Eschatology by Ethos:

Why the "Optimism" vs. "Pessimism" Paradigm Doesn't Work

Anyone familiar with the in-house feud between Reformed postmillenarians and Reformed amillenarians knows that the debate between these two positions is often framed in terms of "optimistic" postmillenarians vs. "pessimistic" amillenarians. Despite the widespread use and apparent utility of these labels, I remain unconvinced that one can formulate a proper and biblical eschatology merely by identifying a position's distinctive ethos and then choosing the most "optimistic" of the various options.

To avoid being labeled an "eschatological pessimist"—a negative label that postmillenarians have successfully pinned on dispensationalists—a number of Reformed amillenarians self-consciously identify themselves as "optimistic" amillenarians. In making this identification, the optimistic amillenarian attempts to co-opt the attractive rhetoric of cultural progress and transformation used by postmillenarians, while at the same time avoiding the serious exegetical problem associated with postmillennialism—a rather embarrassing shortage of biblical passages in the New Testament that teach such a view.

While I am "optimistic" about the kingdom of God and the progress it will make during the interadvental age (and would likely qualify to be an "optimistic" amillenarian), I'm not so sure an unqualified affirmation of "optimism" is the best way for Reformed amillenarians to respond to those who determine the soundness of one's eschatological position using the optimism/pessimism paradigm. Here's why.

No Christian who truly believes that the resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurates the new creation and guarantees the final victory over Satan and his kingdom at the end of the age wants to be identified as a "pessimist." No doubt, the New Testament is crystal clear about who wins in the end. God will save his elect, usher in the age to come, consummate his kingdom, raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. These truths are certainly reason enough to be optimistic about the eventual outcome of the present course of world history, especially when one considers what Jesus Christ did to secure our redemption from sin's power and consequence. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ removes the curse and defeats our greatest enemy, which is death. No small thing and a very good reason to be optimistic.

But the New Testament also has a fair bit to say about the nature and course of this "present evil age" (as Paul refers to it in Galatians 1:4), and this important element of biblical teaching should give us pause as to whether or not "optimism" is the best category to use in identifying the essence of one's eschatology. After all, Paul warns Christians of perilous times until Christ returns (2 Tim. 3:1ff). Likewise, Peter warns the church of scoffers who mock the claims of Christ because they are enslaved to their sinful desires (2 Pet. 3:1ff). This too is a warning that extends until the time when Jesus returns and puts all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25ff). Jesus himself speaks of world conditions at the time of his return as being similar to the way things were in the days of Noah (Matt. 24:37–38)—hardly a period in world history characterized by the Christianizing of the nations and the near-universal acceptance of the gospel associated with so-called optimistic forms of eschatology.

Aside from the fact that many contemporary notions of optimism have stronger ties to the Enlightenment

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than to the New Testament—I'll leave that debate to the social historians—the New Testament's teaching regarding human depravity (i.e., Eph. 4:17–19) should give us pause not to be too optimistic about what sinful men and women can accomplish in terms of turning the City of Man into a temple of God.

The symbolic image of Babylon the Great in Revelation 17–18 is set forth as the epitome of the City of Man reigning on the earth from the time of the Caesars (when John recorded this vision in Revelation before the end of the first century), until the time when that city is displaced at the end of the age by the heavenly city coming down from heaven (cf. Rev. 21–22). There is not the slightest hint in any of this imagery that Babylon is remodeled over time, purged of its evil, and cleaned up by the church's efforts to transform it. Rather, after a long and tragic history of fornication with the kings of the earth, and the persecution of the saints, the city eventually falls under divine judgment, even as God's people are called to flee from her midst (Rev. 18:4). Babylon is not transformed. It is destroyed in judgment and summarily replaced by the heavenly city.

