

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 11

ANALYZING POSTMILLENNIALISM

We won't spend too much time on analyzing postmillennial theology because surprisingly the hermeneutics that lead to postmillennial conclusions are the same hermeneutics that amillennial theologians use. The only difference is in their conclusion. Amillennialists examine the same results and claim the world will revolt against God before the Second Coming. They are pessimists according to postmillennialists who consider themselves to be optimists. They believe it is the church's duty to make the world more and more righteous until nearly the whole world is Christian and then the Second Coming takes place.

What is postmillennialism? In this theological system, the thinking is that the church is going to make the world more and more Christian and once it is largely converted, the Lord will return. "[P]ostmillennialists teach that the millennial age is the entire period of time between Christ's first and second advents, while others teach that it is the last one thousand years of the present age. According to postmillennialism, in the present age the Holy Spirit will draw unprecedented multitudes to Christ through the faithful preaching of the gospel. Among the multitudes who will be converted are the ethnic Israelites who have thus far rejected the Messiah. At the end of the present age, Christ will return, there will be a general resurrection of the just and the unjust, and the final judgment will take place." [Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*, p. 10].

Lorraine Boettner explained the system in detail.

We have defined Postmillennialism as that view of the last things which holds that the Kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized, and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the 'Millennium.' It should be added that on postmillennial principles the second coming of Christ will be followed immediately by the general resurrection, the general judgment, and the introduction of heaven and hell in their fullness.

The Millennium to which the Postmillennialist looks forward is thus a golden age of spiritual prosperity during this present dispensation, that is, during the Church age, and is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand years. The changed character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political, and cultural life of mankind. The world at large will then enjoy a state of righteousness such as at the present time has seen only in relatively small and isolated groups, as for example in some family circles, some local church groups and kindred organizations.

This does not mean that there ever will be a time on this earth when every person will be a Christian, or that all sin will be abolished. But it does mean that evil in all its

many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world.

Postmillennialism further holds that the universal proclamation of the Gospel and the ultimate conversion of the large majority of men in all nations during the present dispensation was the express command and meaning and promise of the Great Commission given by Christ Himself [here he quotes Matthew 28:18-20].

We believe that the Great Commission includes not merely the formal and external announcement of the Gospel preached as a 'witness' to the nations, as the Premillennialists and Amillennialists hold, but the true and effectual evangelization of all the nations so that the hearts and lives of the people are transformed by it. That seems quite clear from the fact that *all authority* in heaven and on earth and an endless sweep of conquest has been given to Christ and through Him to His disciples specifically for that purpose. The disciples were commanded not merely to preach, but *to make disciples of all the nations*. It was no doubtful experiment to which they were called, but to a sure triumph. The preaching of the Gospel under the direction of the Holy Spirit and during this dispensation is, therefore, the all-sufficient means for the accomplishment of that purpose." [Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium*, pp. 14-15].

"[T]he primary tenet of Postmillennialism as generally understood is that the coming of Christ is to follow a golden age of righteousness and peace." [Boettner, p. 21]. That means that only in hindsight will anyone be able to know the Millennium has come and gone because it ends at the Second Coming. Some of them believe it may take thousands and thousands of years to arrive at the final one thousand years because it will be a long slow process to convert the world as history has shown thus far.

Postmillennial eschatology was very popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The slaughter that characterized World War I put an end to a lot of postmillennial fervor and World War II and the world situation since then with the annihilation of millions of people in Europe, Africa, Russia, and Asia at the hands of various dictators and totalitarian regimes caused many to abandon it. Islam is continuing that trend today.

