



EARLY CHURCH WRITINGS GENERALLY DO NOT SUPPORT DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM AS TAUGHT BY SOME TODAY

Various authors have written that millennial dispensationalism was the dominant position embraced by the early church fathers. This is then repeated as dogma. Walter C. Kaiser is an example in this regard when he wrote “nearly everybody will agree that the major millennial view of the early church in its first three or so centuries was a premillennial position.”¹

David Allen declared categorically: “Premillennialism was the dominant position among the ante-Nicene church fathers.”² Many dispensational authors cite as a reference a 1977 Dallas Theological Seminary Th.M. thesis by Alan Patrick Boyd on the topic of: “A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (until the Death of Justin Martyr).” But what did Boyd write about this in his thesis? What Boyd wrote is markedly different from those who typically quote him as a source for millennial dispensational views of the early church fathers. **In fact, Boyd generally concludes the opposite!** Reviewing the writings of the church fathers directly gives the same overall conclusion as Boyd.

True, several early Christian writers — notably Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Barnabas, and Clement were millennialists who believed that Christ’s Second Coming would lead to a visible, earthly reign. **But the millennialism they embraced was vastly different from that taught by modern dispensationalists.** In fact, the idea of a millennium was about the only feature they had in common with today’s teaching. The early church fathers differed greatly from the more recent teachings of John Darby, the Scofield Bible, and professors at the Dallas Theological Seminary such as the late John F. Walvoord and the late Charles C. Ryrie.

The early church fathers taught the “antichrist” would spread false doctrine about Jesus—not that he would be a worldwide political leader. They wrote the false prophet would claim “to be a son of God”, not that he would claim to really be God. Those early church fathers did not hold to distinctively modern and dispensationalist beliefs. The early church fathers did not believe in a rapture before a time of tribulation. Instead, they consistently taught the church would go through a time of tribulation to test their faith.

The early church fathers, whether millennialist or otherwise, believed that the church was the new Israel and that Christians — consisting of both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Romans 10:12) — had replaced the Jews as God’s chosen people. They certainly taught Jews could be saved, **but only through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus**, and no other way. In other words, they did not see the church and Israel as distinct dispensations. They believed in prophecy, but used the New Testament writings to interpret Old Testament Scriptures.

¹ Walter Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching the Last Things: Old Testament Eschatology for the Life of the Church*, Page 143, 2011

² David Allen, “The Millennial Reign of Christ,” in *The Return of Christ: A Premillennial Perspective*, Page 75, edited by David L. Allen & Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2011)

SUMMARY TABLE OF EARLY CHURCH FATHER'S ESCHATOLOGY WRITINGS

Early Church Father	Lifetime Period AD	Salvation Distinction Between Israel and the Church?	Describe a Literal Millennial Kingdom?	Millennial Kingdom Location on Earth?	Belief in Pre-Trib Rapture?
1 Clement	35-99	Church is Israel	Yes	Earth	No
2 Clement	35-99	Church is Israel	Yes	Earth	No
Barnabas	??-61	Church is Israel	Yes	Earth	No
Didache	90	Church is Israel	No	None	No
Ignatius	35-107	Silent	Yes	Silent	No
Irenaeus	130-202	Church is Israel	Yes	Earth	No
Papias	60-130	Silent	No	None	Silent
Hermas	90-140	Church is Israel	No	None	No
Polycarp	69-155	Silent	No	None	No
Aristides	??-133	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent
Justin Martyr	100-165	Church is Israel	Yes	Earth	No
Summary		The Church and Israel have Same Route for Salvation--No Distinction	Most Believed in Some Type of Millennial Kingdom	Millennial Kingdom Location Generally on Earth	No Rapture Before Great Tribulation
Early Church Father	Church Must Go Through a Great Tribulation?	Resurrection Timing Difference Between Believers and Unbelievers?	Judgment Timing Difference Between Believers and Unbelievers?	Judgment at the Time When Jesus Returns?	Judgment Occurs When Universe Re-Created?
1 Clement	Silent	Silent	Silent	Yes	Yes
2 Clement	Silent	Silent	Silent	Yes	Yes
Barnabas	Yes	Silent	Silent	Yes	Yes
Didache	Yes	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent
Ignatius	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent
Irenaeus	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Papias	Silent	Yes	Silent	Silent	Silent
Hermas	Yes	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent
Polycarp	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent	Silent
Aristides	Silent	Silent	Silent	Yes	Yes
Justin Martyr	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Summary	Church Will Be Exposed to Great Tribulation	Resurrection Timing Difference for Believers and Unbelievers Generally Believed	Judgment for Believers and Unbelievers at Same Time	Judgment Occurs at the Time When Jesus Returns	Judgment Occurs When Universe Re-Created

