





END TIMES POSITIONS – AN OVERVIEW

The Bible's Big Picture

The grand narrative of the Bible can be thought of as unfolding over four stages:

Four Stages of Bible's Grand Narrative

<p>Creation</p> 	<p>God creates the cosmos and everything within it. Humans are the pinnacle of this creation, the only component which bears the image of God himself. Human beings are tasked with co-ruling over creation with God, stewarding what has been created and acting in ways that are consistent with God's expressed will. During this time, humanity experiences flourishing and intimate relationships with one another, with God, with creation, and within their own selves.</p>
<p>Fall</p> 	<p>Humans disobey God's expressed will, and as a result are no longer able to be in God's presence. There is now rupture of the relationships that experienced flourishing in creation (God with humans, humans with each other, humans with creation, and each human with him/herself). Sin enters the world, bringing with it death, decay, and brokenness.</p>
<p>Redemption</p> 	<p>Over time, God unfolds a plan for how He will bring his people back into right relationship with himself. Ultimately, this plan leads to the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus, who provides a way back into right relationship with God through his atoning death on the cross. Salvation is received by God's grace alone through faith alone.</p>
<p>Restoration</p> 	<p>God promises his people eternal life in a new heavens and new earth. There will be no more death, mourning, or tears. Creation will be restored to perfection, and there will be full healing of all the relationships ruptured by the fall. God's people will be with him forever and will co-rule over creation alongside Christ.</p>

"Now and Not Yet"

We currently exist in a sort of in between stage – Jesus has already come and accomplished the work that is necessary for redemption. However, the full restoration of creation and humanity has not yet come to pass. This is what theologians refer to as living in the "now and not yet." We are already reconciled to God, but the fullness of his healing and restoration is not yet complete.

How Will God's Plan Finish?

The Bible promises that full restoration is coming. It offers us glimpses into how His plan to bring that about will unfold. The study of what will happen at the end of the story is called *eschatology*. There are many interpretations of the biblical passages that speak about end times, which results in a variety of different ideas about how God's redemptive story will finish.

**WHY DOES END
TIMES THEOLOGY
MATTER?**

**What you believe
about the future
shapes
how you act
in the present.**

What everyone agrees on

There is consensus within Christianity about a few key end times topics:

- God keeps his promises
- God has promised to bring his plans for restoration to completion
- Jesus is coming back
 - As we wait, we are responsible for evangelism, encouraging one another, and enduring in our faith
- There will be a time of final judgment for all people
 - God's people will enter eternal life; those without the Lord will enter eternal death
- God will bring about a new heavens and new earth where His people will live with and enjoy Him forever

What people disagree about

Though the main things are agreed upon, there is still disagreement among Christians on both how the Bible is best interpreted, and what the biblical passages indicate about how God's story will end.

One key point of disagreement is the best way to interpret biblical end times prophecies.

Biblical End Times Prophecy Interpretation Strategies

<i>Preterism</i>	Events took place at the time of the writer or shortly thereafter	Author's present/near future Our past
<i>Futurism</i>	Events will take place in the future, clustered together at the close of the current age	Author's future Our future
<i>Historicism</i>	Events still to come for the writer and have been unfolding over all of church history since then	Author's future Our past, present & future
<i>Idealism</i>	Events refer to timeless symbolic truths and do not represent a historical sequence of singular events	Author's present Our present

The biblical testimony

The following is a list of common passages which are used to inform end times theological positions. It is not an exhaustive list, but rather a compilation of commonly cited passages. Depending on preferred interpretation strategy (see table above), people will vary with the extent to which they consider the following passages relevant to our understanding of end times.

Note: Scripture passages should always be taken within their context – What is the purpose and genre of the book in which they appear? How do they fit within the overall message of that book? Within the overall biblical narrative? What historical considerations underlie the author's purpose and inform the author's intent?

