

---

## Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

---

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Th.D., Westminster Theological Seminary) is Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia). With other degrees from Calvin College and Westminster Theological Seminary, he has taught at Westminster since 1965. He is the author of *The Centrality of the Resurrection* (previously published as *Resurrection and Redemption*) and *Perspectives on Pentecost*. He is the editor of *The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*.

## Chapter Nine

---

### *Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism*

---

Essential to the emergence of theonomy/(Christian) reconstructionism has been a revival of postmillennialism.<sup>1</sup> Among current postmils, to be sure, there are some who are not reconstructionists, but all reconstructionists—whatever their differences—consider themselves postmils. Or so it would have seemed until just recently with the unanticipated and apparently growing impact of reconstructionist viewpoints in circles whose eschatology is characteristically premil. Still, for reconstructionism's leading advocates, postmillennialism is plainly integral—whether logically or psychologically—to their position as a whole. Nonreconstructionist postmils would naturally deny any such connection.

This chapter provides some partial, personally tinged, yet, I hope, not entirely unhelpful reflections on the resurgent postmillennialism of the past twenty to twenty-five years. My reservations lie in at least four areas.

#### DEFINING POSTMILLENNIALISM

A large element of ambiguity cuts across much of today's postmillennialism. Before trying to specify that ambiguity it will be helpful, historically, to give some attention to the fact that in the past, too, postmillennialism

---

<sup>1</sup>This renaissance, unless I've overlooked something, has been taking place almost entirely within the English-speaking, especially American, Reformed community; nothing more than scattered traces are present in non-Reformed contexts or, for that matter, in the rest of the Reformed world—Holland, South Africa, and elsewhere.

has not been the clearly defined, unambiguous position that some of its contemporary proponents make it out to be.

It is fairly common to point out the inadequacy of our conventional designations *pre*, *post*, and *a*. But no less commonly, in ensuing discussion that recognition recedes. As a result, efforts to distinguish, for one, between the postmil and amil positions get confused—usually, as it turns out, more than a merely terminological confusion.

Who coined the term *amillennial*, and when did it first begin to be used? Perhaps I've missed it somewhere, but the usual sources don't seem to know or at least don't say. At any rate, in 1930 Geerhardus Vos, for instance, viewed today as an amil, still seems to distinguish only between a premil and postmil position and to include himself in the latter.<sup>2</sup> And as late as 1948, a year before his death, again in contrasting the two positions, he distances himself, apparently, not from postmillennialism as such but only from "certain types" of it.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in a 1915 article B. B. Warfield, besides characterizing "premillennial" and "postmillennial" as "unfortunate," "infelicitous" terms, seems to recognize only those two positions.<sup>4</sup>

More representatively, the original (1915) and revised (1929/30) editions of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* have no entry for amillennialism, and under "Millennium, post-millennial view" simply refer the reader to Vos's

<sup>2</sup>*The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 226. This passage is from a chapter virtually identical with an article ("The Pauline Eschatology and Chiliasm") originally appearing in *The Princeton Theological Review* 9 (1911): 26–60 (see p. 26).

<sup>3</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 406; cf. 405. This seems a more accurate assessment of what Vos says than that of Greg Bahnsen, "The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 3, 2 (Winter 1976–77): 55–56 (Bahnsen quotes from unpublished class notes identical with the passage from *Biblical Theology* cited above). In "The Second Coming of Our Lord and the Millennium," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 419, Vos appears to distance himself from "the mind of the most pronounced pre- or post-millennarian" (this article first appeared in 1916). As far as I have been able to discover, Vos never calls himself or his views "amillennial."

<sup>4</sup>*Selected Shorter Writing* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 1:349.

(decidedly amil) article "Eschatology of the New Testament."<sup>5</sup>

To note a couple of other related examples: On the millennium passage (Rev 20:1–10), Warfield adopts what almost everyone today would consider an amil view.<sup>6</sup> And the late John Murray, though often claimed (mistakenly, I believe) as a postmil, sets forth, in what in my judgment is the clearest extant statement of his overall eschatological outlook, a position that—if we are to choose one of the standard labels—is best designated amillennial.<sup>7</sup> Murray's exegesis of Romans 11 no more makes him a postmil than Warfield's exegesis of Revelation 20 makes him an amil.

(By the way, can anyone who has carefully read Murray's 1968 address on Matthew 24–25 seriously question its amillennial thrust?<sup>8</sup> It may be somewhat speculative on my part, but hardly unwarranted, to detect in this address—it does not refer explicitly to the work of others—a refutation of the characteristic postmil treatment of Matthew 24, advanced around that time, for instance, by J. Marcellus Kik, particularly the notion that everything up through verse 35 is fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.<sup>9</sup> With typical incisiveness Murray shows that the passage covers history down to its consummation and that the decidedly non-"golden" element of tribulation for the

<sup>5</sup>The recent (1986–89) revision of ISBE discusses all three positions in a single article, "Millennium," by J. W. Montgomery (3:360–61), who cites Vos as a representative amil.

<sup>6</sup>"The Millennium and the Apocalypse," in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 643–64 (originally published in *The Princeton Theological Review* 2 [1904]: 599–617). Vos cites this article with (tacit) approval in his ISBE article, "Eschatology of the New Testament," reprinted in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 45.

<sup>7</sup>"Structural Strands in New Testament Eschatology," a paper read at the seventh annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in December 1954 and decisively influenced, in my judgment, by Vos, especially pages 36–41 of *The Pauline Eschatology*. Regrettably, for whatever reasons, this paper has not been reprinted in Murray's *Collected Writings*. It can be found in the library of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia.

<sup>8</sup>"The Interadvent Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:387–400.

<sup>9</sup>*The Eschatology of Victory* (1948; reprint Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 30–40, 59–173, esp., e.g., 158. The 1971 edition includes a lecture series given at Westminster Seminary in 1961.



church "is represented as characterizing the interadventual period as a whole," p. 389.)

In the past, then, especially over against premillennialism, "post" appears also to have covered what, in effect, was "a." The possibility for that sort of usage lay in the obvious (though sometimes overlooked) consideration that the *amil* view is postmillennial in the sense that for both views Christ will return after the millennium; all *amils* are postmil.

