One: The Basics

The Apostle's Creed:

... On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and **he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

EFCA Statement of Faith:

Article Nine: Christ's Return

We believe in the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

All Christians believe that at the end of the present age there will be a physical resurrection and the return of Christ. Christians disagree, however, on how to understand Revelation 20.

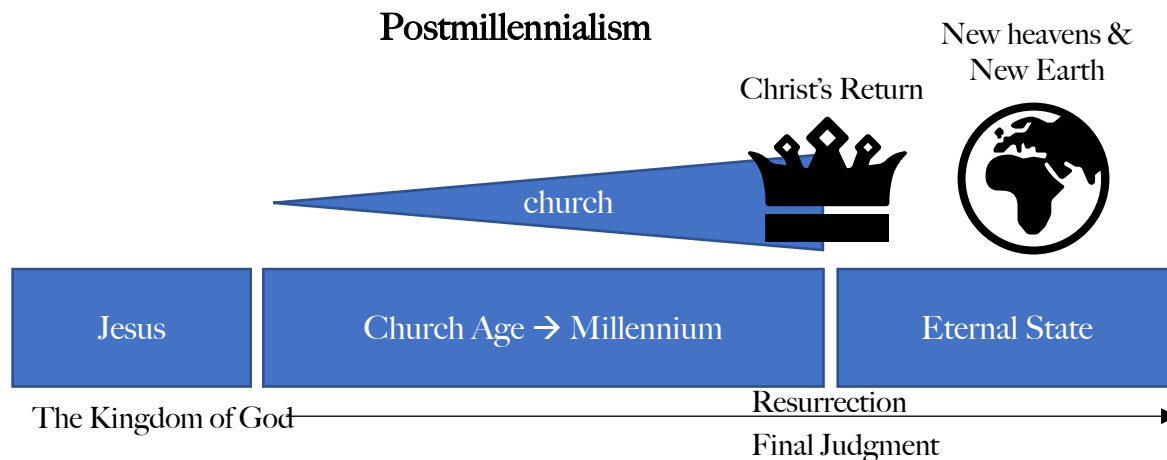
Interpretations of chapter 20 reflect

- Our understanding of the Kingdom of Christ's relationship with the present age
- Our historical moment (i.e., persecuting Rome vs. Christian Rome)
- Our geographical location
- Our convictions about the nature of the book of Revelation

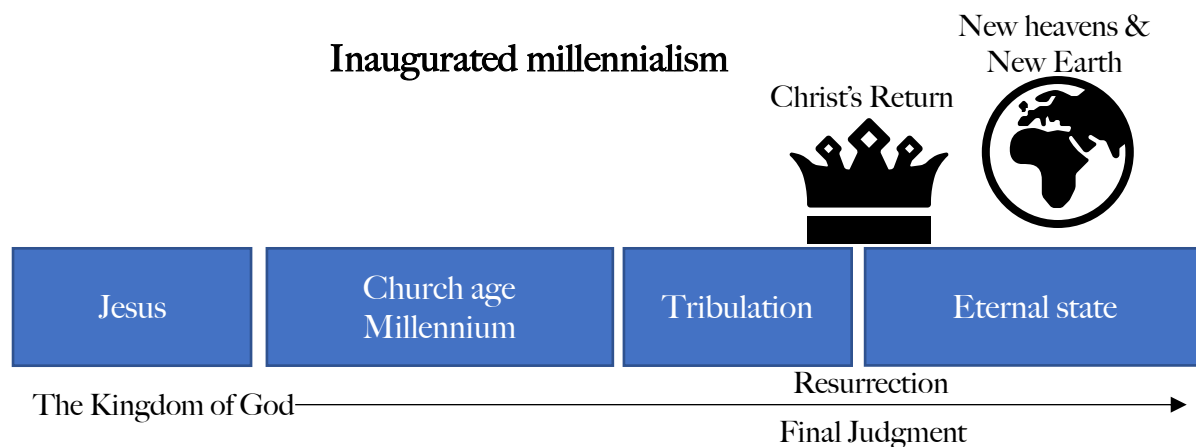
Part Two: The Options

There are three major positions¹ regarding Revelation 20:

Postmillennial: “Christ will return *after* the millennium. Postmillennialists advocate that the kingdom of God is presently being extended in the world through the proclamation of the gospel and in the saving work of the Holy Spirit. The world will eventually be Christianized and experience a period of unprecedented peace and righteousness called the millennium. After that, Christ will return with the general resurrection, final judgment and introduction of heaven and hell.” (Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 275-276)

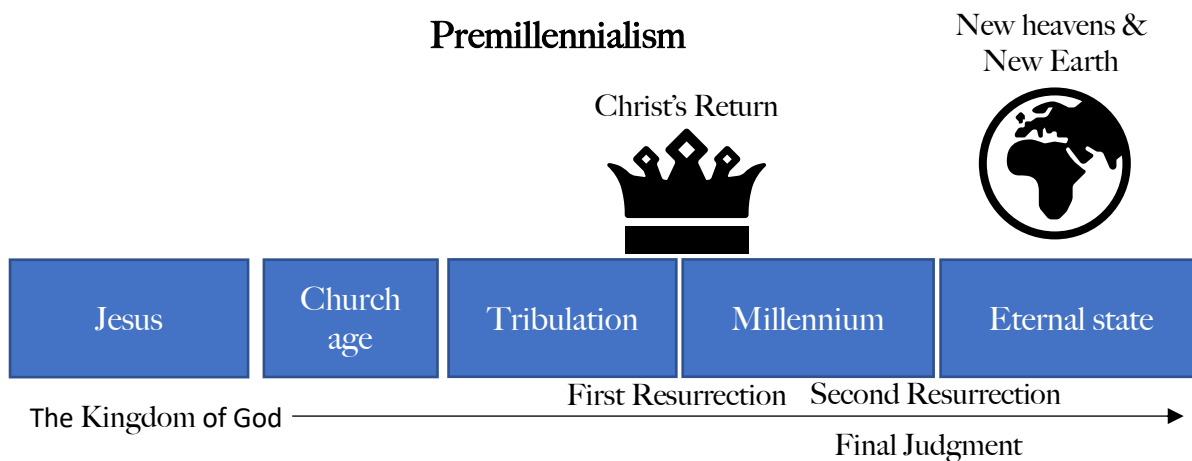


Inaugurated millennialism: Called “amillennial.” “Regards the millennium as a present reality with a future consummation...the church age is the millennium because this is where and when Christ reigns over his people as their lord...the church age is identical to the millennium itself., and there is a period of persecution at the end of the church age, usually called the tribulation; thereafter Christ returns to bring in the eternal state of a new heave and a new earth.” (Bird, 278-79)



¹ These three charts come from Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*.

Premillennial: “proposes that Christ returns before (*pre*) the millennium...In premillennialism, the second coming of Christ will usher in a reign of Christ on earth ahead of the final consummation of God’s redemptive purposes in the new heavens and new earth.” (Bird 281-282) Sometimes called “end-historical” millennialism.



Part Three: Where I land

1. Every position regarding the millennium has its issues. One is not “biblical” while the others are “unbiblical.”
2. That being said, I find **Inaugurated Millennialism** to be the most convincing view.
 - a. 20:1-6 describe the fact that Christ and his church, despite the apparent raging of the devil, are already triumphant over Satan. He is prohibited during the present age from completely swaying the world against God’s people. The “first resurrection” described in v.5 is the resurrection life that believers receive in part now and in God’s presence (John 5:24-29; Romans 6:4-13). The “millennium” is symbolic for the current church age.
 - b. 20:7-10 describes the worsening of persecution that will come right before the return of Christ. Just as God allowed Satan to test Job, so too at the end of the age God will allow Satan to gather his forces (the beast and the false prophet) to seek to annihilate the church. But they will be destroyed (perhaps at Christ’s return, cf. 19:11-21) and subject to eternal judgment (v.10)
 - c. 20:11-15 describes the return of Christ and the final judgment/resurrection. All the dead will be raised physically, uniting again body and soul. Those who are in Christ are saved from the second death, a spiritual death (v.10b, 14) because their names are written in the “book of life” (21:27). After this will come the new heavens and new earth.