Key End Times Scripture Passages

<i>Ezekiel, especially chapters 34-48</i>	Writing as a faithful Israelite and prophet of God during the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel makes a variety of predictions of what awaits Israel after the exile. They include visions for hope and restoration alongside confidence that God will deal seriously and severely with the problem of evil in the world. The book ends with a promise that God's presence will return to his temple one day. Scholarly interpretations vary widely regarding the extent to which these prophecies are meant to be literal or symbolic, as well as whether they have already met their fulfillment in historical events and/or in the person of Christ.
<i>Daniel, especially chapters 7 - 12</i>	Daniel records a variety of prophetic visions that describe apocalyptic events, often using highly symbolic imagery and language. Many scholars consider the prophecies of Daniel to have been at least partially fulfilled when the second temple was destroyed in AD 70.
<i>Matthew 24:1-25:46</i>	Also referred to as the Olivet Discourse (so called because Jesus delivered this teaching on the Mount of Olives), this passage contains instruction about coming suffering and tribulation, the signs that will point to Jesus's coming return, as well as predictions about what will happen to the temple. Many scholars consider the events detailed in this passage to have been at least partially fulfilled when the second temple was destroyed in AD 70. Parallel accounts of this passage are presented in Mark 13:1-37 and Luke 21:5-36.
<i>1 Corinthians 15</i>	Contains direct instruction regarding both the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the rest of humanity, as well as assertion that Christ has definitively defeated death and believers will receive eternal life. For more about resurrection bodies, see 2 Corinthians 5:1-5.
<i>1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11</i>	Describes what happens to believers who have died before the return of Christ and what is to occur at the coming of the day of the Lord. A stark contrast is made between humans who love and follow God ("children of the light") and those who belong in darkness, engaged in wickedness and destined for wrath.
<i>2 Thessalonians 2:1-12</i>	Discusses the coming of the "man of lawlessness," who will falsely proclaim himself to be God and seek exaltation. His ruse will be convincing, so the Thessalonians are urged to hold tight to the truth they have been taught so that they will not fall for it.
<i>2 Timothy 3:1-5</i>	Speaks in stark terms about the ethical, moral and spiritual decay that will mark the end times. Includes a list of sinful patterns that will be evident among people in the last days. See also 1 Timothy 4:1-5.
<i>2 Peter 3:3-18</i>	Outlines how the world will become skeptical about whether God will keep his promises, and many will mock God and those who follow him. However, God will prove faithful to his promises. The current world will be consumed and replaced with a better eternal world. God does not rush into this, though, because He desires as many people to come to repentance as possible. Additionally, no one can know for sure the time God has appointed for this to come to pass.

Key End Times Scripture Passages







Revelation, especially chapters 19-21

The biblical text that most explicitly addresses what will occur during the end times. Like Ezekiel and Daniel, Revelation makes heavy use of imagery and symbolism. Chapters 19 to 21 speak of Christ's ultimate victory, the vindication of the saints, the judgment and destruction of the wicked, and God's provision of a perfected new heavens and new earth where He will dwell with his people for eternity.

What do end times positions explain?

Several key events emerge from the above passages. How these are understood shape the predominant end times positions.

Key Components of End Times Positions

<i>Second Coming of Christ</i>	Christ's physical return to earth	
<i>Millennium/Christ's Reign</i>	A period of peace & righteousness on earth under the rule of Christ himself	
<i>Rapture</i>	Believers going up into the air to meet Christ upon his second coming	
<i>Tribulation</i>	A period of intense suffering on earth	
<i>Resurrection of the Dead</i>	Raising of the dead, either unto eternal life or eternal death	
<i>Final Judgment</i>	Final accounting of deeds and division of people into saved and unsaved	

