

General Eschatology:

What in the world is going to happen?

Introduction

“Unbelievers can make reasonable predictions about future events based on patterns of past occurrences, but in the nature of human experience it is clear that human beings of themselves cannot *know* the future. Therefore unbelievers can have no certain knowledge of any future event. But Christians who believe the Bible are in a different situation. Although we cannot know everything about the future, God knows everything about the future and he has in Scripture told us about the major events yet to come in the history of the universe. About these events occurring we can have absolute confidence because God is never wrong and never lies” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1091).

What do most evangelicals agree on?

1. The return of Christ: the personal, bodily, visible return of Jesus Christ to earth is predicted in numerous NT Scriptures (e.g. Matt 24:27, 29-30 [the coming of Christ is referred to at least 13 times in Matt 24-25]; John 14:3; 1 Cor 15:23; 16:22; 1 Thes 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thes 1:7, 10; 2:1, 8; 2 Pet 3:4-9; 1 John 3:2; Rev 1:7; 19:11-21; 22:20).
2. Believers should eagerly anticipate Christ’s return: the NT repeatedly urges believers to long for the return of Christ (1 Cor 16:22; Phil 3:20; Tit 2:12-13; Rev 22:20), but also to understand that we are to be productive (2 Thes 3:6-15) and grow in holiness (1 John 3:2-3) until He comes; and that His delay is for the salvation of others (2 Pet 3:9).
3. The specific time of Christ’s return cannot be known: several passages clearly state that the exact time of Christ’s return cannot be known (cf. Matt 24:44; 25:13; Mark 13:32-33; Luke 12:40).
4. Evangelicals agree on certain results of Christ’s return: judgment of unbelievers (Rev 20:11-15); reward of believers (2 Cor 5:10); destruction of the present creation (2 Pet 3:10); eternal reign with the Triune God in the new heavens and new earth, centered in the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:1-22:5).

What are the major things evangelicals do NOT agree on?

1. The thousand years of Rev 20:1-7.
2. The time of the catching away (rapture) in 1 Thes 4:13-18; cf. 1 Cor 15:51-54.

Wayne Grudem offers wise advice: “I...think it is important for evangelicals to recognize that this area of study is complex and to extend a large measure of grace to others who hold different views” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 1114).

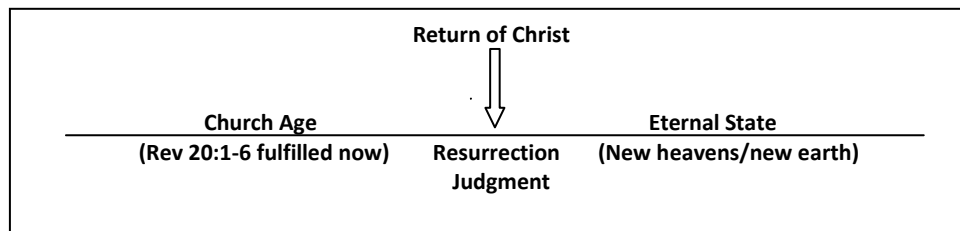
I seriously doubt that anyone’s understanding of how all the details of the future will work out is 100% accurate. But this should not stop us from seeking to know what God’s Word says about the return of Christ and the end of time. After all, this doctrine was among the first things Paul emphasized with the new church in Thessalonica, mentioning the Lord’s return in each chapter of 1 Thessalonians!

Major views on the millennium

The term, 'millennium,' means one thousand years. The expression ([τα] χίλια ἔτη) is used six times in Rev 20:2-7. It is also found in Ps 90:4 and 2 Pet 3:8 (2x) in reference to God's perspective on time (the expression is also found in Eccl 6:6).

There are three major views on the millennium of Rev 20:

1. Amillennialism: no future millennium



According to this view, the present church age is the fulfillment of the millennium. Satan is bound in the sense that his influence is diminished so that the Great Commission can be fulfilled. Christ is already reigning in heaven and those who come to life and reign with Him are believers who die during the church age. Since 'a thousand years' is taken to mean a long period of time, the length of the church age is unknown. The church age will end with the return of Christ, one great resurrection and judgment, followed immediately by the new heavens, new earth, new Jerusalem and the eternal state.

