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What's Wrong With "Postmillennialism"?

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I comment on some of the problems with the term 'postmillennialism'.

Read Jeremy Sexton's critique of postmillennialism: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/postmillennialism-a-biblical-critique/

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Transcript

In the latest issue of Themelios, there's an article by Jeremy Sexton entitled Postmillennialism, a Biblical Critique. Within the article, Sexton criticizes certain contemporary forms of postmillennialism. The abstract of the article reads as follows.

Postmillennialism had been pronounced dead when R.J. Rushdooney and his fellow Reconstructionists resuscitated it in 1977 with stimulating though non-exegetical publications. In the following decades, many in Rushdooney's train added innovative Biblical arguments whose interpretive methods do not withstand scrutiny. This article examines the hermeneutical idiosyncrasies and exegetical fallacies displayed in defences of postmillennialism by Greg Barnson, Kenneth Gentry, David Chilton, Keith Matheson, Douglas Wilson, and others.

Postmillennialists routinely keep textual details out of focus or interpret them tendentiously in service of the belief that the prophecies of worldwide righteousness and

shalom will reach fulfilment on earth before rather than at the second coming. Sexton is a thoughtful and independent minded person and I highly recommend that you read his article. You may well find it very stimulating.

I found it so and yet at the same time reading it I was struck perhaps above all else by the fact that many of his arguments against postmillennialism did not seem to be engaging with the sort of postmillennialism that I held. I am a committed postmillennialist but it felt to me that in many respects he was speaking past the sort of position that I held. Nonetheless, talking with some other postmillennialists it was evident that they felt that their positions were challenged by Sexton's article.

While they took strong issue with some of his arguments, they did not feel that he was talking past their position to a different position entirely. For me this highlighted something of the arbitrary way in which we designate theological positions and divide into different theological camps. In the few minutes that follow this I want us to think about the term postmillennial and perhaps other terms like it to reflect upon the way in which they frame our thinking about particular issues, the way that they give us particular foils against which we express our positions and the way in which they disguise many thought-provoking and stimulating arguments and debates that we could be having.

They can also mask important differences between positions. And as a result of all of this we can be left with a much more obscured understanding of the issues at hand. In some ways we can compare this to the question of where someone lives.

When answering such a question we can often focus upon the nation within which a person lives. So for instance if someone lives in Detroit we would say that they live in the United States of America. And yet living in Detroit they might only be a dozen miles away from someone who is living in Windsor, Canada.

On the other hand they are about four and a half thousand miles away from someone living in Honolulu, about ten hours on a direct flight. And of course if you were focusing upon something such as climate they would have far more in common with the Canadian living in Windsor than with the other American who is living in Honolulu. Focusing upon the nation within which they live might reveal some things about their identity and the significance of their location.

And yet there are many other things that it will obscure. Similar things can be said about theological labels such as postmillennialism. Such a label can name a wide group of people many of whom have significant differences and distance from each other.

This is not to suggest that theological labels have no significance just because they might encompass a wide range of different positions on some supposed theological map. However it is to suggest that in many cases focusing narrowly upon such labels can

disguise as much as it reveals. Also many such labels are fairly arbitrary lines on the theological map.

They can arguably obscure lines and divisions and distinctions that might be far more significant. Reading Jeremy Sexton's article I was struck by the fact that it brought to the surface many of the differences within postmillennial circles. Observing various postmillennialist responses to the article suggested to me that it might bring to light some of people's more absolute stances rather than their more relative alignments.

Responses to such an article might reveal less about whether someone is American or Canadian as whether they are in Detroit or Honolulu. The question of the theological label that is put on someone's position might emphasise people's preferred camps, sides or tribes. It's like the question of whether you're American or Canadian.

And these things can arise more from sociological, ecclesiastical, political, temperamental, confessional or other factors. When you remove from the circulation of the conversation those terms that are more about naming camps of theology or opposing ecclesiastical, confessional or theological groups and focus more upon absolute positions than those diagnostic questions that help to identify them, a very different sort of map can emerge and a very different sense of where people stand relative to each other. Now you're focusing less upon the question of, as it were, what national borders someone lies within than the question of their precise GPS coordinates.

