

## Book Review

David Engelsma, *Christ's Spiritual Kingdom: A Defense of Reformed Amillennialism* (Redlands: The Reformed Witness, 2001).

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In *Christ's Spiritual Kingdom*, professor Engelsma seeks to argue that amillennialism represents a biblical eschatology, and in particular he argues that "postmillennialism," "reconstructionism" and "preterism" are dangerous errors that threaten the integrity of the Christian faith.

My interest in the book arises for two main reasons. Firstly, I identify with the broad Reformed tradition, and secondly I hold to the views called postmillennialism or reconstructionism and preterism. I think that such long labels are unfortunate (as, I suppose, is "amillennialism," which is Engelsma's own position) since as far as I am concerned they simply represent biblical teaching even though they sound like something out of a theological textbook, but they are convenient summaries, so I will use them here.

## Definitions

First, I will explain these terms for the sake of the reader, since there is no place where Prof. Engelsma lays out all of his terms and explains them.

While Prof. Engelsma sometimes glides between the terms "postmillennialism" and "reconstructionism" as though they carry the same definition, they are not in fact the same thing. In fact, the definition of "postmillennialism" itself has undergone development over the last twenty-five years or so, a fact that appears lost on our author.

"Postmillennialism" is a view of eschatology, that is, a view on God's unfolding plan in history leading up to the end of this age and the beginning of what Christians have come to call "the eternal state." There are three so-called "millennial views," postmillennialism, premillennialism and amillennialism. These are all different understandings of the millennium, that is, the "thousand year reign" in the vision of Revelation 20 in the New Testament. In premillennialism, the thousand year reign is a future earthly kingdom lasting 1000 years (or perhaps simply a long period of time), and Jesus will return *prior* to this period (and thus Jesus' return is *premillennial*, before the millennium). In Amillennialism, the thousand years refers to a period beginning with Christ's first advent and ending when He returns (and so it is not literally 1000 years long). Technically then,

amillennialists see Jesus' return as being *postmillennial* (i.e. after the millennium), but in order to clearly distinguish itself from the premillennial view where the kingdom is itself often construed an earthly kingdom, the term amillennialism is used to signify that there will be *no* earthly kingdom.

Traditionally, postmillennialism was the view that the millennium was a future period of time in history, lasting perhaps 1000 years or perhaps just a long period of time. It would be a period during which the Gospel would permeate the world, and peace and justice would be all but universal as a result. Jesus is said to return at the end of this period (hence the term *postmillennial*, after the millennium). This is the view defended, for example, by Jonathan Edwards, B.B. Warfield and more recently Lorraine Boettner. However during the last half century this view has been essentially abandoned. Those who are called postmillennialists today (e.g. Gary DeMar, Kenneth Gentry and the late R. J. Rushdoony) in fact hold to an amillennial view of when the millennium takes place: it is taking place now, it is the church age, and it is a spiritual kingdom. Where contemporary postmillennialists differ with those they call amillennialists is not the millennium itself, but rather what we should expect to happen during this time.

Postmillennialism, while sharing the amillennial view of what the thousand year period refers to, specifically believe that the Gospel will have more and more increase in influence in the world, essentially meaning that an increasingly greater proportion of the world will be converted to Christ until the return of Christ. Postmillennialist Gary DeMar explains:

[In postmillennialism] the millennium itself is variously interpreted. Some postmillennialists equate the millennium with the present age, as Christ rules from His heavenly throne and graciously saves men and nations through His church. This is similar to the amillennial view; in fact, it may also be labelled "optimistic amillennialism."<sup>1</sup>

Here DeMar is making the distinction made above, whereby "old school" postmillennialists see the thousand years as a future period, whereas most today (I daresay all today) see it is the present age, and are actually amillennialists of a specific type.