What prompted invention of the word *amillennial*? While the precise origins of the term may be uncertain, the reason for its emergence seems plain enough. Eventually those who did not share a "postmil" emphasis on the millennium as purely future felt the need to have a label for their view. "Amillennial" has functioned, at least characteristically, not necessarily to deny that the millennium is on earth (although some "amils" have no doubt taken such a position) but to maintain the identity of the millennium and the interadventual period. The "a" negates in two directions: (1) the millennium is the interadventual period, not an interregnum following it (the premil view), and (2) the millennium is the interadventual period in its entirety, not just an era toward its close (the postmil view).

By now enough has been said to remind us all that, measured by church-historical standards, the threefold pattern of designation (*a*, *post*, and *pre*), which we tend to consider traditional, is, after all, a fairly recent innovation. More importantly, "a" and "post" do not distinguish differing viewpoints with long, clearly delineated traditions well-established in the church's past, as some seem to think. So it is somewhat misleading simply to speak—as I, for instance, did at the start—of a revival of postmillennialism in connection with the recent emergence of Christian reconstructionism. There are undoubtedly genuine continuities with earlier "postmillennial" viewpoints, but to assert confidently that current postmillennialism has rediscovered "the historic Reformed eschatology" is surely gratuitous.

For my part (though I remain open to discussion), I am not ready to abandon the historical judgment of none other than Warfield, reported by his friend (and fellow postmil) Samuel G. Craig: "He himself [Warfield] freely admitted that a-millennialism, though not known in those days under that name, is the historic Protestant view, as expressed in the

creeds of the Reformation period including the Westminster Standards" (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> For bygone generations of the church, for instance, to have expressed (more or less unbounded) optimism about the spread of the Gospel or to have believed that Romans 11 teaches a future mass conversion of Jews hardly makes them postmils in a later or contemporary sense.

The ambiguity in earlier postmillennialism, which I have suggested gave rise to the label *amillennial* as an effort to clarify, has been further compounded by the fact that presently a sizable number of postmils (especially in reconstructionist circles, it seems) consider the millennium to be coextensive with the *entire* interadventual period. This is surely a departure, in the main, from previous postmillennialism, and in that respect such postmils are *amillennial*. In the present situation, then, we have "postmil *amils*" (all *amils*) and "*amil* postmils" (some postmils).

How are we to assess this development? Does it perhaps indicate that these postmils at least have drawn close to *amils* and that a basis for eschatological common cause exists between them? It is attractive and challenging to think in that direction, and I, for one, least of all want to be guilty of missing or failing to capitalize on existing elements of unanimity. However, it has to be noted that the postmils in view still wish to remain identified as *postmils*. That, I take it, is not merely incidental or an indifferent matter of terminology but, as I will try to make clear below, reflects the instinct that their deepest affinity, despite the *amil* corrective made, is still with earlier ("nonamil") postmillennialism.

My comments so far should have made clear, if anything, that "postmillennialism" is hardly a simple or monolithic entity. My reservations, then, are not with all that has fallen under that name in the past (or, for that matter,

<sup>10</sup>In the editor's introduction to B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), xxxix. The emphasized clause provides knowledgeable confirmation for the relatively recent origin of the term *amillennial*. Note also the assessment of L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 708: "the name [*Amillennialism*] is new indeed, but the view to which it is applied is as old as Christianity. . . . It has ever since [the ancient church fathers] been the view most widely accepted, is the only view that is either expressed or implied in the great historical Confessions of the Church, and has always been the prevalent view in Reformed circles."



continues to do so at present) but with what, it seems to me, are certain characteristics prominent in much current (and earlier) postmillennialism. That proviso needs to be kept in mind in what follows.

### ESCHATOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

My primary reservation, in a word, is that, like premillennialism, postmillennialism—distinguished from amillennialism—"de-eschatologizes" the present (and past) existence of the church. Postmils misperceive the basic structure of New Testament eschatology and so, in a fundamental way, devalue Christian life and experience in the present (and the past) as well as for the immediate, foreseeable future. How does that happen?

1. Nothing has been more characteristic of current postmillennialism than its emphasis on the kingship of the ascended Christ; nothing fires the postmil vision more than that reality. Yet it is just this reality that postmillennialism effectively compromises and, in part, even denies. Postmils especially will no doubt find this last statement startling, maybe even outrageous, so let me try to explain.

Nothing is more distinctive to the postmil vision than its expectation of promised "victory" for the church, a future "golden age," before Christ's return. That golden era is variously conceived; in its reconstructionist versions, for example, it is to be a period of global supremacy and control by Christians over every area of life. But all postmil constructions—past and present, and all of them marked (as postmil) in distinction from other eschatological viewpoints—have in common that the millennial "gold"/"victory" (1) is expected before Christ's return and (2) up to the present time in the church's history, apart from occasional anticipations, has remained entirely in the future.

Here, then, is where a problem—from the vantage point of New Testament teaching, a fundamental structural difficulty—begins to emerge. Emphasis on the golden era as being entirely future leaves the unmistakable impression that the church's present (and past) is something other than golden and that so far in its history the church has been less than victorious. This impression is only reinforced when, typically in my experience, the anticipated glorious future is

pictured just by contrasting it with what is alleged to be the church's presently dismal state (the angle of vision seldom seems to include much beyond the church scene in the United States!), usually with the added suggestion that those who do not embrace the postmil vision are "defeatists" and contribute at least to perpetuating the sad and unpromising status quo.

The New Testament, however, will not tolerate such a construction. If anything is basic (and, I'm inclined to say, clear) in its eschatology, it is that the *eschatological* kingship of Christ begins already at his first coming culminating in his resurrection and ascension. Already at and dating from Christ's exaltation, "God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church" (Eph 1:22; cf. v. 20).

This is a key eschatological pronouncement (announcing the fulfillment in Christ in terms of Psalm 8:6 and 110:1). At least two observations bear on this and similar declarations (e.g., Ac 2:34, 36; Php 2:9–11; 1Pe 3:22): (1) The New Testament certainly teaches a new phase of Christ's kingship in the future. But that decisive, quantum transition is plainly associated with events concomitant with his personal, bodily return (note especially the application of the same two passages, from Psalms 8 and 110, to the resurrection hope of the church in 1Co 15:24–28), and not with some prior, intermediate point or set of developments leading up to his return. (2) The *entire* period between his exaltation and return, not just some segment toward the close, is the period of Christ's *eschatological* kingship, exercised undiminished throughout (through the eschatological, Pentecostal presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church).

