

Theology Between Christ's First and Second Coming

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The rather broad title of this paper needs some further delineation. The thesis of this paper is that a person's whole theology can be coloured by his position on the millennium. More specifically I hope to point out how I believe my own position on the millennium will affect my teaching of theology at the Reformed Theological College. The crucial points at issue here are two-fold. Firstly, how did Christ's first coming affect the situation of the people of God? And secondly, what further changes can we expect at the second coming of Christ. A key passage for the answer to these questions are the opening verses of Rev. 20, which speak of the binding of Satan for a thousand years.

There are basically three different approaches to the passage in question, traditionally identified as *Premillennialism*, *Postmillennialism* and *Amillennialism*. On the grounds that the Reformed confessions allow freedom of interpretation on this point, (a doubtful premise to my mind), each of these basic positions has found its champions within the Reformed tradition. As we proceed to discuss these positions I hasten to add that within each of these millennial viewpoints one can find considerable differences in interpretation and emphasis. We will therefore have to keep in mind that the observations I will make will relate only to general tendencies associated with each viewpoint, and not necessarily to every specific interpretation.

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I Premillennialism

Let us begin by reviewing the three different interpretations concerning the millennium. The pre-millennial viewpoint has a considerable pedigree in the history of theology. First introduced by various Jewish heretical sects which looked upon the

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millennium in terms of the restoration of Israel, the view also found favour with some of the early church fathers, including Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Basic to this position is the conviction that Christ will return to usher in a period of a thousand years of peace.

For all its popularity in the early centuries, this view never found its way into any of the ecumenical creeds. After the publication of Augustine's De Civitate Dei the premillennial position lost much of its popularity. It did not rise up with any strength again until the time of the Reformation, when it was defended by certain Anabaptist groups. Some of the Anabaptists sought to establish the Kingdom of God through revolutionary means. The group at Münster is probably the best example.

It was largely in reaction to the state of anarchy brought about by these Anabaptist groups, and the government crackdown on all Protestantism that came as the result of this, that Guido de Bres strongly repudiated this teaching in the Belgic Confession. He wrote, 'Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people [who] confound that decency and good order which God has established among men' (Art. 36). The Confession proceeds immediately to describe the end times in terms that preclude any premillennial interpretation. The Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglicans, and both Helvetican Confessions of the Swiss Reformed Church similarly reject the premillennialism of the Anabaptists.

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Premillennialism continued to be promoted by various post-reformational movements, especially by apocalyptic movements such as the Millerites of the 1840's. However, a novel form of the premillennarian position emerged in the second half of the last century as a result of the dispensationalism taught by John Nelson Darby, and popularised by the Schofield Reference Bible. Like the premillennialism of first century sectarians, dispensational premillennarianism saw the millennium as a Kingdom primarily for the Jews. For them the millennium represented the seventh and final dispensation in God's dealing with men. In their view the present 'dispensation of grace' is only an interim measure, during which God will gather from the Gentiles such as respond. These Gentiles will be gathered at the Rapture, when Christ returns in the clouds to gather the Church

to himself. At this time God will continue to fulfil his plans for the Jewish people in the founding of a millennial Kingdom.

This dispensational view of the millennium grew considerably in popularity upon the recognition of the new state of Israel by the United Nations, in 1948. The tension that resulted from the Arab-Israeli conflicts, coupled with the apprehensions of the cold war, led to all kinds of speculations about an apocalyptic end to the present world order. There was a tendency to identify the hordes of Gog and Magog with the political enemies of one's own nation. The writings of Hal Lindsay are a good example of this kind of apocalyptic speculation.

Not only has the recent redrawing of the world map shown the fruitlessness of this kind of conjecture, but there are also many theological problems associated with this form of premillennarianism. Many of the events of the end time, such as Christ's return, the resurrection and judgment, have to be duplicated or even tripled to allow for the timetable envisaged by this form of premillennialism. Moreover, there is no recognition here that God's people of the Old and New Testaments, the *Qahal* and *Ekklesia*, are essentially one. Those who hold this view therefore tend to ignore much of the Old Testament, and in so doing fail to apply God's covenant promises to the new order already introduced by Christ. Thus their view of a Christian ministry is not a participation in the building of the Kingdom of God, but becomes a series of temporary measures aimed at saving as many of the Gentiles as will heed the call to repentance. Here there is no room for Christian organisations and institutions other than as mere instruments for 'snatching brands from the fire.'

