

The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism

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In this article I discuss the recent decline in the espousal of postmillennialism, defend it as a basic system of theological thought against certain misguided criticisms, elaborate its key tenet in contrast to amillennialism and premillennialism, and supply a general defense of its acceptability in the light of the history of Reformed theology. What shall be demonstrated is that its recent unpopularity has been unjustified and that the position must be taken quite seriously by all who adhere to Reformation Christianity.

The Recession of Adherence to Postmillennialism

The years shortly after the turn of the twentieth century witnessed a general decline in the published advocacy of postmillennial eschatology. Conspicuous among the influences generating this popular disenchantment were three factors, best understood in their unrefined and early stages in the nineteenth century.

Liberalism

First, the 1800's brought the entrenchment of rationalistic higher criticism of Scripture, and consequently skepticism regarding Christian dogma, in the academic centers of theology. Late seventeenth-century thought was characterized by the Enlightenment's insistence on the intellectual standard of autonomous reason (i.e., scholarship uncontrolled by biblical presuppositions). The effects of this are evident in early eighteenth-century Deism and critical "lives of Jesus" (e.g., by Reimarus and Paulus) which aimed to eradicate belief in genuine miracles or supernatural intervention in the world, and to discredit the reliability of Scripture as a historical record. Toward the end of the century, Kant taught that a genuinely transcendent God could have no connection with the phenomenal world of time and space. He said that the historical statements of Scripture die with the events themselves; thus, we must go beyond the text in order to find abiding moral-doctrinal value. Such an outlook opens the door completely to a naturalistic and critical treatment of the Bible in its historical teachings (whether past or future). When we come to the nineteenth century, we find higher criticism fostered by men working under the general influence of Kant and Hegel. In the 1830's Strauss introduced the mythological interpretation of Scripture. Later Holtzmann set theological *teaching* over against religious *experience* in the interpretation of biblical writers. Wrede took things a step further by maintaining that the scriptural documents are not reliable historical works but rather

theologized reconstructions. The overall outcome was the discrediting of Scripture's historical accuracy and the undermining of the objectivity of its theology. Ernst Troeltsch explained the critical approach to the Bible, saying that any occurrence must be understood in terms of its probable, *immanent*, historical antecedents; thus is assured the naturalistic autonomy of the historian in reconstructing the past and interpreting the future. Such an approach challenged confidence in anything Scripture (as a supernatural, infallible, verbal revelation) had to say, including its philosophy of history. Postmillennialism, because of its assumptions of a sovereign God, resurrected Savior, and powerfully present Spirit, was clearly not congenial with the assumptions of criticisms.

Evolutionary Progressivism

As a *second* factor, we should think back upon the influence of Kant and Hegel mentioned above. In his early book, *Idea of a Universal History*, Kant had taught that a "secret plan" inherent in nature drives man to build a rational, international, civil order. An even bolder metaphysical account of inevitable progress in the historical process was given in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and throughout his dialectical philosophy. According to Hegel, the theme of history is the actualization of the Absolute in time; the self-development of spirit is seen in the successive types of social organizations and the careers of world-historical peoples. The history of the human race, which follows its own inherent course of development embodying a rational principle, is toward greater freedom, the highest form of which could be found in the Germanic world, romanticism, and maintenance by the state of the orders and social groups of civilized life.

Naturalistic, humanistic optimism about historical progress was given its most popular boost, however, in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as found in his 1859 bestseller, *The Origin of Species*. Reception of this doctrine guaranteed the initial, uncritical adoption of secular optimism. With theological leaders approving of the interpretation and evaluation of Scriptures in the light of autonomous research and philosophy, it was quite natural that evolutionary speculation came to be *read into* the bible's teaching on creation and history. Moreover, with the reduction of religion and revelation to matters of morality (under the influence of Kant), higher critics and liberals could deprecate orthodox *theology* while still maintaining an understandable interest in the personal *ethics* and social reform fostered by Scripture.

These combined elements in turn produced the *secularization* of conservative, supernaturalistic, biblical postmillennialism. The result was evident in the Christian Socialist movement in England and the social gospel movement in America. Walter Rauschenbusch, for example, in his *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, spoke of the "millennium" coming through natural development as an ideal society expressing the communal brotherhood of man. Shirley Jackson Case's *The Millennial Hope* spoke of the long process of humanity evolving and rising higher in the scale of civilization and attainment; the world is constantly growing better, society's ills are to be remedied by education and legislation, and the responsibility for bringing in the millennium is man's own – to be produced in his own strength. This modernistic perversion of God's truth, this antithesis to redemptive revelation and supernatural salvation, called for strenuous and godly opposition by orthodox churchmen. However, in their zeal to stand against the liberal tide, large numbers of Christians threw the baby out with the bath. In disdain for the evolutionary social gospel, sincere believers were led to reject Christian social concern for an exclusively internal or *other-worldly* religion, and to substitute for the earlier belief in a progressive triumph of Christ's kingdom in the world, a new, *pessimistic* catastrophism with respect to the course of history.

Dispensationalism

The church might have had the doctrinal strength necessary to throw off critical and modernist incursion, had not a *third factor* been subverting its doctrinal and working strength. This third factor in the decline of postmillennialism was the rise and popularization of dispensational, pretribulational rapturism. As late as 1813, the English missionary leader, David Bogue, could speak of premillennialism as an astonishing “aberration” of previous days. However, that strictly minority position had recently been rekindled by numerous eschatological predictions and alleged prophetic fulfillments at the time of the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. When Napoleon marched on Rome, some thought the Man of Sin was about to be deposed. George Faber saw Napoleon himself as “the king of the North” (from Daniel 11), James Bicheno viewed Louis XIV as the Beast (of Revelation 13), and Samuel Horsley took Napoleon to be the Anti-Christ and Voltaire the “mystery of iniquity.” Imaginations flourished. William Miller predicted that Christ would return in 1843.

In 1825 Edward Irving, one time assistant to Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow, began to preach that Christ’s *premillennial* return was *imminent* (a doctrine he learned from the layment, Hatley Frere). When a Roman Catholic priest in south America, Manuel Lacunza, wrote *The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty* under the pseudonym of an allegedly converted Jew, Ben Ezra, Irving was attracted to the premillennialism of the treatise. In 1826 he published an edition of the English translation with his own lengthy introductory essay. Irving gained great popularity and carried his eschatology to Scotland in 1828 and 1829, where evangelical ministers received his teaching coolly; Chalmers characterized Irving’s doctrine as woeful, mystical, pernicious, and violently allegorical. At the turn of the decade, Irving was endorsing the revival of charismatic gifts and subverting the doctrine of Christ’s sinless nature and the doctrine of imputed righteousness. Being deposed from the Church of Scotland, Irving founded the Catholic Apostolic Church in 1832, dying two years later.

What is important for our purposes is to see that premillennialism, which was a minor position in 1813, gained a significant following by the 1830’s. This was fostered by the Albury Park prophetic meetings, as well as those at Powerscourt. Henry Drummond opened his home for conferences on prophecy between 1826 and 1830, where Irving set forth his system of thought. At the Irish estate of Lady Powerscourt, Irving continued his conferences between 1831 and 1833. J. N. Darby, a man who would emerge as a leader in this eschatological school of thought, was present at the 1831 Powerscourt meeting. Previously, in 1828, Darby had begun meeting with the Brethren movement, being disaffected with the established church. In premillennialism he found the explanation for the church’s defects: namely, decline is inevitable and judgment for the world is close at hand. The main outline of Darby’s premillennialism was inherited from Irving’s teaching. However, Darby went on to embellish it with strict distinctions among Israel, the church, and the millennial Jews, as well as a dispensational outlook on history (namely, God has utilized various plans for dealing with man; when one fails, God introduces a new one). In addition, Darby published the doctrine that the church would be secretly raptured prior to the Great Tribulation, which would afflict the world as a precursor to Christ’s return in judgment and the establishment of the millennium on earth. This novel teaching was apparently first advanced in the studies made at the Albury Conferences, perhaps by Irving himself; others claim that it originated in a tongue utterance by a member of Irving’s church, and yet others attribute it to prophetic vision experienced by a Scottish woman, Margaret Macdonald. Whatever the specific source, the relevant point is that the belief appeared and gained popularity around 1830, being popularized in the publication of Darby’s dispensational premillennialism.

The effect of the teachings rising out of these years was a drastic pessimism which precluded the courage to face liberal defections (indeed, such defections were expected and inevitable) or to undertake long-term projects for the church. For example, F. W. Newton declared that the imminent return of Christ “totally forbids all working for earthly objects distant in time.” Social and political endeavor was no longer seen as legitimate; note, for example, Zahn’s criticism of Calvin because “he considered it his task to make the secular authorities submissive to his interpretation of the Divine commandments.” Missions had to abandon the aim of establishing Christian institutions and

concentrate simply on the conversion of individual souls, as A. A. Hodge astutely observed of premillennial strategy. The visible church was depreciated, its pastoral office deemed unnecessary, and its historic doctrine disregarded. In Geneva, 1840, Darby declared that restoration is impossible in this dispensation, that it is delusive to expect the earth to be filled with the knowledge of the Lord prior to His advent, and that we must expect a constant progression of evil.^{1[1]} Hope was cut out of the heart of Christendom. As one might expect, such pessimistic predictions as to the value and effect of the church on earth tended to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Darby's dispensational, pre-tribulational rapturism was enhanced in America by his visit here at the request of D. L. Moody, who later founded a college dedicated to such thinking. It was also advanced in the vastly popular Prophecy Conference movement, especially in the first decade of this century. However, dispensational premillennialism, with its decided emphasis upon the rapture, a distinction between Israel and the church (as well as law and grace), and the inevitably meager results of the church's preaching of the gospel in the world, was given its greatest impetus by the publication of the *Scofield Reference bible* in 1909. C. I. Scofield had been greatly affected by Darby's writings, and through his reference notes the system gained widespread popularity. Events which soon followed in world history convinced advocates of this theory that Scripture had rightly been interpreted as teaching advancing lawlessness and the imminent end of the age.

Thus, the three factors of *liberalism*, *evolutionary progressivism*, and *dispensationalism* came to exert simultaneous pressure on Christendom in the early twentieth century, resulting in the unpopularity of biblical postmillennialism. People were now inclined to distrust progressive hopes (if they were fundamentalist) or discount biblical predictions for history (if they were liberals). Furthermore, believers and unbelievers alike had been trained to interpret the Bible in terms of *extrabiblical* considerations (secular scholarship for the modernists, world events for the dispensationalists). The combined outcome was a definite skepticism about the church's progress on earth prior to the second coming of Christ in glory; the outcome was also a tendency to do "newspaper exegesis" of the Scriptures. Given this setting, and the propagation of secularized theology along with pretribulational pessimism, conservative postmillennialism was bound to suffer abuse.

Misguided Ground for Rejecting Postmillennialism

It must be observed that postmillennialism lost favor (and today remains held in disfavor) with conservative theologians for manifestly unorthodox and insufficient reasons. Extra-biblical reasoning, as well as lazy or poor scholarship, has intruded itself into Christian discussions of eschatology.

^{1[1]} For the discussion of the rise of pretribulational rapturism see J. D. De Jongh, *As the Waters Cover the Sea: Millennial Expectations in the Rise of Anglo-American Missions 1640-1810* (J. H. Kok N.V. Kampen, 1970), pp. 163-164, 191-192; Iaian H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), pp. 187-206, 284-287; cf. Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973), *passim*.

Newspaper Exegesis

Alva J. McClain says of postmillennialism: "This optimistic theory of human progress had much of its own way for the half-century ending in World War I of 1914. After that the foundations were badly shaken; prop after prop went down, until today the whole theory is under attack from every side. Devout Postmillennialism has virtually disappeared."²[2] J. Barton Payne's massive *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* mentions postmillennialism only once, and that merely in a footnote which parenthetically declares "two world wars killed this optimism."³[3] Merrill F. Unger dismisses postmillennialism in short order, declaring: "This theory, largely disproved by the progress of history, is practically a dead issue."⁴[4] John F. Walvoord tells us that "In eschatology the trend away from postmillennialism became almost a rout with the advent of World War II" because it forced upon Christians "a realistic appraisal of the decline of the church in power and influence."⁵[5] Hence he says that "In the twentieth century the course of history, progress in Biblical studies, and the changing attitude of philosophy arrested its progress and brought about its apparent discard by all schools of theology. Postmillennialism is not a current issue in millenarianism."⁶[6] He accuses it of failing to fit the facts of current history, of being unrealistic, and of being outmoded and out of step.⁷[7] Jay Adams recognizes postmillennialism as a "dead issue" with conservative scholars, since it predicts a golden age while the world awaits momentary destruction; he agrees with the above authors that the "advent of two World Wars . . . virtually rang the death knell upon conservative postmillennialism."⁸[8] Adams apparently offers his own opinion that Boettner's long-range postmillennialism "is too difficult to grant when Christians must face the fact of hydrogen bombs in the hands of depraved humanity."⁹[9] Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* captures well the attitude of these previous writers, stating that "there used to be" a group called "postmillennialists" who were greatly disheartened by World War I and virtually wiped out by World War II. Lindsey's (poorly researched) conclusion is this: "No self-respecting scholar who looks at the world conditions and the accelerating decline of Christian influence today is a 'postmillennialist.'"¹⁰[10]

²[2] "Premillennialism as a Philosophy of History," in W. Culbertson and H. B. Centz, eds., *Understanding the Times* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), p. 22.

³[3] *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 596.

⁴[4] "Millennium," *Unger's bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, revised 1961), p. 739.

⁵[5] John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 9.

⁶[6] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 36.

⁸[8] Jay E. Adams, *The Time is at Hand* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), p. 2.

⁹[9] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰[10] Hal Lindsey (with C. C. Carlson), *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 176.

The sad fact is that our Christian brothers mentioned above should be embarrassed by what they have written and concluded; the attitude and reasoning they have set forth is woefully lacking as respectable Christian scholarship. By means of such newspaper exegesis, one could *just as well discount the return of Christ in glory*, saying “where is the promise of his coming?” (cf. II Peter 3:1-4). This *reductio ad absurdum* must be reckoned with. The fact that an era of gospel prosperity and world peace has not yet arrived would no more disprove the Bible’s teaching that such an era shall be realized (in the power of God’s spirit and the faithfulness of Christ’s church to its great commission) than the fact that Christ has not yet returned disproves the Bible’s teaching that such an event shall take place!

The only question is *whether* the *Bible* actually teaches these things. If it does, then “let God be true but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). The newspaper has no prerogative to challenge God’s word of truth. Nor do those who read the newspapers. As faithful disciples of Christ, we are to trust God as the sovereign controller over human history, “who works all things after the counsel of His own will” (Eph. 1:11), “declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isa. 46:10), so that “none can stay his hand” (Dan. 4:35). With the Psalmist we should declare, “Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth” (115:3). If God says something is to happen, then it shall happen; it is to our discredit if we are men of little faith with respect to his promises.

Just imagine the following scenario: devout Simeon is in the temple looking for the consolation of Israel (cf. Luke 2), when a popular Jewish theologian comes in and tells him, “Simeon, your hope of a personal Messiah is a dead issue, an idealistic anachronism. Your unrealistic theory has been disproved by the course of history and discarded by all schools; it is out of date, outmoded, and no longer a current issue. No self-respecting scholar who looks at the world conditions and remembers the four hundred years of silence from God believes as you do; prop after prop has gone down, and the events that have come upon our nation have killed the optimism of your theory.” Would any conservative theologian say that Simeon’s belief had been refuted or incapacitated by such considerations? Would any think him justified in no longer treating it as a vital position worthy of scriptural consideration? Of course not. Likewise biblical postmillennialism cannot be thus dismissed.

