



## Postmillennialism

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### Introduction

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'Postmillennialism' is a modern Christian theological term used to denote the belief that Christ's bodily return to earth will occur *after* the thousand-year period known as the [Millennium](#), described in Revelation 20. Postmillennialism is a specifically Christian-inflected form of what Ashcraft (2012) calls 'progressive millennialism' and is based upon the expectation that society will progressively improve through human activity. Postmillennialism, then, is a Christian eschatological system that emphasizes the creation, through human initiative (though ostensibly based on divine or biblical principles), of an ideal society (e.g., 'the kingdom of God on earth' or the Millennium) that will last for a thousand years. After those years of millennial bliss, postmillennialists assert that Jesus will return, the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven, and paradise on earth will be established (Revelation 21). In theory, postmillennialism is more focused on human activity and engagement with the world than [premillennialism](#), which has a much more pessimistic view of the world and anticipates that Jesus will return before society can improve. In practice, however, such a distinction does not always hold and both pre- and postmillennialists are involved in institution-building intended to nurture their ideal social order.

### Historical Traces of Postmillennialism

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Throughout Christian history, there have been aspects of thought that have had postmillennial characteristics (Ashcraft 2012). However, one should be careful not to anachronistically impose modern categories onto the past. Smolinski (2001) argues that 'the traditional criterion of classifying [millennialism](#) on the basis of when Christ would appear is therefore virtually meaningless for the emerging systems prior to 1800' (146).

The first progressive millennialists or postmillennialists of the modern era were English Puritans, who emerged in tandem with modern rationalist thought that emphasized the significance of modern science and the idea that society and culture will improve as scientific analysis is applied to human problems (Marsden 1980, 49; Weinberger 2005, 1913; Ashcraft 2012). Across the Atlantic, Ernest Sandeen (1970, 43) cites Jonathan Edwards as the first postmillennial theologian in US history.

## Growth of Postmillennialism in the Eighteenth Century

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Postmillennialism emerged as a popular and widespread viewpoint in the late eighteenth century, especially in the United States. After Americans achieved independence from Britain, their [millennialism](#) was imbued with an optimism that blended easily with the sense of 'chosenness' that underpinned American nationalism and concepts such as Manifest Destiny (Tuveson 1968; Sandeen 1970; Bercovitch 1978; Ashcraft 2012). This optimistic postmillennialism spread further during the American Antebellum (pre-Civil War) period, with the proliferation of voluntary societies whose proponents viewed themselves as 'God's co-workers' in bringing about the New Jerusalem (Sandeen 1970, 43; Moorhead 1984, 72-73). Postmillennialism was the dominant form of eschatology among American evangelicals between the Revolution and the Civil War (Marsden 1980, 49).

## Decline of Postmillennialism

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After the events of the American Civil War, the rise of higher biblical criticism, the ensuing debates about the validity of biblical literalism, and 'the fundamentalist exile' that helped to constitute fundamentalism as a coherent social formation (Harding 2000), postmillennialism lost its place of prominence in the United States. One reason for this is that postmillennialism was the dominant eschatology among moderate and liberal (i.e. 'mainline') Protestants in this period. Consequently, as part of the 'fundamentalist-modernist split', fundamentalists, or 'bible-believing', Christians strongly asserted that the [premillennial](#), physical return of Jesus was among the 'fundamentals' of authentic Christianity (Moorhead 1984; Harding 2000; Weber 2004). Conversely, among mainline Protestants, themes of postmillennialism (such as faith in progress) endured, but many were sceptical of the supernaturalism that postmillennialism still espoused, and thus it 'ceased to be a distinct biblically grounded eschatology' (Moorhead 1984, 61) and gradually became secularized (Quandt 1973). In this respect, the modern distinctions between pre- and postmillennialism were used as identity markers between competing factions of Protestants.

## Christian Reconstructionism and Postmillennialism

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Although postmillennialism was supplanted as the dominant form of eschatology among conservative Protestants in the United States in the early twentieth century, it did not disappear entirely. Postmillennialism is now a defining feature of Christian Reconstructionism, most commonly associated with the writings of Rousas John Rushdoony (1916-2001). The conservative evangelical predilection to associate postmillennialism with modern mainline Protestants or 'liberals' is evident, for example, in the Christian Reconstructionists Gary North and Gary DeMar's (1991) book *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't*, which devotes an entire chapter to refuting the question 'Isn't Postmillennialism Really Liberalism?'

The postmillennialism associated with Christian Reconstructionism is often called 'dominionism'. Citing the 'Great Commission' in Matthew and the mandate to take dominion over the earth in Genesis, Christian Reconstructionists assert that it is their God-given duty to exercise 'dominion' and to bring all aspects of life under the authority of 'biblical law' (Ingersoll 2015, 27-37). One recent example of this is the 'seven

mountain mandate', which consolidates ideas about taking dominion and codifies them into seven mountains or spheres of society, namely: family, religion, entertainment, media, business, education, and government (see e.g. Wallnau and Johnson 2013).

Scholars of religion have pointed out that theology is fluid in the lives of everyday people, and that observers and academics too often demand a coherence of ideas that most people do not (Ingersoll 2015, 32). An example of this is the way the notable figureheads within the Christian Right who identify as [premillennialists](#) still work closely with Christian Reconstructionists to advance their aims. At the same time, the latter still spend considerable space in their publications arguing against [premillennialism](#). North and DeMar (1991), for example, disparage premillennialism as 'an eschatology based on faith in total bureaucracy' (66), and North (1993) has written an entire book critiquing [dispensationalism](#), lamenting its failure to proactively build Christian institutions on earth.

Despite Reconstructionists' critiques of [premillennialism](#), Rushdoony's ideas were central to the shape the Christian Right took and they continue to be highly influential, even among self-proclaimed premillennialists (Ingersoll 2015). One way that this version of postmillennialism influenced the predominantly [premillennialist](#) Christian Right was through the adoption of dominion theology by premillennialists, who quietly began to move away from eschatology, concentrating instead on 'Christ's command that, until he returned, Christians were to "disciple the nations" and "occupy" the land' (Ingersoll 2015, 33).

By putting aside their eschatological differences about when Jesus is expected to return, contemporary postmillennialists, as Christian Reconstructionists, have successfully built a broad coalition with [premillennialists](#). The results of their 'seven mountains mandate' can be seen, for example, in the election of Donald Trump (b. 1946) and his close relationships with Christian Reconstructionists, including his appointed spiritual advisor, Paula White (b. 1966). Trump rewarded this base by officially recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and appointing conservative Judges to the Supreme Court, paving the way for their decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022.

## Summary

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Postmillennialism is a fluid descriptor that has different connotations in different contexts. In the context of the United States, where it has been most popular, it was initially seen as a more liberal form of eschatology that emphasized social progress. As a result, postmillennialism was supplanted by [premillennialist](#) fundamentalists when they drew up the boundaries of their social formation in the early twentieth century. Under contemporary Christian Reconstructionism, far from being associated with liberal or progressive tendencies, postmillennialism is part of a dominionist agenda that asserts that it is a Christian duty to take control of every aspect of society so that it reflects biblical law.

## Further Reading

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## Article information

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