

A Defense of (Reformed) Amillennialism

(Part VIII)

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Those Glorious Prospects in Old Testament Prophecy

It is those glorious prospects in Old Testament prophecy that are the real basis in Scripture for the postmillennial dream. The postmillennialists make a half-hearted appeal to Revelation 20 (see the editorial in the ***Standard Bearer***, April 15, 1995). They refer to a stray text, here and there, in the New Testament. But their theory of the last things rests, in the end, on Old Testament prophecy, specifically, Old Testament prophecy of the coming, victorious, glorious Messianic kingdom.

Here, in the Old Testament prophecies that hold out grand prospects for the future, is the bulwark of postmillennialism. Messiah's rule over the nations with the iron rod, of Psalm 2; the peaceful kingdom, of Psalm 72; the filling of the earth with the knowledge of Jehovah, of Isaiah 11; the prosperous condition of the saints, of Isaiah 65; and the little stone filling the whole earth, of Daniel 2 — these are the prophecies and these are the passages that ground, and motivate, postmillennialism.

Avoiding the New Testament Testimony

There is a reason for this. There is a reason why postmillennialism deliberately takes its stand on Old Testament Scripture. The reason is that the New Testament is against their theory of a coming "golden age" for the church before the return of Christ. The massive testimony of the New Testament is that the little flock of Christ will suffer tribulation throughout the present age. At the end, lawlessness will increase in the world, there will be great apostasy in the sphere of the visible church, Antichrist will be revealed, and the saints will endure great persecution (Luke 12:32; John 15:18ff.; Matt. 24:3-31; II Thess. 2:3ff.; Revelation 17:8).

Herman Bavinck profoundly and powerfully voiced this New Testament witness when he wrote:

Jesus only knows of two aeons: the present and the future aeons. In the present aeon his disciples cannot expect anything other than oppression

and persecution and must forsake all things for his sake. Jesus nowhere predicts a glorious future on earth before the end of the world. On the contrary, the things he experienced are the things his church will experience. A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above the master. Only in the age to come will his disciples receive everything back along with eternal life (Matt. 19:27-30; cf. Matt. 5:3-12; 8:19, 20; 10:16-42; 16:24-27; John 16:2, 33; 17:14, 15, etc.)

The whole New Testament, which was written from the viewpoint of the “church under the cross,” speaks the same language. Believers ... should not expect anything on earth other than suffering and oppression (Rom. 8:36; Phil. 1:29). They are sojourners and foreigners (Heb. 11:13); their citizenship is in the heavens (Phil. 3:20).... Therefore, along with the entire groaning creation, they wait with eager longing for the future of Christ and for the revelation of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:19; I Cor. 15:48 f.), a glory with which the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17). Nowhere in the New Testament is there a ray of hope that the church of Christ will again come to power and dominion on earth. The most it may look for is that, under kings and all who are in high positions, it may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity (Rom. 13:1; I Tim. 2:2). Therefore, the New Testament does not first of all recommend the virtues that enable believers to conquer the world but, while it bids them avoid all false asceticism (Rom. 14:14; I Tim. 4:4, 5; Titus 1:15), lists as fruits of the Spirit the virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:32; I Thess. 5:14 f.; I Peter 3:8 f.; 2 Peter 1:5-7; I John 2:15, etc.).

It is a constant New Testament expectation that to the extent to which the gospel of the cross is spread abroad, to that extent the hostility of the world will be manifested as well.... In the last days, the days that precede the return of Christ, the wickedness of human beings will rise to a fearful level. The days of Noah will return. Lust, sensual pleasures, lawlessness, greed, unbelief, pride, mockery, and slander will erupt in fearful ways (Matt. 24:37 f.; Luke 17:26 f.; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Peter 3:3; Jude 18). Among believers as well there will be extensive apostasy. Temptations will be so powerful that, were it possible, even the elect would be caused to fall. The love of many will grow cold and vigilance diminish to the extent that the wise will fall asleep along with the foolish virgins. Apostasy will be so general that Jesus can ask whether at his coming the Son of man will still find faith on earth (Matt. 24:24, 44 f.; 25:1 f.; Luke 18:8; I Tim. 4:1) (***The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next***, Baker, 1996, pp. 109, 110).

