

Reformed Eschatology (Amillennial) Since the Reformation

Rev. Charles J. Terpstra

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It is probably well known that the Reformation did not develop Christian doctrine in the area of eschatology very strongly. In part this was due to the fact that, in general, the Reformers accepted the long-standing, amillennial eschatology of Augustine set forth c. AD 400. And partly this was due to the fact that the various doctrines that belong to eschatology were not all that controversial at the time of the Reformation. An exception to this was the chiliast error (literal millennialism, i.e., thousand-year reign of Christ on earth) that arose again in the church, this time in the Anabaptist camp. The Reformers rejected this, as had Augustine twelve centuries earlier and the church consistently thereafter. Perhaps another controversial area was the Reformers' view of the Antichrist, whom most believed to be the Roman Catholic papacy.

This is not to say, however, that the Reformers did not have a firm, orthodox belief of the last things. They certainly did, as other articles in this special issue demonstrate. In simple, straightforward fashion they followed the teaching of Scripture concerning the hope of the church. They understood this present age to be the so-called millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 and the last before the return of Christ. They believed the end of this age would be marked by increasing wickedness in the world and apostasy in the church, culminating in the rise of the antichrist. They held to the personal, visible, glorious coming (only one!) of Christ when all things were full according to God's counsel. They embraced the truth of the bodily resurrection of all the dead, the final, public judgment, and the re-creation of the heavens and the earth by Christ upon His return. And they believed the everlasting states of the righteous and wicked - unending bliss with God in the new creation for the former, and unending torment in hell for the latter. The Reformation doctrine of the last things may be seen (and read), for example, in the brief but beautiful thirty-seventh article of the *Belgic Confession*.

Yet what we are saying here is that the Reformers did not develop the doctrines of eschatology, at least not very far. Witness the fact that neither

Luther nor Calvin produced a commentary on the book of Revelation. They basically repeated what the church had held for over a thousand years. We may also say concerning this that it was not God's purpose that they should develop doctrine in this area. His purpose with them was otherwise, namely, to return the church to the heart of the gospel - the doctrines of sovereign grace - and to reform her organizationally and liturgically according to the Scriptures. In God's wisdom it would fall to the church in future generations to develop the truths of eschatology. This is indeed what has happened. And, we believe, this development is still continuing.

Our intention in this article is to point out this subsequent development of Reformed eschatology. Our focus is on development of the *amillennial* view, because this is the position which this writer and the PRC hold, believing it to be the truth of God's Word.

Having said this, one can hear some of our readers snickering at the writer's apparent ignorance of developments in the area of eschatology. "Developments in amillennialism?! Hardly," many would say. "Amillennialism is dead and buried! The progress in the doctrine of the last things has been in the premillennial and postmillennial camps," they would argue. And there is no question that these teachings have dominated the modern church-doctrinal scene. Yet it is our contention that these views are departures from the classic Reformed-biblical position, and that in spite of all the attention paid to these views amillennialism has not only quietly survived but also powerfully thrived. Amillennialism is alive and well! It simply has not received the attention which it deserves. Amillennial teaching has made progress precisely because it has had to contend with premillennialism and postmillennialism. And though it has for that reason had to be negative in much of its presentation, yet amillennialism has developed positively too.

Perhaps a brief listing of prominent amillennialists in the last century will help us to appreciate this fact. After all, the "pre's" and "post's" are not the only ones with whom we amillennialists should be familiar. For every "Darby" and "Scofield" in premillennialism, for every "Warfield" and "Kik" in postmillennialism, there is an amillennialist to answer. We mention a select few here, along with their writings where pertinent. Among the Dutch Reformed there are Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920); Herman Bavinck (1854-1921; *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, 1996. This is part

of an English translation of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1895-1901); Albertus Pieters (*The Lamb, The Woman, and the Dragon*, 1937); Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology*, 1941); William Hendriksen (*More Than Conquerors*, 1939; *The Bible on the Life Hereafter*, 1959); Herman Hoeksema (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1966; *Behold He Cometh*, 1969); Anthony Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future*, 1979). Among Presbyterians we may note Robert L. Dabney (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 1878), Geerhardus Vos (*Pauline Eschatology*, 1930), William C. Robinson (*Christ the Hope of Glory*, 1945), George Murray (*Millennial Studies, A Search for Truth*, 1948), Jay Adams (*The Time Is At Hand*, 1966), and William E. Cox (*Amillennialism Today*, 1966). While there are variations in the details of the amillennial position set forth by these men, all held to and advanced the basics of the historic amillennial position of the church.

But to move on, we ought to note in what areas amillennial teaching has developed since the Reformation. What are some of the distinctive elements of Reformed eschatology? In the first place, we may mention its emphasis on the *sovereignty* of God. Being one of the cardinal tenets of Reformed theology, God's absolute sovereignty has also been an inseparable part of her doctrine of the last things. The doctrine is applied to eschatology in several ways. For one thing, the sovereignty of God is applied to the very idea of the end of all things. Reformed amillennialism teaches that if all things have their beginning in God (and they do, for He is the sovereign Creator of all things!), then they also have their end in Him. God is the Source of all things and He is the Goal of all things. This means that all things, including the end of the world, have their meaning and purpose in God. From this comes the idea of the consummation of all things, that God is leading all things to a "wrapping up," a "bringing together," indeed to a climax of His sovereign purpose, which is His own glory through the full redemption (glorification) of His elect church and the renewal of His entire creation in Jesus Christ. Thus, Reformed eschatology ties the end of all things to the sovereign, eternal counsel of God (predestination) and to His almighty providence in time and history. H. Hoeksema writes, for example, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*:

...The consummation of all things presupposes a willing and decreeing God, Who is before all things, and Who made all things according to His own counsel unto a definite end and purpose, and Who by that counsel controls and guides all things unto the end He has in mind.

