

PREMILLENNIAL ESCHATOLOGY

Summary

From its founding, the Assemblies of God has affirmed the rapture of the Church, the return of Christ, and His premillennial reign. We do well to hold fast to these beliefs while being careful not to become preoccupied with details not clearly enunciated in the Statement of Fundamental Truths as supportable by Scripture. This paper explores the history and biblical support for premillennial eschatology and offers guidelines for teaching it.

Introduction

Eschatology refers to beliefs about the end times, including the second coming of Christ, millennial views, and other related issues. The Statement of Fundamental Truths affirms four key eschatological beliefs: Fundamental Truth 13, “The Blessed Hope;” Fundamental Truth 14, “The Millennial Reign of Christ;” Fundamental Truth 15, “The Final Judgment;” and Fundamental Truth 16, “The New Heavens and the New Earth.” The return of Jesus is one of the Assemblies of God’s four core doctrines, alongside salvation, Spirit baptism, and divine healing.

Our eschatology has been at the heart of our doctrinal beliefs since our founding in 1914 when the preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws declared, “ ‘Jesus is coming soon’ to this old world in the same manner as he left it to set up His millennial kingdom and to reign over the earth in righteousness and peace for a thousand years.”¹ This belief in the nearness of Christ’s coming has motivated us as a Fellowship to prioritize evangelism and worldwide missions efforts and to challenge people to live committed to Christ.

Different theological communities hold various views on the millennial reign of Christ. There is debate concerning the nature of the millennial reign as well as the order of events around that reign, including the return of Christ and the final judgment of the world. Some believe that when the Bible speaks of the millennial reign, it refers symbolically to the age of the Church between the ascension and return of Jesus, which will also bring about the final judgment. This is the *amillennial* position. Others believe that while the language symbolizes the Church Age, it refers to a time to come when the Church will establish kingdom-like conditions through the earth before the return of Christ and the final judgment. *Postmillennialism* views Christ’s return as occurring after the millennial reign created through the church at some point in history. Additionally, some believe that Christ will return first, then set up a millennial kingdom, with the final judgment coming after those thousand years. Because Christ’s return happens before the millennial reign, this is known as *premillennialism*.

Regardless of the disagreement among Christians, the Assemblies of God has maintained from its beginning that four eschatological events will occur in a particular

¹ *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (April 1914), 1.

order according to the Scripture. The resurrection of the saints will precede the millennial reign of Christ on the earth, after which comes the final judgment, and only then will God bring about the new heavens and new earth.

Historical Context

Church leaders affirmed a premillennial reading of Scripture in the first centuries after Jesus' ascension. Early Christian premillennial interpretation paralleled intertestamental interpretations, found in the books of Enoch and Jubilees, of Old Testament prophecy predicting a messianic kingdom. By the third century, there is evidence that more Christians chose an amillennial interpretation, possibly due to the loss of Jewish influence in the Church coupled with the rise of a Greek-inspired hermeneutic. With the rise of Christendom in the fourth century, most Christian leaders assumed an amillennial view. Some that held to the view that the millennium is symbolic of the Church Age still believed in a literal one thousand years between the ascension and return of Jesus, but that became impossible to believe after the eleventh century.

Postmillennialism rose in popularity after the Protestant Reformation. The ongoing church reform led to hope for the eventual reform of society and a new age of church rule. This hope became associated with Protestant revivalism. Leaders of revival in the United States promoted postmillennialism. Proponents of the postmillennial impulse often associated with reform movements such as abolitionism. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Civil War and social problems from urbanization led many evangelicals to abandon the postmillennial view that the world was getting better. Instead, they looked for the imminent return of Christ to set up His millennial kingdom as the only hope for truly reforming the world.

The Pentecostal Movement began when views of Christ's coming were shifting from postmillennialism to premillennialism. One of the most common refrains in early Pentecostalism was that "Jesus is coming soon." The expectation that Jesus was coming "in the flesh" to establish His kingdom motivated Pentecostals to prepare the world for the return of Jesus—the answer to the world's complex social, spiritual, and moral problems.

