

*P*ostmillennialism

An Eschatology of Hope

Keith A. Mathison

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Introduction

[Postmillennialism is] the view that Christ will return to the earth after the Spirit-blessed Gospel has had overwhelming success in bringing the world to the adoption of Christianity.

—Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.¹

A defense of postmillennialism? Who would be optimistic enough to write such a book at the end of the twentieth century? How could anyone actually believe in postmillennialism, especially in light of two world wars, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and ethnic cleansing? Just look around you! How can you read today's newspaper and say that the gospel is going to prevail? 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?

When God promised to give Abraham a son, everything that his eyes could see told him that he would never have one. Sarah laughed at the promise. Yet Abraham believed God, and God gave him a son. Similarly, God promised Moses that He would use him to lead the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Initially, Moses was doubtful, but when he finally trusted God and believed the promise, God used him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Then God promised to give them the land of Canaan. But ten of the twelve spies sent into the land doubted the promise and persuaded the people that they could never take the land. Their faithlessness resulted in forty years of wilderness wandering. But Joshua and Caleb believed God's promise, and they saw God give Israel the land.

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.

This volume has two purposes. The first purpose is to demonstrate that 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.

The second purpose of this book is directly related to the first. It is my sincere hope and prayer that God will use this demonstration of the truth of postmillennialism to encourage preachers and teachers to proclaim this long-neglected doctrine once again, that He will use this renewed faith in His promise as a means to accomplish what He has promised, and that a period of fruitful missions and evangelism, the likes of which the world has never seen, will bring innumerable multitudes into the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

PART ONE

Hermeneutical Considerations

CHAPTER ONE

Presuppositions and Definitions

If truth exists outside of ourselves, we will not know it by pretending that we have no presuppositions, nor will we attain it by embracing all our presuppositions as unchangeable parts of ourselves; we will achieve it only if we submit ourselves, presuppositions and all, to the One who understands and interprets all things rightly.
—Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton¹

The way in which we approach Scripture and the assumptions we bring to the text are vitally important matters, especially when we are discussing disputed doctrines like eschatology. These matters are often overlooked, sometimes out of ignorance and sometimes because of the mistaken idea that it is possible to approach Scripture without any biases, theological or otherwise. Of course, during our study of Scripture, our most basic assumptions should become more and more conformed to God's authoritative word, but we must at least be aware that we have these assumptions and make every attempt to recognize what they are. Because of the importance of this subject, the first two chapters of this book will explain some of the most basic presuppositions that the author brings to this study of eschatology.

He Is There

There is no more fundamental truth than the fact that God exists (Gen. 1:1). This should go without saying, but because there are those who mistakenly assume that postmillennialism is a variety of liberalism or secularism, it must be clearly affirmed from the begin-

ning that this volume rests upon the most basic assumption that the sovereign God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ exists. The Bible itself assumes the existence of God from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation, and any interpretation that ignores this fact will fail. The Bible also assumes that history is under the providential control of God. As Kenneth Gentry notes, “It means everything to eschatological inquiry whether or not the entire course of world history is under the absolutely sovereign administration of the infinitely personal God of Scripture.”²

He Is Not Silent

God has definitively revealed Himself and His will to man in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Isa. 8:19–20; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15–16). He alone is able to define His own nature and His own will authoritatively. Accordingly, He has revealed Himself to man in various ways throughout redemptive history, sometimes in dreams, sometimes in visions, and sometimes through other means. But as the Westminster Confession of Faith explains, “For the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world,” God committed His revelation to writing (1.1). In other words, we are not left to our own devices to discover the will of God. He has condescended to reveal the truth about Himself, His creation, and His will for that creation in the Bible.³

All Scripture Is Inspired

All Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16).⁴ As the very word of the living God, Scripture is authoritative, inerrant, and internally self-consistent. An excellent summary of the doctrine of Scripture may be found in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Because of its importance, the Short Statement is quoted here in full:

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God’s witness to Himself.

2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; *embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.*
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understanding its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.⁵

In the Image of God

In the creation narrative of Genesis 1, God reveals that He created man in His image and that He gave specific spoken commands to man regarding the creation (Gen. 1:26–30). This reveals that God created the mind of man with the ability to comprehend both His creation and His word. The fact that God continues to communicate and respond to man after the Fall reveals that sin has not annihilated this human faculty. It has corrupted the mind of man, as it has corrupted every other aspect of his nature, but it has not completely destroyed man's ability to think and communicate rationally. This means that it is possible to understand accurately what God has revealed to us in the Scriptures.⁶

Jesus Is Lord

Our understanding of who Christ is and what He has done, is doing, and will do, will also profoundly affect our interpretation of

Scripture. This survey of Scripture is made with the conviction that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God. As all of the orthodox creeds and confessions teach, He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and was born of the virgin Mary. He is truly God and truly man, having two natures “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”⁷ He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried. On the third day He rose from death. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He will come again visibly with glory to judge the living and the dead.

From beginning to end, Scripture is centered on Christ. The Bible is focused on the redemptive work of God in history, and therefore it focuses on the One sent to be the Redeemer, Jesus the Messiah. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament testify to the person and work of Christ. The Old Testament focuses on the promise of redemption, and the New Testament focuses on the fulfillment of that promise. Both testaments testify that Christ is the central message of the entire Bible.