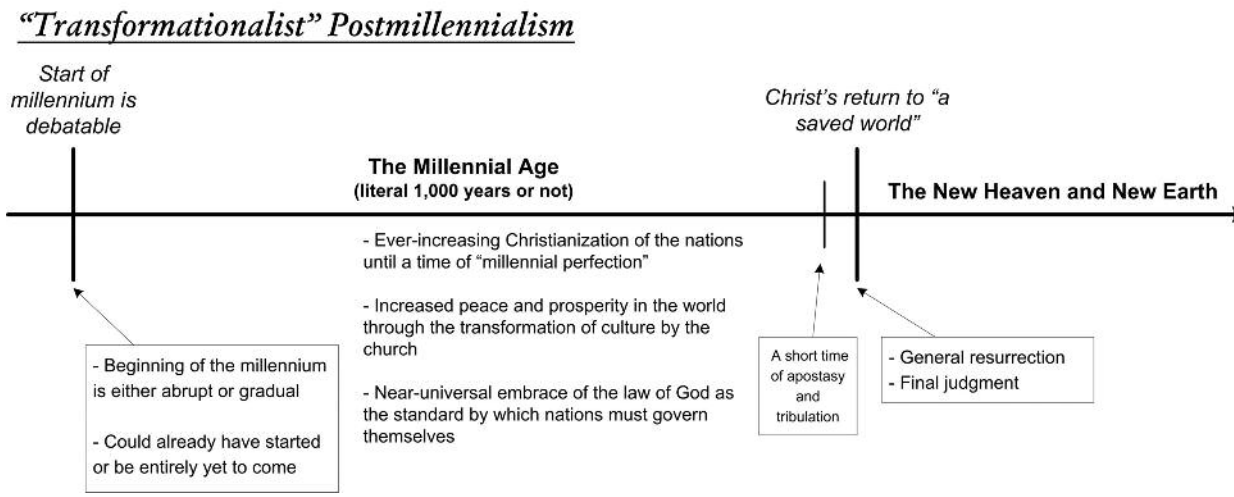
"Optimism," when defined as some sort of moral and cultural progress throughout the interadvental period, simply does not fit the biblical data. Rather, the biblical picture is one of stark realism regarding the human plight. Because of the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are simultaneously given a sure and certain hope, grounded in the eschatological expectation of the glorious and final removal of the curse resulting from human sin. This occurs at Christ's return, but not before. This means that any optimism regarding the eventual outcome of redemptive history should be tempered by the biblical reality of human sin as an ever-present force in the world until Jesus returns. Yet that dark and gloomy pessimism, often associated with focusing upon the fallen human condition just described, must be constantly evaluated in light of the blessed hope. The glory of the final consummation is not an insignificant thing. It is the basis for all human hope in this present evil age (cf. Rom. 8:18–25).

In light of the New Testament's teaching regarding the future course of history and the effects of sin upon our fallen race, I would suggest that we find a better category than "optimism" to describe the essence of our eschatology as Reformed amillenarians. It is quite possible to be optimistic about what God is doing in advancing his kingdom while retaining a healthy and biblical skepticism about the City of Man, and how effectively and thoroughly it may be Christianized before the end of the age.

How did the use of the labels "optimism" and "pessimism" become a standard of evaluation within the Reformed/Presbyterian world not only of competing eschatological positions, but also as a category used to determine how the church relates to culture? How did the focus upon God's people living this life in light of the next give way to a preoccupation with the transformation of culture in the present? Why did the former become "pessimistic," and why did the latter claim the "optimistic" label? In the balance of this essay, I will briefly address these questions.

The Rise of Eschatology by Optimism vs. Pessimism

A bit of history is vital to understand how the use of these categories became so prominent within the Reformed camp. Even though Loraine Boettner's postmillennial volume *The Millennium* was published in 1957, eschatology by



