

REFORMED ESCHATOLOGY

A JUDEO-CENTRIC CRITIQUE

The nature of Reformed eschatology is comprised of several distinguishing characteristics. However it seems unfortunate that these tend to work against the Reformation principle of “*Reformatus est semper reformandum*,” that is “Reformed yet always reforming,” and especially at the level of Scripture exegesis.

To begin with there is the thread of Augustinianism. From the fourth century onward, Aurelius Augustine has continued to be a hovering influence over Christendom, and particularly with regard to the church in its institutional form. Crawford Gribben provides an excellent summary of this prime historic root.

After the rapid decay of the early church, Puritanism really began with St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430), as Richard Muller noted in *Christ and the Decree* (1986): ‘Reformed theology appears not as a monolithic structure – not, in short, as ‘Calvinism’ – but as a form of Augustinian theology and piety capable of considerable variation in its form and presentation.’ Many elements of Augustine’s thought remained paradigmatic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His *City of God* [prepared between 413 and 426 AD], for example, was the first catalyst of puritanism’s eschatological innovations.¹

The alleged purpose of Augustine in this classic was to oppose carnal millennialism and uphold a more spiritual understanding of the kingdom of God.

[H]is antipathy towards millennialism was such that, mainly under his influence, it was declared heretical by the Council of Ephesus in 431. . . . Augustine’s teaching exercised phenomenal influence in succeeding centuries, but the fact that the Reformation confessions needed to reiterate the Ephesian council’s ban – one thousand years after its composition – demonstrates the perennial popularity of millenarian ideas.²

Hence it is not uncommon for Reformed Christians to enthuse and so revere Augustine, as Luther did with the frequent endearing term of “blessed,” that it becomes almost unthinkable that his eschatology and related ecclesiology could be wrong at a point believed to be so essential to the character of the Christian church. In this regard, as a Baptist, Sam Waldron should carefully weigh the doctrine of Augustine on baptism as well as his militant opposition to the Donatists. However, allow James Carroll, as a Catholic, to sum up Augustine’s eschatological/ecclesiological doctrinal endowment.

The legacy of Augustine’s teaching on the Jews is a double-edged sword. On one side, against Chrysostom and even Ambrose, it requires an end to all violent assaults against synagogues, Jewish property, and Jewish persons. . . . On the other side, Augustine’s relatively benign attitude toward Jews is rooted still in assumptions of supercessionism that would prove to be deadly. The

¹ Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium*, pp. 33-34. The reference is to Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, p. 176.

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

“witness” prescription attributed to him—Let them survive, but not thrive!—would underlie the destructive ambivalence that marked Catholic attitudes toward Jews from then on. . . This is the legacy that haunts the Catholic Church into the twenty-first century, a perverse legacy from which, despite the twentieth-century’s jolts, the Church is not yet free.³

It only needs to be added that a considerable part of evangelical Reformed Christianity, along with many associated strains of Calvinism, with their common admiration for Augustine, similarly need to face up to their imbibing of an eschatological legacy that, from an ethical perspective, ranging from indifference to antipathy concerning the Jew, is to be condemned.

It should not be unexpected then that this preceding lineage should lead to confessionalism that became similarly freighted with the Augustinian eschatology. Thus the Augsburg Confession, 1530, and similarly the second Helvetic Confession, 1566, condemned those “who now scatter Jewish opinions, that, before the resurrection of the dead, the godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world, the wicked being every where suppressed [the saints alone, the pious, shall have a worldly kingdom, and shall exterminate all the godless].”⁴ More recently *The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* has declared:

With the Augsburg Confession (Art. XVII) we reject every type of millennialism, or Chiliasm, the opinions that Christ will return visibly to this earth a thousand years before the end of the world and establish a dominion of the Church over the world; or that before the end of the world the Church is to enjoy a season of special prosperity; or that before a general resurrection on Judgment Day a number of departed Christians or martyrs are to be raised again to reign in glory in this world; or that before the end of the world a universal conversion of the Jewish nation (of Israel according to the flesh) will take place.

Amillennialism, however, is the teaching that there will be no millennium of perfect peace on earth before or after Christ’s second coming. The Lutheran church, on the basis of the Bible, holds to this point of view. The Bible does not teach that there will be a definite 1,000-year period of time during which Christ will reign on earth visibly. Christ Himself said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36); furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that we Christians are looking for “a new heaven and a new earth” (2 Pet.3:13)—not an era of prosperity on the present earth.⁵

Hence Iain Murray, being very much a representative of the Reformed emphasis of *The Banner of Truth Trust*, seems to express admiration for the eschatological emphasis of the main sixteenth century confessions when he writes that, “all the Confessional statements of the Reformed churches four hundred years ago refused to identify millenarianism with historic Christianity and spoke rather of the return of Jesus Christ as coincident with the day of judgment.”⁶ The inferential tone here is that “historic Christianity” has an innate legitimacy about it that, when it suits, can be appealed to with regard to eschatology, though certainly not with regard to soteriology. This is the same sort of accommodation that, for the sake of a Reformed ideal, is usually silent concerning many of the Reformer’s denunciation and

³ James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword*, pp. 218-219.

⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, III, p. 18.

⁵ *Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*. Official Web Site.

⁶ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, p. xvii.

persecution of the Anabaptists, concerning which they were terribly wrong. In response, it simply needs to be pointed out that the eschatology of the Reformed churches, notwithstanding their united creedal affirmations, did not represent the recovery of eschatological biblical truth, as was surely the case with regards to the gospel awakening that Luther was used of God to initiate. Murray's use here of the term "historic Christianity" has a nominal inclusiveness about it that in reality is describing the eschatological lineage of the Roman Catholic Church which the Reformer's inherited and passed on without essential change. To be sure, they revised their understanding of the doctrine of the church. However, insofar as supercessionism is concerned with regard to the place of national and ethnic Israel in the covenant plan of God, there was continuation of a doctrinal emphasis that, not surprisingly, also resulted in the continuation of the general disparagement of the Jews. Of course there were exceptions to this general result, such as in parts of Scotland, Holland, and Denmark, though it often involved a desire for Jewish conversion so that they might lose their Jewishness by means of incorporation and absorption into the Gentile Christian church. Consequently, the thread of Augustinianism has continued on unsevered.

As a result, in the evangelical Reformed movement of the twenty-first century, an almost romantic attitude has developed as a consequence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially that which originated from Geneva, the Westminster divines, Dort, the Puritans, Scotland, and to a lesser extent, Germany, that has become equivalent to the authoritative role of the Church Fathers in the Roman Catholic Church. However, as has already been pointed out, in the role of eschatology, it is a fact that the Church of Rome has become far more repentant of its past shameful treatment of the Jews, as a result of its doctrinal legacy, than ever has been the case with the evangelical Reformed movement of today. To name but a few in this regard, refer to the annotated bibliography in *Future Israel* concerning Terrance Callan, James Carroll, Edward Flannery, Malcolm Hay, Franz Mussner, and Michel Remaud (FI 361-377). Certainly the writings of Willem VanGemeren (FI 172, 175, 236, 268, 296), and to a much lesser extent David Holwerda (FI 243-247), in a Reformed context, indicate a more reasonable attempt to wrestle with eschatological matters concerning Israel, especially in the light of Israel's reclamation of Jerusalem in 1967 that sixteenth and seventeenth century Christians never dreamt about.

Nevertheless, there remains an historic culture that is resistant to new paths, and often allied with denominational, associational, and creedal loyalties. Consider the deep eschatological roots, within the *Christian Reformed Church*, that so obviously have influenced Geerhardus Vos, Anthony Hoekema, William Hendriksen, and Kim Riddlebarger. And these roots have continued to transmit degrees of intolerance concerning millennialism, along with anti-Judaism, that refuses to allow exegetical light to be brought to these more recent centuries. In this regard, synodical investigations into the eschatology of Bultema and Kromminga are clear proof of this narrow attitude (FI 173). The Lutheran tradition has also strongly opposed any taint of millennialism and at the same time evidenced explicit anti-Judaism (FI 155-157).

Furthermore, we could perhaps mention the influence of Aristotle, Plato, later Hellenism and scholasticism that have been additional threads that permeated earlier university and

ministerial training. The evangelical Reformed movement, for all of its Puritan loyalties, has placed great store upon the learning of its fathers, especially that which emanated from Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton, and Amsterdam. This is in no way meant to play down the great Biblicism that earlier came from these influential institutions. But if we think that the historical, theological threads already mentioned were not woven within this arena of Christian academia, we are deluding ourselves. Hence we are suggesting that those who claim attachment to this broad, historic eschatological lineage need to carefully assess to what extent they should continue their allegiance based upon a Reformed heritage rather than the biblical text. Consider two examples in this regard. In Jay Adams's amillennial apologetics *The Time Is At Hand*, there is the following introductory comment: "That amillennialism is a beautifully systematic eschatology should be recognized instantly by every amillennialist. Since he believes the system is biblical, and all biblical truth is systematically coherent, this must follow."⁷ This comment is so typical of the Calvinist who, with his integrated system, his logical conclusion, perhaps threatened by paradox and previously unconsidered possibilities, may in fact be seeing the beauty of his eschatological framework rather than its conformity to the biblical text. If this is thought to be an extreme assessment, then try suggesting to a strongly committed Reformed believer that many of the Reformed creeds need updating! Doubtless he will convince many amillennialists of the unity and sufficiency of his system. But others have exegetical matters to consider that they will not allow to be pressed, as it were, like a square peg into a round hole. For instance, consideration by Adams of the vital matter of Israel and Romans 11 is less than brief and nothing short of scrappy, especially when he writes of "the Gentile church, true spiritual Israel, the present seed of Abraham."⁸ In truth, the Gentile church is not the true spiritual Israel, and careful exegesis of Romans 11 would demonstrate this, though it might also destroy the logical system as well. Then consider Samuel Waldron's reliance upon Matthew 12:32, cf. Mark 12:29, where the Lord Jesus speaks of "this age . . . [and] the age to come." Consequently,

