

Reformed Amillennialism – An Introduction

by

Prof. David J. Engelsma

Response to the editorial, “Jewish Dreams” (the *Standard Bearer*, Jan. 15, 1995), has made clear how deep and entrenched are the inroads of postmillennialism into Reformed circles. The editorial, written at the beginning of a new year, reminded Reformed Christians that our only hope, according to the Bible, is the second coming of the Lord Jesus. It sketched in broad outline the traditional, creedal Reformed conception of the last days: abounding lawlessness; widespread apostasy; the Antichrist; and great tribulation for the true church. It gave a warning against the false hope that is known as postmillennialism, quoting a Reformed creed that condemned “Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment.”

Against this Reformed doctrine of the end-time with its condemnation of postmillennialism have come vehement objections. The objections arise from conservative Reformed and Presbyterian men and churches.

One objector asked for a defense of amillennialism from Scripture. He also confidently asserted that the number of Reformed amillennialists is steadily decreasing, suggesting that the reason for this is the irrefutable arguments of the postmillennialists.

It is true that the postmillennialists are very vocal and aggressive in promoting their theory of the last days. Nor is this true only of those associated with the movement known as “Christian Reconstruction.” Also the men of the influential Banner of Truth publishing group vigorously and incessantly push postmillennialism, usually in connection with their expectation of a coming great revival of Christianity.

It is also true that there is little or no defense of amillennialism in the Reformed press. Exposure and condemnation of postmillennialism as false and dangerous doctrine are unheard of.

Reformed and Presbyterian churches and office-bearers have apparently decided to tolerate postmillennialism. This is tacit sanctioning of the error. Postmillennialism is, at the very least, a legitimate option for Reformed Christians. It is, therefore, no wonder that these churches and ministers are

unable to respond to the sharp attack on amillennialism by the postmillennialists. Much less can they take the offensive against the error.

Postmillennialism wins by default.

Error carries the day because truth is kept from the field.

The notion of some amillennialists that amillennialism and postmillennialism are two valid options for Reformed Christians and that the silence of the amillennialists will result in amillennialism and postmillennialism dwelling together in blest accord is silly.

The aggressive postmillennialists know better than this and intend, in fact, to wipe amillennialism out, root and branch. They have given the Reformed amillennialists fair warning. Gary North has written:

There are three main rival views of evangelical eschatology – four, considering dispensationalism. Either all are in error, or all but one is. It is always the task of Trinitarian theologians to discover what is biblically correct. When a theologian has concluded that a particular view is correct, he should seek to make his discovery a test of orthodoxy – if not in his own era, if that is premature, then someday. The goal of the Church should always be an increase in confessional precision. A large part of the Church's confession deals with eschatology. Orthodoxy means *straight speaking*. One cannot speak straight with a four-way tongue.

It is time to stop believing in theological pluralism as anything more than a temporary stopgap. It is time to reject the idea of the equal ultimacy of incompatible theological positions. Premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism are theologically incompatible. God cannot be pleased with all three. At least two of them should be discarded as heretical, if not today, then before Christ comes in final judgment.

I contend that two of them will be. This is another implication of postmillennialism: the Church will eventually identify other eschatologies as wrong. Amillennialists and premillennialists believe that such eschatological precision and confidence will never come to the Church in history; therefore, they are formally defenders of eschatological liberty (at least in Presbyterian circles) even though they

cannot stand postmillennialism. They believe that today's eschatological confusion is a permanent condition: the equal judicial ultimacy of all three. We postmillennialists do not agree. We do not hold eschatologies in dialectical ... tension ("Eschatology and Social Theory," *Christianity & Society* 4, no. 2, April 1994:11).

The delightful Dr. North is wrong on two counts. Protestant Reformed amillennialists do believe that eschatological precision and confidence will come to the Church in history. In fact, they believe that this precision has already come to the church in history. It has come to the church as represented by the Protestant Reformed Churches. It is the confession of amillennialism with its corresponding repudiation of premillennialism and postmillennialism as false doctrines. And this, of course, indicates Dr. North's second mistake.