Arguments for the amillennial view:

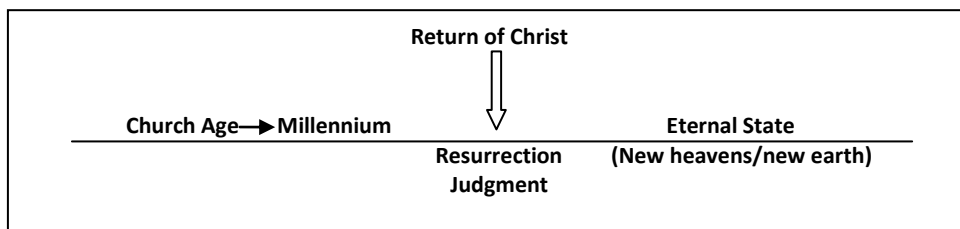
- The millennium is found in only one unclear passage (Rev 20:1-7).
- Scripture teaches only one resurrection (Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15).
- How could sin persist during Christ's millennial rule on earth?
- There is no purpose and hence no need for a millennium.
- Scripture indicates that all the major events of the future come at once at Christ's return and before the eternal state. A very tidy system!

Counterarguments:

- Grudem: "The Bible only needs to say something once in order for it to be true and something we that we must believe" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 1116).
- A number of other passages talk of a time greater than the present age but not yet the eternal state (e.g. Isa 2:1-4; 11:2-9; 65:20; 1 Cor. 15:24-25).
- What is so unclear about Rev 20:1-7?
- Objections to the amillennial exegesis of Rev. 20:1-7.
 - Satan is not only bound, he is non-existent on the earthly scene according to Rev 20:2-3, which does not seem to be true today (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Pet 5:8; 1 John 5:19).
 - 'Came to life' and 'resurrection' (Rev 20:4-5) always signify a bodily resurrection.
 - 'First resurrection' in Rev 20:5 implies a second resurrection (separated in time by the millennium). The passages often cited as requiring one general resurrection may also be interpreted as presenting two resurrections, one of the believing and one of the unbelieving (cf. Dan 12:2; John 5:29; Acts 24:15).

- Jesus also lived on the earth 40 days after His resurrection in a glorified body and lived with the inwardly rebellious Judas for most of His earthly ministry.
- The purpose of the millennium is not stated in Scripture, but it could show both God's good purposes in society and government and the sinfulness of man in spite of this.
- Grudem: "Interpretations of Rev 20...proposed by amillennialists...all have the disadvantage of having to labor under the burden of explaining away what seems to be a straightforward understanding of the text because they are convinced that the rest of Scripture does not teach a future earthly millennium. But if the rest of Scripture does not deny it (and in some places hints at it), and if this text does teach it, then it would seem much more appropriate to accept it" (*Systematic Theology*, footnote 17, p. 1121).

2. Postmillennialism: Christ returns after the millennium



According to this view, as the Gospel progresses and the church grows, the world will come more and more under the influence of the Christian faith. The world will function more and more ideally under God's standards. Over time a golden age of peace and righteousness will come over the world, the millennium, after which Christ will return. The millennium will be a long period of time, not necessarily a literal thousand years. When Christ returns there will be a general resurrection and judgment, after which the eternal state will begin. It should be noted that the chronological relationship of the millennium to Christ's return is just one difference between postmillennialism and premillennialism. The nature of the millennium is also quite different in the two systems (cf. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 1122-1123).

Arguments for the postmillennial view:

- The Great Commission cannot fail to be fulfilled since Jesus has all authority and promises to be with His disciples always (Matt 28:18-20). Thus we would expect a Christianized world, the millennium, after which Christ will return.
- Jesus' parables such as the mustard seed (Matt 13:31-32) and leaven (Matt 13:33) point to the growth God's kingdom such that the entire earth comes under its influence.
- Nothing can stop the advance of the church (Matt 16:18). Church history is replete with examples of how persecution only grows the church. Thus we should expect a golden age of Christian influence over the world before the return of Christ.

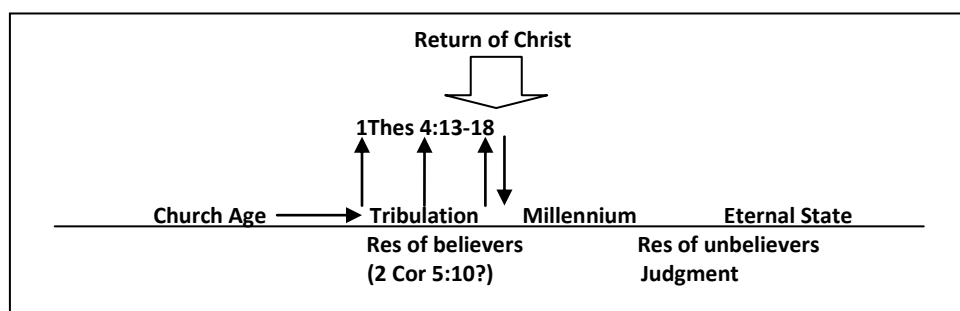
Counterarguments:

- The argument based on the Great Commission is an argument based on implication not the text itself, which says nothing about the Christianization of the world. Rather, earlier in Matthew, Jesus indicates the opposite, *Enter by the*

narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Matt 7:13-14).

