

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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A LETTER FROM LORAIN OR A COVENANTAL VIEW OF THE MILLENNIUM

Dear Mr. Sutton: "—

I have been interested in reading your article, "Covenantal Postmillennialism," as published in *Covenant Renewal*, February, 1989, in which you report having had a telephone conversation with me concerning the millennium, in which you asked concerning my view as to how we will know when that great revival has come. And I am supposed to have answered, "I don't know, I never thought about that question before." And you add abruptly, "End of conversation."

Well, I have only a very hazy remembrance of any such conversation. But in any event I could not have answered in such a manner, nor do I think that the conversation ended so abruptly.

In this book, page 58, I state that the millennium comes by imperceptible degrees, and I liken it to the coming of spring and summer, that there are many advances and many apparent setbacks as the winter winds give way to the gentler spring breezes "and after a time we find ourselves in the glorious summer season." And we certainly do know that we have passed from winter to summer. I add that we cannot pinpoint the arrival of the millennium any more than we can pinpoint certain great events in history, and that over the long term the millennium comes as the Gospel is preached over the world and the Holy Spirit brings more and more people into the kingdom. So if it is incorrect to quote me as having said that I had never thought about that question before.

I do appreciate your having mentioned me in connection with the millennium problem. But I hope that if you have occasion to mention me in connection with any future discussion of the millennium you will not misrepresent me.

Sincerely yours,

Loraine Boettner

I have been asked to respond to this great man of God. I do so with some hesitancy because I have always admired him. I understand him to be a gracious, older Calvinist in the faith, who would share many of my convictions. In no way do I intend to belittle or impugn him by a response.

For the sake of a better day for postmillennialism, however, I think that I should respond. I not only need to set the record straight, but more importantly, I must take the occasion of his letter to point out what's really missing in Dr. Boettner's description of the millennium. Finally, I want

evangelical church, filling the pew racks with the instead of with the *Scotfield*

For the Record

First, I never claimed to have had a conversation with Dr. Boettner. I said in the February (1989) issue of that a "Friend of mine had a conversation." I never claimed to have made the call. In fact, I've never talked personally to Dr. Boettner. Perhaps because of Dr. Boettner's "hazy remembrance of any such conversation," he does not recollect the caller. I can't completely fault him. I've had many a conversation that I can't fully recall. But I do think it is important to set the record straight.

As to the "End of Conversation" citation, I didn't intend to imply that Dr. Boettner cut my friend off. For all I know, the two exchanged parting comments for a while and then concluded the conversation. But theologically speaking, it was the end of the conversation.

Whether my friend word-for-word accurately retold the conversation or not may not be confirmed. But he certainly conveyed the essence of the conversation. Dr. Boettner makes it absolutely clear that he indeed hasn't considered how one would know the millennium has begun. His letter argues that we know but it still doesn't tell us how. Saying you perceive the kingdom just as you would realize that it is Summer is not exactly telling how a person knows. Nor is it telling you how to know it is Summer. In the February issue of this was my initial point: What are the concrete indicators that the millennium has arrived? It was not, "Do we know when it starts?" Boettner's analogy only begs the question, "OK, how do we know it's Summer?" He argues like the romantic who simply says, "I know I'm in love because I know. Love is like the Summer that follows the cold wintry winds of infatuation. You know when it has arrived, and I'm telling you that I know I'm in love." How would you like your daughter (or son) to enter into a lifelong commitment of marriage with this kind of thinking? So, Dr. Boettner has a basic, "A rose is a rose is a rose" approach to the millennium.

A Covenantal View of the Millennium

The real problem, however, is that Dr. Boettner has an individualistic view of the millennium as opposed to a covenantal perspective. When Dr. Boettner starts describing the millennium, he makes many wonderful comments; he even quotes a number of great men of God. But, he

either primarily focuses on individual conversion and revival, or he refers to vague generalities without pointing to definite **covenantal** specifics. To use his own analogy, he says Summer will come, but he doesn't describe what happens to make Summer distinctively Summer except maybe to say that it gets hotter. What's missing?

Dr. Boettner fails to mention some specific **covenantal** indicators of the millennium. He even goes so far as to reference the passages that give the particulars, but still the distinctive features of the millennium are not elaborated. Consider Isaiah, however:

Now it will come about that in the last days many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war (Isaiah 2:2-4, bold face mine).

This passage and others specify how one knows the millennium has arrived. They speak of worldwide conversions, but they also speak of institutional and political conversion. They describe a world run by the Lord and His people, but more importantly, they refer to a world under the Law of God! Ah, we come to the main **covenantal** feature of the millennium that is missing from the discussions of Dr. Boettner: ethics, the third point of the covenant.

