

Dispensationalism

05 - How Can You Be a Premillennialist But Not a Dispensationalist?

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From the **TeachingtheWord** Bible Knowledgebase

What some Christians see as a contradiction really isn't one.

People frequently ask me questions on the subject of eschatology. It's interesting to hear their reaction when they discover that it is possible to be a Premillennialist but not a Dispensationalist. Their response is almost always the same: "I thought you had to be a Dispensationalist to be a Premillennialist" - or more directly, "How can you be a Premillennialist and *not* be a Dispensationalist?"

Since this question comes up so often, I want to take time to answer it here. My purpose is neither to defend a particular view of eschatology nor to dwell upon this subject, but simply to explain that this seeming contradiction is really no contradiction at all.

TTW's Official Position

Before I go on, let me remind readers that TeachingTheWord Ministries takes no official position on eschatology, beyond the following paragraphs in our **Doctrinal Statement**:

At death, men's bodies return to the earth and experience corruption, but their immortal souls return immediately to God who gave them. The souls of believers in Christ go immediately to be with the Lord in Heaven, awaiting the day when they will be reunited with their resurrected, glorified bodies. The souls of those who do not believe in Christ are immediately cast into Hell, where they remain in darkness and torment awaiting the Last Judgment.

Jesus Christ will return, visibly and bodily, to gather believers to Himself for eternity, and to judge all men. The Scriptures teach the bodily resurrection of all mankind, both the saved and the lost.

Christ the righteous Judge will consign the lost to the Lake of Fire, into which they will be cast bodily to be punished for eternity. Those who are saved will

be raised bodily to eternal life, and the Lord will welcome them into eternal glory with Him in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Genesis 3:19; Job 19:25-27; Ecclesiastes 12:7 & 14; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 12:36; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 9:42-48; Mark 13:35-37; Luke 16:19-31; Luke 12:35-40; Luke 16:23-24; Luke 23:42-43; John 5:22-30; Acts 1:9-11; Acts 3:20-21; Acts 13:36; Acts 17:31; Acts 24:15; Romans 8:17-25; Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 6:3; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58; 2 Corinthians 5:1-11; Philippians 1:23; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12; 2 Timothy 4:6-8; Hebrews 9:27-28; Hebrews 12:22-24; Jude 24-25; Revelation 20:10-22:21.

Four Principles

People within the true body of Christ hold a wide range of eschatological views, and most of them are represented among the friends and supporters of this ministry. Sound people can and do differ on these matters. We all need to remember that while our knowledge of the plan of salvation is clear and fully-defined, our knowledge about the future is limited and we now see much of it "through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:8-12). For these reasons, four things must be true of each believer's view of eschatology, as we seek to walk in love together before the Lord.

First, we need to remember our authority. Our study of the subject must be rooted in the authority of Scripture alone, and in the realm of the Spirit alone, and not the latest fads or speculations. Far too many Christians have developed (and seem to continually adjust) their end-times views not on the basis of Scripture alone, but on the basis of such irrelevancies as the latest end-times novel or movie. The only authoritative information on the subject comes from God alone.

Second, we need to remember our position in history. Many things about the prophecies of Christ's first coming were unclear to believers until they were fulfilled (or in many cases after - see for example Jesus' dealings with the disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection in Luke 24). In the same way, at this stage of history many details of Christ's second coming and the complex of events surrounding it are mysteries yet to be revealed, and they will only be fully understood in the light of their fulfillment. And in the light of that

glorious fulfillment, it will doubtless be made clear that every eschatological view of finite man had its flaws!

Third, we need to remember our priorities. We must obey the command Jesus stated in the parable of Luke 19:11-27 - "Occupy till I come," or as the NKJV translates it, "Do business till I come." While we await His return, we need to be occupied with the Lord's business for His church. We need to be preaching the Gospel and building up the saints in sound doctrine. To put it a different way, we need to realize that the price of excessive time spent in eschatological debates is the neglect of souls who need to be evangelized and edified.

Fourth, we need to remember how God saves men. No believer can adopt an eschatological position that involves more than one way of salvation. The only Way to eternal life is now, has always been, and will always be, by grace alone, through faith alone, in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone. If anyone takes an end-times position that involves what amounts to different ways of salvation for different groups of people, he is on heretical ground.

Two Pencil Sketches

Having said these things in preparation, let me turn to the main question: Do you have to be a Dispensationalist to be a premillennialist? The answer is no, but this requires explanation. First of all, many Christians don't realize that there are two branches of premillennialism - one ancient (historic premillennialism), and the other modern (Dispensational premillennialism). Both schools of premillennialism hold the view that Jesus Christ will return prior to His initiation of a thousand-year reign with the saints on the present Earth, which will be followed by a final apostasy led by Satan, the Last Judgment, and the ushering in of the New Heavens and New Earth. But beyond these main points of agreement, there are significant differences.

The following descriptions of the two views are very brief and un-detailed pencil-sketches of a very complex and colorful landscape. But I believe these sketches give the pertinent facts that will help the reader understand the major differences between the two.

Historic Premillennialism

Historic premillennialism draws its name from the fact that it represents the majority position of leading figures in the earliest centuries of the New Testament church. Some trace its origins all the way back to the Apostle John, since one of the most notable early recorded teachers

of historic premillennialism was Irenaeus (140-203 A.D.), who had been taught by Polycarp (ca. 69-156 A.D.), who had been taught by John himself. Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 A.D), Papias (60-130), and others in the early church are known to have held this view as well.