When the Assemblies of God formed its doctrinal statement in 1916, it codified its premillennial beliefs in four eschatological doctrines. In particular, "The Blessed Hope" affirmed: "The Resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ, the rapture of believers which are alive and remain, and the translation of the true Church, this is the blessed hope set before all believers."² The promise of Jesus' return included the promise of the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the living into glorified bodies. In affirming the rapture, or resurrection, of the Church, the Assemblies of God also affirmed a belief in Christ's literal return to reign on earth for a thousand years. This view contradicts the views of postmillennialists and amillennialists. Pentecostals rejected both positions

² *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (October 1–7, 1916), 13.

because they minimize the importance of Christ's imminent bodily return to earth, as promised in the New Testament and affirmed by the Early Church.³

Over the past century, the General Council revised the Statement of Fundamental Truths several times, and eschatological doctrines received substantial revisions as certain situations demanded.⁴ In 1927, the General Council retitled and rewrote "Millennial Reign" to emphasize Israel's role in Jesus' millennial kingdom on earth when He comes. In 1961, the General Council revised "Millennial Reign" again to strengthen its emphasis on the literal millennial reign.⁵ In each case, the Assemblies of God wanted to clarify our position on the coming of Christ to reign on earth.

In addition to these revisions, the General Council passed resolutions that addressed various eschatological teachings that caused a distraction from these core doctrines. In 1917, the General Council discouraged ministers from setting dates for Christ's return.⁶ In 1937, the General Council disapproved the teaching that Christians will go through a full seven-year tribulation because it denied the imminent return of Jesus.⁷ In 1961, the General Council responded to a growing number of ministers holding to amillennial views by including a prohibition of teaching amillennialism.⁸ In 2023, the General Council revised those bylaws to emphasize the right to address other views for educational purposes, but that ministers should refrain from "intentionally leading others astray" regarding the four core eschatological teachings of the Assemblies of God.

The Statement of Fundamental Truths clearly affirms premillennial doctrine, but it is important not to dogmatize other elements of end-time beliefs that are not specifically addressed. These include details about the identity of the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 John 7), the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16:16), the mark of the Beast (Revelation 13:16–17), and the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 7:14). While ministers may have convictions about specific interpretations of these elements, they are secondary to the essential elements of our premillennial eschatology overall. As a Fellowship, we should have charity among our ranks about such debated issues and not divide over nonessentials not clearly stated in our Fundamental Truths.

Fundamental Truths 13 and 14

The Assemblies of God's doctrinal statements about the rapture of the Church and Christ's second coming are supported by various Scriptures that are important to the

³ A survey of early Pentecostal denominations/fellowships shows that the belief in the premillennial return of Jesus was a widespread and significant belief of early Pentecostalism as a whole.

⁴ The first was in 1920 when the seventeen truths were reordered to sixteen.

⁵ *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (August 23–29, 1961), 23.

⁶ *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (September 9–14, 1917), 17.

⁷ *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (September 2–9, 1937), 46.

⁸ *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (August 21–26, 1969), 81–82. It further notes, "We recommend that those ministers who embrace any of the foregoing eschatological errors refrain from preaching or teaching them. Should they persist in emphasizing these doctrines to the point of making them an issue, their standing in the Fellowship will be seriously affected."

premillennial emphasis. Titus 2:13,⁹ which says, “We wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,” is the basis for Fundamental Truth 13. Paul’s hope was that Christ will reward all those who “have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). Additionally, Paul stated that when Christ comes, His coming will be announced with a “loud command” and a “trumpet call,” and believers on earth will be “caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). This “Rapture” or “translation” of the saints emphasizes the resurrection of the body and the welcoming of Jesus into His kingdom by His saints. Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 fortifies this teaching which promises that “in the twinkling of an eye,” our bodies will be “changed,” and death is “swallowed up in victory.” Paul’s writing reminds us that if there is no resurrection, then “our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:13–14). Though there are debates about when this will occur in relation to the Tribulation, it is clear that Jesus’ ultimate destination is His kingdom on the earth.

Fundamental Truth 14, “The Millennial Reign of Christ,” lists several verses supporting Jesus’ return to reign on the earth for a thousand years before the final judgment. The Assemblies of God has held that a premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 is the most natural reading of the text, as it does justice to the details of the narrative and best fits with other passages of Scripture regarding the imminent return of Jesus. It also holds that such an interpretation gives space for God to fulfill promises to the people of Israel.

A common messianic expectation of the Kingdom—the premillennial return of Jesus—is throughout Scripture, not only in Revelation 20. Its roots are in the belief in the premillennial return of Jesus. When Jesus ascended to heaven, the angel promised that “this same Jesus . . . will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Just as His followers saw Him leave, everyone will see Him coming in clouds of glory back to earth (Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7). Zechariah prophesied that the Lord will come and His “holy ones with him” (Zechariah 14:5). Paul referred to Christ’s earthly reign when he wrote, “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25). In this kingdom, even the created order will come under His peaceful rule as “the wolf will live with the lamb,” and creation will be in harmony (Isaiah 11:6–7).

