

Issues in Reformed Theology

Postmillennialism and Amillennialism

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As we continue our study of the issues of Reformed theology, another area of fundamental disagreement is in the doctrine of eschatology, which is the study of last things. While this is a less noticeable distinction than other doctrines such as infant baptism or the practice of the Law in the Christian life, nevertheless there is significance when biblical teaching is not accepted. This area of doctrine is widely different in Reformed churches from biblical teaching. Even many Reformed Baptist churches have been affected by Reformed teaching in this area of doctrine.

1. Reformed theology is not premillennial

Reformed theology is very committed to the Bible, taking it for what it says with the normal meaning of the text. This is true in all areas of theology with one exception, eschatology. However, this Reformed belief in the literal hermeneutic is ignored when it considers the doctrines of the future. This is why Reformed theology by and large does not support Premillennialism, which understands the Bible as teaching a literal, physical kingdom of God on the earth that is instituted with the second coming of Christ.

Reformed theologian Lorriane Boettner once wrote, “It is generally agreed that if the prophecies are taken literally, they do foretell a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine with the Jews having a prominent place in that kingdom and ruling over the other nations.” This is a fair recognition of the reason why Reformed leaders do not believe in the earthly kingdom of God.

Furthermore, anyone viewing the Westminster Confession of Faith as a guiding source of doctrine will oppose Premillennialism. For example, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church notes, “the Westminster Confession of Faith clearly holds to the second coming of Christ followed by the resurrection of all the dead followed by a universal judgment and the entrance of the final state both of the righteous and the wicked.” This results in Premillennialism being either rejected or the Westminster Confession no longer containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scripture.

Reformed theologians most strongly oppose the Premillennialism belief in the rapture of the church. Many are fond of using derisive terms such as “secret rapture.” They detail failed predictions of Christ’s return as if this is representative of mainstream Premillennialism. They seek to tie Pretribulationism to questionable people from the 1800s. This rhetoric has caused some Premillennialists who believe in the doctrines of predestination to downplay their belief in the rapture in order to avoid unnecessary conflict with those Reformed pastors with whom they associate.

2. Amillennialism in Reformed Theology

These days, most Reformed theologians are Amillennial. Amillennialism holds that there will be no millennium before the end of the world. Until the return of Christ, good and evil will develop in parallel. After the second coming of Christ at the end of the world there will be a general resurrection and a general judgment of all people.

While Premillennialists argue that the biblical promises of a future earthly millennium are yet to be fulfilled, Amillennialists believe those promises are either fulfilled spiritually in the church or they were conditional and the conditions were not met. Amillennialists deny the rapture, believing that there will only be a second coming of Christ to usher all of God's people into heaven. Amillennialists deny there will be a Great Tribulation period, believing that all passages referring to a tribulation period or to a coming wrath are the trials and suffering of the church on earth. Amillennialists deny there will be a literal reign of Christ upon the earth.

Amillennialism stems from the Roman Catholic approach to the Scripture. The Reformation was focused upon the doctrines of salvation and the church, not eschatology. The Reformers gave the doctrines of end times very little attention at all. So the Roman Catholic Amillennial view of the end times was carried into the Reformed churches and included in Reformed doctrinal statements in a general sense. Like doctrines of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, some parts of end times theology were changes (such as the Catholic belief in purgatory), but there was not complete rethinking of eschatology from a biblical perspective.

3. Postmillennialism in Reformed Theology

Like Amillennialism, Postmillennialism denies the same belief in a literal kingdom of God as described in the Old Testament and uses

Postmillennialism differs from Amillennialism in two basic ways:

- a. The millennial kingdom is an actual 1,000 years before the return of Christ.

Postmillennialism has historically believed in an actual 1,000-year millennial kingdom. In the past, the Postmillennial view held to the last 1,000 years before the second coming of Christ was the prophesied Old Testament millennial kingdom. This is in contrast to Amillennialism's view of a purely spiritual millennial kingdom. This is also in contrast to the view of Premillennialism that considers the 1,000-year literal millennial kingdom as occurring after the return of Christ to the earth.