Ominous Concentration on the Old Testament

Postmillennialism, therefore, is forced back upon the Old Testament. This bypassing of the New Testament in order to rely on the Old Testament is both erroneous and ominous. The reason is not that the Old is not inspired and authoritative, or that the Old is less inspired and authoritative than the New. But the reason is that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. As the fulfillment particularly of the

eschatology of the Old Testament, the New Testament both clarifies and authoritatively explains the Old Testament prophecies of the last things.

A sound interpreter reads the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. He does not force his understanding of the Old Testament upon New Testament doctrine.

The renowned Old Testament scholar O. T. Allis called attention to the error of ignoring the eschatology of the New Testament, while concentrating on that of the Old Testament, in his classic refutation of dispensational premillennialism (the “rapture theory”). He noted “the tendency to exalt the Old Testament at the expense of the New Testament, to insist that its (the Old Testament’s) predictions stand, we may say, in their own right, and are in no sense dependent upon the New Testament for amplification, illumination, or interpretation.” On the contrary, wrote Allis:

The doctrine of the Christian Church, as generally accepted, has always been that the New Testament takes precedence over the Old, that Christ and His apostles are the authoritative interpreters of the Old Testament, that its types and shadows are to be interpreted in the light of the clearer gospel revelation. As Augustine expressed it so aptly: “In the Old Testament the New is concealed (*latet*); in the New Testament the Old is revealed (*patet*).” This does not mean that the New Testament conflicts with the Old Testament, but rather that it explains it and that its explanation is to be accepted as authoritative (***Prophecy and the Church***, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964, pp. 48, 49).

Bavinck made the same telling point against the chiliasts, or millennialists. Bavinck observed that this teaching of a future, earthly kingdom of God “loves to appeal” to the court of Old Testament prophecy. With specific reference to the millennial insistence on interpreting this Old Testament prophecy literally, disregarding the teaching of the New Testament, Bavinck stated:

... what the Spirit of Christ who was in them (the Old Testament prophets - DJE) wished to declare and reveal by them ... is decided by the New Testament, which is the completion, fulfillment, and therefore interpretation of the Old.... The New Testament views itself - and there can certainly be no doubt about this - as the spiritual and therefore complete and authentic fulfillment of the Old Testament.... The New Testament is the truth, the essence, the core, and the actual content of the Old Testament (***The Last Things***, pp. 91-98).

What is ominous is that in basing its doctrine of the end on Old Testament prophecy, rather than on New Testament clarification and interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, postmillennialism, which claims to be Reformed, lines up with anti-Reformed dispensationalism.

The All-Important Kingdom Prophecies

That Old Testament prophecy is, in fact, the real biblical basis of postmillennialism is evident from such a representative and influential book as Loraine Boettner's *The Millennium* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958). The texts put forward in support of postmillennialism are largely drawn from the Old Testament, e.g., among others, Psalm 97; Zechariah 9:10; Psalm 2; Psalm 72; Isaiah 2; and Daniel 2. The only New Testament passage referred to that conceivably bears on the issue is Matthew 13:33, the parable of the leaven (see pages 22-29).

The main objection raised by Boettner against amillennialism is the kingdom prophecies in the Old Testament:

We understand the Bible to teach very definitely that the world is to be converted to Christianity before Christ returns, and that the amillennial position, which makes no provision for a Christianized world, leaves a whole continent of prophecies unexplained, many of which then become quite meaningless. The kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament, as well as various statements in the Psalms and in the New Testament, often in highly figurative language, surely foretell a future golden age of some kind.

Boettner added a significant, self-incriminating statement: "We are bound to say that in this regard we agree with the Premillennialists, as against the Amillennialists." I intend to come back to this suspicious agreement of postmillennialism and premillennialism in a future article.

