

# THE FATEFUL LIGHTNING

A Study of The Effect of  
Eschatology on Revival

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## PREFACE

*This booklet is about **revival** as it relates to **eschatology**. Borrowing a phrase from the great hymn, "Battle Hymn of the Republic": "He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword," we have likened "The Fateful lightning" to the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in bringing powerful and protracted revival to His people as they conform in vision, faith, and prayer to the purpose of God as presented in His Word — the "terrible swift sword" of the Spirit.*

On the next several pages is presented a study of a very important historical phenomenon. It is a study of the relationship of eschatology to revival — of the effect that differing views of future things have had upon the outlook, zeal, the principles and practice of prayer, the evangelistic power, and the moral and cultural influence of the people of God. The implications of this phenomenon for the effectual proclamation of the Gospel, the revival of God's people, and the salvation and benefit of mankind is so great that we will ignore this matter to our detriment, to the detriment of the name of God, and to the detriment of all mankind.

Any valid view of eschatology must accurately comprehend the general purpose of God. Eschatology is the target of God. It is what God purposes to accomplish and what He will accomplish. *Therefore if we, having an erroneous view of God's purpose, are steadfastly shooting at the wrong target and working diligently toward the wrong goal, how can we expect God to be pleased with our efforts?* He should not, and He will not approve deeds and attitudes contrary to His purpose. In days when many churches seek crowds by entertainment, theatrics, drama and dance, mitigating personal guilt, promoting self esteem, or worse by universalism or a low view of the person on God, shouldn't that be a clue that God has left us to our own devices? The fateful lightning will not strike until we acknowledge this sham and pray fervently, effectually, for the real thing. Isn't it time to reexamine our target?

## I. INTRODUCTION: IMPLICATIONS IN ESCHATOLOGY

Although God is sovereign, His choices are never arbitrary. When His "fateful lightning" strikes, whether in judgment of a people or to bless them with revival, He always has His reasons. Sometimes we can discover them, and sometimes we can't.

In the physical realm, to draw an analogy, lightning appears to strike at random — wholly arbitrarily. However, when an environment can be brought under exact scientific analysis, a lightning strike, where and when, is wholly predictable. Unfortunately, this can only be done under tightly controlled laboratory conditions. In the natural environment the conditions in the atmosphere are constantly changing and shifting so that an exact analysis at any instant in time is impossible, but when we see the dark clouds roll under certain conditions of temperature, pressure, humidity, etc., we may be fairly certain that lightning will soon strike somewhere.

In the spiritual realm, however, we may be a bit more fortunate. We have revelation from an unchangeable God, an infallible Word, and careful instructions in all the parameters necessary for "life and godliness." Is it impossible then to discover what God may require of us before the fateful lightning of His reviving Spirit may strike in a widespread, powerful, heart-rending way? I am not speaking of the local "mercy drops" that come on temporary occasions, for which we are eternally grateful to God. I mean a general and protracted movement of the Spirit of God where conviction of sin swallows up a people, the Gospel becomes strangely effectual, and the righteousness of God begins to impact the moral and civil traditions of one or more nations.

Such revival as this has only occurred in two periods of history since Christ's first advent: 1) It occurred in the 1st and early 2nd centuries under the ministry of the apostolic churches and their immediate successors. And 2) it occurred in the Great Awakening of the 18th and 19th centuries. Are

there any common factors in the doctrines and the vision of God's people in these two unique periods that might give us a clue as to why God was pleased to send the "Fateful Lightning" of His Spirit in revival?

*The Basic Premise*

The premise of this paper is that there are two doctrinal factors that molded the mind-set — the worldview — and pervaded the vision of a large percentage of the Christians during these two periods of time. The first is soteriological and conditioned the *message*:

*'There was the persuasion that A) God is a creator God, and we are His creatures; B) God has revealed eternal principles of righteousness in His moral law; C) all men are guilty before His law and answerable to God; D) there is a day of reckoning coming; E) only through repentance and faith in Christ and His atonement are the guilty pardoned.*

This first doctrinal factor we will call, for want of a better term, *The Evangelical Imperative*. It may be argued that most evangelical Christians accept these truths, but the typical pulpit conveys a different message. One prominent church marquee read: "Come and we'll promise not to 'throw the book' at you." The general trend is: "You're not happy? Come, we'll make you feel good about yourself. You're hurting out there; life has dealt you a bad rap; you're a victim, and you need Jesus. He cares and will make your hurt go away if you will *accept* Him." This approach builds churches burgeoning with people, but without a sense of personal guilt, a sinner cannot repent. And without repentance one cannot be saved. The fact that our sins make us unhappy is a secondary problem; the fact that they make us guilty and place us under the condemnation of God is a major problem. We do not deal honestly, lovingly, or righteously with the sinner unless we openly proclaim this truth to them. The "accept-Christ" emphasis, in contrast to the biblical repentance and faith, highlights self-esteem and self-interest rather than personal guilt; it makes God petition the sinner for "acceptance"

instead of the sinner entreating God for forgiveness and mercy. When the emphasis of preaching centers on the personal life and victimhood of the individual, it misses the biblical Gospel emphasis by a country mile.