Mathison has an entirely optimistic response to this. "My response to questions like these is, how can you read the Bible and say that the gospel is *not* going to prevail? Since when did the newspaper become our authority for doctrine? ... God has promised the church that the gates of hell will not prevail against her, that all the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord, and that all the families of the nations will worship before Him. Shall we, like Sarah, laugh at the apparently unrealistic nature of the promise? Or shall we, like Abraham, believe the promise of God? Throughout biblical history, God has promised the seemingly impossible. In response, some have placed their trust in what their eyes could see. 'We have to be realistic,' they have said. But others, despite the seeming impossibility of fulfillment, have believed the promises of God. ... God has, in fact, promised that the gospel of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, will prevail over the families and nations of the earth. Once the nature and content of that promise are made clear, we must respond by believing what God has said. Today's newspaper is then no longer an excuse for anxiety or apathy." [Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*, p. xi-xii].

All of this theology is based on the presuppositions that the church has replaced Israel because there is only one family of God and there is no literal Millennial, Messianic Kingdom with Christ ruling from the Davidic throne in Jerusalem for 1,000 literal years. By the time of the end, the Jews will be completely converted to Christianity. They also misinterpret many Scriptures to order to support their theology.

For example, Isaiah 42, a Messianic Servant Scripture, is used to claim that “Jesus [is] the new Israel of God ... Jesus is God's anointed servant, the true Israel who will fulfill the role originally assigned to ethnic Israel by being the mediator of God's covenant blessings to the world.” [Mathison, p. 105].

Like almost all nondispensationalists, they confuse the Lord's offer of the Kingdom to Israel with the establishment of the Kingdom at His First Advent. Thus, the church is here now and it represents the Kingdom on earth now. In so doing they completely misunderstand the purpose of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in terms of the Kingdom program and they interpret the Gospels as though they were written about the church.

They use Matthew 16:18 to claim that the church must triumph over the world.

Matthew 16:17–20 ¹⁷And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. ¹⁹“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.

Postmillennialists believe this Scripture is making the claim that the church will be victorious over the forces of Satan. They also base this on the fact that the Old Testament proclaims Kingdom victory. They believe it is the church's responsibility to build the Kingdom. Finally, they use this to say the kingdom of heaven and the church are the same entity. None of these assertions are true.

They think “Christ's promise of victory to the church is nothing new. As we have seen, this is a common thread that runs throughout the Old Testament.” [Mathison, p. 109-110]. Replacement Theology is obviously the basis for claiming that victory for the church is taught in the Old Testament; the Old Testament says no such thing. Further, is Christ actually making the promise that the church will overcome Hades? He is not! He is promising that Hades will not overcome the church. Those are two different issues. It is one thing to say that Hades will not overcome the church but it is quite another thing to say that the church will vanquish Hades. The King is the One who will conquer death, hell, and the grave not the church. It is Christ Jesus who will fight the final battles and secure the experiential victory that He won positionally on the cross. The defeat of Satan, death, hell, and the grave are all the work of God and not the church. Certainly, to some extent we are participating in the battle, but the work of securing the victory is totally the Lord's work.

Revelation 19:21, 20:9, 14 ²¹And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh. ... ⁹And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ... ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Postmillennialists believe it is the job of believers to build the church. In a sense, this is also true. But it is only as the Lord works through us that the church is built. It is noteworthy that Jesus said, "I will build my church." It is equally noteworthy that He did not tell the disciples, "I am going away and you will build my church." As we do the things that result in the building of the church, it is the Triune God who is working through us to build on the foundation that is Christ Jesus. When we preach the gospel, we are presenting the information, but it is God who is doing the work of regeneration that places people into the church, the body of Christ, when they believe. It is also significant that Jesus said building His church would be a future endeavor; the church was not in the Old Testament. The point is, this Scripture is not placing onto the church the responsibility for converting the entire world to Christ before His Second Advent. Christ will work through us to build His church to the extent He desires it to be built in this age. We are to concern ourselves with carrying out our assigned duties and, as we do that, He will take care of building His church.