"Reconstructionism" is one species of postmillennialism (broadly construed). While all reconstructionists are postmillennialists, many postmillennialists are not reconstructionists. In reconstructionism, not only are we to expect the increase of the influence of God's kingdom in this world prior to Christ's return, but the kind of influence that this will be is that the law of God as revealed in Scripture will become the norm and the law of the land as more people come to accept His law as right and just. This view of ethics where God's law is the

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<sup>1</sup> Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity: A Biblical Response to Dave Hunt* (Forth Worth: Dominion Press, 1988), 41.

unchanging standard is known as “Theonomy.” As Kenneth Gentry explains, Reconstructionism is thus a combination of several positions:

Christian Reconstructionism as a distinctive school of thought within the Reformed tradition is founded upon five basic theological premises: (1) Calvinistic soteriology; (2) covenantal theology; (3) postmillennial eschatology; (4) presuppositional apologetics; and (5) theonomic ethics: the cornerstone of Reconstruction thought<sup>2</sup>

“Preterism” is one of four approaches to prophetic and apocalyptic literature, especially the book of Revelation and Matthew 24, along with Mark 13 and Luke 21 (the parallel accounts of the events in Matthew 24). The other three views are futurism, historicism and idealism. In futurism, prophecy is held to refer to the very distant future, to the period just prior to Christ’s return. So for example, the beast and the antichrist are said to be figures that arise in the world in the “end times” just prior to the second advent, and the thousand years become a future period just after this time. In short, futurism leads to premillennialism. In idealism, the book of Revelation (and not so much Matthew 24) is not about chronology as much as it is about theology. Hence, the beast can be seen as a recurring theme throughout history of the earthly powers that oppress the saints, powers that will finally be defeated by God, the reign may be seen as the reign of all the saints in Christ as he has raised them up and seated them “in the heavenly realm in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6), and so forth. Idealism naturally gives rise to amillennialism, and also idealism does not demand that we reject all other uses of prophecy (for example, one might apply principles of both idealism and, say, preterism or historicism). Historicism is the view that eschatological prophecy chronologically describes the whole stretch of time between the two advents of Christ. This was popular during the Reformation, largely as a motivation to oppose the papacy, and thus the view declared the Pope to be “the Antichrist.”

As far as strict definitions are concerned, amillennialism, being no more than a view of what the millennium is, says nothing about what we must expect during this time. As it turns out, however, some who call themselves amillennialists adopt a futurist view of the passages of Scripture that describe the “great tribulation,” even though they take an opposite approach when reading Revelation 20 on the thousand year reign, and most who take the amillennial label, in addition to being amillennial, also believe that the world will become increasingly godless, and that the effect of the Gospel in the world prior to Christ’s return will not increase, but *decrease*.

Terminology is among the more irritating aspects of theology, but it is important that we have the meanings of these terms clearly in our mind, since Engelsma uses them freely throughout his book. Having set out their meanings, we may proceed.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Gentry, “Preface to the Third Edition,” in Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002), xix. Not every reconstructionist would insist on all five points, but the point is that reconstructionism and postmillennialism are not synonymous.

Engelsma's book is very clearly written for the layperson, and is not a deep or scholarly academic treatise. This in itself is not harmful to the content, but if one is looking for a more thorough treatment of the subject, a better choice in recent publications would be Kim Riddlebarger's *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*. Unfortunately, while the book is intended as a work for laypeople, even still it suffers from serious scholarly lapses and problematic arguments – often a lack of argument altogether, as it turns out.

### **The First Resurrection: A shaky start**

The first chapter, "A hope of the saints," begins what quickly becomes recognizable as an unusual approach to a familiar subject, with a specific end in mind. The hope that Engelsma discusses is not the resurrection of the dead and eternal glory, which he is right to call *the* hope of the saints. Rather, this chapter is about a lesser hope, namely "the hope of conscious life and glory with Christ in heaven at the moment of death." He tells us, "I believe in the resurrection of the soul." At this point the reader will be forgiven for finding such language unfamiliar – the resurrection of the soul? Engelsma says that when the soul leaves the body and goes to heaven, this is a resurrection. As it turns out later in the book, the only reason such a strange terminology is used here is to lay the foundation for interpreting Revelation 20 by saying that the "first resurrection" is the resurrection of the soul into heaven.

