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Millennial Series - 2

Postmillennialism

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One of the outstanding facts about postmillennialism is that it was, until the present generation, one of the most important and influential millennial theories. It was probably the dominant Protestant eschatology of the nineteenth century and was embraced by Unitarian, Arminian, and Calvinist alike. It influenced as well the prevailing concept of amillennialism during this period. In the twentieth century the course of history, progress in Biblical studies, and the changing attitude of philosophy arrested its progress and brought about its apparent discard by all schools of theology. Postmillennialism is not a current issue in millenarianism, but the principles that brought it into being and resulted in its downfall are highly significant.

While postmillennialism is the most recent of millennial theories, a number of reasons prompt the study of this aspect of millenarianism before other viewpoints. The millennial issue as a whole tends to become complicated and burdened with detail until the principles are often forgotten. The postmillennial view because of its relative simplicity affords a typical study in millennialism which throws significant light on the problems presented by other views. The beginnings, rise, and present decline of postmillennialism afford a test case for millennial doctrine. The Cartesian principle of solving the more simple problems first justifies the present order of consideration.

As previously defined, postmillennialism is the doctrinal belief that Christ will return after (*post*) the millennium and usher in the eternal state with the final judgment of men and angels. It is opposed to premillennialism, which holds that Christ will return before (*pre*) the millennium. Many variations exist within postmillennialism in the concept of the nature of the second advent of Christ and of the nature of the millennium itself. Postmillennialism sometimes almost merges with amillennialism, and yet in other forms is quite distinct. James Snowden, for instance, consistently classifies amillenarians as included in postmillennialism.

THE RISE OF POSTMILLENNIALISM

Postmillennialism not Apostolic. While Daniel Whitby (1638–1725) is commonly given the credit for the rise of postmillennialism as a division of millenarianism, the roots which brought his theory to life extend back to the early centuries of the church. All seem to agree that postmillennialism is quite foreign to the apostolic church. There is no trace of

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anything in the church which could be classified as postmillennialism in the first two or three centuries. The millenarianism of the early church was premillennial, that is, expected the return of Christ before a millennium on earth.

Rise of figurative interpretation. The first notable denial of this premillennial viewpoint was made by Origen (185–253). His allegorical method of interpretation resulted in the destruction of not only the millennial doctrine but most other important aspects of Christian belief including the doctrine of resurrection. Origen, however, was clearly not a postmillenarian, and his contribution is his method of allegorical and figurative interpretation which became later a component of postmillennialism.

Rise of millennial inter-advent theory. The eschatology of Augustine was an important milestone in the history of millennialism. He held that the age between the first and second advents is the millennium of which the Scriptures speak and that the second advent would occur at the end of the millennium. This is definitely a postmillennial viewpoint as it places the second advent *after* the millennium. For various reasons, however, Augustine is better classified as an amillenarian inasmuch as his view amounts to a denial that there will be any literal millennium on earth. His important contribution to postmillennialism is obvious, however, especially as his amillennial views became the dominant belief of both the Roman church and the Reformers.

Failure of Augustinian millennialism. While Augustine was not a postmillenarian in the modern sense of the word, it is highly significant that postmillennialism arose partly from the success and partly from the failure of the Augustinian view. Augustine, with his denial of a millennium after the second advent, succeeded in displacing premillenarianism as the prevailing belief of the church. His most significant contribution, however, lay in the fact that history has proved the details of his system to be wrong and the resulting readjustment made postmillennialism seem plausible. Allis, an ardent Augustinian, sums Augustine's contribution in these words:

"He taught that the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian Church. He held that the binding of Satan took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord (Lk. 10:18), that the first resurrection is the new birth of the believer (Jn. 5:25), and that the millennium must correspond, therefore, to the inter-adventual period or Church age. This involved the interpreting of Rev. 20:1–6 as a 'recapitulation' of the preceding chapters instead of as describing a new age following chronologically on the events set forth in chap. 19. Living in the first half of the first millennium of the Church's history, Augustine naturally took the 1000 years of Rev. 20. literally; and he expected the second advent to take place at the end of that period. But since he somewhat inconsistently identified the millennium with what remained of the sixth chiliad of human history, he

