

## The Millennium: Will Christ Reign for a Thousand Years? <sup>1</sup>

CONVINCED that "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all" (*WCF* 1.7), Reformed theologians have often acknowledged that sincere believers hold different views on a number of subjects. One issue about which there has been much friendly disagreement is that of the Millennium.

Reformed confessions and catechisms have unanimously affirmed a number of cardinal truths about Biblical eschatology, the doctrine of the last things (*WCF* 32; 33; *WLC* 84,85,86,87,88,89,90; *WSC* 38; *BC* 37; *HC* 52). The Scriptures clearly teach the following: (1) Christ will return in glory (Col 3:4). (2) The righteous and wicked will be resurrected from the dead (Jn 5:28-29). (3) A final judgment will take place (Mt 25:31ff.). (4) The righteous in Christ will be rewarded with eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth (Mk 10:29-30; Rev 21:1-5). (5) The wicked will be condemned to eternal judgment (Mt 25:41,46).

Even so, Reformed confessions and catechisms have been purposefully silent on a number of issues related to the end of time - issues on which there has been little unanimity among Reformed theologians. When will Christ return? What will be the signs of his coming? What will be the condition of the church and the world when he returns?

The question of the Millennium, Christ's one-thousand-year reign on Earth, has largely to do with the interpretation of Revelation 20. Three basic approaches have been taken toward this passage, and all are fully acceptable in Reformed theology: premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism.

**Premillennialists** believe that the thousand years of Christ's millennial reign will follow the second coming (described in Rev 19:11-21). After the second coming, Satan is bound and Christ ushers in a prolonged period of earthly peace and prosperity. Some think of this as a literal thousand years, while others regard the number as symbolic of a very long period of time. Christians receive resurrected bodies at the beginning of the Millennium, but the resurrection of the wicked (and of those living in untransformed bodies during the Millennium), as well as the final judgment for all others, takes place at the end of the Millennium, following a rebellion led by Satan. Reformed premillennialism should be distinguished, however, from currently popular dispensational premillennialism, which adds features such as a rapture of the church before, during or after a seven-year future tribulation period that precedes Jesus' millennial reign.

**Postmillennialists** believe that the kingdom of Christ and the church will experience much more expansion on Earth before the second coming. The thousand years are understood by some as a final period of Christian earthly triumph following the spread of the gospel (described in Rev 19:11-21). Other postmillennialists agree with amillennialists in identifying Revelation 20:1-6 with the entire period beginning with the resurrection of Christ and ending with his return.

**Amillennialists** understand the Millennium to be a picture of the present reign of Christ and the saints in heaven (analogous to Rev 6:9-10) and of the inauguration of Christ's

rule on Earth, especially through the church. The first resurrection is either the life of disembodied Christians with Christ in heaven or life in Christ that begins with spiritual new birth (Ro 6:8-11; Eph 2:6; Col 3:1-4). Satan has been bound through the triumph of Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection (Jn 12:31; Col 2:15). Although there are variations in details, amillennialists remain largely uncommitted to a particular scenario for the end times. The church may or may not fare well; evil may grow stronger or weaken. In the end, however, Christ will return in glory to reward his church and to judge the wicked.

The dispute among the various views partly concerns the chronological relation of Revelation 20:1-10 to Revelation 19:11-21. Premillennialists believe that Revelation 20:1-10 simply follows the second coming (depicted in Rev 19:11-21). But Revelation 20:1-15 might also represent a seventh cycle of judgments leading up to the second coming. The final battle in Revelation 20:7-10 seems to be the same as that in Revelation 16:14,16; 17:14; and 19:11-21. Similar language from Ezekiel 38-39 is used in the various descriptions. The judgment of Satan in Revelation 20:10 parallels the judgments against Babylon (Rev 17-18) and against the beast and the false prophet (Rev 19:11-21). These enemies of God are all consigned to doom, and the visions depicting their demise may be arranged thematically rather than chronologically. Certain features in Revelation 20:11-15 correspond to earlier descriptions of the second coming (Rev 6:14; 11:18). Most important, all Christ's enemies have already been destroyed in Revelation 19:11-21. If Revelation 20:1-6 represents later events, there would be no one left for Satan to deceive in Revelation 20:3, nor would Satan be around to deceive anyone.

Caution is needed because the different millennial positions depend on the interpretation of Old Testament prophetic texts as well as of Revelation 20:1-10. Moreover, like most of Revelation, Revelation 20:1-10 uses language that in principle maybe capable of more than one concrete embodiment. These facts make precise interpretation difficult. The major point is that Satan will be finally defeated and that, even before that time, God takes care of his saints and allows them to enjoy the benefits of his triumphant rule. This assurance ought to comfort us, whatever our millennial position.

BC = Belgic Confession

HC = Heidelberg Catechism

LBC = London Baptist Confession

WCF = Westminster Confession of Faith

WLC = Westminster Larger Catechism

WSC = Westminster Shorter Catechism

<sup>1</sup> "Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible", p. 2080