

On the EFCA's Change to Our Statement of Faith, about Christ's Return

This fall we will be voting to affirm the EFCA's newest Statement of Faith. The biggest change only involves a few words. In Article 9, the Statement no longer speaks of Christ's "premillennial" return, but instead his "glorious" return. I'm writing here to give you more of an explanation, so that you as a member can make an informed decision.

There are three basic reasons for the change from "premillennial" to the more ambiguous word "glorious":

1. Unity across a wider spread of "orthodoxy"
2. Generational shifts
3. God's intended purpose for eschatology

Before I discuss each of those, we should define what we mean by "eschatology." It means the study and understanding of the "last things", those events which will precede the return of Christ, the resurrection of humanity and the final judgment.

Let me take each of the above reasons for this change in turn:

1. The church possesses first a given unity, before we have an actual unity. We ARE united together (Eph. 4:4), and thus we are to grow into what we already are (Eph. 4:13, 14) - "mature manhood" - and one of the ways we will do this is by coming to a unity in eschatology, as well as a general unity.

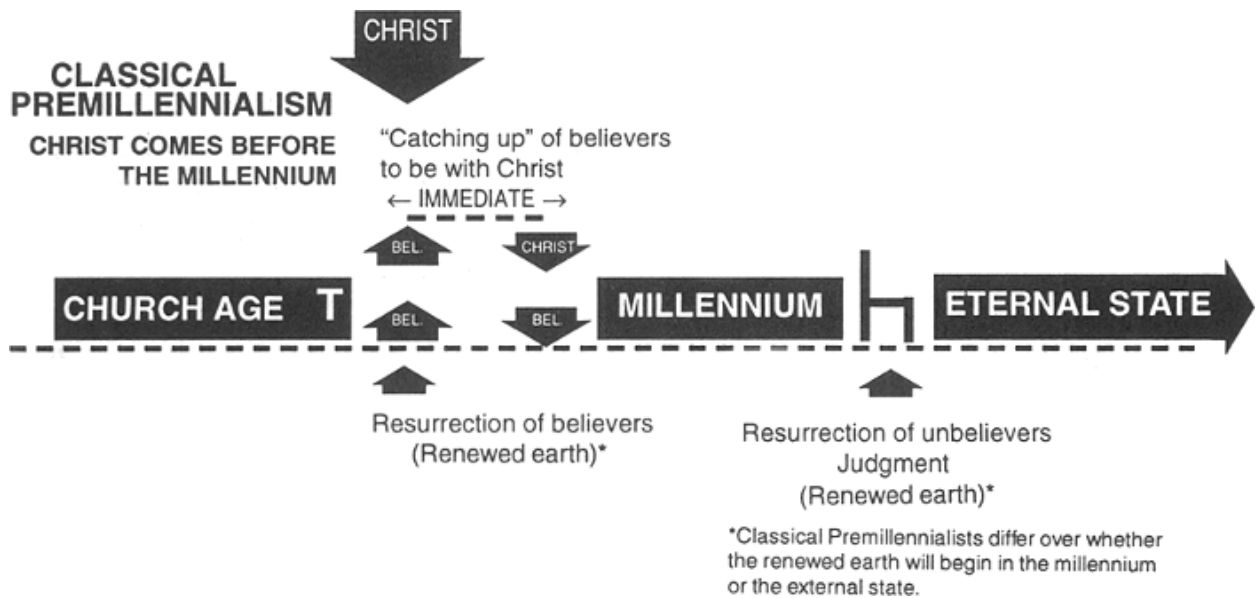
It is my own view and the view of others that in the coming decades, Christians may very well need to unite across prior dividing lines, in order to endure and mutually support and aid one another. We will need the strength found in unity.

There are three basic views on eschatology which are all within the scope of what we would call "orthodox" or non-heretical Christianity. In other words, people that we will spend eternity with, that we are to grow in unity with, hold three differing views on the end. These three views, with one of them split out into two common variations, are displayed below.