But this seems, on the surface at least, to militate against ordinary usage of the term "resurrection." Resurrection, one would think, involves a dead thing coming to life. But in the case of the soul going to heaven, the Reformed confessions to which Engelsma repeatedly refers are absolutely clear: this is not resurrection at all. In the Westminster confession of faith chapter four paragraph two we read that God endowed human beings with "immortal souls," which clearly indicates that they never die at all. In 22:1 of that same confession, we read of the righteous and the wicked alike, "The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them," the righteous going to heaven and the wicked going to hell. In fact, Prof. Engelsma fails to make his case even from the Reformed confession that he cites most often, the Heidelberg Catechism, question fifty seven: "my soul after this life shall be immediately taken up to Christ its head." But this says nothing about resurrection. Engelsma wants to avoid saying that the soul survives death because it is immortal, insisting that on the contrary "the explanation of the Christian's being with Christ in his or her soul immediately upon dying is resurrection." But in saying this he rejects the Reformed tradition he so often lays claim to by citing the confessions. He also, I daresay, violates common sense. If one believes, as Engelsma does, that the soul of the believer goes to be with Christ upon death, it can only be because resurrection *has not* yet taken place, and hence the saint must wait patiently.

Engelsma rejects the teaching of the Reformed Confessions further when he claims that it is *proof* that the everlasting future life has nothing to do with the soul's immortality to point out that the damned will go to hell and suffer forever, even though they are not immortal. But the Belgic Confession says precisely the opposite, saying that the lost "shall be made immortal but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." I say this not to defend the Reformed Confessions, but only to point out that Engelsma seems to be having it both ways, in many places insisting that nobody who differs from them should minister in Reformed Churches, but rejecting their teaching outright when it comes into conflict with his own.

In short, Engelsma must give up his loyalty to the Reformed confession, or he must give up his view of the first resurrection. This is because the Reformed confessions teach that the soul is immortal and never dies (hence ruling out the need for resurrection of the soul). Now, it may be that he would be willing to reject the Reformed confessions, but this means he is then put in the position of having to show that Scripture teaches that when the body dies, an invisible event occurs that can be called resurrection (and of course he cannot appeal to Revelation 20 at this point, since that would be begging the question). He would have a much easier task if he instead identified our spiritual resurrection in the same way the Apostle Paul did, when he declared in Ephesians 2 that "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." Not only would this not conflict with his view of the thousand year reign as spiritual in nature, but it would be much more defensible on biblical grounds – and it would also not bring him into conflict with the Reformed confessions he cherishes so much.

Unfortunately Engelsma does not end the chapter there. He goes on (pp 4-5) as though he were about to seriously tackle the claim that the immortality of the soul is an intrusion of Greek pagan views into Christianity (even though Engelsma himself has said, in conflict with the Reformed confessions, that the departure of the soul from the body has nothing to do with the soul being immortal). But instead of doing so, he decides to identify a learning institution that was at one time associated with a person who made this accusation (namely the conservative Herman Dooyewerd), and point out that another person (a theological liberal) who now works there a century later has endorsed a book written by a homosexual, as though this discredits the view expressed a hundred years ago by a different person! Tactics like these are something to be ashamed of, rather than published.

## **Jewish Dreams?**

Throughout the book Prof. Engelsma frequently misrepresents the views of the postmillennial theologians he disagrees with. For example, in a chapter entitled “Jewish dreams,” he calls the postmillennial vision a “carnal” kingdom, “**exactly** the kind of Messianic kingdom dreamed and desired by the Jews in the days of Christ’s kingdom” [emphasis added], and he adds that postmillennialists want “Christ as the king of an earthly kingdom and ... political power and earthly glory” (p 8). He goes so far as to begin slinging mud by saying that for any postmillennial brother in Christ, “Christ’s coming is not his hope, the **carnal kingdom** is” (p 11). It is, in fact, difficult to count the number of times Engelsma uses the term “carnal kingdom” in his book to describe the postmillennial view of the kingdom of God.