ALAN PATRICK BOYD'S 1977 THESIS STUDY AT DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

At Dallas Theological Seminary Charles Ryrie and John Walvoord were the major teachers of dispensationalism. Dr. Charles Ryrie of Dallas Seminary fame had boldly written "Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church." In 1977 Boyd's thesis was to determine whether or not early Christian authors (some of which were in direct contact with Apostles) affirmed or were even aware of the dispensational premillennial perspective as advocated by Dallas Theological Seminary professors Charles Ryrie and John Walvoord.

Boyd stated the purpose of his work succinctly: *"The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether Dr Ryrie's 'premillennialism' is similar to, or dissimilar to, the premillennialism exhibited in some of the patristic writings under consideration."*³

Boyd found the early authors did employ a generally literal interpretation of the biblical text. He found a distinction between Israel and the church was missing. Dispensationalism, as articulated by contemporary authors, was fully absent. Boyd found that all the early authors expected the church to experience a great tribulation. The church would be saved from the wrath of God, but not Satan's tribulation time of testing.

After a close examination of early Christian authors prior to Papias (including 1 Clement, 2 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, Ignatius, and Hermas), **Boyd discovered that the "differences" between them and the premillennial construct of Dr. Ryrie are "profound, and disqualify any claim that pretribulation, dispensational premillennialism existed in any form in the period."**

In fact, Boyd found Dr. Charles Ryrie's statement was not true:

"It is the conclusion of this thesis that Dr. Ryrie 's statement is historically invalid within the chronological framework of this thesis."

"The reasons for this conclusion are as follows: 1) the writers/writings surveyed did not generally adopt a consistently applied literal interpretation; 2) they did not generally distinguish between the Church and Israel; 3) there is no evidence that they generally held to a dispensational view of revealed history; 4) although Papias and Justin Martyr; did believe in a Millennial kingdom, the 1,000 years is the only basic similarity with the modern system (in fact, they and dispensational premillennialism radically differ on the basis for the Millennium); 5) they had no concept of imminent or of a pretribulation Rapture of the Church; 6) in general, their eschatological chronology is not synonymous with that of the modern system."

³ Alan Patrick Boyd, "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (until the Death of Justin Martyr)," Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977, 2.

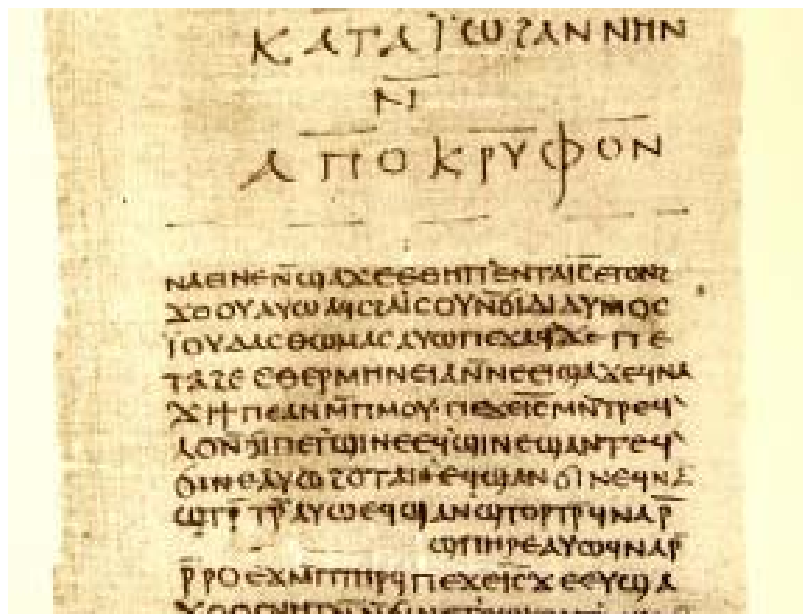
THE DIDACHE ("THE TEACHING OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES") ~ 90 AD

Lost for centuries, a Greek manuscript of the Didache was rediscovered in 1873 by Philotheos Bryennios, Metropolitan of Nicomedia in the Codex Hierosolymitanus. A Latin version of the first five chapters was discovered in 1900 by J. Schlecht. The Didache is considered part of the category of second-generation Christian writings known as the Apostolic Fathers.