Not surprisingly the theology of those holding to such forms of premillennarianism tends to be largely anthropocentric, concentrating on man's conversion and personal holiness rather than God's sovereign works. While we can admire the zeal for missions displayed by many premillennarians, their general attitude towards creation is marked by a pessimism which views the goings on in the present world as primarily the work of Satan.

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II Postmillennialism

The second main approach to interpreting Revelation 20 is that of Postmillennialism. Basic to this position is the conviction that Christ will return after 1000 years of peace on earth. This peace may not be interpreted as a situation where the wolf will live with the lamb, but it will be a period differentiated from the rest of world history by its relative peacefulness and prosperity, as men more or less live in obedience to God. This viewpoint, which is still held by some today, was popular with many Puritans, and also with later evangelicals during the great revivals and age of missions. It was believed that reformation, revivals and missions would bring the whole world under Christ.

To my mind this is a healthier view than Premillennialism. While it stresses the need for missions and revival, it also recognises the continuity of God's work in Old and New Testaments. Postmillennialism in itself does not clash with any of the great biblical doctrines upheld in the Reformed Confessions, and fully recognises the responsibility of every Christian to work towards the greater realisation of God's Kingdom.

However, the Postmillennial position is open to some emphases that constitute a real threat to the Reformed heritage. The first is that there can be a tendency to equate the establishment of the Kingdom of God with human progress. We see this strongly in the old liberalism, where the growth of the Kingdom was often explained in terms of an evolutionary model of human progress. Here the cultural developments of the so-called Christian nations were seen as the outward evidence of the Kingdom. While the strong attacks of Karl Barth and others upon this form of 'culture protestantism' put a stop to this line of reasoning, it has returned today in a much more dangerous form. In the new liberal approach it is not Christian culture, but all positive human development that is regarded as a sign of the presence of God's Kingdom, irrespective of the philosophy, ideology or religion behind it.

A second danger with the Postmillennial position arises where the continuity between the Old and New Testaments is overstressed to the extent that the Old Testament theocracy is pictured as a blueprint for the Kingdom of God. We find an example of this in

the so-called theonomy movement. Here there is not sufficient recognition that the purpose of the O.T. was to point to, and prepare for, a better dispensation under a New Covenant rather than to serve as a prototype of the new order. This position misinterprets the real changes that took place as a result of Christ's first coming.

In summing up the postmillennial position we have to conclude that it tends to be too optimistic about what is happening in this world, and too ready to ascribe human developments to the working of God's Spirit. While the theonomists guard against such optimism by measuring all developments by the revelation of God's Word, their own preoccupation with the Old Testament does not give sufficient recognition to the very real changes that have occurred as a result of Christ's victory on the cross.

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III Amillennialism

A position that avoids both the unwarranted pessimism of the premillennialists and the excessive optimism of the postmillennialist is that of amillennialism. Amillennialism holds that there is no distinct period within the New Testament dispensation which is to be distinguished from the rest of the history of God's people because of conditions of peace and prosperity. I believe that a careful interpretation of Revelation 20 supports this position.

The amillennial interpretation is based on the recognition that the book of Revelation is not to be interpreted as a single chronological timetable for events after the coming of Christ, but a series of seven parallel visions which were given to strengthen the church during the progress of history. Each vision covers the time between Christ's first and second coming. This parallelism of the visions has long been recognised by such able interpreters as B. Warfield, L. Berkhof and W. Hendriksen. It explains why the book repeats such themes as Christ's return, the resurrection of the dead, and judgment of humanity again and again.