Misrepresentation

Postmillennialism has not only been discarded in this century on clearly unorthodox grounds; it has also been made a straw man so that modern advocates of the other schools of interpretation can easily knock it down and get on to other interests. The worst possible interpretation is put on postmillennial tenets, or the eccentric aspect of some postmillennial writer’s position is set forth as representing the basic school of thought. As instances of these procedures we can note the following. Hal Lindsey says that postmillennialists believe in the inherent goodness of man,^{11[11]} and Walvoord says that the position could not resist the trend toward liberalism.^{12[12]} He also

^{11[11]} *Ibid.*

^{12[12]} Walvoord, p. 34.

accuses it of not seeing the kingdom as consummated by the Second Advent. 13[13] William E. Cox claims that postmillennialism is characterized by a literal interpretation of Revelation 20.14[14] Adams portrays the postmillennialist as unable to conceive of the millennium as coextensive with the church age or as a present reality, 15[15] for he (according to Adams) must see it as exclusively future – a golden age just around the corner.16[16] Finally, it is popularly thought and taught that postmillennialism maintains that there is an unbroken progression toward righteousness in history – that the world is perceptibly getting better and better all the time – until a utopian age is reached. Geerhardus Vos portrays the postmillennialist as looking for “ideal perfection” when “every individual” will be converted, and some will become “sinless individuals.”17[17]

All of the above claims are simply inaccurate. The Calvinist, Loraine Boettner, certainly does not believe in man’s inherent goodness, and B. B. Warfield can hardly be accused of not resisting liberalism. That a. A. Hodge did not see the second coming of Christ as the great day of consummation is preposterous. J. Marcellus Kik and many others insisted on a figurative interpretation of Revelation 20. Certain sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch theologians, as well as Jonathan Edwards and E. W. Hengstenberg, were all postmillennialists who saw the millennium as coeval with the interadventual age (in which there would be progressive growth for the church in numbers and influence). Charles Hodge, Snowden, and Boettner were all postmillennialists who explained that the growth of Christ’s kingdom in the world suffers periodic crises, and Boettner has especially stressed the fact that it grows by imperceptible degrees over a long period. Finally, anyone who thinks of postmillennialism as a utopian position misunderstands one or the other in their historically essential principles. Indeed, a chapter in Boettner’s book, *The Millennium*, is entitled, “The Millennium not a Perfect or Sinless State,” contrary to the misrepresentations of Vos. Nobody has ever propounded, in the name of evangelical postmillennialism, what Vos claimed (*least* of all his Princeton colleagues or predecessors). Therefore, the recent opponents of postmillennialism have not been fair to its genuine distinctives, but rather have misrepresented it as a general category of interpretation. This surely provides no firm ground for rejecting the position.

Two-edged Criticisms

A third infelicitous way in which postmillennialism has been disposed of is by means of (allegedly) critical considerations which in fact apply *as much to the other* eschatological positions as to postmillennialism. For example, it has been contended that there is incoherence among various postmillennialists rather than a unified theology, and in connection with this criticism it is observed that

13[13] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

14[14] William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Col., 1966), p. 64.

15[15] Adams, pp. 9-0; as we will see below, the possibility of such a claim rests merely on a terminological issue: does the word “millennium” denote the same thing as “kingdom (church) age” or more pointedly a segment of the latter? Either way, Christ’s *reign* has been realized, and the millennium is *not* set in *contrast* to the church age.

16[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 41.

17[17] *Outline of Notes on New Testament Biblical Theology*, pp. 89, 90.

postmillennialism is adhered to by extremely divergent theological schools.^{18[18]} However, this is just as true of amillennialism and premillennialism; numerous details differ among proponents of these positions (indeed, one is inclined to think that they are more extensive and significant differences than those among proponents of these positions (indeed, one is inclined to think that they are more extensive and significant differences than those among postmillennialists), but this says nothing about the truth of their central tenets. Then again, postmillennialism is sometimes thought to be falsified through imputing guilt to it by association, observing that it has sometimes been held in some form by unitarians and liberals. But “premillennialism” has been advocated by the apostate Jews and modern cultists, and “amillennialism” is endorsed by neo-orthodox dialectical theology. The fact that there are functional similarities between various evangelical and heretical theologians does not in itself settle the key question of which position is taught by God’s word; *whichever* millennial position *is scriptural*, it is nonetheless subject to misuse and inappropriation. Hence the use of one of these positions by an unorthodox writer does nothing in itself to discredit the position.

A further criticism which cannot be applied uniquely to postmillennialism is that it interprets biblical prophecy both figuratively ^{19[19]} and literally.^{20[20]} The premillennialists see symbolic interpretation as a failure of nerve, and amillennialists take literal understanding of prophecy as crude and insensitive. But the fact remains that none of the three schools interprets biblical prophecy exclusively in either a literal or figurative fashion. (And, by the way, nobody really adheres to the rule, “Literal where possible,” as is evident from the respective treatments of the beast of Revelation, which *could* possibly be a literal monster but obviously is not.) *All three* schools end up finding *both* kinds of literature in the prophetic passages, and it is dishonest to give an opposite impression. If anything, the fact that postmillennialism is seen as too literal by amillennialists and too figurative by premillennialists perhaps suggests (certainly does not prove) that it alone has maintained a proper balance. The upshot is this: the charge of subjective spiritualization or hyperliteralism against any of the three eschatological positions cannot be settled *in general*; rather, the opponents must get down to hand-to-hand exegetical combat on *particular* passages and phrases.

Premature Charges

Finally, in addition to the misguided and failed attempts to dismiss postmillennialism based on (1) newspaper exegesis, (2) misrepresentation, and (3) the application of two-edged criticism (which applies to the critic as well as the position criticized), there are current day charges against the position which are *premature or unfounded*. To this category belongs the allegation that postmillennialism is founded on Old Testament passages rather than New Testament evidence,^{21[21]} that the New Testament knows nothing of the proclamation of a semi-golden age.^{22[22]} Such statements do not bear their own weight in the face of postmillennial appeals to New Testament passages like the kingdom growth parables of Matthew 13, the apostle John’s

^{18[18]} Walvoord, pp. 23, 34, 36.

^{19[19]} *Kibid.*, pp. 24-25, 34.

^{20[20]} Cox, pp. 20, 136; Adams, p. 15.

^{21[21]} George L. Murray, *Millennial Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 86-87.

^{22[22]} Adams, p. 13.

teachings about the overcoming of Satan and the world (e.g., John 12:31-32; 16:33; I John 2:13-14; 3:8; 4:4, 14; 5:4-5), Peter's Pentecost address (Acts 2:32-36, 41), Paul's declaration that all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:25-32), his resurrection victory chapter in I Corinthians 15 (esp. vss. 20-26, 57-58), the statements of Hebrews 1-2 about the subjection of all enemies to Christ in the post-ascension era (1:8-9, 13; 2:5-9), and numerous passages from Revelation, notably about the vastness of the redeemed (7:9-10), the open door for missionary triumph and the Christian's reign with Christ over the nations (2:25-27; 3:7-9), the submission of the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of Christ (11:15), and the utter victory of gospel proclamation (19:11-21). Opponents of postmillennialism may wish to dispute its interpretation of such passages, but it is groundless for them to allege without qualifications and without detailed interaction with postmillennial writings that the position is not taken from the New Testament itself.

Further premature criticisms would include Walvoord's accusation that postmillennialism obscures the doctrine of Christ's second coming by including it in God's providential works in history,^{23[23]} and Adams' charge that it confounds the millennium with the eternal state – since it takes Old Testament prophecies of kingdom peace and prosperity and illegitimately applies them to the New Testament mention of the millennium, and thereby winds up with the dilemma that either there is no need for a new heavens and earth (to which the Old Testament prophecies really apply) or else the millennium is frustrated.^{24[24]}

Walvoord has failed to grasp adequately the postmillennialist's philosophy of history; it is not the case that the postmillennialist fails to distinguish providence from consummation, but *rather* that he sees providence as well orchestrated to subserve the ultimate ends of consummation. And in connection with this understanding, he recognizes that the New Testament speaks of Christ "coming" in *various* ways (contrary to Walvoord's apparent thought that there is only one single sense in which Christ "comes," namely, at his return in glory) – for example, in the first-century establishment of his kingdom (Matt. 16:28), in the person of the Holy spirit at Pentecost (John 14:18, 28; cf. vs. 16; Acts 2:33; I Cor 15:45; II Cor. 3:17), in fellowship with the repentant and obedient believer (Rev. 3:20; John 14:21-23), in historical judgment upon nations (Matt. 24:29-30, 34; Mark 14:61-62), and upon churches (Rev. 2:5, 16). Such "comings" of the Lord are part of God's providential government of pre-consummation history and are *in addition* to Christ's visible and glorious coming in final judgment (II Thess. 1:7-10). The postmillennialist does not obscure the second coming with providence.

Nor does he, as Adams said, confound the millennium with the eternal state; the postmillennialist clearly knows the difference between the two. It is just that he disagrees with Adams that certain Old Testament prophecies pertain exclusively to the eternal state. *Prior* to the amillennialists and postmillennialists engaging in full exegetical debate over such passages, it would be just as legitimate for the postmillennialist to accuse *Adams* of confounding the eternal state with the millennium. The postmillennialist has a sound rationale for connecting relevant Old Testament passages with the New Testament millennium, in that these passages (according to postmillennialist claims) speak of the *pre*-consummation prosperity of Christ's kingdom, and the millennium *is* precisely the pre-consummation form of his kingdom. Such Old Testament passages are taken to be (at least in part) predictions concerning a pre-consummation state of affairs because they speak of things which are inappropriate to the eternal state (e.g., opposition to the kingdom, evangelism, kingdom growth, national interaction, death, etc.). Again, the opponents of postmillennialism may dispute its interpretation of such passages, but it is premature to accuse the position of confounding two openly

23[23] Walvoord, p. 33.

24[24] Adams, pp. 9, 14, 99; Adams applies these comments to "unrealized millennialists," among whom he counts postmillennialists.

recognized distinct entities (namely, the millennium and eternity) prior to refuting the exegetical reasoning of the position. Postmillennialism is not suspect *in advance*, any more than amillennialism is.

A further groundless criticism of postmillennialism as a system is Adams' claim that it has even less reason to expect a semi-golden age in history than does the premillennialist, since there is nothing but sinful, non-glorified humanity to produce it, and that it has no explanation for the anticipated sudden change of conditions in the world at the end of history.^{25[25]} Such statements are unwarranted, for the postmillennialist sees the powerful presence of Christ through the Holy spirit as sufficient reason to expect the release of Satan from the post-resurrection restraints on his deceiving power over the nations as adequate explanation of the change of world conditions at the very end of the age (just as Adams does). Such tenets have been made well known in postmillennial teaching, and thus Adams' criticism is an obvious oversight of what is an important element of the position criticized.

A similar reply is called for with respect to Walvoord's criticism that postmillennialism deprives today's believer of the hope of Christ's imminent return.^{26[26]} The fact is that postmillennial never claimed to salvage the doctrine of the any-moment return of Christ; indeed, distinctive to it is the *denial* of the imminent physical return. The New Testament definitely indicates that the coming of the Lord is a delayed event, and that the Christian should expect to see precursor signs of its approach.^{27[27]} It is not to come upon him as an unexpected thief (I Thess. 5:4), for he believes the Scriptures that certain things must first occur (cf. II Thess. 2:1-3, etc.). Indeed, it was the error of the foolish virgins to expect the imminent coming of the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-8). Hence postmillennialism can hardly be faulted for not preserving a doctrine which it does not, by the very nature of its position, think should be preserved (cf. Matt. 25:5, 10).

We must conclude, then, that current day writers have offered no good *prima facie* reason for ignoring or rejecting postmillennialism as an important theological option for biblical believers. It has been unwarrantedly dismissed in the past fifty years on the basis of newspaper exegesis, misrepresentation, two-edged criticisms, and premature or unfounded charges. Postmillennialism deserves to be taken seriously and considered in the light of Scripture; quick dismissal or ignoring of it in recent years has no good justification.

The Distinctive Essentials of the Three Positions

In the preceding section of this discussion there was occasion to note that postmillennialism had been misrepresented in its basic position. This causes us to ask, just what are the fundamental differences among premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism? That is, what is the distinctive outlook of each position, its essential and central characteristic?

Here many people are prone to be misled, becoming entangled in questions which are subsidiary and indecisive with respect to the *basic dogmatical* outlook of a pre-, a-, and postmillennialism. What this means is that they take important *exegetical* issues pertaining to the millennial question and attempt to use them to *delineate* the three fundamental *theological* positions; however, these

^{25[25]} *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 87.

^{26[26]} Walvoord, pp. 32-33.

^{27[27]} Cf. O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), pp. 173-174. This fact should clearly not be taken to imply that the Christian knows the actual day or hour of Christ's return; Christ did not even claim such knowledge (Mark 13:32), and it is not for us to know God's secret decree for the commencement of this event (Luke 12:40; Acts 1:6). Our duty is simply to be in faithful preparation for it (Matt. 24:46; 25:19-23; Mark 35-36).

particular exegetical issues are *not decisive* for the *central* and general claims of the school of thought. Perhaps some examples would be helpful.

When we come to discuss the *distinctive essentials* of premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism, there are many interpretative questions pertaining to scriptural teaching about the millennium which, while very important for the Christian to consider, are not definitionally crucial at this particular *topical* point; that is because adherents of *different* basic schools of thought have *agreed* on particular answers to these questions. For instance, we can ask about *the nature of the "first resurrection"* of Revelation 20:5. Does it refer to a bodily resurrection, the regeneration of the believer, or his passage at death to the intermediate state in heaven? Such a question usually separates premillennialists from the other two positions, since premillennialism insists on the first option; however, adherents of both amillennialism and postmillennialism have been known to endorse each of the last two options. Likewise, the question of the *imminency of Christ's return* tends to be answered in a cross-categorical manner; some premillennialists deny it in practice (post-tribulationists), while others propound it, just as amillennialists are split by those who accept it and those who reject it. The question does not serve us well in the particular project of finding the distinctive essentials of each of the three eschatological schools. Further subsidiary or theologically indecisive issues would pertain to such things as whether the Christian martyrs receive a special blessing during the millennium, whether the millennium pertains to the intermediate state at all (amillennialists and postmillennialists have agreed in various ways on this question), whether the church is an expression of Christ's kingdom (recent premillennialists have come to grant this point), whether a future period of unprecedented tribulation with a personal Anti-Christ awaits the world and/or church (all three positions have espoused, or can accommodate, such an opinion), whether the "one thousand" of Revelation 20 is symbolic or literal (again, all three positions have or could answer this both ways). Such questions as these are of momentous significance for the Christian in his faith and practice, and this writer has definite convictions on each one of them. However, these issues and many more like them are not the *telling* differences among the three *theological schools* of premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism.

In order to get down to the really basic differences among these three positions as distinct schools of thought we can begin by outlining their respective central claims.^{28[28]} *Premillennialism* holds that (1) Christ will return physically prior to the millennium, and that (2) the millennium is a period of righteousness, peace and prosperity for Christ's kingdom on the earth. There will be (3) a significant historical delay or gap *between* the return of Christ at the first resurrection *and* the judgment of the wicked at the second resurrection, just prior to the inauguration of the eternal state. (This gap corresponds to the millennial kingdom of earthly prosperity for God's chosen people.) Therefore, (4)

28[28] The following descriptions of the tenets of each school will be numbered in such a way that it facilitates cross-reference and comparison among the three positions.

As we progressively work toward the essential, hard-core issue separating the three schools of eschatology, the reader should keep in mind that the individual nuances of each millennial writer preclude a *rigid* organization and elaboration of the tenets of the three schools. Thus it goes without saying that in the broader summaries and general statements which follow we are of necessity still dealing with approximations. Not every single adherent of a perspective has endorsed each and every statement I make for that perspective in what follows. For example, the professed premillennialists John Gill and Charles Spurgeon have (quite inconsistently and uncharacteristically) held to important beliefs of postmillennialism – particularly the great success of the church on earth prior to the parousia. Again, a few postmillennialists have not taught an apostasy at the very end of history. However, in the analysis which follows, I have attempted to represent widespread, current convictions among noted adherents of the three schools. The summaries *do* approximate a general consensus of opinion, but the summaries remain just that – summaries, with the built-in disadvantages of such. A topical, rather than personal, study of eschatological opinions requires nothing less.

the millennium is distinct from the current church age, being a future interim period between Christ's return and the final judgment. (5) The specific nature of the millennial kingdom will be seen in the national prosperity of the restored Jewish state with Christ ruling bodily from Jerusalem and militarily subduing the world with the sword. (However, some premillennialists de-emphasize this Jewish element and simply stress that the millennium is a preparatory stage for the church; the Old Testament nation, the New Testament church, the millennium, and the eternal state are all seen as developing stages in the kingdom.) Thus, (6) the Old Testament prophecies of prosperity are required to be taken literally as pointing ahead to a Jewish state separate from the church and necessitating a radical discontinuity between Israel and the church. Finally, (7) the church's preaching of the gospel through the whole earth prior to Christ's return will prove to be of no avail culturally; the world will become a hopeless wreck, increasingly getting worse and worse, climaxing in the tribulation at the very end of the church age.