- “The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven do tell us that the kingdom of God will gradually grow from something very small to something very large, but they do not tell us the *extent* to which the kingdom will grow” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1123).
- Texts such as 1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 3:1-9; 4:3-4 indicate that the world will grow more evil rather than more righteous ‘in later times’ (1 Tim 4:1) and ‘in the last days’ (2 Tim 3:1). 2 Thes 2:3-9 speaks of end-time apostasy and a man of lawlessness to be vanquished by Christ’s coming. This does not sound like the utopian picture of the millennium prior to the return of Christ.

3. Premillennialism: Christ returns before the millennium



According to this view, the church age will continue until climaxed by a period of unprecedented evil, often referred to as the tribulation. At the end of this evil period, Christ will return to earth and defeat His enemies. Satan will be bound and cast into the abyss. Believers will be raised and Christ will establish His kingdom, reigning as King over all the earth (either for 1,000 years or a long period of time). Raised and living believers will be given resurrection bodies and will reign with Christ during this period of righteousness and peace. At the end of this period, Satan will be released from the abyss and will gather for battle all who outwardly submitted to Christ’s rule during the millennium, but inwardly did not believe. Satan and his unbelieving followers will be defeated, the unsaved dead will be raised and judged and eternity will begin. Some premillennarians begin the new heavens and new earth during the millennium, others see it as happening only after the defeat of Satan and the resurrection and judgment of the unbelieving dead. Some premillennarians hold that Christ’s return will be in two phases. He will come in the air for believers before the tribulation begins (pre-tribulational rapture) or at its midpoint (mid-tribulational rapture) and will come to earth to defeat His enemies, bind Satan and raise tribulation martyrs at the end of the tribulation. Other premillennarians hold to a single-phase return of Christ and that all of these events will happen at the end of the tribulation (post-tribulational rapture position). Premillennarians who hold to a pre-tribulational rapture often place the judgment of believers’ works between the two phases of Christ’s return.

Arguments for the premillennial view:

- The most straight-forward (i.e. normal/literal) reading of Rev 20:1-6 calls for a thousand year kingdom of Christ bookended by the resurrection of the just (before; 20:4) and the unjust (after; 20:5). For example:
 - The binding of Satan (20:1-3) fits best with a premillennial understanding.

- The resurrection spoken of in 20:4 is best understood as a bodily resurrection, especially in light of 20:5 and Rev 2:8, which uses the same word of Jesus' resurrection.
- Rev 20:4, 6 places believers' reign with Christ after a future resurrection. "Nowhere does Scripture say that believers in the intermediate state (between their death and Christ's return) are reigning with Christ or sharing in rule with him" (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1131; see esp Rev 6:9-10), as the amillennial view maintains.
- Other passages are best understood as requiring an earthy rule of Christ prior to the eternal state (see especially 1 Cor. 15:23-26; cf. Rev 2:26-27).
- A number of OT passages seem to talk about an age unique from our own or from the eternal state (cf. Isa 2:1-4; 11:6-11; 65:17-27, esp v. 20—the passage seems to mingle statements about the millennium and the eternal state).

Counter arguments:

- See previous arguments for amillennialism and postmillennialism.

Major views on the rapture

The term 'rapture' comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word in 1 Thes 4:17 which is translated into English as 'caught up' (Gk, ἀρπάζω; cf. John 10:12).

First, a some prefacing thoughts:

1. This is not an issue that should divide believers. There is no verse that clearly states the time of the rapture. I personally think there is one that comes close. But still, even that verse is open to lively debate. So let us make sure we are very gracious to one another in this discussion.
2. I have sometimes heard evangelicals say, I don't believe in a rapture. Unless we are going to tear 1 Thes 4:17 out of the Bible, we must believe in the 'catching away' (i.e. rapture) that is described in that verse.
3. Views on the time of the rapture are only debated among premillennialists, since all postmillenarians and amillenarians view 1 Thes 4:13-18 as part of the second coming of Christ (as do post-tribulational premillenarians). So our discussion of the time of the rapture in relation to the tribulation period delves more deeply into only one eschatological system, that of premillennialism. As one might expect, the further we delve into the details of a system, the more complex become the various arguments for and against the various views. The scope of this presentation will not allow us to consider all of these detailed arguments, but only the most basic ones.