Boettner represents the typical Postmillennial thinking on this issue as it concerns the responsibility of the church to convert the world. "We must acknowledge that the Church during the past nineteen centuries has been extremely negligent in her duty, and that the crying need for our time is for her to take seriously the task assigned to her. Instead of discussions of social and economic and political problems, book reviews and entertaining platitudes from the pulpit the need is for sermons with real Gospel content, designed to change lives and to save souls. ... Christ commanded the evangelization of the world. That is our task. Surely He will not, and in fact cannot, come back and say to His Church, 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' until that task has been accomplished." [Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium*, p. 15]. Boettner is saying here that Christ is not coming back until the Church evangelizes the world. That is the postmillennial doctrine.

They use the Great Commission to justify the doctrine that the church is responsible for converting the nations of the world to Christianity.

Matthew 28:18–20 ¹⁸And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

This is not a command that includes making entire nations completely Christian. It is a command to go into all the nations of the world and make disciples of all who believe among the people of those nations. The thrust of this command concerns discipleship and not evangelism.

Mathison interprets the Great Commission as “a pronouncement of the instrumental means by which Christ will fulfill all of the great covenant promises of the Old Testament. The Son of Man is exalted to the right hand of God and is given all authority and dominion and a kingdom that will extend over the earth. All of His power and authority is put behind the command to disciple the nations, thereby bringing the covenant blessing to all families of the earth. Israel was given the responsibility of being the mediator of God’s blessing to all nations in the Old Testament, but she failed. Christ has now been given this same responsibility, which He delegates to His people, the church. With the power and authority of Christ the King behind the command, and with the outcome resting in His hands, ultimate failure is not possible.” [Mathison, p. 116].

What covenant promises of the Old Testament are postmillennialists talking about? Are they talking about the theological covenants they have invented, works and grace, or are they talking about the biblical Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New Covenants God made with Israel? They do claim parts of the biblical covenants but they apply them only to the church and they cut Israel out of them completely. Accordingly, they will claim the blessing part of the Abrahamic Covenant and they will claim the seed part of it as it applies to David, but they cut the promises to Israel out of it. The Land Covenant God made with Israel is denied. The Davidic and the New Covenants belong to the church and not to Israel.

Notice the Replacement Theology doctrine that is the presuppositional beginning for postmillennial theology. They believe the Kingdom predicted in the Old Testament is, in fact, present right now and Christ is ruling over it from heaven. They do not recognize Israel’s land promises. They do not recognize a literal on earth Kingdom with Christ ruling from the Davidic throne in Jerusalem. It is noteworthy that Mathison never said Christ is ruling from the Davidic throne but rather from the right hand of God in heaven.

When Christ promised Peter the keys of the Kingdom, He was referring to the Millennial Kingdom. Postmillennialists have to force the kingdom of heaven to which Jesus referred into this dispensation because they don’t believe the Millennial Kingdom will be a literal, definable 1,000 year period after the Second Coming.

Because postmillennial theologians believe the end of the age will be characterized by a golden age of righteousness, they consider the Tribulation to be the time in Israel’s history that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD. [Mathison, p. 113]. That is a preterist concept and they share that with amillennialists. As a result, they completely misunderstand the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25.

Postmillennialism is driven by theology rather than by biblical exegesis. Mathison I think unwittingly admits as much. "This small volume is written by one who stands unashamedly within the Reformed tradition. This means that the great confessions and creeds of the Reformed churches are the framework and boundaries within which this work stands. It is the conviction of this author that the Westminster Confession of Faith is an accurate and faithful summary of the teaching of Scripture. ... Foundational for this book, providing the vantage point from which we shall proceed, are the Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine, as interpreted by the ecumenical creeds and the Reformed faith." [Mathison, p. 8]. In other words, he is admitting to using a Reformed theological hermeneutic to exegete the Scriptures. On the one hand, he claims to be using the Bible as his sole authority, but on the other he admits the presupposition he uses to exegete the Scriptures is Reformed theology. These theologians really believe they start with the Bible because they have convinced themselves that's how they do exegesis; but they have to admit they really start with their theology and that determines their exegesis.