In other terms, for the New Testament the *entire* interadvental period, not just a closing episode, is the "golden age" of the church; that period and what transpires in it, as a *whole*, embodies the church's millennial "success" and "victory." To deny that by defining "golden"/"success"/"victory" (almost) exclusively in terms of the church's future (short of Christ's return), is either to deny the eschatological quality of the church's present existence (to "de-eschatologize" the present), or—what for the New Testament is no less problematic, as we will presently see—to deny the equation (for the period until



Christ returns) of what is "eschatological," on the one hand, and "victory," "success," etc., on the other.

On either of these alternatives the effect is the same: the present exercise of Christ's (eschatological) kingship, as presented in the New Testament, is decisively diminished. His kingship, in effect, is held in abeyance; rather than being a present actuality, it is largely a matter of potential, poised for its future, "golden" exercise.

2. At stake here is the basic *duality* of the eschatological fulfillment taught in Scripture. What from the Old Testament angle is a unitary, telescoped focus of eschatological hope (*one* coming of the Messiah, *one* Day of the Lord) turns out in the differentiation of its actual fulfillment, in the New Testament, to have a *dual* focus (not three or more foci). In other words, there are *two* comings (or, more accurately, two episodes of the one coming) of the Christ, but no more than that. In the terminology of then contemporary Jewish eschatology, taken over by Jesus and the New Testament writers, the "age-to-come"/kingdom, already present in Jesus' earthly ministry culminating in his exaltation, will also arrive in the future at his return, but not until then (and then not again and again).

Certainly within the first, "already" installment there is room for different stages or phases—marked off by epochal events like Jesus' baptism, his death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, and the fall of Jerusalem. But none of these events or some presumably still future event or development prior to Christ's return, no matter how momentous, can have categorical, definitive eschatological significance on a par with Christ's coming in its (past and future) duality. Pentecost, for instance, is properly understood as Christ's coming (to be with the church through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; see, e.g., Jn 14:18–20; Ro 8:9–10; 1Co 15:45; 2Co 3:17). But it would be thoroughly misleading to view Pentecost on the same level as the incarnation and what the New Testament regularly calls the Parousia (e.g., 1Co 15:23; 1Th 2:19; 2Pe 3:4), so that the latter would then be the "third" coming of Christ.

(The fall of Jerusalem, by the way, is to be closely associated with the above-mentioned events [death, resurrection, ascension] *preceding* it; with them it is one in a unified complex of events. As such, like those other events,

it does point to and anticipate the second coming—with which, from the unitary outlook of the Old Testament, the event complex of the first coming can even be said to be one event. But the fall of Jerusalem is decisively misunderstood unless we recognize that—even for the apostolic church, when it was still future—its primary affinities are not toward the future but the *past*, toward the first coming, as it marks the end of the brief transitional period from the old to the new covenant. It is a fundamental misreading to see the eschatological discourses of Jesus [Mt 24, Mk 13, Lk 21] and the Book of Revelation as fulfilled almost exclusively or even largely in the events of A.D. 70, as if those events were of major eschatological importance. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple begins already on Good Friday, when God himself radically desecrates "the holy city" [Mt 27:53] in its inner sanctum. Already then the city is desolated at its vital center as the temple curtain is torn "in two from top to bottom" [v. 51; cf. Mk 15:38; Lk 23:45]. What happens in A.D. 70, despite the untold suffering and violence, is but the inevitable aftermath, nothing more than a secondary after-shock.)

The pivotal factor here, once more, is the *duality* involved. When—by contrasting it with the present (and past) condition of the church—an attempt is made to locate the climactic eschatological event(s) prior to Christ's return at a point still in the future for the church, then all that precedes necessarily (in terms of fundamental biblical structure) forfeits its eschatological character. Alternatively, if we grant the eschatological significance of Christ's first coming taught in the New Testament, the future (prior to his return) cannot involve the introduction of anything substantively or constitutively new eschatologically; that future must be in continuity with and an unfolding of the eschatological reality already present and operative in the church.

If, as some charge, this position is "staticism," involving a "static" view of history, so be it. But it is not a staticism that eliminates real, meaningful progress in history. It is, we may say, the "staticism of eschatological dynamism," staticism in the sense of the kingly permanence of the exalted Christ being effectively manifested—in its full, diverse (and ultimately incalculable, unpredictable) grandeur—over the entire interadvental period, from beginning to end. What is



constant throughout this period—the exercise of Christ's eschatological kingship—is more basic and constitutive than any of the variations and “success”/“progress”/“development” that have and may still result from that exercise. In other words, the “gold”/“victory” is already present and continually being realized.

To put my main concern here another way, any viewpoint for which the victory of the church on earth prior to the eternal state is (primarily) future is essentially “chilastic,” that is, by that focus on the future it denies (at least implicitly) or can maintain only inconsistently the New Testament emphasis that the *provisional* eschatological order has already been inaugurated at Christ's first coming.<sup>11</sup> Because, for the period prior to the new heavens and earth, postmillennialism effectively shifts the eschatological center of gravity into the future, it, no less than premillennialism, is a form of chiliasm. In opposition to what is common to these other two positions—their “chilastic” preoccupation with the millennium as entirely future—the New Testament teaches “realized millennialism” (Jay Adams).<sup>12</sup>

3. But now, how about the “amil postmils” mentioned earlier? What about the fact that many (most?) contemporary postmils recognize that the millennium and the interadvental period are coextensive? Doesn't that fact make much of my preceding analysis and criticism, at least so far as they are concerned, inapplicable and irrelevant? So it might at first seem.

The issue here, however, is not whether there is agreement about the millennium beginning at Christ's first coming and spanning the whole interadvental period; nor is

<sup>11</sup>The comments of W. Rordorf concerning the historic Christian, Augustinian rejection of chiliasm are undeniably pertinent here: “. . . if the thousand-year kingdom is already present, it will not come a second time. A time of salvation which is only temporary [‘provisional,’ ‘eine zweifache nur vorläufige Heilszeit’] cannot occur twice. Conversely, if in opposition to Augustine we were to maintain belief in the future millennium, we should not hold that the thousand-year kingdom is already proleptically realized: the very same reason would lead us to this conclusion” (*Sunday*, [Eng. trans. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968], 117).

<sup>12</sup>*The Time Is At Hand* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 9–11, passim; however, we may ask whether Adams, too, sufficiently appreciates the *eschatological* nature of the millennium/interadvental period.

it even the recognition that “the definitive cataclysm has already taken place,” important as that recognition is.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the issue is what implications are drawn from this recognition (and from the kingship of the ascended Christ) for the present (and past) existence of the church: Is millennial “victory” defined so that it is realized only at the end or over the entire period? Is that victory only a future expectation or a present reality as well?