By contrast, *amillennialism* says that (1) Christ will return after the millennium. (2) It maintains that there will be no millennium in the sense of a semi-golden era of earthly prosperity for the kingdom; instead, the millennium is restricted to the blessings of the intermediate (heavenly) state (some restricting its blessing to the martyrs there) and/or the purely inward spiritual triumphs experienced by the church on earth (i.e., Christ ruling in the believer's heart). Basically then, amillennialism denies that there will be any visible or earthly expression of Christ's reign over the entire world; as D. H. Kromminga says, "the millennium is a spiritual or heavenly millennium." (Note: the *church* is a *visible* form of Christ's kingdom in the world, according to many amillennialists; however, the church will *not* make all the *nations* disciples of Christ and gain a dominant or widespread influence throughout the world, but will rather remain a remnant of believers representatively spotted across the globe, which is unable to effect a period of [comparative] justice and peace.) (3) The return of Christ at the end of the church age will synchronize with the general resurrection and general judgment of all men, believer and unbeliever alike. Therefore, (4) the millennium is the present interadventual age. (5) There will be no conversion or subduing of the world by Christ during the millennium, but rather the world will see a more or less parallel development of good and evil, with evil intensifying toward the end of the church age. Thus (6) the Old Testament prophecies of prosperity are required to be taken completely figuratively as pointing ahead to the eternal state or the internal spiritual condition of the church, thus propounding continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. Finally, (7) the world is moving toward a time of increasing lawlessness, and the preaching of the gospel throughout the world will not achieve outstanding and pervasive success in converting sinners (i.e., the overall discipling of the nations).

Postmillennialism, as the name implies, holds that (1) Christ will return subsequent to the millennium, which (2) represents a period which will see growth and maturation of righteousness, peace, and prosperity for Christ's kingdom on earth (visibly represented by the church) through the gradual conversion of the world to the gospel, as well as a period for the glory and vindication of the saints in heaven. (3) The return of Christ will synchronize with the general resurrection and general judgment at the end of the church age. Therefore, (4) the millennium or kingdom of millennialists have used the eschatological vocabulary in such a way that the "millennium" represents the latter day, publicly discernible, prosperity of the interadventual "kingdom.") (5) The specific nature of the millennial kingdom on earth will be the international prosperity of the church (new Israel), its growth (through the conversion of the world by the sword of the Spirit), and its influence in society and culture. Thus, (6) the Old Testament prophecies of prosperity for the kingdom are both figuratively and literally interpreted according to the demands of context (both local and wider) as pointing ahead not simply beyond the church age to a restored Jewish kingdom or the eternal state (thus rendering the visible church on earth something of a parenthesis for the most part), but to the visible prosperity of Christ's established kingdom on earth, climaxing in the consummated glory of the eternal state; there is continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church (new Israel), which eventually will include the fullness of converted physical Israel grafted back into the people of God. Finally then, (7) over the *long range* the world will experience a period of extraordinary righteousness and prosperity as the church triumphs in the preaching of the gospel and discipling the nations through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit; however, the release of Satan at the very end of the age will bring apostasy from these blessed conditions.

The Heart of the Matter

Although it leaves some details and qualifications out, the above description basically summarizes the distinctive thrust of the various millennial options. We now need to *narrow down* even further the treatment of each school of thought to its key distinctives (allowing for differences of interpretation within each school, as well as cross-category agreement on certain exegetical points).

All three positions *agree* that, while there may be terminological differences (e.g., the application of the words “kingdom,” “millennium,” “tribulation,” etc.), in practical outworking the church is a divinely established institution, Christ will return in judgment upon a lawless or apostate world, and the believer’s *ultimate hope* is in the perfectly golden, new heavens and earth which will be established in the consummated kingdom of the eternal state. Moreover, none of the positions denies that there is or will be a millennium of some king; none anticipates that it will be a *completely perfect* age. Further, no one *completely* identifies the kingdom and millennium as coextensive with each other, for each agrees that the kingdom as a *pre-consummation as well as consummation* form or stage – the millennium being restricted in some fashion to the former category. Thus the key distinctives among pre-, a-, and postmillennialism can be further specified by the following analysis of the *pre-consummation* form of the *kingdom*.

There are some who hold that (I) the pre-consummation form of the kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament is *not realized* during the *interadventual* age at all, but pertains exclusively to the *millennial* age of *prosperity* that *follows* the *church age* and begins with Christ’s return. These are usually dispensational premillennialists. Then there are those who hold that (II) the pre-consummation form of the kingdom *is realized* during the *interadventual* age; they fall into two subdivisions. First, we have those who say (A) that the *church age* is *not* inclusive of the *millennium* but separate from it as a future age of prosperity after Christ’s return (however, the church and the millennium both express God’s kingdom). Here we have advocates of historic premillennialism (or post-tribulationists). Secondly, we have those who say (B) that the *church age* *is* inclusive of (or identical with) the *millennium*, thus having the pre-consummation kingdom extend from Christ’s first to his second advent. These proponents in turn fall into two groups: those teaching that (1) the *millennial* age on earth is a time of visible prosperity for the kingdom, or those asserting that (2) only the eternal state realizes the promise of prosperity for the kingdom. Respectively, these are postmillennialists and amillennialists.

From this outline it becomes apparent that there are *two major watersheds* in eschatological teaching among evangelical conservatives. The first has to do with *chronology*, the second pertains to the *nature* of the millennial kingdom. The first key question is: Is the church age inclusive of the millennium? (Alternatively: Will the end-time events of Christ’s return, the resurrection, and judgment *synchronize* with each other?) Such a question separates premillennialists (who answer no) from the amillennialists and postmillennialists (who both answer yes). The second and subsequent key question is: Will the church age (identical with or inclusive of the *millennial* kingdom) be a time of evident prosperity for the gospel on earth, with the church achieving worldwide growth and influence such that Christianity becomes the general principle rather than the exception to the rule (as in previous times)? This question separates amillennialists (who answer no) from postmillennialists (who answer yes).

These questions also reveal the *basic agreement between amillennialism and premillennialism* that the great prosperity for Christ’s kingdom which is promised in Scripture is *not* to be realized at all *prior* to His *return* in glory, thus concluding the *church age* *to lack evident earthly triumph in its calling and endeavors*. Robert Strong, in expositing and defending amillennialism, states: “Amillennialism agrees with premillennialism that the Scriptures do not promise the conversion of the world through

the preaching of the gospel" (*The Presbyterian Guardian*, January 10, 1942). The amillennialist, William E. Cox, says further, "Premillenarians believe the world is growing increasingly worse, and that it will be at its very worst when Jesus returns. Amillennarians agree with the premillenarians on this point."²⁹[²⁹]

Our foregoing discussion of the three eschatological schools of thought has centered around the concept of the kingdom and its various qualifications (time and pre-consummate nature), thereby revealing that the most fundamental and telling question in distinguishing the unique mark of each position has to do with the *course of history prior to Christ's return* (or, the evident prosperity of the great commission). Jay Adams' concern with the realized or unrealized nature of the "millennium" is *not* the real issue which marks out a central and unique position in eschatology, for amillennialism is *not* (contrary to Adams' claim) the only position which sees the millennium as established at Christ's first advent and coextensive with the present church age. A noted postmillennialist, J. Marcellus Kik, has said, "The millennium, in other words, is the period of the gospel dispensation, the Messianic kingdom The millennium commenced either with the ascension of Christ or with the day of Pentecost and will remain until the second coming of Christ."³⁰[³⁰] Many other postmillennialists concur with Kik here. And even those earlier postmillennialists who saw the millennium as a later segment of the interadventual period held that the messianic kingdom had been established during Christ's first advent; thus, the "kingdom" was realized, and the "millennium" represented the coming triumphant (yet imperfect) part of the kingdom (i.e., church) age. Hence Adams' question leads to a *terminological*, rather than a substantive, disagreement. (And note, even some recent premillennialists, e.g., G. E. Ladd, grant that the kingdom in some sense has been established already.)

What is really at stake is the question of the *future prospects on earth* for the *already established* kingdom. Shall it, prior to Christ's return, bring all nations under its sway, thereby generating a period of spiritual blessing, international peace, and visible prosperity? Shall the church, which has been promised the continual presence of Him who has been given all power in heaven and earth, be successful in making disciples of all nations as he commanded? On this basic and substantive issue – one with succeeds in separating out the three millennial schools – it becomes apparent that the *essential distinctive* of postmillennialism is its scripturally derived, sure expectation of gospel prosperity for the church during the *present* age. Premillennialists and amillennialists *agree* in *rejecting* this hope, and *then separate* from each other in explaining the (*prima facie*) scriptural grounds for that hope. The premillennialist looks for kingdom prosperity in history, but it has a distinctively Jewish nature and is separated from the true Israel of God (Christ's church). The amillennialist expects no sure prosperity for the kingdom in history on the earth, reserving the scriptural teaching of an age of justice and peace exclusively for the realm beyond history.

Summation

In summary, the premillennialist maintains that there will be a lengthy gap in the end-time events into which the millennium will be inserted after Christ's return; the millennial kingdom will be characterized by the prosperity of a restored Jewish state. The amillennialist denies any such gap in the end-time events, looking for Christ to return after a basically non-prosperous millennial age. And the post millennialist is distinguished from the two foregoing positions by holding that there will be no gap in

²⁹[²⁹] Cox, p. 5.

³⁰[³⁰] J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), p. 17. This statement was originally made in a lecture at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1961.

the end-time events; rather, when Christ returns subsequent to the millennial, interadventual, church age. There will have been conspicuous and widespread success for the great commission. *In short*, postmillennialism is set apart from the other two schools of thought by its essential *optimism* for the kingdom in the *present age*. This confident attitude in the power of Christ's kingdom, the power of its gospel, the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer, and the progress of the great commission, sets postmillennialism apart from the essential pessimism of amillennialism and premillennialism.

Alva J. McClain observes the following about amillennialism:

In the Bible eschatological events are found at the end of but *within* human history. But the "eschatology" of Barth is both above and beyond history, having little or no vital relation to history. Dr. Berkhof has written a valuable summary and critical evaluation of this new school of "eschatology." . . . But what Berkhof fails to see, it seems to me, is that his own Amillennial school of thought is in some measure "tarred with the same brush," at least in its doctrine of the established Kingdom of God. According to this view, both good and evil continue in their development side by side through human history. Then will come catastrophe and the crisis of divine judgment, not for the purpose of setting up a divine kingdom *in* history, but *after* the close of history. Hope lies only in a new world which is *beyond* history. Thus history becomes merely the preparatory "vestibule" of eternity; and not a very rational vestibule at that. It is a narrow corridor, cramped and dark, a kind of "waiting room," leading nowhere *within* the historical process, but only fit to be abandoned at last for an ideal existence on another plane. Such a view of history seems unduly pessimistic in the light of Biblical revelation.³¹[31]

Perhaps the major difficulty with McClain making this statement is that he overlooks that his own premillennialism is "tarred with the same brush" as that of amillennialism. Boettner's statement about premillennialism is appropriate here:

Premillennialism or Dispensationalism thus looks upon the preaching of the Gospel as a failure so far as the conversion of the world is concerned, and sees no hope for the world during the present dispensation. It regards the Church as essentially bankrupt and doomed to failure as each of the five preceding dispensations supposedly have ended in failure, and asserts that only the Second Coming of Christ can cure the world's ills Another corollary of this belief is that the benefits of civilization that have been brought about through the influence of the Church are only illusory, and that all this will be swept away when Christ comes This being the logic of the system, it is not difficult to see why the outlook as regards the present age should be pessimistic. If we feel the whole secular order is doomed, and that God has no further interest in it, why, then of course we shall feel little responsibility for it, and no doubt feel that the sooner evil reaches its climax the better. To hold that the preaching of the Gospel under the dispensation of the Holy spirit can never gain more than a very limited success must inevitably paralyze effort both in the home church and on the mission field. Such an over-emphasis on the other-worldliness cannot but mean an under-emphasis and neglect of the here and now It would be hard to imagine a theory more pessimistic, more hopeless in principle or, if consistently applied, more calculated to bring about the defeat of the Church's program than this one.³²[32]

The thing that distinguishes the biblical postmillennialist, then, from amillennialism and premillennialism is his belief that Scripture teaches *the success of the great commission in this age of the church*. The optimistic confidence that the world nations will become disciples of Christ, that

31[31] McClain, pp. 22-23.

32[32] Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1957), 352, 353, 354.

the church will grow to fill the earth, and that Christianity will become the dominant principle rather than the exception to the rule distinguishes postmillennialism from the other viewpoints. All and *only* postmillennialists believe this, and only the refutation of that confidence can undermine this school of eschatological interpretation. In the final analysis, what is characteristic of postmillennialism is not a uniform answer to any one particular exegetical question (e.g., regarding “the man of sin,” “the first resurrection,” “all Israel shall be saved,” etc.), but rather a commitment to the gospel as the power of God which, in the agency of the Holy spirit, shall convert the vast majority of the world to Christ and bring widespread obedience to His kingdom rule. This confidence will, from person to person, be biblically supported in various ways (just as different “Calvinists” can vary from each other in the precise set of passages to which they appeal for support of God’s discriminating soteric sovereignty). The postmillennialist is in this day marked out by his belief that the commission and resources are with the kingdom of Christ to accomplish the discipling of the nations to Jesus Christ prior to His second advent; whatever historical decline is seen in the missionary enterprise of the church and its task of edifying or sanctifying the nations in the word of truth must be attributed, not to anything inherent in the present course of human history, but to the unfaithfulness of the church.

The Reformed Heritage of Postmillennialism

With an understanding, then, of the distinctive character of postmillennialism, it is important to go on and see that this position is not eccentric in terms of the outlook of orthodox theology, nor is it a recent innovation (associated, as some erroneously say, with the rise of nineteenth-century humanistic optimism). Rather, *the postmillennial hope has been the persistent viewpoint of most Reformed scholars from the sixteenth century into the early twentieth century*. In light of that fact, the position deserves to be examined again today for its biblical support and not lightly dismissed as somehow an obvious theological mistake. That is, there is no *prima facie* reason to reject postmillennialism as foreign to the thinking of the most respectable theological teachers or the unwitting parallel to specific secular movements. The position has been endorsed by the most dependable and outstanding theologians and commentators from the Reformation to the present.

John Calvin

Reformed theology (as distinguished from evangelical or Lutheran theology) takes as its father the indisputable theological master of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin. The heritage of postmillennialism in Reformed theology can be traced to the Calvinian corpus of literature. J. A. De Jong, in his doctoral dissertation at the Free University of Amsterdam (*As the Waters Cover the Sea*), asserted that “John Calvin’s commentaries give some scholars cause for concluding that he anticipated the spread of the gospel and true religion to the ends of the earth.”^{33[33]} J. T. McNeill, the editor of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* for the Library of Christian Classics, speaks of “Calvin’s conception of the victory and future universality of Christ’s Kingdom throughout the human race, a topic frequently introduced in the Commentaries.”^{34[34]} In his recent study, *The Puritan Hope*, Iain H. Murray stated that “Calvin believed that Christ’s kingdom is *already* established, and, unlike Luther, he expected it to have a yet greater triumph in history prior to the

^{33[33]} De Jong, p. 8.

^{34[34]} *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. II, p. 904, n. 76.

consummation.”^{35[35]} The judgment of these men (and those secondary sources upon which they depend) is certainly well grounded in Calvin’s writings.

About the view that Christ would have a literal one-thousand-year reign upon the earth (namely, premillennialism), Calvin said this “fiction is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation.” At the same time, he indicated his implicit disagreement with the view (fostered by later amillennialists) that the millennium pertains to the intermediate state of the saints (i.e., their disembodied heavenly rest subsequent to physical death and prior to the general resurrection); according to Calvin, the “one thousand” of Revelation 20 pertains to “the church while still toiling on earth.”^{36[36]} Nor would Calvin have agreed with the position that says the millennial triumph of the saints is simply the spiritual (invisible) victories in the Christian’s heart or the internal blessings privately experienced by the church (namely, one school of amillennial interpretation). With particular application to the kingdom of Christ, he said, “it would not have been enough for the kingdom to have flourished internally.”^{37[37]} Calvin saw the Psalmist as saying that the prosperity and strength of the King of God’s choosing must be *visible and publicly acknowledged*; Christ must be *shown victorious* over all His enemies *in this world*, and His kingdom must be demonstrated to be immune from the various agitations currently experienced in the world.^{38[38]} In his commentary on II Thessalonians 2:8, Calvin declared:

Paul, however, intimates Christ will in the meantime, by the rays which he will emit *previously to his advent*, put to flight the darkness in which antichrist will reign, just as the sun, before he is seen by us, chases away the darkness of the night by the pouring forth of his rays.

This victory of the word, therefore, will show itself in this world . . . He also furnished Christ with these very arms, that he may *roul his enemies*. This is a signal commendation of true and sound doctrine – that it is represented as sufficient for putting an end to all impiety, and as destined to be *invariably victorious, in opposition to all the machinations of Satan . . .*[emphasis added].

