

He Will Come Again to Judge the Living and the Dead

(The Essential Christian Truth About the Nature of End Times)



Is There Some Way to Simplify All This?

Few topics will divide the Christian community as quickly as the issue of “End Times” (known amongst theologians as the study of “eschatology”). Entire denominations have divided over the issue, and many would argue that a particular “eschatology” must be adopted if we are going to claim that we are “Christians”. Well, there ARE some essentials that Christians must adopt related to End Times and it turns out that these essentials are really quite simple and easy to understand. Let’s take a look at some of the theories and interpretations that have been developed over time as people have tried their best to understand what the Bible teaches, and then let’s settle on the ESSENTIAL truth that all of us should hold as Christians...



The Basic Stuff We Know for Sure

Let’s start with the basics, shall we? We would all agree on three things from the start. We would agree that (1) Jesus came and appeared to His followers over 2000 years ago, (2) Jesus will eventually return, and (3) Jesus will someday judge the living and the dead. We know these things based on the clear teaching of the scriptures:



Jesus Came:

For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty (2 Peter 1:16)

Jesus Will Return:

“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go and prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I

will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3)

Jesus Will Judge:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war (Revelation 19:11)



One More Thing We Know

OK, so far we can at least agree on these three simple details! These are details that no Christian would deny, and they are details that were supported and proclaimed by the first believers, the apostles themselves! But there is one more common belief that has been proclaimed from the earliest days of Christianity. It is something called “Millennialism”. Christianity claims that some day Christ will rule over the earth for a millennium (from the Latin word, “Mille”, meaning “one thousand”), which simply describes a thousand year period of time (whether literal from man’s perspective, or figurative from God’s perspective). This claim is made in the scriptures in the book that is most focused on the return of Jesus, the Book of Revelation:



Revelation 20:1-10

I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while. And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.



Two Important Questions

Even if we agree on the idea that Jesus came to earth, will someday return and judge the nations and will reign over the earth for a millennium, there are still a number of details that are uncertain. There is still a lot that has been left to the imagination; there are a number of details that could be “filled in”. In essence there are two questions that could be asked and answered:

- 1) *What will happen before Jesus returns?*
- 2) *What, if anything, will occur between His return and His judging of humanity?*

These two questions have been the topic of much debate, and it turns out that the answers to these questions have divided theologians and believers for many years. Let’s begin a quick survey of how people have tried to respond to these concerns related to End Times.



Three Views of the End

There are three classic ideas about what might take place at the end of time, and these ideas find their source in the writings of the earliest believers, even though the details in these three systems were not completely worked out until much later:

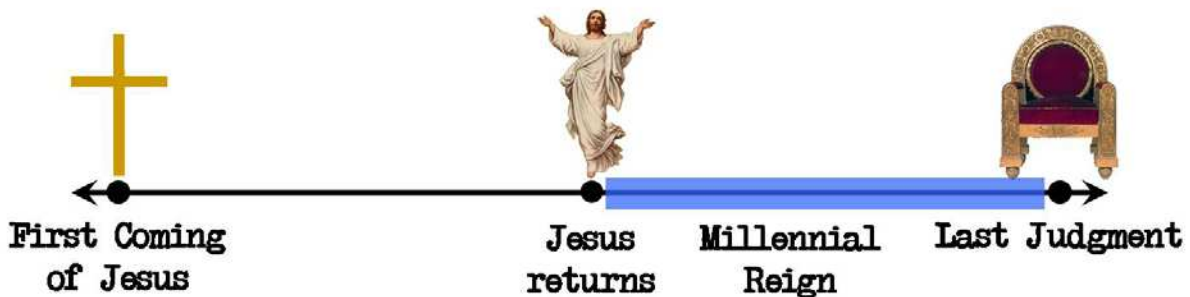
- 1) *Pre-Millennialism*
 - i. *Post- Tribulational Pre-Millennialism*
 - ii. *Mid- Tribulational Pre-Millennialism*
 - iii. *Pre- Tribulational Pre-Millennialism*
- 2) *Post-Millennialism*
- 3) *A-Millennialism*

These three ideas about the end of time have captured the imagination of theologians and believers alike. Let’s examine the three ideas very briefly and see what we can (and should) agree on.



Pre-Millennialism

We’ll start with pre-millennialism as it appears to be perhaps the most widely accepted view of End Times and its foundations run deep in the history of the church.