The answer given to this question is decisive, and, so far as I can tell, the former is the answer given more or less consistently by the postmils in view. Their deepest intention or instinct is revealed in continuing to call themselves postmils and in thinking of their position as a revival of postmillennialism (even though their recognition that the millennium and the interadvental period are coterminous was usually lacking in earlier postmils). “Amil” postmils are not really very amil after all; that factor appears to represent an exegetical concession that is not particularly influential in their overall viewpoint.

But they are inconsistent, in some cases perhaps even in fundamental tension, with themselves. You can't have it both ways. Either give up the hope of future “dominion,” defined in contrast to the alleged disarray, the supposedly indecisive, ambiguous, noninfluential, “nonvictorious” condition of the church at present (and in the past), or, as the inevitable alternative, effectively abandon the present/past *eschatological* kingship of Christ as anything more than (largely unrealized) potential.

I should reemphasize my concern not to be involved here in unnecessary polarizing or in exaggerating differences. If that is happening, then I need (and want) to have it pointed out. Perhaps, despite everything said so far, the line between myself and some postmils will prove after all to be a

<sup>13</sup>I agree for the most part with the comments of David Chilton in “Orthodox Christianity and the Millenarian Heresy” and “Optimistic Amillennialism,” *The Geneva Review* 19 (June 1985): 3; 20 (July 1985): 5–6. The entire statement, excerpted above, reads: “The definitive cataclysm has already taken place, in the finished work of Christ” (p. 3, emphasis his). It seems to me, however, that his vision of *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, Tex.: Reconstruction Press, 1985) is controlled by an eschatological structure substantially in tension with, even alien to that indicated in his helpful, often incisive articles.



rather fine one. If it is simply a matter of disagreement over specific exegetical questions like whether Scripture entitles us to optimism about the future spread and success of the Gospel (most emphatically yes, although my definitions of "optimism" and "success" may be somewhat different), or whether Romans 11 teaches a mass end-time conversion of Jews (most likely not), then the debate can continue without the differences having to be substantive eschatologically.

A problem, however, enters—and I become uneasy—when and where a particular set of answers to these (and related) questions (a certain notion of future millennial "victory") is elevated to be definitive for eschatology and so becomes perceived as a basic eschatological position supplanting all others. Then, with this (postmil) set of answers assuming such principal, constitutive proportions, the de-eschatologizing of the church's present, already noted, is virtually inevitable.

4. This, finally, is the place to make clear that what I have so far written about postmillennialism should not be read as a defense of amillennialism as a whole. From the angle under consideration, my criticism of the latter is in a way even more sweeping. If the postmil is to be faulted for de-eschatologizing the existence of the church prior to the anticipated era of millennial victory, the amil, too often, has been guilty of de-eschatologizing the *entire* interadvental period. The correct exegetical insight that the millennium can't be reduced to an era either within or following that period often has gone (and goes) hand in glove with a failure (along with post- and premils) to comprehend the true, eschatological dimensions of the interadvental period as a whole. Measured by the New Testament, much amillennialism has not really been an *eschatological* position at all. Whether or not "defeatist" is the best description of it, it is, let's say, "thoroughly de-eschatologized" millennialism. (By the way, should we want to throw around the charge of "defeatism": if amils are "defeatist" about the entire millennium [interadvental period], then postmils are guilty of being "defeatist" about what has turned out so far to be a substantial part of it.)

For me, a bottom line to much of the discussion so far is this: Biblical eschatology, especially New Testament eschatology, decisively corrects (and relativizes) our traditional

eschatological debates. The New Testament presents an eschatological structure that is in fact "*pre-millennial*" (!)—in the sense of being prior to and more fundamental than any of the standard eschatological views. The church today will remain impoverished in understanding its true identity and its task in the creation, until it is grasped by the fully eschatological significance of Christ's death and resurrection and embraces the "realized" or "inaugurated" eschatology taught in the New Testament—what Vos, for want of a better term, calls the "semi-eschatological" nature of Christian existence in the period between Christ's resurrection and his return. What will challenge and activate and sustain the church (and give it "optimism") in its present calling is its perception, not of a presumed promise of future dominion before Christ's return, but of the real victory it already possesses in the exalted Christ.

What the New Testament announces in Christ's first coming, especially his exaltation, is nothing less than the actual beginning of the end—the great, long-awaited work of God bringing history to an end and inaugurating the new and final order for the creation (e.g., Mk 1:15; 2Co 5:17; Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10; Heb 1:2; 9:26). This order, from the *outset*, is so climactic that it cannot be superseded—other than by the eternal state of affairs beginning at Christ's return. There is no other "second" in eschatological order of magnitude than that state—precisely what Hebrews 9:28 teaches ("he will appear a second time. . ."; cf. v. 26). Any set of developments in the interim between Christ's resurrection and his return, however otherwise significant, perhaps even momentous, can be of no more than subordinate, derivative importance eschatologically. Any "hope" for what may yet transpire prior to his return cannot compare with what has already arrived in Christ *and* is already being realized in and through the church.

What Vos writes primarily with premillennialism in view applies as well to postmil constructions:

Paul conceives of the present Christian state on so high a plane that nothing less nor lower than the absolute state of the eternal consummate kingdom appears worthy to be its sequel. To represent it as followed by some intermediate condition falling short of perfect heavenly life would be in the nature of an anticlimax. . . .



It is thus of the very essence of salvation that it correlates the Christian's state with the great issues of the last day and the world to come. . . .

The point we wish to emphasize in all this is that Paul throughout represents the present Christian life as so directly leading up to, so thoroughly prefashioning the life of the eternal world, that the assumption of a *tertium quid* separating the one from the other must be regarded as destructive of the inner organism of his eschatology. For . . . what the Christian life anticipates is . . . something of an absolute nature, something pertaining to the consummate state. No matter with what concrete elements or colors the conception of a Chiliastic state may be filled out, to a mind so nourished upon the firstfruits of eternal life itself, it can, for the very reason of its falling short of eternal life, have had little significance or attraction.<sup>14</sup>

This is the eschatology taught in the New Testament: a realized-eschatological and therefore decidedly optimistic amillennialism, optimistic about the victory—present (and past) no less than future—being realized in and through the church.

