

Critical Junctures in American Evangelicalism: II The Transition from Postmillennialism to Premillennialism

By Randall Balmer

Charles Finney's theological revolution had repercussions for evangelicals far beyond the arcane arena of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. At least as popularly understood, Finney's Arminianism assured Americans that they controlled their own religious destiny, that they could initiate the process of salvation simply by exercise of volition. Finney's declaration that revival was "the work of man" led to a codification and a routinization of evangelism. Beginning with Finney and extending to B. W. Gorham's *Camp Meeting Manual* and to Billy Graham and various revivalists of the twentieth century, the enterprise of revival became formulaic, almost mechanistic. As long as you followed certain conventions, Finney and others promised, revival would ensue.

The social implications of Finney's ideas were even more profound. If individuals controlled their ultimate destinies, surely it didn't require much of a leap to suppose that their actions here on earth could affect the temporal realm as well. And the aggregate actions of believers could bring about monumental changes in society.

Aside from the individual empowerment implicit in Arminian soteriology, another theological discipline figured into antebellum evangelicalism: postmillennialism. Throughout church history, generations of theologians have puzzled over the prophetic passages of the Bible, from Isaiah and Ezekiel and Daniel in the Hebrew Bible to Revelation and 2 Thessalonians in the New Testament. Jesus himself suggested some sort of apocalyptic development within a generation, and the book of Revelation contains all manner of images and events that should or should not be interpreted literally and should or should not be understood as prophetic. What do we make of the mark of the beast or the emergence of the antichrist? Revelation 20 talks about a millennium, one thousand years of godly rule. What does that mean? When will it occur, now or later? Ann Lee Stanley of the Shakers, for example, taught that the millennium was already in place and that this new age dictated that women and men should no longer engage in sexual relations, whereas John Humphrey Noyes of the Oneida Community believed that the millennial age loosened the bonds of exclusivity in marriage, thereby allowing for sexual license.

Theologians over the centuries have disagreed, sometimes spectacularly, over the meaning of these apocalyptic passages, but by the nineteenth century two broad streams of interpretation had emerged: premillennialism and postmillennialism. Although the multitude of interpretations and the infinity of nuances make generalizations difficult, those who numbered themselves premillennialists believed that Jesus would return to earth to take his followers out of the world, an event known as the rapture. Those left behind would face hardship and judgment in a period known as the tribulation. Eventually, however, Jesus and his followers would return to earth for the millennium, one thousand years of righteousness, before the culmination of time in the last judgment.

Postmillennialists, on the other hand, held that Jesus would return to earth *after* the millennium, that there would be no disruption between this temporal age and the onset of the millennium.

The sequence here is crucial. Premillennialists believe that Jesus will return *before* the millennium (hence *premillennialism*), whereas *postmillennialists* hold that Jesus will return *after* the millennium, the one thousand years of righteousness. Although this may appear to be a recondite doctrinal debate, the unfortunate detritus of people with too much time on their hands, the distinction here has had enormous repercussions for the ways that evangelicals approach society. If you believe that Jesus will return after the millennium with no disruption in the advance of time, the corollary is that it is incumbent on believers to construct the righteous kingdom. If, on the other hand, your reading of scripture leads you to believe that Jesus will come for his followers before the millennial age, then the onset of the millennial kingdom will come later in the apocalyptic calendar, thereby absolving believers from responsibility for bringing about the millennial kingdom in this age.

This is exactly what played out among evangelicals in the nineteenth century. Given the Arminian theology that dominated the Second Great Awakening, the doctrine that individuals could exercise their volition to initiate the salvation process, it should come as no surprise that the concomitant eschatology of the Second Awakening was postmillennialism, the notion that Jesus would return after the millennium. The corollary of postmillennialism was that believers bore the responsibility for bringing on the millennium by dint of their own efforts. Those who had appropriated salvation for themselves now looked to broaden their efforts and inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth, more particularly here in America.

And that is precisely what they set about to do. The Second Great Awakening unleashed a reforming zeal unmatched in the annals of American history. Evangelical converts, convinced of their mandate to usher in the millennium, set about to purge society of its ills. They recognized that slavery was an abomination and inconsistent with a millennial society, so they organized to abolish it. They were part of the temperance crusade, which in the nineteenth century was a progressive cause. They joined with Horace Mann and others in support of public education, known as common schools in the nineteenth century. Part of the rationale for public schools was to advance the lot of children of the less fortunate and also provide a foundation for democracy by allowing children of different backgrounds to learn from one another in the classroom and on the playground and get along with one another with at least a measure of comity. Evangelicals opened female seminaries to raise the literacy rates among women to a level of parity with men by the middle of the century, and they sought to advance the rights of women generally, including the right to vote.

