

A Defense of (Reformed) Amillennialism (Part II)

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Revelation 20

The name by which the distinctively Reformed doctrine of the last things is known is “amillennialism.” This name derives from the 20th chapter of Revelation. Six times in verses 1-7 is mentioned a period of “a thousand years.” An angel binds Satan for “a thousand years” (vv. 1, 2). The result is that Satan cannot deceive the nations for “a thousand years” (v.3). John sees certain souls living and reigning with Christ “a thousand years” (vv. 4, 6). The rest of the dead lived not again until the “thousand years” were finished (v. 5). When the “thousand years” expire, Satan is loosed, deceives the nations, and makes war against the saints (vv. 7-9).

The term “millennium,” of Latin origin, means “thousand years.” “Amillennialism,” therefore, is the teaching about the thousand year period of Revelation 20 that *denies* that this period is a literal one thousand year period of history during which Christ will establish an earthly kingdom in the world. Positively, amillennialism holds that the thousand year period of Revelation 20 is a figurative description of the entire period from Christ’s exaltation until shortly before His second coming. During this period two important events take place. One occurs in the abyss: Satan is bound. The other happens in heaven: the martyrs live and reign with Christ.

Millennial Error

The matter of the millennium, mentioned only in Revelation 20, has come to require more attention in eschatology (the church’s doctrine of the last things) than Scripture would suggest. The thousand year period is just one more feature of the revelation of the end in the book of Revelation. The reason why the subject receives so much attention, and *must* receive so much attention, is that serious doctrinal errors have attached themselves to the millennium of Revelation 20.

On the one hand, there is the grievous heresy that bewitches multitudes of supposed evangelicals and fundamentalists so that they expect a carnal kingdom of the Jews in Palestine, preceded by a secret “rapture” of the church. This bizarre teaching involves denial of the oneness of Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church, rejection

of the unity of the covenant of grace, opposition to infant baptism, and the embracing of the dreaded doctrine and practice of antinomism (lawlessness of life with appeal to “grace”).

On the other hand, there is the serious error tolerated, if not promoted, by Reformed and Presbyterian churches, that finds in Revelation 20 the basis for expecting a carnal kingdom of Christ that will be victorious according to earthly standards. Not only does this error, known as postmillennialism (since it postpones Christ’s coming to the end of the future earthly golden age), find in Revelation 20 the basis of a carnal kingdom, but it also finds in this chapter a mandate to the church to get busy to “Christianize” this world. Any church that declines this mandate is severely criticized, if it is not heartily damned.

The effect of this interpretation of Revelation 20 is the radical, total reconstruction of Reformed eschatology. No longer are there signs of the return of Christ; no longer does the earthly future hold abounding lawlessness; no longer are we to anticipate great apostasy; no longer are the saints to prepare for Antichrist; no longer are we to brace ourselves for a great tribulation.

Especially because of these millennial errors, Reformed and Presbyterian people must be clear as to the meaning of Revelation 20.

The Meaning of Revelation 20

“A thousand years” is a figurative, or symbolical, description of the entire age of the new covenant. The number 1,000 is a symbolical number, made up as it is of the number 10. In the Bible, 10 is the number of completeness. The symbolical nature of the thousand year period is in harmony with the symbolical character of the book of Revelation, e.g., the depiction of Satan as a great red dragon (Rev. 12). It is also in harmony with the obviously figurative character of the binding of the spirit, Satan, with a great chain. In addition, Revelation 20 is a vision (“and I saw,” vv. 1, 4), not historical observation.

The binding of Satan represents the sovereign control and restraint of the devil by the Lord Jesus that prevents him from deceiving the nations. During the present age, Satan cannot unite the nations under Antichrist. This restraint is related to the “withholding” and “letting,” or restraining, of II Thessalonians 2:6, 7 that assures that the man of sin, “that Wicked” (v.8), will be revealed in his proper, God-appointed time (v.6).

Throughout this same age, the martyrs — those who were beheaded on account of the witness of Jesus and on account of the Word of God — live and reign in heaven with Christ. The vision of the thrones in Revelation 20:4-6 refers to what theology calls “the intermediate state,” that is, the life and glory of elect saints at death and until the second coming of Jesus.

This is plain.

John sees “souls” sitting on the thrones. Earlier, in Revelation 6:9, the apostle spoke of the souls of the martyrs under the altar in heaven. Those souls in heaven were distinguished from humans dwelling on earth (v.10). The “souls” of Revelation 20:4-6 are those men and women who had been beheaded for their faithful confession of Christ in time of antichristian persecution throughout the present age.

At the instant of death, the martyred saint is taken up in his soul to be with Christ in heaven, and there he lives and reigns with Christ.

Living with Christ in heaven in the soul at the instant of physical death is the “first resurrection” (v. 5). The postmillennialists argue that the living and reigning with Christ cannot refer to the intermediate state because the life of the soul at death is not resurrection. J. Marcellus Kik, whose commentary on Revelation 20 has been very influential among modern postmillennialists, wrote: “The very fact that Revelation Twenty deals with a resurrection eliminates the interpretation that the Chapter is speaking of the intermediate state of the soul” (*An Eschatology of Victory*, Presbyterian and Reformed, p.230). The “Christian Reconstructionist” David Chilton has written:

We can dispose of the Amillennial position right away, by pointing out the obvious: this is a *resurrection, a rising again from the dead.*

Dying and going to heaven is wonderful, but, for all its benefits, it is not a resurrection. This passage cannot be a description of the state of disembodied saints in heaven (*Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion*, Reconstruction Press, p.196).