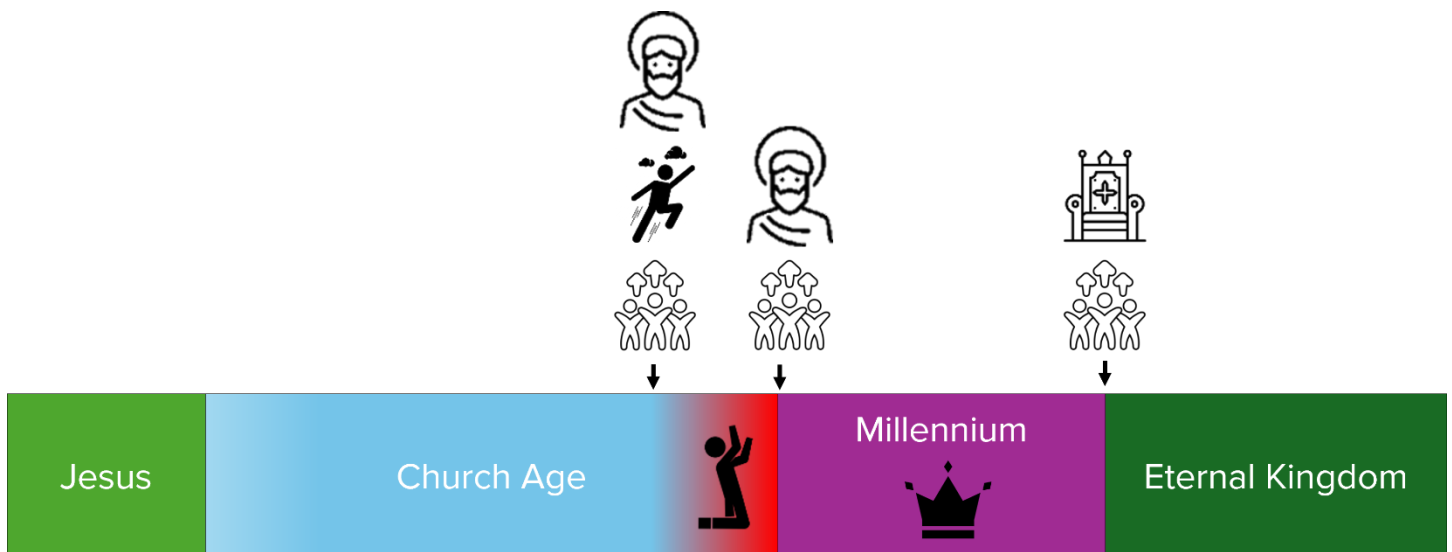
What are the predominant end times positions?

The four most common Christian end times positions are:

- Dispensational premillennialism
- Historic premillennialism
- Amillennialism
- Postmillennialism

