

Quotable Quotes: The Postmillennial Hope

by Virginia Orton

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The concern over eschatological systems is not merely academic but deeply spiritual and practical: “When ignorance and confusion prevail regarding the optimistic hope of scripture, we witness a consequent ebbing of the power and vitality from the Christian faith itself” (Gentry, p. 59).

While premillennial, dispensational, and amillennial systems have distinct characteristics and features that set them apart, they have one unifying feature: an overall pessimism concerning the hope of the gospel and its Christian transformation of civilisation in history before Christ returns. In this way, postmillennialism stands in contrast to these other systems as optimistic.

It is distinguished by the belief that Scripture teaches the success of the Great Commission before Christ returns, bringing the overwhelming majority of men and nations under the sway of Christ’s sceptre. To clarify, in view of it’s critics, it does not assert: 1) universalism (not all will be saved at any point in history); 2) perfectionism (the saved are never perfect on earth); or 3) satisfactionism (adherents do not prefer earthly dominion over consummational glory).

In his extensive theological and historical work on postmillennialism “[He Shall Have Dominion](#)” – a must read –Gentry defines postmillennialism as follows:

Postmillennialism holds that the Lord Jesus Christ established his kingdom on earth through the preaching and redemptive work in the first century and that he equips his Church with the gospel, empowers her by the Spirit, and charges her with the Great Commission to disciple all nations. Postmillennialism expects that eventually the vast majority of men living will be saved. Increasing gospel success will gradually produce a time in history prior to Christ’s return in which faith, righteousness, peace, and prosperity will prevail in the affairs of men and nations. After an extensive era of such conditions the Lord will return visibly, bodily, and gloriously, to end history with the general resurrection and the final judgment after which the eternal order follows (pp. 81-82).

He goes on to say that “the widespread confusion regarding postmillennialism’s nature, origins, and advocates is lamentable. The modern church, sapped of the power of hope, largely through poor exegesis and a lack of an understanding of church history, is the weaker for it” (p. 109).

Let us, therefore, heed the witness of history to regain the hope and strength that powers the Church: the scriptural vision of Christ’s victorious rule in history, for

The kingdom of the world has become [in the first century through Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension and session] the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever.

Rev 11:15

Quotes

For Calvin, the kingdom of Christ was viewed as established at the first advent. During this interadventual period, the church is destined to experience widespread success; throughout history it will bring all nations under the sovereign sway of Christ. To this interadventual period Calvin referred many of the glorious prophecies about the Messiah’s kingdom found in the Old Testament. ... About Isaiah 2:2-4, Calvin had the following to say, “...while the fullness of days began at the coming of Christ, it flows on in uninterrupted progress until he appears the second time for our salvation.” ... The triumphant progress of the church, reigning under Christ, will be remarkable down through history;

the soteric restoration of the world will be increasingly evident as all nations come under the rule of the Savior. Such was Calvin's hope, his biblical philosophy of history. ...

The confidence of the Reformer was clearly expressed in his expositions of the Lord's Prayer at the second petition ("Thy kingdom come"): "now, because the word of God is like a royal sceptre, we are bidden hear to entreat him to bring all men's minds and hearts into voluntary obedience to it. ... We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth; that he spread and increase them in number; ... that he cast down all enemies of pure teaching and religion; that he scatter their counsels and crush their efforts. From this it appears that zeal for daily progress is not enjoined upon us in vain. ... With ever-increasing splendor, he displays his light and truth, by which the darkness and falsehoods of Satan's kingdom vanish, are extinguished and pass away. ... [God] is said to reign among men, when they voluntarily devote and submit themselves to be governed by him. ... By this prayer we ask, that he may remove all hindrances, and may bring all men under his dominion. ... We therefore pray that God would exert his power, both by the Word and the Spirit, that the whole world may willingly submit to him. ... The substance of this prayer is that God would enlighten the world by the light of his Word,—would form the hearts of men, by the influences of his Spirit, to obey his justice,—and would restore to order, by the gracious exercise of his power, all the disorder that exists in the world ... Again, as the kingdom of God is continually growing and advancing to the end of the world, we must pray every day that it may come: for to whatever extent iniquity abounds in the world, to such an extent the kingdom of God, which brings along with it perfect righteousness, is not yet come." This prayer for the evident success of the Great Commission will not be in vain, according to Calvin; our hope for success should be bold, for we must not doubt that Christ will accomplish this purpose in the world. Here we have the postmillennial vision for preconsummation [i.e., pre-second advent] history.

Rev Dr Greg L Bahnsen, *Victory in Jesus: The Bright Hope of Postmillennialism*, 1999

The kingdom of God is going to break the power of sin wherever there is defection from the will of God. ... Therefore, fundamentally the success for the kingdom that we look forward to, biblically, is going to be found in mankind returning to faith. According to Psalm 22, there will be worldwide conversion. Isaiah 11:9 tells us that, "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." God one day flooded the world in judgment in the days of Noah. He now, in the days of Christ, is flooding the world with the knowledge of him in salvation. How thorough will it be? Is it adequate for us to say there is always going to be a few converts here and there—a few righteous remnants in this city and that, in this country and that? No! The knowledge of the Lord is going to cover the earth in the same way the water covers the sea. How does the water cover the sea? In little puddles, a little puddle here, a little puddle there? No! The water inundates the sea. Isaiah says this is what we should expect—the knowledge of the Lord is going to be just that thorough. It will flood the world.