1 What Does It Propose?

Pre-Millennialism simply claims that Jesus will return PRIOR to what we think of as the “Millennial Reign of Jesus”. In this view, the “Church” is seen as something distinct from the future Kingdom of God. Those who hold to this view of End Times usually refer to the Book of Revelation chapters nineteen and twenty to make a case that Jesus will return and defeat Satan prior to the Millennial Reign:



Revelation 19:10-20:15

...Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf... (vs. 19,20)

Within Pre-Millennialism there are three separate views that have been formed around another concept in the Scripture, the idea of a “Great Tribulation”:



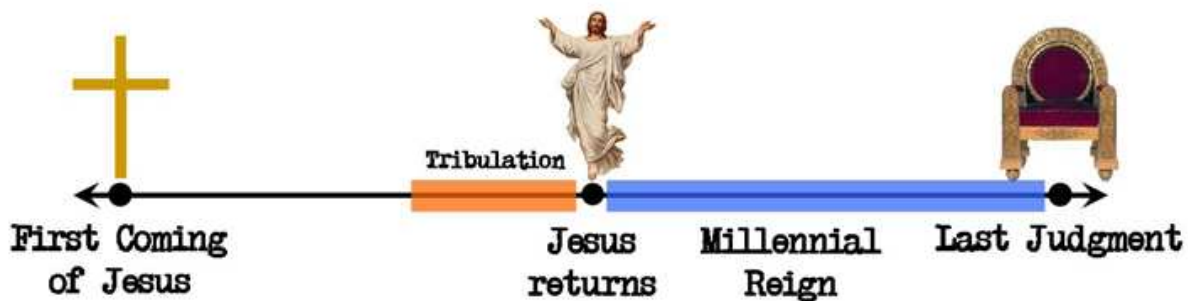
Matthew 24:21

“For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no nor ever shall be”



Revelation 7:14

“These are they which came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”



As a result, Pre-Millennialists have formed into three camps based on when they believe Jesus will return in relationship to the Tribulation:

Post-Tributational Pre-Millennialism

Jesus returns at the end of the tribulation to rapture the church just prior to His Millennial Reign. In this view, believers must suffer through the tribulation along with non-believers.



Matthew 24:6-14

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still

to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Mid-Tribulational Pre-Millennialism

Jesus returns somewhere in the middle of the tribulation to rapture the church after they have experienced some hardship but prior to the worst part of the tribulation and prior to the Millennial Reign

Pre-Tribulational Pre-Millennialism

Jesus returns at the beginning of the tribulation to rapture the church prior to both the tribulation and His Millennial Reign



Isaiah 57:1-2

The righteous man perishes, and no man takes it to heart; and devout men are taken away, while no one understands for the righteous man is taken away from evil, he enters into peace; they rest in their beds, each one who walked in his upright way.



Revelation 3:10

“Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”



Who First Believed This?

Pre-Millennialists argue that their view of End Times is very ancient, tracing back the origins of pre-millennialism to the apostles (without making distinctions between the three distinct types of pre-millennialism). Most historians of Christianity would agree with that, and it can be demonstrated that the very earliest of believers seem to adopt and embrace some form of Pre-Millennialism. Justin Martyr (100-160AD) is among the first to write about the topic.



Who Worked Out the Details?

Over time, the concept of a future Kingdom (that was distinct from the time in which we live) fell out of favor within the Roman Empire, where emperors were not all that eager to embrace the idea that some Kingdom other than the one they controlled was more important to Christian believers! But Pre-millennialism remained as a powerful (if less discussed) theological idea throughout the

Roman Empire and then thrived following the Reformation of the Church in the 16th century. From that time on, thinkers and theologians such as John Milton, John Wesley, Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, Franz Delitzsch, Dean Alford, and Phillip Schaff wrote extensively about the view and helped to make Pre-Millennialism what it is today.



So What's the Bottom Line?

As we try to get to the bottom of the Pre-Millennial view and what it proposes, let's ask and answer three important questions that will help us understand why some people would prefer this view of End Times:

Does History End When Jesus Comes?

No. In this view, Jesus returns first to rapture the Church, and then returns with believers to establish His Reign on earth.

Does the Kingdom of God Prevail Over the Culture of Our World?

Yes. In this view, Jesus returns a second time to establish the Millennial Reign and eliminates the world we know in favor of a future world that is far better. Our culture will be replaced by the Kingdom of God

Can Evil Be Controlled Prior to the Return of Jesus?

