

GOD'S PLAN UNFOLDS

Part 12

*God's Plan Unfolds: The Kingdom in
Early Church History*

Through the centuries, the Church has tended to interpret God's kingdom through the lens of their social context

- Persecution
- Prosperity
- Hermeneutics
- Extreme beliefs

GOD'S PLAN UNFOLDS, PART 12 - MESSAGE

DIFFERENT VIEWS AMONG CHRISTIANS

“The difficult nature [of these issues] requires that we listen intently to the text and to one another”

(Jason Meyer, *Progressive Covenantalism*, eds. Stephen Wellum & Brent Parker, p. 97)

Conquest or Edification?

- ▶ Listen to acquire understanding (Prov 18:15)
- ▶ Ask heart-level questions to listen constructively (Prov 20:5)

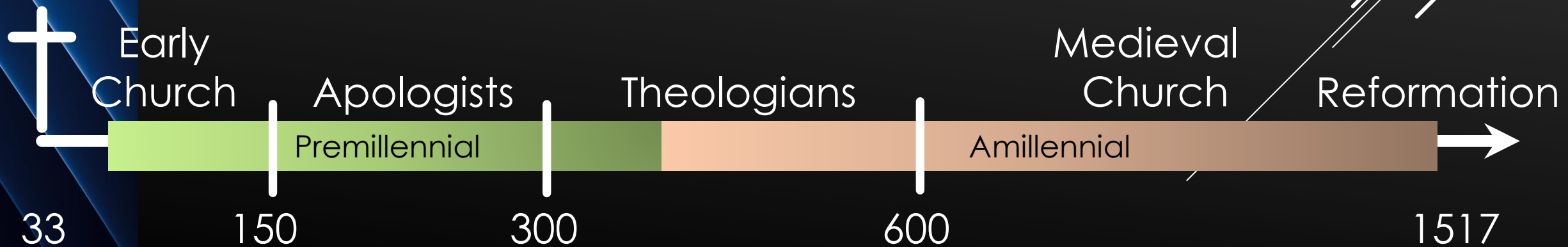
Draw out their worldview, guiding principles, goals, motives, desires [“counsel” in 20:5]

WHAT IS YOUR GOAL IN DISCUSSING THEOLOGY?

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Early Church Fathers

- ▶ Earliest Church Fathers (A. D. 100 – 150)
- ▶ The Apologists (A. D. 150 – 300)
- ▶ The Theologians (A.D. 300 – 600)
- ▶ Medieval Christianity (A. D. 600 – 1500)



THE KINGDOM IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

I. Historical difficulties in understanding end times passages

“No doctrine has been so influenced by sociological context than the interpretation of the Second Coming...the experiences of God’s people—times of suffering or times of prosperity—have provided a lens through which they have read the Bible”

(John Hannah, *Our Legacy*, p. 305)

STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS IN EACH VIEW

“It is most probably not the case that one view is solely correct and biblical, whereas the others are totally false. Consequently, true progress toward a consensus on the question of the millennium is possible only as we come to see the strengths and weaknesses of each of the various systems...[moving] the entire question to a deeper level”

(Stanely Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, p. 24)



THE KINGDOM IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

II. The Early Church Fathers (A. D. 100-600)

Earliest fathers (A. D. 100-150)

“The earliest writers after the apostles understood that Christ would return to earth and physically reign before the Final Judgment” (John Hannah, *Our Legacy*, p. 306)

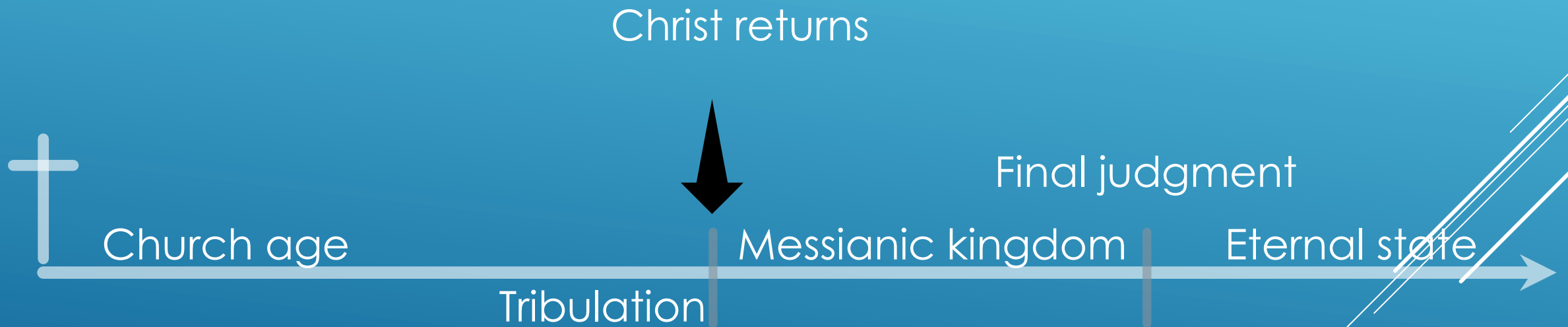
Premillennialist – Papias (c. 60 – c. 130) a disciple of the apostle John

EARLY PREMILLENNIALISM

Premillennialists “anticipate that Jesus will be physically present on the earth to exercise world dominion during his thousand-year reign...Satan will be restrained from exercising influence over human affairs...the millennium arrives solely as the gift of divine grace and only after a catastrophic act of God that brings the present eon to a close”