The Necessity of Faith

The proper interpretation of Scripture requires regeneration, faith, and sanctification in the interpreter. While unbelievers may be able to comprehend the literary message of Scripture, true discernment demands the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the interpreter. Moisés Silva explains that “a right relationship with its divine author is the most fundamental prerequisite for proper biblical interpretation.”⁸ In other words, knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, while invaluable, does not guarantee a correct interpretation of a particular text of Scripture. The illuminating presence of the Holy Spirit is necessary.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

Scripture is the public revelation of God to man. As such, it may and must be interpreted with great care and caution. Scripture must be interpreted in the normal grammatical sense. This does not mean

that every text will automatically be interpreted literally. The question of literalism must be decided on a text-by-text basis.⁹ For example, the genre of the particular text must be taken into account. The epistles of Paul are not written in the same way that the Psalms are written and cannot be interpreted in exactly the same way. History must be interpreted as history, allegory as allegory, poetry as poetry. Most importantly, the context, whether canonical, literary, historical, or cultural, must always be taken into consideration.¹⁰ The fundamental importance of the canonical context, of reading every Scripture in light of all of Scripture, is stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.9:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

As Joseph Braswell explains, “To ignore the *canonical* context is to read smaller textual units out of context and so misconstrue their God-asserted, canonical truth-claims—their Christological meaning.”¹¹

Scripture, Community, and Tradition

The proper interpretation of Scripture also requires a correct understanding of the role of tradition and community. This simply means that interpretation cannot be done in isolation from the church as the body of Christ. God has been giving the church gifted teachers and interpreters for two thousand years, and it is sheer folly to ignore their testimony. The typical evangelical understanding of the relationship between tradition and biblical interpretation is far removed from the understanding of the orthodox Reformers and the church fathers.

The magisterial Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, did not reject tradition outright. They rejected the late medieval understanding of tradition, which saw it as a second source of authoritative doctrine. They wanted to return to an earlier view, which understood

tradition to be the traditional interpretation of Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent (1545–63), decided firmly in favor of the later view of tradition and accepted it as a second source of doctrine. It was only the radical Reformers, the Anabaptists, who rejected tradition altogether. They claimed that all any Christian needed to interpret Scripture was a Bible and the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, their rejection of the traditional understanding of Scripture led many of them to reject fundamental doctrines of orthodox Christianity, including the Trinity and the deity of Christ.¹²

In order to understand and interpret Scripture rightly, we must utilize the gifts that God has given the church, both today and throughout history. We ignore the insights of those who have gone before us at our own peril. This means that we interpret Scripture within the boundaries of the universally accepted ecumenical creeds of the church. It means that we seek the insights of others who are more gifted than we are, in order to determine whether or not we are reading something into the text that is not there or missing something that is in the text.

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. It is also the conviction of this author that, when dealing with a controversial and disputed doctrine like eschatology, it is wise to move from the known to the unknown, from the clear to the less clear. That is, we should first establish the areas of agreement as a foundation, and then, from that vantage point, examine the options. 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.

Definition of Terms

Finally, since this book is an introduction to and a defense of post-millennialism, it is necessary to define it and the other millennial po-

sitions with which it is contrasted.¹³ There are basically four millennial positions defended today:

1. *Historic premillennialism* teaches that at the end of the present age there will be the Great Tribulation, followed by the second coming of Christ. At Christ's coming, the Antichrist will be judged, the righteous will be resurrected, Satan will be bound, and Christ will establish His reign on earth, which will last for a thousand years and be a time of unprecedented blessing for the church. At the end of the Millennium, Satan will be released and will instigate a rebellion, which will be quickly crushed. The unrighteous will at this point be raised for judgment, after which the eternal state will begin.¹⁴
2. *Dispensational premillennialism* is the most popular eschatological position among evangelicals today. It also offers the most complex chronology of the end times. According to dispensationalism, the present church age will end with the rapture of the church, which, along with the appearance of the Antichrist, will indicate the beginning of the seven-year Great Tribulation on earth. The Tribulation will end with the Battle of Armageddon, in the midst of which Christ will return to destroy His enemies. The nations will then be gathered for judgment. Those who supported Israel will enter into Christ's millennial kingdom, and the rest will be cast into hades to await the Last Judgment. Christ will sit on the throne of David and rule the world from Jerusalem. Israel will be given the place of honor among the nations again. The temple will have been rebuilt and the temple sacrifices will be reinstituted as memorial sacrifices. At the end of the Millennium, Satan will be released and lead unbelievers in rebellion against Christ and the New Jerusalem. The rebellion will be crushed by fire from heaven, and Satan will be cast into the lake of fire. The wicked will be brought before the Great White Throne, judged, and cast into the lake of fire, and at this point the eternal state will commence.¹⁵
3. *Amillennialism* sees Revelation 20 as a description of the spiritual reign of Christ with the saints throughout the entire

present age, which is characterized by the parallel growth of good and evil. The present “millennial” age will be followed by the second coming of Christ, the general resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the new heaven and the new earth.¹⁶

4. *Postmillennialism* is probably the most misunderstood of the four millennial positions. Like amillennialism, postmillennialism teaches that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 occurs prior to the Second Coming. Some postmillennialists 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.¹⁷

Conclusion

These are the presuppositions and definitions which form the foundation for the remainder of this work. The thesis of the book is simple: Postmillennialism is the system of eschatology that is most consistent with the relevant texts of Scripture, a covenantal approach to Scripture, and the nondisputed doctrines of Reformation theology. The goal of this book is to prove the validity of this thesis.