More recently, the typical Postmillennialist views the 1,000 years of the millennial kingdom as figurative. This part of Postmillennialism has fallen out of favor with many of its proponents. The 1,000 years only represents a long period of time that is considered to be the millennium that exists prior to Christ's return.

b. The millennial kingdom is a time when things will progressively improve on earth.

The primary distinction between Postmillennialism and Amillennialism today is that Postmillennialists consider the condition of the world as improving in time. Satan is viewed being overcome and the kingdom of God is expanding. This improvement is seen as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the millennial kingdom. Things like more Bibles being sold, the gospel going to areas it has never been before, and the improvement of certain social conditions are looked to for supporting data.

Postmillennialism was the very popular view in Reformed theology prior to the 20th century. Reformed preacher Jonathan Edwards saw the Great Awakening in the United States as evidence supporting the Postmillennialism. The general improvements in society in the 19th century gave further support for this position. With the two world wars of the 20th century, the belief that the world was improving became a very minority point of view.

Some have argued that the Westminster Confession of faith promotes Postmillennialism:

Q. 191. What do we pray for in the second petition?

A. In the second petition (which is, Thy kingdom come), acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in; the church furnished with all gospel officers and ordinances, purged from corruption, countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate; that the ordinances of Christ may be purely dispensed, and made effectual to the converting of those that are yet in their sins, and the confirming, comforting, and building up of those that are already converted: that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him forever: and that he would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends.

Later, the Reformed Savoy Declaration of 1658 gave Postmillennialism additional support:

“As the Lord in his care and love towards his Church, hath in his infinite wise providence exercised it with great variety in all ages, for the good of them that love him, and his own glory; so according to his promise, we expect that in the latter days, antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of the kingdom of his dear Son broken, the churches of Christ being enlarged, and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.”

Postmillennialism has recently seen resurgence in some Reformed circles. This has occurred through a minority segment of Reformed Theology known as Christian Reconstructionism. This movement began under Rousas Rushdony, who wrote the Institutes of Biblical Law in 1973. Leading advocates of Reconstructionism have been Greg Bahnsen, Gary North, and to a lesser degree, D. James Kennedy, who was influenced by this view later in his life.

The primary basis of Reconstructionist writings is to advance the belief in Theonomy, which is the idea that the Bible ought to govern all areas of life, including the government. Due to its Reformed basis, it views the Old Testament Law as the basis for reconstructing society toward the Kingdom of God. Indeed, Reconstructionism is so focused upon Theonomy that the two terms are often used synonymously. While we will look into Reformed Theology and the government in our next class, for now it is notable that Christian Reconstructionism is also postmillennial, viewing the development of God's kingdom until the return of Christ.

Postmillennialism is therefore a part of Christian Reconstructionism as the spread of Christianity and the Law through society prepares it for the Lord's return. Many who long for our nation to be more moral are drawn to this theological perspective and with it they adopt the postmillennial view of the end times. The Old Testament Law for civil life in society seems for some to be God's design and should be implemented in our generation as the rule of law. This has given a boost to Postmillennialism.

The rise of Postmillennialism in recent years is also due to an increased interest by many Christians in the political realm. Evangelical leaders have promoted political activism for societal change and the hoped for success corresponds to the Postmillennialist doctrine. This enthusiasm for moral improvement in the country through the politics has moved more Reformed believers toward Postmillennialism than to any other end times doctrine.

The basic difference between Amillennialism and Postmillennialism then comes down to the word—optimism. Amillennialists do not view the world as progressively improving under the influence of the kingdom of God. Since this has appeared to be similar to the pessimism of Premillennialism's view of the society getting worse in the latter days (2 Timothy 3), some Amillennialist have sought to call themselves "optimistic Amillennialists" in order to be more aligned with the Reformed brethren than with Premillennialists. Others view optimistic Amillennialists as nothing other than Postmillennialists.

But fundamentally, Postmillennialism views there to be a golden age of Christian influence into history as the spread of the gospel. The tribulation passage of Matthew 24 is viewed as occurring now as the gospel will spread until the return of Christ (Matthew 24:14). Increases in the propagation of the gospel, of the distribution of the Bible, of moral laws enacted, etc. are considered a part of this glorious era that ushers Christ's return to bring His people into heaven.