### ESCHATOLOGY AND SUFFERING

I now come to my most substantial reservation. It concerns the understanding of Christian existence and of the role of the church in the world, until Jesus returns, that seems to characterize much contemporary postmillennialism, particularly within reconstructionism. Developing this point will serve to clarify and sharpen the formal, structural observations—by themselves necessarily somewhat abstract—already made. I confine myself here almost entirely to that dimension of my concern, as I see it, that is most critical and religiously sensitive ("practical," if you will).

The inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament is least of all the basis for triumphalism in the church, at whatever point prior to Christ's return. Over the interadven-

<sup>14</sup>"Eschatology and Chiliasm," 34–35; cf. *Pauline Eschatology*, 235–36. Cf. "Second Coming," 422: "The point may be made that . . . the present so directly leads up to, so thoroughly pre-fashions the eternal future as to leave no room for a third something that would separate the one from the other."

tal period in its entirety, from beginning to end, a fundamental aspect of the church's existence is (to be) "suffering with Christ"; nothing, the New Testament teaches, is more basic to its identity than that.<sup>15</sup>

1. Two passages, both in Paul, are especially instructive concerning this reality. Strictly speaking, they are autobiographical, but the immediate and broader context of both shows that they intend to provide a paradigm, not only for other apostles or his own generation but for all believers until Jesus comes.

a). 2 Corinthians 4:7—"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

"This treasure in jars of clay" graphically captures the tension at the heart of this statement and of the apostle's overall understanding of the nature of Christian existence between the resurrection and the return of Christ. "This treasure" is the Gospel or, better, the content of the Gospel—the glory-light of the (exalted) Christ (v. 4), the eschatological, new-creation glory of God, revealed in Christ (v. 6). "Clay jars," in contrast, are believers—in all of their mortality and fragility. We have "this treasure," Paul says, but for now, until Jesus comes, we have it only in the "clay jars" that we are. Or, as he puts it elsewhere (Ro 6:12–13), believers are "alive from the dead," already resurrected, but they are that only "in the mortal body," as they are (in that sense) still unresurrected.

Verses 8 and 9 expand on this fundamental, resurrected/not-resurrected "dialectic" of the Christian life—by means of four pairs of pointedly formulated contrasts: as "clay jars," believers are "hard pressed on every side," "perplexed," "persecuted," and "struck down"; nevertheless (note the fourfold repetition of "but not")—as possessing "this treasure"—they are "not crushed," "not in despair," "not abandoned," and "not destroyed."

Verse 10 further describes this reality in summary fashion: we (believers) carry around in the body "the dying of Jesus" [*nekrōsis* here has in view death as an activity or

<sup>15</sup>For a more developed treatment of the discussion in this section, see my article "The Usefulness of the Cross," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1978–79): 228–46, and the literature cited there.



process], so that "the life of Jesus" ["this treasure"] may be manifested "in our body" ["in clay jars"]. Verse 11 closely parallels verse 10 with slight explanatory variations: "always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

Even from this brief analysis of the passage there should be little difficulty in recognizing that in the summary description in verses 10–11 suffering (characterized as "the dying of Jesus" and "always being given over to death for Jesus' sake") and "the life of Jesus" are not separate sectors of Christian experience, as if the latter, by addition, somehow balances off and compensates for the former. Much less does Paul say that the tendency of the latter is to replace the former; in fact, he effectively distances himself from the (postmil-like) view that the (eschatological) life of (the risen and ascended) Jesus embodies a power/victory principle that progressively ameliorates and reduces the suffering of the church.

Rather, Paul intends to say, as long as believers are in "the mortal body," "the life of Jesus" manifests itself as "the dying of Jesus"; the latter describes the existence mode of the former. Until the resurrection of the body at his return Christ's resurrection-life finds expression in the church's sufferings (and, as will become clear presently, nowhere else—so far as the existence and calling of the church are concerned); the locus of Christ's ascension-power is the suffering church.

This, it should not be overlooked, involves an evangelistic or missiological reality of fundamental proportions—"death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (v. 12; cf. v. 7: "that this all-surpassing power may be from God and not from us").

b). Philippians 3:10—"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

This aspiration expresses essentially the same idea as 2 Corinthians 4:10–11. In the immediate context Paul is concerned for "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus [his] Lord" (v. 8), knowledge that comes from being "found in him" (v. 9), that is, from being united with Christ. Verse 10, then, brings into view a fundamental component of this rich, experiential union—knowledge.

A key to the intended impact of verse 10 is to recognize that both "ands" (following "Christ" and "resurrection") are not simply coordinating but explanatory; they do not merely connect, they explicate. In step-wise fashion Paul progressively traces a single, composite notion: Knowing the power of his resurrection is not something in addition to knowing Christ, nor is knowing the fellowship of his sufferings a further addition to both. Rather, the controlling consideration is union with Christ in his death and resurrection such that to "know"/experience Christ is to experience the power of his resurrection and that, in turn, is to experience the fellowship of his sufferings—a total reality that can then be summed up as conformity to Christ's death.

By virtue of union with Christ, Paul is saying, the power of Christ's resurrection is realized in the sufferings of the believer; sharing in Christ's sufferings is the way the church manifests his resurrection-power. Again, as in 2 Corinthians 4:10–11, the locus of eschatological life is Christian suffering; the mark—the indelible, ineradicable impression—left on the existence of the church by the formative power of the resurrection is the Cross. And, further, this is not some merely temporary state of affairs incidental to the circumstances of the church in the apostle's own day but is for all—the whole church in whatever time and place—who aspire to the resurrection of the dead (v. 11).

c). This is also what Romans 8:17b has in view when Paul rounds off his immediately preceding teaching with a sweeping proviso—not a condition for the adoption just spoken of (v. 14b–17a) but a conditional element nonetheless, given with that adoption: "if indeed we share his [Christ's] sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

This correlation of future glory and present suffering is a prominent concern in the section that follows. At least two points are worth noting about "our sufferings" (v. 18): (1) their nature/breadth and (2) their terminus.

(1) Christian suffering ought not to be conceived of too narrowly. In the passages so far considered, and elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., 2Co 1:5–10; 1Pe 4:12–19), suffering surely includes but is more than persecution and martyrdom (reserved primarily, say, for apostles and foreign missionaries).



Romans 8:18ff. especially discloses the breadth of what ought to be our conception of Christian suffering. Suffering has to be seen in the context of the "frustration"/"futility" (*mataiotēs*), the "bondage to decay" to which the entire creation has been subjected, not by the inherent nature of things but because of God's curse on Adam's sin (v. 20–21 are, in effect, a Pauline commentary on Ge 3). Suffering is a function of the futility/decay principle pervasively at work in the creation since the fall; suffering is everything that pertains to creaturely experience of this death-principle.