(Stanely Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, p. 25-6)

- ▶ **Messianic Kingdom: future, literal, King on earth**
- ▶ **Second Coming: Jesus returns before (Pre-mill) kingdom begins**
- ▶ **Tribulation: Great Tribulation 7 years before Jesus returns**



PREMILLENNIALISM – EARLY CHURCH

THE KINGDOM IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

II. *The Early Church Fathers (A. D. 100-600)*

The Apologists (A. D. 150-300)

Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) wrote to a Jewish man,

“There is a certain man, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem” and afterward the final judgment (*Dialogue to Trypho* 81, cited in John Hannah, *Our Legacy*, p. 308)



EARLY PREMILLENNIALISM

Circumstances impacted belief:

“In times of persecution, as was the case in the early centuries, the church has looked for a dramatic deliverance from heaven, while in times of peace and triumph, such as that after the third century, the perspective changed to His victory over the church as individuals”

(John Hannah, *Our Legacy*, pp. 307-309)



Origen (c. 185 – c. 254)

- ▶ Heaped scorn on extreme views by some in Premillennialism
- ▶ His Platonism viewed “material things as a shadow of a greater nonphysical significance”
- ▶ He sought a higher, spiritual sense: the kingdom of God is not a place but rather “a maturity of faith and life by believers now...a spiritualized realm in the hearts of God’s people” (Hannah, *Our Legacy*, pp. 307-11)

APOLOGISTS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

THE KINGDOM IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

II. The Early Church Fathers (A. D. 100-600)

The Theologians (A.D. 300 – 600)

Lactantius (c. 250 – c. 325) , Premillennialist, taught one of Constantine's sons

Eusebius (c. 260 – c. 340), bishop of Caesarea, heaped scorn on the Premillennial view

Augustine (354-430)

- ▶ Developed Amillennialism
- ▶ “I myself at one time accepted such an opinion. But when these interpreters say that the rising saints are to spend their time in limitless gormandizing with such heaps of food and drink as not only goes beyond all sense of decent restraint but go utterly beyond belief, then such an interpretation becomes wholly unacceptable save to the carnal-minded” (The City of God, cited in Hannah, Our Legacy, p. 314)

APOLOGISTS IN THE EARLY CHURCH



Variety of views on the millennium

- ▶ 1) *“a specific period of time in the past during which Christ held sway in his church”*
- ▶ 2) *the entire church age*
- ▶ 3) *“the reign of departed saints in the heavenly realm during this age”*
- ▶ 4) *the eternal state*

(Stanley Grenz, The Millennial Maze, p. 25)

AMILLENNIALISM

SHIFT FROM PRE-MILL TO A-MILL

“When centuries rolled by without the return of Jesus Christ, when persecutions ceased, and when Christianity received a sure footing in the Roman Empire and even became the State religion, the passionate longing for the appearance of Jesus Christ very naturally gave way for an adaptation of the Church to its present task. The allegorical interpretation of Scripture...also had a chilling effect on all millennial hopes”

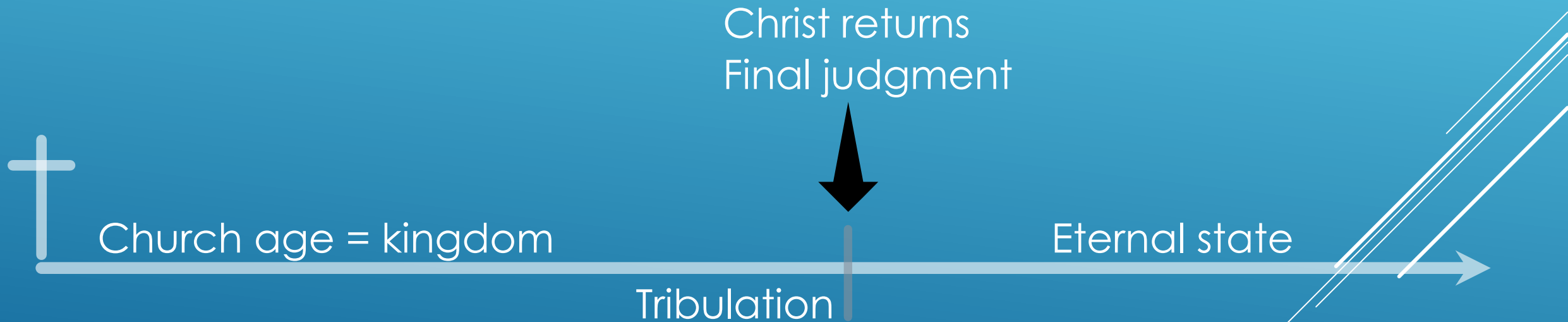
(Louis Berkhof, The History of Christian Doctrines, p. 262)

THE KINGDOM IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

III. Medieval Christianity (A. D. 600 – 1500)

- ▶ Church experienced rapid growth
- ▶ Church wielded great influence over people and kings
- ▶ Augustine's Amillennialism remained the prominent view

- ▶ Messianic Kingdom: not literal (A-mill)
- ▶ Messianic Kingdom: now, spiritual reign, King in heaven
- ▶ Second Coming: Jesus returns after “kingdom” age is complete
- ▶ Tribulation: Great Tribulation or things get progressively worse



AMILLENNIALISM – EARLY CHURCH