For Calvin, the kingdom of Christ was viewed as established at the first advent and continuing in force until the second advent. Durint this interadventual period, the church is destined to experience widespread success; throughout history it will bring all nations under the sovereign sway of Christ. To this interadventual period Calvin referred many of the glorious prophecies about the Messiah’s kingdom found in the Old Testament. “The saints began to reign under heaven when Christ ushered in his kingdom by the promulgation of his Gospel.”^{39[39]} Commenting upon the Isaiah 65:17 prophecy of God’s creating new heavens and a new earth, Calvin said: “By these metaphors he promises a remarkable change of affairs; . . . but the greatest of such a blessing, which was to be manifested at the coming of Christ, could not be described in any other way. Nor does he mean only the first coming, but the whole reign, which must be extended as far as to the last coming . . . Thus the world is (so to speak) renewed by Christ . . . and even now we are in the progress and accomplishment of it . . . The Prophet has in his eye the whole reign of Christ, down to its final close, which is also called ‘the day of renovation and restoration.’ (Acts iii.21)” “The glory of God shines . . . never more brightly than in the cross, in which . . . the whole world was renewed and all things

^{35[35]} Iain Murray, p. 40.

^{36[36]} *Institutes*, III.XXV.5.

^{37[37]} Commentary at Ps. 21:8.

^{38[38]} *Ibid.*, with vs. 17.

^{39[39]} Commentary at Dan. 7:27.

restored to order.”^{40[40]} About Isaiah 2:2-4, Calvin had the following to say: “. . . while the fullness of days began at the coming of Christ, it flows on in uninterrupted progress until he appears the second time for our salvation.” During this time “the church, which had formerly been, as it were, shut up in a corner, would now be collected from every quarter The Prophet here shows that the boundaries of his kingdom will be enlarged that he may rule over various nations Christ is not sent to the Jews only, that he may reign over them, but that he may hold sway over the whole world.” The triumphant progress of the church, reigning under Christ, will be remarkable down through history; the soteric restoration of the world will be increasingly evident as all nations come under the rule of the Savior. Such was Calvin’s hope, his biblical philosophy of history.

The scepter of Christ’s kingdom by which He rules is “his Word alone,” and Satan with his power fails to the extent that Christ’s kingdom is upbuilt through the power of preaching.^{41[41]} Calvin boldly proclaimed that “the labour of Christ, and of the whole Church, will be glorious, not only before God, but likewise before men Hence it follows, that we ought to have good hopes of success.”^{42[42]} “We must not doubt that our Lord will come at last to break through all the undertakings of men and make a passage for his word. Let us hope boldly, then, more than we can understand; he will still surpass our opinion and our hope.”^{43[43]}

The confidence of the Reformer was clearly expressed in his expositions of the Lord’s Prayer at the second petition (“Thy kingdom come”): “now, because the word of God is like a royal scepter, we are bidden here to entreat him to bring all men’s minds and hearts into voluntary obedience to it. . . . Therefore God sets up his Kingdom by humbling the whole world We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth; that he spread and increase them in number; . . . that he cast down all enemies of pure teaching and religion; that he scatter their counsels and crush their efforts. From this it appears that zeal for daily progress is not enjoined upon us in vain With ever-increasing splendor, he displays his light and truth, by which the darkness and falsehoods of Satan’s kingdom vanish, are extinguished, and pass away [God] is said to *reign* among men, when they voluntarily devote and submit themselves to be governed by him by this prayer we ask, that he may remove all hindrances, and may bring all men under his dominion The substance of this prayer is, that God would enlighten the world by the light of his Word, -- would form the hearts of men, by the influences of his Spirit, to obey his justice, -- and would restore to order, by the gracious exercise of his power, all the disorder that exists in the world Again, as the *kingdom* of God is continually growing and advancing to the end of the world, we must pray every day that it *may come*: for to whatever extent iniquity abounds in the world, to such an extent *the kingdom of God*, which brings along with it perfect righteousness, is not yet *come*.”^{44[44]} This prayer for the evident success of the Great commission will *not be in vain*, according to Calvin; our *hope* for success *should be bold*, for we *must not doubt* that Christ will accomplish this purpose in the world. Here we have the postmillennial vision for preconsummation history.

^{40[40]} Commentary at John 13:31.

^{41[41]} *Institutes*, IV.ii.4 and I.xiv.18; cf. Commentary at Isa. 11:4.

^{42[42]} Commentary at Isa. 49:6.

^{43[43]} Cited by Murray, p. xii.

^{44[44]} *Institutes*, III.xx.42, and commentary at Matthew 6:10 (*Harmony of the Evangelists*).

Calvin's belief that the nations will be disciplined and become obedient to Christ's word was expressed over and over again in his writings. "Our doctrine must stand sublime above all the glory of the world, invincible by all its power, because it is not ours, but that of the living God and his Anointed, whom the Father has appointed king that he may rule from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the ends of the earth; and so rule as to smite the whole earth and its strength of iron and brass, its splendor of gold and silver, with the mere rod of his mouth, and break them in pieces like a potter's vessel; according to the magnificent predictions of the prophets respecting his kingdom (Dan. 2.34; Isa. 11.4; Psa. 2.9)."45[45] "God not only protects and defends [the kingdom of Christ], but also extends its boundaries far and wide, and then preserves and carries it forward in uninterrupted progression to eternity . . . We must not judge of its stability from the present appearances of things, but from the promise, which assures us of its continuance and of its constant increase."46[46] "The Lord opens his reign with a feeble and despicable commencement for the express purpose, that his power may be more fully illustrated by its unexpected progress."47[47] In commenting upon Isaiah 54:1-2, Calvin speaks of the "extraordinary fertility of the Church" as the kingdom is increased, and he uses the image of growth from childhood to manhood in explaining that "the work of God will be extraordinary and wonderful." With reference to Psalm 67, Calvin calls attention to the new and unprecedented blessing that will come when the Gentiles are called and all nations participate in the saving knowledge of God; as the word of salvation is diffused throughout all the earth, said Calvin, all the ends of the earth will submit themselves to the divine government. At Psalm 22:27 ("All ends of the earth shall remember and turn to Jehovah") Calvin again speaks of the whole world giving the willing obedience of true godliness to the promised Messiah.

The triumphant reign of the Messiah over the entire world will be accomplished as the nations come to a saving knowledge of God, held Calvin. "The knowledge of God shall be spread throughout the whole world; . . . the glory of God shall be known in every part of the world."48[48] In his *Sermons* on the pastoral epistles, Calvin declared that "the knowledge of God must shine generally throughout all the world and every one must be a partaker of it"; therefore, "we must take pains to bring all them that wander out of the way of salvation: and we must not lonely think upon it for our life time, but for after our death."49[49] It was precisely because of Calvin's confidence in Scripture's promise that the gospel would be so prosperous as to bring the nations to submission to Christ that he alone was active in sending out missionaries – unlike the medievals and his fellow Reformers, who expected the imminent end of the world (e.g., Luther expected it in his own lifetime).

Because Christ has committed to ministers "his Gospel, which is the sceptre of his kingdom, . . . they exercise in some sort his power" – a power by which they subdue to Christ's dominion the whole world.50[50] According to Calvin, Psalm 47 "contains . . . a prophecy of the future kingdom of Christ. It teaches that the glory which then shone under the figure of the material sanctuary will diffuse its

45[45] *Institutes*, Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France.

46[46] Commentary at Isa. 9:7.

47[47] Commentary at matthew 13:31 (*Harmony of the Evangelists*).

48[48] Commentary at Isa. 66:19.

49[49] Cited by Murray, p. 84.

50[50] Commentary at Ps. 45:16.

splendor far and wide; when God himself will cause the beams of his grace to shine into distant lands, that kings and nations may be united into fellowship with the children of Abraham.” “When God is called *a terrible and great King over all the earth*, this prophecy applies to the kingdom of Christ The prophet, then, when he declares that the Gentiles will be subdued, so that they will not refuse to obey the chosen people, is describing that kingdom of which he had previously spoken. We are not to suppose that he here treats of that secret providence by which God governs the whole world, but of the special power which he exercises by means of his word By these words he intimates that the kingdom of God . . . would be extended to the utmost boundaries of the earth . . . so as to occupy the whole world from one end to the other.”⁵¹[51] “The Church shall not be limited to any corner of the world, but shall be extended as far and wide as there shall be space throughout the whole world.”⁵²[52]

It must be clear by this point that *Calvin endorsed the central tenet of postmillennialism*, the optimistic confidence that the gospel of Christ shall convert the vast majority of the world some time prior to the return of the Lord in judgment and glory. Speaking of Psalm 72, Calvin taught that “the kingdom of Christ . . . was to be extended from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof The meaning then is, that the king chosen by God in Judea will obtain so complete a victory over all his enemies, far and wide, that they shall come humbly to pay him homage This verse [11] contains a more distinct statement of the truth, That the whole world will be brought in subjection to the authority of Christ The nations will be convinced that nothing is more desirable than to receive from him laws and ordinances David . . . breaks forth in praising God, because he was assured by the divine oracle that his prayers would not be in vain David, therefore, with good reason prays that the glory of the divine name may fill the whole earth, since that kingdom was to be extended even to the uttermost boundaries of the globe.”

Expressions of this conviction are manifold throughout the commentaries. For instance, “. . . the Father will deny nothing to his Son which relates to the extension of his kingdom to the uttermost parts of the earth.”⁵³[53] In the same place Calvin indicates that he understood Psalm 2 to predict that men will subdue the whole world to Himself and embrace all lands and nations under His dominion. In introducing Psalm 110, he explains: “In this psalm David sets forth the perpetuity of Christ’s reign, and the eternity of his priesthood; and, in the *first* place, he affirms, That God conferred upon Christ supreme dominion, combined with invincible power, with which he either conquers all his enemies, or compels them to submit to him. In the *second* place, he adds, That God would extend the boundaries of this kingdom far and wide Christ should not reign as King upon Mount Zion only, because God would cause his power to extend to the remotest regions of the earth.” Calvin adds that this kingdom continues to spread and prosper.

Of the scope of this prosperity, Calvin said: “The import of the whole is, that Christ would so rule far and wide, that the farthest would live contentedly under his protection, and not cast off the yoke laid

⁵¹[51] Commentary at Ps. 47:2, 3, 7, 8; cf. Commentary at Isa. 60:3 for a similar image of the light diffusing throughout the whole world, starting in one place and spreading to every corner; “the church shines with such brightness as to attract to herself nations and princes.”

⁵²[52] Commentary at Isa. 60:4.

⁵³[53] Commentary at Ps. 2:8.

on them.”54[54] “The worship of God will flourish everywhere The law which had been given to the Jews would be proclaimed among all nations, so that true religion might be spread everywhere since then it is necessary that the worship of God should be based on the truth, when God declares that his name would become renowned in every place, he doubtless shows that his law would be known to all nations, so that his will might be known everywhere”55[55] Lest there be any misunderstanding of Calvin’s meaning, it should be observed that in his Isaiah Commentary he makes it abundantly clear that these prophecies of prosperity and worldwide growth do *not* pertain simply to an *ordinary* effect of the gospel on the nations; the prophets envision not merely the placing of the church in a few localities over the earth, but rather the extraordinary – indeed, incredible – triumph of the kingdom through the world. The church goes forth, not simply to battle (with periodic or spotted conversions from place to place), but to *incredible* victory (namely, the discipling of *the nations as such*.) “Although those things which the Lord promises are concealed, for a time, from the eyes of men, yet believers perceive them by faith; so that they have a firm belief and expectation of the accomplishment of them, however incredible they may appear to others He speaks of the extension of the Church which he had formerly mentioned; but it was of great importance that the same things should be frequently repeated, because it appeared to be incredible that the Church would be restored and spread throughout the whole world to the astonishment of all spread far and wide through every part of the world.” In the same place Calvin spoke of “obedience, which the whole world shall render to God in the church.” With the infallible truth of god’s word as his foundation and confidence, then, Calvin affirmed, “there is nothing which we ought to desire more earnestly than that the whole world should bow to the authority of God.”56[56]

A further insight to Calvin’s optimistic philosophy of preconsummation history is afforded us in his prayers. Two examples are offered here. The Reformer’s strength of faith is evident as he prayed, “Grant, I say, that we may raise our eyes upward, and consider how much power thou has conferred upon thine only-begotten Son. Grant, also, that he may rule and govern us by his spirit, protect us by his faithfulness and guardianship, and compel the whole world to promote our salvation.” In the same lecture series he prayed, “May we never grow weary, but learn to overcome the whole world”57[57] After Hosea Lecture 34, Calvin prayed: “O grant that we, being mindful of these benefits may ever submit ourselves to thee, and desire only to raise our voice for this end, that the whole world may submit itself to thee, and that those who seem now to rage against thee may at length be brought, as well as we, to render thee obedience, so that thy Son Christ may be Lord of all” Calvin’s biblically grounded hope shines forth with brilliance in his prayer, “May we daily solicit thee in our prayers, and never doubt, but that under the government of thy Christ, thou canst again gather together the whole world, though it be miserably dispersed, so that we may persevere in this warfare to the end, until we shall at length know that we have not in vain hoped in thee, and that our prayers have not been in vain, when Christ shall exercise the power given to him for our salvation and for that of the whole world.”58[58]

54[54] Commentary at Zech. 9:10 (“his dominion shall be . . . even to the ends of the earth”).

55[55] Commentary at Mal. 1:11 (“For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same, my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering; for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts”).

56[56] Commentary at Isa. 60:4, 16.

57[57] Prayers at the end of the 9th and 65th lectures in the Daniel Commentary.

58[58] Prayer at the end of the 97th lecture on the Minor Prophets (following Micah 7:15).

Thus we conclude that Reformed theology was launched with a postmillennial perspective, a heart-felt confidence in the promises of Scripture to the effect that Christ would subdue the whole world with the gospel. The dogmatics, commentaries, and prayers of Calvin form a beautiful and orchestrated presentation of an eschatological hope which would become a doctrinal distinctive and motivating power throughout the history of Reformed Christianity.

Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Postmillennialism was evident in the successors of Zwingli. When Zwingli died in 1531, he was succeeded in the chair of theology at the University of Zurich by Theodor Bibliander, who “foresaw an age when humanity would be united as one flock under one Shepherd . . . Bibliander believed that this age of true faith, love, knowledge, and holiness would dawn through the preaching of the evangelical faith of the Reformation. Justice, peace, humanity, wisdom, and the spread of science would characterize this era.”⁵⁹[59]

Upon Zwingli's death, Martin Bucer became the leader of the Reformed churches in southern Germany and Switzerland. Later, under Edward VI, he came to England in 1549 as Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. Bucer was convinced that the future conversion of the Jewish people is guaranteed by Paul's teaching in Romans 11:25-26. This same optimism was expressed by the Strassburg reformer and later professor of the Universities of Zurich and Oxford, Peter martyr, in his 1558 Commentary on Romans; he insisted that “Israel” in Romans 11 has to be taken literally and not figuratively. David Paraeus, the Heidelberg expositor, shared this belief with Bucer and Martyr. For such men, the history of the church would witness a spectacular triumph of the gospel when even the Jews, who had historically rejected and crucified the Messiah, would be brought to submit to him.

Theodore Beza, the renowned New Testament scholar who taught at Lausanne and the Geneva academy, became leader of the Swiss Calvinists after Calvin's death in 1564. He taught that there will come a time when the *world* is restored to spiritual life again, a time when the Jews *also* will come to profess the gospel. The future conversion of the Jews was taught in the marginal note for Romans 1:26 in the 1560 *Geneva Bible*, produced by Scottish and English refugees; the note read: “He sheweth that the time shall come that the whole nation of the Jews, though not every one particularly, shall be joined to the church of Christ.” Thus, *optimism* for the success of the Church's Great Commission characterized the early Reformers.

Rooted deeply in the Reformation tradition were expectations of greater, more glorious days for the church on earth . . . While most Protestants concurred with Calvin's condemnation of the extreme chiliasm . . . they were nevertheless optimistic about the course of history in the sixteenth century. This optimism took several forms: anticipation of the approaching fall of the Roman Catholic and Turkish Antichrists; hope for the conversion of the Jews and many heathen to the Reformed faith; predictions of an age of peace, unity among Christians, and a great decline in the power of Satan and evil; the belief in the destined wealth and prestige of the Protestant powers. These hopes were found both on the Continent and in Britain. . . . After the initial days of the Reformation many heirs of that movement – both Lutheran and

⁵⁹[59] De Jong, p. 8.