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believed that this period might end about A.D. 650 with a great outburst of evil, the revolt of Gog, which would be followed by the coming of Christ in judgment."¹

As Allis goes on to admit, Augustine's prophecy of the return of Christ at about A.D. 650 did not materialize, nor did the hopeful adjustment of this date to 1000 A.D. by his followers meet with any more success. Obviously there was something wrong with Augustine's interpretation. Even the expedient of the Reformers who held that they were in the "little season" (Rev. 20:3) has now with the passing years become untenable. It was the easiest way out to conclude that Augustine was wrong in dating the binding of Satan with the earthly ministry of Christ (Lk. 10:18). The millennium, then, began sometime during the centuries following. Another view was that the millennium itself was of indefinite duration, not 1000 years. Either interpretation paved the way for postmillennialism with its concept of a millennium at the close of the present age preceded by a time of conflict and trouble. Thus while the theory of Augustine was proved untrue in its main elements, it nevertheless opened the way for both a continued amillennialism and for the rise of postmillennialism.

Joachim of Floris. The first genuine postmillennialist according to Kromminga² was Joachim of Floris, a twelfth century Roman Catholic writer, founder and abbot of the monastery of Giovanni del Fiore (or Floris) in Calabria. His exposition of Revelation is a classic of the period. His view of the millennium is that it begins and continues as a rule of the Holy Spirit.³ He had in view three dispensations, the first from Adam to John the Baptist; the second began with John; and the third with St. Benedict (480–543), founder of his monasteries. The three dispensations were respectively of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit. Joachim predicted that about 1260 the final development would take place and righteousness would triumph.⁴ While Kromminga is probably right in classifying Joachim as a postmillenarian, it is clear that he differs from the modern type, though it is still common to designate the millennium as a reign of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Postmillennialism before 1700. In the interval between Joachim and Daniel Whitby, no doubt others qualified as postmillennial. Berkhof cites a number of Reformed theologians in the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were postmillennial: "Coccejus, Alting, the two Vitringas, d'Outrein, Witsius, Hoornbeek, Koelman, and Brakel" of which the majority expected the millennium to be future.⁶

¹ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 3.

² D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church*, p. 20.

³ Cf. Benz, *Zeitschrift fuer Kirchengeschichte* (1931), p. 86 f., cited by D. H. Kromminga, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁴ Cf. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, VI, 184, s.v. "Joachim of Fiore."

⁵ Cf. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1013, "a period ... under special influence of the Holy Ghost."

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 716.

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Strangely, in his discussion of postmillennialism Berkhof does not so much as mention Daniel Whitby who popularized postmillennialism in the eighteenth century. A. H. Strong, however, makes no apology for being a follower of Whitby, stating, "Our own interpretation of Rev. 20:1–10, was first given, for substance, by Whitby."⁷

Daniel Whitby. Modern postmillennialism is usually considered the child of Daniel Whitby. His major contribution was his reversal of the prevailing amillennial viewpoint of Revelation 20. Augustine, it will be remembered, held that Revelation 20 was a recapitulation of the previous chapters of Revelation. Whitby advanced the idea that Revelation 20 followed chronologically the events of Revelation 19, and that the millennium, while in the inter-advent period, was still future, possibly remotely future. This at once provided a way of escape from the incompatibility of the events of history of his day with millennial prophecies and allowed a more literal interpretation of the glowing promises of a golden age of righteousness and peace on earth to be fulfilled in the future.