The Didache was considered by some of the Church Fathers as part of the New Testament but rejected as non-canonical by others, eventually not accepted into the New Testament canon.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church "broader canon" includes the Didascalia, a work which draws on the Didache.

Most scholars place the Didache at some point during the mid to late first century, but some (John Robinson) argue that it is first generation, dating it in the 40–60 AD time. It is an anonymous work, a pastoral manual "that reveals more about how Jewish-Christians saw themselves and how they adapted their Judaism for gentiles than any other book in the Christian Scriptures."



The Didache is also known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. The first line of this treatise is "The teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles (or Nations) by the twelve apostles". The text, parts of which constitute the oldest extant written catechism, has three main sections dealing with Christian ethics, rituals such as baptism and Eucharist, and Church organization.

The opening chapters describe the virtuous Way of Life and the wicked Way of Death. The Lord's Prayer is included in full. Baptism is by immersion, or by affusion if immersion is not practical. Fasting is ordered for Wednesdays and Fridays. Two primitive Eucharistic prayers are given. Church organization was at an early stage of development. Itinerant apostles and prophets are important, serving as "chief priests" and possibly celebrating the Eucharist.

The Didache reveals how Jewish Christians adapted their practice for Gentile Christians. The Didache is similar in several ways to the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps because both texts originated in similar communities. The opening chapters, which also appear in other early Christian texts, are likely derived from an earlier Jewish source. This close relationship between these two writings might suggest that both documents were created in the same historical and geographical setting.

THE DIDACHE TEACHINGS OF THE LAST DAYS

The Didache teaches that the resurrection of the dead precedes the coming of the Lord, but mentions nothing about a millennium. It does not teach anything about a separate plan of salvation for Israel. It does point out the False Prophet will not claim to be God, or the Son of God, but rather “a son of God.” with *“the world-deceiver shall appear as a son of God; and shall work signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands; and he shall do unholy things, which have never been since the world began.”* The Didache makes the same distinction as Polycarp with the resurrection of the just, but not of all the dead. It seems to indicate a tribulation for all in the church with: *“Then all created mankind shall come to the fire of testing.”*

16:1 Be watchful for your life;

16:2 let your lamps not be quenched and your loins not ungirded, but be ready;

16:3 for you do not know the hour in which our Lord comes.

16:4 And you shall gather yourselves together frequently, seeking what is fitting for your souls;

16:5 for the whole time of your faith shall be of no use to you, if you are not perfected at the last.

16:6 For in the last days the false prophets and destroyers shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate.

16:7 For as lawlessness increases, they shall hate one another and shall persecute and betray.

16:8 And then the world-deceiver shall appear as a son of God;

16:9 and shall work signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands;

16:10 and he shall do unholy things, which have never been since the world began.

16:11 Then all created mankind shall come to the fire of testing, and many shall be offended and perish;

16:12 but those who endure in their faith shall be saved through the Curse itself.

16:13 And then the signs of the truth shall appear;

16:14 first a sign of a rift in the heaven, then a sign of a voice of a trumpet, and thirdly a resurrection of the dead;

16:15 yet not of all, but as it was said:

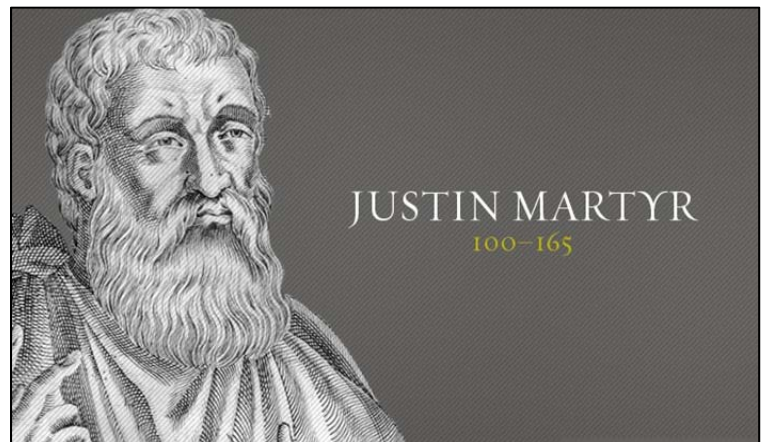
16:16 The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him.

16:17 Then the world will see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.

