

## A Defense of (Reformed) Amillennialism

(Part IX)

[Prof. David J. Engelsma](#)

### A Spiritual Interpretation of Isaiah 65:17ff

Postmillennialism — the teaching about the last things that posits the earthly victory of the church and a coming “golden age” in history — rests its case, finally, on Old Testament prophecy.

Emphatically not on New Testament doctrine about the days leading up to the coming of Christ.

Old Testament prophecy forecasts glorious prospects for Judah and Jerusalem.

One such passage is Isaiah 65:17-25. Jehovah creates new heavens and a new earth (v.17). In this new world, Jerusalem will be a rejoicing and the citizens of Jerusalem, a joy (v.18). None will die young, and old sinners will be accursed (v. 20). The people of Jerusalem will live productive, profitable, peaceful lives, free from disappointment, opposition, and trouble. They will build houses and live in them; they will plant vineyards and eat of them; theirs will be lives without weeping (vv. 19-23). Such will be the bliss of this new world that even the animals will be at peace: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (v.25).

According to postmillennialist, Christian Reconstructionist Gary North, this proves that, when the church aggressively works at dominating nations and culture, there will be a long period of earthly victory, earthly prosperity, and earthly peace for the saints before the second coming of Christ. This will be the Messianic kingdom of Jesus in its full, final glory.

The passage in Isaiah 65 prophesies of a coming era on earth and before the final judgment (since sinners will still be active) in which there will be great external blessings, including very long life spans (“Foreword,” in Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion*, Institute for Christian Economics, 1992, p. xxvii; see the longer explanation of the passage by North quoted in the August, 1996 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, pp. 439, 440).

To the postmillennialist, the Isaiah 65 passage is not only one of many Old Testament prophecies that predict a glorious future of earthly power and peace for the church in history, but it is also the passage that clinches the postmillennial position against

amillennialism. It is “the one passage *more than any other passage* in *the Bible*, that categorically refutes amillennialism” (North, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. xxviii - the emphasis is North’s).

### **The Error of a Literal Interpretation of Prophecy**

The postmillennial interpretation of the passage is erroneous. The error is obvious and grievous. It is the error of interpreting Old Testament prophecy in a literal way, so that the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is earthly, rather than spiritual.

North freely acknowledges that his interpretation of the passage is literal. Indeed, he boasts of this as though it were a virtue, railing against the spiritual interpretation of amillennialism as a fault.

A postmillennialist can interpret this passage literally: a coming era of extensive millennial blessings **before** Jesus returns in final judgment. So can a premillennialist.... But the amillennialist cannot admit the possibility of such an era of literal, culture-wide blessings in history. His eschatology denies any literal, culture-wide triumph of Christianity in history. Therefore, he has to “spiritualize” or allegorize this passage (*He Shall Have Dominion*, p. xxviii).

Equating the spiritual interpretation of Old Testament prophecy with allegorizing is either ignorance or malice. Both are inexcusable in one who claims to be a Reformed defender of the faith.

But our interest is drawn to this postmillennialist’s startling admission of a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy.

Does he not know that in this insistence upon a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy the postmillennial Christian Reconstructionists break with the entire Reformed tradition? Commenting on the very passage under discussion, Isaiah 65:17ff., John Calvin wrote:

Now the Prophets hold out those things which relate to the present life, and borrow metaphors from them; but it is in order that they may teach us to rise higher and to embrace eternal and blessed life. We must not fix our whole attention on these transitory blessings, but must make use of them as ladders, that, being raised to heaven, we may enjoy eternal and immortal blessings (*Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 4, Eerdmans, 1956, p. 401).

Expressing, not a Dutch Reformed idiosyncrasy but the Protestant consensus, the great Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck wrote:

And this kingdom (of Messiah -DJE) is sketched by the prophets in hues and colors, under figures and forms, which have all been derived from the historical circumstances

in which they lived.... But into those sensuous earthly forms prophecy puts everlasting content.... Prophecy pictures for us but one single image of the future. And this image is either to be taken literally as it presents itself but then one breaks with Christianity and lapses back into Judaism or this image calls for a very different interpretation than that attempted by chiliasm (millennialism DJE).

This “very different,” and correct, interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is, Bavinck continued, “symbolic” and “spiritual” (*The Last Things*, Baker, 1996, pp.90-98).

Does Gary North not know that this issue of the literal or spiritual interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is the basic issue between dispensational premillennialism (the “rapture theory”), which is the enemy of the Reformed faith, and Reformed covenantal theology?

Does not this postmillennial Christian Reconstructionist see that the Spirit of Christ speaking in New Testament Scripture gives a symbolic, spiritual interpretation of Old Testament prophecy? The raising up of the tabernacle of David is not fulfilled in the restoration of the earthly dominion wielded by David’s royal line, but in the spiritual salvation of the Gentiles (cp. Amos 9:11 with Acts 15:16-19).

God’s calling them “my people” which were not His people does not refer to earthly Israel, as the literalist must hold, but to the spiritual church of Jew and Gentile (cp. Hosea 1, 2 with Rom. 9:24-26).

Ezekiel’s new temple is not a physical building that will yet be erected on a mound of dirt in the earthly city of Jerusalem, but the spiritual body of Jesus Christ (cp. Ezek. 40-48 with John 2:18-22 and I Pet. 2:1-10).

The irenic Bavinck was not too severe when he said that to interpret the prophecy of the Old Testament literally means that one “breaks with Christianity and lapses back into Judaism.”

Christian Reconstructionism with its avowed literalist interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, its binding of all the civil laws that regulated national Israel upon New Testament Christians (if not today, then in the coming millennium), and its willingness to impose such ceremonies as the dietary laws of the Jews and the garb of the Jewish priests upon the church of the new dispensation has already succumbed to this mortal peril.

But postmillennialism generally flirts with this horrendous heresy by its identification of the Messianic kingdom with an earthly kingdom of physical dominion, material prosperity, and worldly peace. This was, and is, the hope of the Jews (see John 6). The cause is a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy.

## The Impossibility of a Literal Interpretation

Whatever Isaiah 65:17ff. may mean, it is not a prophecy of the improvement of the present form of creation; of material houses, fields, and work; of physical life extended to hundreds of years; and of the avoidance of mundane troubles.

The fulfillment of Isaiah 65:17ff. is not earthly.

The prophecy may not be interpreted literally. The New Testament teaching that all prophecy is fulfilled spiritually in Jesus Christ, His gospel, and His church forbids it.

It *cannot* be interpreted literally. Gary North cannot interpret the prophecy literally. To interpret the prophecy literally would mean that literal, earthly, Old Testament Jerusalem and its people, the Jews, will be the main delight of Jehovah God in the coming Messianic kingdom (v.18).

Interpreted literally, the passage teaches that nowhere will anyone cry during the “golden age”: not the mother in childbirth, not the child who gets a spanking, not a penitent sinner over his sins, not a mourner at the deathbed of a loved one. For “the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying” (v. 19).

Also, a literal interpretation demands that prior to the second coming of Christ, before the radical renewal of all things, the fierce wolf will be friendly with the domestic lamb and that the carnivorous lion will eat straw (v. 25). Now the Christian Reconstructionists are jolly optimists, as they never tire of telling us. But does even the most optimistic of them really expect this radical change in the animal world before the coming of Christ? Will frogs no longer eat bugs? Will spiders no longer catch flies? Since lambs will be safe from wolves, and bullocks from lions, will lambs and bullocks also be safe from the saints? Must we all become vegetarians in the millennium? But this is demanded by a literal interpretation.

North, Gentry, and their cohorts cannot even explain the glorious opening words of this important prophecy literally: “I create new heavens and a new earth” (v. 17). A literal interpretation does not vaguely and lamely speak of a “fundamental transformation of the way our world presently works,” as North does in the quotation given in the August, 1996 issue of the *SB*.

Isaiah did not prophesy a “fundamental transformation of the way our world presently works.” He prophesied a *new world*. Such will be its newness, said the prophet, that it will be radically different from the present world. It will be a new world in distinction from “the former” world.

Nor will this new world come about by gradual “transformation,” much less transformation “in response to the ethical transformation of the great portion of

mankind,” as North explains. In plain language, the new world of Isaiah 65 will not come into being by the efforts of the church to dominate culture and as the effect in history of men’s obedience to the law.

But Jehovah God will “create” the coming new world. The word in Hebrew is *bara*, the word that describes the exclusively divine action of calling into existence the things that are not as though they were. By a wonder of divine power, wisdom, and goodness, comparable to and outstripping the wonder of the original creation of the heavens and the earth, a new world will replace the old one. This wonder will be an act of sheer grace, not something that the saints have deserved by keeping the law.

North’s interpretation does not do justice to the plain sense of the main thought of this important prophecy, much less explain it literally.

Isaiah 65:17ff. is not about the present world, Jerusalem, Jews, long and trouble-free earthly lives, nice houses, good farms, plenty of money, ease, happy times, and tame wolves.

It is about Jesus Christ, His church, salvation, eternal life, and a new, different world.

It is about a *spiritual* Christ, a *spiritual* people, *spiritual* salvation, *spiritual* blessings, *spiritual* life, and a *spiritual* world.

If the prophecy is not about this, the Jews can have it.

A Christian is not interested.

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