Some of this information is from *A Case for Amillennialism* by Kim Riddlebarger

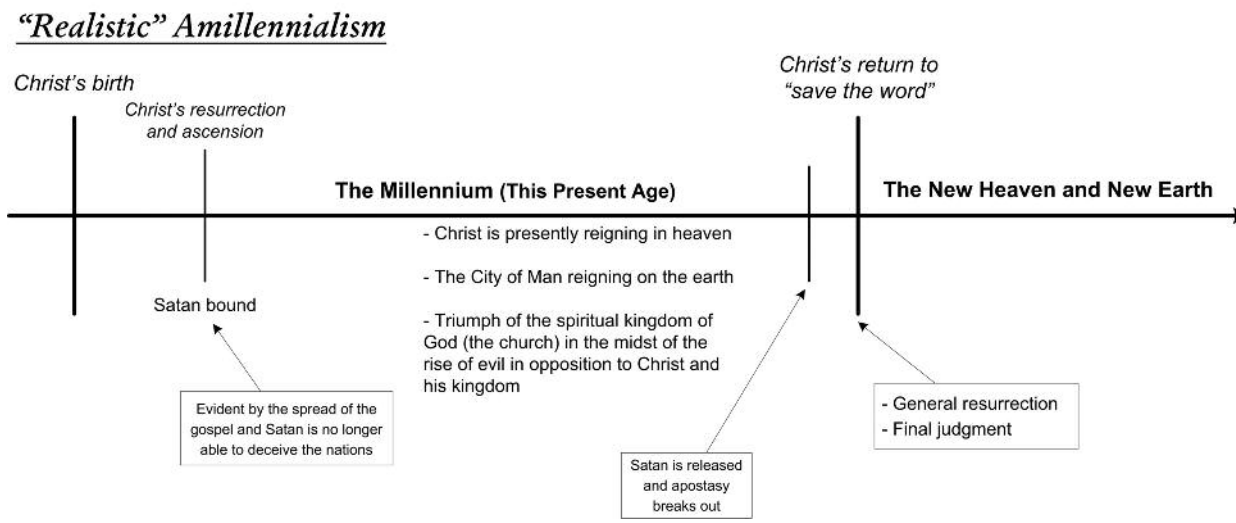
ethos gained significant traction in Reformed circles with the 1971 publication of J. Marcellus Kik's *An Eschatology of Victory*. The title captures the essence of the book. If postmillenarians hold to an eschatology of victory, then all other positions are necessarily tied to some sort of eschatological pessimism (i.e., "defeat").

The implication that those who do not embrace Kik's victorious eschatology are "defeatist" or pessimistic makes perfect sense, given the fact that Kik labored against the backdrop of the steady rise in popularity of dispensationalism among culturally and theologically conservative Reformed and evangelical churches. If, as dispensationalists held, Christians were to be raptured off the earth before things really got bad, why worry about politics and culture, education, and other "worldly" endeavors? Instead, dispensationalists insisted that Christians must focus upon evangelism. Yet, this was judged to be essentially pessimistic and to be rejected in light of postmillennial expectations—that Jesus will reign over the earth through his church for one thousand years, *before* he returns.

Shortly after the publication of Kik's book, R. J. Rushdoony's *Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973) and Greg Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (1977) were also distributed by Presbyterian & Reformed (known for publication of distinctly Reformed books and literature), making these volumes readily available to a new generation of Reformed Christians who were wrestling with important questions about the apparent decline of Christian influence upon American culture, and the rising eschatological sentiment that told people not to engage the culture, and to focus instead almost exclusively on missions and evangelism. After all, it was the eschatological pessimists who argued that because Christ is coming back soon we shouldn't be polishing the brass on a sinking ship. With the publication of these volumes, a new form of eschatological optimism made its way into the Reformed bloodstream—one closely tied to the transformation of culture.

It was not long before the postmillennial expectations found in Boettner and Kik became the eschatological foundation for the movement known as theonomy (or Christian reconstructionism). Not only were Christians to actually polish the brass because it would be a long time before the ship would sink (namely, the thousand years of the millennial age), but the cruise itself would inevitably lead to the calmer seas of cultural progress, seen as the fruit of nations now converted to the cause of Christ in willing submission to the law of God as the universally accepted standard by which the nations must govern themselves. Theonomists contend that God's law as revealed to Israel (even in its theocratic context) is the proper standard of all human ethics, including civil government.