Another way to think of things, perhaps, would be to see such theological terms as suitcases. As suitcases, this is an analogy that I've taken from N.T. Wright, terms such as postmillennialism can help us to carry certain ideas around in shorthand. Theological terminology functioning as suitcases enables us to carry ideas from place to place without having to lay out all of the different contents on every single occasion.

Nevertheless, sometimes it is helpful to insist that we lay out the contents of our suitcases. We might find that the suitcases have been chosen less for their fittingness to the contents as for their attractive appearance on the surface or the people that those terms align you with. Perhaps the postmillennialism suitcase is the one that all the cool kids are carrying around and you want to be part of that group.

When you start to unpack the suitcase of a term such as postmillennial, it can often become apparent quite quickly that people are using that term with very different contents or, perhaps, that the contents of postmillennial for many isn't that dissimilar from the contents of amillennial for others. It can also become apparent that there are few contents in many people's terminological suitcases. They may have chosen their terms mostly because they like their connotations.

They prefer the vibe of the side that is carrying around those suitcases and they want to be one of that group. I think that part of the challenge here is that the term

postmillennial and other terms like it have tended to do a lot of duty as tribal markers, as vibe indicators, as shibboleths and other things like that for people. They're designed, in many respects, more to prioritise the sociological purposes of team forming and galvanising over those of clear theological and exegetical understanding.

The moment that we ask people to unpack such terminological suitcases, I think we'll find that there are many important debates that have been disguised by them, debates that I think that Sexton's piece, and others like it, engaged charitably could encourage. The following are a few areas where I think that the term postmillennial is not really doing good service. It's either masking debates that we should be having, it's disguising key differences, or it's dividing us from people who are actually quite close to us.

The first of these areas concerns the various degrees of kiliasm among postmillennialists. Is there an awaited golden age that has not yet arrived? Or is the millennium very much already in effect? Is the millennium already in effect but requires a progressive movement towards golden age style conditions that we do not currently experience? There are some postmillennialists, particularly historical postmillennialists, who are looking for some future age of gospel success perhaps, and that is the millennium. For many other postmillennialists, however, we are already living within the millennium.

And within this group there are radical differences in the degree to which radical positive transformation of current conditions is regarded as required by biblical prophecy and eschatology. Perhaps we are already living within the millennium, but this period of time would not truly count as the millennium were it not to rise to a stage of considerably greater glory. A greater glory that for many involves a radical transformation of every single country so that the majority of their population, and perhaps even almost all of their population, identifies as Christian.

This then can be seen as the second great area where the term postmillennial can disguise a lot of significant difference. How glorious do millennial conditions have to be to count as a fulfilment of scriptural promise? When you actually get into the details with many postmillennialists, it becomes evident that we do not agree among ourselves on this question at all. A third area where the term postmillennial might not be helping us is that it draws far too sharp a distinction between amillennials and non-Keleastic postmillennials, between those who hold to the position that the millennium is a symbolic period of time and identify as amillennial, perhaps even optimistic amillennials, and those postmillennials who do not believe in a literal period of time called the millennium, and yet believe in a period of Christian success, however that is understood.

An optimistic amillennial could conceivably be looking forward to some time of gospel success, not least expecting a conversion of a large number of the Jews in fulfilment of their understanding of Romans 11. Here it seems to me it's helpful to remind ourselves

of the fact that in many respects amillennialism, premillennialism and postmillennialism are framed in terms of different questions. Amillennialism is framed in terms of the question is the millennium literal or spiritual, answering that the millennium is not a literal period of time but a symbolic one, and that period of time is a real period of time in which we are currently existing.

