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New, Improved Postmillennialism

by Thomas Ice

Perhaps more than any area of theology, one's eschatology is molded by the spirit of the times in which they live. This goes a long way in explaining the unparalleled success of a book like *The Late Great Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsey. It first appeared in 1970. This was a time when the secular world was preaching a doomsday message of their own. Especially younger people often felt a sense of desperation, which, to some extent, predisposed them toward the scenario given by Lindsey and many other similar messages. This "escapist" mentality has been expressed by the slogan: "I don't have a problem the Rapture wouldn't solve." This is not a comment on the truthfulness of Lindsey's message, just an example of how people are normally influenced by the framework of the thinking of the times in which they live.

By the end of the 1970's, the secular world began to increasingly trade in their pessimism for a new found "self-help-can-do" approach. Both individual and cooperate narcissism became the order of the day. A new rise of optimism had begun sweeping baby-boomers. The direction of the wind was coming from the East bringing with it a new yuppie "can-do" optimism, which has served to enliven the dead corpse of humanism. As witnessed in the 1984 presidential elections, when it became known that President Reagan held to a Hal Lindsey-type scenario of the future, it was perceived that he had given up on this world. It was the common secular understanding that this perceived fatalism could lead to a nuclear war, since many wrongly thought that someone like Reagan would view their role as helping God bring on Armageddon. Increasingly, in many circles the new optimistic New Age spirit of the '80's is the opposite of the despair of the '70's. This spirit holds that an individual can take control of their personal lives that could in the process transform and save the world.

In a similar way in which Karl Barth had scathingly rebuked old liberal theology for its bankruptness, so also current New Age Humanism is most severe in their renunciation of their own heritage—Rationalistic Humanism. Again, like Barth, the product which was produced is a synthesis between the old (Western Rationalism) and the new (Eastern Pantheism). Like the parent, the child believes that with the right amount of proper individual and cooperate development, Humanism (man-centeredness) has produced a new, improved version of optimism often called New Age Thought. It is the leakage of this secular optimism into some Christian circles which I believe has created a predisposition for the Reconstructionists "new, improved postmillennialism".

In 1984, Church Historian James H. Moorhead published two articles on the nature and decline of postmillennialism.¹ Moorhead began his first essay by saying, In 1859 an influential theological quarterly asserted without fear of contradiction that postmillennialism was the "commonly received doctrine" among American Protestants; but by the early twentieth century, it had largely vanished, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, with only slight partisan exaggeration, could claim in 1936 that it was without "living voice."² Moorhead goes on to note that it did not die a sudden death, rather it eroded away. He says the key to understanding its decline lies in properly evaluating the components of its make-up.

During its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century, this eschatology represented a compromise between an apocalyptic and an evolutionary

view of time, between a history characterized by dramatic upheavals and supernatural events and one governed by natural laws of organic development.³

So it is that Moorhead sees postmillennialism as a blend of what he calls the apocalyptic and the evolutionary view of time. Moorhead is saying that the spirit of the age accounted for the popularity of the way in which postmillennialism viewed the Bible--upward progress toward perfection. But at the same time, postmillennialism had to deal with the interventionist, apocalyptic language of the Bible that ran contrary to the spirit of the age and the postmillennial view of progress. As the upward development belief was increasingly shaken, beginning with the Civil War and progressing through World War II, the only way American Christians could envision anything approaching a golden age was through the intervening and apocalyptic Return of Christ, His cleansing judgment of the world, and His overwhelming presence to set-up and maintain such a period.

The remainder of this essay will center round Moorhead's analysis of "apocalyptic" and "an evolutionary view of time" as the key to understanding the two major ingredients of the older postmillennialism and how they are key to understanding the "new, improved" version of neo-postmillennialism being offered by the Christian Reconstruction Movement. All of this is happening at a time when we are witnessing the rising New Age optimism of the last decade and its corresponding influence within Christianity. This perception of New Age optimism most likely accounts for the mindset that is creating a surprising increase in interest toward neopostmillennialism.