Postmillennialism becomes an influential system of theology. It can hardly be said that the view of Whitby was a result of a movement to return to literal interpretation of prophecy. Whitby himself was a Unitarian. His writings particularly as bearing on the Godhead were publicly burned and he was denounced as a heretic. He was a liberal and a freethinker, untrammelled by traditions or previous conceptions of the church. His views on the millennium would probably have never been perpetuated if they had not been so well keyed to the thinking of the times. The rising tide of intellectual freedom, science, and philosophy, coupled with humanism, had enlarged the concept of human progress and painted a bright picture of the future. Whitby's view of a coming golden age for the church was just what people wanted to hear. It fitted the thinking of the times. It is not strange that theologians scrambling for readjustment in a changing world should find in Whitby just the key they needed. It was attractive to all kinds of theology. It provided for the conservative a seemingly more workable principle of interpreting Scripture. After all, the prophets of the Old Testament knew what they were talking about when they predicted an age of peace and righteousness. Man's increasing knowledge of the world and scientific improvements which were coming could fit into this picture. On the other hand, the concept was pleasing to the liberal and skeptic. If they did not believe the prophets, at least they believed that man was now able to improve himself and his environment. They too believed a golden age was ahead.

Two principal types of postmillennialism. Stemming from Whitby these groups provided two types of postmillennialism which have persisted to the twentieth century: (1) a Biblical

⁷ Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 1014.

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type of postmillennialism, finding its material in the Scriptures and its power in God; (2) the evolutionary or liberal theological type which bases its proof on confidence in man to achieve progress through natural means. These two widely separated systems of belief have one thing in common, the idea of ultimate progress and solution of present difficulties. Postmillennialism in itself does not have the principle or method to attain a system of theology, yet its principal elements constitute a distinct branch of theology. The influence and contribution of postmillennialism to theology is at least worthy of consideration.

POSTMILLENNIALISM AS A THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM

The diverse elements which have united in agreement on postmillennialism make it difficult to make fair general statements of the position of postmillennialism. Included in postmillennialism are Unitarians who deny the deity of Christ and inspiration of Scripture as well as Calvinists who affirm both. From the vantage point of the observed history of postmillennialism over several centuries, it is possible, however, to speak in at least general terms of this answer to the millennial question and draw some significant conclusions.

The postmillennial attitude toward the Scriptures. Within the ranks of postmillenarians there are all types of attitudes toward the Scriptures. Charles Hodge, an ardent postmillennialist, without doubt accepted the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God. On the other hand Walter Rauschenbusch and Shirley Jackson Case, who are classified by some as postmillennialists, felt free to deal with the Scriptures with a light hand. A basic fault of postmillennialism is its method of interpretation of Scripture rather than its doctrine of inspiration. In order to find fulfillment of millennial promises in the present age it is necessary for them to follow an allegorical or figurative system of interpretation in great areas of Biblical prophecy. This method has historically subverted not only prophecy but every important doctrine. Without question the real issue in the millennial controversy is right here. Practically all scholars agree that a strictly literal interpretation of prophecy leads to the premillennial concept of the millennium, while if the figurative method be employed, Scripture may be interpreted in favor of other views. Postmillennialists quite frankly accept the figurative method as necessary to their interpretation.

James H. Snowden in a determined effort to establish postmillennialism as against premillennialism nevertheless writes: "It is true that many of these prophecies when so applied must be taken poetically and not literally.... It is further true that many of these prophecies are as yet only partially and often only very faintly realized...."⁸ Snowden,

⁸ James H. Snowden, *The Coming of the Lord* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919), pp. 237–38.

