



Postmillennialism – its historical development

***Eschatology** is the study of the doctrine of the "last things". Traditionally, positions have been defined by one's views on the return of Christ — whether it will be before or after the "millennium". The "millennium" (literally "a thousand years") is the name given to a long period of gospel blessing promised in the Word. "Postmillennialism" is the view that the **Second Coming** (or the **Second Advent**) of Christ will take place **after** the millennium. Here the minister of Duthil-Dores Free Church deals with how ideas about this have developed. Next month, the Biblical basis for this point of view will be examined.*

During the period extending from the apostolic ages to the Reformation, interest within the church in the subject of unfulfilled prophecy and matters eschatological, was centred on two questions:

1. What was to be the nature of the millennial kingdom that Christ was to set up during the thousand years when — according to Revelation 20:2 — Satan was to be bound?
2. Would the Second Advent of Christ take place before or after the millennial period?

Even in those early days, there were Premillennarian and Postmillennarian answers to these questions!

In the early church

The initial interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6 led some of the early church fathers — men like Papias, Barnabas and Hermes — to adopt a Premillennarian stance in which they distinguished between a first and a second resurrection. Christ was to come in the first resurrection and establish a millennial Kingdom of peace and righteousness on this earth. Thereafter would come the second resurrection when the judgement of the world would take place.

No trace is found of this viewpoint however in such respected church fathers as, for example, Clement of Rome, Ignatius or Polycarp — men whom that notable historical theologian, William G. T. Shedd, esteemed as of great ecclesiastical weight and authority. Neither is there any evidence of the influence of Premillennial thinking in the so-called Apostles' Creed of this period. The only qualifications found there are that "Christ shall come from heaven to judge the quick and the dead", and that there is a "resurrection of the body" and a "life everlasting" (immediately following, is the implication).

Admittedly, the Premillennial viewpoint became more popular during the intense persecution of the church in the latter half of the second century as their distressed condition led many of the people of God to desire and pray for an advent of the Head of the church that would extinguish all its enemies. But the third and fourth centuries witnessed a very decided opposition to Premillennialism and, by the fifth century, we find an opposing Postmillennial viewpoint maturing and crystalising in the writings of Augustine.

Augustine

In his book *Prophecy and the Church* Dr O.T. Allis gives this accurate outline of Augustine's eschatology. "Augustine taught that the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian church. He held that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord (Luke 10:18); that the first resurrection is the new birth of the believer (John 5:25); and that the millennium must correspond therefore to the interadventual period or Church Age" (pp. 3-4).

(The "interadventual period" is the period between Jesus' First Coming and his Second — the period in which we are living.) This involved Augustine interpreting Revelation 20:1-6 as "a recapitulation" of the preceding chapters instead of as describing a new age following chronologically on the events set forth in chapter 19. Living in the first half of the first millennium of the church's history, Augustine naturally took the thousand years of Revelation 20 literally and he expected the Second Advent to take place at the end of that period. He believed this period might end about 650 A.D. with a great outburst of evil, the revolt of Gog, which would be followed by the coming of Christ in judgement.

In short, Augustine regarded the millennium as a present spiritual reign by Christ in the earth and that the Second Advent of Christ would be at the end of this period, that it would be Postmillennial.

The Reformation...

Although the medieval period was, generally speaking, a time of religious stagnation, yet it would also be fair to say that, insofar as attention was given to the doctrine of the last things, this Augustinian view of the millennium remained the dominant one throughout Western Europe up till the Reformation. And even in the period of the Reformation, such early comeback as Premillennialism made was among the more fanatical sects of the Anabaptists and the Fifth Monarchy Men. Their teachings were soundly rejected by the mainstream Protestant churches, as is evidenced by the condemnatory language used of them in the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Second Helvetic Confession* and also in the English *Confession of Edward IV* from which the *Thirty Nine Articles* of the Church of England were later condensed.