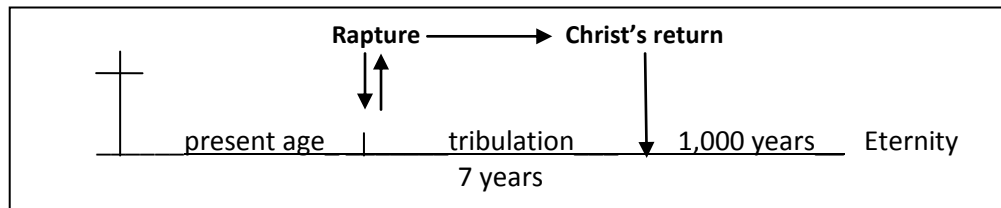
Second, views on the rapture relate it to the tribulation period. What is that? The term, 'tribulation,' comes from Matt 24:29 (cf. 'great tribulation;' Matt 24:21). The preceding verses in Matt 24 describe a time of unprecedented difficulty for the world and persecution for believers just prior to the second coming of Christ (see Matt 24:15-28). Other passages use different terms, but likely refer to the same period of time (cf. Jer 30:7, 'the time of Jacob's distress;' Dan 9:27, Daniel's so-called seventieth week; Rev 3:10, 'the hour of testing'). Some evangelicals believe the tribulation will be seven years in length (see especially Dan 9:24-27). Others believe the tribulation will be shorter (see especially Matt 24:22). Some would refer to the seven years prior to Christ's return to

earth as the *tribulation* period and the last half of that period (i.e. the last three and one half years before Christ's return to earth) as the *great tribulation*.

There are three major views on the time of the rapture in relation to the tribulation:

1. The pretribulation view: the rapture occurs before the tribulation

In this view, Christ comes in the air for believers *before* the tribulation period and then comes to earth with those believers at the end of the tribulation. Many who hold this view place the judgment of believers' works during the time between the two phases of Christ's second coming.



Arguments for the pretribulation view:

- Rev 3:10 promises keeping from 'the hour of testing which is about to come upon the whole world.' This seems to refer to keeping from the time of world-wide judgment detailed in Rev 6-18, the tribulation. It would be difficult to be kept from a time of world-wide testing unless believers were removed from the earthly sphere by the rapture. The Gk expression τηρέω with ἐκ in biblical and extra-biblical literature can denote keeping outside rather than out from within (the basic meaning of the preposition ἐκ). For additional discussion of Rev 3:10 and the rapture from a pretrib perspective, see "The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 137 (July-September, 1980): 252-266.
- There is no use of the term, 'church' (Gk, ἐκκλησία) between Rev 3:22 and 22:16 but 'church' is used twenty times outside those verses in Revelation.
- The tribulation is a time of God's wrath on earth-dwellers (cf. Rev 6:16-17) but Jesus will deliver believers from this wrath to come (1 Thes 1:10; 5:9).
- 1 Thes 4:13-18 says nothing about Jesus coming to earth. Rather resurrected and living believers will meet Him in the air. In Rev 19 Christ returns to earth with the armies of heaven to defeat His enemies.
- The possibility of two phases of Christ's second coming parallels the two phases of the Messiah's coming as seen in the OT (cf. Isa 61:1-2; Luke 4:16-21). In both cases Christ comes to bless and to judge, but the comings are separate phases of the same event (i.e. the coming of the Messiah from an OT perspective and the second coming of Christ from a NT perspective).
- The NT presents Christ's return as imminent in the sense that no predicted sign or event must precede His coming. This can only be true of the pretrib position if Dan 9:24-27, Daniel's 70th week, refers to the seven-year tribulation period.
- Most pretribulationsits hold to a strict distinction between Israel and the church throughout Scripture. They view the rapture as for the church only, after which God begins to deal directly with Israel during the tribulation period (cf. Rev 7:1-7; 11:1-13; 12:1-17; 13:1-18 [cf. Dan 7, 8, 11]; 14:1-5).

