

Through a Glass Darkly

For centuries Christians have held very different eschatological views. Here are the primary perspectives.

As experts in eschatology (the theology of the end times) and Bible scholars have sought to decipher biblical prophecies through the centuries, they have raised a number of enigmatic questions. Poring over the Scriptures, they have found a variety of ways to interpret the portions of the Bible that contain end-times prophecy.

Most Bible scholars at secular universities and mainline seminaries believe the book of Revelation and other prophetic books are allegories or pertain to people and events in the first century. Bible scholars at conservative seminaries and popular prophecy writers argue that these Scriptures contain predictions about the future of the world.

For 2,000 years, Christians have held a combination of these different views. The four most common are dispensational premillennialism, covenant premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism. And although they disagree about the details, most Christian scholars teach that Jesus will return one day to judge the earth.

“These controversies are eternal,” says Stephen D. O’Leary, an associate professor of communications at the University of Southern California and an expert on Armageddon and apocalyptic events. “But at some point [the Second Coming] will happen. Our job as followers of Jesus is to remember that of that day and hour no man knows.”

- **Dispensational premillennialism** is the most widely known eschatological view and the predominant view among modern evangelicals. Adherents believe the second coming of Jesus will be preceded by wars and natural disasters as well as a widespread turning away from God, the appearance of the

Antichrist, and the Great Tribulation—a seven-year, unprecedented time of trouble throughout the world (see Matt. 24:3-31). Then Jesus will return and establish an earthly kingdom for 1,000 years. This period, known as the Millennium, will be one of peace and righteousness because Satan has been bound and thrown into the pit (see Rev. 20:1-10).

- **Premillennialists** are divided in their opinions about whether the “Rapture”—the sudden disappearance of believers who are “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air (see 1 Thess. 4:15-17)—will occur before, during or after the tribulation.

- **Covenant premillennialism** is similar to dispensational premillennialism. However, adherents believe the church has replaced Israel in God’s prophetic plan. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, put Israel at the center of God’s prophetic calendar. They see current events involving the Middle East and the Jewish people as clear signs of the last days.

- **Postmillennialists** believe the world will continually get better as more people become Christians, and then Jesus will return. This view was popular at the beginning of the 20th century but lost some of its appeal as a result of the world wars and the Great Depression.

It has experienced a resurgence in recent years as “dominion” theology, along with preterism, a belief that most of the Bible’s prophecies were fulfilled by the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The underlying concept of postmillennialism is that Christians are responsible for ushering in the millennium—and ultimately Christ’s second coming—by preaching the gospel and taking dominion over the earth (see Gen. 1:26), thereby pulling down Satan’s kingdom and advancing the kingdom of God.

C. Peter Wagner, a partial preterist and former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, says Jesus will return after Christians transform the seven “mountains” of

culture—religion, family, government, arts and entertainment, media, business and education.

“Our goal is to change whole cities, states, nations and regions for the kingdom of God,” Wagner says. “I see huge change coming, particularly in the next generation of Christians being much more involved in things of the world rather than just hiding ... in what we call the religious mountain of the church.”

- **Amillennialism** was the popular eschatology for most of the 2,000 years of church history. Proponents believe the millennium is not a future event but simply the time period between the First and Second Coming. They believe we’re living in the millennium now—and that we will experience both good and bad together until Jesus returns at the end of history and conducts the final judgment.