

Theological Equipping Class: Postmillennialism

The Text in Question

Revelation 20:1-8 – *1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. 4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, ... They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. 7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth...*

The debate is about the order and nature of these events

- When will Jesus come back in relation to the millennium?
- Will Christ's return immediately bring in the eternal state or is there a millennial reign in between Christ's return and the eternal state?
- What is this "thousand years," this millennium, referring to?
 - Literal or Figurative?
 - Current or Future event?
 - Earthly or Heavenly?

Review the other 2 views from the past 2 weeks

Historic Premillennialism:

The Church Age > Tribulation > Believers will be resurrected > Millennium > Resurrection and final judgment of un-believers > New Heavens and New Earth

Dominant view of the early church

Dispensational Premillennialism:

Resurrection of believers & first return of Christ (rapture) > Tribulation > Second return of Christ (& resurrection of martyrs) > Millennium > Judgment & Resurrection of non-believers > New Heavens & Earth

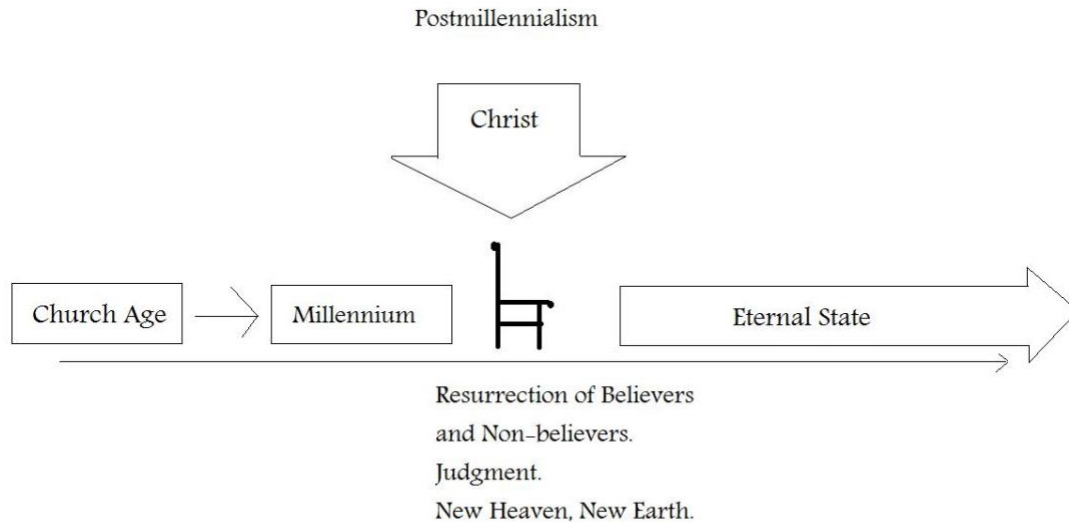
Much later (mid 19th century) view

Amillennialism:

Church Age > Christ Returns > Resurrection of everyone & the Final Judgment > New Heavens & Earth

Dominant view in the Church from Augustine throughout the Middle Ages and the Reformation, the majority of Church history.

Postmillennialism



Order of Events:

The Church Age > Millennium > Return of Christ, Resurrection of everyone, and Final judgment > New Heavens and New Earth

- Christ will return “after” (post) the millennium

The millennial kingdom is an earthly kingdom, prior to the return of Christ, brought in by the successful proclamation of the Gospel.

- Christianity will then have a significant influence on the surrounding society as society is shaped by God’s standards and laws.
- At the end of this millennial age (after or “post” the millennium), Christ will return, the dead will be raised, the final judgement will occur, and there will be a new heavens and new earth and the eternal state.

And there are different views within Postmillennialism of when the millennium began or will begin.

- The Ascension of Christ
- The Destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.
- We’re still in the Church Age but the Millennium is coming in the future.

The “Millennium” of Postmillennialism:

The biggest difference between Postmillennialism and the other two views (Premillennialism and Amillennialism) is the nature of the “millennium” itself.

The Postmill “millennial reign of Christ,” is experienced on earth through the Christianizing effect of the Gospel where life will carry on as normal, with birth, death, marriage, sin, etc.

- This millennium is simply a world with many, many Christians influencing society.

This postmill holy reign will come about gradually through the spreading of the Gospel, rather than Premillennialism's cataclysmic event of Christ’s return.

Key Characteristic of Postmillennialism:

The key characteristic of Postmillennialism is an optimistic view regarding the Church, the world, and the future. There is an optimistic expectation for the Gospel to go forth in power, convert the unbeliever, and transform society by God's laws and standards.

Premillennialism and Amillennialism have a more pessimistic view of the future, believing that the world is getting worse and worse but Christ will return and bring about His ultimate victory.

Main Arguments from the Scriptures:

1. Postmillennialists see the millennial kingdom as fulfilling many of God's promises in the Old Testament:

- Abraham was promised that he would become a "great nation" and that "all the peoples on the earth would be blessed" through him (Genesis 12:2-3).
- The Psalms talk about a day when the nations shall turn to God and worship him.
 - Psalm 22:27 – "*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.*"
 - Psalm 67:7 – "*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah 2 that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. 3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah 5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! 6 The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us. 7 God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!*"
 - Psalm 102:15 – "*Nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory.*"
- The prophetic hope that the nations will come with the desire to worship the LORD.
 - Micah 4:1-2 – "*It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, 2 and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*"
 - Isaiah 2:2-3 – "*It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, 3 and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*"
 - Habakkuk 2:14 – "*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*"

2. The Great Commission (and Acts) talk about the Gospel going forth in power to all nations.

- Matthew 28:18-20 - "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"
- Acts 1:8 – "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*"

- Matthew 16:18 – (after Peter makes the great confession) *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*