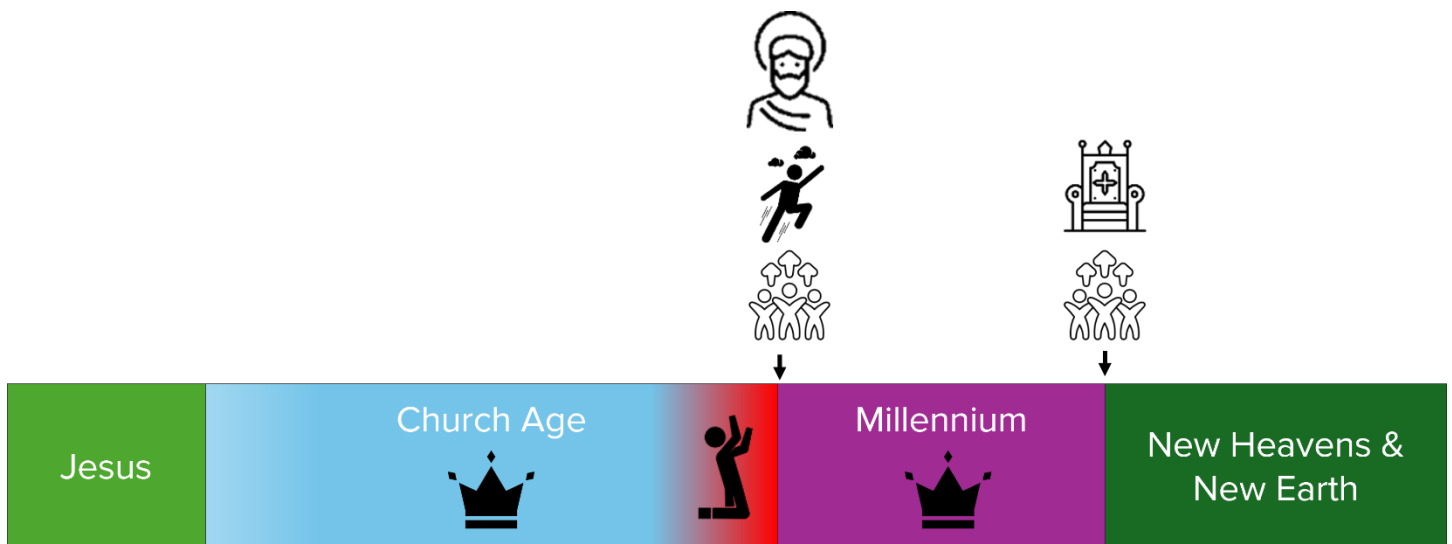
Dispensational Premillennial View

- Developed in the 1800s by John Nelson Darby, popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible
 - Proponents include Jerry Falwell, John MacArthur, and Hal Lindsey
- Dispensationalism is more than just an end times view; it is a systematic approach to biblical interpretation that suggests there are discrete periods (called *dispensations*) that serve as stages in God's redemptive plan
- Core assumptions:
 - The Bible is to be interpreted literally whenever possible
 - A sharp distinction between the church and Israel (i.e., those who are ethnically Jewish)
 - Old Testament promises to Israel are not applied to the church, but instead must be fulfilled literally for the ethnic nation state of Israel
- Distinctive Features:
 - A 7-year period of tribulation will occur before the second coming so that God can pour out his wrath on the unbelieving world and engage his final plan to bring Israel to faith in Christ as the Messiah
 - The church is raptured (and thus spared from God's wrath) in a partial return of Christ (just far enough to meet believers in the air) before the tribulation
 - During the millennium, the temple will be restored in Jerusalem, sacrifices will again be offered there, and alongside Christ, Jews will have preeminence in rule over the world (other saints—i.e., Gentile believers—will assist in this rule)
 - At the end of the millennium, a final rebellion of man and Satan will occur, culminating in Satan's final defeat, after which he is cast into the lake of fire alongside unbelievers
 - Posits three resurrections from the dead:
 - One at the rapture for Christians who had already died
 - One at the end of the tribulation for the faithful of Israel who died during the Old Testament period and for martyrs who converted and were killed during the tribulation
 - One at the end of the millennium for the unrighteous, who are then judged and thrown into the lake of fire
- Especially common among American Evangelical Christians