Counter arguments:

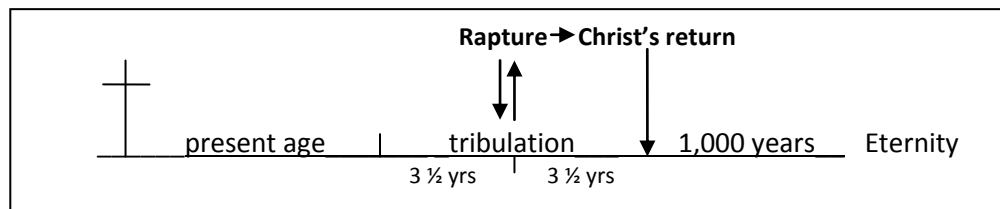
- Rev 3:10 was written to one church that no longer exists. The hour of testing may have come upon the Roman world of John's day. Others would say that the

keeping promised is guarding of believers during tribulation period with removal at the end when Christ returns.

- The term, 'saints' is found 12 times in Rev 4-19 and is used in the NT to refer to the church (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2 [but never by John]). So the church is on earth during the tribulation.
- God's wrath during the tribulation period will target evil-doers not His own.
- It is very difficult to distinguish two phases of Christ's second coming based on the words and contexts in which they are found in the NT (e.g. 2 Thes 2:1, 8).
- Positing a parallel between the coming of the Messiah and the two phases of Christ's second coming, while interesting, establishes nothing.
- A strict distinction between Israel and the church cannot be maintained (e.g. 1 Cor 11:25; Gal 3:7, 9; 6:16; Eph 2:11-22; Heb 8; 1 Pet 2:1-10).

2. The midtribulation view: the rapture occurs at the midpoint of the tribulation

Some would say midtribulationism is a modified form of pretribulationism because the midtrib view holds that the rapture will come half way through the seven-year tribulation period and before (pre-) the 'great tribulation' of the last three and a half years.



Arguments for the midtribulation view:

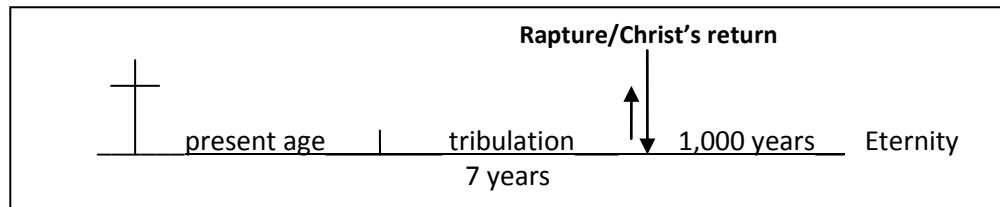
- The significance of a three and a half year period points to a midtrib rapture (cf. Rev 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5; see also Dan 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11).
- In the judgments of Rev 6-16, the wrath of man is seen in the first half of the tribulation period and the church is present for this. The wrath of God and the Lamb is seen in the last half. But the church is to be delivered from this wrath by the rapture (cf. 1 Thes 1:10; 5:9).
- The seventh trumpet of Rev 10:7; 11:15 is to be identified with the last trumpet of 1 Cor 15:52 (cf. 1 Thes 4:16). Since bowl judgments are yet to come in the Rev chronology, the rapture must be in the middle of the tribulation.

Counter arguments:

- But there is no mention of the rapture in these verses that speak of a three and a half year period.
- But the Lamb by opening the seven-sealed scroll (6:1-17; 8:1) opens all the judgments poured out on the earth and His wrath cannot be said to be confined to the last half of the tribulation (see especially 6:16-17).
- But the description of the seventh trumpet in Rev 11:15-19 seems to relate to the end of the tribulation period. Also the trumpets of Rev sound judgment upon earth-dwellers but the trumpet of 1 Cor 15 and 1 Thes 4 is one of resurrection and deliverance (Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 499).

3. The posttribulation view: the rapture occurs after the tribulation

The historic premillennial position is that the rapture occurs at the end of the tribulation period as part of the second coming of Christ. As Christ descends from heaven believers are resurrected, changed and caught up to meet Him in the air and then proceed back down to earth with Christ. This view eliminates the need for two phases in the second coming of Christ and sees all references to the second coming as describing the same event in its various aspects.



