



# The Future in Our Past: Post-millennialism in American Protestantism

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**F**EW BIBLE PASSAGES HAVE SPARKED AS MUCH PRAYER, MISSION, AND REFORM as Rev 20:1-4, in which Christ reigns with the martyred and risen saints while Satan is bound in chains for a thousand years. Post-millennialism<sup>1</sup> – the belief that Christ will return after this thousand-year period – once animated not only small utopian sects but benevolent societies and some of the older, respectable churches. American protestants looked forward to the millennium as an era of peace, prosperity, and progress, in which social evils would be banished and all nations would come to faith in Christ. One need not espouse post-millennialism (the author does not) in order to recognize its importance in American religion and to appreciate the vivid contrast it makes with our own times when, as Lesslie Newbigin observes, “it is hard to find people in our society who have any sense of a worthwhile future.”<sup>2</sup> A theological critique of post-millennialism may be found

<sup>1</sup>Post-millennialism is the belief that Christ will return *after* the thousand-year reign (Rev 20:4). God’s will is achieved by improving the world rather than destroying it. The churches can hasten the millennium through evangelism, prayer, and reform. Post-millennialists combine a prophetic eschatology with an essentially optimistic and progressive view of history. *Pre*-millennialism, in contrast, has an apocalyptic eschatology in which Christ returns to judge the earth *before* the thousand year reign takes place. Pre-millennialists expect history to get worse and worse until the destruction of the world clears the way for God’s new heaven and new earth. The church’s task is to convert as many people as possible before the final cataclysm. Both pre- and post-millennialists assume that Rev 20:4 refers to a future event, and this sets them in opposition to the classic Augustinian (and Lutheran and Reformed) view that the millennium is the present age of the church militant. For more on pre-millennialism, see Craig Koester’s article, “On the Verge of the Millennium: A History of the Interpretation of Revelation,” 128-136 in this issue.

<sup>2</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 111.

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elsewhere;<sup>3</sup> this essay traces post-millennialism from puritanism to the social gospel, noting how it has informed the mission of American protestantism.

### I. PURITAN MILLENNIALISM

Eschatology in New England puritanism did not fall into clear post- or pre-millennial categories, according to James West Davidson's *The Logic of Millennial Thought*. Sermons of the puritan era reveal a wide assortment of scenarios about the timing of the millennium and the martyrdom of the witnesses (Rev 20:4), how many of the seven seals had yet to be opened (Revelation 6), or how many of the seven vials of God's wrath had yet to be poured out (Revelation 16). Chronological consensus was lacking, but the coherence and consistency of American puritan eschatology are found in the broader themes of judgment and redemption. New Englanders understood the Revelation to John as a cosmic story of redemption. Just as the individual suffers under conviction and judgment before experiencing grace, so too the world passes through travail and judgment. Progress through affliction was the way God worked with individual saints, the church, and the world. "So long as New Englanders regarded judgment as an inseparable part of salvation, they would continue to combine hopeful rhetoric with the gloom of both natural and moral calamities."<sup>4</sup>

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was never one to shrink from pronouncing divine judgment, yet he looked for the millennium to begin in this world, about the year 2,000, before the final return of Christ. During this time of peace and well-being, learning and wisdom would increase. Labor-saving devices, including new methods of global communication, would give people more time to savor "divine things." Religion would be the chief concern of all people and Christianity would spread far and wide.<sup>5</sup> From his vantage point at mid-eighteenth century, Edwards calculated that about two hundred and fifty years were needed to convert the nations to faith in Christ. The dramatic New England revivals of his own lifetime were a prelude to a millennium still many generations in the future.<sup>6</sup>

Edwards kept a notebook for interpreting current events in light of the apocalyptic timetable which he understood to be an important aspect of the book

<sup>3</sup>For example, see George Forell's essay, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought," in *Martin Luther, Theologian of the Church*, Word & World Supplement Series 2 (St. Paul: Luther Seminary, 1994) 37-47. Forell writes, "Eschatology without justification by faith is mere utopianism. For Luther, it is not history which is redemptive but Christ who came in history. It is because of Christ's justifying deed that we may have hope. This is as valid against the *Schwärmer* [enthusiasts] in Luther's time as against those who today see the historical process itself as the agent of redemption" (46).