THE VIEWS OF JUSTIN MARTYR ~100-165

Justin Martyr was an early Christian apologist, and is regarded as the foremost interpreter of the theory of the Logos in the 2nd century. He was martyred, alongside some of his students, and is considered a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Most of his works are lost, but two apologies and a dialogue did survive. The First Apology, his most well known text, passionately defends the morality of the Christian life.



Already in the early second century, Justin Martyr reported Christians held opposing eschatologies. Some believed the earth would be the site of history's final consummation while others regarded heaven as the destination for the righteous. Adherents of these competing views vied for dominance for several centuries before the heaven idea won out, becoming the standard notion most Christians hold right down to the present day. Justin Martyr was a millennialist. He did believe in a literal 1,000 year reign, and believed that dead saints would be resurrected and take part in the millennium.

But it is evident that Justin Martyr's eschatology is dissimilar in fundamental aspects with that of the modern construct, e.g., 1) no rapture; 2) resurrection of Christians at the Second Advent; 3) the fulfillment of the national promises in Christians; 4) a general resurrection; 5) an insignificant millennium; 6) the synchronized timing of the Second Advent and the Day of Judgment; 7) an allegorical basis for the millennium; and 8) the idea that Israel and the church are synonymous.

From these features, it is apparent that the eschatology of Justin Martyr and of dispensational premillennialism are radically dissimilar.

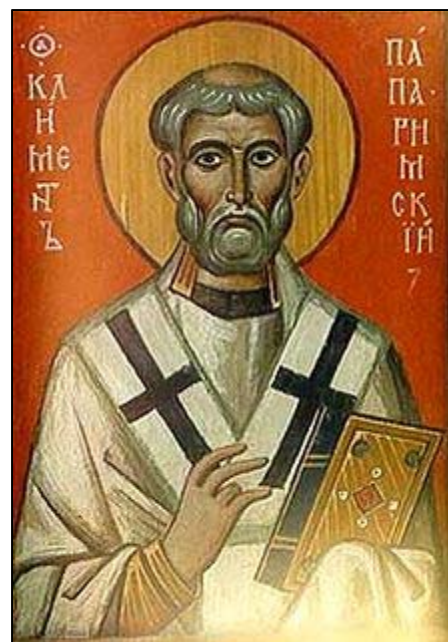
THE VIEWS OF CLEMENT ~35-99 AD

Clement I, also known as Saint Clement of Rome, is listed by Irenaeus and Tertullian as Bishop of Rome, holding office from 88 to his death in 99. He is considered to be the first Apostolic Father of the Church.

Tradition holds that Clement was consecrated by Saint Peter, and he is known to have been a leading member of the church in Rome in the late 1st century. Early church lists place him as the second or third bishop of Rome after Saint Peter.

Clement's only genuine extant writing is his letter to the church at Corinth (1 Clement) in response to a dispute in which certain presbyters of the Corinthian church had been deposed. He asserted the authority of the presbyters as rulers of the church on the ground that the Apostles had appointed such. His letter, which is one of the oldest extant Christian documents outside the New Testament, was read in church, along with other epistles, some of which later became part of the Christian canon.

These works were the first to affirm the apostolic authority of the clergy. A second epistle, 2 Clement, was attributed to Clement, although recent scholarship suggests it to be a homily by another author.



Clement writes of the resurrection (Chapters 24 through 28) and the final judgment (Chapter 35), but makes no mention of a millennium. If Clement, who wrote so much in terms of eschatology, actually believed in an earthly reign of Christ, then it would have been a tremendous oversight for him not to include it. Therefore, it must be concluded that the end times views of Clement of Rome are best described as amillennial.

In “The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians,” Clement makes some claims that deal with the imminent return of Christ. However, he also explains that Christ is going to save the Church from wrath and would return to the temple. Clement summarizes his views in Chapter 23 on the coming of Christ:

“Ye foolish ones! compare yourselves to a tree: take for instance the vine. First of all, it sheds its leaves, then it buds, next it puts forth leaves, and then it flowers; after that comes the sour grape, and then follows the ripened fruit. Ye perceive how in a little time the fruit of a tree comes to maturity. Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, ‘Speedily will He come, and will not tarry;’ and ‘The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.’”