3. Parables of the gradual growth of the Kingdom.

- Matthew 13:31-32 – *“31 He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. 32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. 33 He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”*
- Matthew 6:9-13 – *“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”*

Postmillennialism in Church History:

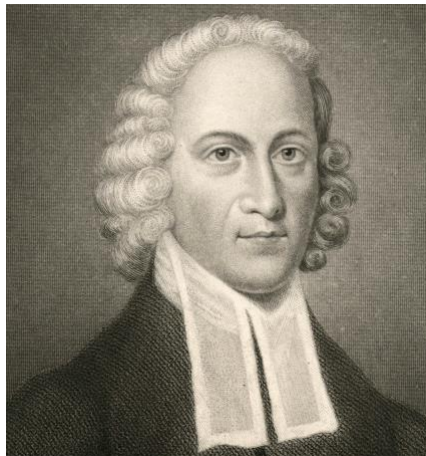
Puritans (17th Century)

“Amid the trying times of the seventeenth-century England, the Puritans began to break from historical Augustinian doctrine (Amillennialism) and to formulate a more optimistic future for the church. This optimism, developed by numerous Puritan writers, became the backbone of the New England settlements. Their new society would serve as a “city on a hill,” calling Old England to repentance and ushering in the future millennia with all its hopes. This optimism overflowed into the everyday lives of Puritans and influence the ministry of the church – especially in mission outreach to the Indians and society and in personal piety.” (Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology*)

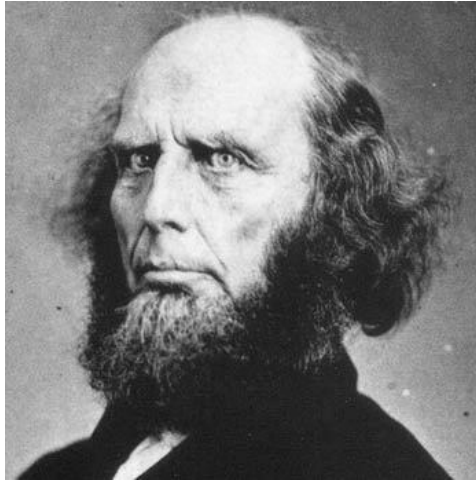
Jonathan Edwards – 1st Great Awakening (18th Century)

Jonathan Edwards saw the events of his day as the “the dawn of that glorious day” of the millennium, that would eventually be brought about as the 1st Great Awakening would radiate from America to the rest of the world.

Edwards believed God was the one bringing about the revival by His own hand and for His glory. Man’s role was to stay faithful in preaching of the Word and prayer.



Charles Finney – 2nd Great Awakening (18th and 19th Centuries)



Finney believed that man had the power to turn to Christ by their own will and that people could (and should) perfect themselves (Pelagianism).

"God might be eliminated from Finney's theology entirely without essentially changing its character." - B. B. Warfield

Finney, unlike Edwards, saw revival as coming through man's efforts. So he instituted "New Measures" that he said would "produce revival at will."

So Jonathan Edwards said, "Look at what God is doing. The millennium must be near." Finney and the 2nd Great Awakening said, "Christ can't come back until you bring about the millennium."

Split of Conservative and Liberal Postmillennialism (19th and 20th Centuries)

Liberal theologians liked the optimism of Postmillennialism but saw the true "golden age" as coming through social reform, rather than preaching the Gospel.

Conservative theologians maintained that the spread of the Gospel would bring about the millennial golden age on the earth. (Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and B. B. Warfield)

Devastating blow to Postmillennialism's popularity – The World Wars

The greatest blow to postmillennial optimism was the World Wars, which had devastating effects both on the optimism of the Enlightenment and the popularity of Postmillennialism. By the conclusion of World War II, Postmillennialism had shrunk to a minority view within the Church.

Postmillennialism Today

In academic circles there was a resurgence of Postmillennialism in the late 20th century but it is still a minority view.

There are actually many Postmillennial ideas in charismatic circles today (Bethel Church).

Liberal churches continue to work towards the "golden millennial age" through the Social Gospel.

Strengths of Postmillennialism

1. All the things discussed in the “Biblical Argument” section.
2. Passion and urgency to share the Gospel and see the Holy Spirit transform lives.
3. It does not separate Christ’s spiritual reign from His reign over every area of life.
4. It best explains why it is taking so long for Christ to come back.

Weaknesses of Postmillennialism

1. Response to “Scriptural Argument” section.
2. Several biblical texts seem to say that the world will get worse and that most people will not be Christians.
 - Matthew 7:13–14 - “*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*”
 - Luke 18:8 - “*...Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*”
 - 2 Timothy 3:12–14 - “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.*”
3. The world is not getting better (more “Christianized”).
 - There were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than all the centuries combined.
 - All throughout history when there is great persecution and the church spreads, that doesn’t mean the surrounding society becomes less evil.
4. Christ could not come back at any time in this view (nor could he have come back at the time of the early church) because the millennium has to happen first. (Matthew 24:36-51, 1 Thessalonians 5:2-6)

Conclusion

Regardless of if Postmillennialism is the correct view or not, it does challenge us with the fact that we should all have a very optimistic view of the power of the Gospel to change lives and bring about righteousness in the hearts of God’s people.

The postmillennial views of “the Puritans remind us that one of the chief principles of the Christian life is hope. We must hope that God yet has work to do, and He accomplishes this through the ordinary means of grace and through the preaching of the Word. Let us be moved by the great hope of the gospel to join in the great work of promoting the gospel to go forth to cover the world as the waters cover to sea. And let us be stirred up to the fervency of prayer. Maranatha!” (Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, A Puritan Theology)

Our ultimate hope is not in the millennium, but in the return of Christ.