Without the presupposition of this counsel of a personal God the world can have no purpose and no destination unto which it was called into being. And without an all-ruling providence, according to which God controls all things according to His good pleasure, there cannot possibly be any definite line or stability in the development of all things, and there is no guarantee that they will attain to the purpose unto which they were called into being (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966, p. 737).

Reformed eschatology also stresses the sovereignty of God in connection with the powers of darkness that rise up against the Lord and seek to frustrate His purpose with all things, especially in the end. Rejecting the dualism taught by paganism and by much of the church-world, the Reformed faith holds that God is absolutely sovereign also over all the evil in the world. He is Lord of Satan and his hosts, Lord of the ungodly nations and peoples, Lord of all sin and darkness, Lord of Antichrist and all his forces. Being Lord over them, He uses them for the accomplishing of His own purpose. All the rantings and ragings of the beast against God and His people only serve to fulfill His will. It is right here that Reformed eschatology provides the believer with great comfort and peace as he lives in these last days. Nothing and no one can possibly overthrow his God and thwart His purposes! His cause is and will be triumphant! And, therefore, every elect child of God will reach the goal of his salvation.

In the second place, we may mention that Reformed eschatology is *covenantal* in focus. Covenant theology has always been an important part of the Reformed faith. So too the doctrine of the covenant has been brought to bear upon the doctrine of the last things in Reformed amillennialism. The eternal purpose of God concerning all things is viewed in connection with God's eternal covenant of grace with His people in Christ, a covenant that embraces all of creation too. Christ, the Head of the church and creation and the Mediator of the covenant, is at the center of God's eternal purpose with all things. All that God has done in the past, is doing in the world now, and will do yet in the future is for the realizing of His covenant plan in Christ. The end (goal) to which all things are leading is the realization of God's gracious covenant of redemption in Christ. When the end comes in the return of Christ, God's covenant will be complete.

It was especially H. Hoeksema who developed this covenantal eschatology. While other Reformed theologians before him certainly applied the doctrine of the covenant to eschatology (H. Bavinck is a case in point), Hoeksema wove it throughout the whole of theology and thus made it the warp and woof of eschatology as well. He did so in connection with his biblical development of the idea of the covenant itself, that it is in its essence the bond of living friendship and fellowship with His people in Christ. This truth he applied to the doctrine of the last things, so that, for example, when he wrote on Revelation 21:1-4, he said,

Heaven and earth, therefore, shall be united in Christ. The New Jerusalem shall have its abode on earth, yet it shall inhabit all creation. And the whole creation shall be heavenly, made like unto the risen Lord. In that new creation all things shall be perfectly adapted to serve the resurrected and glorified church in Christ, in order that we may serve our God and enjoy the fellowship of His covenant forever and ever (*Behold He Cometh*, p. 677).

Such a covenantal emphasis reveals the unity of God's purposes throughout the ages and casts a warm, relational light on the doctrine of the last things. What bliss beyond compare the church looks forward to according to the purposes of her faithful, covenant Father!

A third distinctive element of Reformed eschatology is its sober, balanced *interpretation of prophecy*. A proper hermeneutic of both Old Testament and New Testament prophecy is essential to and characteristic of Reformed amillennialism. It takes a careful, comprehensive approach to understanding the prophetic words of Scripture, avoiding the crass literalism and false dispensationalism of premillennialism on the one hand, and the inconsistent interpretation of postmillennialism on the other hand. Over against these, amillennialism has recognized the unique features of biblical prophecy, that it has elements which are to be taken literally, historically, symbolically, and spiritually. It has also maintained, developed, and applied two important Reformation principles:

- (1) that the Scriptures present a unified revelation of God; and
- (2) that Scripture interprets Scripture.

In harmony with these principles, Reformed amillennialism stresses that Old Testament prophecy must be understood in the light of the New Testament,

and New Testament prophecy in the light of the whole of Scripture. This applies, for example, to those Old Testament prophecies which were spoken to Old Testament Israel as a nation and seem to promise her yet future, earthly blessings, but which, when interpreted in harmony with the New Testament Scriptures, are seen to be fulfilled in the church and in her future glorification in the new heavens and earth at the second coming of Christ.

H. Bavinck does a masterful job of laying out this proper Reformed hermeneutic in chapters four and five of his book *The Last Things*, especially in opposition to the chiliast interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. We give here a brief example of the Reformed interpretive approach in Bavinck's words:

The New Testament views itself ... as the spiritual and therefore complete and authentic fulfillment of the Old Testament. The spiritualization of the Old Testament, rightly understood, is not an invention of Christian theology but has its beginning in the New Testament itself. The Old Testament in spiritualized form, that is, the Old Testament stripped of its temporal and sensuous form, is the New Testament.

... All Old Testament concepts shed their external, national-Israelitish meanings and become manifest in their spiritual and eternal sense (in the New Testament, CJT).

... Therefore the New Testament is not an intermezzo or interlude, neither a detour nor a departure from the line of the Old Covenant, but the long-aimed-for goal, the direct continuation and the genuine fulfillment, of the Old Testament (Baker, 1996, pp. 96-98).

These, then, are a few of the distinctive features of Reformed amillennialism as it has developed since the Reformation. May the Lord be pleased to spread the knowledge of the true hope of the saints far and wide!

This article appears on [The Mountain Retreat](#).