It is important to notice that a very particular kind of eschatological optimism is in view here—one closely tied to gospel progress and the Christianization of the nations in this present age, and not connected to the final outcome of God's redemptive purposes (i.e., the return of Jesus Christ). While this distinction illustrates a major difference between amillenarians and postmillenarians, a subtle but important shift also took place when, according to theonomic postmillenarians, gospel progress was understood as the vehicle for universal cultural transformation. "Optimistic" Christians are not only to evangelize the world, but they also must engage the surrounding culture with the goal of transforming it. Transformation of culture



becomes the church's mission. Transforming culture is no longer understood to be the incidental fruit of the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The pronounced shift away from missions and evangelism to that of cultural transformation is one that people don't often recognize, yet one that dramatically colors one's understanding of eschatological optimism. Those who see cultural transformation as being in some way part of the church's mission are labeled "optimists," while those (i.e., the dispensationalists) who did not see transformation as tied to the church's mission were labeled eschatological "pessimists." In other words, nontransformationalists (even Reformed amillenarians) were much too much like dispensationalists and other forms of premillenarians. They were too pessimistic. And it's not good to be pessimistic.

The tie between the compilation of Kik's exegetical essays on Matthew 24 and Revelation 20 and the rise of theonomy is critical in this regard. It is important to notice that Kik sees himself standing in the non-theonomic postmillennial tradition of Old Princeton.[1] Rushdoony (a founding father of theonomy, who wrote the forward to Kik's volume) sees Kik's book as an important response to what he regards as a latent Manichaeanism (dualism between spirit and matter) in the church, characteristic of the increasingly popular premillennialism that, according to Rushdoony, "surrender[s] the world to the devil." According to Rushdoony, "Any true revival of Biblical faith will also be a revival of postmillennialism."[2] If the goal of the church is to transform culture and not simply to leave culture to the devil, then there must be an eschatological foundation. Postmillennialism fits the bill.

The specific content for this new theonomic brand of eschatological optimism was set forth in Rushdoony's *Institutes of Biblical Law* and in Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. The charge often raised by those reading Rushdoony and Bahnsen was that if you were not interested in transforming culture, you were not only a pessimist, you might even be Manichaean. If you fail to embrace this optimistic eschatology, you now have two strikes against you.

Postmillenarians of previous generations (especially among the Scots and the Old Princetonians) defined the essence of postmillennialism in terms of the Christianization of the nations, which they believed was the necessary fruit of the worldwide spread and influence of the gospel. As David B. Calhoun points out in his two-volume treatment of the history of Princeton Theological Seminary and its key figures, a remarkable interest in missions and the evangelization of the nations was at the heart of this brand of postmillennialism, at least at Princeton Seminary.[3] As the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth, the nations will bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ. In this form of postmillennialism, the focus was squarely on world missions—the cause of increase of the knowledge of Christ, which in turn produced the profound transformation of the nations. Christians were optimistic about the missionary enterprise, but saw the transformation of culture only as a consequence of the missionary enterprise, not its *raison d'être*.

Charles Hodge set forth this basic postmillennial expectation in his famous *Systematic Theology*. Hodge believed that "millennial perfection" will be achieved before Christ returns, and this in conjunction with the expansion of the influence of Christianity, which produces great advances in all areas of society.[4] While believing that millennial perfection would be attained at some point in the future, Hodge also reminds those who would insist that the millennial age is characterized by unbroken progress that such may not be the case. Says Hodge, "Experience concurs with Scripture in teaching that the kingdom of Christ passes through many vicissitudes." In other words, "It has its times of depression and its seasons of exaltation and prosperity."[5] The kingdom of God, Hodge says, will experience seasons of blessing and times of testing. But nonetheless, it will spread to the ends of the earth and bring about what Hodge calls a millennial perfection, before a brief but severe period of tribulation for the people of God. Human sinfulness will remain, although restrained through common grace and the advance of the gospel.