From this perspective, then, Christian suffering is literally all the ways in which this "weakness-existence" (v. 26) is borne, by faith, in the service of Christ—the mundane, "trivial" but often so easily exasperating and unsettling frustrations of daily living, as well as monumental testing and glaring persecution. Suffering with Christ is the totality of existence "in the mortal body" and within "this world in its present form [that] is passing away" (1Co 7:31), endured for his sake. What has to be reckoned with here is the pervasive "givenness" of Christian suffering—its constitutive nature for the existence of the church as a whole; suffering for Christ is the inseparable correlate of believing in him—the precise point of Philippians 1:29: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. . . ." (cf. 2Ti 3:12: "In fact ['in the last days,' v. 1, that is, until his return], everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted").

(2) Romans 8:18ff. is no less clear as to the terminus of this comprehensive suffering. Together with the rest of the creation, Satan and his servants excepted, believers exist in hope (v. 20), in "groaning" (v. 22–23, cf. 26) anticipation (v. 19, 23) of "the revelation of the sons of God" (v. 19), of "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21). This revelation/liberation of believers (note: along with and inseparable from the liberation of creation as a whole) is the future dimension of their adoption and will take place at the time of the redemption (=resurrection) of the body (v. 23), not before. Until then, at Christ's return, the suffering/futility/decay principle in creation remains in force, undiminished (but sure to be overcome); it is an enervating factor that cuts across the church's existence, including its mission, in its entirety. The notion that this frustration factor

will be demonstrably reduced, and the church's suffering service noticeably alleviated and even compensated, in a future era before Christ's return is not merely foreign to this passage; it trivializes as well as blurs both the present suffering and future hope/glory in view. Until his return, the church remains one step behind its exalted Lord; his exaltation means its (privileged) humiliation, his return (and not before), its exaltation.

d). It bears emphasizing that what we are presently considering is not some subordinate, peripheral strand of New Testament teaching. That can be further appreciated from the fundamental structural observation that Paul and the other writers expound the teaching of Jesus and so the eschatological reality, central to that teaching according to the Synoptic Gospels, called the kingdom of God/heaven; the New Testament writers are basically interpreters of the kingdom-proclamation of Jesus (and, so, in turn, of the Old Testament as the roots of that proclamation).

The passages on suffering just considered, among others, expand on a fundamental dimension of Jesus' teaching on discipleship: The actual arrival of the eschatological kingdom in Jesus' coming means, until his return, suffering service. In the kingdom the measure of greatness is to be a servant (Mt 20:26; Mk 10:43); a key watchword of the kingdom is "very last and servant of all" (Mk 9:35). More specifically, Jesus announces as an absolutely requisite, "life-saving" condition of discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23–24; cf. Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 14:27). Cross bearing is a comprehensive description of kingdom-discipleship, as the qualification "daily" makes explicit. In response to the disciples' request for prominent kingdom status—kingdom "dominion," if you will—the only promise Jesus has for them (and us), this side of his return, is the "fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (cf. Php 3:10): "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with" (Mk 10:37, 39). John has got it just right: until Jesus comes again, the presence of the kingdom is bracketed by the realities of "suffering" and "endurance" (Rev 1:9; cf. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).

2. This mark—this *essential* mark—of the church's identity seems muted or largely ignored in much of today's



postmillennialism, measured by my reading and other contacts, which I take to be fairly representative. Its "golden" dreams appear to leave little place for Christian suffering—other than as a perhaps necessary, but temporary means for achieving those dreams, whose realization, in turn, will mean the virtual disappearance of suffering for the church.

Most assuredly, the eschatology of the New Testament is an "eschatology of victory"—victory presently being realized by and for the church, through the eschatological kingship of the exalted Christ (Eph 1:22). But any outlook that fails to grasp that, short of Christ's return, this eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering—an eschatology of (Christ's) "power made perfect in weakness" (2Co 12:9)—confuses the identity of the church. As Paul reminds the church just a few verses after the Romans 8 passage considered above (v. 37), *not* "beyond" or "[only] after" but "in all these things" ("trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword," v. 35), "we are more than conquerors." Until Jesus comes again, the church "wins" by "losing."

What has happened to this theology of the cross in much of contemporary postmillennialism? The picture of hope and progress that I get from reading the New Testament does not include, for instance, the unbeliever as a naked child scrambling for the crumbs falling from the bountiful, overlaid table of the believer.<sup>16</sup> Is it really overreacting to say that such triumphalism is repugnant to biblical sensibilities? Some postmils at least—especially within reconstructionism, it seems—are spelling "success" and "progress" with an alphabet that cannot be found in the New Testament.

(Hermeneutical commitments of far-reaching importance are at stake at this point, although I cannot discuss them here at any length. Briefly, the basic issue is this: Is the

<sup>16</sup>So the picture on the front cover of Gary North's *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987). That this is what the cover intends to convey is surely the impression left by the contents of the book itself, especially as the author elaborates his views of historical progress and the millennial outworkings of common grace.

New Testament to be allowed to interpret the Old—as the best, most reliable interpretive tradition in the history of the church (and certainly the Reformed tradition) has always insisted? Does the New Testament as a *whole*—as the God-breathed record of the [eschatological] end point of the history of special revelation—provide the *controlling* vantage point for properly understanding the entire Old Testament, including its prophecies? Or, alternatively, will the Old Testament, particularly prophecies like Isaiah 32:1–8 and 65:17–25, become the hermeneutical fulcrum? Will large reaches of the still-future eschatological outlook present in the New Testament, like the discourses of Jesus in Matthew 24 with its parallels and the bulk of Revelation, be effectively deprived of their continuing relevance for the eschatological outlook of the church today, by relegating their fulfillment to the past events of A.D. 70?<sup>17</sup> Will the vast stretches of Old Testament prophecy, including its recurrent, frequently multivalent apocalyptic imagery, thus be left without effective New Testament control and so become a virtual blank check to be filled out in capital, whatever may be its source, that is something other than the result of sound exegesis? To adopt this alternative is to be leading the church into a hermeneutical morass from which, only with difficulty, it will eventually have to extricate itself. We ought to spare ourselves that.)