Isaiah says that it is when the nations of the world come to Christ and to the Law of God that we not only know they have truly come to Christ, but we know that the millennium has arrived. I don't agree that we will not definitively be able to mark the beginning of the millennium. It is when the nations of the world give up natural law as a control to law and submit to God the Son's Law, which is nothing less than the Law of God the Father. It is when the nations of the world turn to the Law of God for their politics, their economics, their science, their everything.

Dr. Boettner refers to a marvelous quote by an optimistic **amillennialist**, Dr. William Hendriksen:

The Church has become international. The international Church is very powerful; "like a mighty army moves the Church of God!" The particularism of the Old Testament has made place for the universalist of the New. The Bible, just recently, was translated into its thousandth (!) tongue. The influence of the Gospel upon the thought and life of mankind, can scarcely be overestimated. In some countries the blessed truth of Christianity affects life in all its phases: political, economic, social, and intellectual. Only the individual who lacks the historical sense and is, therefore, unable to see the present in the light of conditions which prevailed throughout the world before Christ's ascension, can fail to appreciate the glories of the millennial age in which we are now living. Truly, prophecy found in Psalm 72 is being fulfilled before our very eyes.²

Dr. Hendriksen believes the millennium began at the Cross, and comes to some kind of fulfillment in history. But in my opinion, what he describes falls into nebulous vagueness. For example, it is not necessarily good for Christians to have political influence if they think like pagans! Dr. Hendriksen's own native country, the Netherlands, can serve

as an illustration. Many sound Christians have exercised influence there. They have held political office. But more often than not they have not ruled by the Bible, particularly God's Law. Rather, men such as Abraham Kuyper believed in rule by natural law, even though he implemented some fine Christian legislation. So, after Kuyper the present age of decadence began. Why? The Bible and God's Law were not set up as the rule. Christians ruled, in other words, but they did not establish Christian rule: namely, rule under God's Law.

Isaiah not only describes conversions, he speaks about Law-abiding-conversions. He not only discusses converted people, he describes converted nations with converted laws, converted politics, converted economics, converted education and so forth. And, each converted sphere is known to be converted by its compliance to the Law of God. As Scripture says, "By this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:3). Converted Christians are not enough! Converted Christians involved in politics or any number of activities is not enough! Converted Christians who keep God's commandments, however, is more than enough! For too long Christians have naively thought that all they need is a moral majority. Yes we need a majority of Christians, but we need Christians committed to the Biblical covenant and who have the opportunity, authority and grace to apply God's Law in the societies of the world. Until they do, the millennium has not begun.

We have only discussed the ethical aspect of a **covenantal** view of the millennium. We have found that by simply looking at the millennium in terms of one of the points of the covenant, however, we can begin to arrive at the particulars, **covenantal** ones. If we turn to one of the main passages on the subject, we can discover even more.

Revelation 203

Revelation 20 is perhaps the clearest expression of a **covenantal** view of the millennium. The chapter clearly follows the **covenantal** pattern.

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand (20:1).

The calling of the messenger by God normally begins a covenant sequence. This is precisely what happens in the Deuteronomic covenant. Moses begins by authenticating that his words come from God (Deuteronomy 1 :3). The transcendence then also appears in the emphasis that the angel "came down from heaven"; he was not any kind of **normal** earthly messenger. He was sent from God.

We should conclude that the first **covenantal** aspect of the millennium is that messengers will be sent out all over the earth as never before, proclaiming the Lordship of Christ. Isaiah makes the same point in the above passage.

And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years (20:2).

Satan's sphere of jurisdiction is limited. He is confined to quarters by one of God's agents. The same dynamic appears in the second aspect of Deuteronomy (1 :5ff.). Israel is confined to an area, the wilderness. They cannot escape because God's messenger has bound them. in

3. For a complete **covenantal** analysis of the Book of Revelation, see David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, Dominion Press, 1987). Revelation 20 falls in the fifth part of the book, corresponding to the fifth point of the covenant: succession.

2. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 19), p. 227.

their case, however, they are released.

Marcellus Kik points out that the "thousand year" language of Revelation is similar to the language of Deuteronomy, particularly found in the hierarchy segment of the book: "The Lord God of your fathers make you a thousand times so many more as you are" (Deuteronomy 1:11).⁴

The **covenantal** point to be drawn from this aspect of the millennium is that God's hierarchies – family, church, and state – will displace the demonic and Satanic hierarchies (Daniel 10:13; cf. Ephesians 6:12).

And threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer (20:3).