Of all the Princeton theologians, B. B. Warfield had the most to say about millennial expectations.[6] While Warfield's exegesis of the critical millennial texts (i.e., Rev. 20) tended to be amillennial, Warfield self-consciously rejected the amillennialism of his Dutch Reformed friend Abraham Kuyper and young colleague at Princeton, Geerhardus Vos. Warfield was an avowed postmillenarian. Warfield's vision for the future was likewise grounded in gospel progress:

> If you wish, as you lift your eyes to the far horizon of the future, to see looming on the edge of time the glory of a saved world...and that in His own good time and way [God] will bring the world in its entirety to the feet of Him whom He has not hesitated to present to our adoring love not merely as the Saviour of our own souls but as the Saviour of the world....The scriptures teach an eschatological universalism, not an each and every universalism. When the Scriptures say that Christ came to save the world, that He does save the world, and that the world shall be saved by Him....They mean that He came to save and does

> save the human race; and that the human race is being led by God into a racial salvation: that in the age-long development of the race of men, it will attain at last unto a complete salvation, and our eyes will be greeted with the glorious spectacle of a saved world.[7]

It has been correctly said that the difference between the postmillennial Warfield and the amillennial Geerhardus Vos was that Warfield believed that Jesus Christ returned to a "saved" world, while Vos argued Christ returned to "save" the world. This difference of opinion between postmillenarians like Warfield and amillenarians like Vos remains to this day, and is thought by many to be a clear indication of postmillennial "optimism" vs. amillennial "pessimism." It is one thing to be optimistic about the eventual evangelism of the world through the spread of the gospel. It is quite another to see the goal of evangelism as the rise of nations governing themselves by the theocratic elements of the Law of Moses.

Enter Greg Bahnsen and "The *Prima Facie*" Case for Postmillennialism

Theonomists often speak of the optimism of their postmillennial eschatology and their expectations that the law of God will become the standard by which governments render civil justice, but the shift away from the emphases of older forms of postmillennialism (missions and evangelism) to a focus upon cultural transformation (especially the transformation or even the "taking back" of American culture from the secularists) was already taking place when Kik's work was published.

The use of "optimism" vs. "pessimism" as categories to evaluate eschatological positions reached its zenith in Greg Bahnsen's influential essay, "The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism."[8] So far as I know, it is through the influence of this particular essay that the optimistic/pessimistic paradigm became a popular benchmark for evaluating eschatological views based upon their particular ethos.

In his own unique and triumphalistic style, Bahnsen sees the defining essence of postmillennialism (especially in contrast to both premillennialism and amillennialism) as "its essential *optimism* for the present age. This confident attitude in the power of Christ's kingdom, the power of the gospel, the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer, and the progress of the great commission, sets postmillennialism apart from the essential pessimism of amillennialism and premillennialism."[9] Bahnsen's comment reflects traditional postmillennial concerns, although Bahnsen now makes the ethos of his view (optimism) the basic standard of comparison between his position and others.

This kind of argument has powerful rhetorical teeth and certainly plays well in a world that already imbibes from the Enlightenment notion of progress. Who wants to be a pessimist? Since dispensationalism was largely anathema to Reformed Christians, if you could make the charge stick that amillenarians were close to dispensationalists in ways they had not realized before, so much the better—at least from Bahnsen's perspective.

But even as Bahnsen makes the claim that amillenarians and premillenarians are essentially pessimistic, he subtly attempts to capture the flag for his own view as the majority opinion within the Reformed tradition. With a fair bit of audacity, Bahnsen claims that "the postmillennial hope has been the persistent viewpoint of most Reformed scholars from the sixteenth century into the early twentieth century."[10] I beg to differ with Bahnsen's claim—but again, another debate for another time. No doubt, there have been many postmillenarians within the Reformed and Presbyterian world, but Bahnsen boldly overstates the case. Perhaps he's a bit too optimistic in his evaluation of the Reformed tradition's acceptance of postmillennialism.

That said, the issue under discussion in this essay is that while postmillenarians have contended that a time of gospel progress will precede the second coming of Christ, until the rise of theonomy, postmillenarians have been generally clear that eschatological progress must be tempered by the biblical reality—that there will be periods of unbelief and the persecution of God's people, as well as a time of great apostasy throughout the millennial age before Christ returns. But this biblical realism seems to disappear when eschatological optimism is transferred from the success of the missionary enterprise to the transformation of culture.