Any outlook that tends to remove or obscure the (constitutive) dimension of suffering for the Gospel from the present *triumph* of the church is an illusion. The misplaced expectation, before Christ's return, of a "golden age" in which, in contrast to the present, opposition to the church will have been reduced to a minimum and suffering will have receded to the periphery for an (at last) "victorious"

<sup>17</sup>Do we really wish to risk staking the viability of our eschatological position on doubtful answers to questions of Special Introduction—questions that themselves, by the nature of the case (the lack of adequate canonical givens in many instances), admit to answers that are at best highly probable and are always, like all results of historical scholarship, subject in principle to review and revision? If I understand correctly, this appears to be the line being followed increasingly by some postmils in trying to argue for a rigorously consistent "preterism," based on the conclusion that all of the New Testament documents, particularly Revelation, were presumably written before the fall of Jerusalem and have a future outlook largely preoccupied with that fall as a key eschatological event.



Christendom—that misconception can only distort the church's understanding of its mission in the world. According to Jesus, the church will not have drained the shared cup of his suffering until he returns. The church cannot afford to evade that point. It does so at the risk of jeopardizing its own identity.

### WATCHFULNESS FOR CHRIST'S RETURN

My final reservation is that postmillennialism deprives the church of the imminent expectation of Christ's return and so undermines the quality of watchfulness that is incumbent on the church. At issue here is not that there are imminence statements in Matthew 24 and its synoptic parallels, for example, that refer proximately to the fall of Jerusalem; some no doubt do. Rather, the issue is that not all such statements are fulfilled in that cataclysm and those that are, in their immediate contexts, ultimately point to the Second Coming. The *marana tha* of the New Testament is not nearly satisfied by the events of A.D. 70 (1Co 16:22; cf., e.g., Ro 13:11–12; Php 4:5; Jas 5:8; 1Pe 4:7; 1Jn 2:18; Rev 1:3; 22:20).

The overall message of the New Testament is that—given the death and resurrection of Christ, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the close of the apostolic era (including the destruction of Jerusalem), in their eschatological significance—the stage is set for Christ's return; the only event still outstanding in the history of redemption, as far as biblical prophecy reveals, is that return with its concomitants (see, e.g., 2Th 2:1–12). So, for instance, Paul sees the spreading, worldwide triumph of the Gospel as already fulfilled in his own day; through his own (apostolic) ministry, in part, “all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing,” and “the gospel . . . has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Col 1:6, 23).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the

<sup>18</sup>One reason I am inclined against the view that Romans 11:11ff. teaches a future mass conversion of the Jews is that Paul seems to see his *own* ministry to the Gentiles (with its jealousy-provoking, repentance-producing effect) as serving, *already* at that time, to bring about the “fullness” of the Jews (v. 11–15; cf. “all Israel,” v. 26)—a fullness that throughout the passage contrasts with the elect “remnant” (v. 5), who were not “hardened” (v. 7) and did not “stumble” (v. 11); the Jews who repent through the apostle's activity are not added to the remnant but inaugurate the fullness, whose sum total will then be realized over the entire interadvental period.

Book of Acts does not leave the reader hanging, presumably waiting for “Part 3” to Theophilus or some other sequel for the final outcome. It tells a *complete* story; it documents the actual realization of the sweeping promise of 1:8—the universal spread of the Gospel through the *apostles* (see v. 2–3 for the apostolic antecedent of “you” in v. 8), expanding out from Jerusalem (the Jews) to “the ends of the earth” (Rome representing the world center of the Gentiles). In short, the first part of Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 24:14 (“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, . . .”; cf. Mk 13:10) has an adequate fulfillment in the ministry of the apostles.

Certainly the New Testament anticipates and makes provision for the postapostolic future of the church, quite explicitly in the Pastoral Epistles especially; it recognizes that there is to be an ongoing superstructure erected on the once-for-all apostolic foundation (Eph 2:20). But it gives no indication as to the duration of that future, at least no calculable indications. A pivotal consideration, it seems, is that according to the New Testament, Christ *could* have returned at virtually any time since the ministry of the apostles; all the demands of prophecy, short of Christ's return and its sequel, have been satisfied by the course of redemptive history terminating with their ministry.

In other words, the universal circumference of the Gospel's triumph has been drawn by the ministry of the apostles. So far as God has revealed his purposes, the subsequent process of filling in that circle could have been and can be terminated at any time. That filling-in process is the church's “filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions,” to use Paul's language describing his own ministry (Col 1:24; cf. Ro 8:17b). But the duration of that essentially missiological reality, just how long it will take to constitute the sum total of that suffering, lies hidden with God. The “day of salvation” (2Co 6:2), the New Testament announces, has not only arrived but is also at its end; the length of its gracious extension is known only to God, rooted in the unfathomable depths of his saving mercy.

It seems, then, that the New Testament does not warrant the kind of confidence that is prepared to assert, “This world has tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of



thousands of years of increasing godliness ahead of it, before the Second Coming of Christ."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps it may be that long, even longer, but then again, perhaps not. Perhaps it may be in our time, but then again, perhaps not. The New Testament calls us to a readiness, an (eager) longing (Ro 8:23, 25) that is not trapped by either extreme of reckoning.

The balance we ought to have is aptly expressed by the Westminster Divines in the words with which, take note, they chose to close their Confession of Faith:

... so will He have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

### THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

It will not do simply to dismiss this chapter as the ramblings of someone who has betrayed his Reformed heritage—with its ennobling vision of life itself as religion and the whole of life to the glory of God—for an anemic, escapist Christianity of cultural surrender. Without question, the Great Commission continues fully in force, with its full cultural breadth, until Jesus returns; "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" is the mandate of the exalted Last Adam to the people of his new creation. We cannot measure the limit of that "everything" and its implications; of it we can only confess with the psalmist: "To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless" (119:96). That mandate, then, is bound to have a robust, leavening impact—one that will redirect every area of life and will transform not only individuals but, through them corporately (as the church), their cultures; it already has done so and will continue to do so, until Jesus comes.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 221–22. This prediction, unlike the prophecies of Hal Lindsey et al., may be immune to embarrassment by the disconfirming possibilities of the immediate future, but it is on the same continuum of chiliastic calculation.

<sup>20</sup>This is a good place to register my reaction to typical reconstructionist rhetoric (that seems a not unfair description) that you can't expect people to work effectively for the success of the Gospel today unless they are convinced of the reconstructionist vision of eventual millennial victory; you can't and won't work for a goal, the argument runs, that you don't believe

But that intended impact will be realized only as the church lives out of the mind-set articulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31: "The time is short"—not temporally (or temporarily), say, until the events of A.D. 70 (a fairly typical postmil misunderstanding, apparently, that trivializes this passage and strikes at the heart of Paul's theology of Christian existence as a whole), but until Jesus comes—however long that may be. For that shortened, compressed time, he continues, "those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them." "For," he reasons, introducing a consideration of much more fundamental, far-reaching magnitude than the fall of Jerusalem ever had, "this world in its present form is passing away."