In all of these, “T” refers to the Tribulation (see, for instance, Rev. 7:14), and the chair symbol refers to the judgment seat of Christ (see, for instance, 2 Cor. 5:10 and Rev. 20:4). Take a look (all charts taken from Grudem’s “Systematic Theology”, with a few adjustments by me):

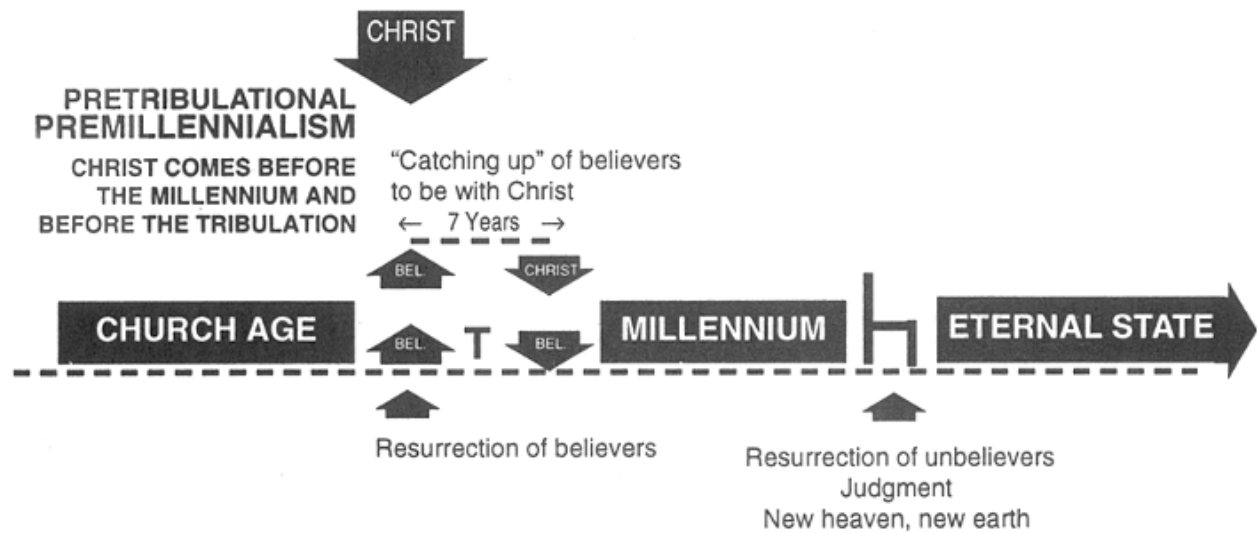
Premillennialism

- Historic or Classic



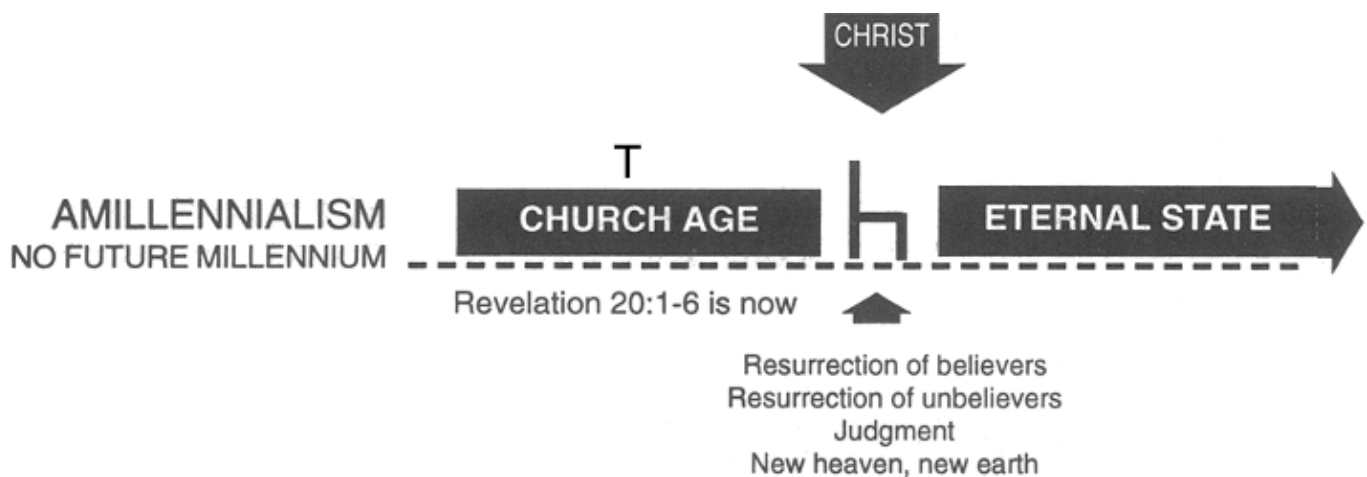
This is the oldest view, held by many of the early church fathers (thus the name “Historic” or Classic.) Tribulation occurs throughout the church age, and is at its worst at the end. In my view, that’s in response to the advance of the church in this age. Notice the numerous similarities between this view and the next one.