The kingdom prophecies that Boettner mentioned are Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-5; Isaiah 11:1-10; Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 65:17-25; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Joel 2:28; Malachi 1:11; and Psalm 72 (see pp. 119-124).

A Crucial Text

We may take Isaiah 65:17-25 as representative of all the Old Testament prophecies upon which postmillennialism pins its hope. This is the passage that begins with Jehovah God's promise that He creates "new heavens and a new earth" (v. 17). Verse 20 declares that in this new world "there shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed." Verses 21-23 prophesy a peaceful, prosperous, profitable life for the elect and their offspring. The passage ends by extending the peace of the new creation to the animal world: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock...."

I choose this passage deliberately. The postmillennialists themselves appeal to this passage as the strongest support of their doctrine of a coming golden age and as the clearest refutation of amillennialism. Their argument is that the passage predicts a

renewed creation in which there will yet be both death and sinners. In the world of new heavens and a new earth, a child will die at 100 and sinners will be accursed. This cannot be the case in the new creation after Jesus' return, but this will be true in the golden age of postmillennialism.

Postmillennialist, Christian Reconstructionist Gary North assures his readers that "this detailed and obviously literal prophecy, above all other passages in the Bible, poses the greatest problems for amillennialists, who deny the coming of any period of literal worldwide blessings" (*Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory*, Institute for Christian Economics, 1988, p. 145).

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. calls Isaiah 65 "the major passage setting forth the spiritual conception of the change wrought by Christ in history." The unwary reader must not be deceived by the words, "spiritual conception." Gentry does not have in mind spiritual blessings such as the forgiveness of sins. Gentry understands Isaiah 65 to be promising "a period of unprecedented, literal (read: physical, carnal - DJE) blessings ... for mankind prior to the resurrection." With a curious disregard for the eschatological lineup that he is suggesting, Gentry says that Isaiah 65 "poses no problem for the postmillennialist, nor ... for the premillennialist." Both of them expect, and desire, a carnal kingdom in history, stuffed with material goodies. But the passage is, however, a decided problem for the amillennialist. It is perhaps the greatest single exegetical problem facing amillennialism, which is why amillennialists rarely comment on the passage, and when they do, they do not make a great deal of sense (*He Shall Have Dominion: A Post-millennial Eschatology*, Institute for Christian Economics, 1992, pp. 360-365).

The Postmillennial Interpretation of Isaiah 65

The postmillennial interpretation of the passage is that Christ will triumph in history in such a way that the saints will enjoy earthly peace, earthly prosperity, and very long earthly life. Somehow, there will even be a kind of "transformation" of nature. But this will take place before the second coming of Christ, since, according to verse 20, children shall die and sinners shall be accursed.

Listen, critically, to Dr. North:

This process of cosmic transformation will accelerate in response to the spread of the gospel. Man's genetic code will eventually be healed, so that there will be no more miscarriages; this same promise applies even to his domesticated animals (Exodus 23:26). Sickness will be removed (Exodus 23:25). These blessings were available to the Israelites, but they failed to obey God's law. These blessings are still available to us. Isaiah promised that man's life expectancy will someday increase: "There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred

years old shall be accursed” (Isaiah 65:20). Time’s threat will therefore be reduced. This future era will represent a return to the lifespans of men before the great flood. So great will be the visible and biological blessings of God that it will be a fundamental transformation of the way our world presently works. And it will come specifically in response to the ethical transformation of the great portion of mankind: “And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (v. 24).

Notice that Isaiah was not speaking about the world beyond the grave and after the final judgment, for sinners will still be operating in the future period of history described by the prophet. He was speaking about a period of time called the *new heavens and new earth*: “For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth” (v. 17a). Obviously, this cannot possibly refer to a period beyond the final resurrection, for there will be no sinners among us then. They will all be in the lake of fire, along with Satan and his angelic host (Revelation 20:14-15). Therefore, *the new heavens and new earth must begin before Christ comes again in final judgment.* (**Unconditional Surrender**, pp. 143-145).

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