Historic premillennialists in more recent times include Baptists John Gill (1697-1771), Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), Benjamin Newton (1807-1899), and George Eldon Ladd (1911-1982). Ladd wrote several books, including a commentary on Revelation, articulating a historic premillennialist position. Among Presbyterians, such diverse men as Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), Gordon Clark (1902-1985), James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000), and Carl McIntire (1906-2002) were historic premillennialists.

I could point to many things that notably distinguish all historic premillennialists from Dispensational premillennialists, but I believe two stand out. First, historic premillennialists see in Scripture a unity of all believers, Jew and Gentile, through all of time, as one body in Christ. They do not believe that Scripture posits separate programs of God extending into eternity for national Israel and the New Testament church. Secondly, virtually all historic premillennialists agree that Scripture teaches no re-institution of bloody sacrifices (even on a memorial basis) during a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. They point especially to the statements of the Book of Hebrews as clear evidence that those sacrifices have been done away with forever by the full and final sacrifice of Christ Himself.

However, there are significant differences even among historic premillennialists, just as there are among Dispensationalists. Many historic premillennialists believe that Christ will not return and establish a millennial kingdom until after the Great Tribulation, i.e., the church will go through the Tribulation. This sub-branch of historic premillennialism does not teach the Rapture of the saints prior to the Tribulation, or actually any Rapture at all. Others believe the Bible teaches the pre-Tribulation Rapture; that Christ will return before the sudden and largely unexpected onset of the Great Tribulation to take both the resurrected and then-living saints to glory; that there will be a large number of additional martyr-converts to Christ during the Tribulation; and that He will return at the end of that period to establish the millennial kingdom.

Dispensational Premillennialism

Dispensational premillennialism draws its name from the fact that it represents the eschatological position that developed, beginning in the early 1800s, principally under the

influence of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Darby was responsible for the development of the overall theological position that became known as Dispensationalism. This position was later promulgated and adjusted by C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952), John Walvoord (1910-2002) and others.

Dispensationalism, with its unique form of premillennialism, is a relatively new theological development in the history of the church. But due largely to the widespread influence of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and its nearly-universal adoption by the Bible college movement of the twentieth century, Dispensational premillennialism became the predominant end-times view among Evangelicals by the end of the century. All Dispensationalists are premillennialists.

As the name indicates, Dispensational premillennialists base their eschatology on their view that the Bible must be divided into several dispensations. All four editions of the *Scofield Reference Bible* give this definition: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." They maintain that the Bible teaches two distinct plans of God, one for Israel and another for the New Testament church, extending into eternity. Most Dispensational premillennialists hold to a pre-Tribulation Rapture, but some believe it will take place in the middle of the seven-year Tribulation, and a few believe it will take place at the end of that period.

Dispensational premillennialists believe that the millennial reign of Christ on the present Earth will be essentially Jewish in character. Most believe there will be a reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood and bloody sacrifices in a new temple, although most of them hold that those sacrifices will be only "memorial" in nature and will not serve as atonement for sin.

In the early stages of the development of Dispensationalism, especially the first eighty years, a number of men taught that there were two (and sometimes more) ways of salvation - for example, one for Old Testament Jews (saved by their sacrifices and/or law-keeping), and another for the New Testament church (saved by faith in Christ). Remnants of this teaching appeared in the first (1909) edition of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, but were expunged in later editions. However, some Dispensationalists (known more generally as hyper-Dispensationalists or ultra-Dispensationalists) continued to hold these clearly heretical views. Most notable among them were E. W. Bullinger (1837-1913), J. C. O'Hair (1876-1958), and Cornelius R. Stam (1909-2003). In the present day, a television preacher named Les Feldick

is the best-known purveyor of hyper-Dispensationalism. However, hyper- or ultra-Dispensationalists share common views of eschatology with "mainstream" Dispensationalists. In the late twentieth century, a new branch called Progressive Dispensationalism began to develop. Unlike other Dispensationalists, the Progressives do not see the dispensations, as they define them, as being successive periods of time without overlap. Three of the best-known advocates of the Progressive view are Darrell L. Bock, Craig A. Blaising, and Robert L. Saucy. Their theology is rooted in mainstream Dispensationalism, but has also been influenced by the postmodern Biblical theology movement. But once again, the Progressives share common views of eschatology, especially the features of separate programs for Israel and the church, and the Jewish nature of the millennial kingdom, with all other Dispensationalists.

How Can the Two Coexist?

I've been asked how these two eschatological positions can coexist among true believers. However, that question cannot be limited to historic and Dispensational premillennialism. We could expand it to include amillennialism, postmillennialism, and some (the non-heretical) forms of preterism as well!

Let me remind you of the four principles we stated earlier in this article. We all must stick to the authority of Scripture alone as we contemplate the future. We must remember our position in history. We must remember that our Christ-ordained priority is not to argue about eschatology but to evangelize the world and edify the saints.

But ultimately, the issue in answering the question of the coexistence of varying end-times views within the true body of Christ is not eschatology but soteriology. When all true believers are in glory together, we shall find that our doctrine of salvation needs no adjustment. We shall all be there because "worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (Revelation 5:12). But there can be no doubt that as we at last gather around the throne, all believers of all eschatological views will find that their thinking has required a major overhaul, to bring it in line with the revelation of the amazing details of God's consummated plan of redemption, when He has "gathered together all things in one in Christ" (Ephesians 1:10).

Can you be a premillennialist without being a Dispensationalist? Absolutely. But is that the end of the story? Absolutely not! Our prayers for one another need to echo that of Paul for the Ephesians:

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:15-23)

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