<sup>4</sup>James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 121; see also 131-2.

<sup>5</sup>See James McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1992), especially the chapter entitled "That Glorious Work of God and the Pre-millennial Society: The Pre-millennial Age and the Millennium," 37-92.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 54. Edwards thought that it would take one half-century for Christianity "in the power and purity of it" to win over the Protestant world, another half-century to gain the ascendancy "in that which is now the *popish* world," a third half-century to subdue the "*Mohametan* world and bring in the *Jewish* nation," and another whole century to convert the heathen world to the Christian faith, placing the millennium about 250 years beyond his own lifetime (78).

of Revelation. Edwards's "conjectures and calculations about the Apocalypse were not idle amusements but serious theological business" because they expressed his faith in God's providence.<sup>7</sup> All human events must take their place in God's plan of redemption, confirming, supporting, and furthering the work of Christ, which was the heart and center of Edwards's theology. According to Stephen J. Stein, editor of Edwards's *Apocalyptic Writings*, christology defined Edwards's view of history too, for the Old Testament dispensations ended with Christ's coming, and the days of the church began with Christ's ascension. Christians share in Christ's suffering and glory, and carry forward God's plan of redemption, which is to increase over all the world until Christ's kingdom is universal. Then Christ will deliver the kingdom to his Father and the marriage feast of the Lamb will be consummated in heaven. Stein adds that this transcendent perspective does not absolve Christians from earthly responsibility but increases the pressure on the Christian life, for God's work of redemption is accomplished by the Holy Spirit working "through human instrumentalities of the church."<sup>8</sup>

A gradual yet glorious work of God was expected to bring on the millennium by means of a two-fold strategy. First, God would pour out the Spirit in revivals to build up the church. Noting "the late remarkable religious awakenings" in New England and in the British Isles, Edwards encouraged Christians everywhere to unite in "concerts of prayer" for "universal outpouring of the Spirit of God."<sup>9</sup> Second, God would pour out vials of wrath upon the enemies of the church. Edwards understood the "vials" to be specific events in human history; for example, the fifth vial (Rev 16:10) was thought to be the reformation poured out upon the papacy.<sup>10</sup> The vials would constrict Satan's rule without destroying the earth, while prayer and revival extended Christ's work of redemption to more and more people. Thus Edwards's "millennium was to come neither by a reconstruction of the temple nor through its destruction, but as a renewal of the nature of those who dwell within."<sup>11</sup> After the millennium Christ would finally return, bringing the last epoch in the history of redemption to a close. Edwards did not make the millennium the final goal in history, but kept it subordinate to the larger purposes of a transcendent God.

## II. PATRIOTIC AND PROPHETIC POST-MILLENNIALISM

By the time of Edwards's death in 1758, a new kind of post-millennialism was growing in America, a vision that linked God's future ever more closely with politics

<sup>7</sup>Stephen J. Stein, in his introduction to Edwards's *Apocalyptic Writings* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 51.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>9</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture-Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time," in *Apocalyptic Writings*, 363.

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. and trans. John F. Wilson (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) 422.

<sup>11</sup>Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1966) 64.

and nations. For the revolutionary generation, the antichrist was no longer the pope in Rome but any oppressive or arbitrary civil government. In *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, Nathan Hatch identifies a new configuration of civil and religious priorities in which “the ultimate goal of apocalyptic hope – the conversion of all nations to Christianity – became diluted with, and often subordinate to, the commitment to America as a new seat of liberty.” This political millennialism developed during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) in the rhetoric of New Englanders who abhorred the presence of a Catholic colonial power in nearby Canada. During the 1750s and ‘60s the “antichrist became more a symbol of tyranny than of heresy and the millennium much more an age of liberty than of piety.” By 1765, the year of the infamous Stamp Act, New England pulpit rhetoric against tyranny was already in place and had only to be re-deployed against Britain. Taxation without representation was of the devil, and liberty, understood as the “capacity to enjoy one’s own public and private life within limits set by defined laws rather than by the arbitrary will of those in power,” had become sacred.<sup>12</sup>

