

THE BLESSED HOPE: TWO VIEWS ON THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

Considering Amillennialism and Postmillennialism by Aw Swee Eng¹

The Bible has a lot to say about events happening before the Lord Jesus returns. It is part of the subject called eschatology - from the Greek word 'eschatos', which means 'final' or 'last' with regard to either place or time. It deals with such topics as Christ's second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the judgement day, the new heavens and the new earth. The study of 'millennialism' (*mille* – Latin for thousand) is one of these. The word 'millennium' derives from the reference to the mention of a period of a thousand years in Revelation 20:1–10. Some Christians think of the millennium as a literal thousand years. Other Christians do not take the millennium in this literal sense but rather as symbolic of an indefinite period stretching from the time of Christ to the end of this age.

Premillennialists place the return of our Lord Jesus just before (pre-) the millennium. During the literal thousand years He will rule from Jerusalem on a renewed earth. The millennium closes the present era of human history. It is to be followed by the final judgement and the eternal kingdom. Compared to the other two views we will discuss, premillennial beliefs are rather convoluted and will not be pursued further.

Postmillennialism ('post' means after, hence 'after the millennium') and amillennialism share the common belief that Christ will return as He promised. Amillennialism does not mean that there is no millennium, but that there is no future period by that name. This current era, which began with the coming of Christ, is **the** millennium. This belief rests on a symbolic interpretation of the 'millennium' of Revelation. This is common to both views. What are their differences and how are they based on the interpretation of Scripture?

The literature on the two views is fairly extensive. On postmillennialism, probably the most comprehensive tome is that of Keith A Mathison: "Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope". In the same genre is the book by Kenneth L Gentry Jr.: "The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World." On amillennialism we have the oft-quoted book of Anthony A Hoekema : "The Bible and the Future." A recent, slimmer and more readable volume is that by Cornelis P Venema: "Christ and the Future ".

Amillennialists believe there is a millennium, as Revelation 20 clearly teaches. They hold that Christ is now ruling in the world among His people through His Word and Spirit and is also sovereign over the affairs of men. Satan is restrained in his activity but evil in this world will increase even as the kingdom of God is being extended through the preaching of the gospel to all nations. Towards the end of this age there will be a personal antichrist, a great tribulation and apostasy. Christ will physically return to end history and to inaugurate the eternal kingdom. There will be a resurrection of the dead, of both believers and unbelievers, followed by the judgement of all men. The redeemed people of God will live in the new heavens and the new earth. Among theologians who have been amillennialists are Augustine, Louis Berkof, William Hendrickson, Bruce Waltke and Edward J Young.

Postmillennialists agree with amillennialists on most issues. However they insist on the beneficial effect - that Christianity will bring the world to a golden age of prosperity and blessing which will precede Christ's return. Just like a grain of mustard seed, the church will be unstoppable in its growth. It will be instrumental in transforming economic and social structures through her missionary mandate of discipling the nations. In short, society will be "Christianized". They regard the amillennialist view as being pessimistic and an attempt to spiritualise what the Bible intends to be an emerging reality. They are unnecessarily postponing the total triumph of the church to the eternal state .This is the striking difference between the two schools of thought. Well-known

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Christians who espouse postmillennialism include John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Gresham Machen and Oswald T Ellis.

The beliefs outlined, quite obviously, arise from differing interpretations of passages in the Bible. This discussion cannot be exhaustive for a topic that has, over many decades, exercised the mind and heart of earnest believers. We will concentrate on a few major points of disagreement.

WILL THERE BE A GOLDEN AGE ON EARTH BEFORE CHRIST RETURNS?

Amillennialists say that there is insufficient Scripture to warrant the view that all nations will be converted such as to lead to an unprecedented era of peace and righteousness on earth. In reply to this postmillennialists refer to the following:

“Go, therefore and make disciples of *all nations*” (Mt 28:19). God wants *all men* to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2: 4). Paul writes in Colossians 1: 6, “...the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world.” Jesus said, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself.” (Jn 12: 32). As the Bible appears to teach such a universal turning to God, why should a period of unparalleled peace and goodwill on earth be unbelievable? The presence of evil in such a utopian world will be negligible.

Amillennialists point out that these verses and others like them refer to the broad reach of salvation worldwide. It highlights God’s all-embracing mercy and grace to all who call upon Him in faith. For instance, in the passage from John 12: 32 above, it is significant that Jesus said this after some Greeks had asked to see him. The Lord was announcing that all people, Gentiles included, will be able to come to him. There is no justification to infer from these verses that the Lord will use his authority to compel the majority of peoples to repent and accept salvation. On the contrary, He made the following statements, which we do well to pay heed: “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8)

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me . . . and because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold.” (Mt 24:9, 13)

These prophecies are not meant just for local churches, such as the warnings the apostles Paul and Peter gave to their churches (Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 3:12; 2 Pet 3: 3, 4). The Lord’s words are meant to have a global impact on the life and ministry of the endtime church.