The postmillennialists are wrong.

The taking up to heaven of the soul of the believer at death is, indeed, resurrection. There is an act of the risen Christ upon the soul at the instant of death purifying it from all sin and transforming it from a soul adapted to earthly life into a soul adapted to heavenly life. There must be this resurrection of the soul by Christ if the soul is to be with Christ in heaven. Souls do not automatically fly away to heaven at death. Souls of believers do not naturally fly to heaven. The *Heidelberg Catechism* indicates Christ’s raising of the soul of the believer at death in Question 57: “my soul after this life *shall be ... taken up* to Christ its head.”

The saint goes to heaven by resurrection, and *only* by resurrection. There are two stages. The first is the resurrection of the soul. This is the resurrection of Revelation 20:5. The second is the resurrection of the body. This is the second resurrection, implied by the first resurrection of Revelation 20:5.

Accordingly, the first death of the reprobate ungodly is the suffering of God’s wrath in his soul at the moment of physical death. The second death will be his suffering of God’s wrath in hell in soul and body after the final judgment (see Rev. 20:6, 14).

At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be loosed for a short time (vv. 3, 7). The one who “leteth,” or restrains, will be taken out of the way (II Thess. 2:7). This enables Satan to establish his world-kingdom under Antichrist. The result is the final, all-out assault upon the true church and her living, faithful members (vv. 8, 9). The “beloved city” represents the church. The “saints” are all those whom the Spirit of Christ has sanctified through faith in Christ.

After a short time of intense persecution of the church — the “great tribulation” of Matthew 24:21 and the “time of trouble” of Daniel 12:1 — fire from God will devour the ungodly in the second coming of Christ (cf. II Thess. 1:6-10).

Then follow at once the final judgment and the eternal state, heaven and hell (Rev. 20:11 ff.).

The Explanation by Postmillennialism

The postmillennial explanation of the passage in the interests of the physical victory of an earthly kingdom of Christ in history is mistaken. The explanation by J. Marcellus Kik, adopted in the main by the “Christian Reconstructionists,” is an example of this mistaken interpretation.

The reign of the saints is located *on earth*, as though the apostle never spoke of “souls,” indeed, of “souls” who had been “beheaded.” Beheaded souls do not live and reign on earth. B. B. Warfield, himself a postmillennialist, recognized that “disembodied souls” do not rule in Christ’s kingdom on earth. Correctly, he concluded that Revelation 20:4 gives us “the picture of the ‘intermediate state’” (“The Millennium and the Apocalypse,” in *Biblical Doctrines*, Banner of Truth, pp. 648, 649).

The postmillennialist interpretation supposes that Christ’s taking of the soul of the Christian to heaven at death is not resurrection when, in fact, *only* resurrection can translate a sinful earthly soul to a holy, heavenly life. The postmillennialist denies that the intermediate state involves resurrection in the face of the explicit testimony of Revelation 20 that the living in heaven of souls that had been beheaded is the first resurrection.

The Kikkian/“Christian Reconstructionist” postmillennialists are even wrong in their explanation of the binding of Satan. Kik explains the binding as restraining Satan from having “complete control over the nations of the world” (*Eschatology*, pp. 203-208). But Satan *does* have “complete control over the nations of the world.” Of course, he is not the almighty sovereign. The triune God is sovereign. But Satan controls the nations of the world as to their spiritual condition. Scripture calls him the “god of this world.” History proves that for the past 1900 odd years now, Satan has governed nations as to their spiritual and moral life.

The binding of Satan is the restraint of him in this one respect: he cannot establish the kingdom of Antichrist. This is unacceptable to postmillennialism since it has decided that Antichrist is a thing of the past, having been fulfilled in the Roman empire from about A. D. 65 to about A. D. 313.

Kik is also in error when he explains that Satan is bound by *the action of the church*. The church has the great chain. She could almost completely “restrain his influence over the nations.” It is the fault of the church that the devil has so much influence in the world. If only the church would heed the “Christian Reconstructionists” and exert herself to get and wield dominion on earth, Satan would be bound (see *Eschatology*, p.196).

This is obviously false. The angel who binds Satan is not the church, but the servant of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Christ has bound Satan. Kik’s explanation is a denial that Satan is actually bound. Since the church has not yet exerted herself to get dominion, Satan is not yet bound. But the text says that he has been bound: “. . . and bound him a thousand years” (v.2).

Revelation 20 against the Postmillennialists

Revelation 20 is no support to postmillennialism, but rather a refutation of that error. The saints do not gain earthly victory in the world; rather, they suffer and are beheaded. History does not come to its end with the earthly triumph of the church; rather, Satan is loosed, and the hordes of the ungodly attack the church and the saints. The hope held before the people of God is not a carnal kingdom on earth; rather, it is our living and reigning with Christ in heaven at death.

This hope, with its accompanying hope of bodily resurrection in the Day of Christ, does not render the Reformed amillennialist passive on earth. On the contrary. Exactly because we are assured that the worst that the foe can do is usher us into heaven and onto our thrones, we are encouraged to be faithful and diligent in our confession of the Word of God. This is the calling of the church in the world.

And this is preparation for the “little season” that is before the church, the loosing of Satan.

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