The revolutionary era found New England ministers interpreting their conflict with Great Britain in light of prophetic scriptures like Dan 2:31-35, in which king Nebuchadnezzar dreamed that he saw a great and terrible image, with a head of gold, arms and chest of silver, belly and thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet part iron and part clay. The king also dreamed of a stone, “cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces,” and these broken pieces of the vanquished image became like chaff carried away by the wind; but “the stone that smote the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.” To some New England patriots it seemed clear that the terrible image with feet of clay was Britain (or Europe in general), the stone cut without hands was the American revolution, and the mountain which grew was the American republic. In a sermon entitled “The Millennial Door Thrown Open,” one clergyman wrote:

the *political stone* which is now giving the deadly shock to the last section of the Babylonish Image...was it not the weighty stone which we all helped to lift, during the introduction and progress of that political revolution through which we have just now passed?<sup>13</sup>

After the war the new American republic came to be seen as the primary agent of redemptive history. Only a free nation could guarantee religious liberty. Without political freedom people might not be able to understand the gospel, much less receive it. Thus the advance of republican government seemed essential for the spread of the gospel and the dawn of the millennial day. As Nathan Hatch observes, “this vision of history moving toward a republican millennium” linked

<sup>12</sup>Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 24, 44, 72.

<sup>13</sup>David Austin, “The Millennial Door Thrown Open,” a 1799 sermon quoted in Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 149. Hatch notes that although Austin’s views were sometimes eccentric, his interpretation of Daniel was a “logical extension of judgments being made by numerous Congregational and Presbyterian clergymen.”

the gospel “inseparably with a libertarian political order.”<sup>14</sup> The further political liberty and republican government extended throughout the world, the closer history would move toward the thousand-year reign foretold in Rev 20:4. Thus by the 1830s Alexis DeTocqueville saw that “for Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other.”<sup>15</sup> America would lead the way toward the millennium as Christianity and democracy advanced together.<sup>16</sup>

Although it could be patriotic, post-millennialism also had its critical edge. For example, Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), a student of Edwards and a congregational pastor in Newport, Rhode Island, used his vision of the millennium to draw attention to America’s sins. In his 1774 work, *Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans*, Hopkins called slavery a great and public sin and pointed to the “shocking [and] intolerable inconsistency” of a people who refused to submit to British control and yet enslaved the black population. Hopkins sent a declaration to the Continental Congress as it met in Philadelphia in 1776, in which he called slavery a moral outrage and warned that America could not be the harbinger of the millennium unless it carried out the principles of “disinterested benevolence” in its domestic institutions. Hopkins charged that the nation which claimed for itself the rights of liberty and yet denied those rights to slaves would suffer God’s wrath.<sup>17</sup> Several years later, Hopkins’s *Treatise on the Millennium* drew upon Isaiah and the Psalms to describe a world of universal peace in which all nations would come to know Christ. This millennial vision was both a future hope and a standard by which to measure the present moral stature of the new American nation. Hopkins thus represents a departure from those who identified “the unfolding of American society with the millennium itself.”<sup>18</sup> Hopkins’s call to repentance and reform was solidly in the puritan tradition: God’s elect will be held strictly accountable for both their individual and common life.

### III. FROM THE MILLENNIUM TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In the decades before the Civil War the dominant eschatology among protestants in America was post-millennialism, and it included both reforming and patriotic impulses. This was an era when enlightenment ideals of progress and the perfectibility of human institutions seemed to complement biblical visions of the

<sup>14</sup>Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 156.

<sup>15</sup>Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 293.

<sup>16</sup>For an analysis of the perceived connection of American destiny and biblical prophecy, see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968).

<sup>17</sup>M. Darrol Bryant, “From Edwards to Hopkins: A Millennialist Critique of Political Culture,” in *The Coming Kingdom: Essays in American Millennialism & Eschatology*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant and Donald W. Dayton (Barrytown, NY: International Religious Foundation, 1983) 55-58. See also H. Richard Niebuhr’s discussion of Hopkins’s millennialism in *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937) 159, 143-6.