Reformed, theologians as well as scientists – expressed in one form or another their optimism regarding the dawn of an era of growth, purity, and unity for the church.⁶⁰[60]

The postmillennial hope of the early Reformers planted a seed which blossomed in the seventeenth century. In 1609 Thomas Brightman's optimistic exposition of the book of Revelation, *Apocalypsis Apocalypseos*, was published; in it he aimed to instill courage in the church amidst present persecutions by pointing out the Scripture's promise of an era of triumph for the church on earth. This era will be characterized by the conversion of the Jews and the fulness of the Gentiles, the downfall of the papacy and the Turks, tranquility and a revitalized church, and Christ ruling the nations by His word. The influential Puritan and Elizabethan theologian, William Perkins, taught at Cambridge and St. Andrews; in his commentary on Galatians (published posthumously in 1617) he said, "The Lord saith, *All the nations shall be blessed in Abraham*: Hence I gather that the nation of the Jews shall be called, and converted to the participation of this blessing . . . before the end of the world we know."⁶¹[61] Three years later, in 1620, one of the earliest and most popular Puritan commentaries on Romans, Elnathan Parr's *Plain Exposition*, declared:

The casting off of the Jews, was our Calling; but the Calling of the Jews shall not be our casting off, but our greater enriching in grace, and that two ways: First, in regard of the company of believers, when the thousands of Israel shall come in, which shall doubtless cause many Gentiles which now lie in ignorance, error and doubt, to receive the Gospel and join with them. The world shall then be a golden world, rich in golden men, saith Ambrose. Secondly, in respect of the graces, which shall then in more abundance be rained down upon the Church.⁶²[62]

The title of Henry Finch's 1621 work is indicative of the Puritan hope: *The Worlds Restauration. Or the Calling of the Iewes, and (with them) of all the Nations and Kingdoms of the earth, to the faith of Christ*. A similar outlook was propounded in sermons before Parliament by William Strong, George Gillespie, and Robert Baillie, in dogmatic works by John Owen, Thomas Manton, John Flavel, and Moses Wall, in biblical commentaries by Dickson, Hutcheson, Greenhill, and Durham. The postmillennial understanding of world history was firmly entrenched in the early decades of the 1600's.

The popular Puritan preacher, Richard Sibbes, was appointed lecturer at Cambridge in 1610. Two quotations from him suffice to indicate his future hope for the church:

The Jews are not yet come in under Christ's banner; but God, that hath persuaded Japhet to come into the tents of Shem, will persuade Shem to come into the tents of Japhet, Gen. 9:27. The "fulness of the Gentiles is not yet come in," Rom. 11:25, but Christ, that hath the utmost parts of the earth given him for his possession," Psa. 2:8, will gather all the sheep his Father hath given him into one fold, that there may be one sheepfold and one shepherd, John 10:16.

⁶⁰[60] *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 12.

⁶¹[61] Cited in Murray, p. 42.

⁶²[62] Cited *ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

Let no man therefore despair; nor, as I said before, let us despair of the conversion of those that are savages in other parts. How bad soever they be, they are of the world, and if the gospel be preached to them, Christ will be "believed on in the world." Christ's almighty power goeth with his own ordinance to make it effectual . . . And when the fulness of the gentiles is come in, then comes the conversion of the Jews.63[63]

Perhaps the most famous theologian of the 1630's and 40's was the Puritan leader in Boston, John Cotton. The texts which appear on the title page of his farewell sermon to those sailing for New England on the *Arbella* in 1630 (viz., II Sam. 7:10; Ps. 22:27, 30, 31) evidence his belief that all nations of the world will come to acknowledge the living and true God; the colonists were to bear in mind that God's millennial purposes must be served by their efforts (especially in the evangelization of the Indians). Cotton soon came to New England himself, and in 1642 he produced three significant millennial studies. In *The Powring Out of the Seven Vials*, cotton expounded the hope of a future ideal church which, after the fall of Antichrist (i.e., Roman Catholicism), will consist in united Jews and Gentiles. This era will witness the widespread "rising of men from spiritual death to spiritual life" and consequently the revitalization of the church (*The Churches Resurrection or the Opening of the 5th and 6th verses of the 20th Chapter of the Revelation*); this will also be, after the Turkish downfall, an age of peace and rest for the church (*A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles*). Cotton's writings did much to propagate the postmillennial interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy; his opinions were quite influential on many other writers. Furthermore, it is clear from Oliver Cromwell's correspondence with Cotton, as well as the history of the New England colonies, that Cotton's postmillennialism guided and motivated significant social and political leaders of his age.

Postmillennialism was prevalent not only in England and New England, but also in Scotland. Robert Baillie, a Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, wrote in 1645:

We grant willingly that the nation of the Jews shall be converted to the faith of Christ; and that the fulness of the Gentiles is to come in with them to the Christian Church; also that the quickening of that dead and rotten member, shall be a matter of exceeding joy to the whole Church. But that the converted Jews shall return to Canaan to build Jerusalem, that Christ shall come from heaven to reign among them for a thousand years, there is no such thing intimated in the Scriptures in hand.64[64]

It was in the environment of this widespread Puritan postmillennialism that the Westminster Assembly met and formulated its doctrinal declarations. Samuel Rutherford, renowned Presbyterian writer at St. Andrews and one of the Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly with Baillie and Gillespie (whose postmillennialism has been mentioned above), shared the postmillennial perspective:

63[63] Cited *ibid.*, pp. 43, 92.

64[64] *A Dissuasive from the Errors of the time*, chapter 11: "The Thousand Years of Christ his visible reign upon earth is against Scripture," cited in Murray, p. 50.

I shall be glad to be a witness, to behold the kingdoms of the world become Christ's. I could stay out of heaven many years to see that victorious triumphing Lord act that prophesied part of his soul conquering love, in taking into his kingdom the greater sister, that kirk of the Jews . . . ; to behold him set up as an ensign and banner of love, to the end of the world.

I mean not any such visible reign of Christ on earth, as the Millenaries fancy.

Yet we are to believe, Christ . . . shall reign a victorious conquering King to the ends of the earth. O that there were nations, kindreds, tongues and all the people of Christs habitable world, encompassing his throne with cries and tears for the spirit of supplication to be poured down upon the inhabitants of Judah for that effect.⁶⁵[65]

Among the English delegates to the Westminster Assembly were men like William Gouge, Joseph Caryl, and Edward Reynolds. Gouge, a well-known Presbyterian, not only published postmillennial works of other authors, but wrote his own (e.g., *The Progress of Divine Providence*, 1645) and declared this hope before the House of Lords. Gouge referred to "particular promises concerning a future glory of the Christian church" as found in the Old Testament prophecies, the worlds of Christ and His apostles, and especially in the book of Revelation; according to him, they do *not* apply to the world to come, but to the "glorious estate" of the church *prior* to the day of judgment – an estate characterized by the calling and conversion of the Jews and the fullness of the Gentiles into one visible church. Caryl was a leading Independent, a strong promoter of missions, and a friend of John Owen. He wrote the address "To the Reader" in the 1655 Eliot (missionary) tract and the preface to the 1660 tract, both of which were strong with millennial overtones. In them he spoke of the increase of Christ's kingdom to the ends of the earth in fulfillment of harvest of the future for the church. Reynolds wrote the address "To the Reader" for the 1659 Eliot tract, calling upon the English to support New England missions because

It is the Ardent prayer of all that love the Lord Jesus in sincerity, that his kingdom may be enlarged, and the glorious light of the *Gospel* may shine forth into all Nations, that all the ends of the world may see the salvation of our God, that the *Stone* cut out without hands may become so great a mountain as to fill the Earth, that the *Idols* may be *utterly abolished*, and the *Gods of the Earth famished*, and that all the Isles of the Heathen may worship the only true God . . .
..66[66]

Perhaps it is worth mentioning, as well, that Thomas Manton, who wrote the "Epistle to the Reader" for the Westminster Confession of Faith, was also an expressed postmillennialist; his confidence in the church's power over Satan is manifest when he therein says, "The devil hath a great spite at the kingdom of Christ . . . [However,] O how sweetly and successfully would the work of God go on, if we would but all join together in our several places to promote it!"

In the light of the above opinions, it is not difficult to interpret relevant statements of the Westminster Standards as to the eschatological perspective they advance. De Jong observes that the early English Calvinists defended the view that a time of increased spirituality will crown the course of earthly history. According to his research, proponents of an optimistic view of history in the 1640's shared the anticipation of the fall of the Church of Rome (the Antichrist), the swarming of Jews and

65[65] Cited in Murray, pp. 53-54, 98.

66[66] Cited in De Jong, p. 54.

Gentiles into the true church, and an era of true faith and blessing among all men.⁶⁷[67] We have seen how commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, convened by Parliament in 1643, freely expressed this confidence. That it should become incorporated into the Westminster documents is not surprising. In *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, the section treating “Of Publick Prayer before the Sermon,” we read that we are “To pray for the propagation of the gospel and kingdom of Christ to all nations; for the conversion of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles, the fall of Antichrist . . .” In *The confession of Faith* itself, the pope is identified as the Antichrist (XXV.6) and Christ is said to overcome all the enemies of the redeemed by His almighty power and wisdom in a manner consonant with His wonderful dispensation (VIII.8); for the latter assertion the Confession cites Psalm 110:1; I Corinthians 15:25-26; Colossians 2:15; and Malachi 4:2-3, passages which pertain to the pre-consummation (i.e., prior to the general resurrection, I Cor. 15:21, 23), interadventual (i.e., beginning with Christ’s work during His first coming, Col. 2:14-15; cf. John 12:31-32; I John 3:8), ascended ministry of Christ (cf. the use of Ps. 110 in Acts 2:33-36; Heb. 1:2-4, 13) wherein the saints participate in the Savior’s triumph over the forces of wickedness (Mal. 4:3; cf. Gen. 3:15 with rom. 16:20; John 16:33 with I John 5:4). *The Larger Catechism* reinforces this teaching, saying “Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws and censures, by which he visibly governs them; . . . restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good . . .” (answer to question 45). *The Directory* cited above amplifies by praying “for the deliverance of the distressed churches abroad from the tyranny of the antichristian faction, . . . for the blessing of God upon the reformed churches . . . and for our plantations in the remote parts of the world: more particularly for that church and kingdom whereof we are members, that therein God would establish peace and truth, the purity of all his ordinances, and the power of godliness; prevent and remove heresy, schism, profaneness, superstition, security, and unfruitfulness under the means of grace . . .” The view that the church will effectively defeat its opposition and disciple all nations is reinforced by statements elsewhere: “. . . after a most special manner [the providence of God] taketh care of his Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof” (*Confession V.7*); the ascended Christ “doth gather and defend his Church, and subdue their enemies” (*Larger Catechism*, question 54), and in the gospel ordinances God’s covenant “is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles” (*Confession VII.6*).

Thus, the Westminster divines looked forward to the overthrow of the Roman Antichrist, the expansion of the true church by the conversion of the Jews and fullness of the Gentiles, and an age of blessing upon the church through the rule of Christ. They believed in the visible prosperity of the gospel and the future accomplishment of the Great Commission. With reference to the Lord’s Prayer, *The Larger Catechism* declares, “In the second petition, (which is, *Thy Kingdome come*,) . . . we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in; the church furnished with all gospel-officers and ordinances, purged from corruption . . . and made effectual to the converting of those that are yet in their sins, . . . and that he [Christ] would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends” (answer to question 191). The Scripture texts cited are again common to the early literature of postmillennialism (e.g., Ps. 67; 68:1, 18; Mal. 1:11; Rom. 10:1; 11:25-26; Rev. 12:10-11). The Reformed theology of the Westminster Standards looks ahead to the worldwide advance of the gospel, bringing conversion in large measure (indicated by the calling of the Jews and fullness of the Gentiles) in all the world, and prosperity for the true church of Christ. As De Jong says, “. . . in the context of the views current then, Westminster’s formulation must be seen as a deliberate choice of mild, unsystematized, postmillennial expectations.”⁶⁸[68]

67[67] De Jong, pp. 119, 77.

68[68] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Therefore, we see that there was a solid and consistent testimony to postmillennial eschatology in Reformed circles from Calvin to Westminster. This confidence was not speculative in nature, but rather rooted in Scripture and practical in its effects:

Anglo-American missions were the fruit of these enlivened expectations Presbyterian and Independent millennialists were her strongest supporters and leaders in the propaganda and financial drives on her behalf Uncountable guarantees of this glorious day were found throughout the Old and New Testaments and were used throughout the missionary literature to amplify the understanding of and quicken desires for it. The early work was seen as leaven, a mustard seed, a bruised reed and smoking flax, a day of beginnings and small things, the harvesting of first fruits. All these figures guaranteed greater things to follow. Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, was seen as riding forth to victory on a white horse. Knowledge of the Lord was being spread to all nations as his heritage. Fields were white unto harvest. The everlasting gospel was being proclaimed. The stone cut out of the mountain was crushing earthly kingdoms and would soon fill the earth with Christ's kingdom. Clearly the first fullness of the Gentiles was being completed and would be followed by widespread conversions of both Jews and Gentiles.

. . . many leading Puritans in England and America wrote and endorsed missionary propaganda in the 1640's and 1650's. Their support was predicated on the belief that through missions the glorious gospel day would dawn. It should be noted that this faith was based on many Old and New Testament passages of hope and not on a few select verses. Many Biblical images and figures of speech were used to describe the period that had already begun.^{69[69]}

The influence of postmillennialism on missionary enterprises in England was phenomenal.^{70[70]} A series of eleven booklets was published in London between 1643 and 1671, designed to promote support for missions; named after one of their prominent authors, they came to be known collectively as the "Eliot tracts." The signers of these tracts were advocates of postmillennialism. Thomas Shepherd was the editor of the 1648 tract, and in it we read:

This little we see is *something* in hand, to *earnest* to us those things which are in hope; something in *possession*, to assure us of the rest in promise, when the ends of the earth shall see his glory, and "the Kingdoms of the world shall become the Kingdoms of the Lord and his Christ, when hee shall have Dominion from Sea to Sea, and they that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him." And if the *dawn* of the *morning* be so delightfull, what will the clear day be? If the *first fruits* be so precious, what will the *whole harvest* be? If some *beginnings* be so full of joy, what will it be when God shall *perform* his *whole* work, when "the whole earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the Sea," and East and West shall sing together the song of the Lamb?^{71[71]}

^{69[69]} *Ibid.*, pp.m 77-78, 55.

^{70[70]} The reader is recommended to consult recent works by De Jong and Murray, mentioned above, for a detailed survey of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history of missions in millennial perspective. Much of the information in the present essay is derived from these sources.

^{71[71]} Cited in De Jong, p. 52.

This tract was forwarded by twelve prominent Puritans to the Parliament, saying, "The utmost ends of the earth are designed and promised to be in time the possessions of Christ . . ."72[72] In the introduction to the 1653 tract, Richard Mather declared:

The Amplitude, and large Extent of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ upon Earth, when "the Heathen shall be his Inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the Earth his possession; and when all Kings shall fall down unto him, and all Nations do him service, all contrary Kingdoms and Powers being broken in pieces and destroyed," is a thing plainly and plentifully foretold and promised in the Holy Scriptures; *Psal.* 2:8 and 22:7 and 72:11 and 86:9 *Dan.* 2:35, 44, 45. and 7:26, 27, *Zech.* 14:9.73[73]

John Eliot defined the kingdom of Christ as a condition prevailing "when all things among men are done by the direction of the word of his mouth," and thus applying to individuals, churches, states, and the eternal kingdom in heaven. According to him, Christ desires "to bring all the World subject to be ruled in all things by the Word of His mouth." Eliot taught that Christ's kingdom on earth will grow to unprecedented proportions and be established to the ends of the earth in both civil and ecclesiastical affairs. "The Gospel shall spread over all the Earth, even to all the ends of the Earth; and from the rising to the setting Sun; all Nations shal become the Nations and Kingdoms of the Lord and his Christ."74[74] The perspective in which missions work is to be seen is also evident from the Scripture texts cited on the title pages of the Eliot missionary tracts: e.g., Job 8:7; Zephaniah 2:11; Zechariah 4:10; Malachi 1:11; Matthew 13:13, 33.

In addition to its stimulus to missions, the postmillennial hope was influential on men of letters (e.g., John Milton), scientists (e.g., Sir Robert Boyle), and politicians (e.g., Oliver Cromwell). English sea power came to be viewed as an avenue for enlightening the heathen, as evidenced in the writings of John Norden, John Davis, and Richard Hakluyt. The last named, as well as men like Edward Johnson, put colonization in the same light. The English colonies were taken as agencies for advancing the kingdom of God in the world, as can be seen from the charter of the Macedonian call, "Come over and help us"), and the title of, for instance, John Oxenbridge's book, *A Seasonable Proposition of Propagating the Gospel by Christian Colonies on the Continent of Guaiana*. With evangelization and colonization came the foundation of schools and catechetical interests. New civil communities were organized, and older societies (e.g., the Indians) were often reorganized along explicitly Christian lines. For instance, John Eliot's total program for missions aimed to establish Christ as the Indians' law-giver, judge, and king, just as John Cotton aimed to do among his own people in New England. All in all, postmillennialism brought a total vision for subduing the world to Jesus Christ, beginning with widespread conversions, and continuing into the reform and prosperity of ecclesiastical, intellectual, and social affairs.