Postmillennial theology uses the New Testament to reinterpret the Old Testament which is also a product of the Replacement Theology mindset. He claims that the literal hermeneutics of dispensational theology are basically a misunderstanding of the hermeneutical process. "The problem is that dispensationalists, when interpreting prophecy, rarely take into consideration the broader context of Scripture. But Christians simply cannot ignore the New Testament when interpreting the Old." [Mathison, p. 199]. What Mathison really means here is that we don't understand hermeneutics. In his mind, to properly understand the Bible, the New Testament must be used to reinterpret the Old Testament. It is disingenuous to suggest that dispensationalists just don't understand the Bible from beginning to end. Mathison could not be more wrong. The difference is dispensationalists allow God to present His program and we accept it as He presented it. Reformed theology changes God's program to match their theology and that's why they resort to exegetical tricks such as replacing Israel with the church and thereby being forced to reinterpret the Old Testament with the New Testament.

Mathison approvingly quotes a man named Joseph Braswell who extolls what he calls "New-Covenantal interpretation." The obvious presupposition for this theology is that the church is the true recipient of the New Covenant which was specifically made with Israel and with Judah. This man condemns literal hermeneutics because his theology is born of Replacement Theology and it is only by virtue of theological hermeneutics that Replacement Theology can be sustained. "Literalism cannot be given a criteriological status as the way we are to interpret texts. We must rather pay attention to the way the NT treats the OT texts, learning our paradigms of interpretation from canonical examples of New-Covenantal interpretation. We must read the OT bearing in mind that what God promised to the patriarchs God has fulfilled in his raising up Jesus and that all the promises of God are affirmed as fulfilled in Christ. We must look at the time inaugurated by the coming of Christ as the last days and time of eschatological fulfillment—the antitypical substance of which the Old Covenant was but the

typological shadow. ... We will understand, for example, that Isaiah 2:2-4 does not refer to fleshly Israel's future glory in a coming millennial age (a judeocentric reading), but to the result of Pentecost. We will not look to *another* New Covenant (to be made in the future with fleshly Israel and Judah) as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, but will take literally what Hebrews tells us, even as we will accept at face value what Peter said at Pentecost regarding the prophecy of Joel 2. We will understand OT eschatological expectation as that which the NT gospel announces as fulfilled. We will not allow an abstract (self-contained, stand-alone) OT theology—an Old-Covenantal theology—to determine the shape of NT theology and Biblical theology as a whole, but we will use NT theology as a key to interpreting the OT and read the OT as part of the whole Biblical theology that is the canonical theology of the New Covenant, seeking to understand how the end was declared from the beginning and how the NT develops OT themes." [Joseph Braswell, "Interpreting Prophecy: The Canonical Principle," *Chalcedon Report*, no. 384 (July 1997), 28, quoted by Mathison, p. 199-200].

Isaiah 2:2-4 ²Now it will come about that In the last days The mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it. ³And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For the law will go forth from Zion And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.

Pentecost has no relationship to this Scripture at all. It is, at this time, still future and has yet to be realized and when it is realized, it will be as a literal Kingdom with Christ reigning in Jerusalem. They have to reinterpret this Scripture in order to maintain their theology. According to postmillennialists, promises to Israel cannot possibly be interpreted the way they are written in the Old Testament covenants because everyone knows the church has replaced Israel in the plan of God.

Jeremiah 31:31 ³¹"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,

According to Braswell, Jeremiah could not possibly have been correct when he was led to write the New Covenant was made with Israel and with Judah. According to postmillennialists, the New Covenant is with the church not with Israel. It is noteworthy that this theologian claims any New Covenant that pertains to Israel and to Judah must be another, future New Covenant that will be made with Jews still in the flesh. He reaches that conclusion because he thinks the New Covenant was not for Israel and for Judah but for the church.