The quotation does serve to show that postmillennialism is not content peacefully to coexist with amillennialism, contrary to the thinking of the Reformed amillennialists who refuse to speak out in defense of amillennialism.

In this and a few subsequent editorials, I like to do my small part in defending and promoting the biblical doctrine of the last days, namely, Reformed amillennialism. This will necessarily involve demonstrating that postmillennialism is a false doctrine, as well as a vain and dangerous hope.

Let us have the positions clearly in our mind.

Both are teachings about the last days. Both instruct the church as to what she can expect in the future before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

They differ radically.

Reformed amillennialism teaches the church, that is, us who believe and our children, to expect increasing lawlessness in the world, apostasy from the truth in the churches, the establishment of the kingdom of Antichrist over the entire world, and great tribulation for all those who fear God and keep His commandments. To such a world, thus fully developed in sin, will Christ return.

Postmillennialism in Reformed and Presbyterian circles holds out quite a different prospect. Gradually, the gospel will convert the majority of the world's inhabitants. True Christians will possess political power in every

nation, controlling all aspects of the life of the nation so that there will be a genuinely Christian culture. This will be the “Christianizing,” as they put it, of the world. The human race will obey the law of God, at least outwardly (for many will remain unconverted). There will be earthly peace worldwide. The result will be unprecedented material prosperity. Poverty will disappear. Disease will be checked. Crime will be virtually non-existent.

Coming is a “golden age.” It will last at least for a thousand years, perhaps a hundred thousand years.

Christ will get an earthly victory in history.

This earthly victory will be the “Messianic kingdom” in its full splendor.

At this point, the postmillennialists differ among themselves.

Some have Jesus returning to the grand earthly kingdom. Others, looking hard at the disconcerting testimony of Revelation 20:7ff., that at the very end Satan will unleash an all-out assault on the church, predict that the peaceable earthly kingdom of Christ will suffer revolution at the end from the ungodly who were only submitting outwardly.

In either case, the second coming of Christ will follow hard upon the “golden” millennial age.

Merely to describe the two positions is to squelch the inevitable protest from some, “What difference does it make? Must we argue about such things? Do not both the amillennialists and the postmillennialists believe in Jesus? Cannot we live together in harmony?”

Postmillennialism tells the Reformed saints that apostasy, Antichrist, and persecution are past. It calls them to take power in the world. It assures them of future earthly ease. It leaves the people unprepared for the struggle that lies ahead for the church, the fiercest struggle that the church has ever faced. It renders the people oblivious to the gathering storm at this very moment. The abounding lawlessness in Western society, for example, does not for the postmillennialist herald the “lawless one,” the “man of sin,” of II Thessalonians 2. It is merely the prelude to the collapse of ungodly society so that the saints can take control.

I heard R. J. Rushdoony for the first time, early in my ministry, in the late 1960s as I recall, in Ft. Collins, Colorado. He described in graphic detail an impending collapse of civilization. His advice to Christians in view of this

disaster? “Save your gold and silver.” This will empower the saints to reconstruct society. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. The thought of possessing any silver and gold was hilarious. The idea that a Reformed minister would strengthen Christians for their struggle in the last days by financial advice was sad.

In Ezekiel 33, the Lord instructs the watchman to signal the approach of the enemy against His people, warning that the watchman who fails to blow the trumpet of alarm shall be guilty of the blood of the people.

Reformed amillennialism sees the enemy of the church approaching. It sees this in light of the Word of God, Holy Scripture. It is giving the warning. No opposition from dreamers of coming earthly peace will stop its trumpet.

As for those who refuse to heed the warning, their blood will be upon their own heads.

This article appears on [GraceOnlineLibrary](http://www.graceonline.com).