<sup>18</sup>Bryant, “Edwards to Hopkins,” 66. For the social critique implied in Jonathan Edwards’s millennialism see McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society*, 91-92.

future, and many protestants strove to usher in the millennium by their own individual and collective efforts. Post-millennialists believed that God works “by the established laws of nature, physical and human” and that God works through people “and their institutions to regenerate the kingdoms of this world.”<sup>19</sup> Churches, revivalists, reformers, and benevolent societies all had a role to play. During this optimistic era, many Lutherans of pietist background espoused moderate forms of post-millennialism.<sup>20</sup> Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799-1873), a leading figure in the General Synod and founder of the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg (1826), avoided rash predictions yet encouraged Christians to advance toward the millennium through evangelism, ecumenism, and benevolent societies.<sup>21</sup> A more radical sign of the times was the appearance in 1830 of a journal called *The Millennial Harbinger*, founded by Alexander Campbell (1788-1966) who also helped begin the Disciples of Christ. The *Harbinger* sought to introduce “that political and religious order of society called the millennium, which will be the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in Christian Scripture.”<sup>22</sup>

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), founder of Oberlin College and the premier revivalist of his generation, preached a strident post-millennialism: converts were to strive for both personal sanctification and social reform for the nation. Finney expected the millennium to come as soon as Christians secured enough conversions and achieved sufficient reforms. Indeed, many Finney converts invested their energies in revival, abolition, and temperance crusades, which they believed would hasten the millennium. Finney envisioned the millennium as an age of benevolence or active good-will toward others. Human beings as moral agents could either speed the progress of the millennium through active benevolence or postpone it through stubborn selfishness. Finney vigorously applied enlightenment faith in benevolence, progress, and humanitarianism to the moral issues of the day and coupled this with a revivalist’s passion for conversion. Finney’s campaign for a sanctified social order represents the high tide of post-millennialism in America.

The Civil War was a turning point for eschatology in this country. During the war itself, northern protestants “hopelessly confused the weapons of the saints with the Union’s military power and awaited the first signs of the millennium in the

<sup>19</sup>Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 36-38; see also Donald W. Dayton, “Millennial Views and Social Reform,” in *The Coming Kingdom*, 132.

<sup>20</sup>Paul P. Kuenning, *The Rise and Fall of American Lutheran Pietism: The Rejection of an Activist Heritage* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1988) 24-29, 235. Kuenning traces the post-millennial views of American Lutheran pietists to Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and contrasts the eschatology of Spener with that of Luther.

<sup>21</sup>Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1853) 289-98. This volume was used for many years as a textbook at the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg. Schmucker thought that article 17 of the *Augsburg Confession* condemned only extreme forms of millennialism.

<sup>22</sup>Alexander Campbell, in the “Prospectus” for *Millennial Harbinger*, quoted by Carey Gifford, “Space and Time as Themes in Alexander Campbell,” in *The Coming Kingdom*, 120. Campbell himself moved from a pre-millennial to a post-millennial view that affirmed America’s role in ushering in the millennium.

exploits of the Army of the Potomac."<sup>23</sup> But the "glory of the coming of the Lord" who trampled out the grapes of wrath (Rev 19:15) turned out to be an apocalypse for the nation. Many began to wonder if the pre-millennialists were correct in their belief that destruction must precede the new order. In the defeated south, it became harder than ever to believe that history was progressive; while in the north, political scandal and growing poverty in the industrialized cities meant, among other things, that the reign of Christ with the saints was nowhere in sight. Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899), the premier revivalist after the war, spoke the language of pre-millennialism when he preached that earth was a "wrecked vessel" and God had given him a lifeboat and the mandate, "Moody, save all you can."<sup>24</sup>

By the close of the nineteenth century, post-millennialism was no longer the dominant eschatology of American protestantism, but hopes for perfecting society through human efforts did not just vanish. Instead, they flowed into the new liberal protestantism, particularly the social gospel ideal of the coming kingdom. The social gospel espoused a prophetic, this-worldly eschatology (as opposed to an apocalyptic, transcendent one) in which the mission of the church was to make social institutions reflect Christian values. Washington Gladden (1836-1918), Congregational minister and apologist for the social gospel, wrote, "Religion is becoming steadily more spiritual and more ethical, less formal, less dogmatic, less crudely emotional."<sup>25</sup> Thus the social gospel replaces the old-fashioned "millennium" with something more progressive and sophisticated: the kingdom of God. The individual conversion experience was no longer the *sine qua non* of Protestant advance. Rather, society as a whole was to be Christianized. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), another leading exponent of the social gospel, wrote that his focus on the kingdom of God called for Christians to take a broader view of salvation than that of the individual soul and seek nothing less than "the transfiguration of the social order."<sup>26</sup>