No. In this view, the evil we see in our world is to be expected because Jesus has not yet returned to establish His Kingdom. We are patiently enduring the evil we see, waiting for the return of Jesus.

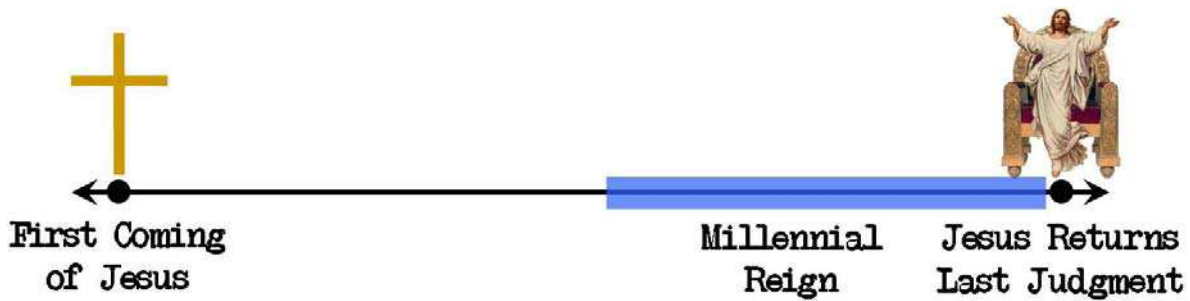
Can you see now why some might interpret the scriptures in a certain way to support this view? Let's face it; we see how much evil there is in our world. Based on the presence of this evil, many cannot accept the idea that we are presently in any sort of millennial reign. The peace and harmony they seek must be something that still lies ahead of us.

And can you also see how this view might impact our present lives? Those who hold this view really have no expectation that evil will be eliminated in our present world. That is something that will only occur when Jesus returns and establishes His Millennial Reign. Many might take this interpretation as license to do nothing about the evil they see around them, and they could justify this inaction based on their view of End Times.



Post-Millennialism

The second major view of End Times that is held by Christian believers is called Post-Millennialism and this view has some support through the history of the Church as well.



1 What Does It Propose?

Post-Millennialism claims that Jesus will return AFTER what we think of as the “Millennial Reign of Jesus”. In this view, the “Church” is the force that gradually brings the Millennium into existence. As time goes by in the Millennium, the Church helps the world become a better place of increasing peace and righteousness. This view holds that the Church is a part of the future Kingdom and is not distinct from it.



Luke 17:20-21

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.”



1 Timothy 4:1-2

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron

2 Who First Believed This?

Post-Millennialists have a difficult time finding their view expressly stated in the writings of the early believers or early church fathers. While bits and pieces of this theology may be found in some of the ideas proposed by early believers, Post-Millennialists usually point to Augustine (354-430AD) as one of the first proponents of the view. Augustine believed that the Church and the Kingdom of God were one in the same and he believed that the Church would continue to grow and influence the world right up until Jesus’ return. For this reason, Post-Millennial believers point to him as a founding thinker in this view of End Times.

3 Who Worked Out the Details?

But Post-Millennialism did not appear in the robust form it has today until much later. The first true Post-Millennial declaration didn’t appear until the 12th century when Joachim of Floris, a Roman Catholic, wrote about the view. He was followed by theologians of the Reformation like Coccejus (1603-1669AD), Witsius

(1636-1708AD), and Jonathan Edwards (1636-1716AD). There are a number of Post-Millennialists that have written in the very recent history of Christianity, such as William Dabney, A. A. Hodge, Charles Hodge, William Shedd, Augustus Strong, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, Loraine Boettner, and R. J. Rushdoony.



So What's the Bottom Line?

As we try to get to the bottom of the Post-Millennial view and what it proposes, let's once again ask and answer the three important questions that have helped us to understand why some people would prefer this view of End Times:

Does History End When Jesus Comes?

Yes. In this view, Jesus does not return until the end of the Millennial Reign to judge the nations. He will not be physically present during the Millennium. Only the Church will be present to influence the world for better.

Does the Kingdom of God Prevail Over the Culture of Our World?

Yes. In this view, the Kingdom is here even before Jesus returns. The world we know is, therefore, impacted by the way that the Church lives and breathes within the world in which we live. The increase of righteousness that is supposed to be seen in the Millennial Reign is possible right now in our world as the Church influences those who are around Her.