- Dispensational or Pretribulational



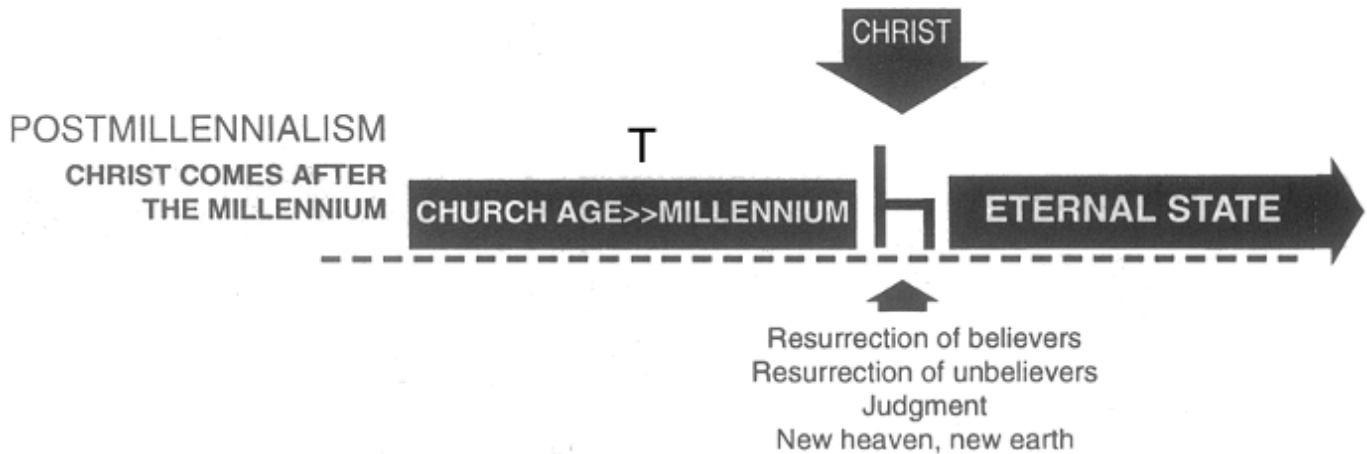
This is the youngest view, having come into existence in the early to mid 1800's. There is variation within this view about where to place the "T" for tribulation. This view holds to two "returns" of Christ and maintains a clear distinction between the church and Israel. God will gather in ethnic Israel during the tribulation.

Amillennialism



This view is less common than the premillennial views but is on the rise. It views the millennium to be the church age, and considers tribulation to occur throughout the church age/millennium. Amillennialism views the "first resurrection" of Rev. 20:5 as the resurrection of Christ, when many rose from the tombs with him.

Postmillennialism



This view is the least common at present, but was once the most popular - before the two world wars. It is the most optimistic of the four, because it believes the church ushers in the millennium, as the gospel spreads among the nations. Tribulations in various but declining forms are expected throughout this age.

Look again at the charts above and notice how many similarities there are between each view, especially when you remove the words. Proponents of each view ground their support for their view in Scripture. This is why Christians throughout the centuries have charitably held that all four views are “orthodox” or “Christian.”

2. The second reason has to do with two generational shifts in the last 30 years.

The first shift is a move from dispensational premillennialism, to a more even distribution among younger Christians between the dispensational, historic and amillennial views. And lately there’s been a resurgence in postmillennialism.

The second is from a vigorous interest in eschatology to eschatological agnosticism (“I’m pan-millennial; it’s all going to pan out in the end.”) I have a good friend who “swore off” eschatology altogether, after witnessing a shouting match in front of the church over different views. He said, “If this is what eschatology is all about, then count me out.” Many in younger generations hold such a view.

3. The third reason behind this change is God’s intended purpose for eschatology: our own blessing. Eschatology is meant to create “hooks” for our hope to “hang on,” that we would endure to the end, and receive ultimate, infinite blessing. This is what my friend

was missing out on, sadly. By “counting out” eschatology altogether, he was short-changing himself of this hope and blessing.

This goal of eschatology is stated simply and clearly in Rev. 22:7: “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (emphasis mine). The purpose is bless us with a strong, jolly hope that will enable us to endure to the end, and experience the glory of life in full in Christ.