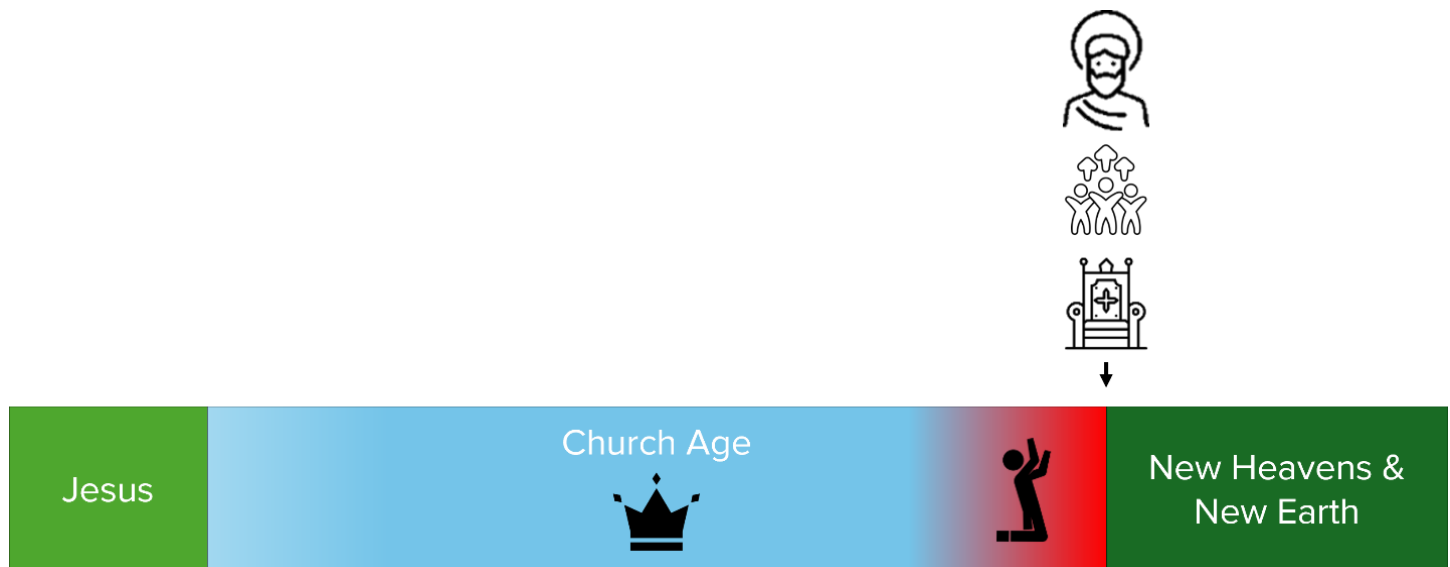
Historic Premillennial View

- Draws its name from this being the predominant view of early church fathers (e.g., Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Papias)
 - Proponents include Charles Spurgeon, John Piper, and Ben Witherington III
- Core assumptions
 - Biblical end times prophecies can be interpreted as a meaningful sequence of discrete events, but can be understood figuratively instead of with strict literalism
 - Assumes unity/continuity between Israel and the church
- Distinctive features:
 - Believes the millennium to be a physical and visible reign of Christ on earth, but allows the 1000 years component to be understood figuratively rather than literally
 - Likewise, the tribulation is not necessarily understood to be literally 7 years in length
 - Rejects a pretribulation rapture, instead interpreting the tribulation as in part a final testing of God's faithful people amidst intense suffering and persecution
 - Some historic premillennialists suggest there may be a midtribulation rapture, where the church is rescued before the final full brunt of God's wrath
 - Christ's reign has already begun on a spiritual level in the regenerated hearts of believers, and he will return to inaugurate a physical reign on earth prior to the final judgment and the establishment of new heavens and new earth
 - Upholds two resurrections from the dead
 - One for all faithful believers at Christ's second coming so they may rule alongside him during the millennium
 - One for everyone else at the time of final judgment
- Especially common among Protestant denominations (e.g., Lutherans, Presbyterians)