Reconstructionist postmillennialism, it seems, lacks or at least substantially mutes this Pauline "as if not" (*hōs mē*), this paradoxical tension of "fully involved detachment" or, if you will, "detached involvement" in the affairs of this world. In fact, its vision of millennial "gold" leaves little, if any, place for that tension.

This tension, it should not be missed, reflects an essential quality of the Gospel itself; it exhibits a dimension of that "offense" and "foolishness" that Paul earlier in this same letter tells us unbelief inevitably perceives the Gospel to be (1:23). Admittedly, the balance called for here is elusive and difficult to maintain; there are no easy formulas or self-evident regimens. The perennially demanding, often perplexing path the church is called to follow, until Jesus comes, can be negotiated only as "we live by faith, not by sight" (2Co 5:7).

That faith, in its mode as hope and eschatological optimism, perseveres—as the immediate context intimates in the light of Romans 8:18–25—toward the permanent,

will be realized. Assuming for a moment the legitimacy of any particular reconstructionist/theonomic vision and, apart from other considerations, that line of reasoning seems suspiciously akin, on a broader, corporate scale, to arguing that you can't expect the individual believer to be concerned personally for perfect holiness unless such personal perfection is attainable in this life. Presumably, reconstructionists will not want to maintain that in the light of Romans 6:1ff.; 1 Peter 1:15–16 et al.



perfected order for *this* creation (not some other heavens and earth), in all of its concreteness and full corporeality, to be established, without further delay, along with the bodily resurrection of believers at Christ's return.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, such faith will remain on guard against being drawn off balance—whether by premillennial (or de-eschatologized amillennial) tendencies toward world-renunciation and neglect, or by the disposition, more pronounced in some postmils than others, toward world-absorption and seduction.

\* \* \* \* \*

The comprehensive outlook found in the Book of Hebrews provides a fitting close to these remarks. Two realities dominate the writer's marvelous exposition of God's eschatological, "last days" speech in his Son (Heb 1:2). The one reality is Jesus, the high priest in heaven (e.g., 4:14; 8:1). Fulfilling Psalm 110, the exalted Christ is "priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (e.g., 5:6; 6:20; 7:17); the New Testament contains no more impressive presentation of the realized eschatological dimension of his person and work than this.

But for whom is the exalted Christ high priest? Who is served by his sanctuary service (Heb 8:2) of eschatological intercession (7:25)? The answer to that question is the other reality in view—the church as a pilgrim congregation, a

<sup>21</sup>My surmise is that, for many, a significant factor disposing them toward either a premil or a postmil position stems from etherealized, even insipid, less-than-biblical understandings of the eternal state. Such rarefied, colorless conceptions give rise to the conviction—compounded by a missing or inadequate awareness of the realized eschatology taught in Scripture—that eventually God must somehow "get in his licks" and "settle things" in history, as distinct from eternity. But what is the eternal order other than the consummation of *history*, the historical process come to its final fruition? The new heavens and earth, inaugurated at Christ's return, will be the climactic vindication of God's covenant and, so, his final historical triumph, the ultimate realization of his purposes for the original creation, forfeited by the first Adam and secured by the last. Inherent in both a postmil and a premil outlook, it seems, is the tendency, at least, toward an unbiblical, certainly un-Reformed separation or even polarization of creation and redemption/eschatology. (As this chapter goes off to the editors, it strikes me that the whole might well have been developed from the angle of this footnote.)

people in the wilderness. Utilizing a broad covenant-historical analogy, the writer compares the church between Christ's exaltation and his return to Israel in the desert (see esp. 3:7–4:11): just as the wilderness generation delivered from Egyptian bondage (picturing realized eschatology) had not yet entered Canaan (a picture of still future eschatology), so the New Testament church, presently enjoying a real experience of the salvation promised in the Gospel, has not yet entered into the possession of that salvation in its final and unthreatened form ("God's rest").

Two basic perspectives emerge with these two realities. On the one hand, the writer's realized eschatology leaves no room for a premil position: Once Jesus "has gone through the heavens" (Heb 4:14) and has "sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (8:1), his return for a provisional earthly rule, prior to the eternal heavenly order, would be retrograde for the writer, a step backward eschatologically. Christ's return will be the return of the *heavenly* high priest, not the appearance of Christ temporarily exchanging heavenly ministry for earthly duties. That return will mean the appearance on *earth* of the heavenly order/sanctuary where Christ is "a high priest forever" (6:20), the manifestation on *earth*, without delay at his return, of the "heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22), the "enduring city" (13:14), the eternal "rest"-order (4:11).

But the writer is no less indisposed toward a postmil outlook: Until Christ returns the church remains a wilderness congregation; like the Patriarchs in the land of promise, believers are "aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb 11:13). That tension is an essential dimension of their identity—aliens in the creation that is theirs by right and whose eschatological restoration has already been secured for them by their high priest and king.

There is no "golden" age coming that is going to replace or even ameliorate these desert conditions of testing and suffering. No success of the Gospel, however great, will bring the church into a position of earthly prosperity and dominion such that the wilderness with its persecutions and temptations will be eliminated or even marginalized. That would have to be the outcome if prosperity—understood, for instance, in the terms of Isaiah 65:17ff.—is to be at all



meaningful. Such prosperity and blessing for the church are reserved until Christ returns.

The writer of Hebrews operates with a simple enough eschatological profile: the bodily absence of Christ means the church's wilderness existence; his bodily presence, its entrance into God's final rest. What he must confront in his readers is a perennial problem for the church, a primal temptation bound up with its wilderness existence: the veiledness, for the present, of messianic glory and of the believer's eschatological triumph; "at present we do not see everything subject to him" (Heb 2:8), with the longing as well as the promise that "at present" holds for the church. All of us, then, are involved in a continuing struggle—against our deeply rooted eschatological impatience to tear away that veil and our undue haste to be out of the wilderness and see the realization of what, just because of that haste and impatience, will inevitably prove to be dreams and aspirations that are ill-considered and all too "fleshly."

"For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14).

## Chapter Ten

---

### *Theonomy, Pluralism, and the Bible*

---

William S. Barker