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while admitting that premillenarians prevailed in early centuries, traces the introduction of the figurative and allegorical method of interpretation to Origen: "Origen in the first half of the third century was the first to raise an influential voice against the premillenarian view. He interpreted the millennial imagery of the Bible in a figurative sense and thus adopted a principle of interpretation which has been followed ever since, though he also introduced a method of 'allegorizing' Scripture which has long since been discarded."⁹ It should be noted that Snowden admits that the figurative method was new in the third century and was therefore not apostolic or in common use before; that he distinguishes the allegorical and figurative methods of interpretation in an attempt to escape the excesses of Origen; and that he claims that the result of the adoption of this new method was the abandonment of premillenarianism. Snowden presents the usual arguments in favor of the figurative method of interpretation: that the Bible is an Oriental book and abounds in figurative language; that literal interpretations are often "absurd"; that all viewpoints find some allegorical passages; that apocalyptic literature is especially symbolic.¹⁰ Without discussing further the relative merits of the figurative method, it is at least clear that postmillennialism necessarily adopts this method of interpreting millennial prophecy—a method which is admittedly not apostolic in its historic origin. Postmillennialism depends upon a system of interpretation which does not find literal fulfillment of the millennial passages. The dangers of this system are well illustrated in the history of the church since Origen its founder and infiltrate the systems of interpretation of both the Roman church and modern liberalism. Making Scripture figurative which should be taken literally subverts its meaning and evades its authority. The result is the denial of the plain intent of the Scriptures.

The postmillennial doctrine of the millennium. Generally speaking, postmillennialism finds the millennium in this present inter-advent period. If millennial prophecy is taken more literally, this is usually pushed to the remote future; if more liberties are taken in explaining millennial Scriptures, the entire present age is considered the millennium, differing from the amillennial concept only in the idea of a growing triumph and final victory before the second advent. James Snowden takes this latter view and finds the kingdom of God in the present age the only earthly millennium which will ever exist.

Snowden's contribution may be divided into two aspects—his concept of the kingdom of God and his interpretation of Revelation 20. Snowden's interpretation of Revelation 20 amounts to an endorsement of the amillennial position. His lengthy chapter on the interpretation of Revelation 20 is principally one of ridicule of the premillennial interpretation. He is quite sure that the premillennialists are wrong. When he faces the

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–39.

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problem of a positive interpretation, he finds it difficult to offer more than two possible interpretations. He frankly is not sure of his interpretation: "We may be sure what a passage of Scripture does not mean, and yet not be sure what it does mean."¹¹ In general he offers two views: (1) that the events mentioned in Revelation 20:4–6 are already past—"The souls whom John saw in the vision are the souls of the martyrs and confessors reappearing in the faithful and brave Christians in the days of the Roman persecution";¹² (2) that the millennium mentioned here is a picture of the souls in heaven—following the amillennial interpretation of Warfield.¹³ According to Allis, this viewpoint originated in Duesterdieck (1859) and Kliefoth (1874).¹⁴ Snowden finds the second viewpoint preferable: "This seems to us to give a clear and practical meaning to this passage."¹⁵ In effect Snowden rules out Revelation 20 as casting any light on the form of the millennium which will eventuate in the earth. Snowden's doctrine of the millennium is reduced to his concept of the kingdom of God in its course in the world before the second advent. If it were not for the evident idea of progress and triumph in the earth of the kingdom of God Snowden would be classified as an amillennialist. His concept of the kingdom of God is definitely postmillennial in its details and deserves a careful study.

The kingdom of God to Snowden is a rule of God in the hearts of believers in Christ. He defines it: "The sense, however, in which it is commonly used is the rule of God in the hearts of obedient souls. It is a general designation for all those in all ages who turn to God in faith and constitute the total society of the redeemed."¹⁶ The present age is the process of growth of this kingdom in human hearts, and the millennium on earth is achieved through the advance of this kingdom of God. He finds that the kingdom is not materialistic, political or of the earth, but it is rather spiritual and within the heart. Snowden's exposition of the spirituality of the kingdom is at once typical and the heart of postmillennialism:

"In the New Testament the material trappings of the kingdom, as prefigured in the Old Testament in forms adapted to the religious development of that day, are stripped off and it appears in its pure spirituality. It is now clearly brought out that the kingdom has its seat in the heart and consists in the rule of God in the soul or in moral and spiritual dispositions and habits. Jesus expressly set forth this inward spiritual nature of the kingdom in contrast with the outward materialistic form of the Jewish expectation of his day: 'And being asked by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God cometh, he answered