The Reformation however introduced a new impetus into Postmillennial thinking — a new optimistic thrust. Now there came a greater attention to Scripture bearing on the future of the Jews and this matured ultimately into a conviction that the converted Jews would, in God's hand, be instrumental in bringing about a fuller in-gathering of Gentile nations and therefore a future universal golden age of spiritual prosperity. This introduced a note of optimism into the character and temper of eschatological thinking in the 16th and 17th centuries, especially in Britain. This climate of thought has been aptly described by Iain Murray as *The Puritan Hope* — and indeed this optimistic thrust continued well into the 18th and 19th centuries.

Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr, who taught at Cambridge and Oxford respectively in the reign of Edward IV, were among the first to understand the Bible to speak of a future calling of the Jews. In this view they were followed by Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva. As early as 1560, the English and Scots refugee Protestant leaders who produced the Geneva Bible, expressed the same belief in their marginal notes on Romans 11:15 and 26. On the latter verse, they comment, "*He showeth that the time shall come that the whole nation of the Jews, though not everyone particularly, shall be joined to the church of Christ*". The first volume in English to expound this conviction at great length was the translation of Peter Martyr's *Commentary on the Romans* (1568).

...And after

This millennial understanding remained the dominant one among English and Scottish Puritans in the time of the Covenants and civil wars of the 1640s as can be seen from the sermons, writings and commentaries of such as Thomas Goodwin, Richard Sibbes, John Howe, Samuel Rutherford, George Gillespie, David Dickson, Robert Leighton and John Brown of Wamphray. It was enshrined also into the Westminster Assembly's *Larger Catechism* in the answer to Question 191, "*What do we pray for in the second petition (of the Lord's Prayer)?*" "*In the second petition 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 *Directory for the Public Worship of God* also expressed this view, advising ministers to pray publicly "*for the conversion of the Jews, the fulness of the Gentiles, the fall of Antichrist*".

A different stream

Yet another stream of thought however can be seen to emerge as early as the 17th century in European and English eschatology. Some identified this future age of spiritual prosperity with the period of a thousand years spoken of in Revelation 20:2. No doubt this new thinking had its origins in the writings and millennial views of Johannes Coccejus, a 17th century German theologian whose major work *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento Dei* (1648) presents an outline of the Scriptural teaching of salvation. He pictures the relationship between God and man, both before and after the Fall, in the form of a covenant, first a covenant of works, then a covenant of grace. This latter covenant of grace had its foundation in eternity, in an agreement between the Father and the Son, but had its realisation, fulfilment and outworking in the context of time in a succession of historical steps culminating in the Kingdom of God. In this way, Coccejus was able to introduce the idea of the history of salvation and of millennialism into scholastic reformed theology.

Coccejus for a time taught at Leyden in Holland and, as there was much contact between English and Dutch theologians of this period, this was the probable avenue through which the new thinking emerged into English eschatology. It is also probable that it was this same strain of Postmillennialism that Robert Baillie, one of the Scottish delegates to the Westminster Assembly, was referring to when he wrote from London on 15th September, 1645: "*The most of the chief divines here, not only Independents but others such as Twiss, Marshall, Palmer and many more, are express Chiliasts*" (Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, Volume 2, p. 156). ("Chiliasts" comes from the Greek word meaning "a thousand", so "Chiliasts" are "millennialists".)

Spreading influence

This particular branch of Postmillennialism was further popularised by the writings of Daniel Whitby (1638-1726), an English scholar and erudite clergyman. Whitby held that the world would be converted to Christ, the Jews restored to the Holy Land, the Pope and the Turks defeated, after which the world would enjoy a time of universal peace, happiness and righteousness for a thousand years. At the close of this millennium, Christ would personally come to the earth again and the last judgement would be held.

It is no surprise, therefore, that as we progress into the 18th and 19th centuries, we find some confusion among theologians, gospel ministers and commentators, as to the exact definition of the term *Postmillennialism*. Some, like John Newton and Jonathan Edwards, undoubtedly regarded the millennium as being confined to the period of great gospel prosperity which they believed would take place towards the end of the age, when the Jews would be restored and the fulness of the Gentiles brought in. Others, however — and this group included such notables as Thomas Chalmers, R.L. Dabney, W.G.T. Shedd, Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield — appear to equate the millennium with the interadventual period, or, at least, with most of the interadventual period, although they also looked optimistically to a time of great spiritual prosperity towards the end of, but within, the millennium.