We can complete our survey of postmillennialism in the 1600's by noting quickly the most significant statements of this hope in the last half was undoubtedly John Owen. In October of 1651 he preached before the House of Commons, the title of his sermon being, "The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of the World." Therein he explained the kingdom of God as spiritual control of Christians resulting in obedient conformity to the word of Christ. The antichristian

72[72] Cited in Murray, p. 94.

73[73] Cited in De Jong, p. 55.

74[74] Cited *ibid.*, p. 75.

kingdoms then being shaken will, according to Owen, be replaced with the triumph of Christ's reign, signalized by the conversion of the Jews. Certain things will characterize this time:

That God in his appointed time will bring forth the kingdom of the Lord Christ unto more glory and power than in former days, I presume you are persuaded. Whatever will be more, these six things are clearly promised:

1. *Fulnes of peace* unto the gospel and the professors thereof, Isa. 11: 6, 7, 5:13, 33:20, 21; Rev. 21:15.
2. *Purity and beauty of ordinances* and gospel worship, Rev. 11:2, 21:3 . . .
3. *Multitudes of converts*, many persons, yea nations, Isa. 60:7, 8, 66:8, 49:18-22; Rev. 7:9.
4. *The full casting out and rejecting of all will-worship*, and their attendant abominations, Rev. 11:2.
5. *Professed subjection of the nations* throughout the whole world unto the Lord Christ, Dan. 2:44, 7:26, 27; Isa. 60:6-9; – the kingdoms become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ (Rev. 11:15) . . .
6. *A most glorious and dreadful breaking of all that rise in opposition unto him*, Isa. 60:12 – never such desolations, Rev. 16:17-19.75[75]

Owen's postmillennial confidence was rooted in the assured promises of Scripture rather than an autonomous reading of world history, for even in a time of decline and despair (. . . *if Popery Should Return Upon Us*, 1680), the promise of God will stand firm. "Though our *persons* fall, our *cause* shall be as truly, certainly, and infallibly victorious, as that Christ sits at the right hand of God. The gospel shall be victorious. This greatly comforts and refreshes me."76[76]

William Strong, an Independent like Owen, also preached noteworthy postmillennial sermons before the powers that be (1648, 1653, 1654), wherein he emphasized the triumph of the church over all her enemies, Christ's dominion over all kingdoms, and the millennium of the Churches Peace and glory" which will come, not by physical force, but by "conversion." Strong argued that Christ will not rule on earth in person during this time, but rather will entrust this rule to His saints. In his book, *A Confutation of the Millenarian Opinion* (1657), Thomas Hall argued against the error of premillennialism as well; the fact that "the great sensible and visible happiness of the Church on earth before the Ultimate Day of Judgment is prophesied in the Word of God"77[77] does not prove Christ's personal appearance on earth at that time, but only supports the optimism for gospel prosperity advanced by the Puritan postmillennialists.

The most significant doctrinal statement from seventeenth-century Independents (and later endorsed by American Congregationalists in 1680 and 1706) was drawn up at a 1658 conference held in the chapel of the old Savoy Palace. In agreement with the eschatology of the Westminster divines, the representatives at Savoy (which included John Owen) declared:

75[75] Cited in Murray, p. 38.

76[76] Cited *ibid.*, p. XII.

77[77] Cited *ibid.*, p. 51.

We expect that in the latter days, Antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the kingdom of his dear Son broken, the churches of Christ being enlarged and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceful, and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.⁷⁸[78]

Twenty years later, a commissioner to Savoy, John Howe, preached a series of sermons on Ezekiel 39:29 which were subsequently published under the descriptive title: *The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest Before the End of Time, by a Plentiful effusion of the Holy spirit*. Howe taught “that there shall be a permanent state of tranquillity and prosperity unto the church of Christ on earth,” characterized by internal prosperity for the church as well as external peace and cessation of persecution. Through the Holy Spirit, Christianity will flourish by means of the ministers of the state (who “shall universally concur, or very generally, in the practical acknowledgment that Christ is King of Kings, and Lord of lords, willingly resign, as it were, their sceptres, or hold them only in a direct and designed subordination and subserviency to him and his sceptre”) and ministers of the church (who “shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurements, than we now find we can”). The direct influence of the spirit on individuals will show itself in two great effects: “(1) In numerous conversions; and (2) In the high improvement and growth of those who sincerely embrace religion, their eminent holiness . . .” Thus, with the decline of hostilities and wars in the world and with the increase of the church in both extent and glory, “religion shall not be an inglorious thing in the world always.”⁷⁹[79] Another important postmillennialist we could mention here in passing would be Stephen Charnock (1628-80), a proctor at Oxford, ejected from the ministry under the Restoration of Charles II, and author of one of the classic Reformed treatments of theology proper, *The Existence and Attributes of God*.

When we turn to Scotland and the Netherlands, it becomes obvious that postmillennialism in the seventeenth century was an internationally endorsed position. Quotations from two leading Scottish Covenanters during the “killing times” are illustrative. Richard Cameron, preaching on Psalm 46:10, said:

You that are in hazard for the truth, be not troubled: our Lord will be exalted among the heathen. But many will say, “we know he will be exalted at the last and great day when He shall have all the wicked on His left hand.” Yes; but says He, “I will be exalted in the earth.” He has been exalted on the earth; but the most wonderfully exalting of his works we have not yet seen. . . . The Church of Christ is to be so exalted that its members shall be made to ride upon the high places of the earth. Let us not be judged to be of the opinion that some men in England called the Fifth-Monarchy men, who say that, before the great day, Christ shall come in person from heaven with all the saints and martyrs and reign a thousand years on earth. But we are of the opinion that the Church shall yet be more high and glorious, as appears from the book of Revelation, and the Church shall have more power than ever she had before.⁸⁰[80]

⁷⁸[78] Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1877), vol. III, p. 723.

⁷⁹[79] The quotations from Howe’s work are taken from Murray’s reprint of it as Appendix I of his above-mentioned text.

⁸⁰[80] Cited in Murray, pp. 54-55.

Cameron's hope was built on Scripture, not current events, as is clear from the fact that he preached these words three days before his death on the Arysmoos moors. Another Covenanter leader who was martyred was James Renwick, whose death in 1688 came just two years before the reconstitution of the Presbyterian Church. Renwick proclaimed, "There have been great and glorious days of the gospel in this land; but they have been small in comparison of what shall be."⁸¹[81]

The same optimism characterized Dutch theology; postmillennialism was popular in the Netherlands among the leaders of the so-called "Second Reformation" and had significant influence on early Dutch missions. Berkhof says:

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries several Reformed theologians in the Netherlands taught a form of Chiliasm, which would now be called Postmillennialism. Among them were such well-known men as Coccjus, Alting, the two Vitringas, d'Outrein, Witsius, Hoornbeck, Koelman, and Brakel The prevailing view was that the gospel, which will gradually spread through the whole world, will in the end become immeasurably more effective than it is at present, and will usher in a period of rich spiritual blessing for the Church of Jesus Christ, a golden age, in which the Jews will also share in the blessings of the gospel in an unprecedented manner.⁸²[82]

The 1689 work of Jacobus Koelman is particularly noteworthy for the familiarity it shows with English millennial writers. His contemporary, Herman Witsius (died 1708), exercised a heavy influence on commentators and mission leaders. He taught that

. . . when the fulness of the Gentiles is brought in, *all Israel shall be saved*, that is, as our Dutch commentators well observe, not a few, but a very great number, and in a manner the whole Jewish nation, in a full body To this restoration of Israel shall be joined the riches of the whole church, as it were, life from the dead, Rom. 1:12. The apostle intimates, that much greater and more extensive benefits shall redound to the Christian church from the fulness and restoration of the Jews . . . ; greater, I say, *intensively*, or with respect to degrees, and larger with respect to *extent* For there is a certain fulness of the Gentiles, to be gathered together by the successive preaching of the gospel, which goes before the restoration of Israel, of which ver. 25, and another richness of the Gentiles, that comes after the recovery of Israel.⁸³[83]

Therefore, we cannot avoid concluding that international Calvinism, for the first two centuries of its history, anticipated an era of peace and prosperity when the gospel will have converted the world nations; Reformed theology was pervasively aligned with the postmillennial hope, advocated by a wide variety of dogmaticians and expositors, preachers and politicians, in a variety of places and

⁸¹[81] Cited *ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁸²[82] Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), p. 716.

⁸³[83] *Economy of the Covenants*, cited by Kik, p. 8.

circumstances, and rooted in an extensive variety of scriptural passages from the Old and New Testaments. The effects were felt in ecclesiastical, intellectual, political, and various social domains.

The Eighteenth Century

In 1700 Samuel Willard called upon his hearers in *The Fountain Opened* to show diligence in prayer as well as in the training of their children in preparation for the days of spiritual prosperity that would accompany the calling of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles, and the destruction of Antichrist. These were, as we have seen, common themes in the preceding century. Once again the postmillennial hope would gain the support of the leading lights of the period. The famous Calvinistic commentator, Matthew Henry, preached these words on New Year's Day, 1707:

The year of the revival of primitive Christianity in the power of it, will be the year of the redeemed. This we wish, we hope, we long to see, both at home and abroad When the bounds of the church will be enlarged by the conversion of pagan and Mahometan nations to the faith of Christ, and the spreading of the gospel in foreign parts.⁸⁴[84]

Of Isaiah 2:2-4, Malachi 1:11, and Psalm 72:8-11 Henry wrote in his commentaries:

Not it is here promised . . . that Christianity shall be openly preached and professed . . . , that it shall be firmly fixed and rooted . . . , that it shall not only overcome all opposition, but overtop all competition The spiritual worship which it shall introduce shall put down the idolatries of the heathen Multitudes shall embrace the Christian faith. They shall flow into it, as streams of water, which denotes the abundance of converts that the gospel should make

Instead of being worshipped and served among the Jews only, a small people in a corner of the world, he will be served and worshipped in all places, *from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same; in every place*, in every part of the world, *incense shall be offered to his name*; nations shall be disciplined, and shall speak of the wonderful works of God

Religion shall flourish under Christ's government Righteousness shall abound and be in reputation, shall command and be in power Christ's kingdom shall be extended very far, and greatly enlarged; considering, 1. The extent of his territories . . . 2. The dignity of his tributaries.

These quotations are but representative samplings of Matthew Henry's eschatological convictions about world history. Similar expressions can be found in men like Thomas Boston, the renowned author of *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, and the Connecticut preacher, Adams, of New Longon. In 1716 the former preached, "There is a day coming in which there shall be a national conversion of the Jews . . . that will be a lively time, a time of a great outpouring of the spirit, that will carry reformation to a greater height than yet has been." Likewise the latter preached in 1721, "Oh! That the Lord would arise and have mercy upon Zion, that the time to favour it, the set time may come,

⁸⁴[84] Cited in Murray, p. 113.

that the whole earth may be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea!"⁸⁵[85]

The extent to which postmillennialism had become engrained in the thought of the period is perhaps indicated in the commentaries, prayers, and hymns of the general era. Postmillennial commentaries were published by Daniel Whitby in 1703 (on the New Testament, with a special treatise on the millennium), William Lowth in the years between 1714 and 1725 (on the prophets), and Charles Daubuz in 1720 (on Revelation). Often the prayers of the period which are recorded for us⁸⁶[86] petition the Lord for the latter-day glory of the church, the triumph of the gospel throughout the world, the conversion of the Jews, and bringing in of the fullness of the Gentiles. In 1679 Walter Smith drew up rules for the praying societies and said, ". . . all that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity . . . will long and pray for the out-making of the gospel-promises to his Church in the latter days, that King Christ would go out upon the white horse of the gospel, conquering and to conquer, and make a conquest of the travail of his soul, that it may be sounded that the kingdoms of the world are become his, and his name called upon from the rising of the sun to its going down." Toward that end Smith went on to direct prayer for the engrafting of the Jews, the enlightenment of the pagan world, and correction of all heresy.

Reformed piety breathed postmillennial confidence through its *hymns* as well (and the hymns it inspired outside of Reformed circles also), as evidence from two centuries proves. Isaac Watts succeeded John Owen in London's mark lane pulpit and was responsible for sponsoring and prefacing works by Jonathan Edwards; he stood between the greatest English and American theologians of the times. In 1719 he led the church to sing, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun, Does his successive journeys run; His kingdom stretch from shore to shore, Till moons shall wax and wane no more"; also, "This is the day the Lord hath made; He calls the hours his own; Let heav'n rejoice, let earth be glad, And praise surround the throne. Today he rose and left the dead, and Satan's empire fell; Today the saints his triumph spread, and all his wonders tell." In 1746 even Charles Wesley testified to the same confidence: "His kingdom cannot fail, He rules o'er earth and heav'n . . . He sits at God's right hand Till all his foes submit, and bow to his command, And fall beneath his feet: Lift up your heart, lift up your voice; Rejoice, again I say, rejoice." Benjamin Beddome wrote in 1769: "Shout, for the blessed Jesus reigns; Through distant lands his triumphs spread . . . Gentiles and Jews his laws obey; nations remote their offerings bring, And unconstrained their homage pay, To their exalted God and King. O may his holy church increase, His Word and Spirit still prevail, While angels celebrate his praise, And saints his growing glories hail." The beautiful 1772 hymn of William Williams should be given in full:

O'er the gloomy hills of darkness, Cheered by no celestial ray,
Sun of Righteousness, arising, Bring the bright, the glorious day;
Send the gospel To the earth's remotest bounds.

Kingdoms wide that sit in darkness, Grant them, Lord, the glorious light;
And from eastern coast to western May the morning chase the night;
And redemption, Freely purchased win the day.

Fly abroad, thou mighty gospel, Win and conquer, never cease;
May thy lasting, wide dominions Multiply and still increase;
Sway thy sceptre, Saviour, all the world around.

⁸⁵[85] The previous two quotes are cited *ibid.*, pp. 113, 114.

⁸⁶[86] Examples from the last half of the 1600's are given in Murray, pp. 100-103.

Edward Perronet's popular hymn of 1779, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name!," takes as one of its stanzas: "Le ev'ry kindred, ev'ry tribe, On this teresstial ball, To him all majesty ascribe, And crown him Lord of all." In 1781 John Morison sang, "To us a Child is born, To us a Son is giv'n, Him shall the tribes of earth obey, Him all the hosts of heav'n . . . His pow'r increasing, still shall guard his throne above, And peace abound below." In 1795 William Shrubsole swelled the treasury of musical theology with this short but excellent piece:

Arm of the Lord, Awake, awake! Put on thy strength, the nations shake,
And let the world, adoring, see Triumphs of mercy wrought by thee.

Say to the heathen from thy throne: "I am Jehovah, God alone."
Thy voice their idols shall confound, And cast their altars to the ground.

Let Zion's time of favor come; O bring the tribes of Israel home:
And let our wond'ring eyes behold Gentiles and Jew in Jesus' fold.

Almighty God, thy grace proclaim In every clime of every name;
Let adverse pow'rs before thee fall, And crown the Saviour Lord of all.

Shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century, Thomas Kelly produced a good number of postmillennial hymns, including "Zion's King Shall Reign Victorious," "Look, Ye Saints, the Sight Is Glorious," "Hark! Ten Thousand Harps and Voices," and "Zion Stands by Hills Surrounded." In these we sing phrases such as, "spread abroad the Victors fame," "Jesus rules the world alone," and "all her [Zion's] foes shall be confounded." The church's confidence was lifted again with William Hurn's 1813 hymn:

Airse, O god, and shine In all thy saving might,
And prosper each design To spread thy glorious light:
Let healing streams of mercy flow, That all the earth thy truth may know.

Bring distant nations near To sing thy glorious praise;
Let ev'ry people hear And learn thy holy ways:
Reign, mighty God, assert thy cause, And govern by thy righteous laws.

Send forth thy glorious pow'r, That Gentiles all may see,
And earth present her store In converts born to thee;
God, our own God, thy church O bless, And fill the world with righteousness.