Arguments for the posttribulation view:

- No NT verse explicitly says believers will be taken out of the world prior to the tribulation period.
- The Gk word (παρουσία) found in 1 Thes 4:15 (Eng 'coming, arrival, presence') is also found in Matt 24:27 where it clearly refers to the second coming of Christ after the tribulation.
- Similar arguments can be made based on the use of the Gk word (ἀπόκαλυψις) found in 1 Pet 1:7 and 2 Thes 1:7 (Eng 'revelation') and the Gk word (ἐπιφάνεια) found in Tit 2:13 and 2 Thes 2:8 (Eng 'presence').
- The Gk phrase (εἰς ἀνάτησιν) found in 1 Thes 4:17 (Eng 'to meet') "is used in Gk literature outside the Bible to speak of citizens going out of a city to meet an arriving magistrate, then to return to the city with him" (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1134, footnote 42). This idea fits best with a posttribulation rapture.
- If the trumpets of Matt 24:31 ('a great trumpet'); 1 Cor 15:52 ('the last trumpet'); and 1 Thes 4:16 ('the trumpet call of God') are the same, then the rapture must be posttribulation since Matt 24:29 places the trumpet of 24:31 'after the tribulation of those days.'
- Matt 24 is addressed to Jesus' disciples as representative of believers of the church age and the tribulation.
- Post-tribulationism is the historic position of the church whereas pretribulationism is a relatively recent development traceable to the teaching of Irish Plymouth Brethren leader, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Darby's teaching was later popularized in the *Scotfield Reference Bible* (1909; revised 1917; revised 1967).

Counter arguments:

- Likewise, no NT verse explicitly says that the rapture will happen at the end of the tribulation as part of the second coming. Just as in the OT passages that speak of the coming of the Messiah to bless and to judge and those comings were millennia apart (the classic example being Isa 61:1-2; cf. Luke 4:16-21), so NT passages that speak of the second coming of the Messiah to bless and to judge may speak of the two aspects of His second coming that are separated by the seven year tribulation period.
- But as in Gk so in Eng, the same word in different contexts can have somewhat different meanings. So another conclusion from the evidence is possible. Ryrie (*Basic Theology*, p. 501) offers this illustration: "Suppose proud grandparents should say to their friends, 'We are looking forward to enjoying the presence (*parousia*) of

our grandchildren next week;’ then later in the conversation add, ‘Yes, we expect our grandchildren to be present at our golden wedding anniversary.’ If you heard those statements you could draw one of two conclusions. (1) The grandchildren are coming next week for the golden wedding anniversary. In other words, the grandparents were speaking of the coming and the anniversary as a single event, occurring at the same time. Or (2) the grandchildren will be making two trips to see their grandparents—one next week (perhaps as part of their vacation) and another later to help celebrate the golden wedding anniversary.”

- The counter argument above applies. Ryrie notes that second coming words in the NT might be understood to *catalog* “whatever event is referred to in all the passages where the word is used as the same, single event.” But those same words could be used to *characterize* “different events in the same way.” Ryrie goes on to state that “the vocabulary used in the NT does not seem to prove either pre- or posttribulationism.” He concludes with this illustration, “Take the word ‘motor.’ My automobile has a motor. My wife’s washing machine has a motor. My moped has a motor. Our furnace fan has a motor. My camera has a motor that automatically advances the film. Is the term ‘motor’ a characterizing feature of these rather diverse machines? Or is it a means of cataloging them that would force us to conclude that everything that has a motor is the same thing” (*Basic Theology*, p. 502).
- But it could also fit a pretribulational rapture with the meeting and returning aspects separated by the tribulation. As noted above, OT passages frequently envision the two comings of the Messiah in the same passage, even though the two comings are now separated by 2,000 years (e.g. Isa 52:13-54:12).
- But there is no proof that these trumpets must be identified as one.
- In Matt 24 Jesus addresses His disciples’ questions in 24:3, “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” Jesus answers their questions from an OT, Jewish perspective (since the church age had not yet begun) and His answer relates to the Jews of the tribulation period.
- Though it is true that the pretribulational position is a recent development, this does not necessarily imply it is suspect. The history of Christian dogma shows that doctrines are continually being refined and that successive eras of church history brought forth refinements in various doctrines at different times. For example, since the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), the biblical doctrine of creationism has undergone significant study and development. Ultimately, the issue is not whether a doctrine had long historical roots (though we ought to respect that God has taught others in the body of Christ), but whether that doctrine is true to Scripture.

Conclusion

Equally godly, studious believers in Jesus Christ with equal commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture continue to differ on the issues of the millennium and the rapture. That does not mean we should not have convictions on these issues. It does mean that we must hold our convictions with much grace offered to those who disagree with us. Let us emphasize the things we can all agree on and teach with much grace in the areas of disagreement. As the saying goes, ‘in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity’ (often attributed to Augustine).