Of course Reconstructionists are appalled by the suggestion that their view of progress could have anything to do with an evolutionary foundation. But when one surveys their writings for specific Scriptural support for upward progress, the best they are able to put forth is the parable of leaven of Matt. 13:31-32. There is no doubt that it speaks of an idea of progress, but a lexical study of "leaven" shows that it normally refers to an evil, not good concept. Their approach, even if they are right about this parable teaching upward progress, should also be questioned since it is shaky to build doctrine out of a parable.

Normally the approach taken by Reconstructionists can be seen in the recent book *The Reduction of Christianity*⁴ as its authors argue that the historic church has always believed in progress and optimism. Other than the fact that progress and optimism are such broad categories, it is amusing to note the author's attraction for quoting non-postmillennialists examples in their attempted polemic for postmillennial thought. Some of the premillennialists noted include Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian from the early church; and Puritans Isaac Newton and Cotton Mather. Certainly the church has always believed in progress and optimism. Augustine believed in the progress of the City of God, but DeMar and Leithart fail to note that he also believed in the progress of the City of Man. This is why Augustine was optimistic that Christ would intervene in history by returning to judge evil and then sort out the wheat and the tares. Premillennialists are optimistic about the future, since it includes Christ return.

DeMar and Leithart's clever chapters on the history of postmillennialism does not even deal with the fact that the postmillennial system of eschatology did not begin to be put forth until the 1600's, at the earliest. Most historians hold that it became a distinct system of eschatology when the Unitarian Daniel Whitby developed what he called a "new hypothesis" in 1703. Postmillennialism was clearly the final major

system of eschatology to develop. It followed premillennialism by over 1500 years and did not surface until after the Reformation.

David Chilton in his two postmillennial works *Paradise Restored*⁵ and *Days of Vengeance*,⁶ along with DeMar and Leithart attempt to define postmillennialism in such broad strokes for the purpose of associating with amillennialism, in order to appear to have greater historic credibility. However, this cannot be done. If postmillennialism is a distinct eschatology (all agree it is), then it is different at points from the other systems of eschatology. Even though it relies upon other eschatologies at points, it is distinct from them at other points. Therefore, postmillennialism is not amillennialism and was a very late development, unless Reconstructionists are willing to sacrifice the distinctives of postmillennialism for an improved historical position.

Moorhead's observation that postmillennialism is a struggle between progress and apocalyptic gives us a basis for understanding why the new, improved postmillennialism has opted for the preterist hermeneutic, or what North recently labeled as "the fusion of covenant and symbol."⁷ The preterist (lit. "past") interpretation of the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation, as well as other selected passages, view these things as past, historically fulfilled events. The Reconstructionist version believes that "all these things" were fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The preterist approach removes the apocalyptic obstacle by dumping all those passages into a 40-year dispensation ending in A.D. 70. Any time a Reconstructionist encounters texts that through normal exegesis negate their progress approach, they are (mis)handled by feeding them to their friendly preterist monster. Gulp! "Out of sight! Out of mind!" However, there are a number of major problems with this whole approach, which most of the eager, new followers of this movement seem totally ignorant of.

First, there is absolutely no record in all of church history of anyone who understood the prophetic Scriptures in this way until a Catholic, Jesuit named Alcazar gave birth to this approach in 1614. Alcazar argued that the Pope could not be the anti-Christ, as the Protestants were charging, since prophetic events and personalities had all been fulfilled by the Christianization of the Roman Empire in A.D. 313. It is strange that if this fulfillment was to be such a great comfort to the Apostolic Church, as Reconstructionists contend, that there is absolutely no record of their supposed comfort. Instead, extant writings indicate that they interpreted these texts to refer to future fulfillments, just as do modern premillennialists.