Premillennialism is focused on the question of whether the coming of Christ awaited in the New Testament proceeds or follows the millennium, whereas postmillennialism is asking the question of whether the final coming of Christ proceeds or follows the millennium. Ironically, a partial preterist postmillennial position, which believes that much of New Testament prophecy was fulfilled in the context of AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem, can affirm each of these positions understood in a particular way. Amillennialism, because they believe that the millennium is a symbolic rather than a literal period of time, and that it was ushered in as a result of Christ's work and destruction of Jerusalem.

Premillennialism, because they believe that the coming of Christ, chiefly awaited in the New Testament, preceded the millennium because it was a coming in judgement in Jerusalem and the establishment of the Church in AD 70. And postmillennialism, because they believe that the final coming of Christ will follow the millennium, the millennium that was ushered in by the coming of Christ in the context of AD 70. Hopefully by now you're starting to see some of the limitations of such terminology.

A fourth area to consider is the question of the place of the Jews and the reading of texts such as Romans 11. The future mass conversion of the Jews has played a very important role in many historic understandings of postmillennialism. Indeed it was absolutely integral for many Puritans.

It's important to notice that among postmillennials today, however, this question of the future conversion of the Jews is often given far less significance, even among those who do believe in a future mass conversion of this type. James Jordan, for instance, believes that the fullness of Israel referred to in Romans 11 was a conversion of many Jews around AD 70. It seems to me that it should be considered whether such a reading of a text like Romans 11 opens up ways of conceiving of millennial conditions that are definitely not as far-reaching and transformative as many postmillennials would like to think.

If the fullness of Israel can be achieved by a sort of last gasp conversion of many Jews in the context of the destruction of their nation, then perhaps something similar as a sort of deathbed conversion of nations towards the end of their existence will suffice for the fulfilment of millennial prophecy. Related to some of the points I've made earlier, a fifth point is what the envisaged postmillennial victory involves. It seems to me that the historic tendency has been to emphasise the success of gospel ministry and the

conversion of many who are brought to a knowledge of God's grace in Christ.

However, one thing that should be apparent in Jeremy Sexton's article is the importance placed on nations in many contemporary postmillennial visions. In some contexts, the success envisaged seems to be less that of gospel ministry of the church than that of Christians in gaining the upper hand in their polities. It's the vision of dominion, for instance, that one finds in theonomic reconstructionism.

This, it seems to me, is a very good example of an important spectrum and perhaps distinction within postmillennial positions. Many positions that do envisage gospel success primarily do have a sense of the gospel being acknowledged and Christ being upheld within the civic and political life of peoples and their nations. However, that is not where the primary accent is placed.

An ecclesiocentric postmillennialism, for instance, would probably look very different from a Christian nationalist version of postmillennialism. On that note, we might ask whether Christian nationalism is necessarily postmillennial. It seems to me that if you're talking to someone like Douglas Wilson, you might get that impression.

If you're talking to someone like Stephen Wolfe, perhaps not. Is postmillennialism necessarily Christian nationalist? I see various answers to these questions among advocates of both. Is the glorious postmillennial success of Christ's kingdom one in which we can readily imagine the passing away of our current nations and peoplehood, but the endurance of the Church? All of these are important questions that shape the sort of postmillennialism that one holds to.

Sixth, we might ask what the envisioned means and manner of postmillennial victory are. The place of cultural and political antagonism is considered very differently among postmillennialists. For many, postmillennialism means leaning into culture war and political conflict and antagonism in a manner that foregrounds the wider societal and political realm.

For others, the foregrounded realm is that of spiritual powers, and the manner of the conflict emphasises the Church's mission of prayer, peaceful proclamation of the gospel, and exercise of the power of binding and loosing. It's not denying cultural and political conflict, but it really places the accent and emphasis elsewhere. We might ask whether victory is chiefly imagined in the form of conversion of, rather than in terms of the crushing of, political and cultural adversaries.