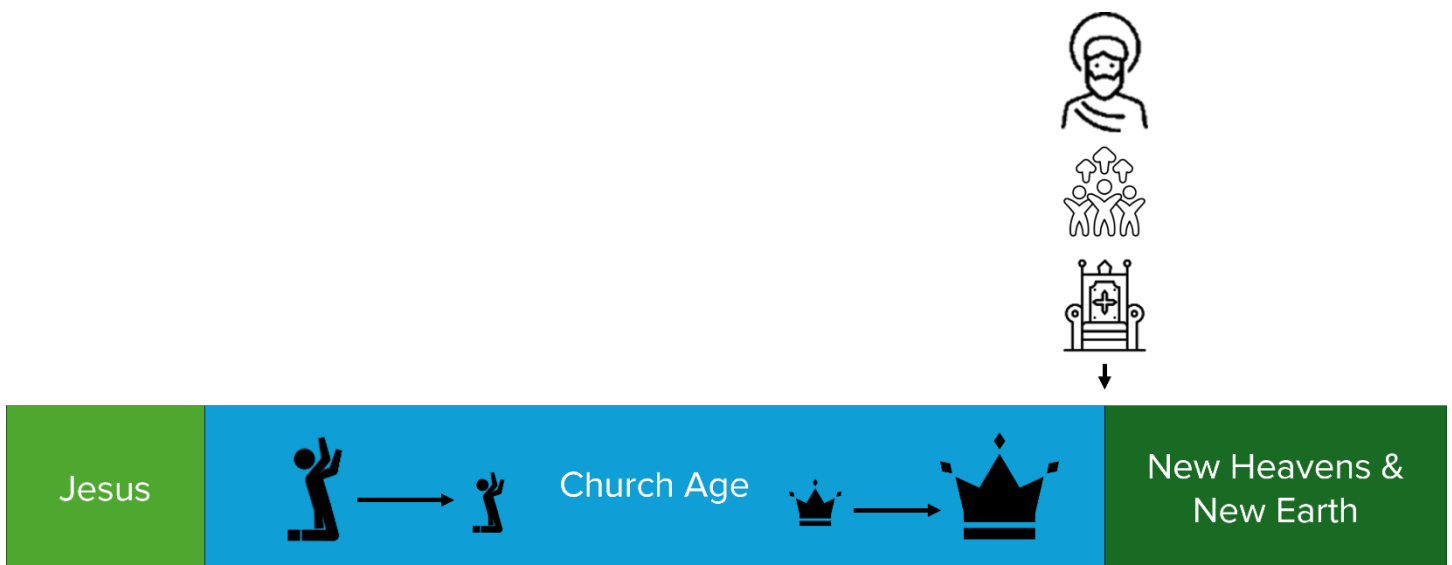
Amillennial View

- First developed within the 4th century, drawing from Jewish apocalyptic thought and informed largely by the work of St. Augustine of Hippo
 - Proponents include John Calvin, Martin Luther, and C.S. Lewis
- Core assumptions
 - Uses a symbolic or figurative interpretation of many biblical end times prophecies
 - Views Christ's rule as having already begun, though it is not yet fully implemented on earth
- Distinctive features
 - The millennium is best interpreted symbolically and refers to the church age (i.e., the period between Christ's ascension to heaven and his second coming)
 - No physical millennial rule of Christ will occur on earth; instead, his millennial rule is understood to be a spiritual reign in and through his people—the church
 - A period of intensifying persecution will come at the end of the church age, followed by the return of Christ
 - The church will be present on earth during this period
 - Christ's return coincides with the resurrection of all people (believers and unbelievers) and immediate final judgment thereafter
- The predominate view for most of church history