Moreover, Jesus, in Matthew 28, does not hesitate to call on us to baptize the nations. Psalm 72 says the righteous will flourish in His day. It is not going to be these yahoos that we have in Washington now that are going to flourish, not these wicked evil people who flourish in the media, that sing songs and make movies and draw people away from righteousness, but the righteous will flourish in His day. ...

There is going to be a visible, numerical increase of believers. There is going to be a personal peace with God, piety, assurance of our calling, and wholeness in our lives. This is going to bring a blessed purification and expansion of the Church. In Malachi 1:11, the prophet Malachi says the day is coming when a pure offering will be offered to Jehovah. No longer this weak and ineffective and impure worship that has been offered, but in that day a pure offering, and God will be worshipped from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof. There will not be a place on planet earth where Jehovah is not purely worshipped. *That is great!* This is not wishful thinking, this is not something we have made up; this does not come from watching the 6 o'clock news. Only God could give us something this wonderful, this blessed.

Rev Dr Greg L Bahnsen, *Victory in Jesus: The Bright Hope of Postmillennialism*, 1999

Oh, what promises are ours, if we had only faith to grasp them! What a promise is that in the great commission – Go and do so, and lo I am with you, even to the end of the world! We go forth amongst hundreds of millions of the nations, we find gigantic systems of idolatry and superstition consolidated for 3000 years, heaped up and multiplied for ages upon ages, until they tower as high mountains, mightier than the Himalaya ... But what does faith say? Believe and it shall be. And if any Church on earth can realise that faith, to that Church will the honour belong of evangelising the nations, and bringing down the mountains.

Rev. Alexander Duff, speech *On Foreign Missions and America*, 1854

Eschatology, the doctrine of last things, is also the doctrine of first things because it is concerned with the goal of history. Of necessity, goals determine present-day action. We are not motivated to action unless we know the purpose for our action. Specific goals motivate us. If we believe that the main and final goal of the Christian life is heaven, or the salvation of our souls, we will be indifferent to history and the world around us. But, if in terms of Matthew 6:33, we believe that the Kingdom of God and his righteousness or justice must have priority in our lives, then we will not have a self-centered view of salvation. Our personal salvation is not the focus and goal of the Gospel but simply the starting point. The goal is God's Kingdom, His purpose for humanity and the world. The essence of man's fall is his will to be his own god, his own source of law and morality (Gen. 3:5). All too often men retain aspects of this original sin in insisting that their salvation is the center of God's plan. God seeks His own glory and purpose; our place in His plan is not at the center.

Thus, it is serious deformation, *first*, if we make our personal salvation central to God's plan and purpose. It is arrogant for man, in plain divergence for God's word, to see himself as more important in God's plan than God Himself! Such a view is an echo of man's original sin.

Second, it is also an error to make the church central to God's plan and purpose. Such a view is Augustinian but wrong. St. Augustine, father of much good and bad in church history, despaired of victory in the world and therefore saw the church as the sphere of victory. This led to a very high doctrine of the church, both in Rome and Protestantism. If our hope for the futures of man and Christ's world is only in the church, then we will stress the church as man's hope. The church will be over-stressed because it is man's only hope. Neither the state, the Christian family, nor the school, nor any other institution offers hope, and none are seen as therefore central or important.

Third, an eschatology which is not postmillennial will have a prayer life very different from that of a postmillennialist. A problem in prayer is self-absorption, and undue concern with the personal. To a degree, this is necessary, and the psalms reflect the private concerns of their writers; but they also reflect the hope of victory and the assurance of God's triumph in history. Without such a concern, our prayers become warped and self-centered.

A grim fact that faces us today is the impotence of the Christian community. More than half the people in the United States who are eighteen years of age and older profess to believe in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, and in the Bible as God's infallible word. If those people were only one fourth of the population, they should still be dominating the culture when in fact they are marginal. Their false eschatologies place them on the sidelines of history, and some even pride themselves on their irrelevance.

Some years ago, I edited the eschatological writings of J. Marcellus Kik and published them under the title *Eschatology of Victory*, perhaps the best title I ever gave a book. The title states the case: postmillennialism is the eschatology of victory. This was the reason for the widespread success of *God's Plan for Victory*. Many people with other views were quick to embrace postmillennialism because, as they wrote, they were not happy with being "losers." The notion of defeat does not go well with the fact of an omnipotent God and a conquering Christ.