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 178–79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁴ Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Snowden, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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them and said, The kingdom cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, There! for lo, the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:20–21). Paul expresses the same truth when he declares that 'the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17). It begins in repentance and faith and goes on to purify and pervade the whole personality in mind and heart, soul and body, character and conduct and life. It sets up the throne of God in the heart, 'casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and brings every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5). The beatitudes of Jesus describe its inner spirit and substance as humility, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity and peacefulness. Paul, describing the same inner kingdom, says 'the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth' (Eph. 5:9), and 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22–23)."¹⁷

Snowden then accommodates other aspects of truth to this central idea of the kingdom of God within the individual. The church is only a means of expression of this kingdom, not the kingdom itself. This accounts for the failures of the church. Snowden labors to justify the paradoxical term "democratic kingdom" in an attempt to link postmillennialism with the political trend toward democracy immediately following the first World War.¹⁸ He finds further that Jesus did not accept the prevailing Jewish opinions of the first century of a literal kingdom on earth: He merely "adopted this mode of expression and accommodated his teaching to it..."¹⁹

In general, therefore, the postmillennial concept of the millennium is a rule of the Spirit of God in the heart, beginning in the past and continuing in the future in ever increasing power. Christ is now on the throne in heaven and will never have an earthly throne. The righteousness and peace of the kingdom refer to the kingdom of God, not the whole earth. The appeal is to the individual to let the Spirit reign in the heart and achieve millennial spiritual blessings as a result.

The postmillennial idea of progress. The postmillennial viewpoint is definitely optimistic in regard to the future, that is, they believe there will be definite progress toward the goal of the triumph of the gospel and the power of God in the world. In this they are opposed to premillenarians who believe that the millennium will be brought about by the sudden return of Christ and the accompanying catastrophic events. The parables of Matthew 13 are interpreted by postmillenarians as presenting the progress of the Gospel and the triumph of the power of God over evil. The mustard seed becomes a great tree, speaking

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

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of the growth of the kingdom of God. The leaven, which postmillennialism regards as the triumph of the Gospel, leavens the whole lump—converts the whole world.

David Brown, a leading nineteenth century postmillenarian promotes this viewpoint: “The *growing* character of the kingdom, taught by the ‘mustard seed,’ and the *penetrating* and *assimilating* character, taught by ‘the leaven,’ go on till ‘the whole (earth) is leavened,’ and all the world have been brought to lodge in the branches of the mighty tree of life.”²⁰ Snowden who agrees with this interpretation quotes Trench with approbation on the same point: “Nor can we consider these words, ‘till the whole is leavened,’ as less than a prophecy of a final complete triumph of the gospel in that it will diffuse itself through all nations, and purify and ennoble all life.”²¹

Snowden goes on to emphasize the character of this development of the kingdom. It is not only progressive but is slow and not without periodic crises. Snowden cites the conclusions of geologists that the age of the earth is 100,000,000 years and quotes Professor Nathanael S. Shaler of Harvard that “man will probably continue for another hundred million years.”²² It is clear that Snowden embraces fully the conclusions of evolutionists regarding progress in the earth, and that with this theory as a guiding light the second advent is projected into the future by 100,000,000 years. Snowden goes on, “This scientific view of the age of the earth is the background against which we must now read and interpret Scripture teaching; and we may expect to find that it will revolutionize our view of Scripture at points, just as had been done by astronomy and geology. For when we come to look at it, we find in the Scriptures clear intimations and indications that the second coming of Christ with the end of the world is yet a long way off.... The world is only in the morning of its day and humanity is only in its infancy. Vast vistas of time stretch out before it in which our world will develop its resources and man will grow into maturity. All our achievements, industry and invention, science and art, education and social progress, liberty and brotherhood, ethics and religion, are only in their bud and will put forth their full bloom and ripened fruit. Even now [1919] world unity is looming up on the horizon and will be achieved to-morrow; and then the path will just be cleared for unified and speeded-up human progress.... We have good grounds, then, for believing that the end of the world, with its attendant events of the second coming of Christ, the general resurrection and the final judgment, is yet a very remote event.”²³ One

²⁰ David Brown, *Christ's Second Coming: Will it be Pre-Millennial?* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), p. 333.