Can Evil Be Controlled Prior to the Return of Jesus?

Yes. In this view, evil can be reduced during the Millennial Reign which is actually a time when the Church influences the world for better, even before Jesus returns.

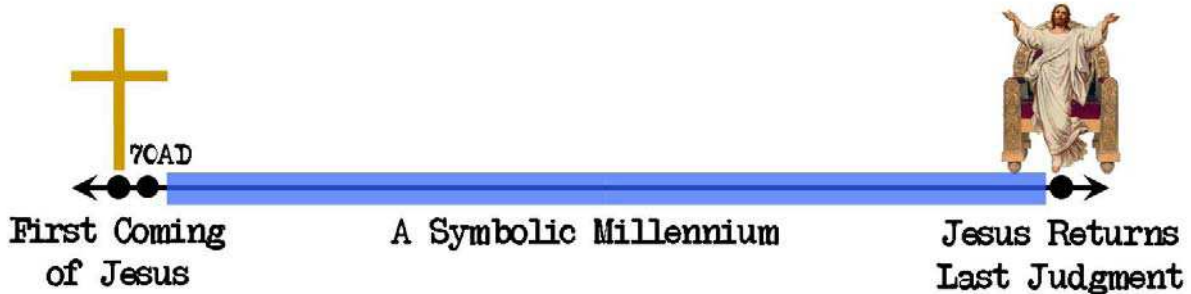
Once again we can see why some might interpret the scriptures in a certain way to support this view. Post-Millennialists would say that their view of End Times has helped them to see the importance of their efforts as Christians to change the world for better right now (in their lifetime). If Post-Millennialism is true, we are slowly bringing the Millennial Reign into existence by our efforts, and we don't really know how far into this Millennial Reign we are today. Our efforts are important; they matter because they are connected to the End Times.

And we can also see how this view might impact our present lives. Those who hold this view see themselves as active participants in the "End Times Story". Many who embrace the "Social Gospel" or who are concerned about social injustices in our world are compelled by this view of End Times. They want to move quickly to be an active participant in the Millennial Reign which they believe will take place even before Jesus returns.



A-Millennialism

Let's end our examination by looking briefly at the third view held by Christians as they try to understand what the Bible teaches about the End Times.



1 What Does It Propose?

A-millennialism claims that there is NO earthly victory of the Kingdom of God in our mortal, physical history. Instead, people who hold this view say that the Old Testament prophecies that describe this victory of God in history have been fulfilled 'spiritually' by the Church in the present age. Many view the destruction described by the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation NOT to be some future Armageddon, but to be a description of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD (This is also known as "Preterism") In the A-Millennial view, the Church is seen as the spiritual fulfillment of the Millennial Kingdom and the Millennium itself is seen as a purely figurative period of time.

2 Who First Believed This?

A-Millennialists also have a difficult time tracing their roots back specifically to the earliest believers. Most would point to an early Jewish philosopher named Philo of Alexandria (20-54AD), who was one of the first to interpret the scriptures allegorically (therefore making it possible to see the Millennium as something other than a true 1,000 year period of time). But Philo was not a Christian and he did not adopt any Christian view of End Times. He did perhaps influence Origen (185-254AD) and Augustine (354-430AD), however, and A-Millennialists will often point to these two Christians as early founders of the view, based again on the simple fact that they seem to have embraced Philo's approach and read the scriptures allegorically. But neither of these two early thinkers held a robust A-Millennial view with all of its detailed propositions.

3 Who Worked Out the Details?

It was the Reformers who did the 'heavy lifting' in sorting out the details of this view. Writers like Abraham Kuyper, Louis Berkhof, Oswald Allis, Albertus Pieters, William Hendriksen, and G. C. Berkouwer have all been A-Millennialists and have influenced much of the Protestant world, including the Lutheran Church, the Christian Reformed Church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and many Baptist and Church of Christ denominations.



So What's the Bottom Line?

OK, let's once again ask and answer the three important questions that have helped us to understand why some people would prefer this view of End Times:

Does History End When Jesus Comes?

Yes. In this view (like the Post-Millennial view), Jesus does not return until the end of the Millennial Reign to judge the nations. He is obviously NOT present with us today and this view proposes that we are presently IN the symbolic Millennium! Only the Church is present in this symbolic period of time to influence the world for better. When Jesus returns, it's all over.

Does the Kingdom of God Prevail Over the Culture of Our World?