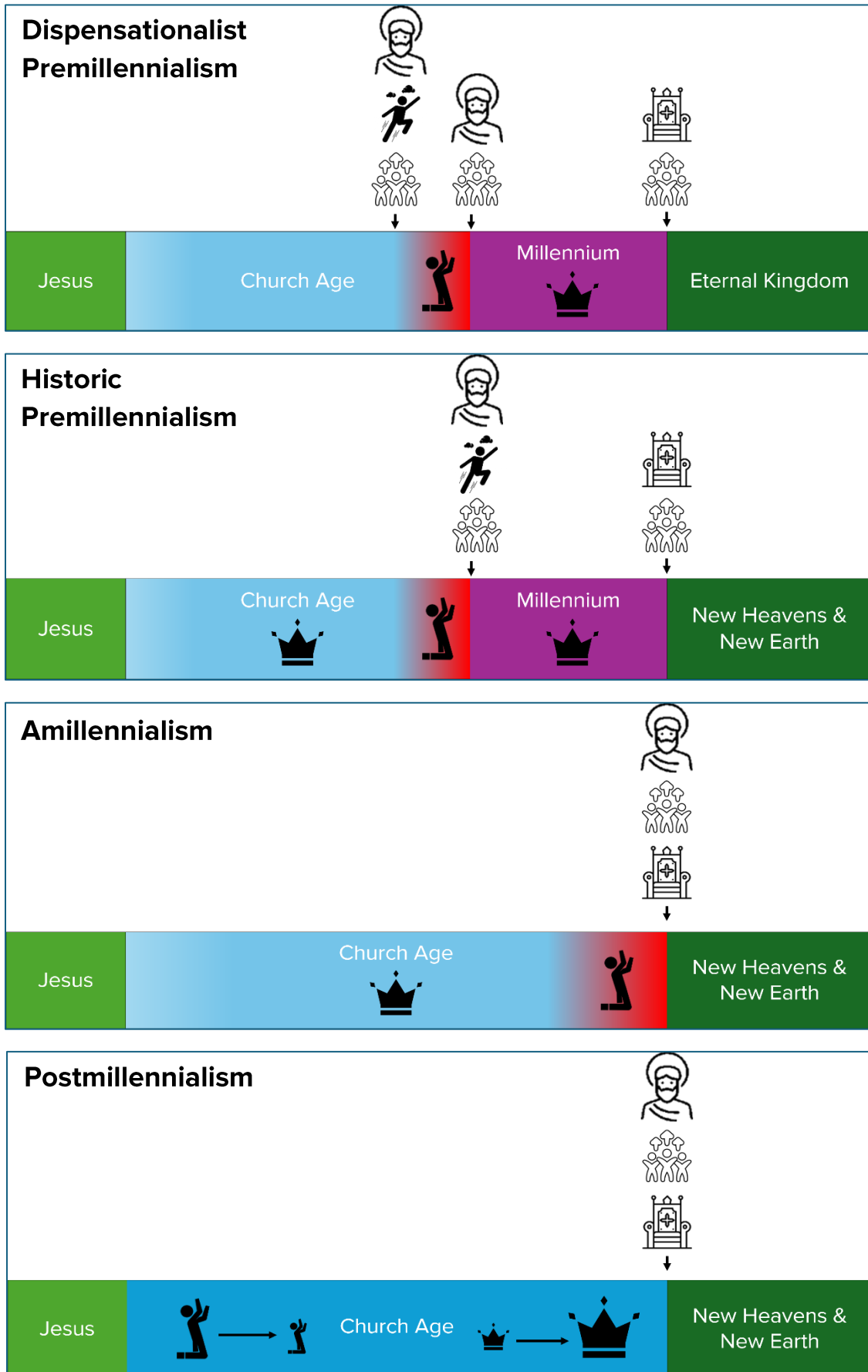


Postmillennial View

- This approach traces its roots back to the Reformation, with the viewpoint developed more fully in the 17th century
 - Proponents include Jonathan Edwards, R.C. Sproul, and B.B. Warfield
- Core assumptions:
 - A strong confidence in the capacity of the gospel message and the Holy Spirit to bring about God's purposes
 - Often hold an interpretive preference for preterism—the view that at least some biblical end times prophecies were fulfilled in the past
 - Many point to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 as the event that fulfilled many prophecies
- Distinctive features:
 - Like amillennialists, postmillennialists reject the idea of a discrete historical period during which Christ is physically present to rule on earth prior to final judgment
 - As the gospel spreads and the Holy Spirit indwells more and more hearts, there will be increasing improvement in human relations and godly rule will prevail
 - Often accompanied by belief in the millennium as a coming golden age of unprecedented peace and prosperity once the gospel and Christian ethics have spread globally, which may or may not last a literal 1000 years
 - Christ will return after the spread of the gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is complete on earth
 - Some hold that there will be a brief rebellion against God immediately before Christ returns, though not nearly as pronounced as the tribulation proposed by other end times positions
- Was a common view among Protestant Christians and social reformers in the 19th and 20th centuries