²¹ Cited by Snowden, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²² Snowden, *ibid.*, p. 79. Cf. Nathaniel S. Shaler, *Man and the Earth*, p. 215.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

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wonders whether if Snowden were living today he would care to make the same statement.

The progress of the kingdom is attended, however, by periodic crises. Snowden finds this in accord with nature in which a flower after long growth suddenly bursts into bloom. He finds parallels in Scripture—the crises of the Exodus, the death and resurrection of Christ, Pentecost, the destruction of Jerusalem, the World War. He concludes: “The kingdom of God has followed and will follow this general law of gradual yet catastrophic growth from its first inception in this world to its climax in the final events that will issue in the eternal state.”²⁴

Method of consummating the kingdom. At no point does the premillennial and postmillennial viewpoints clash more abruptly than on the method of consummating the kingdom. The postmillenarian believes that the millennium will be brought on the earth by a long process of preaching of the Gospel with subsequent transformation of society. The kingdom of God reaches its consummation principally by the work of the Holy Spirit, but it includes many other factors. A. A. Hodge, a postmillenarian, writes: “The process by which this kingdom grows through its successive stages towards its ultimate completion can of course be very inadequately understood by us. It implies the ceaseless operation of the mighty power of God working through all the forces and laws of nature and culminating in the supernatural manifestations of grace and of miracle. The Holy Ghost is everywhere present, and he works directly alike in the ways we distinguish as natural and as supernatural—alike through appointed instruments and agencies, and immediately by his direct personal power.”²⁵ Hodge goes on to enumerate the church, civilization, science, political and ecclesiastical societies, Christian missions, Christian workers as means to the end. He finds the kingdom coming: “in all the growing of the seeds and all the blowing of the winds; in every event, even the least significant, which has advanced the interests of the human family...”²⁶ It is clear that postmillennialism as to its method of bringing in the kingdom of God is quite removed from the premillennial doctrine that the kingdom will be consummated by the second advent.

The postmillennial doctrine of the second advent. Not all postmillenarians will agree on the doctrine of the second advent. In general, their viewpoints fall into two classifications. The more Biblical type of postmillennialism conceives of the millennium as a thousand years or extended time yet future in which the Gospel will triumph, at the close of which

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ A. A. Hodge, *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1887), pp. 295–96.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 296–97.

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Christ will return to the earth in a bodily second advent which is a distinct and important event.

Charles Hodge may be taken as representative of this Biblical type of postmillennialism. He sums up his doctrine of the second advent as follows: "The common Church doctrine is, first, that there is to be a second personal, visible, and glorious advent of the Son of God. Secondly, that the events which are to precede that advent, are (1) The universal diffusion of the Gospel; or, as our Lord expresses it, the ingathering of the elect; this is the vocation of the Christian Church. (2) The conversion of the Jews, which is to be national. As their casting away was national, although a remnant was saved; so their conversion may be national, although some may remain obdurate. (3) The coming of Antichrist. Thirdly, that the events which are to attend the second advent are:—(1) The resurrection of the dead, of the just and of the unjust. (2) The general judgment. (3) The end of the world. And, (4) the consummation of Christ's kingdom."²⁷