The nations are free to be converted by the Great Commission because Satan is no longer loose. It is important to keep in mind at this point that Jesus commanded the nations to be discipled by "Baptizing and teaching them the commandments" (Matthew 28:19-20). Thus, the teaching of the **Law** as never before stands as the great **covenantal** implication during the millennium. It will have to be taught for the Great Commission to be fulfilled.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had not received the mark of the beast (20:4-5).

The issues are clearly oath and judgment. Anyone with the "mark of the beast" had taken a false oath; he had received a symbol that pledged himself to the false gods. Those who had not, by implication those who had foresworn themselves to the true God, sit on thrones in judgment (1 Corinthians 6:2). These same emphases appear in the fourth segment of the Deuteronomistic covenant (Deuteronomy 27-29).

Thus, the fourth characteristic of the millennium will be that Christians will run the world. According to the Apostle Paul, they will be judges (1 Corinthians 6:2).

And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison . . . And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night (20:7-15).

The issue is succession. As Moses released Joshua to "surround the city of Jericho" (Joshua 6) and disinherit the Canaanites, Satan is released to surround the people of God. Only, he is disinherited by the Lord's judgment. He is thrown forever into the lake of fire (disinheritance) and the righteous receive their rewards (inheritance).

Thus, the final characteristic of the millennium is the revolt of Satan that leads to his final disinheritance. It completes the picture of a **covenantal** view of the millennium in Revelation 20. Dr. Boettner's explanation only discussed the first **covenantal** principle of the millennium; he is to be commended for at least doing that much. But a **covenantal** understanding of the Bible and particularly the millennium gives us a fuller picture. I believe that this **covenantal** picture has been lacking even in reformed theology. I find the failure to capture the evangelical mind at this point as well.

Covenant Theology's Failure to Capture the Evangelical Mind

I had a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary who told me that Loraine Boettner's critique of **dispensationalism** in the was the best he had ever seen; and that it had never been adequately answered by anyone from Dallas. Keep in mind that this professor had been head of the New Testament Department for a number of years and was at that time head of the Systematic Theology Department; he had been called "Dr. Dallas Seminary," perhaps one of the most respected professors in the history of Dallas Seminary. But I should also add that I heard the same professor tell me that I would never be convinced of postmillennialism by Boettner's book. In fact, I would, he went on to explain, be quite let down by the actual presentation of Boettner's position. My professor was right, bringing me to another need to respond to Boettner's letter.

I think Boettner's book, is weak in presentation in the same way it is strong in criticism. It is weak in **covenantal** development of postmillennialism, which is not to say that the book has no Scriptural presentation at all; it does, but the arguments are not textually developed; they come across as **proof-texting**. But when Boettner's book comes to the other millennial views, it goes immediately to the whole Bible, more consistent with a **covenantal** approach, and it does not just proof-text. It eviscerates dispensational premillennialism and does a fairly effective job on **amillennialism**. Whole-Bible presentation is the key and this is lacking in his general overview of postmillennialism.

When I was at Dallas Seminary, I heard one resounding criticism of reformed theology: "It's a great system, maybe the best ever produced by the church, but it's not Biblical; it's a manmade system that is logical but not Biblical; it's a system found in books but not the Bible." Over and over again I had professors and students use this litany to attack the reformed faith. Over and over again they told me that when push came to shove, the reformed men would use logical and not Biblical arguments! Over and over again I went to the library to find some kind of defense of covenant theology. And over and over again I discovered that the critics were right.

I had a difficult time. Solid treatments of the Biblical text itself from a reformed perspective could hardly be found. I discovered Meredith Kline to be the most helpful simply because he was a Bible oriented scholar (Up to the point of Biblical law, that is), who was able to use the text of **Scripture** to make his case. He definitely gave the best Biblical presentation for covenant theology, and I believe that is why he was mildly effective at moving a few evangelical students at Gordon **Conwell Seminary** and elsewhere into a more **covenantal** view.

Evangelical are not impressed with non-Biblical arguments. They want Bible! And if a person can't prove his case from the Bible, he's not going to secure much of a hearing in America. Moreover, if reformed theologians cannot show why and how their position is more Biblical, then they will fail to capture the evangelical mind.

If I'm exaggerating, prior to my book on the covenant, where are the other books on the covenant that present a Biblical defense for such a theology? Where are the ones that provide a Biblical and **covenantal** world and life view? Where are the books on covenant theology that apply the system to the institutions of society? Where are the books that take the **Bible** and speak **covenantally** to the issues of the day? Where are the Bible-centered, reformed books that address the practical problems Christians face? For that matter, where are the books with **Biblical** and **covenantal** criticisms of dispensationalism?