Appeal is also made to Micah 4: 1, 2: “In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” This is taken to mean that there will eventually be a worldwide phenomenal improvement in the affairs of mankind caused by nations turning to God.

In reply, amillennialists remind us that the Bible uses metaphors and symbols to explain the mysteries of God’s plan and purpose in the language of man. Thus Peter in Acts 10 has a vision of a large sheet let down from the sky bearing all kinds of four-footed beasts, creeping things and birds. This looks like some surreal vision from the books of Daniel or Revelation! However the purpose was to impress strongly on that apostle that God will freely receive Gentiles as well as Jews who believe. So it is with the Micah passage quoted. The mountain of the LORD, Mount Zion, is not particularly striking compared to other mountains in the region but it has an important symbolic place in God’s plan.

Likewise, Hebrews 12: 22, 23 enlightens us of the spiritual truth: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the myriads of angels, to the

great assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous man made perfect.” This is the New Testament understanding of the significance of Mt Zion from the total biblical perspective.

A similar line of reasoning applies to the visions from Daniel 7:13-14 and the exuberant prophecies such as those of Psalms 2:6-12, 22:26-28, 47:6-9, 67, and 86:9-10. Inspired by the Holy Spirit the authors wrote of things they themselves could barely understand. The extravagant language of symbols and poetry were used to convey what would be the glories of the gospel age. These passages look to the future, to what John, in equally thrilling words, proclaimed:

“ . . . I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . .” (Rev 7:9)
“...the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ: and He will reign forever and ever.” (Rev 11:15)

PAUSING TO CONSIDER THE REALITY

It may be asked whether the current age reflects the optimistic projections of postmillennialism. In truth there is something terribly wrong with the world of today. Persecution of the church, open and covert, is taking place before our very eyes. This is being tolerated and even encouraged in some quarters. A titanic clash of cultures with the consequent martyrdom of Christians is ongoing. The Western countries that once were Christian in profession and witness have wilted under the pressures of the world to conform. They are a shadow of their dynamic selves. Their churches are all but empty. A missionary outreach to them from their former mission fields is an urgent need. The Lord Himself taught that the plight of the world in the last days is as chaotic and godless as in the days of Noah (Mt 24: 37-39). This called forth the destruction of the Flood of Genesis 6 -8.

Only the personal return and intervention of Christ will ensure that there be true and lasting peace. Peter writes, “But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet 3: 13). The optimism of postmillennialism for a golden age seems badly misplaced.

THE DANGER OF UNBRIDLED POSTMILLENNIAL OPTIMISM

Postmillennialism encourages an optimistic outlook and a zeal for reaching out with the gospel to fulfill its mandate. This is surely admirable. There are dangers though and these come from several directions: some quite easy to discern, others more subtle.

Fired by postmillennial optimism, there has arisen a movement within postmillennialism called by various names – Dominionist, Theonomist or Reconstructionist. Dominionists consider it their sacred duty to wrest back dominion of the world from Satan. Theonomists, in addition, favour the return to Old Testament Law as a way of life. All see themselves as Kingdom people reigning now with Christ, ready to take over the world, which they consider as their mandate. They claim the earth on behalf of Christ since “kingdom authority flows from His throne unto His own”. In the US this has led to the presence in certain political parties of a vocal ‘right-wing’ religious movement to gain control of the social and governmental structures of the country and beyond. The movement believes that this is an essential, non-negotiable prelude for the Second Coming to occur, hence their fervour.

A militant form of social activism by Christians may be misunderstood as political challenge to the powers that be. There are many ways Christians can serve society which the world has long recognized and appreciates. But social activism to promote a religious cause, that is, to restore the primacy of a species of Christianity quite rightly attracts unwelcome attention. The result is that the church as a whole suffers from being tarred with the brush of religious imperialism. This can only militate against its witness and evangelistic outreach.

As the objective is an earthly kingdom, claimed and held in Christ's name, one hesitates to conjecture on the fleshly ambitions aroused thereby. We have precisely such a case reported in Matthew 20:20-28. Postmillennialists do not appear to lay much store by this possibility, of which the history of the church provides ample example.

With eyes on an expected universal improvement in national and international affairs, the postmillennial Christian is not paying diligent attention to the signs that indicate Christ's imminent return. The Lord has told us in His parables to watch for His coming and has provided us with sufficient signs for that purpose (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). What if the prognostication of an enlightened civilisation turns out to be in error? What if the warnings our Lord issued regarding the end-time persecution were true? Postmillennialists are not preparing their followers to face this eventuality. There will be widespread disillusionment and a falling away as people despair, thinking that the Bible has misled them.

ENDNOTE

His imminent return is our blessed hope. That is the mainspring of godly living and of our missionary endeavours.

“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...” (Titus 2:11-13)

Regardless of our millennial persuasion, let us hold fast to this blessed hope without wavering.