Modern developments

And in our own century, two other eschatological viewpoints have emerged, each of which claims for itself the label *Postmillennialism*.

The first of these is the product of an increasing trend within and without church circles towards evolutionism and secularism. Its devotees cast scorn on orthodox Postmillennialism, which regards the Kingdom of God as the product of the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit in connection with the preaching of the gospel. These rationalistic modernists hold an optimistic view of human betterment and progress, and teach that the Kingdom of God on earth will be achieved through a natural process by which mankind will be improved and social institutions reformed and brought to a higher level of culture and efficiency. In short, they regard the Kingdom of God as the product of natural laws in our evolutionary process.

The other one is really an extension of the earlier Postmillennialism insofar as its upholders — men like Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen and Gary North — consider the millennium to be co-extensive with the interadventual period. It is known as Theonomy or the Christian Reconstructionist Movement and is a refinement of all earlier millennialism in that its emphasis is on the continuing authority not only of the moral law but of Mosaic judicial law as being still applicable in our contemporary situation, even in its penal sanctions.

Summary

There are today, therefore, four strands of eschatological outlook which each go under the label of *Postmillennialism*.

- There are those who regard the millennium as being largely co-extensive with the interadventual period;
- there are those who identify the millennium with a future period of spiritual prosperity, within and towards the end of the interadventual period;
- there are the secular evolutionists; and
- there are the Theonomists.

And so, the question before us is: which is the true Postmillennialism? Would the real Postmillennialism please stand up?

The four strands

Some regard the millennium as being largely co-extensive with the interadventual period (that is, the period between the First and Second Comings of Christ); others identify the millennium with a future period of spiritual prosperity, within and towards the end of the interadventual period; then there are the secular evolutionists; and there are Theonomists. We can safely disregard the evolutionists: they are both non-spiritual and non-supernaturalistic, and therefore also non-Reformed and non-Biblical in outlook. They do not look for blessing from the Holy Spirit through the application of the truth to our persons and society.

In favour of the Theonomists, it must be acknowledged that the pursuit of blessing through applying the **universal** principles of the Old Testament law to our contemporary situation is indeed very commendable. To their credit also — and unlike many Premillennialists — they acknowledge that the shadows of the Old Covenant have now become obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), having been imposed only until the time when Messiah would come (Hebrews 9:10; Colossians 2:17).

But they undoubtedly err when they insist on the retention of the judicial or civil laws of the ancient theocracy — laws, for example, regulating the distribution of property, the duties of husbands and wives, the punishment of crimes etc. As Charles Hodge made abundantly clear,

"These laws were the application of general principles of justice and right to the peculiar circumstances of the Old Testament Hebrew people. Such enactments bind only those who are in the circumstances contemplated and cease to be obligatory when these circumstances change. It is always and everywhere right that crime should be punished, but the kind or degree of punishment may vary with the varying conditions of society. It is always right that the poor should be supported, but one mode of discharging that duty may be proper in one age and country and another preferable in other times and places. All these laws, therefore, in the Old Testament, which had their foundation in the peculiar circumstances of the Hebrews, ceased to be binding when the old dispensation passed away"

(*Systematic Theology*, volume 3, p. 268)

Theonomists appear to have lost direction here. There has been a tendency for them to become highly "mechanistic" in their approach to the problems of our day and to lose sight of the primacy of grace. They often resemble a mechanic who takes apart all the nuts and bolts of a stalled car engine without first having checked if the fault lay in an empty petrol tank.

We can therefore now narrow our question down to this: is the millennium largely coextensive with the interadventual period or is it a future period of great spiritual prosperity within and towards the end of the interadventual period?

A key passage

Significant here is Revelation 20:2-3: *"And he laid hold on the dragon ... and bound him a thousand years ... and set a seal over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled, and after that he must be loosed for a season"*. Although obscure, the following principles stand out in this passage; they are in line with the thrust of the rest of Scripture; and may therefore help us to arrive at an acceptable Biblical definition for the millennium.

- **Firstly, the millennium is set within the context of time.** It is said that the bound dragon should not deceive the nations any more. Reference is also made to the angel **coming down from heaven** (v. 1). This means the millennium cannot be identified with the intermediate state of the soul. We disagree with those Amillennialists who hold this view of the thousand years and even dare also to disagree with that revered Postmillennialist, B.B. Warfield, who apparently also held this view — although we readily agree that Revelation 20:4-6 is a parenthetical passage, descriptive of the intermediate state.
- **Secondly, the binding of Satan must be one that is capable of being undone**, for the dragon is bound for a thousand years but at the end of that period he is to be set loose for a season. This rules out that binding of him that took place in the cross, when by the death of our Saviour he was deprived of the legal power of death over us. That binding can never be disannulled: death must ever remain stingless to the believer.
- **Thirdly, this binding involves exposing Satan to be what he in fact is: a liar!** — for the purpose of this binding is *"that he should deceive the nations no more"*.

Satan is a master Goebbels who has bound many with that old lie that God is an oppressive tyrant who takes delight in depriving people of their freedom by subjecting them to his rule and to a negative religion of "don'ts". But, in the cross that lie was nailed down. Even when the holy will of God required that Christ as Mediator descend into deep mires of unknown and unknowable sufferings as the surety of his people — even then, the refrain of his heart was, *"to do thy will I take delight"*. Satan's claim that our being subservient to the will of God deprives us of both freedom and pleasure was not only shown to be a lie, but the opposite was indeed shown to be true, that *"man's chief end is to glorify God and (thus) to enjoy him forever"*.

In the cross, justice was not only done to the enemy of souls but was seen to be done. And therefore the ability of Satan to thwart the progress of gospel proclamation has been much diminished. Certainly there is a sense in which that binding will not be complete till the last of the elect has been ingathered, but there is undoubtedly also a sense in which it had its beginning then in the cross — in the nailing down of Satan's lie. And yet this is also a binding which is capable of loosing (Revelation 20:7ff), in the sense that the now unveiled truth that Satan is a liar is again capable of being veiled, in God's providence, even if this loosing, mercifully, will be only for a short season.

Our conclusion therefore must be that the millennium begins at the cross and that the binding of Satan continues till close to the second advent of our Lord. The millennium itself must not be narrowed down to some mere future period, however glorious that period may yet be.

Key events

Scripture, however, also speaks of certain things that must be accomplished — that is during the present millennium - before the Second Advent does take place.

1. The universal proclamation of the Gospel

The gospel is to be proclaimed worldwide in obedience to the Great Commission given by Christ to his church prior to his ascension. *"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye, therefore, and teach the nations..."* (Matthew 28:17-20).

Having fulfilled covenant conditions as the surety of his people, Christ, the Mediator was at his ascension, established on the throne of the universe. This glorious promise, recorded for us prophetically by the Psalmist, was renewed to him by the Father: *"Ask of me and for heritage, the heathen I'll make thine..."* (Psalm 2:8). Thus, he also received the Spirit of reward, and gifts for men, and he in turn endowed his church with all the gifts necessary to fulfil its duties and commission. He promised to send his Spirit to render their preaching effectual. *"He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers"* (Ephesians 4:11).

All this is the ultimate guarantee that the proclamation of the gospel must have a successful outcome worldwide. The gospel's advance, however, is to be characterised by ebb tides as well as flood tides — and even in the flood tides, there must be receding waves! Although often by imperceptible degrees, it will develop ultimately into a golden age which, though far from being marked by perfection, will yet be a time of great spiritual prosperity.

So many Scriptures point forward to this. For example, *"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"* (Isaiah 11:6-9). The whole of Isaiah 60 could also be mentioned. Zechariah also brings before us the same hope: *"And the Lord shall be King over all the earth: in that day, there shall be one Lord, and his name one"* (Zechariah 14:9).

It is evident that such prophecies have not yet been fulfilled and, though expressed in metaphorical language, they give us warrant to hope that the prayers and desires of the church will, in the future, be signally answered in the following respects: that the gospel shall visit the nations which are at present in darkness; that the gospel shall prevail not in word only but in power also; that the animosities and disputes which prevail among Christians shall cease; that it will be a time of general peace.

2. The conversion of Israel and the fulness of the Gentiles

In Romans 9-11, the ethnic distinction between Israel and the Gentiles is highlighted and the interrelationship that exists in God's dealings with each of them is brought out in a way that fills Paul with wonder.

In 9:32-33, he speaks of the mass of Israel having stumbled through the sin of unbelief: *"But Israel which followed after the law of righteousness,"* says Paul, *"hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law"*. This stumbling of unbelief — this rejection of Christ as their Messiah — has brought serious consequences to them as a people. God has "cast off" his ancient people, giving them up to the Spirit of stumbling (11:7-10).

This rejection of Israel, however, is not **complete**. They have not all become gospel-hardened, for, says Paul, *"even at this present time, there is a remnant according to the election of grace"* (11:7). Neither is it final, for God has purposed through it the outworking of glorious purposes:

- **Firstly, "through their fall salvation shall come to the Gentiles"**. This was completely in accordance with Jesus' words (Matthew 8:11, 12; 21:43) and had the beginnings of its actual fulfilment in the history of the apostolic era. Thus Paul says to the Jews in Rome: *"Be it known, therefore, unto you that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it"* (Acts 28:28). Ultimately, gospel preaching would bear such fruit among the Gentiles that it is referred to in 11:25 as the *"fulness of the Gentiles"* being come in — a phrase surely to be related to the proclamation of the gospel to all nations.
- **Secondly, the salvation of the Gentiles would ultimately "provoke Israel to jealousy" (Romans 11:11)**. In the words of John Murray, *"the idea is that the Jews, observing the favour and blessing of God accruing there from will be moved to emulation and be thereby induced to turn unto the Lord ... the unbelief of Israel is ordained to promote the salvation of the Gentiles. But this implied faith on the part of the Gentiles is not, in turn, to be prejudicial to Israel's salvation: it is to promote the same."* Indeed a mass restoration of Israel is

envisaged, as is suggested by the word "fulness" in Romans 11:12 and by the words in 11:26, *"and so all Israel shall be saved"*.

- **Thirdly, the restoration of the Jews to divine favour will bring divine blessing to the world.** *"Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world and the diminishing of them be the riches of the Gentiles, how much more their fulness?" "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead?"* (Romans 11:12, 15).

By "life from the dead" we are surely to understand a time of spiritual revival far exceeding anything that previously obtained in the unfolding of God's counsel. The restored Jews, strategically placed as they are now in God's providence amongst the cultures, languages, races and nations of the world, will be missionaries for the bringing of gospel light into the present fortresses of darkness and so will bring "life from the dead".

3. The Coming of Anti-Christ

The Anti-Christ is to appear before the Second Coming of Christ: *"...that day (of Christ) shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition"* (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

The common opinion among Protestants is that the prophecies concerning Anti-Christ have official reference to the Papacy.

It is clear that the Anti-Christ is not a particular individual but rather an institution or order of men, because the work assigned to him in prophecy extends over far too long a period to be accomplished by one man. It is also clear that Anti-Christ represents an ecclesiastical rather than a world power. He is said to have his seat of power in the temple of God and to *"exalt himself above all that is called God or is worshipped, so that he, as God, sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God"* (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

These are certainly descriptions that have been true of the Papacy as they have not been true of any other power which has appeared on the earth. Popes have successively claimed to themselves the honour that is due to God alone, not merely by claiming to be the Vicars of Christ on earth and by allowing themselves to be addressed by the title "Your Holiness" but by exacting men's allegiance to their authority. They have also claimed divine prerogatives as infallible teachers in all questions of faith and practice, practically setting aside God's Word and substituting for it their own decrees which they put forth as the teaching of the church. They have even claimed to themselves the right to hear confessions and to forgive sins!

Given then that the man of sin is the Papacy, we must assume that he will have his fall in that period towards the end of the millennium when, as we have already noticed, gospel proclamation in the hands of God's Spirit is to bring about what Scripture calls a "fulness" amidst Jew and Gentile.

After that period of spiritual prosperity, however, there is to be a brief period of spiritual apostasy, when, according to Revelation 20, Satan is to be set loose for a season. Thereafter will come suddenly and in great majesty the Second Coming of our Lord, which event will be succeeded immediately by the Resurrection and the Judgement.

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