I am sorry to say that you will find few if any thor-

4. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), p. 205.

oughly Bible-based books from a reformed perspective on these subjects. Why? Why has 20th century covenant theology failed to be thoroughly Biblical, capturing **evangelicalism** and leading it into a potent, cultural expression? I think the answer can be traced back to the old Princeton Seminary of the 19th century, to the primacy of the intellect.

Primacy of the Intellect at Princeton

The old back to the theology of 19th century, in particular the work of the Hodges (Charles, Archibald and **Casper W.**). But it was not a covenantal theology that was born in the 19th century. It had its roots in the theology of the Middle Ages, especially the theology of Thomas **Acquinas**. It was not unlike much of the standard systematizing after the Reformation: the systematic literature was often influenced by one basic presupposition of Aquinas.

How so? Aquinas believed that man had fallen in all of his faculties except in his mind. He differed from the Augustinian view of man that man is sinful in his mind, emotion and will. He resisted Augustine's standard formula: grace before response: intellectual, emotional and volitional. As a result, Aquinas maintained an intellectual view of man. He saw the human being as essentially rational, or intellectual, what has been called, the primacy of the intellect.

Standard Reformational theology in principle differed significantly from Aquinas' view of man. It believed in grace before response, meaning man could not reason his way to God; grace had to enable a man to think straight before he could reason properly: grace before response. Reformed thought would have never said that a man's reason was not fallen. But it was still a creature of the Middle Ages and unable to break completely from its own era.

How do I know? Reformational theology in practice still operated as though the intellect were primary. This emphasis appears two ways. First, the primacy of the intellect in classic Reformational thought is reflected in the presupposition that reason is primary, meaning reason is the way to convert men.⁵ **Consider the following statement by Benjamin Warfield, professor of theology at Princeton:**

It is the distinction of Christianity that it has come into the world clothed with the mission to reason its way to its dominion. Other religions may appeal to the sword, or seek some other way to propagate themselves. Christianity makes its appeal to right reason, and stands out among all religions, therefore, as distinctively the "Apologetic religion." It is solely by reasoning that it has come thus far on its way to its kingship. And it is solely by reasoning that it will put all its enemies under its feet.⁶

5. Note that Jonathan Edwards tried to save Calvinism from this charge in his classic book, *Freedom of the Will*. See Alan C. Guelzo, *Jonathan Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

6. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. II* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), pp. 99-100.

Warfield certainly believed in grace before response. Yet, when he began to discuss how Christianity would expand, it was all in terms of thinking its way to dominion. He literally could not imagine what else the church would do except use reason, use the sword, or as he puts it, "seek some other way," which he does not bother to explain because he didn't know any other way except by reason and force. That's because he was not using the Bible first and logic second. If he had, he would have been able to cite the many evangelical alternatives for spreading the Gospel. Scripture cites several means of having dominion: covenant lawsuits, benevolence ministries, political involvement and Christian education to name only a few. But this is the point isn't? Scripture provides the means of Christian dominion, not reason. When reason is the solution, reason cannot think of any other reason!

A second indicator of the primacy of the intellect in Reformed thought appears in the failure to administer the sacrament of communion to young children prior to catechism or confirmation. Intellectual ability to think abstract thought, as well as to articulate a credible profession are the bases of admission to the Lord's Table. Why? All standard reformed creeds hold two truths: grace before response and sacramental means of grace, meaning in the latter case that grace is applied through the administration of the sacraments. Now, if grace is before response and the sacraments are a means of the grace that comes before response, why should communion be withheld from young children who cannot "give a rational response? **Withholding** the sacrament ends up defeating the doctrines of grace so prevalent in the historic reformed faith. Intellectual response or any other kind of response is not able to precede grace, but in actuality, it does in most reformed churches because of the primacy of the intellect.

This was Princeton, the Princeton where Loraine Boettner was educated. This was the Princeton that failed to produce a theology that could rival Darwinism and Marxism. Why? Because it believed in the primacy of the intellect and not the Bible. Hence, it lacked a thoroughly Bible-based-covenant-theology to give it a system that had its content as well as its structure rooted in the Bible.⁷ It took another Princeton theologian of whom the students complained that they could not understand, Geerhardus Vos, to create the rival covenant theology to Hedge and company. Interestingly, Vos did it through one of his students who did understand him and who went on to produce the rival; his name was Cornelius Van **Til**. But, this is a story for a later newsletter!

7. Richard Gattin, *The Centrality of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 19-30. Gaffin says that Vos believed that when theology gets its content from Scripture and its form from somewhere else, the system becomes rationalistic.