End Times Positions – A Side-by-Side Comparison





Second Coming



Millennium/
Christ's Reign



Rapture



Tribulation



Resurrection



Final Judgment

<i>Dispensational Premillennialism</i>	<p>Two stage process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A partial return prior to tribulation when Jesus meets the church in the air and takes them to heaven • Full physical and visible return to earth of Christ and the church, to co-rule during millennium 	<p>A literal 1000-year reign of Christ, alongside the church and the martyrs (people converted and then killed during the tribulation), occurring after the full second coming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning of new heavens & new earth, as the curse is partially lifted (full realization after millennium ends) 	<p>Occurs prior to the tribulation and serves to preserve believers from experiencing the pouring out of God's wrath</p>	<p>Literal 7-year time of intense suffering on earth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will serve to bring Israel to salvation • Church does not endure tribulation • God's judgment and wrath pour out on the unbelieving world 	<p>Three separate resurrections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resurrection of saints to participate in rapture (Note: some hold that this occurs later, near the end of the tribulation) • Resurrection of martyrs at full second coming • Resurrection of everyone else at final judgment 	<p>Posits three stages to the judgment of humanity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One for raptured believers • One for the nations at the beginning of the millennium • One for resurrected unbelievers at the end of the millennium
<i>Historic Premillennialism</i>	<p>A singular occurrence when Christ physically and visibly returns to earth to rule alongside the church</p>	<p>Christ's reign began and is currently present in the regenerated hearts of church-age believers, but will culminate in a distinct period when Christ is visibly and physically present to rule on earth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permits 1000 years to be interpreted figuratively 	<p>Occurs after the tribulation and is simultaneous with Christ's second coming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some posit a midtribulation rapture prior to second coming, but this is less common 	<p>A period of intense suffering and testing of people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God's wrath pours out on unbelievers • Believers must endure and stay faithful amidst persecution and attack from Satan, the Antichrist, and the wicked 	<p>Two separate physical resurrections of the dead:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resurrection of believers at second coming • Resurrection of unbelievers at final judgment 	<p>Holds to only one judgment, occurring at the end of the millennium, when both the wicked and the righteous will stand before the Lord, give account for their lives and deeds, and be sorted into the saved (who enter eternal life) and the unsaved (who are cast into eternal death)</p>



Second Coming



Millennium/
Christ's Reign



Rapture



Tribulation



Resurrection



Final Judgment

<i>Amillennialism</i>	<p>Though Christ is reigning currently from his seat at the right hand of the Father, He will physically return to rule on earth</p>	<p>Interprets the millennium as symbolic and holds that Christ presently rules on earth through his people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The church age and the millennium are synonymous 	<p>Does not distinguish between rapture and second coming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May interpret what others call "rapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ 	<p>Is occurring in this current age, but will markedly intensify immediately prior to the return of Christ</p>	<p>Asserts only one physical resurrection of all the dead, said to occur at the time of Christ's second coming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interprets the first resurrection of believers as spiritual in nature (i.e., regeneration of the heart) rather than physical 	<p>Holds to one final judgment, occurring at the second coming, when both the wicked and the righteous will stand before the Lord, give account for their lives and deeds, and be sorted into the saved (who enter eternal life) and the unsaved (who are cast into eternal death)</p>
<i>Postmillennialism</i>	<p>The glorious progress of the gospel will usher in the return of Christ after its spread to all corners of the world</p>	<p>Can take a literal or figurative approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literalists propose a coming 1000-year golden age of unprecedented peace when all earthly kingdoms are in submission to Christ's spiritual rule • The figurative approach considers the church age and the millennium to be synonymous 	<p>Does not distinguish between rapture and second coming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May interpret what others call "rapture" as the resurrection at the second coming of Christ 	<p>Is occurring in this current age, but will decrease as the gospel spreads and more and more of the world comes under its influence</p>	<p>One resurrection of all the dead occurring at the time of Christ's second coming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interprets the first resurrection of believers as spiritual in nature (i.e., regeneration of the heart) rather than physical 	<p>Holds to one final judgment, occurring at the second coming, when both the wicked and the righteous will stand before the Lord, give account for their lives and deeds, and be sorted into the saved (who enter eternal life) and the unsaved (who are cast into eternal death)</p>