The Old Testament is denigrated as being only types and shadows of the truth presented in the New Testament. Literal hermeneutics are ridiculed as inadequate to understand the Bible from beginning to end. The Old Testament is reinterpreted by the New Testament. The Millennial prophecies of Isaiah do not refer to a literal Kingdom but instead are a type of Pentecost. He calls a literal reading of Isaiah “judeocentric” which is Replacement Theology thought. It is also a not so subtle anti-Semitic denigration of Israel and the Jews. He does not believe that the New Covenant is made with Israel and with Judah. The Kingdom expectations of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ and in the Gospel. The Old Testament must be made to conform to the New Testament according to his theological interpretation of it. Literal hermeneutics cannot be allowed to stand. Literal hermeneutics must not be used; theological hermeneutics must be used because that alone yields the results that affirms the theology. Either the theology must change or the Scriptures must change; they change the Scriptures.

Postmillennial theology readily lends itself to a heresy known as Christian Reconstruction or Dominion Theology. It is also known as theonomy which comes from the Greek words for God, Θεός, and law, νόμος. This system of Dominion Theology may be, in my opinion, properly thought of as postmillennial theology on steroids. Dominion Theology is a system that insists not only will the world become more and more Christian, but they will forcefully make it more and more Christian by imposing the ethical, moral standards of Old Testament Law on society. They divide the Mosaic Law into categories—moral, civil or judicial, and ceremonial—and then strip away the ceremonial aspects of the Law as no longer applicable. The problem is the Law is a cohesive unit and no part of it may be arbitrarily stripped out and discarded as no longer useful.

Thomas Ice was a Christian Reconstruction theologian for twelve years and examined postmillennial theology but failed to find a scriptural basis for it. Once he realized there was no exegetical basis for postmillennial theonomy and that his premillennial dispensationalism not only didn't fit in but wasn't welcome, he left that theology behind. In a letter to Dr. Ice, David Chilton claimed the Bible supported postmillennial eschatology on every page but offered no biblical proof. He wrote, “That's why my book started in Genesis. I wanted to demonstrate that the Paradise Restored theme (i.e., postmillennialism) is not dependent on any one passage, but is taught throughout Scripture. ... The fact is, postmillennialism is on every page of the Bible.” [H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* p. 9].

One Dominion Theology theologian wrote, “The point of Christian reconstructionism that is a main bone of contention in the wider debate today, is not that it teaches the victory of God's kingdom on earth ... but that it teaches the victory of God's kingdom on earth *during and continuous with our present era.*” [Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “The Reduction of Christianity: A Review Article,” *The Council of Chalcedon* (10, no. 2 and 3, April-May 1988), p. 5].

The point to Christian Reconstruction theology is that the church will set up a theocratic government, Christians will evangelize the world, and those things will result in Christ's return to earth. It is a Christian obligation to keep the Mosaic Law and it is the government's responsibility to enforce that Law according to biblical dictates. The church is the new Israel and all that was promised to Israel by God in the Old Testament now belongs to the church. They not only make the mistake of reinterpreting the Old Testament with the New Testament, but they also make the mistake of imposing Old Testament Law onto the New Testament. They insist that Satan and his demons were bound by Christ at His First Advent. They are preterists who believe the Olivet Discourse is only about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The book of Revelation is simply an explanation of the Olivet Discourse. Christ can only return when people submit to the Law because this will usher in the blessings of God. Prosperity, human and agricultural fertility, good weather, peace, and blessed personal lives are all dependent on obedience to God's law.

In general, postmillennial theologians seem to present the idea that they are responsible for making it possible for Christ to return. That is simply not a biblical position to hold. Amillennialism and postmillennialism reach many of the same eschatological conclusions with the exception of the conversion of the world. Their hermeneutics are quite similar concerning the Scriptures they use to support their positions and they use the same Scriptures for that support.

Dennis Waltemeyer
Fredericksburg Bible Church