Reasons I find Inaugurated Millennialism (I.M.) the most convincing²:

1. Revelation is a symbolic text (1:1), and chapter 20 is highly symbolic (“bottomless pit”, “great chain”, “prison” etc.)
 - a. Everyone, even premillennialists, has to take some aspects of Rev 20 as symbolic:
 - i. I.M. takes the “first resurrection” of v.4-6 as the spiritual life given to believers when they enter God’s presence (Romans 6:4-13; John 5:24-29; notice that it is the “souls” of the martyrs in 20:4)
 - ii. Premillennialists and I.M. take the “second death” of v.6, 14 as spiritual, not *physical*. If “death” can be spiritual, so can “resurrection.”
 - iii. 20:5 states that the souls of the martyrs “came to life.” Beale notices that ζάω (life) has a variety of meaning in the NT (Matt 9:18; Rom 14:9; 2 Cor 13:4). “In [Revelation] it sometimes refers to physical resurrection (1:18, 28), or more generally to some form of physical existence (16:3; 19:20), but more often it has a figurative connotation of spiritual existence, especially with respect to God’s attribute of timeless existence (six occurrences). In 3:1 the verb refers to spiritual life (and the uses in 7:17 and 13:14 are probably also figurative).” (Beale, *Revelation*, 1004).
2. Numbers are consistently symbolic in apocalyptic texts, and Rev.’s dependence on Daniel supports a symbolic reading of “1,000” years.
 - a. Many examples of symbolic use of “1,000” in OT:
 - i. Nontemporal: Deut 1:10-11; 32:30; Josh 23:10; Job 9:3; 33:23; Pss. 68:17; 50:10; Song 4:4; Isa. 7:23; 30:17; 60:22 LXX; Dan 7:10; Amos 5:3
 - ii. Temporal: Exod. 34:7; Deut 7:9; 1st Chron. 16:15-17; Ps 84:10; Eccl. 6:6; 7:28
3. “1,000” years in early Christian and Jewish literature often is symbolic of a state of eternal blessing (though sometimes it refers to a “golden age”).
4. The rest of Scripture only posits *one* return of Christ and *one* physical resurrection.
 - a. Isa 26:19-21; Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29; 6:39-40, 44, 54; Acts 24:15; 2nd Thess 1:7-10
 - b. It is much more consistent to see this one physical resurrection taking place in vv.11-14, when “the dead, great and small” come before the throne.
5. Christ’s return is not mentioned in chapter 20:1-6.
 - a. The beginning of a new vision in chapter 20 separates the return of Christ in 19:11-21 from the visions of chapter 20.
6. Though there are elements of chapter 20 that seem to contradict previous aspects of Rev and demand a premillennial interpretation (i.e., Satan bound), this is a consistent element of John’s prophecy: to focus on one aspect at a time without a concern for complete internal consistency. (Morris 224). In each vision, “it is the symbolism that is important, not the possibility of our reconstructing the picture” (Morris 59).
7. I.M. is the only position that balances the *optimism* of postmillennialism and the *pessimism* of premillennialism.

² Sources: G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary); Leon Morris, *Revelation*, (Tyndale New Testament Commentary); Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*; Bauckham, “Millennium,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, pp.428-29; K.E. Brower, “Eschatology” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 459-464; B.J. Dodd, “Millennium”, in *Dictionary of Later New Testament and Its Development*, 738-741.

Take away

“The search for a cosmic calendar that plots out the future days and weeks according to the book of Revelation is misguided. The book’s message is not in its details but in its impact on the beleaguered church. Those Christians needed to hear what Revelation had to offer, that suffering is temporary but a necessary experience of those who profess Christ in a corrupt age; that Christ and the church ultimately prevail over this present evil; that believers should hold on to faith even through suffering; and that God’s justice and peace will ultimately prevail, even if it is not yet evident to us. This is the message of Revelation to the church militant in every age: the church, like Christ, will soon be triumphant. Patience and faithfulness are required, but we will soon join ‘all the saints, who from their labors rest.’” (B.J. Dodd, “Millennium”, 741).