4. Historic Premillennialism in Reformed Theology

It is worthy to note that there is a small minority within Reformed Theology that allows for a certain view of the millennial kingdom. This view, known as Historic Premillennialism, is consistent with a Posttribulational understanding of Premillennialism. This considers that there is a future kingdom of God on earth but that the coming of Christ for His church occurs after the tribulation period.

This view is called Historic Premillennialism because it is considered to be the view of the early church fathers. The first church father who clearly diverted from Premillennialism was Augustine around three centuries after the Book of Revelation was written. This is a general problem for those who value the historic church but are opposed to Premillennialism. In reality, the early church fathers believed in the earthly millennial kingdom but without the details of modern Posttribulationalism. James Montgomery Boice is the most well-known Reformed pastor to hold to this view. Yet this view is not consistent with the historic Reformed confessions.

Some Presbyterian denominations, such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, that will not ordain Premillennialists as ministers have made an exception for Historic Premillennialism. But there is no exception for those who believe in an imminent return of Christ for His church prior to the prophesied events of the tribulation period.

5. The Reformed view of biblical prophecy

What does Reformed theology do with the prophetic Bible passages such as the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 or the Book of Revelation? There are four views of how to interpret the biblical texts of prophecy. The first three fit within both Postmillennialism and Amillennialism. The last view is largely held by Premillennialism.

a. Preterist

The Preterist view is that much of the prophetic passages of the New Testament were fulfilled in 70 A.D. with the fall of Jerusalem. Christ's return is still future but the details of Revelation have already occurred. This is sometimes called Partial Preterism in order to distinguish it from the heresy that views that all prophecy is fulfilled and there is no future return of Christ.

b. Historical

The Historical view understands the New Testament prophecies as being fulfilled through various events during the time since the first coming of Christ. Most of the leaders of the Reformation held to a historical view of New Testament prophecy. This is why many writings of the Reformers and their followers declare the Pope to be the antichrist.

c. Idealist

The Idealist view sees the prophecies as figurative. These are not specifically fulfilled but are simply descriptive of the difficulties that Christians face in this present life.

d. Futurist

The Futurist view sees the large number of New Testament prophecies as yet to be fulfilled. These prophecies will be fulfilled as stated in the events of the end times.

Postmillennialism and Amillennialism share much of the same view of the Bible and of the end times. The prophetic passages are viewed symbolically in order to arrive at any interpretation other than a futurist perspective. So Reformed theologians are divided in the end times theology, but they are also divided in their view of the fulfillment of New Testament prophecies. They arrive at the same general sense of a heavenly destiny of God's people devoid of Premillennialist detail, while taking different interpretive paths to get there. Yet they remain united in the failure to use the literal method of interpretation in their approach to the prophetic text. The one thing that unites full Reformed Theologians is their opposition to Premillennialism. This would be less true of Reformed Baptists, since many are Premillennial.

6. The significance of eschatology

Reformed theology does not believe in Premillennialism but Reformed people tend to not be as concerned about this doctrine as they are with some others that we have discussed in our series. The primary reason for this goes back to the failure to adhere to a literal reading of prophetic Bible texts. When discussing biblical prophecy, Amillennialists do not have much detail because of their symbolic interpretation of verses. The 1,000-year millennial kingdom is spiritualized to be the equivalent to the present church age. So there is not much that prophecy adds to what we presently know.

The result is that we do not have people being swayed toward Reformed teaching in eschatology because the argumentation of most of it is of the Amillennial form that simply opposes the literal millennial kingdom. Not only is the teaching thin on details but there is also less of a consistent understanding of what the details symbolize. This lack of coherency is why there is less appetite for believing this doctrine.

Postmillennial has adherents who are more zealous for the propagation of their doctrine since their enthusiasm is more in regard to the spread of Christian societal influence. Yet this desire for the spread of the gospel and the conformity of society to God's Law is more important to most Reformed people than what eschatological system you hold to.