To God, they only wise, The one iimmortal King,
Let hallelujahs rise From ev'ry living thing:
Let all that breathe, on ev'ry coast, Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Five years later, these words appeared in a James Montgomery hymn: "See Jehovah's banner furled, Sheathed his sword; he speaks – 'tis done, And the kingdoms of the world Are the kingdoms of his Son. He shall reign from pole to pole With illimitable sway . . ." In 1819 Reginald Heber gave the church one of its greatest missionary hymns, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains"; in it we sing, "Salvation! O salvation! The joyful sound proclaim, Till each remotest nation Has learned Messiah's Name. Waft, waft, ye winds; his story, And you, ye waters roll, Till like a sea of glory It spreads from pole to pole." In the well-known hymn by Sabine Baring-Gould, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" (1875),

the church declares in song: "At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee; On then, Christian soldiers, On to victory: Hell's foundations quiver At the shout of praise, Brothers, lift your voices, Loud your anthems raise."⁸⁷[87] Examples could be multiplied virtually without end, and we could investigate the significance of the musical renditions of particular psalms (e.g., 67, 72) as well. But enough has been said to demonstrate the thorough-going optimism for the gospel which was expressed by the church in this age – expressed in its sermons, its expositions of Scripture, its prayers, and pervasively in its hymns.

The fuller gospel day prophesied in both Testaments was often set before the S.P.G. (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts) as an incentive, encouragement, and hope for the first thirty-five years of the eighteenth century; numerous texts were utilized to show a coming era when the church should increase and prosper, eventually filling the whole world. These sermons were preached by a wide variety of Anglican leaders (e.g., Stanhope, Ash, Chandler, Waddlington, Pearce). The work of missions was placed in the same context of millennial optimism by the influential Boston judge, Samuel Sewall, in his *Phaenomena quaedam Apocalyptica* (2nd 3d. 1727). But in addition to missionary activity, the postmillennial hope stimulated the famous "awakenings" of the early eighteenth century; in turn, the awakenings occasioned even wider acceptance of postmillennialism as men looked to the gospel and the Spirit as able to generate a new era on earth. This confidence was almost simultaneously expounded by Jonathan Edwards in America, Robert Millar and John Willison in Scotland, John Erskine, George Whitefield, and John Wesley in England, and Johannes Bengel in Germany.⁸⁸[88] "Calvinistic millennialism 'controlled the mind of the period,'" says De Jong.⁸⁹[89] It was a common hope of both Old Light (e.g., Sergeant, Chauncy, Appleton) and New Light (e.g., Bellamy, Hopkins, J. Sewall, Prince, Pemberton, Buell) Presbyterians of America.

Selected statements from prominent leaders of this period give a portrait of early eighteenth-century eschatology. In America Benjamin Coleman, preaching a series on Haggai 2:7 (1727), said: "We look for the days, when the blessed Saviour of men shall be *more* the desire of the nations than he yet has been," when the church would be enlarged through extensive conversions among Jews and Gentiles. In 1723 Solomon Stoddard cited psalm 2:8 and 72:7 to call for missionary work among the Indians. His grandson, Jonathan Edwards, was a key figure in the Great Awakening and one of the most notable theologians and philosophers of American history. He once said, "My mind has been much entertained and delighted with the scripture promises and prophecies, which relate to the future glorious advancement of Christ's kingdom upon earth."⁹⁰[90] In his *A History of the Work of Redemption*, Edwards maintained that the kingdom of Christ must step by step displace the kingdom of Satan in the period between Christ's resurrection and the consummation of all things. This will happen through preaching, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The worldwide extent of Christ's rule is guaranteed, he said, by "many passages of scripture that can be understood in no other sense." In the coming period there will be advanced peace, holiness, and material prosperity. Christ's kingdom shall be universal:

⁸⁷[87] The preceding hymns can be found in the *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1961), numbers (in order of mention) 374, 326, 149, 226, 298, 373, 218, 163, 372, 217, 225, 386, 300, 383, 490.

⁸⁸[88] Cf. De Jong, pp. 120ff.; see also Murray's quote from Bengel, p. 132.

⁸⁹[89] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁹⁰[90] Cited in *ibid.*, p. 125.

The visible kingdom of Satan shall be overthrown, and the kingdom of Christ set up on the ruins of it, everywhere throughout the whole habitable globe. Now shall the promise made to Abraham be fulfilled, that "in him and in his seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed"; and Christ now shall become the desire of all nations, agreeable to Haggai 2:7. Now the kingdom of Christ shall in the most strict and literal sense be extended to all nations, and the whole earth What can be more universal than that in Isa. 11:8, "For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." . . . So it foretold in Isa. 45:22, that all the ends of the earth shall look to Christ, and be saved. And to show that the words are to be understood in the most universal sense, it is said in the next verse, "I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." So the most universal expression is used. Dan. 7:27, "and the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High God.' You see the expression includes *all* under the *whole heaven*.^{91[91]}

Edwards was quite moved, as well, by the undying hope of David Brainerd that the banner of Christ would unfurl around the globe, joyously drawing all nations into the church and bringing prosperity to the gospel. Charles Chauncy proclaimed that Scripture promises that the kingdom of Christ shall be spread to all nations of the earth (1742), and Nathaniel Appleton declared "the knowledge of the Truth shall spread, and fill the Earth, as the Waters do the Seas."^{92[92]} In 1740 Thomas Prince delivered a message entitled "The Endless Increase of Christ's Government," and David Brainerd's friend, Samuel Buell, would speak of "the many promises, which have respect to the magnificent Enlargement, Light, Purity, Glory and Felicity, of the Divine Redeemer's Kingdom, in these last Days."^{93[93]} The American Calvinists were staunch adherents, then, to a scriptural optimism about the history of Christ's kingdom on the earth.

In the book, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture* (reprinted five times by 1726), the Scottish writer Robert Fleming, Sr., substantiated the hope for the conversion of the Jews, a flourishing and united church, and a gradual securing of victory for the church. Robert Millar, in his 1723 publication, *The History of the Propagation of Christianity*, looked for the evangelization of the world when Christianity will be established around the globe. As the kingdoms of the world bow to Christ, doctrinal error and denominationalism will wane, he held. John Willison wrote *The Balm of Gilead . . . And A Scripture Prophecy of the Increase of Christ's Kingdom, and the Destruction of Antichrist*, which saw eight editions by 1786; although Christ's kingdom has experienced at times diminution, "The increase of Christ's kingdom and glory in the world is absolutely certain and necessary. It must infallibly be, for God hath said . . ." His fellow Scottish ministers were called upon to take away all "hindrances of the kingdom of Christ, so that his dominion may spread from sea to sea, thro' all nations of the earth."^{94[94]} John Erskine hoped that the Scottish revival was hastening the day when the knowledge of Christ will fill the earth.

Similar sentiments and declarations could be illustrated from leaders in the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (S.S.P.C.K.) like Alexander Webster, John Gillies, John Gibson, and James Brown; they could be matched with similar statements from leaders in other missionary

91[91] Cited in Kik, p. 7.

92[92] Cited in De Jong, p. 139.

93[93] Cited in De Jong, p. 139.

94[94] Cited *ibid.*, p. 144.

organizations: for instance, the Church Missionary Society (Henry Venn, John Newton, Richard Cecil, Thomas Scott, Charles Simeon), the London Missionary Society (Henry Hunter, George Burder, John Eyre, Melville Horne, David Bogue), the Baptist Missionary Society (William Carey, Andrew Fuller), not to mention the New York and Glasgow Missionary Societies, or the continued flow of postmillennial thought in the later S.P.G. (e.g., Shute Barrington, Richard Terrick, Martin Benson, Thomas Hayter, Robert Drummond, William George, Edward Cresset, etc.) and S.S.P.C.K.⁹⁵[95] Their messages and sermon texts, as well as book titles, signify their postmillennial confidence (e.g., Gibson, *The Unlimited Extent and Final Blessedness of God's spiritual Kingdom*, 1768; Brown, *The Extensive Influence of Religious Knowledge*, 1769; Hunter, "The Universal Extent, and Everlasting Duration of the Redeemer's Kingdom," 1780; Toller, *The Coming and Enlargement of the Kingdom of God*, 1779; Witner, *The Happy Tendency and Extensive Influence of the Christian Dispensation*, 1788; Snodgrass, *Prospects of Providence Respecting the Conversion of the world to Christ*, 1796; etc.).

Statements from David Bogue and George Whitefield [WHITfield] will serve to represent the spirit of postmillennialism then prevalent. Bogue asserted that ignorance of Christ is due to the negligence and indifference of Christians in propagating their faith:

One means, and indeed the greatest and most effectual for introducing the glory of the latter days, is the preaching of the gospel Let it also be remembered, that whenever the sacred Scripture speaks of the conversion of the world to Christ, and specifies the means by which it is to be accomplished – that means is always the preaching of the gospel In order to introduce the Millennium, many thousands of ministers like them [viz., Knox and Whitefield] will God raise up, and send forth into the harvest and he will crown their labours with extraordinary success. From a multitude of such labourers in every country, what may not be expected!⁹⁶[96]

Whitefield is known to have longed for the day when all Israel would be saved, and he ws wont to pray, "Fulfil Thy ancient promises, and let Thy Son have the heathen for His inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession."⁹⁷[97] In 1763 Whitefield wrote of the Christian's duty to anticipate great revivals:

The Scriptures are so far from encouraging us to plead for a diminution of divine influence in these last days of the gospel that on the contrary, we are encouraged to expect, hope, long, and pray for larger and more extensive showers of divine influence than any former age hath ever yet experienced. For, are we not therein taught to pray, "That we may be filled with the fulness of God," and to wait for a glorious epoch, "when the earth shall be filed with the Knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas"?⁹⁸[98]

⁹⁵[95] For a discussion of the above-named, see De John, pp. 148-155, 165-193.

⁹⁶[96] Cited in Muray, p. 234.

⁹⁷[97] Cited in De Jong, p. 153.

⁹⁸[98] Cited in Murray, p. 150.

Clearly, then, the eschatological hope of the eighteenth-century Christian leaders in England and Scotland was identical with that of American Calvinists, like Jonathan Edwards. Therefore, De Jong is certainly justified in speaking of the “seventeenth and eighteenth century vision of the global spread of Christian knowledge” and “the expectation of an era when knowledge of and faith in Christ would be universal.”⁹⁹[99]

Returning briefly to America, we should note that the same postmillennial confidence which characterized the first part of the eighteenth century was prominent as well at the end of the century, being carried forward by the Edwardeans. Joseph Bellamy, a leader among them, preached a famous sermon on the millennium in 1758, which was republished in 1794; in it he argued on the basis of the increased fertility of the long millennial period that, in the last analysis, many more will be saved than lost. Another Edwardean leader, Timothy Dwight, served as president of Yale from 1795, where he led an apologetic battle against infidelity. He promoted revival and preached often on millennial themes, holding that the conversion of the Jews is contingent upon the widespread conversion of the Gentiles. In a 1798 sermon, he looked for the capitulation of Moslems and Jews to Christ, as well as the latter-day glory of the church. In 1800 he composed the well-known hymn, “I love Thy Kingdom, Lord,” wherein he taught the church to sing; “Sure as thy truth shall last, To Zion shall be giv’n The brightest glories earth can yield, And brighter bliss of heav’n.” but perhaps the most important millennial writer of this period was Samuel Hopkins, who is well known for his extensive involvement in missions projects. Hopkins saw an essential connection among revival, missions, and the millennium. In 1793 he produced his two-volume systematic theology with an appendix entitled, “A Treatise on the Millennium.” In it, he demonstrated from Scripture that Christ’s church must come in this world to a state of prosperity – a doctrine expounded in every major section of the bible and especially Revelation 19. Hopkins interpreted Revelation 20 figuratively and said that the millennium will be characterized by peace, holiness, benevolence, knowledge, and joy. Science and technology will develop remarkably and commerce improve. Financial prosperity and general health will see an upswing. Agriculture, as well as the mechanical arts, crafts, or trades will all see vast improvement. More leisure will allow the pursuit of education and understanding; books will spread rapidly. Mankind will be unified under God’s blessing, and the church will rid itself of schisms as discipline becomes charitable and pure. That is, widespread cultural transformation will accompany the global conversion of mankind; indeed, such blessings will depend upon the majority of men hearing the gospel in repentant faith and leading lives which evidence radical spiritual transformation. In 1801 Hopkins wrote a sermon which clearly stated that Christ will reign until His enemies are subjugated and until all earthly kingdoms become His own. Thus, the mission effort of the church “will, in some way, though unknown to us, serve to promote and hasten on the happy day when the Heathen shall be given to Christ for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession.”¹⁰⁰[100]

Just as in the seventeenth century, so also in the eighteenth, Calvinistic postmillennialism generated not only interest in revival and missions, but also *the transformation of all areas of life so as to serve the glory of God and advance His rule in the world*. In 1797 Neil Douglas of Scotland preached on “Messiah’s Glorious Rest in the Latter Days,” defining the reign of Christ as the conversion of the nations through prayer, missions, the overthrow of idolatry, and God’s historical judgments on guilty nations. Douglas was a social reformer, and he placed social reform in the postmillennial context. Preachers like John Love, David Bogue, and Robert Winter emphasized that when the knowledge of the Lord becomes universal, “it will act as a leaven on life and culture in general.”¹⁰¹[101] Thus

⁹⁹[99] De Jong, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰[100] Cited in *ibid.*, p. 212. Hopkins’ *Treatise* has been reprinted by Arno Preso of New York.

¹⁰¹[101] Cited *ibid.*, p. 171.

bringing a general abhorrence of war and mutual compassion between men and nations, and calling for educational, agricultural, industrial programs to be fostered by kingdom-building Christians. These programs were never the substance of preaching, but always integrated with living faith in Christ. De Jong comments: "Such full-orbed Christianity would dominate the millennium. Winter regarded the society's comprehensive approach to the whole man as consistent with the character of the latter days." In our own day, we see a resurgence of this interest in sanctifying all areas of life to Christ, not merely our worship and evangelistic witness. Those concerned with such matters do well to investigate their postmillennial roots; one can ask whether premillennialism or amillennialism can honestly and consistently promote or generate this "full-orbed Christianity" and "comprehensive approach to the whole man." A pessimistic philosophy of history, coupled with an often excessive otherworldliness, is unavoidably detrimental, if not fatal, for the evangelistically informed pursuit of the cultural mandate. The church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, comments about the Christianity which emerged from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century awakenings:

This Protestantism was characterized by an abounding vitality and a daring unequalled in Christian history. Through it, for the first time, plans were seriously elaborated from bringing the Christian message to all men and to make the life of all mankind conform to Christian ideals.¹⁰²[102]

This active and conquering Protestantism was steeped in postmillennial eschatology: "Prior to 1810 . . . simple chiliasm [i.e., postmillennialism], with its strong emphasis on the gradual arrival of the promised kingdom through preaching and conversion, was in vogue . . . simple chiliasm had become universal in Anglo-American churches by this period."¹⁰³[103]

The Nineteenth Century

It is recognized on virtually all sides that postmillennialism was a strong position in the nineteenth century – so much so, in fact, that some erroneously characterize the outlook as the pale reflection of nineteenth-century humanistic optimism. By and large, the works of prominent postmillennialists from this century are available in reprints. For these previous two reasons, it is not necessary to concentrate in detail upon the works of the period to demonstrate Reformed adherence to postmillennial eschatology. However, a short survey is still appropriate, indicating that the best-known biblical and theological scholars were of this persuasion.

In England and Scotland, the conviction that the Jews would be converted, resulting in even further blessings for the Gentiles, was propagated by the minister, Walter Tait (1811), the popular preacher William Cooper (1896), and missionaries Robert Johnston (*The Conversion of the Jews; and Its Bearing on the Conversion of the Gentiles*, 1853) and Caludius Buchanan (1808). It was advanced in commentaries by Robert Haldane and Thomas Chalmers, as well as in works by Robert M. M'Cheyne, Henry Hunter (*The Rise, Fall, and Future Restoration of the Jews*, 1806), and Archibald Mason (*Sixteen Discourses from Romans 11:25-27*, 1825; and *The Conversion of the Jews*, 1839). It was widely endorsed and acted upon. William McBean strongly advocated missions in the Scottish

¹⁰²[102] *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), vol. IV, p. 65.

¹⁰³[103] De Jong, pp. 164, 166.