All of these initiatives were directed (at least in part) toward the goal of constructing the kingdom of God on earth. To take another example, the redoubtable Lyman Beecher was horrified when Aaron Burr, vice president of the United States, killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in Weehawken, New Jersey, on the morning of July 11, 1804. (Dick Cheney was not the first sitting vice president

in American history to shoot a man!) Beecher decided that the barbaric practice of dueling was not a fixture of the millennial kingdom, so he launched a campaign, ultimately successful, to outlaw dueling as part of his efforts to inaugurate the millennial age.

Much of this reforming energy unleashed by the Second Awakening came from women. Finney had authorized women to participate more fully in religious gatherings than they ever had before (with the possible exception of the first century), and evangelical women, many of them freed by nascent industrialization and middle-class privilege from the drudgery of subsistent living, devoted their considerable energies to social activism. These evangelical women served as tireless foot soldiers in the campaign to usher in the millennial age.

America would never be the same. Postmillennialist evangelicals in the antebellum period, convinced that they could bring about the millennium by dint of their own efforts, animated social reform and utterly reshaped American society. The power of their arguments and the urgency of their activism led Americans to the brink of irreparable schism and the Civil War.

With the onset of war, however, the postmillennial optimism of antebellum evangelicals began to fade. The carnage of the war itself represented a disappointment; northern evangelicals hoped that the moral clarity of their case against slavery, combined with divine favor, would bring the conflict speedily to a conclusion. Victory, however, proved elusive. But there were other factors at work in American society as well, factors that called the entire postmillennial enterprise into question.

The character of American society over the course of the nineteenth century was reshaped by both industrialization and urbanization. Industrialization, beginning with the textile mills of New England, changed forever both the work and domestic patterns of Americans. Employment in the mills transported adults out of the home and into the workplace, thereby altering the dynamics of the family. Men, working now beyond the ken of church and home, began to socialize in networks with fellow workers; their wives increasingly socialized with one another and in circles defined by religious affiliations. Men came to be seen as “worldly,” an impression that lent urgency to the Second Great Awakening in boom areas like Rochester, New York, but also fed what historians have called the “feminization” of American religion, the shift of spiritual responsibility from men to women.

If industrialization altered American domestic life by changing patterns of socializing, the accompanying demographic phenomenon of urbanization similarly shook the theological understanding of America’s evangelicals. The move to the cities exposed evangelicals to a different world from the relatively bucolic and small-town life that had prevailed in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Add to that the changing ethnic and religious composition of Americans, and evangelicals suddenly felt their hegemonic hold over American society slipping away.

Put in its starkest terms, the teeming, squalid ghettos of the lower east side of Manhattan, festering with labor unrest, no longer resembled the precincts of Zion that postmillennialist evangelicals had envisioned earlier in the century.

Immigrants, including Jews and Roman Catholics, most of whom did not share evangelical scruples about temperance, represented a threat to the millennial aspirations of American evangelicals. The world, at least as seen through the lens of the United States, was getting worse, not better. Righteousness, which was often confused with white, middle-class, Victorian ideals, had given way to wickedness: unemployment, filth, drunkenness, disease, and the corruption of urban political machines.

Faced with this wretchedness, American evangelicals looked to alter their eschatology. Postmillennial optimism about the advent of a millennial kingdom here in America no longer seemed appropriate, so evangelicals cast about for another interpretation of those biblical prophetic passages. They found an answer from an unlikely source; a former barrister and Anglican priest named John Nelson Darby, who had left the Church of England in 1831 for a small, Pietistic group called the Plymouth Brethren. Darby became enamored of a new hermeneutic of biblical interpretation called *dispensationalism* or *dispensational premillennialism*.

Dispensationalism posited that all of human history could be divided into discrete ages (or dispensations) and that God had dealt differently with humanity in each of these dispensations. God had struck a particular deal, or covenant, with Adam, for instance, and another with Noah and Abraham and with the people of Israel. The present dispensation, Darby argued, called for the separation of true believers from nonbelievers in anticipation of the imminent, *premillennial* return of Jesus. In other words, Jesus may return at any moment, before the millennium, and the corollary of Darby's teaching was that those left behind at the rapture would face the judgment and the wrath of God. Indeed, Darby even insisted that the social degeneration evident everywhere should be taken as evidence that Jesus would soon return to rescue believers out of this mess.