A great many Christians view the disagreements surrounding eschatology as being so significant that it is impossible to be confident in end-times doctrine. The date setting by some Premillennialists and the rampant speculations regarding the relationship between world events and biblical prophecy have not helped build confidence. Also, prophecy can be difficult to understand. Yet this ought not to undermine the importance of doctrine. Many people have debated doctrine that we consider to be fundamental to the gospel, such as the person of Christ. Because there is opposition and confusion does not mean the doctrine is either unimportant or unknowable.

There are significant reasons as to why an interest in the prophetic texts of the Bible is very important to the Christian faith:

- a. Much of the Bible is prophetic. Estimates are that over 25% of the Bible is predictive. Jesus spoke often of the future and the epistles speak frequently of the future. Of course the book of Revelation concludes the New Testament canon.
- b. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16). This means that (1) biblical prophecy is inspired by God and important to learn and (2) biblical prophecy is useful to develop us into a fruitful servant of Christ.
- c. We are specifically called to comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18) with biblical teaching of the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). This is hard to apply if you do not actually believe that the dead in Christ will be resurrected and those who are alive on the earth will be caught up together with the dead in Christ to meet the Lord in the air.

7. Main reasons to believe in Premillennialism

Given that the doctrine of eschatology is important, why is Reformed theology wrong? The alternative is Premillennialism, which teaches that there will be a future, literal, coming of Jesus Christ to rule on earth for a 1,000-year period of time. Thus the millennial (1,000 year) kingdom is preceded by the second coming of Christ. The main reasons to believe this doctrinal perspective include:

- a. The literal understanding of the Bible leads to a premillennial viewpoint. There is no justifiable reason to conclude that the descriptions of future things in the Bible are symbolic. Before we conclude something is symbolic there must be an indicator in the text to direct us to such an understanding. There is nothing that directs to anything other than Premillennialism.
- b. Without Premillennialism there is no consistency in the understanding biblical prophecy. The Old Testament prophecy regarding the first coming of Christ was fulfilled literally, so the New Testament prophecies of the second coming of Christ will be also.

c. The symbolic interpretation of prophecy is hopelessly subjective in regard to what the alleged symbols refer to. The interpretations are so diverse that most Reformed teachers refrain from even attempting to explain the specific meaning of the text of Revelation. When a symbolic understanding of a Bible text is appropriate, there is some corresponding clarity of the referent. Either a symbol is used for clarification or to illustrate a truth by absurdity (cf. Matthew 5:29).

d. Not only does Revelation 20 speak specifically of a 1,000-year reign of Christ on the earth, but it does so *six* different times between Revelation 20:2-7. It is highly unlikely that an author would use a symbol with such repetitiveness.

e. In the description of the 1,000-year reign there is a chronological aspect taught. The duration of the binding of Satan is for 1,000 years and his release is after the 1,000 years. This is indicative of a real period of time rather than a figurative period of time.

f. The idea of our reigning with Christ for the entire 1,000 year period of time after our resurrection (Revelation 20:4) is difficult to understand with any view other than Premillennialism. Other views have people being regenerated throughout the millennial and not resurrected until eternity. Only under Premillennialism does Revelation 20:4 make any sense.

g. Only Premillennialism allows the promises of Abraham to be fulfilled. The unilateral and unconditional promise of “to your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18, cf. Genesis 13:15; 17:8). This is also true of the promise of the everlasting throne of David (1 Samuel 7:12-16). Other views of the millennium see the promise of land to Abraham to be fulfilled figuratively in the church.

h. In fact, all the references in the Old Testament, much of them in the major and minor prophets, are rendered meaninglessly figurative. Most of the prophets include a section regarding the millennial kingdom with a literal description in their writing.

8. Conclusion

As we have seen with other areas of Reformed doctrine, the tendency to value a theological system over the plain teaching of the biblical text is at the core of this eschatological error. When the literal approach to reading the Bible is not applied, bad doctrine results. If the straight-forward reading of the biblical text is set aside because it does not fit a preconceived theological system, the Bible is diminished.