General Assembly, saying, "it ought also to be our endeavor to hasten the time when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth 'as the waters cover the sea.'"104[104] The renowned Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff, declared in 1840, "Never for a moment lose sight of the grand ulterior object for which the Church was originally constituted, and spiritual rights and privileges conferred, viz. The conversion of the world."105[105] Similar statements could be given from men like John Love, David Livingston, and John G. P

Paton.106[106]

Postmillennialism was a great stimulus to American missions as well. In 1805 Joseph Eckley encouraged the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America by speaking of the day when the knowledge of the true God will fill the earth. Notable sermons to the same effect were preached by Joseph Barker in 1806 (on Ps. 67:7) and Abiel Holmes in 1808 (on Ps. 72:17); noteworthy is also John Livingston's sermon before the New York Missionary Society in 1804. Jonathan Pomeroy reminded the Hampshire Missionary Society in 1806 that Christian knowledge was to be universal and the worship of God reformed as men unitedly worship Him. In 1820 S. E. Dwight interpreted the second petition of the Lord's Prayer for the Foreign Missionary Society of Boston; according to him it referred to the reign of peace, joy, and righteousness still to appear through the work of the church. William Collins elaborated three themes for the Baptist Missionary Society in 1806: the conversion of the Jews, the gathering of the Gentiles, and the Christianization of the world as indisputably taught in God's word. It was explicitly a postmillennial eschatology which brought about the formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1812 the Board's first five missionaries were ordained, at which time a professor of theology at Andover, Leonard Woods, preached that divine prophecy guarantees an era of millennial glory when all nations and people will praise and fear God; the universal knowledge of Christ is our unalterable object, Woods claimed. As human kingdoms and empires are shaken and fall, the kingdom of God will grow and increase to cover the globe. The extension of Christ's kingdom over the entire world and the realization of a glorious era assured by prophecy were themes set forth by other A.B.C.F.M. leaders, for instance, Samuel Worcester (*The Kingdom of the Messiah*, 1813), Jedidiah Morse (*The Gospel Harvest*, 1815), Alexander Proudfit (*The Universal Extension of Messiah's Kingdom*, 1822), and America's greatest missionary leader of the last century, Rufus Anderson.

We see, then, that if one wishes to find evidence of postmillennialism, he need only to look to the great missionary movements of the church prior to the twentieth century. The growth of Christian missions cannot properly be understood apart from the eschatology which stimulated it. Abundant evidence of postmillennialism is to be found among the biblical scholars and theologians of the era as well. The finest systematic theology of the early nineteenth century was written by Dr. John Dick and published in Scotland in 1834. In it he asserts:

However improbable it may seem that the whole world should be Christianized, we know that God is able to perform what he has promised. The great revolution commenced immediately after our Saviour's ascension A future generation will witness the rapidity of its progress; and long before the end of time, "the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea." Christianity will gain a complete triumph over all false religions; and the visible

104[104] Cited in Murray, p. 161.

105[105] Cited *ibid.*, p. 178.

106[106] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 179-183.

kingdom of Satan will be destroyed or reduced within narrow limits, during the happy period when, in the figurative language of the Apocalypse, "he shall be bound."¹⁰⁷[107]

In 1850 John a James wrote *The Church in Earnest*, saying that "if the world is never to be converted to Christ . . . then would infidelity triumph and exultingly affirm that the Son of God had *not* destroyed the works of the devil – that the gospel had been partially, and to a great extent, a failure, and therefore was a fable." But James was not persuaded that the church would have to face such a conclusion: "A brighter era is destined to arrive; a golden age is to dawn upon us, when the prediction of prophets, and the descriptions of apostles, are all to be fulfilled, and the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord."¹⁰⁸[108] In his 1851 work, *History of the Christian Religion and Church*, J. A. W. Neander wrote, "Strong and certain was the conviction of the Christians that the church would come forth triumphant out of its conflicts, and, as it was its destination to be a world-transforming principle, would attain to dominion of the world."¹⁰⁹[109] The nonconformist leader, William Jay (died 1853), once said:

We have many express assurances in the Scriptures, which cannot be broken, of the general, the universal spread and reign of Christianity, which are not yet accomplished. Nothing has yet taken place in the history of Divine grace, wide enough in extent, durable enough in continuance, powerful enough in energy, blessed enough in enjoyment, magnificent enough in glory, to do anything like justice to these predictions and promises. Better days, therefore, are before us, notwithstanding the forebodings of many.¹¹⁰[110]

A similar postmillennial eschatology is taught by the famous German exegete, E. W. Hengstenberg (1802-1869), who was a professor at the University of Berlin and an opponent of the liberalism of Schleiermacher. In this regard, Hengstenberg's work on the Psalms and Revelation should be especially noted. These works were translated into English by another great Bible scholar of the last century, Patrick Fairbairn (1805-1874). Fairbairn wrote extensively on scriptural interpretation, and his 1856 book on *Prophecy* is still a classic. He there taught that "Christ shall reign until His enemies have become His footstool, and shall cause the knowledge of the Lord to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. The word of prophecy can never reach its full accomplishment till this result is attained."¹¹¹[111] In his discussion of Revelation 20, Fairbairn speaks of the time when Christians will have "grown so many in number and so powerful in influence, that every sphere of life shall be penetrated by their agency, and every region of earth be willingly obedient to their sway." Fairbairn recognized that the age which experiences worldwide conversions will of necessity, see a sanctification in outward culture as well: "What a remodelling shall it not need to bring along with it of the political and social fabric!"¹¹²[112] For many years, a book considered to be a standard on the

¹⁰⁷[107] Cited in Kik, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸[108] Cited *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰⁹[109] Cited in Murray, p. xii.

¹¹⁰[110] Cited *ibid.*, p., xiv.

¹¹¹[111] Cited in Kik, p. 11.

¹¹²[112] For the previous two quotes, see *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), pp. 474, 461-462.

subject of eschatology was *The Second Advent*, by the Scottish Presbyterian, David Brown. Written in 1846 (and revised 1849, reprinted many times), the book was a strong apologetic for postmillennialism and an attack on premillennialism. As an example of Brown's outlook we notice his treatment of the parables in Matthew 13: "The *growing* character of the kingdom, taught by the 'mustard seed,' and the *penetrating* and *assimilating* character, taught by 'the leaven,' go on till 'the whole (earth) is leavened,' and all the world 'have been brought to lodge in the branches of the mighty tree of life.'"113[113]

Among those who are still held in highest esteem for their exegetical and theological acumen are the scholars of "Old Princeton" Seminary; their writings have remained in print because they are valuable research tools and dependable guides for finding what the word of God has to say. While fallible, the opinions of these men are not lightly dismissed. One of the clearest nineteenth-century witnesses to the biblical basis for postmillennialism was raised by these men. Archibald Alexander, who founded Princeton Theological Seminary in 1812, was a postmillennialist. His son, Joseph Addison Alexander, was one of the finest commentators and Bible scholars of all time. J. A. Alexander's eschatological confidence in the victory of the church on earth is expressed repeatedly in his 1846 commentary on Isaiah; for instance, on Isaiah 2:2-4, he says: "The Prophet sees the church, at some distant period, exalted and conspicuous, and the nations resorting to it for instruction in the true religion, as a consequence of which he sees war cease and universal peace prevail."114[114] The renowned dogmatist, Charles Hodge, and his son and grandson (A. A. Hodge and C. W. Hodge) were adherents of the postmillennial hope. In his outstanding work, *Systematic Theology*, Charles Hodge wrote: "The Scriptural doctrine therefore, is consistent with the admitted fact that separate nations, and the human race as a whole, have made great advances in all branches of knowledge and in all the arts of life. Nor is it inconsistent with the belief that the world under the influence of Christianity is constantly improving, and will ultimately attain, under the reign of Christ, millennial perfection and glory. Also: "The common doctrine of the Church stated above, is that the conversion of the world, the restoration of the Jews, and the destruction of Antichrist are to precede the second coming of Christ."115[115] In his *Outlines of Theology*, A. A. Hodge says, "The Scriptures, both of the Old and new Testament, clearly reveal that the gospel is to exercise an influence over all branches of the human family, immeasurably more extensive and more thoroughly transforming than any it has ever realized in time past. This end is to be gradually attained through the spiritual presence of Christ in the ordinary dispensation of Providence, and ministrations of his church."116[116] Finally, we can observe the strong postmillennial convictions of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921). His commentary on Revelation 19 is excellent:

The section opens with a vision of the victory of the Word of god, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords over all His enemies. We see Him come forth from heaven girt for war, followed by the armies of heaven The thing symbolized is obviously the complete victory of the Son of God over all the hosts of wickedness The conquest is wrought by the spoken word – in short, by the preaching of the gospel What we have here, in effect, is a picture of the whole period between the first and second advents, seen from the point of view of heaven. It is the period of advancing victory of the Son of God over the world As emphatically as Paul, John teaches that the earthly history of the Church is

113[113] Cited in Walvoord, pp. 28-29.

114[114] *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), p. 96.

115[115] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), vol. II, p. 94; vol. III, p. 861.

116[116] A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, [1860] 1972), p. 568.

not a history merely of conflict with evil, but of conquest over evil: and even more richly than Paul, John teaches that this conquest will be decisive and complete. The whole meaning of the vision of Revelation 19:11-21 is that Christ Jesus comes forth not to war merely but to victory; and every detail of the picture is laid in with a view precisely to emphasizing the thoroughness of this victory. The Gospel of Christ is, John being witness, completely to conquer the world A progressively advancing conquest of the earth by Christ's gospel implies a coming age deserving at least the relative name of "golden."¹¹⁷[117]

The Reformed heritage in eschatology, represented by the theologians of Old Princeton Seminary, is without doubt solidly postmillennial.

That heritage was not limited to Princeton, however, nor to the Presbyterian Church in the USA (Northern Presbyterian). At Union Theological Seminary (Virginia), the Calvinist dogmatist, W. G. T. Shedd (1820-1894) shared and taught the postmillennial perspective. In his *History of Christian Doctrine*, Shedd says that the universal teaching of the church was that the second coming of Christ will not occur prior to the conversion of the fulness of the Gentiles and calling of the Jews – the preaching of the gospel victoriously to all nations.¹¹⁸[118] Such was certainly the conviction of the greatest theologians of the Southern Presbyterian Church (P.C.U.S.), J. H. Thornwell and Robert L. Dabney. Thornwell, in writing against premillennialism, said, "if the Church could be aroused to a deeper sense of the glory that awaits her, she would enter with a warmer spirit into the struggles that are before her. Hope would inspire ardour It is our unfaithfulness, our negligence and unbelief, our low and carnal aims, that retard the chariot of the Redeemer. The Bridegroom cannot come until the Bride has made herself ready. Let the Church be in earnest after greater holiness in her own members, and in faith and love undertake the conquest of the world, and she will soon settle the question whether her resources are competent to change the face of the earth."¹¹⁹[119] Dabney's *Lectures in Systematic Theology* shows that he taught that prior to Christ's return there must be the overthrow of Romanism, "the general triumph of Christianity over all false religions, in all nations," and the conversion of the Jews.¹²⁰[120] Dabney was quite perceptive in saying that premillennialism "disparages the present, the dispensation of the Holy Ghost, and the means committed to the Church for the conversion of sinners. It thus tends to discourage faith and missionary effort. Whereas Christ represents the presence of the Holy Ghost, and this His dispensation, as so desirable, that it was expedient for Him to go away that the paraclete might come. John xvi.7. Pre-Adventism represents it as so undesirable that every saint ought to pray for its immediate abrogation. Incredulity as to the conversion of the world by the 'means of grace,' is hotly, even scornfully, inferred from visible results and experiences, in a temper which we confess appears to us the same with that of unbelievers in 2 Peter iii:4."¹²¹[121] Finally, it is to be noticed that postmillennialism characterized not only the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches in America, but was also endorsed by the Reformed Presbyterian Church, as evidenced in its 1901 "Reformed Presbyterian Testimony" from Belfast:

¹¹⁷[117] B. B. Warfield, "The Millennium and the Apocalypse," *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 647-648, 662.

¹¹⁸[118] Cf. Kik, p. 10.

¹¹⁹[119] Cited in Kik, p. 6.

¹²⁰[120] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, reprinted 1972), p. 838.

¹²¹[121] *Ibid.*, pp. 839-840.

Prophecy shows that a time is coming when the Kingdom of Christ shall triumph over all opposition and prevail in all the world. The Romish antichrist shall be utterly destroyed. The Jews shall be converted to Christianity. The fulness of the Gentiles shall be brought in and all mankind shall possess the knowledge of the Lord. The truth in its illuminating, regenerating and sanctifying efficacy shall be felt everywhere, so that the multitudes of all nations shall serve the Lord. Knowledge, love, holiness, and peace shall reign through the abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Arts, sciences, literature, and property shall be consecrated to the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. The social institutions of men shall be regulated by gospel principles, and the nations as such shall consecrate their strength to the Lord. Oppression and tyranny shall come to an end. The nations, instead of being distracted by wars, shall be united in peace. The inhabitants of the world shall be exceedingly multiplied, and pure and undefiled religion shall exert supreme dominion over their hearts and lives so that happiness shall abound. This blessed period shall be of long duration. It will be succeeded by a time of general defection from truth and holiness, and of the prevalence of irreligion and crime. This will immediately precede the second coming of the Son of man from heaven. 122[122]

This quick survey of leading Christian thinkers in the nineteenth century has established, therefore, that the postmillennialism which characterized John Calvin, the second generation reformers, the early English Puritans, the Westminster Assembly, Presbyterians and Independents in England, American and Scottish Calvinists, German and Dutch scholars, the great missions movements and awakenings, early American Presbyterians (whether Old Light or New Light), social and intellectual movements – this same postmillennialism continued with driving force among missionary leaders, Christian writers in England, Scotland, Germany, and America, leading Presbyterians in the Northern, Southern, and Reformed Presbyterian Churches, as well as the great Princeton theologians. One cannot draw back from concluding that *postmillennial eschatology is central in the heritage of Reformed theology*; optimism for the church's endeavors on earth is deeply engrained in historic, international Calvinism. The preceding survey, then, exhibits the groundlessness of Berkhof's contention that amillennialism is "the only view" expressed or implied in the historic confessions of the Church "and has always been the prevalent view in Reformed circles." 123[123] Such a claim cannot stand up in the face of solid and pervasive original-source testimony. So also, claims that postmillennialism originated with Daniel Whitby in 1703, or was generated in the environment of nineteenth-century, humanistic optimism, are deprived of credibility. The Reformed heritage is *permeated* with postmillennial eschatology. This surely does not demonstrate that the postmillennial belief is correct; however, it cannot but commend the position to our attention and demand our scriptural examination of the doctrine. It is nothing less than precarious for us to sweep aside lightly the testimony of so many expert and trustworthy theologians of repute. One's theological tradition may be wrong, but it cannot be ignored. Therefore, all who affirm the truths of Reformed theology ought carefully to consider and weigh the teaching of postmillennialism rather than thoughtlessly or hastily brushing it aside – always, of course, in the Reformation spirit of *sola Scriptura!*

Conclusion

The present essay has not attempted to prove the truth of postmillennialism; only responsible scriptural exegesis can do, or fail to do, that. However, *the way has been cleared* for an honest consideration and possible demonstration of the position's veracity. I have attempted to clarify just what postmillennialism at base teaches in order that the position itself, rather than subsidiary matters, might be central in one's consideration. Further, I have aimed to dismiss popular prejudices and distortions, as well as to point out inadequate excuses for rejecting postmillennialism. The recent decline of adherence to postmillennialism does not stem from advances in Bible scholarship or a

122[122] Cited in Kik, pp. 8-9.

123[123] *Op. Cit.*, p. 708. The same preconceived and baseless *assumption* is cited as *fact* by George Murray, p. 87.

strong textual refutation of it, but rather from the incursions of autonomous rationalism, secularization, failing faith, new interpretations (based on a faulty hermeneutic at best, a new "vision" at worst), and newspaper exegesis. Contemporary accusations against postmillennialism have rested on misrepresentations of it, and the arguments urged against it have been nontelling (since applicable to all three schools and irrelevant in determining the truth of the position); further, postmillennialism has been wrongly rejected on the basis of unfounded or premature allegations. All and all, no good reason has been offered in recent years for laying aside postmillennial belief. Moreover, far from being eccentric or minimally followed, the position can claim the support of the leading Reformed scholars in the past four hundred years. This is the state of the case, then, at present. There is no *prima facie* reason for ignoring or dissenting from postmillennialism. Quite the contrary, its initial credentials look very good indeed. When contemporary and unwarranted prejudice is laid aside, postmillennialism has a strong and serious claim on the attention of every faithful student of the Bible. And in the light of the history of Christian thought, it would be absurd to hold that prophetic matters are too secondary to warrant our attention; in fact, the most *practical* of issues is at stake, not to mention one of the most *central* of scriptural themes – namely, the kingdom of God. Because *all* Scripture is inspired of God and *profitable* for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, in order that men of God may be perfectly furnished unto every good work, we must look upon eschatological indifference, agnosticism, and liberty as departures from the full authority, benefit, and sanctifying power of God's word.