Fundamental Truth 14 also affirms that Jesus’ coming includes a future for Israel. Drawing from Paul’s promise that “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26–27), it notes that the reign of Christ will mean the “salvation of national Israel.” In affirming this, it does not mean that Jewish people today do not need Christ as Savior and Messiah. The Assemblies of God has long emphasized evangelism among the Jewish people. This line affirms that Christ’s future messianic kingdom will bring salvation to Jewish people as promised in the Old Testament because they will accept Jesus as Messiah.

⁹ Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

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While respecting that other Bible-believing traditions may interpret the Millennium in different ways, the Assemblies of God has always held that premillennialism best affirms the core beliefs in the imminent return of Christ, the resurrection of the Church, the fulfillment of biblical promises regarding the messianic kingdom, and all other events leading to a renewed creation (Revelation 21–22). The Church bears witness to the reign of Christ but must never act as if it *is* the reign of Christ on the earth. Whenever the Church has assumed power in place of Christ, the result has been a historic disaster for the witness of the gospel.

Guidance for Pastors

The doctrines of the Blessed Hope and the millennial reign are essential pillars of our Assemblies of God doctrine. For generations, the Holy Spirit has inspired believers to expect and long for the imminent return of Christ. This belief has motivated reaching the lost, launching ministries, and sending missionaries to the ends of the earth to reach people for Christ.

Unfortunately, our long history of focusing on the end times includes unhealthy prophetic speculation. End-time controversies and failed predictions have led to exhaustion in some ministers, discouraging them from preaching about eschatology. At times, pastors have avoided the topic altogether rather than face the minefield of divergent eschatological beliefs. There is a great danger that ministers and teachers may be avoiding one of the Assemblies of God's distinctive doctrines altogether. Eschatology is too important to allow the extremes of speculation or outright neglect to determine our message. Because of this, we recommend the following.

Trust in the Bible's promise that Jesus is coming again.

There are many ways to interpret Scripture, but the truth of His coming and the future resurrection is a divine promise from a God who does not lie. Throughout church history, the creeds and doctrines of orthodox Christianity have affirmed this belief. It remains a core belief of the Assemblies of God.

Focus on the hope of Christ's coming.

We call His coming "the Blessed Hope" because of our hope that Christ will raise us from the dead. We have hope that Christ will reverse the injustice and sin of the world when He establishes His kingdom of peace on earth. Our world needs this hope. Our ministers can use our eschatological doctrines to preach hope in our churches.

Avoid misusing the promise of Christ's return.

At times, Christian teachers and ministers have taught about Jesus' return to inspire fear rather than hope. By preaching this hope as a warning for those who will be "left behind," these leaders have used the doctrine of Jesus' return to preach judgment rather than salvation. Paul admonished us to "encourage one another" with this promise (1 Thessalonians 4:18). It is inappropriate to use the doctrine of Christ's return as a way of controlling behavior by scaring people about missing His return rather than proclaiming it to inspire hope (and allowing that encouragement to motivate). It is appropriate to warn

people about the consequences of rejecting Jesus, which is why we preach the doctrine of hell.

Do not allow the details to detract from the main thing.

Prophetic predictions, charts, and debates about the details can be interesting. However, they are often a distraction from the main message. It is important not to let debatable details distract from the important core belief in Christ's coming. The imminent return of Jesus motivates, encourages, and unites us in our mission.

Show charity to other believers in disagreements over eschatology.

The Assemblies of God has defined the boundaries of its eschatology with the formulation of the Statement of Fundamental Truths. However, the Statement of Fundamental Truths does not set the boundaries for being a Christian. We recognize that Christians can disagree on matters that are not essential to salvation, even if it involves the interpretation of Scripture. Eschatology matters, but not all Christians hold the same beliefs about eschatology. God has called all Christians to show charity to one another because of who we are in Christ Jesus despite our disagreements. Premillennialists, postmillennialists, and amillennialists can all hope in and proclaim the return of Jesus and the resurrection of all believers.

The coming of Christ is our Blessed Hope. As a Fellowship, our responsibility is to "have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8) so strongly that we never cease to proclaim the message. After all, the Spirit stirs us to join in the divine chorus of the Bride: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).