Engelsma is either badly confused or blatantly dishonest. It is possible that he is simply muddling up different eschatologies here, since what he is describing is not postmillennialism, but rather a kind of premillennialism known as dispensationalism, where the kingdom of God is literally an earthly kingdom with Christ in the throne here on earth ruling over a political body from Jerusalem. But no postmillennialist has ever asserted any such thing, and it is hardly likely, given the number of postmil authors that Engelsma claims to have read, that he could have made the mistake honestly. It is worthy of note that Engelsma sees no need to actually quote any postmillennial author to substantiate his claim. If he had attempted to do so, perhaps he would have discovered that he was attacking a straw man all along. Such sloppy scholarship (assuming that this is not dishonesty) is inexcusable. Engelsma even goes so far as to respond to a letter from postmillennialist Gary DeMar and directly state that Gary DeMar believes that the kingdom of God on earth is “political,” in spite of the fact that he quoted the whole letter in the same chapter, enabling the reader to see that DeMar said no such thing.

Postmillennialists clearly say that Christ’s kingdom is not an earthly kingdom but a spiritual kingdom. It is not a worldly political body but rather Christ reigns from heaven over his church on earth. This is everywhere affirmed by all the postmillennialist writers of every stripe. Lorraine Boettner stated it clearly, “in short, postmillennialists set forth a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men.”<sup>3</sup> No postmil could agree more heartily. The issue is whether or not an increase in the world of those who believe in Christ will make any worldly difference at all. If faith translates into action (as it surely must), then no *political* kingdom of Christ would be necessary, provided those who are members of His spiritual kingdom (including politicians, lawmakers, clergy, butchers, bakers, accountants and so forth) act accordingly. Gentry spells that matter out in a way that clearly illustrates how false and misleading Engelsma’s comments are, when he describes the postmillennial view of God’s kingdom:

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<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in Robert G. Clouse (ed.), *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 121.

[T]he fundamental nature of that kingdom is essentially redemptive and spiritual rather than political and corporeal. Although it has implications for the political realm, postmillennialism is not essentially political, competing with temporal nations for governmental rule. Christ rules His kingdom spiritually in and through His people in the world (representation), as well as by His universal providence.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to so obviously misrepresenting his theological opponents, Engelsma in this chapter stoops to almost unbelievable tactics when he makes the claim that postmillennialism “in some quarters” leads to social passivity. For example, he says, some in the British Isles are so sure that the government will become more godly when society becomes more godly that they are happy to let the state educate their children instead of establishing Christian schools. Just imagine how this argument works in reverse! Amillennialists like Engelsma, who are so certain that things are doomed to get worse, the Gospel is doomed to fail to transform society and our social task is ultimately a futile one, would have the reader think that the *alternative* view leads to social passivity. It is no accident that the bulk of early Christian homeschooling material in the United States was written by reconstructionists, and virtually all those who hold to Reconstructionist ethics are themselves defenders and practitioners of homeschooling.

In his very next breath, Engelsma demonstrates that he has not read the work of his opponents, or that he has not read it carefully. He again makes the mistake of saying that Reconstructionists believe the kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom, and then he claims, based on no evidence at all, that they believe that the future earthly millennial kingdom is the fulfillment, the typological fulfillment, as it were, of the Old Testament nation of Israel! His response is predictable (p 12):

The enormous, and obvious, blunder of Christian Reconstruction that results in such bondage, as well as in innumerable hefty tones of instruction in and controversy over this Reformed “utopia” – this “no-place,” this “never-never-land” – is the failure to understand that the fulfillment of Old Testament Israel is not a future, earthly Christian world power, but the church. The fulfillment of Old Testament Israel as a *nation* is the church – the present, spiritual church.

The reader is left with absolutely no idea who Prof. Engelsma is referring to. This is always what postmillennialists have said. In fact it is ironic almost to the point of being hilarious (were it not so ignorant or misleading) to see a Reformed amillennialist say this about postmillennialists, given that postmillennialists (including reconstructionists) are criticized by the premillennialists precisely because they *do* teach that the Church is the fulfillment of the nation of Israel, whereas the premillennialists (specially dispensationalists) see the temporal political nation of Israel taking once more the role as keepers of the kingdom in the future, as an earthly kingdom of God. At least the dispensationalists understand what they are criticizing! Premillennial authors attack postmillennialism just because it *does* teach what Engelsma teaches about the relationship

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 70-71.

between Israel and the church, a view that dispensationalists label “replacement theology.” Engelsma could have saved time by doing a small amount of homework (although this would have robbed him of some of his more sensational remarks). For example, he could have read a modern standard on postmillennialism, Kenneth Gentry’s *He Shall have Dominion*:

The kingdom which Christ preached and presented was not something other than that expected by the Old Testament saints. In postmillennialism, the Church becomes the transformed Israel, being called “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).<sup>5</sup>

Yes, it is clear that postmillennialists deny that the church is the continuation of biblical Israel!