Second, Reconstructionists often scold other Christians for ignoring the lessons of Church History. They say, "We must listen to the voice of our mother—the Church." However, they are inconsistent in applying their belief when it comes to realizing that the two major aspects of their eschatology are very late developments within the history of the Church. Why did we have to wait until the 17th century for the Church to be given the preterist hermeneutic and the postmillennial system? In addition, the preterist hermeneutic did not really become popular until the 1800's and that was mainly within liberal, higher critical circles, which saw this approach as an excellent means for denying the veracity of Biblical predictive prophecy. The Reconstructionist pretension to listen to the voice of Mother Church, as with their approach to hermeneutics, is followed when it fits their preconceived theology and ignored when her voice cries out against their system.

Third, by the time the preterist monster has lumbered through the Biblical text, there does not remain a single passage that teaches the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. "Now wait a minute," the offended Reconstructionist cries, "We believe in the second

coming!" "The orthodox church has always believed in the second coming." This is my point. The church has always interpreted Christ's coming in the clouds to be a reference to the second coming. Therefore the Fathers believed that the Bible taught the futurist second coming and included it in their creeds. In other words, they arrived at their belief in the second coming by means of a non-preterist hermeneutic. Had they used the Reconstructionist approach there would be no basis for believing in a second coming, which had become the orthodox position. It is true that Reconstructionists deduce the second coming from 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, based upon the future resurrection. But no passage within Scripture that contains the word "coming" teaches Christ's future second coming within their system. If the Early Church did not develop the doctrine of the second coming from passages using the word "coming," which they did, then they would have never labeled that future event the second coming.

Fourth, it appears to me that the only possible motive for adopting the preterist approach could be to remove the apocalyptic element from the Bible so that the Reconstructionist view of upward evolution can be inserted. This hermeneutic can in no way follow from comparing Scripture with Scripture. It is simply another chapter in the long history of allegorical interpretation.

Fifth, the ingredients that compose the postmillennial system of the current Christian Reconstruction Movement parallels the false notions Peter warned believers to look out for in the last days (2 Pet. 3:1-18). The "last days" of Peter cannot be limited to the few years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Rather they characterize, at least, the whole of the current Church Age. Peter is not saying that these "mockers" will deny the second coming, instead, they will deny the promise of an "any-moment," sudden, or cataclysmic coming. The mockers attempt this by replacing the apocalyptic, any-moment nature of Christ's return with their false uniformitarian notion that "ever since the father fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation" (v. 4). This amounts to the replacement of an apocalyptic hope for a present process hope.

The mockers non-cataclysmic view of progress in this passage parallels the view of modern Reconstructionists. By teaching that Christ cannot return until the Church achieves some level of success, or that He most likely will not return for 36,000 or one million years fits the perspective of the mockers⁸ who are saying that the Lord is slow and will not suddenly appear (v. 9). Also, by teaching that current processes and spiritual enablements, plus time and faithfulness are all that are needed to transform our current world into the Millennium, Reconstructionists parallel the mockers who denied that Christ will come suddenly—"like a thief" (v. 10). As North has recently said, "Victory in history is not going to be a discontinuous, unexpected event for God's people."⁹ Once again, Holy Writ contradicts Reconstructionist wisdom when it says that the righteousness of the future age will come suddenly and in a moment (vv. 10-13).

Reconstructionists have attempted to put forth the idea that heavenly-minded Christians do not have present motivation in the "nasty now-and-now." However, Peter's futuristic prophetic theology, in keeping with the theme of the rest of Scripture, says that apocalyptic expectations furnish the motive for present-day ethics. "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, . . . Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (vv. 11, 14).

Since Reconstructionists "distort" (v. 16) the texts of Scripture in this manner it gives them a distorted view of the future, resulting in misdirected action in the present. This defect blinds the development of their theology to pitfalls that are present within Satan's current arrangement of the world's system. Specifically, they seek a premature establishment of the Millennium. This has long been Satan's goal. He has tirelessly tried to preempt God by tempting man to help establish the Kingdom. His twofold tactics have been to get people to use false means and to try to establish a kingdom at a time of his choosing rather than God's.