Hodge goes on to recognize that many other theologians conceive of the coming of Christ as repeated and spiritual rather than bodily.²⁸ Snowden is a representative of this latter school of thought. Snowden finds that Christ "comes" at various critical points in history—in the Old Testament against Babylon and Assyria, to the Ephesian church in the New Testament (Rev. 2:5), to the churches in Sardis and Philadelphia (Rev. 3:3, 11–12).²⁹ Snowden finds the conversion of Constantine, the Reformation, the Civil War in the United States, and the first World War as illustrations of the coming of the Lord. Snowden concludes: "Every act of judgment and justice and every new manifestation of sympathy and service is a coming of God and of Christ."³⁰ He goes on to cite the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as evidence: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." In particular he finds the coming of the Lord in the destruction of Jerusalem which he treats at length, the coming of the Lord in His resurrection, and the coming of the Lord on the day of Pentecost.³¹ In addition to these "comings" of Christ, Snowden speaks of a "final coming of Christ"³² which is at "the end of the world in a remote future."³³ In this final coming of Christ, Snowden places the general resurrection and final judgment, both of which he hastens to qualify as spiritual rather than physical.

²⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), III, 792.

²⁸ Charles Hodge, *ibid.*, pp. 792–800.

²⁹ Snowden, *op. cit.*, pp. 124–28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–140.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

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It is clear from this brief survey of the postmillennial doctrine of the second coming that the “blessed hope” of an imminent return of Christ is entirely lost in the postmillennial viewpoint. While Hodge is literal in his interpretation of Scripture to the point of recognizing the conversion of the Jews, in his view the coming of the Lord is no more imminent than in Snowden’s. Further, the doctrine of the second coming itself is slurred and obscured by including in the doctrine every providential work of God in the history of the world.

Summary of postmillennial theology. The general features of postmillennialism are not difficult to summarize. Postmillennialism is based on the figurative interpretation of prophecy which permits wide freedom in finding the meaning of difficult passages—a latitude which is reflected in the lack of uniformity in postmillennial exegesis. The prophecies of the Old Testament relative to a righteous kingdom on earth are to be fulfilled in the kingdom of God in the interadvent period. The kingdom is spiritual and unseen rather than material and political. The divine power of the kingdom is the Holy Spirit. The throne which Christ is predicted to occupy is the Father’s throne in heaven. The kingdom of God in the world will grow rapidly but with times of crisis. All means are used in advancing the kingdom of God—it is the center of God’s providence. In particular the preaching of the Gospel and spread of Christian principles signal its progress. The coming of the Lord is regarded as a series of events. Any providential dealing of God in the human situation is a coming of the Lord. The final coming of the Lord is climactic and is in the very remote future. There is no hope of the Lord’s return in the foreseeable future, certainly not within this generation. Postmillennialism like amillennialism believes that all the final judgments of men and angels are essentially one event and will occur after a general resurrection of all men and before the eternal state. Postmillennialism is distinguished from premillennialism which regards the millennium as future and after the second advent. Postmillennialism is distinguished from amillennialism by its optimism, assurance of the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God in the world, and its relative fulfillment of the millennial idea on the earth. Theologians like Hodge find rather literal fulfillment, including the conversion and restoration of Israel as a nation. Others like Snowden regard the millennium of which Revelation 20 speaks as referring to heaven.

PRESENT DECLINE OF POSTMILLENNIALISM

The difficulties of the postmillennial system of theology. In general it is fair to say that postmillennialism is not a current issue in theology. While it is not the purpose of this discussion to refute postmillennialism, the system can be analyzed with a view to determining the cause of its collapse in our generation. Of necessity, the discussion will

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be brief on each cause. The important fact is that postmillennialism has declined and its reasons are significant.

The inherent weakness of postmillennialism as a system. As a system of theology based upon a subjective spiritualizing of Scripture, postmillennialism lacks the central principles necessary for coherence. Each postmillennialist is left more or less to his own ingenuity in solving the problem of what to do with prophecies of a millennium on earth. Even a random survey of their interpretations of such a key passage as Revelation 20, as previously discussed, demonstrate this lack of uniformity. The result is that postmillennialism has no unified front to protect itself from the inroads of other interpretations. At best postmillennialism is superimposed upon systems of theology which were developed without its aid. When an interpretation is equally acceptable to the Calvinist, Arminian and Unitarian, it ceases to be a determinative principle.

