

## WHAT IS POSTMILLENNIALISM?

*Tom's Perspectives*  
by Thomas Ice

Postmillennialism is the belief that Christ will return after the millennium. Thus, the name "post" (after) millennial (1000). All postmillennialists believe that the current age is the kingdom, while some believe that the millennial phase of the kingdom is present and others hold that it is yet future when the world has been Christianized. Postmillennialists also believe the Church is the agent through which this return to Eden will be mediated by Christ the King from heaven. Most postmillennialist have stressed the preaching of the gospel, resulting in a conversion of most of mankind as the means for Christianization. However, the more recent Reconstructionist version adds to evangelism obedience and faithfulness to biblical law as a condition for victory. Some postmillennialist believe that the conversion of the world will be a very slow and gradual process, taking perhaps thousands of years more. On the other hand, others believe that conversion could happen within a short period of time (about 10 years) as the result of a great revival. Systematic postmillennialism was the last of the three major eschatologies to develop. It was first taught within the church in the seventeenth century.

### POSTMILLENNIAL SELF-DEFINITION

Contemporary Reconstructionist, postmillennialist Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. gives the following seven characteristics of evangelical postmillennialism:

- First, postmillennialism "understands the Messianic kingdom to have been founded upon the earth during the earthly ministry and through the redemptive labors of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . the Church becomes the transformed Israel."
- Second, "the fundamental nature of that kingdom is essentially redemptive and spiritual . . . Christ rules His kingdom spiritually in and through His people in the world (representation), as well as by His universal providence."
- Third, Christ's "kingdom will exercise a transformational socio-cultural influence in history. This will occur as more and more people are converted to Christ."
- Fourth, "postmillennialism, thus, expects the gradual, developmental expansion of the kingdom of Christ in time and on earth. . . . Christ's personal presence on earth is not needed for the expansion of His kingdom."
- Fifth, "postmillennialism confidently anticipates a time in earth history (continuous with the present) in which the very gospel already operative in the world will have won the victory throughout the earth in fulfillment of the Great Commission. . . . During that time the overwhelming majority of men and nations will be Christianized, righteousness will abound, wars will cease, and prosperity and safety will flourish."
- Sixth, there are "two types of postmillennialism today: pietistic and theonomic postmillennialism. . . . Pietistic postmillennialism . . . denies that the postmillennial advance of the kingdom involves the total transformation of culture through the application of biblical law. Theonomic postmillennialism affirms this."
- Seventh, "possibly 'we can look forward to a great 'golden age' of spiritual prosperity continuing for centuries, or even for millenniums, . . .' After this . . . earth history will be drawn to a close by the personal, visible, bodily return of Jesus Christ (accompanied by a literal resurrection and a general judgment) to introduce His . . . consummative and eternal form of the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

## LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES

While many of the basic elements of postmillennialism remain the same, distinction should be made between liberals who promote a postmillennialism through humanism (i.e., the social gospel of the past) and evangelical postmillennialism that promote progress through the church's preaching of the gospel and application of Mosaic Law. Both adhere to a gospel combined with social change as the agency of change and progress. Thus, in a sense, evangelical postmillennialists believe that many nineteenth century postmills went astray by adopting humanistic liberalism, instead they should have relied upon a more traditional, conservative approach.

## HISTORY

The historical rise and development of postmillennialism has been the object of some dispute, partly because of some similarities between it and amillennialism. Amillennialism and postmillennialism, for example, would have Gentry's point one, two, and four in common. Thus, because of points of similarity, some have confused amillennialism and postmillennialism. Because of these similarities, it may be difficult at times to clearly distinguish postmillennialism and amillennialism in history. It is the differences that are significant, in spite of similarities. Both are clearly anti-premillennial.

It is generally thought that Daniel Whitby (1638-1725) developed systematic postmillennialism, as a clearly distinct form of millenarianism. This does not mean that elements of systematic postmillennialism did not exist prior to Whitby, for they clearly did. However, it seems best to understand the maturity of postmillennialism into a distinct system as post-Reformational and in a sense an optimistic form of amillennialism. Thus, postmillennialism's development is dependent upon amillennialism.

