1000 Years: A Better World Before the End?

A sermon on Postmillennialism

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Gold Silverware and the Charger

One holiday in the 1970's, my family and I gathered at my aunt's house for a customary holiday dinner. My aunt was very picky and precise, to, some would say, a fault. Everything always had to be just right, or she couldn't enjoy herself. One year she took it up another notch. The table was set with gold silverware, which was unusual enough that none of us had ever sat down to anything like it. And my plate sat on something called a charger, something I had never seen at a family meal before, or anywhere else for that matter.

We felt a little out of place. But we didn't say a word. We just thought it, and ate the comfortable food and enjoyed being together, because that was what we had come for. The dinner had been prepared with great care, and I think she wanted it to be perfect. We, on the other hand, were simply glad to be there.

If you have ever tried to make life perfect before you could relax in it, you know how that dinner feels. And if you have ever thought the good life is waiting on the other side of getting everything just right, then let's talk about what that longing really promises, and what it cannot deliver.

That same longing shows up in the Church's hope as well. Some faithful Christians believe the Church must first make the world ready, bringing the nations into order and blessing, so that Christ can come at last. It is a hope born of love for the Gospel, and it deserves a fair hearing. But it asks what my aunt's table asked of us: that we wait until everything is in place before we can rest.

The Hope of a Golden Age

Postmillennialism holds that the Gospel will prevail across the nations before Christ returns, producing an extended era of righteousness and blessing, and only then will the Lord come again. This is not a fringe idea. Many Presbyterian churches have historically held it, and some Baptist teachers have as well. These are people who love the Gospel and want to see it honored in the world. So let us hear their case as they would make it.

The case begins with the Great Commission, where the risen Christ says:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Postmillennialists take the word "all" seriously. They expect the making of disciples to reach the nations as nations, so that the Gospel shapes whole peoples and not only scattered individuals.

They add the parable of the leaven. Jesus says:

"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:33)

In their reading, this is a picture of the Gospel working quietly through the whole loaf until nothing in the dough is untouched.

Psalm 72 is their great promise of the nations. The psalmist sings of the king:

"He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth… May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!" (Psalm 72:8, 11)

Isaiah speaks of the earth itself:

"They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:9)

Romans 11 is the other passage they lean on most. Paul writes of Israel:

"a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25-26)

Postmillennialists read the fullness of the Gentiles as the Gospel reaching every nation, and all Israel as a great turning of the Jewish people to Christ before the end. On this reading, the Church's witness reaches a fullness in history that Paul himself expects. Others read all Israel as the whole people of God, and the fullness of the Gentiles as the completed number of the elect. Faithful Christians stand on both sides of that question, and we do well to hold our readings with humility.

They expect the era to look like a Christianised society in the fullest sense, though not a perfect one, followed by the Lord's coming to judge, raise the dead, and bring the new creation.

Revelation 20 speaks of a thousand years, and they read it as describing the present age, not a future golden era. The thousand years are the Church's reign with Christ, and the "first resurrection" is the new birth. Its key picture is the saints reigning with Christ.

"And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any more, until the thousand years were ended." (Revelation 20:2-3)

The thousand years do not last forever. At their close, the one who was bound is loosed for one final rebellion.

"And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand of the sea." (Revelation 20:7-8)

Postmillennialists place this final rebellion at the very end of the thousand years, just before Christ returns. In their reading, the Church's long victory is the setting in which that assault is met, and it ends the same way for every

enemy of God: fire comes down from heaven and consumes them (Revelation 20:9).

Confidence That Rises and Falls

Have you ever noticed how quickly our confidence follows the news? When the Church is growing, we feel the promise is close. When the numbers fall, when a generation walks away, when the nations seem to harden, we begin to wonder whether God's promise is still on track. A hope built on the Church's visible success will always rise and fall with the Church's visible condition. That is a heavy thing to ask of a congregation.

A Victory Already Won

The scheme places the completion of God's promise in the record of history. The victory the Church hopes to see is a victory she has yet to build, a golden age that must be finished before the Lord can come. But Scripture points us somewhere else. The decisive victory has already been won on a cross and at an empty tomb, and it is that finished work, not the length of our progress, that sets the date of hope. The day of Christ's return is not waiting for us to finish our task.

Two Readings of the Thousand Years

The difference between these readings is precise, and it matters for how we live. Both postmillennialism and amillennialism affirm that Christ reigns now. They part ways on what the thousand years describe, and on what comes before His return.

Postmillennialism places a golden age inside history before the Lord comes. The thousand years lie ahead, and the Church's success is expected to bring them about. Amillennialism reads Revelation 20 as describing the present age, the span between Christ's first and second comings, in which He reigns through His Word and Sacraments while the Church lives among the nations. For the amillennialist there is no golden age to build. Christ's reign is real now, and His return does not wait on our progress.

Most of the historic churches, including the Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions, have generally favored amillennialism. The early Church and Augustine read Revelation 20 this way, and the Augsburg Confession rejects the expectation of a worldly kingdom of the saints before the resurrection. The return texts also have a single shape: one coming, one resurrection, one judgment. Jesus says:

"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:27)

Amillennialism keeps the Church's hope where the creed keeps it, on the Christ who will come, raise the dead, and judge.

All Authority

Hear what the risen Christ says to His disciples, and to us: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He does not say that authority will be given once the nations are won. He says it has been given, now, from the place of His resurrection. The one who sends us out is already the Lord of heaven and earth. So we do not go out to earn His reign. We go out because He reigns, and because He has promised to be with us always, to the end of the age.

Faithful Waiting

Here is what that means for us this week. We are tempted to measure our faithfulness by what we can see, the numbers, the outcomes, the signs of progress. But Christ calls us to faithfulness whether or not the world has caught up with us. So we keep speaking His Word, we keep baptising and teaching, and we keep loving our neighbours, not to bring about the kingdom ourselves, but because the King is already reigning and has given us His promise.

In practice, this means we can rest. We pray "Your kingdom come" every week because we trust the answer does not depend on our tallies. When the numbers disappoint us, we return to the font and the table, where Christ gives

His promises in water, bread, and wine. We bring our neighbors the Word, and we leave the harvest in the hands of the One who sends the rain.

Think of that dinner table, the gold silverware and the charger, and the family who didn't say a word and simply ate and was glad to be together. That is the kind of rest Christ gives. You do not have to get everything just right for Him to be with you.

Christ Reigns Even Now

And hear this gently, because it is meant for the tired and the anxious. Christ says to His disciples:

"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

And Paul tells the Thessalonians what the return of Christ will mean for those who belong to Him:

"And so we will always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

The Church does not need a golden age to be sure of her Lord. She needs only His promise, and a place to wait for Him.

So we wait, not idly, and not anxiously, but with our eyes on the One who has all authority. The day is coming when He will return, the dead will rise, judgment will be spoken, and God will dwell with His people forever. Until then, He is with us always, to the end of the age. Christ reigns even now.

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