The scholars mentioned agree that the passage in Revelation 20 closely parallels chapters 11-14. These chapters relate that Christ's victory will be followed by a period of church expansion, then a period of persecution, and finally by Christ's return. The binding of Satan mentioned in the opening verses of chapter 20 refer to the period of church expansion.

The crucial issue in the interpretation of the passage is when the binding of Satan takes place. To be able to determine this it is necessary that we look on the role of Satan before his defeat at the cross. During his ministry on earth Christ identified Satan as the 'prince of this world' (Jn. 12:31; 16:11). Through the sin of Adam, Satan had gained an entry into creation which enabled him to usurp the authority that legitimately belonged to the Creator. The very real power of Satan can be seen in the clearly diminishing number of worshippers who remained true to God during the Old Testament era. From Adam's offspring we see that only some believed, and when their children intermingled with the unbelieving descendants of Cain the number of believers began to decline rapidly, so that at the time of the flood only Noah and his family proved true.

After the flood man's continued rebellion causes God to select a nation to preserve the promised seed, but here too, the corroding influence of Satan can be seen. Of Abraham's descendants it is only Isaac and Jacob who continue in the covenant. The twelve tribes descended from Jacob received God's special promise, and receive God's special revelation in the laws of Moses and the words of the prophets to keep them faithful. They are strongly commanded to separate themselves from the surrounding heathen nations, and not to share in their pagan ways. Even so ten tribes fall by the way, and of the two remaining tribes only a remnant remains faithful after the exile. The corrosion continues, and while Christ's own coming proves that Satan's attacks had not destroyed the line of promise, it is also clear that there were only a few who remained faithful and who recognised Christ for who he was.

Satan was not just bluffing when, during the temptations of Jesus, he claimed that all the glory and splendour of the nations belonged to him, and was his to give (Lk. 4:6). He was the 'prince of the world,' strong enough to resist the angel God sent to Daniel

John 12:31; 16:11

for 21 days, forceful enough to move the nations to fight for Israel's destruction, mighty enough to cause Herod to murder all the babes at Bethlehem. But not powerful enough to conquer the promised seed!

And so we see that things begin to change at the coming of Christ. The legions of demons sent to possess their helpless victims cannot but submit to the holy power of Christ (Lk. 4:36,41). The ravages of sin are removed when Christ proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord, the coming of God's Kingdom (Lk. 4:18-21, 43). When the seventy-two sent out in Christ's name joyfully attest that even the demons submitted to them, Christ replies, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' (Lk. 10:18).

In a passage where Jesus speaks of driving out Satan and his demons he compares his ministry to robbing the house of a strong man. He explains 'how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first binds up the strong man?' (Mt. 12:29). It is interesting that Jesus here uses the same verb for binding that we find in Rev. 20:2. The fact that in Matthew it is Christ who binds the strong man, whereas in Revelation it is an angel who binds the serpent, should not keep us from identifying these events. Here we must keep in mind that the angel is not acting on his own authority, but represents a higher power. I have no hesitation, therefore, in following the interpreters who would equate the incidents described here.

A further event that has bearing on our subject is the one recorded in John 12:20ff. Here we read that some Greeks had come to see Jesus, who then remarked that the hour had come for him and his Father to be glorified. When this is confirmed by God's voice sounding from the heavens, Jesus responds with the observation: 'Now is the time for judgment on this world, now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' Here the expulsion of Satan is clearly linked with the coming to Christ of the gentile Greeks. It is Christ, lifted up on the cross, who binds Satan and casts him out, so that ALL MEN, will be drawn to him.

This brings us back to Rev. 20, where it is clearly stated that the purpose of Satan's binding is 'that he should deceive the nations no more.' This qualifying phrase must not be overlooked. The text

is not speaking of a binding of Satan that leads to utopia, where the lamb will lie with the wolf, but a binding that restricts Satan's power over the nations. The binding of Satan must therefore be linked with the great commission given in Mt. 28:18. All authority has been given to the victorious Christ, who now sends his disciples to reclaim the nations for the Kingdom of God. And Satan is powerless to stop this, so that the Gospel spreads from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

This interpretation does not imply that Satan is inactive. On the contrary, it fully recognises that the now much frustrated Satan goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (I Pet. 5:8). The devil is still the 'god of this age' (II Cor. 4:4), the leader of those who rebel against God (Eph. 2:2). But one thing that he can no longer do is to deceive the nations, and stop the spread of the gospel. That is why, until today, we see the Gospel penetrating every frontier and every people, and we will continue to see this until people from every nation confess Christ. Only then will Satan be unleashed for a little while, so that he may muster the nations for that final battle in which Christ will annihilate all the forces of wickedness (Rev. 20:7ff.).