Only a handful of partisan polemicists would attempt to argue that postmillennialism has a post-apostolic presence. "All seem to agree that postmillennialism is quite foreign to the apostolic church. There is no trace of anything in the church which could be classified as postmillennialism in the first two or three centuries."<sup>2</sup>

The rise of figurative interpretation and Augustine's millennial interadvent theory began to lay a foundation for the later development of postmillennialism. Augustine "held that the age between the first and second advents is the millennium of which the Scriptures speak and that the second advent would occur at the end of the millennium. This is definitely a postmillennial viewpoint as it places the second advent *after* the millennium."<sup>3</sup> However, it is also at the same time an amillennial viewpoint. Augustine and his eschatology is best classified as amillennial because he lacked the optimism required for a true postmillennial viewpoint, regardless of whatever similarities they may have in common.

Another development that contributed to the development of systematic postmillennialism is the rise of Christendom and the merger of church and state with Constantine's declaration that Christianity was the new religion of the Roman Empire (A.D. 313). Before Constantine it is estimated that only eight to ten per cent of the Empire was Christian. However, as the fourth century neared its end, virtually all identified themselves as Christian. This development led to a form of victory and optimism about the spread of Christianity and its ability to overcome even a hostile state, like the previously evil Roman Empire. However, such optimism was tempered

with the loss to Christendom of North Africa in the fifth century and the rise of militant Islam a few centuries later.

Joachim of Floris' rise to prominence in the twelfth century certainly was a watershed event in the development of eschatology. He not only laid the foundation for the historicist interpretation of prophetic literature, but his optimism is seen by some as contributing to the development of postmillennialism. Whether or not he can be classified as a clear postmillennialist,<sup>4</sup> he certainly contributed to an optimistic view of history. E. Randolph Daniel notes,

the twelfth century was optimistic about history and the future. The Gregorian reformers certainly believed that they could dramatically reform and purify the Church on earth. Joachim, who was clearly Gregorian in his sympathies, believed that history was evolving toward the status of the Holy Spirit . . . when the Church would enjoy a historical era of peace and spiritual attainment that would far surpass anything achieved in the past.<sup>5</sup>

While Joachim helped prepare the way for the later development of postmillennialism, it is best not to classify him as a millennialist.

Joachim's third *status* has often been described as chiliastic or millennial, which implies that it constitutes a new beginning, the emergence of a spiritual church that would replace the corrupt clerical church. Certainly the millennium as depicted in Apocalypse 20 is a new beginning, but Joachim's status of the Holy Spirit is not millennial in this sense. . . . Joachim's thinking is evolutionary, not revolutionary. He was a reformer, not a millennialist.<sup>6</sup>

Joachim helped prepare the way for postmillennialism by contributing an idea of optimism that was to be continuous with the course of the present age. His belief that it was to be an age of the Holy Spirit was often adopted by later postmillennialists.

The Reformation sprang out of an attitude of pessimism and despair. Marjorie Reeves notes, "E. L. Tuveson has argued that the classical attitude of Protestant reformers towards history was one of pessimism: all things must decline; decay is the essential fact of history."<sup>7</sup> Robin Barnes says, "in the eyes of many Lutherans in the late sixteenth century, the entire social order appeared to be falling apart."<sup>8</sup>

John Calvin, while not reaching the depths of Luther's despair, cannot be claimed for postmillennialism as some have done<sup>9</sup>. just because he utters statements of optimism. Such statements need to be optimism within the context of a postmillennial creed. Calvin also made pessimistic statements: "There is no reason, therefore, why any person should expect the conversion of the world, for at length—when it will be too late, and will yield them no advantage."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, "despite Calvin's Augustinian avoidance of historically oriented eschatology, the hint of progressivism in his thought left the way open for the frank meliorism and chiliasm of many later Calvinist thinkers."<sup>11</sup>

It would be left to the post-Reformation era for developments to spring forth into what can rightly be called postmillennialism. Joachim's idea of progress was recast into a "new interpretation of the Apocalypse and of the eschatological pattern which looked forward to some great transforming event rather than to inevitable decay."<sup>12</sup> Postmillennialism came into flower in the 1600's as the "idea of novelty rather than return is seen in the excited references to all the new manifestations of the age—the new

lands, the new learning, the new books, the new missionaries."<sup>13</sup> This was aided by the gains of Protestantism over Catholicism in Europe as the new continued to gain over the old.