Darby came to North America to propagate these ideas, making seven visits between 1859 and 1874. He found there a receptive audience; his scheme eventually caught the attention of such evangelical figures as Dwight L. Moody, A. J. Gordon, and James H. Brooks. Just as Finney's Arminianism suited the temper of the new nation, the pessimism implicit in Darbyism took hold among American evangelicals. Premillennialism, with its assertion that Jesus would return at any time, effectively absolved evangelicals of any responsibility for social reform. Dispensationalism taught that such efforts ultimately were unavailing.

For American evangelicals, part of the appeal of dispensationalism was its esoteric nature. Darby provided the Rosetta Stone for understanding the confusing and sometimes contradictory prophecies in the scriptures. Dispensationalism allowed evangelicals triumphantly to announce, in effect, that they had cracked the code. They understood the mind of God. Anyone who did not acknowledge this historic breakthrough was, by definition, benighted, and terrible judgment awaited them at the return of Jesus.

It is worth noting that not all nineteenth-century evangelicals fall into this tidy scheme of antebellum postmillennialists and postbellum premillennialists. William Miller, a farmer and biblical interpreter from Low Hampton, New York, believed that Jesus would return sometime in 1843 or 1844. Approximately fifty

thousand followers were persuaded by his arcane calculations, and as the date approached they whipped themselves into a frenzy of anticipation. When Jesus failed to materialize as predicted on October 22, 1844, Miller's followers returned home disappointed, and this passage is known to this day among Adventists as the Great Disappointment.

If the Millerites represented the premillennial exception in antebellum evangelicalism, the most notable exception to premillennialism among evangelicals in the latter part of the nineteenth century was the Salvation Army. Known originally as the Christian Mission when it was established in the slums of London in 1865, the Salvation Army, part of the holiness movement, retained its emphasis on social reform and social amelioration even after it arrived in the United States in 1880. The Salvation Army, with its slum brigades, its street-corner preaching, and its battles against the systemic ills of the ghettos, managed to retain its twin emphases on evangelism and social reform.

With their embrace of dispensationalism, however, evangelicals on the whole shifted their focus radically from social amelioration to individual regeneration. Having diverted their attention from the construction of the millennial realm, evangelicals concentrated on the salvation of souls and neglected reform efforts. "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel," Moody famously declared. "God has given me a lifeboat and said, 'Moody, save all you can.'"

The social and demographic upheavals of the late nineteenth century mark the beginning of a great divide in American Protestantism. As evangelicals retreated into a theology of despair, one that essentially ceded the temporal world to Satan and his minions, other Protestants allied with the Progressive movement assumed the task of social amelioration. Led by such pastor-theologians as Washington Gladden of Columbus, Ohio, and Walter Rauschenbusch in New York City, aided by such theorists as Richard T. Ely of the University of Wisconsin, and popularized by Charles Sheldon's novel *In His Steps*, the Social Gospel emerged to take up the cause of social reform. Although they seldom invoked the language of postmillennialism, the proponents of the Social Gospel, also known as Social Christianity or Christian Socialism, sought to make this world a better place, especially for the wretched of society. They believed that Jesus redeemed not merely sinful individuals but sinful social institutions as well.

To that end, the Social Gospel, working arm in arm with political Progressives, pushed for child-labor laws and for the six-day work week. They sought to discredit and to destroy the urban political machines by exposing their corruption. They advocated the rights of workers to organize, and they sought to blunt the effects of predatory capitalism. At the same time that evangelicals were retreating into their otherworldly reverie, looking for the imminent return of Jesus, the more theologically liberal Social Gospel advocates sought to reform the present world to make it more nearly represent the norms of godliness.

As the twentieth century progressed, these two streams of American Protestantism grew more divergent. Although the Social Gospel itself was popularly discredited by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the attendant rise of Communism, the ideas of Rauschenbusch resurfaced in the thought of Martin

Luther King Jr. in the 1950s after King had encountered the Social Gospel in graduate school. Though the Social Gospel label had lost its allure, liberal Protestants continued to align themselves with the ideals of the Social Gospel, the mandate that the followers of Jesus bore responsibility for redressing the evils of society. As evident in the civil rights struggle, opposition to the war in Vietnam, support for the rights of women, and a sympathetic disposition toward immigrants and the poor, liberal Protestants have tried to retain the principles of the Social Gospel, which in turn reflects, at least dimly, the principles of nineteenth-century postmillennialism.

And what about the evangelicals, the other stream of American Protestantism? Throughout most of the twentieth century, at least until the rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s, evangelicals clung to premillennialism and its emphasis on individual regeneration rather than social amelioration. They evinced little interest in social issues; this world, after all, was doomed and transitory. Politics itself was corrupt and corrupting, and many evangelicals did not even trouble themselves to vote. Jesus would appear at any moment to rescue them from the morass of the present world, so why invest any significant energies in making it a better place? With time so short, moreover, all resources – money, energy, personnel – should be deployed in the enterprise of evangelism and missions, bringing others into the kingdom of God in preparation for the end of time.