Thus we should hold our eschatology with a jolly humility toward ourselves, and unity-seeking charity toward others. When people hear us talk about eschatology, they should say of us, “I’m not sure I agree, but I would sure enjoy having a beer with that guy.” In other words, our eschatology should come out of us in the form of joy and strength that is winsome and attractive, not divisive and repulsive.

For these reasons, I too am in favor of this change, even though my own view is premillennial. Personally, I didn’t need the change, but I think Christ’s Church does.

Now, here are some further thoughts, not necessarily in any order, that others have found helpful on this subject.

On Christian unity. One of the “mistakes” or “errors” that Christians have made through the centuries is how they responded when they “won.” Two examples would be in the fifth century, when Constantine suddenly made the Roman Empire explicitly and officially “Christian,” and the second was during the Puritan Reformation in England, after King Charles was beheaded and Oliver Cromwell became the Lord Protector of the realm.

In the case of Constantine, the Church was simply not ready to take the reigns. It had not matured sufficiently yet to know how to devise a merely Christian civilization out of the pagan Roman one. In the case of the Puritans, they drove into the opposite ditch, and imposed too many narrowly sectarian “laws” upon the new structures of the land.

In my view and others, when (not if, but when) Christians “win” again, it will be necessary to impose this “merely Christian” order - one that is biblical and clear and unapologetically submitted to the royal law of Christ, and yet does not go so far as to become sectarian, in the sense of it must be “Presbyterian,” or “Baptist,” or “Free Church” or “Anglican” or whatever.

It will not be easy - it will require maturity, for the church, as a whole - but this “merely Christian” order will be necessary. And thus I believe this change to our Statement of Faith, though it is a change to a more ambiguous word, will be more useful for when the Church “wins” again.

On the nature of our Statement of Faith. It is important to remember that this document is first a statement of unity, not a statement of comprehensive belief. It’s first purpose is not to declare everything that is important to believe, and what those beliefs are. It’s first function is to provide a document around which Christians of varying other beliefs may unite around, while allowing for charitable diversity on those issues not spoken of in the document.

Therefore, it is important to remember that we not changing our belief, nor requiring anyone else to change their belief. We are instead expanding the scope of unity, enlarging the circle in which we will unite with other brothers and sisters. Part of this is surely pragmatic: in a declining culture, there is the tendency to then widen the scope so as to survive. And you know, survival is a good thing.

But then our task is to see what the Statement says, at the level of our church, and as households and individuals, and ask if we find what it says to be true for ourselves! Do I personally find his return GLORIOUS?

It has been said that some people are no earthly good because they are too heavenly-minded. But I think the reverse is more often the case: that we are no earthly good because we are not heavenly-minded enough. The change of wording is actually a challenge for all of us: when it was “premillennial,” did we find that “glorious” then? Or just another theological word? Was it something that defined our lives today, or was it just one of the names for “our team”?

On maturing, as an “us”. So perhaps this change, as much as anything, is a challenge to us, to consider how we, as a church and households, view the return of Christ. After all, it has always been easy to get things wrong about Jesus’ return.

In just the last 50 years, there have been a number of false detours and cul-de-sacs about the end times. And yes, we are called to mature as individuals. But we are also called to mature as a church, as an “us”. This is why Paul writes passages like 2 Thessalonians 2 to the whole church there - that they would mature together.

This too is part of our sanctification: in maturing in our understanding of the end times, especially in HOW we hold our beliefs - whether for ourselves only, or in love with others. This maturing

process will look like many things, but I'm convinced it will always look like a growing, infectious and jolly HOPE, in you and me, in our households, and in our church.

But it will also look like a loving curiosity, a listening ear, about what the other thinks on eschatology, especially when they appear to be less mature. Maturity looks like seeking to create MORE unity, not less, without dilution of the glorious truths we believe. As you listen to others, you may find - as I often do - your own view only reinforced, not diluted. But your listening ear will also create a safe atmosphere for the other person to hear their own views out loud, express their own experiences with eschatology, and perhaps refine their views, and grow in them.

This change is an opportunity for all of us to mature together as disciples of Christ, as households in Christ, and as a church headed by Christ. This church, your household, you - they were all bought with a price, his own life. Let us continue to labor to build up this body of His into Him, who is our glorious head (Eph. 4:15).