Trend toward liberalism. During the last century postmillennialism has found it impossible to resist a trend toward liberalism. While premillennialism, for instance, is unchanged in its attitude toward the inspiration and authority of Scripture and all major doctrines, there has been a most noticeable trend toward liberalism in institutions and groups which have embraced postmillennialism. The contrast of Charles Hodge and James Snowden in succeeding generations of postmillennialists is most illuminating. The significant fact is that postmillennialism lends itself to liberalism with only minor adjustments. If millennial prophecies could be spiritualized, why not the doctrine of inspiration, the deity of Christ, the substitutional atonement, the doctrine of resurrection, and the final judgment? The principle of spiritualizing Scripture and avoiding its literal exegesis if applied to prophecy could as well be applied to other fields. In any event, the old conservative, Biblical postmillennialism has long since passed from the contemporary scene.

Failure to fit facts of current history. Probably the immediate cause of the decline of postmillennialism was the events of the first half of the twentieth century involving two great world wars. While Snowden and others continued to proclaim their postmillennialism after the first World War, their millennium was far removed from the contemporary scene. No longer was it possible to preach that the promised millennium was at hand. The cold facts of world affairs brought a chill to postmillenarians. In any case, their cause was lost and they rapidly lost adherents. The second World War with its brutality and world tension which followed stilled apparently forever the idea of anything comparable to a millennium on earth. As postmillennialism had risen in an atmosphere of scientific and educational progress, so it declined in an atmosphere of war and world chaos.

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Trend toward realism in theology and philosophy. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed also a change in the attitude of liberal theology and philosophy. In theology, the humanistic liberalism of the first twenty-five years of the century began to disappear. Liberals found that their philosophy and theology was impractical. It did not produce converts and inspire benevolence. There was need for a return to Biblical ground and more realism in dealing with human sin. The trend in philosophy kept pace. It too began to adjust itself to a world of real sin and strife. The second World War had a terrific impact on both liberalism and philosophy. A survey of their writings during this period will demonstrate a new appreciation of sin, of divine sovereignty, of human weakness, and the recognition of a possible catastrophic end of the world and ultimate judgment of God. Such a theological and philosophical atmosphere did not generate new converts to postmillennialism. Institutions which had formerly taught this viewpoint moved over into the less specific camp of amillennialism. The facts of the contemporary scene seem to point to no millennium on earth and no definable progress in making the world a Christian community. Postmillennialism was out of step and outmoded.

Trend toward amillennialism. Having lost hope of a golden age and having real doubts whether the world as such will be brought under the sway of Christian principles, it remained to find a new millennial theory. Amillennialism seemed to be the answer for many. This viewpoint gave some freedom. They could believe the coming of the Lord indefinitely postponed, or they could believe it was imminent. They could believe the present age was a millennium if they chose, or they could relegate it to heaven. They would be in the comfortable fellowship of most of the Reformers, the Roman Church, and modern liberal theologians. They could at least unite on a negative—they did not believe in a literal millennium or kingdom on the earth.

The remaining millennial issue. The decline of postmillennialism brought into sharper focus the clash between amillennialism and premillennialism. This, at least, is the present area of debate. Some central problems of postmillennialism remain: the principle of spiritualizing Scripture or giving it a figurative meaning, the subjective approach by which each expositor is given wide liberty in determining the meaning of a passage, and the search for principles of interpretation which will provide a unified system of theology. The decline of postmillennialism is a significant failure of the spiritualizing principle of interpretation and the failure of Biblical expositors following this method to arrive at an interpretation of prophecy that fits historic fulfillment. The problem is large and deserving of the attention of all really interested in arriving at a true interpretation of the Scriptures.³⁴

³⁴ Walvoord, J. F. (1949). "Millennial Series: Postmillennialism." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 106, 149–168.