The postmillennialism of the seventeenth century consisted mainly of those who believed in the success of the preaching of the gospel and correspondingly the conversion of the Jews. The later belief was one held in common with premillennialism. Yet, even though there were a few prominent postmillennialists in the seventeenth century, the position exploded into popularity as a result of Whitby's "new interpretation" of Revelation 20 at the dawn of the eighteenth century.

Contemporary reconstructionist postmillennialists usually bristle at the reminder of Whitby's key role in postmillennial history. Their defensiveness likely stems from the fact that Whitby was a less than orthodox Unitarian. Nevertheless, it was as result of the efforts of Whitby who provided exegetical and theological definition for postmillennialism that the position began to gain ground and become the dominate eschatology in Europe and eventually North America before its decline. Walvoord note the following concerning Whitby:

He was a liberal and a freethinker, untrammled by traditions or previous conceptions of the church. His views on the millennium would probably have never been perpetuated if they had not been so well keyed to the thinking of the times. The rising tide of intellectual freedom, science, and philosophy, coupled with humanism, had enlarged the concept of human progress and painted a bright picture of the future. Whitby's view of a coming golden age for the church was just what people wanted to hear. It fitted the thinking of the times. It is not strange that theologians scrambling for readjustment in a changing world should find in Whitby just the key they needed. It was attractive to all kinds of theology. It provided for the conservative a seemingly more workable principle of interpreting the Scripture. . . . Man's increasing knowledge of the world and scientific improvements which were coming could fit into this picture. On the other hand, the concept was pleasing to the liberal and skeptic. If they did not believe the prophets, at least they believed that man was now able to improve himself and his environment. They, too, believed a golden age was ahead.<sup>14</sup>

After gaining dominance in Europe and America among both conservatives and liberals, postmillennialism began a decline into near extinction. Fallout from the French Revolution in Europe dealt a severe blow to postmillennial optimism. Later, in the States, postmillennial decline awaited the turn of the century and was dealt a near-fatal blow by WWI and WWII and identification with the Social Gospel and Liberalism. Only in the 1970's has postmillennialism began to reassert itself, primarily through the reconstructionist movement. While postmillennialism has made some gains in recent years, it is still a minor position in the overall field of eschatology.

#### **OBJECTIONS TO POSTMILLENNIALISM**

The greatest problem with postmillennialism is the fact that the Bible just does not teach it. Where is a specific passage that teaches the postmillennial concept? Not a passage that they think it their best, from which they attempt to develop a postmillennial theology. I am asking for a passage that teaches the idea of postmillennialism. It is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Lack of specific biblical

support is fatal to postmillennialism for any Bible believing Christian. This explains why their normal presentation approach is to first attack premillennialism and then present broad theological concepts that one must adopt as a framework with which one needs to approach biblical texts.

Basic to postmillennialism failure to match up with Scripture is its lack of a consistent hermeneutic. At key points, postmillennialism must abandon the literal hermeneutic of the historical, grammatical, and contextual approach for some degree of spiritualization.

Nowhere does the New Testament teach that the kingdom of God was brought into existence at Christ's first coming. The New Testament does say that the kingdom was "near" during Christ's ministry, but it stops short of saying that it arrived during Christ's first coming. Furthermore, while personal redemption is certainly an essential key to the kingdom, that fact should not be used to negate equally clear teachings concerning the physical nature of this kingdom.