For me, there is another (and very personal) advantage in postmillennialism. It takes with total seriousness and a totality of meaning the validity of Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose." My work has not lacked its sometimes ugly and dishonest attacks. To be in the "winner's circle" makes a great difference in facing these things and ignoring them because the end result is so clear. History, both world history and the personal outcome, is a magnificent success story according to the Bible. We can thus be patient at the rage of the ignorant and of losers.

R. J. Rushdoony, From the Preface of *God's Plan For Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism* (1997 reprint edition; first published 1977).

Hope is one of the principle springs that keep mankind in motion. It is vigorous, bold, and enterprising. It causes men to encounter dangers, endure hardships, and surmount difficulties innumerable, in order to accomplish the desired end. In religion it is of no less consequence. It makes a considerable part of the religion. Of those that truly fear God ...

Andrew Fuller, first Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, in a circular letter to the Churches of the Northamptonshire Association on *The Excellency and Utility of the Grace of Hope*, 1782

Strong and certain was the conviction of the Christians that the church would come forth triumphant out of its conflicts, and, as it was its destination to be a world-transforming principle, would attain to dominion of the world.

J.A. Neander, 1851, *History of the Christian Religion and Church Vol 2*

Plain it is, there is not a more stupifying, benumbing thing in all the world than mere despair. To look upon such a sad face and aspect of things through the world as we have before our eyes; to look upon despairingly and with apprehension that it never will, never can be better. ... But hope is a kind of anticipated enjoyment and gives a present participation in the expected pleasantness of those days, how long soever they may yet be off from us. ... Religion shall not be an inglorious thing in the world always.

John Howe, 1678, *Sermons on The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest Before the End of Time*

There will come a time when in this world holiness shall be more general, and more eminent, than ever it hath been since Adam fell in paradise.

Thomas Brooks, 1608-1680, *The Crown and Glory of Christianity, Complete Works Vol 4*

Though our persons fall, our cause shall be as truly, certainly, and infallibly victorious, as that Christ sits at the right hand of God. The gospel shall be victorious. This greatly comforts and refreshes me.

John Owen, 1616-1683, *The Works of John Owen Volume 9*

We also rejoice in hope. We have many and express assurances in the Scriptures, which cannot be broken, of the general, the universal spread and reign of Christianity, which are not yet accomplished. Nothing has yet taken place in the history of Divine grace, wide enough in extent, durable enough in continuance, powerful enough in energy, blessed enough in enjoyment, magnificent enough in glory, to do anything like justice to these predictions and promises. Better days, therefore, are before us, notwithstanding the forebodings of many.

William Jay, 1769-1855, Nonconformist leader, *The Autobiography and Reminiscences of the Rev. William Jay*.

Micah proclaims how all the world will be brought to God at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. This reunification has already begun, is taking place now, and will continue until the end of the world. ... Jesus Christ has been designated the Lord, not simply of one corner of the world, but of all nations. ... Since our Lord Jesus Christ's kingdom has hardly begun, it is necessary for it to be implemented little by little, until it achieves its full perfection.

John Calvin, AD 1509-1564, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*

Commenting on Psalm 2 regarding the Lord laughing at the nations (v.4):

It is to be understood of that power which he giveth to His saints, that they seeing the things to come, namely, that the Name and rule of Christ is to pervade posterity and possess all nations. ... 'Ask of Me' (v.7), may be referred to all this temporal dispensation, which has been instituted for mankind, namely, that the 'nations' should be joined to the Name of Christ, and so be redeemed from death, and possessed by God. 'I shall give Thee the nations for Thine inheritance,' which so possess them for their salvation, and bear unto Thee spiritual fruit.

Augustine, AD 354-430

It is right for you to realise, and to take as the sum of what we have already stated, and to marvel at exceedingly; namely, that since the Saviour has come among us, idolatry not only has no longer increased, but what there was is diminishing and gradually coming to an end: and not only does the wisdom of the Greeks no longer advance, but what there was is fading away. ... And to sum the matter up: behold how the Saviour's doctrine is everywhere increasing, while all idolatry and everything opposed to the faith of Christ is daily dwindling, and losing power, and falling. ... For as, when the sun is come, darkness no longer prevails, but if any be still left anywhere it is driven away; so, now that the divine Appearing of the Word of God is come, the darkness of the idols prevails no more, and all parts of the world in every direction are illumined by His teaching.

Athanasius, AD 296-372, *Incarnation*

David was not a believer in the theory that the world will grow worse and worse, and that the dispensation will wind up with general darkness, and idolatry. Earth's sun is to go down amid tenfold night if some of our prophetic brethren are to be believed. Not so do we expect, but we look for the day when the dwellers in all lands shall learn righteousness, shall trust in the Saviour, shall worship thee alone, O God, 'and shall glorify thy name.' The modern notion has greatly damped the zeal of the church for missions, and the sooner it is shown to be unscriptural the better for the cause of God. It neither consorts with prophecy, honours God, nor inspires the church with ardour. Far hence be it driven.

C. H. Spurgeon, *From an exposition of Psalm 86:9, 'All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name'.* *The Treasury of David*, 1874.

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