Clement uses language drawing upon classic Scriptural illustrations regarding the Second Coming (E.G. Matt. 24:32-33). He does this to stress that Jesus will both come soon and suddenly. This is the case because Clement attributes the words to God’s will being accomplished. The will is then defined through the quoting of Scripture (Hab. 2:3, Heb. 10:37, Mal. 3:1). How exactly does Clement hold to Christ not tarrying and yet teach that when he comes it will be to His temple? Clement certainly could not have been speaking of Herod’s temple, as this letter was written well after its destruction in 70 AD. Given that there was no temple when Clement wrote this, was Clement saying a temple would have to be built before the Second Coming could occur? How could Christ come: “Speedily will He come, and will not tarry”? Or is Clement more likely referring to the **spiritual temple**, which was in the world at the time of his writing?

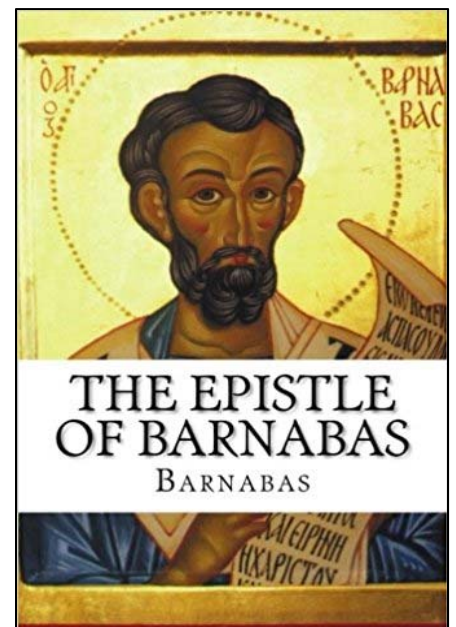
Jesus coming soon and suddenly seems like a teaching on imminency. A prerequisite as significant as the building of a new temple would negate any normative view of Jesus coming soon and suddenly. Thus we must consider the temple Clement wrote about is mostly likely spiritual.

THE VIEWS OF BARNABAS ~??-61 AD

Barnabas, born Joseph, was one of the prominent Christian disciples in Jerusalem. According to Acts 4:36, Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew. Named an apostle in Acts 14:14, he and Paul the Apostle undertook missionary journeys together and defended Gentile converts against the Judaizers. Christian tradition holds that Barnabas was martyred at Salamis, Cyprus, in 61 AD.

Paul and Barnabas traveled together making more converts (45–47 AD), and participated in the Council of Jerusalem (50 AD) Barnabas and Paul successfully evangelized among the "God-fearing" Gentiles who attended synagogues in various Hellenized cities of Anatolia.

Barnabas' story appears in the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul mentions him in some of his epistles. Tertullian named him as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, but this and other attributions are conjecture. Clement of Alexandria and some scholars have ascribed the Epistle of Barnabas to him.



Barnabas did write about a millennium, but he totally disassociated Israel from the precepts of the Old Testament. In fact, he specifically designates the church to be the heir of the covenantal promises made to Israel fulfilled by Jesus (Barnabas 14:4-5, and others).

14: 4 Moses did indeed receive them, but the people were not worthy. So pay attention you! See how we received them? Moses received them as a slave, but YHWH himself gave them to us as the people of his inheritance, having patiently suffered for our sake. 5 And he became public so that (1) they might be complete in their sins, and (2) we, through the heir, might receive the covenant of the Sovereign Yeshua, who was prepared for this function. By personally appearing and redeeming us from the darkness of our hearts, Yeshua could then establish among us the covenant of his people – we who had already paid out for our death, and we who were already given over to the deception of iniquity

THE VIEWS OF POLYCARP ~69-155 AD

Polycarp was a 2nd-century Christian bishop of Smyrna. According to the Martyrdom of Polycarp he died a martyr, bound and burned at the stake, then stabbed when the fire failed to touch him. Polycarp is regarded as a saint and Church Father in the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches. His name 'Polycarp' means 'much fruit' in Greek. It is recorded by Irenaeus, who heard him speak in his youth, and by Tertullian, that Polycarp had been a disciple of John the Apostle.



The sole surviving work attributed to him is Polycarp's letter to the Philippians preserved in Irenaeus' account of Polycarp's life.

In Chapter 7 of Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians, Polycarp mentions the resurrection and the final judgment, but makes no mention of a millennium. He also defines antichrist biblically, not expecting him to be a future, worldwide dictator, but rather one who spreads false doctrine about Christ. (*"For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist; and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross, is of the devil."*)

7 For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist; and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross, is of the devil; and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the firstborn of Satan. Wherefore, forsaking the vanity of many, and their false doctrines, let us return to the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning; watching unto prayer, and persevering in fasting; beseeching in our supplications the all seeing God not to lead us into temptation, as the Lord has said: The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak.