36. The Rapture and end times

Often heard: "Are you ready for the Rapture?" (Left Behind)
Also heard: "No Christian taught a secret rapture before Darby in the 1830s."

Pre-tribulation rapture and earthly millennium

HELD BY Baptist many, not all

Many (not all) Baptists hold a pre-tribulation rapture: Christ will secretly remove believers before a seven-year tribulation, then return to reign on earth for a literal 1,000 years, with God keeping separate plans for Israel and the Church (dispensationalism).

VERSES CITED

1 Thess 4:16–17; 1 Cor 15:51–52; John 14:2–3; Matt 24:40–41; Dan 9:24–27; Rev 3:10; 20:1–6.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren (1830s). It spread through the Scofield Reference Bible (1909), Dallas Theological Seminary (1924), Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the *Left Behind* novels (1995–2007). Many Reformed Baptists reject it.

One return of Christ, then resurrection and judgment

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox · Lutheran · Reformed no fixed millennial scheme · Anglican millennial views vary · Methodist millennial views vary

Christ will return once, visibly and gloriously, followed by the general resurrection and final judgment. The "thousand years" of Rev 20 is generally read as the present reign of Christ with His saints. The phrase "to meet the Lord in the air" uses the word *apantēsis*, for citizens going out to welcome a visiting king and escort him back into the city (as in Acts 28:15), not for being taken away. The Church will pass through a final trial before the end.

VERSES CITED

Matt 24:29–31; 25:31–46; John 5:28–29; Acts 1:11; 28:15; 1 Thess 4:16–17; 2 Thess 2:1–12; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 20.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Some early writers held an earthly millennium after Christ's return (Papias; Justin, *Dialogue* 80–81; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.32–36), but none of them taught a pre-tribulation rapture. Pretribulationists cite a Latin sermon ascribed to Ephrem ("Pseudo-Ephraem," dated anywhere from the 4th to the 7th century, most scholars favouring the late 6th or 7th), which says the elect are gathered "prior to the tribulation" and "taken to the Lord" lest they see the world's confusion; critics answer that it is late and

does not separate this gathering from Christ's final coming. Augustine (*City of God* 20.7–9, c. 425) read the millennium as the present age, and that became the standard view.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 668–682 (esp. 675–677; 676 rejects millenarianism).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Christ will return once, visibly and in glory, followed by the general resurrection and the final judgment; the Church must first pass through a final trial, and the Catechism rejects millenarianism, even in modified forms. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 668-682, esp. 675-677 (676 on millenarianism) (vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P1V.HTM).

Orthodox

The Creed confesses that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and that His kingdom will have no end. St Philaret's Longer Catechism teaches one return in glory, preceded by signs including the coming of Antichrist, then a general resurrection in which the living are changed in a moment, and the last judgment. Orthodox dogmatic theologians such as Michael Pomazansky hold that the Council of Constantinople (381) excluded chiliasm. There is no rapture doctrine.

Sources: Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, art. 7 and 11-12; Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q226-237 (seventh article), Q366-373 (eleventh article), Q378-384 (twelfth article) (azbyka.ru English text); Council of Constantinople I (381), canon 1 (anathema on Marcellians, Apollinarians) (newadvent.org/fathers/3808.htm); M. Pomazansky, Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, section 'The Error of Chiliasm' (orthochristian.com/86555.html).

Lutheran

The Augsburg Confession teaches that at the end of the world Christ will appear to judge, raise all the dead, give the godly eternal life and condemn the ungodly, and it rejects "certain Jewish opinions" that the godly will take over the kingdoms of the world before the

Reformed

The Westminster Confession teaches that God has appointed a day when the world will be judged in righteousness by Jesus Christ, the righteous entering everlasting life and the wicked eternal torments; the day is hidden so that believers stay watchful. The Second Helvetic

resurrection. The Missouri Synod's Brief Statement rejects "every type of millennialism, or Chiliasm," teaching one resurrection and a Last Day whose time stays unknown. Lutheran confessions have no rapture doctrine.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XVII (bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/article-xvii); A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod (1932), section 42 'Of the Millennium' (projectwittenberg.org mosynod doct-16).

Confession condemns "Jewish dreams" of a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment. Beyond this the Reformed confessions fix no millennial scheme and teach no rapture.

Sources: Westminster Confession of Faith 33.1-3 (opc.org/wcf.html); Second Helvetic Confession (1566) ch. 11, sections 'Christ is truly ascended into heaven' and 'The Sects' (ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm).

Anglican

The Thirty-Nine Articles confess, with the Creeds, that the risen Christ sits in heaven "until he return to judge all Men at the last day." The Edwardine Forty-Two Articles of 1553 (XLI) had rejected the millenarian "fable," but that article was dropped in the Elizabethan revision, and the Articles now say nothing about a millennium or a rapture. Anglicans are therefore free to hold differing views on the millennium.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles IV (churchofengland.org/liturgy/book-of-common-prayer/articles-religion); Forty-Two Articles (1553) XLI, in P. Schaff, Creeds of Christendom vol. 1, section on the Thirty-Nine Articles (ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds1.ix.vi.iv.html).

Methodist

The Methodist Articles of Religion confess that Christ sits in heaven "until he return to judge all men at the last day" and set no millennial view. Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, which United Methodism counts among its doctrinal standards, read Revelation 20 as describing "two distinct thousand years," the first ending before the end of the world. Methodists today hold varied views on the millennium.

Sources: Methodist (UMC) Articles of Religion III (umc.org/en/content/articles-of-religion); John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Rev 20:2, 20:4 (ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.xxviii.xxi.html); J. L. Topolewski, 'Resolution of Intent: A Case Study in Legislative Process', Methodist History 40:2 (2002) (on the Notes as doctrinal standards).

Baptist

Many, though not all, Baptists hold a dispensational pre-tribulation rapture followed by a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth; others, including many Reformed Baptists, reject it, and the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 affirms Christ's personal, visible return, the

resurrection and the judgment without naming a millennial view. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Chapter text above; Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Art. X 'Last Things' (bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000).

Where it gets contested: Early premillennialism is real, and those who hold an earthly millennium, such as many Baptists, can cite Irenaeus and Justin for it, though not for a pre-tribulation rapture.

Hell and the last judgment

Every tradition here confesses a last judgment; they differ chiefly over whether punishment is endless.

Catholic: hell is "definitive self-exclusion" from God, and it is eternal; God predestines no one to it (CCC 1033–1037). **Orthodox:** unbelievers and transgressors go to "everlasting fire" and torment (Longer Catechism Q 383; Synod of Jerusalem 1672, decree 18). Canon 11 of Constantinople II (553) names Origen among the heretics. Fifteen anathemas against Origenism, the first condemning the "monstrous restoration," are usually attached to that council, though scholars dispute whether it or a synod of 543 adopted them; Justinian's anathemas condemn the claim that punishment will end in an *apokatastasis*. Gregory of Nyssa, venerated as a saint, taught that evil will at last be purged away (*On the Soul and the Resurrection*), and some modern Orthodox, such as Kallistos Ware, call universal salvation a hope, not a doctrine. **Lutheran:** the Augsburg Confession condemns those who teach "an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils" (XVII). **Reformed:** the wicked "shall be cast into eternal torments" (Westminster 33.2). **Anglican:** the Athanasian Creed in the Prayer Book sends evildoers "into everlasting fire." The Forty-Two Articles of 1553 condemned universal salvation (art. 42); the Elizabethan revision dropped the article. A Doctrine Commission report, *The Mystery of Salvation* (1995), described hell as final non-being rather than endless torment, but Canon A 5 places the Church's doctrine in the Articles, Prayer Book and Ordinal. **Methodist:** Wesley preached that the torment has no end (sermon 73, "Of Hell"); the United Methodist Confession of Faith speaks of "endless condemnation" (art. XII). **Baptist:** the unrighteous go to "everlasting punishment" (BF&M art. X). Some evangelicals hold annihilationism or conditional immortality; the Anglican John Stott tentatively argued for annihilation in *Essentials* (1988).

See Purgatory, prayer for the dead, indulgences.

Millennial views

- **Amillennialism:** the "thousand years" of Rev 20 is the present reign of Christ; held by Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans and many Reformed.
- **Historic premillennialism:** Christ returns before an earthly millennium, with the Church passing through the tribulation; held by some early writers (Papias, Justin, Irenaeus) and some Baptists.

- **Dispensational premillennialism:** a pre-tribulation rapture, then tribulation and a literal millennium; dates to Darby in the 1830s and is common among Baptists.
- **Postmillennialism:** the gospel will gradually Christianize the world before Christ returns; common among 18th–19th-century Protestants.

Last reviewed November 10, 2026