The means that God has ordained for the establishment of Christ's Millennial Kingdom is through a cataclysmic interruption into history, like Creation and Noah's Flood. Reconstructionists hold that millennial blessings will be mediated through the present dynamics of the Church. It does not follow that the first phase of Christ's career, His humiliation, is spent immediately and physically upon the earth, and then for Him to not correspondingly display His great glory Himself by reigning directly upon this earth. We will reign with Christ, but only because of the status gained by His gracious provision for our sins.

The Reconstructionist view of a mediated reign results only in a watered down, spiritualized, even truncated, reduction of the true reign of Christ. Reconstructionists second-rate spiritualizations of millennial fulfillments have more in common with current non-Christian efforts than they are willing to admit. A friend of mine captured something of the greatness of Christ's premillennial reign when he wrote concerning the shortcomings of Reconstructionism.

[Postmillennialists] suppress the future millennial career of Jesus Christ, transferring to mortal mankind what belongs to Him. Control of the last thousand years of world history belongs to the Risen Christ, as immediate theocratic agent, and to His brethren, the "sons of the resurrection"—not to any combination of well-intentioned mortals in an ecclesiastical status quo development.¹⁰

False hopes concerning the means of bringing in Christ's Millennial reign make Dominionist theology open to intermingling with current false views of the Kingdom, both Christian and non-Christian. This has been their track record: devastatingly wrong movements that have tried to use the wrong means to subdue the world for Christ. Some of these movements include: the Munster Revolt, Fifth Monarchists, Oliver Cromwell, the Abolitionist of the Civil War, the Social Gospel, and according to Reconstructionist David Chilton, Nazism and Marxism.¹¹ Reconstructionists are naive to think that only premillennialists create an air of expectation by preaching their views of the any-moment return of Christ. Their own history is one of dashed false optimism often producing disastrous results.

The other main area in which Reconstructionists err is over the timing of Christ's coming. He does not return after millennial conditions have been mediated by the Church, but rather, it is His return which then produces such conditions. Much could be said concerning this matter, but space only permits this single point: Christ has promised to eat and drink with believers when He enters into His Kingdom (Luke 22:14-23). He instituted the Lord's Supper for us to practice "until the kingdom of God comes" (22:18). The fact that Christ instituted this to be observed during the interim demonstrates that we are not yet in His Kingdom, nor has He yet returned to set it up. Anyone who has only casual knowledge of Reconstructionists know the central place

which communion has in their practice. It is ironic that they weekly testify to the fact that their theology is deviant concerning the timing of the second coming as they eat the bread and drink the wine.

It is not surprising that the most unstable elements of the Charismatic movement, the optimistic, positive confession wing, have been attracted to Dominion Eschatology. Certainly hard-core Reconstructionists will not be deluded into integrating New Age Thought into their thinking, however, they are strengthening the hand of many less stable Christian "theologies" by providing them with a false eschatology. No matter how many "breakthroughs" or brilliant blendings of their theology their sophisticated spiritualizations of the Biblical text produce there still remains a major obstacle for "the 'new, improved' Christian Reconstruction movement"—the Bible does not teach it. The challenge remains: produce one passage of Scripture that teaches postmillennialism. It cannot be found within the apocalyptic nature of God's Holy Revelation. The Bible does command us to "gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ James H. Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865-1925," *Church History*, (March, 1984) Vol. 53; pp. 61-77. "Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880," *The Journal of American History*, (December, 1984) Vol. 71; pp. 524-42.

² Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism", p. 61.

³ Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism", p. 61.

⁴ Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity: Dave Hunt's Theology of Cultural Surrender*, (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1988).

⁵ David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985).

⁶ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1987).

⁷ Gary North, "Stones and Cornerstones in Christian Reconstruction," *Christian Reconstruction*, (Vol. XII, No. 2; March/April, 1988), p. 2.

⁸ See Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, p. 221 and Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, p. 507.

⁹ Gary North, *Is the World Running Down?* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economic, 1988), p. 111.

¹⁰ John Pilkey, personal letter to Thomas D. Ice, March 23, 1988.

¹¹ David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), p. 495.