Rauschenbusch's emphasis on social ethics for a new industrial society drew from the liberal German theology of Albrecht Ritschl; Rauschenbusch was also acquainted with some evolutionary and socialist thought. But from American protestantism he inherited the hopeful activism of post-millennialism. The social gospel movement is identified as a direct descendant of post-millennialism in H. Richard Niebuhr's classic essay, *The Kingdom of God in America*. While the older movement "had proceeded in dialectical fashion from individual to communal hope," Niebuhr notes, in the social gospel this dialectic disappeared as "liberalism began to outweigh Evangelicalism more and more." Social gospel liberalism lost

<sup>23</sup>James Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven: Yale University, 1978) x.

<sup>24</sup>Dwight L. Moody, sermon quoted by Donald Dayton, "Millennial Views and Social Reform," in *The Coming Kingdom*, 133-34.

<sup>25</sup>Washington Gladden, *Burning Questions of the Life That Now Is, And of That Which is to Come* (New York: Century, 1890) 242. In the essay, "Where is the Kingdom of God," 223-48, Gladden, like Finney, relies heavily upon benevolence as a sign of the kingdom and selfishness as an enemy of the kingdom.

<sup>26</sup>Walter Rauschenbusch, "A Theology for the Social Gospel" in *A Rauschenbusch Reader*, comp. Benson Landis (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957) 114-19.

“the sense of broken relationship” between God and human beings, “between the present and the coming kingdom.”<sup>27</sup> The divine transcendence which had been so important to Jonathan Edwards was gone.

The various millennial views articulated within puritanism were now polarized into divergent eschatologies. Many persons of pre-millennialist persuasion contributed to a new coalition called fundamentalism, a combination of emphases on individual salvation, personal holiness, a particular set of doctrines, and an apocalyptic, dispensational eschatology.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile persons of post-millennialist persuasion could switch to pre-millennialism (which many did) or re-invest their hopes for social progress in the new protestant liberalism, seeking the salvation of social institutions through an activist, this-worldly eschatology. Those who believe that the church’s primary responsibility is to help shape the social order are, at least to some extent, working out of the post-millennial heritage filtered through the social gospel.

#### IV. OVER-BELIEF AND UNDER-BELIEF

William James’s concept of “over-belief” is one helpful way to understand post-millennialism. Over-belief is the extension of a basic religious belief into a more exact construction than reason or evidence (we add scripture or tradition) will support. In the case of post-millennialism, the basic belief is in the accomplishment of God’s purpose for human history *within* history. The “over-belief” is in the specific duration and characteristics of the period called the millennium (or the kingdom of God, the Great Society, the New World Order, and so on), and what is necessary to bring it about. William James does not rush to condemn over-belief, but remarks that “the most interesting and valuable things” about people are usually “their over-beliefs.”<sup>29</sup> Two “valuable things” about post-millennialism are its energetic contributions to the anti-slavery movement and its zeal for spreading the gospel through Christian missions. And one “interesting” thing about post-millennialism is the sharp contrast it poses with western Christianity today, which has undergone a loss of *telos* and exhibits a “diminished sense of responsibility for public affairs.”<sup>30</sup> Old-time post-millennialism does not provide a workable eschatology but it does reveal a source of the fervor of previous generations. It also points up present-day “under-belief” in God’s work in history. The role of the future in our American past may prompt Christians to ask whether and how our confession of faith – we believe that Christ “will come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end” – quickens the life of the church and inspires its mission today.

<sup>27</sup>Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God in America*, 161; see also 194.

<sup>28</sup>See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1980) 43-138, for a detailed description of this coalition.

<sup>29</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902) 503-5.

<sup>30</sup>Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 113.