Aggravating his errors in this chapter is the fact that there is only one kind of evidence that Engelsma offers in this chapter against postmillennial hopes. The Second Helvetic Confession, written by one Heinrich Bullinger, says that such progress will not be made on earth. Secondly, the Engelsma says that the “three forms of unity” (that is, the doctrinal basis of Reformed Churches: the Canons of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession) condemn postmillennialism. He says that the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession both say that the kingdom of Christ is the church, which is actually something all postmillennialists accept. He adds to this the claim that the Heidelberg Catechism denies that the church will ever gain dominance in the world, but will be a persecuted church. As evidence, he makes no quote, but refers to question 52 of the catechism. For the sake of clearly exposing the quality of evidence used, let us see what this question and its answer say:

**Question 52.** What comfort is it to thee that “Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead”?

**Answer:** That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same person, who before offered himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as judge from heaven: who shall cast all his and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all his chosen ones to himself, into heavenly joys and glory.

Now that the question and answer are clearly presented to the reader instead of a mere footnote with no content, we can see that Engelsma is just wrong in thinking that the catechism teaches against postmillennialism. The question is about what comfort we receive from knowing that Christ will return. The question has nothing at all to do with whether or not the church is doomed to always remain a persecuted minority, as Engelsma suggests. If he wants us to imagine that because the person answering the question himself has “sorrows” and “persecutions,” this is supposed to indicate an entire eschatological scheme, he is attempting to build far too much on much too little. He also adds a reference to the Belgic confession, article 37, on the last judgment. But here too he is inserting teachings that simply are not there. The only plausible

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<sup>5</sup> Gentry, *He Shall have Dominion*, 70.



reference in this statement to what Engelsma has in mind is the declaration that all those who “tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented” Christians in this world will receive God’s “terrible vengeance.” But postmillennialists do not deny any such thing!

Then comes Engelsma’s attack: “For this reason, it is unfaithfulness on the part of office bearers bound by the “Three Forms of Unity” to permit the advocacy of the postmillennial dream in the churches for which they are responsible.” But Engelsma is just wrong about what the three forms of unity teach. Moreover, Engelsma is a Protestant. The watchword of the Reformation was *sola scriptura* – the Scripture alone! In this chapter written to refute postmillennialism, Engelsma has not *once* appealed to Holy Scripture, but expects the reader to accept Heinrich Bullinger’s authority as an infallible rule of faith. It is time for Engelsma himself to come face to face with the Belgic Confession, article 7:

**Article 7: The Sufficiency of Scripture**

We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it. For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one-- even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says-- ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us. For since it is forbidden to add to or subtract from the Word of God, this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects.

***Therefore we must not consider human writings-- no matter how holy their authors may have been-- equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.***

For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself.

Postmillennialist build their case on Scripture, and plenty of it. But where is the response built upon Scripture? Apparently for Engelsma, creeds settle doctrinal matters. Well, not all the creeds. He admits that some Reformed Creeds and a great many Reformed theologians were postmillennial. For some reason, these ones do not count. Texts like Daniel 2:29ff, Isaiah 11, John 12:23 (cf. Micah 4 and Hebrews 12:22), Matthew 13:31-33, and so forth, are never dealt with at all. Apparently the words of men (very few selected men, actually) take precedence over Scripture, which the Reformed confessions regard as the very word of God, when it comes to settling theological disputes for Prof. Engelsma.