What role does the martyrdom of faithful and loving witnesses play relative to highly antagonistic and angry culture war? These, it seems to me, are questions that when pressed and followed up might reveal a lot of very significant variation within postmillennial camps. Seventh, and related to these points previously, is postmillennialism strongly connected to, or presumed to be indicative of, a particular

vibe or mood? There is a sort of triumphalism, for instance, among certain postmillennials, a mood that is claimed to follow from the position itself, yet which does not seem to be demanded by it. Of course, many postmillennials do not have such a mood.

The variation in the sort of vibe or mood of many postmillennials might be worthy of closer examination. An eighth point relates to how much postmillennialism is weighted in the wider system of doctrine. On paper people might hold to the same doctrines, and yet in practice weight them very differently.

In practice certain doctrines can become shibboleths, means by which we decide who is in and who is out. Is postmillennialism a defining doctrine of particular groups? In what way is it defining? Is it defining chiefly in terms of a theological and exegetical commitment, or chiefly in terms of a presumed vibe that should follow from it? It is important to recognise that even when the same doctrines might be held by different people, if those doctrines are weighted very differently, there can be a radical shift in the centre of balance of the faith in its entirety, and the result can be quite destructive or distorting. A ninth point might follow from this.

How does postmillennialism function within a broader Christian philosophy of history? How does it relate to, for instance, the process of the maturation of humanity? Are we supposed to imagine things, broadly speaking, getting better all of the time? How much room is there for ups and downs in history? How much room is there for the uneven successes of the church? For the church collapsing in the so-called post-Christian West, while rising in the East and the global South, for instance? How does postmillennial perspective lead us to relate to things like technological developments that radically transform society? Is postmillennialism committed to some sort of Whiggish theory of history? We might also ask how it relates to the seemingly black-pilled character of many American Christian nationalists postmillennialists, the way that they view American society in extremely dark terms. Is there a danger that in focusing upon some ideal situation, people might be led to despair and to have the most negative perspectives on everyday reality on account of its imperfections? Tenth, and beyond all of these things, I think that there are a host of exegetical questions that need to be answered. There are marked variations among postmillennialists in the reading of Revelation, for instance in the ways that things are regarded relative to Israel and the wider nations.

Or the way in which the victory of Christ is understood. Is the focus chiefly upon the spread of the gospel and conversion? Or is the vision primarily that of military defeat and destruction of the enemies of Christ? How are we to imagine the final apostasy in Revelation chapter 20, for instance? Even among partial preterists who focus upon AD 70, there are clear differences in the degree to which they are reading things preteristically. Some partial preterist postmillennial readers of the book of Revelation focusing upon the events of AD 70 are reading Josephus as a sort of primary cheat sheet

to the book.

Others, however, focus more upon covenant symbolism. Considering all of these points, I think it can be helpful to put some of our designations, like postmillennial, to one side for a while. To think about other diagnostic questions that we could ask to discern what positions people hold.

To focus at certain points less upon relative designations, what camp you fall into, what theological group or tribe. And to focus more upon more absolute positions. What exactly is your reading of this passage? Or how more exactly would you define and articulate a specific doctrine? I believe when we start to do this, our differences will be seen in a very different complexion.

The result can be disorienting and it can be unsettling, particularly for those who think primarily in terms of teams and sides, and want to feel the thrill of being part of a particular group in its theological conflicts. Taking such an approach does not mean that there is never a time for sides. However, those who adopt an approach will be able to look at situations from different angles.

To be able to see beyond issues of partisanship. To think more in terms of principle and more precise personal positions, rather than the relative positioning of team alignment. To be able to step outside existing terminology and to think about ways in which things might be more fruitfully expressed.

Such processes of reconsidering our terms, of unpacking them as suitcases, for instance, or tabooing them as terms that have been overused and are disguising more than they are revealing, or moving away from tribal terms to thinking in terms of more absolute positions. All of this will help us to speak with greater clarity. It will help us not to be the prisoners of our language, to realise how we are using our terms, and maybe those times when the terms need to be taken to the cleaners and other more serviceable and fitting terms adopted.

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