"Optimism" and "Pessimism" as Categories for Understanding the Church's Mission

After Bahnsen's significant reworking of traditional postmillennial eschatology into a theonomic framework now focused upon social ethics instead of world evangelism, there is little room left for the biblical realism of the earlier forms of postmillennialism, much less the supposed pessimism of amillennialism. Since the emphasis in Bahnsen's system falls squarely upon the transformation of culture through a near-universal embrace of the law of God among the nations, using Bahnsen's standard of evaluation, it would be a demonstration of rank unbelief (much less pessimism) to allow that during the inter-

advental period the nations should, or even could, govern themselves by natural law (understood to be an aspect of common grace in the estimation of many Reformed thinkers), and not by the same theocratic system of government given by God to ancient Israel.

Granted, not all who wish to engage the culture and transform it are postmillenarians or theonomists. But whenever anyone takes up the label "optimistic amillenarian," or "optimistic whatever it might be," they are using a label developed in the context of an intramural debate about the nature and character of the millennial age, and are not giving sufficient consideration to the biblical data regarding the abiding character of human sin that has long characterized amillennialism and also most forms of postmillennialism.

The charge is often levied by the self-proclaimed optimists that it is the dispensationalists—not anyone who claims the mantle "Reformed"—who focus on evangelism to the exclusion of transformation. Why would any self-respecting Reformed Christian want to be a pessimist? Dispensationalists are the pessimists! Those who see the world as requiring the final intervention of Jesus Christ in order for final salvation to come about—amillenarians and dispensationalists alike—are accused of being Manichaean in their thinking (however unintentionally they may embrace the error). And it is argued that such pessimists deny the Lordship of Christ by leaving the world, supposedly, to the devil.

Understood in the context of the question as to whether or not one leaves the nations to the devil (considered the supreme form of eschatological pessimism), or whether one seeks to claim the nations for Jesus Christ (as optimists should), the optimistic/pessimistic paradigm certainly has new life, due to the prevalence of the discussion about how we as Christians relate to contemporary culture. Those who wish to transform culture—or who wish to claim the arts, sciences, and cities for Christ—are self-declared optimists, while those who tend to define the kingdom of God in relationship to the Word and Sacrament ministry of the church are labeled pessimists because of their focus upon an otherworldly kingdom.

As an aside, one interesting irony in all of this is that while most in the Reformed and Presbyterian world once identified the papacy as the seat of the antichrist, many—now having embraced a theonomic ethic—look with a fair bit of nostalgia back to Christendom as a glorious age when the church (under the authority of the papacy) ruled the nations. I for one am not warmed by the thought, but am amused by the irony.

It is at this point that the optimistic/pessimistic paradigm completely breaks down. Not only does the paradigm fail to account for the biblical teaching regarding the successful spread of Christ's kingdom and the simultaneous tribulation and persecution facing the church militant throughout the course of the present age (what I call a biblical "realism"), but it also fails miserably to explain the church's relation to culture. While I see little evidence in the New Testament that the church is to focus upon transforming culture as part of its mission (culture will be transformed incidentally, however, when the church is faithful to its mission), I do see vast evidence that the mission of the church in this age is to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, discipline its erring members, and demonstrate Christ's compassion to the poor and needy among its ranks.

Since these things constitute the church's prescribed mission, whenever Christians faithfully endeavor to fulfill it we should fully expect people to come to faith in Jesus Christ, and that these new Christians will serve as salt and light to the surrounding culture. That is cause for optimism. But since Babylon the Great is not due for remodeling before its eventual demolition, I do not see much value in considering myself either an optimist or a pessimist. I am, however, perfectly satisfied to remain a biblical realist. ■

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[1]J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1971), 4.

[2]Kik, ix.

[3]David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996).

[4]Cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), III:792.

[5]Hodge, III:858.

[6]See my essay "Princeton and the Millennium" at http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/theological-essays.

[7]B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 99–103.

[8]Greg Bahnsen, "The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* III, no. 2 (Winter 1976/77), 48–105.

[9]Bahnsen, 66–67.

[10]Bahnsen, 68.