No. In this view, while the Church certainly has an impact on the culture during the Millennium, we can clearly see that the culture has not been completely overturned for the cause of Christ. The Kingdom, under this view, is not such that it completely transforms the physical culture. The Kingdom is a spiritual force.

Can Evil Be Controlled Prior to the Return of Jesus?

No. If we are presently in a symbolic and spiritual Millennial Reign of Christ as this view proposes, it is clear that this reign is not capable of overturning all evil. We see that evil still exists in our world, even during this time that we would call the Millennium.

Once again we can see why some might people interpret the scriptures in order to support this view. A-Millennialists would say that their view of End Times (like Post-Millennialists) has helped them to see the importance of their efforts as Christians to change the world for better right now, in their lifetime. If A-Millennialism is true, we are living in the Millennial Reign of Christ. Any transformation we would expect to see in the Millennium would have to come as a result of Christ's work THROUGH US. Our efforts are important; they matter because once again they are connected to our theory regarding the End Times.

And we can also see how this view might impact our present lives. Like Post-Millennialists, those who hold this view see themselves as active participants in the "End Times Story". Many A-Millennialists also embrace the "Social Gospel" and are concerned about social injustices in our world based on this view of End Times. They want to move quickly to be an active participant in the Millennial Reign which they believe is occurring today.



Why All the Confusion?

So why isn't the Bible more clear about the End Times? Why do so many good thinkers disagree? Well there is an important principle that we, as

Christians, ought to follow when reading through the Bible and searching for the essential truths that define us as followers of Jesus. It's a simple principle; are you ready? Here it is:

Things That Have Been Left Gray by God Should Not Be Made Black and White by Men

Does that make sense? If God has not specifically and clearly described the minute details of some aspect of His nature (or His plan for the future), it just might be that He doesn't want us to know those details or doesn't believe that it's in our best interest to know the details! We should be very careful about trying to "fill in the blanks" when God has not done that for us to begin with!

When it comes to our understanding of the End Times, God has clearly left many things "gray" and less than perfectly defined. Why then, have we, over the centuries, divided over our interpretations of the gray area? If God wanted us to know all the details, He would have given us all the details. But it appears that God has intentionally left details of the future undefined:



Matthew 24:36-44

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will."

It's pretty clear here that God is intentionally leaving the details of the future UNCLEAR! Why would He do that? Why wouldn't He want us to know exactly how it will all end? Well, I think we can probably figure out why Biblical Prophecies are not as explicit as we might like. If we knew all the exact details, do you really think we wouldn't try to manipulate the events or use the information to our advantage? Do you really think that we wouldn't be tempted to do something to CHANGE the aspects of the future we don't like?

Biblical prophecies are given by God to demonstrate His power, but they are meant to be a demonstration AFTER the fact, and simply a warning BEFORE the fact. That's why it says:

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away

Once the end has come, we will be able to look back with even more confidence at God's Word and it's accurate (albeit incomplete) description of how it all would happen. Now, you may be saying, "Hey, doesn't the same passage in Matthew tell us that we are supposed to 'be on the alert'? How can we be on the alert with so few precise details?" Well the passage answers that question for us.

"...if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into."

When God tells us to 'be alert' He is simply telling us to live our lives in such a way that we acknowledge that the end could come at any time. The 'thief' could break in on any day and try to steal all our belongings. Are we ready? Have we reached our own families with the truth? Are they ready to meet God? Hey, are WE even ready to meet God?



So What Is The Essential Truth?

OK, we've looked at a number of possibilities related to End Times, and a number of classic positions that have been held by theologians and believers over the years. So which one of these positions is actually true? Is there a particular view that must be held by a person in order for that person to be called a Christian? Are some of these positions orthodox and some heretical? What is the essential truth about End Times?

It turns out that this is one area of theology that the Apostle's Creed sufficiently describes. If we want to get back to the essential truths about this issue, we simply need to return to the creed:

*(Jesus) was crucified, died, and was buried...
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and
he will come again to judge the living and the dead*

We're right back where we started really. These are the things we can say with certainty; these are the minimum truths that we must agree on if we want to call ourselves Christians:

- 1) Jesus Came*
- 2) Jesus Will Come Again*
- 3) Jesus Will Judge the Living and the Dead*

Pretty simple isn't it? This is really all we need to affirm as orthodox Christians, and as soon as we step beyond this, we find ourselves arguing about the "black and white" details that God has intentionally left gray...