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IV Implications of the Amillennial position

The affirmation that the millennium signifies a binding of Satan so that he can deceive the nations no more should guard us against both the pessimism of the premillennialist and the optimism of postmillennialism. Amillennialism calls us to a realism that acknowledges both Christ's victory over Satan, and the fact that Satan is not yet totally defeated. The recognition of Christ's victory brings with it the realisation that the new order of the Kingdom has come, that the new wine can no longer be poured into old wineskins, and that the new cloth cannot be used to patch the old garment (Mt. 9:16,17). The recognition that Satan continues to deceive people guards against identifying the manifestation of the Kingdom with all kinds of worldly movements, however noble in human eyes.

But what are the changes that we can look for in the new order of the Kingdom? Without aiming to be exhaustive we would point to the following:

1. **For Missions:** Christ's victory has not only made missions a possibility but also a necessity. The command to make disciples flows from the authority bestowed on Christ by the Father. As the one who was victorious over Satan, Christ directs and accompanies those who bring the Good News to the nations (Mt. 28:18-20). The Church can therefore participate in this work in the full confidence that in every nation there will be those who respond to Christ's offer of salvation. We can therefore expect that those areas which are yet closed to the Gospel will be opened up before Christ returns.
2. **For Kingdom work:** Every aspect of life must be brought under the reign of Christ. Where Christ has his followers we can expect cultures to change as Christians apply their faith to the spheres of education, politics, the economy, the environment, and all other areas of life. These changes will not follow the patterns of Old Testament society, the old wineskin, but create new patterns built on the same principles of God's abiding Word.
3. **For ethics:** The new order of the Kingdom calls for greater commitment to God's revealed will. With God's law written on their hearts, Christians will follow Christ's leading when he teaches: 'you have heard it said ... but I say unto you' (Matt.5:21,27, etc.). Christ's victory over Satan signifies that God's people need no longer live in strict adherence to the Mosaic code, given to set God's people apart from the heathen nations. Instead Christians are called to be the light of the world, that by demonstrating God's will in love and integrity they may prompt the nations to follow their example.
4. **For worship:** The principles that regulated O.T. worship were given to keep the Israelites from falling into the heathenism of the surrounding nations. Again this changed with Christ's victory over Satan, as Christ testifies to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:23-24). In the

new order it is not Mt. Zion that forms the centre of worship, nor are believers expected to follow the Jewish rites, but men may now worship God everywhere as long as they worship Him in spirit and in truth.

The few examples given should serve to illustrate the radical nature of the changes that came with the victory of Christ. Once the promised seed of the woman had crushed the serpent's head the carefully regulated laws and rites of the Old Testament had served their purpose to keep God's chosen nation from giving in to the deceptions of Satan. The theocratic culture that had centred on the temple worship at Mt. Zion had to give way to a new order, the Kingdom of God.

With God's help I intend to base my teaching of theology here at RTC on the amillennial approach. In recognition of Christ's victory over Satan I hope to guard against the pessimism of premillennialism. In recognition that this victory awaits the final destruction of Satan at the return of Christ I hope to guard against the optimism of postmillennialism. I will encourage participation in the task of mission, in order that people from all nations will respond to the Gospel message. I will counsel against a pietistic withdrawal from the world as the realm of Satan, and encourage the full participation of Christians in all matters affecting God's creation. I will seek to stimulate students to a greater dedication to God's Word in all aspects of Christian life and worship. It is my prayer that, in this way, I too may contribute to the preparation for Christ's return. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!