The postmillennial idea of progress is not found in any particular text of the Bible. Rather, it appears to be an idea brought to the pages of Scripture. Postmillennialism is inconsistent with the biblical fact that the cataclysmic return of Christ brings in the kingdom (Rev. 19-20), not the preaching of the gospel and gradual human progress. Gospel preaching in the current age is for the purpose of gathering out the elect for the future kingdom. An increase in the number of Christian converts has not resulted in a transformational socio-cultural influence. Too often there has been cultural regression. Such thinking, by postmillennialists, falls far short of the Old Testament description of the actual conditions of the kingdom.

Postmillennialism confuses Israel and the church. The postmillennial view requires the church to take over the fulfillment of promises made to national Israel so that they may posit a present kingdom. Modern postmillennialism needs to posit replacement theology or supersessionism as a key plank in its theology. Thus, it denies that the modern state of Israel could have any place in God's future prophetic plan. Postmillennialism is anti-Zionist. The New Testament nowhere teaches that Israel has been replaced by the church. Paul says to these things, "God has not rejected His people [Israel], has He? May it never be!" (Rom. 11:1) The church is certainly a partaker in the Abrahamic promises, but not a taker over of Israel's promises.

While it is true that the Bible predicts an increasing spread of the proclamation of the gospel in the current age, this does not support the notion of postmillennial progress. All millennial positions—pre, post, and amillennialism—believe in a global preaching and spread of the gospel during the current age. In addition, the Bible speaks frequently in catastrophic and interventionist language of Christ's return to earth as the cause of millennial conditions. Specific statements of gradualism are lacking in the Bible. Postmillennialism also denies the New Testament teaching that Christ could return at any-moment, known as imminency. The Great Commission is being fulfilled, not by exercising a certain level of response to the gospel, but when the church is preaching the gospel and making disciples throughout all the nations. This is occurring in our own day.

Shifting from pietistic to theonomic will not make postmillennial sudden more effective in history. In fact, at least pietistic postmillennialism was much more evangelistic than is the current brand of theonomic postmillennialism. If the church were looking to theonomic postmillennialism to show the way in the area of evangelism, then it would become extinct within a generation.

If a viewpoint truly represents Scripture then it is not too much to ask it to be able to correspond to history. Postmillennialism teaches that this current age will be a time of steady and upward growth. However, this is impossible to defend from history. While the gospel frequently expands to new territories, at the same time so many areas where the gospel has dominated society and culture there has been regression and relapse, not progress. It appears that wherever Christianity has come to dominate the culture, and has lost that dominance, it has never been revived as a significant force. This is not progress it is regression. At this point in time, history supports the premillennial notion of the global spread of the gospel, while at the same time the church becomes increasingly apostate.

Postmillennialism fails to account for the fact that if there is going to be a fulfillment of millennial conditions predicted in the Bible, it is going to be only as a result of a revolutionary intervention of Jesus Christ at His second coming in order to introduce new factors which are discontinuous with the present age. It will require the personal presence of Jesus Christ Himself to roll back the curse and to rule with a rod of iron. Only the premillennial model provides the changes necessary to implement a millennial golden age.

Postmillennialism is taught nowhere in the Bible. The postmillennial model of historical expectations is also failing. It is therefore, more than reasonable to conclude that postmillennialism is a deviant and unbiblical aberration.

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 70-73.

<sup>2</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, *Millennial Kingdom*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>D.H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church: Studies in the History of Christian Chiliasm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), p. 20f.

<sup>5</sup>E. Randolph Daniel, "Joachim of Fiore: Patterns of History in the Apocalypse" in Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, editors, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel, "Joachim," pp. 86, 87.

<sup>7</sup>Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study of Joachimism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 501.

<sup>8</sup>Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>10</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, n.d.) Vol. XVII, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup>Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis*, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup>Reeves, *Influence of Prophecy*, p. 502.

<sup>13</sup>Reeves, *Influence*, pp. 502-03.

<sup>14</sup>Walvoord, *Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 22-23.