Fueled by dispensationalist ideology, evangelism and missionary efforts flourished among evangelicals in the early decades of the twentieth century – at a time when mainline Protestants, fraught with misgivings, were throttling back on missionary activity, especially after the *Re-Thinking Missions* report of 1932. Evangelism took many forms, from the vaudeville antics of Billy Sunday and the corporate efficiency of Billy Graham to the “Four Spiritual Laws” of Campus Crusade for Christ and the come-to-Jesus appeals of the televangelists. But the overriding focus of their efforts was individual redemption, not social action. When asked about reforming society, Graham would routinely respond that the only way to change society was “to change men’s hearts,” by which he meant that only the aggregate effect of individual conversions would bring about real reform.

Aside from the emphasis on personal evangelism and the neglect of social amelioration, what have been the effects of the evangelical shift from postmillennialism to premillennialism? I can think of two material consequences related to the evangelical penchant for dispensationalism. The first is lack of concern for the environment and the natural world. For much of the twentieth century, and even militantly so during the last several decades, evangelicals have been notoriously uninterested in environmental preservation. If Jesus is going to return soon to rescue the true believers and to unleash judgment on those left behind, why should we devote any attention whatsoever to care of the earth, which will soon be destroyed in the apocalypse?

In recent decades, this premillennial disposition on the part of evangelicals combined with some blend of capitalism and libertarianism to produce a concoction even more hostile to environmental interests. This amalgam reached its apotheosis in the person of James G. Watt, an Assemblies of God layman and Ronald Reagan’s

secretary of the Interior. Watt had been associated with the so-called Sagebrush Rebellion, a coalition of western ranchers who wanted to open more wilderness areas to development and who opposed any efforts to alter their favorable grazing rights on federal lands. After Reagan, who famously remarked that if you'd see one Redwood tree you'd seen them all, tapped Watt to be Interior secretary, Watt remarked to stunned members of the House Interior Committee that, "I don't know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." Watt insisted in later years that he meant that environmental resources had to be husbanded long enough to last until the rapture, but his remark was widely interpreted as a justification for his lack of interest in environmental protection.

The second twentieth-century legacy of evangelical premillennialism is less pernicious but no less regrettable: bad religious architecture, sometime spectacularly bad architecture. If Jesus is coming at any moment, why waste precious time and resources on fancy buildings? The unfortunate legacy of this attitude can be seen in evangelical church buildings and on countless Bible institute and Bible college campuses, where function doesn't merely triumph over form, it utterly obliterates it. Cinderblock and folding chairs will do just fine, and the theological neglect of the sacraments, so common among evangelicals, only exacerbated this tendency to neglect aesthetics.

To be fair, another factor contributed to the bad architecture, namely a lack of resources. Following the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s, many evangelicals felt duty-bound to secede from mainline Protestant institutions – churches, denominations, seminaries, mission boards – and strike out on their own, separated from what they reviled as godlessness. Such independence may have been noble, at least according to the standards of fundamentalism, but it was also costly because it meant that the separatists left behind church and schools buildings, not to mention endowments. They started from scratch, at considerable expense, and they simply could not afford to be fancy.

The combination of premillennialism and economic stringency may not entirely excuse the architectural atrocities that evangelicals constructed in the twentieth century. It does help to explain them.

The theological shift from postmillennial optimism to premillennial pessimism had ripple effects that shaped evangelicalism throughout most of the twentieth century. The evangelical embrace of American society that animated various antebellum reform movements gave way, in the face of profound social and demographic changes, to a deep and brooding suspicion and the expectation of imminent judgment. Evangelicals by the turn of the twentieth century no longer sought to construct a millennial kingdom; that would have to await divine intervention. Instead, they turned inward, tending to their own piety and seeking to lure others into a spiritualized kingdom in preparation for the imminent return of Jesus.

By adopting dispensational premillennialism, evangelicals ceded the arena of social amelioration to Protestants who had been shaped by the teachings of the Social Gospel. Although they rarely used the language of postmillennialism, these more liberal Protestants took up the cause of advancing the kingdom of God on

earth, even as evangelicals retreated ever more determinedly into their own subculture.

By 1900, the chasm between the liberal Social Gospel and evangelical dispensationalism was firmly established. The very people who had reshaped the nation in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century now found themselves divided. American Protestantism would never be the same.