What could be simpler than this system? . . . There could not be a simpler eschatology. . . . There are only two ages—one temporal and natural, the other eternal and supernatural, separated by the second coming and resurrection. If one grasps this, one knows vastly more than most of the so-called "prophetic teachers" of our day. It is men who have made eschatology difficult, not God.⁹

But as we have repeatedly enquired with regard to the distinctiveness of saved Israel within the unity of the people of God, and granted that in a broad sense there is simply "the age to come," how can it be biblically maintained that this unity in no way incorporates diversity as well as complexity? Is there no complexity in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation? And further, it is a false simplicity when critical exegetical particulars, such as the relationship between Revelation 19 and 20 are so cavalierly passed over. We are told,

the second advent of Christ in chapter 19, . . . does not demand that the historical fulfillment of the visions in Revelation 20 be chronologically subsequent to the historical fulfillment of the visions in

⁷ Jay Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*, p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁹ Samuel Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple*, p. 42.

chapter 19. Just as Revelation 12 takes us back to the beginning of the gospel age, so also may Revelation 20 do the same.¹⁰

But this superficial explanation will not do, as Craig Blaising has pointed out. He refers to a number of non-evangelical scholars who, without carrying evangelical eschatological baggage, are agreed that there is continuity between Revelation 19 and 20, in which case, Waldron's "simple" scheme begins to become unraveled. Thus Blaising comments, and raises a significant *raison d'être* behind the amillennial objections to this exegetical continuity.

When we see a basic consensus of people who study the literary structure of the book that John does in fact see an interregnum between the Parousia and the new world freely admitting this point (while disassociating any personal theological commitments from such an idea), then the question is: Why do some evangelicals committed to Scripture have such trouble seeing this? I suggest that the answer lies in traditional theological preunderstandings that are hostile to this interpretation, preunderstandings whose history we have sketched earlier.¹¹

Finally, this writer is convinced that much of Reformed eschatology is the result of a Gentile mindset, certainly rooted in Gentile patristic dominance, that has tended to disparage a Jewish perspective of Scripture as Jewish fable or potential Galatianism or carnal chiliasm and dispensationalism. There is the implication that the eschatology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has settled the issues of biblical eschatology once and for all. This is simply foolish thinking. There is a legacy involved here that not only originates from the Constantinian revolution, but also passes through the illustrious Reformation. More recently, a reevaluation of this legacy has indicated that these roots have involved raw theological anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism based upon supersessionism channeled through church authoritarianism. Hence in this regard it is fascinating to consider what factors contributed toward the sudden eruption of millennialism during the sixteenth century that so rent a long-standing eschatological tradition. In the conclusion of his study on Puritan millennialism, Crawford Gribben offers a most enlightening explanation.

If, as [Christopher] Hill claims, English Calvinism was crumbling in the 1590s, then after the 1640s both strict church discipline and Calvinist theology finally "lost their grip": "Calvinism broke down when the Revolution established freedom of discussion." . . . The revolution's literary implications were also enormous. . . . As Thomas Manton noted in 1655, "The press is an excellent means to scatter knowledge, were it not so often abused. All complain there is enough written, and think that now there should be a stop. Indeed, it were well if in this scribbling age there were some restraint. Useless pamphlets are grown almost as great a mischief as the erroneous and profane." Hill has noted that, "The collapse of censorship saw a fantastic outpouring of books, pamphlets and newspapers. Before 1640, newspapers were illegal; by 1645 there were 722. Twenty-two books were published in 1640; over 2,000 in 1642. As both sides in the Civil War appealed for support from the ordinary people, the issues at stake had to be discussed. But it went farther than that . . .

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

¹¹ Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism," *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and Stanley N. Gundry, p. 214.

No old shibboleths were left unchallenged in this unprecedented freedom.” Perhaps Owen had been right in hoping “we might have less writing, and more praying.”¹²

In other words, implicit here is the fact that the centuries preceding the Reformation were times of doctrinal repression, especially concerning teaching that would deny that the Church of Rome is the new Israel. Once printing was followed by liberation of personal investigation and expression, then truth, displacing centuries of error, resulting from individual biblical enquiry, could not be suppressed. It is not surprising then that an awakened interest in millennialism burst forth, especially amongst Puritanism, and along with it a revival of interest in Judeo-centric eschatology.

Hence, at the present, along with the rise of a diverse Messianic Judaism, there has come about a more objectively biblical and scholarly reevaluation of the place of national and ethnic Israel in the New Testament, some of which sources have been employed in the exegetical sections of *Future Israel*. The time may have come, in a manner of speaking, for the Gentile church at Antioch to return to the mother church at Jerusalem and confess its need to ask forgiveness for its disregard of Paul’s warning in Romans 11:18, “do not be arrogant toward the [natural] branches.”



¹² Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium*, pp. 194-195.