Engelsma does agree with critic Gary DeMar that Engelsma’s amillennialism is on the decline, and Reformed Christians, in fact many Christians generally, are giving up his views of eschatology and prophecy, and embracing postmillennialism and preterism. But far from giving him reason to earnestly turn again to Scripture to evaluate his stance, Engelsma delights in this fact as evidence that his views are correct, since he is now able to say that “the reason [for so many now embracing preterism and postmillennialism], is the great apostasy now fulfilling the apostle’s prophecy in II Thessalonians 2:3” (p. 34). An ironic double standard is at work. For some reason Engelsma thinks that numbers make truth when it comes to strenuously arguing

(although not always accurately) that the theologians of the Reformation all opposed postmillennialism and agreed with him. But now this tactic is reversed. Far from thinking that numbers make right now, he argues in just the opposite way, that large numbers in disagreement with him show that there is a great apostasy. Either numbers prove something is true, or they do not. If they do, then the fact that many Christians are turning to postmillennialism and preterism is evidence for those views. If numbers prove no such thing, then Engelsma must abandon his arguments about what he thinks most theologians of the reformation thought.

## Postmillennialism and Apostasy

Prof. Engelsma makes it clear that he believes the mere occurrence of apostasy in history proves that postmillennialism is false. He leaves the reader in absolutely no doubt that this is exactly what he thinks, as he states as much innumerable times. He declares simply (p. 71) that “Postmillennialism’s denial of apostasy, antichrist, and persecution is refuted by historical events” (although he does not bother to show us where postmillennialism insists that there will never be and never has been any apostasy, antichrist or persecution). As one reads through the book one begins to wonder, who has Engelsma been reading? He regards it as clear and simple that the facts of persecution and apostasy in history contradict what postmillennialists have been teaching. Since there is mass secularization in the USA (p. 70), there surely can be no doubt that history is going, and is doomed to go down, down, down, until Jesus finally returns to rescue His flailing church.

While these arguments might have clout with people who have not themselves become familiar with postmillennialism, they, again, fail to accurately represent the position. As the late postmillennialist Greg Bahnsen observes, “it is popularly thought and taught that postmillennialism maintains that there is an unbroken progression toward righteousness in history – that the world is perceptibly getting better and better all the time – until a utopian age is reached.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, if there is ever *any* setback in the evident progress of good in the world, then postmillennialism has failed, since consistent, uninterrupted progress has been thwarted. This is the road Engelsma is taking. But this is just to take the convenient road of defining a position in such a way that everyone already *knows* is untenable – postmillennialists included! Those opponents of postmillennialism who fairly represent those with whom they disagree are quite frank in acknowledging that this is a misrepresentation of postmillennial theology. Erickson (who has a premillennial view) for example explains that the postmillennial view of history quite freely admits that there will be “setbacks within the general trend,” yet in themselves such setbacks in no way ultimately pose a problem for an optimistic eschatology.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps a better question to ask than “has there ever been any occasion of apostasy or setback,” would be

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<sup>6</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, “The *Prima Facie* Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 3:2 (1976-77), 55.

<sup>7</sup> Millard Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 64.

the question: What if Jesus had never come at all? Would the world be a more or less Christian place than it is now? If we admit (as we must) that Christian progress has been made since then *in spite* of the setbacks that Engelsma says so much about, then such setbacks are simply not evidence that the postmillennial view of the future is mistaken. The job of falsifying postmillennialism must be done with Scripture if it is to be done at all.

Unfortunately, the level of scholarship does not improve throughout the rest of this book, and to continue commenting on each chapter at this level of detail, stopping at every falsehood, misrepresentation, fallacy and error, would take possibly a greater amount of time than it took Prof Engelsma to write the book. The remainder of this review, then, will focus on Engelsma's arguments against preterism.

## Preterism

When dealing with "the preterism of Christian Reconstruction," Engelsma sees fit to print two letters of response that he has received from two preterists, Gary DeMar and Andrew Sandlin. These letters, he wants the reader to think, are evidence that such preterists are nasty pieces of work, who are harsh, ungracious and berating towards those they disagree with. Now, to some degree this may be correct. To say this, however, does not do anything to address the content of their views. Moreover, when we actually look at the content of the letters that Engelsma shows the reader, we begin to see what might have inspired the letters (which, it needs to be said, were not especially harsh, merely honest and in disagreement with Engelsma's stance). Note the words that DeMar used that Engelsma considers so terrible:

It's one thing to disagree with a position and those who hold it, it's another thing to lie about what people actually believe. The ninth commandment is still in force. Your editorial is an example of very poor scholarship. It's embarrassing to think that it was written by a seminary professor who is supposed to be preparing students for ministry and truth telling.

Sometimes the truth hurts. Reading Engelsma's book (which is a collection of articles that appeared in the publication DeMar is referring to), it is sadly clear what he is referring to. Misrepresentation is the name of Engelsma's game. Note also the supposedly dreadful utterances that came from Andrew Sandlin:

It [Engelsma's editorial] was so twisted in its depiction of the Christian Reconstructionist position that I prefer to assume that you are simply misinformed for, certainly, one would otherwise be guilty of slander to so egregiously misrepresent the documentable view of Christian Reconstruction.

Yes, see the vicious venom of a man who objects to being misrepresented! That Engelsma even printed this letters suggests that he thinks it is a sure bet that the reader will think that these claims by DeMar and Sandlin are false. He made a bad bet. Engelsma included the editorial in his book, the editorial that these men objected to, a decision that simply enables the reader to see that the letters were correct.

In chapter twenty, Engelsma makes a number of very clear claims. He says that preterism is the view that every single piece of eschatological prophecy was finally fulfilled in the first century, and that the final return of Christ is thus in the past. He says that preterism entails that the Bible says nothing at all about what now lies in store for humanity and the world. He says (correctly) that the view he has *described* was promoted by R. and J. Leonard, and that it was promoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by J. S. Russell. And then he makes his kill – most Reconstructionists use the word “preterism” to describe their view of prophecy, therefore “Christian Reconstruction is committed, willy-nilly, to the full-blown, consistent preterism that strips the church and the Christian of all hope and all salvation” (p. 137).

I have tried very hard in the earlier parts of this review, so allow for the possibility that Engelsma was confused or misinformed about what his opponents believe. I can no longer do this. Professor David J. Engelsma lied, and any person who reads his book and who is familiar with the position that he criticizes will be able to see that this is true. After making the observations made here, I think that this is an entirely fair – albeit very unhappy – judgment to make. The appropriate response by Engelsma to that comment is not, in my view, to react as though I have maliciously attacked him, but rather to engage on some serious self reflection, retraction, apology and repentance.

This is a review, not a defense of preterism, so I will simply limit myself to looking at what Engelsma says. He is correct to condemn the view of Russell and the Leonard brothers, which denies the physical resurrection of the dead, and the future return of Jesus. He is wrong to attribute this view to reconstructionism. He scandalously suggests that because Gary DeMar and Kenneth Gentry say some positive things about some of the points made by Russell, they thereby endorse his view. But this is like suggesting that because Engelsma shares the Roman Catholic Church's view of the Trinity, he is a Roman Catholic (a point I hope you can appreciate regardless of your view of the Catholic Church).

Engelsma glosses over the fact that there are two distinct views here. “Preterism,” that is, the view held by Gentry, DeMar and others, is the view that the events of Matthew 24 were first century events. Preterists consider that just as God said to Egypt in Isaiah 19:1, “See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them,” so the reference to the Son of Man coming in judgment in Matthew 24 are references to the historic judgment that was to come upon Jerusalem in the first century, and that these are not references to the return of Christ. Preterists, however, do believe that Jesus will return, since Scripture elsewhere clearly declares that He will, and the dead will be raised when He does (an obvious reference to this would be 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; and a clear reference to the physical resurrection would be 1 Corinthians 15), and they also believe that

Scripture says other things about the future prior to this glorious event as well, namely that the Gospel will transform the whole earth, which will become filled with those who are part of God's spiritual kingdom.

But Engelsma here is describing another view, a view rejected by these preterists. The view is a deviant form of preterism, referred to in a number of ways, "full preterism," being the most common. Now, Engelsma believes that the tribulation and the events of Matthew 24 are in the future, but he does not believe that every event of prophecy is in the future. For example, the first coming of Christ and His saving work, and of course the first resurrection, which Engelsma certainly doesn't think is an end-times event (unlike dispensationalists, who do). He understands, therefore, that just because some events are future, it does not follow that all of them are. But now observe the logic he uses against preterists. He notes that preterists take the reference to "this generation" in Matthew 24 as literal, and that the coming of the Lord in judgment on Israel in 70AD is what many New Testament passages are referring to when they talk about the "soon" coming of the Lord. Then comes the response (pp. 135-136):

If this is, in fact, what is meant by "near," "at hand," and "quickly," Christ came in AD 70, and everything connected with His coming, e.g., the resurrection, took place at that time in the past. Scripture's prophecy of the end has been fulfilled... There is no further revelation of any future coming.

And how does Engelsma argue for this conclusion? As with most of his claims, he does not. His word is final. But surely he knows better than this. After all, one might just as easily assert:

If the tribulation is yet future, then all prophecy is future, and none of it has any relevance to any who have ever lived in the past, the thousand years, the first resurrection, none of it has yet come to us.

Clearly it makes no more sense to say that "if some is past, all is past," than it does to say "if some is future, all is future," yet this is exactly what Engelsma does. Moreover, Prof. Engelsma reveals that he in fact has not read the work of preterists like DeMar or Gentry (or cannot remember them). It seems that he thinks that they are trying to get out of saying that the Lord came in AD 70. In fact they are not, any more than they would deny that the Lord came to Egypt as stated in Isaiah 19, or that the Lord came to Israel in judgment (very much like he did in AD 70) in the attack that led to the Babylonian exile as promised in Amos 4:12. Their point, however, is that although there are occasions throughout Scripture like this when the Lord "comes" to exercise judgment on His people, this does not mean that every one of those occasions is the same as the visible *return of Jesus*. Yes the Lord came in judgment on Israel just as He indirectly said he would in Luke 11:47-51

Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute." Therefore this generation

will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

And yes, Jesus is also going to return for His church, as preterists have always said, as the Apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Engelsma also claims that "Christian Reconstructionists" actually *depend* on Russell's full preterist book in reaching their conclusions about prophetic passages of Scripture, including, for example, "the entire book of Revelation" (p. 135). But when it comes to offering any evidence of any kind, none is provided. No quotations, no footnotes, no lists of publications that draw on Russell's work, nothing at all! One can certainly understand DeMar's complaint about Engelsma lying about the views he holds, and one can only wonder why Engelsma reprinted the following part of DeMar's letter, thinking that it would somehow vindicate, not DeMar, but Engelsma:

I did not use Russell for my research. I was most influenced by the Hebraist scholar John Lightfoot, one of the participants at the Westminster Assembly. He, along with many other commentators, showed that Matthew 24 and II Thessalonians 2, to name just two passages, have a preterist fulfillment. If you read my *Last Days Madness* and follow its arguments, you might not be so quick to misrepresent a brother in Christ.

Well said. Engelsma should not be crowing about his false claims and the above confrontation they caused. He should be apologizing, and instead he publishes it to show how lost in heresy his opponents are! He made a false claim about Reconstructionist writers simply for the purpose of bolstering his claim that they are committed to full preterism, when in fact they are not, and they consistently reject that view. There is literally no argument to justify Engelsma's insistence that preterism must eventually be committed to full preterism.

And so ends this review. If you are looking for a good book to explain amillennialism to you on biblical grounds, this is not it. If you are looking for a reasonable interaction with postmillennial theology, this is also not it. If you're looking for an honest and balanced treatment of *any* issue, as it turns out, this book is not for you. It is a cause for genuine shame that it was ever written or published in the first place in the name of anything "Reformed" or Christian. Reformed theology cares about truth. It cares about God's law, so one teaching it would not bear false witness. Reformed theology is committed to the Scripture as sole infallible

authority on matters of doctrine. Professor Engelsma shows concern for none of these things in this book, whatever his personal views might be.

If you are a postmillennialist or a preterist, and you have heard of this book, have no fear. This dog's bark is significantly worse than its bite. But it is difficult to take pleasure in the weakness of your opponent's argument when it is so apparent that such dishonesty and slander is taking place in the name of truth.