Moreover, popular evangelicalism today has called in question the traditional understanding of God himself. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President and Professor of Christian Theology in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote:

... a look at popular evangelicalism reveals a God of sentimentality not unlike the God of the early modernists. The "user-friendly" God of market-driven evangelicalism bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible... Many evangelicals are now mostly concerned about what good this God will do for us, how well this God may make us feel, and how much self-esteem this God may give us as His Gift.<sup>1</sup>

Thus we cannot say that a large percentage of evangelical Christians today have a persuasion that has molded their mind-set to *The Evangelical Imperative*.

However, this is only one of the two factors that were common to both the first-century and the Great Awakening period. The second is eschatological and conditioned the messenger:

•*There was the persuasion that: A) God's purpose includes a golden age of Gospel victory through the agency of the church wherein B) the great commission will be actualized by the power of Christ at God's right hand through the agency of the church. C) The righteous principles of God's kingdom will be realized in the affairs of men and state around the world in this age — before His second advent"*

This second doctrinal factor we will call *The Inspirational Imperative*. There are at least three reasons why this second factor is an imperative. *First*, before God seriously blesses His people, He requires that there be a robust faith — the inspiration of such trust in the power of the Almighty to actualize all His purposes that they become flaming incendiaries for His name! This is the exact principle that was at

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<sup>1</sup>R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Eclipse of God at Century's End," *Who Will Be Saved*, ed. Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornbury (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000) 46, 47.

work in Joshua and Caleb. They had "another spirit" in them (Num. 14:24). They were inspired by the purpose, promise, and power of God and were ready to march with Him into the strongholds of giants. The others languished in miserable, abject *pessimism* paralyzed by hopelessness, and their no-victory theology became to them, in their time, a self-fulfilling prophecy. They "couldn't" win, and *they* didn't win; it was Joshua and Caleb who won.

The *second* reason has to do with the human psyche. If a man goes into a battle that he believes he cannot win, he has little spirit to fight. He may go through the motions out of a resigned sense of duty — like Thomas: let us go and "die with him" John 11:16). Such a man may stand and be counted on the right side and suffer valiantly, but his belief system, his dismal pessimism, tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and sure enough things get worse. But God is not into defeatism.

The third reason, and quite possibly the most important reason why *The Inspirational Imperative* is an imperative, has to do with both the human psyche and the theology of prayer. God has revealed to us that the objectives He has purposed to accomplish through human agencies will involve the "effectual fervent prayer" of those agents. Consider now God's objective for the church to disciple all nations, baptize them, and teach them to observe (to obey) all Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:19, 20) - to actualize that commandment so that the earth would "be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9). How can one who believes that the church is a mere parenthesis in God's plan awaiting His return and restoration of Israel, pray in faith for the actual disciplining of all nations by the church? And how can this monumental task be accomplished without the effectual, fervent prayers of faith by a clean, unified, obedient church, even as Christ prayed before us in John 17:17-21 that the "world may believe"? It's time to abandon a theology that creates such a serious dilemma.

*Two Scenarios*

Today Christians are divided as to God's purpose in the church age. A *huge* majority of Christians essentially believe this age, except for a comparatively small remnant, belongs to Satan - that the Lord is to return soon. Meanwhile, moral and spiritual values are on an irreversible downhill spiral until He comes. We can't, they say, actualize the Great Commission; God never expected the church to "disciple all nations." The church is a "parenthesis" in God's plan to fill space and to "cali out" a relatively small percentage of people from the world. And now, since the end of this age is virtually upon us, we're just going to have to "suck it up" and admit that at least 5 billion lost souls are destined for the chambers of perdition (2Thess. 1:7-10).

On the other hand a *tiny* minority says, it is surely God's purpose for the church to actualize the Great Commission, subdue the gates of hell, that men, in this age, will beat their swords into plowshares and the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (see Isa. 2 & 11).

While this is not the place to develop the pros and cons of this issue,<sup>2</sup> it is little understood or considered by evangelical Christians just how enormous a difference, as to their ultimate consequences, these two views will make :

- Will we continue business as usual, with the theology that the Lord's plan for this age includes the irreversible decline of truth, righteousness, and Gospel power until He comes, while the 5 billion souls drop into hell one by one?
- Or will He indeed return soon and plunge them all into hell?
- Or does God expect us to have "another spirit" (Num. 14:24), become unified in truth (John 17:17-21), marshal our forces and resources, and in His power win the ever-growing billions of souls over the next two or three decades?

*The Majority Strategy*

Strategy depends upon one's understanding of God's plan for the age. Since the rise of dispensationalism, the

<sup>2</sup>For a full biblical discussion see, Willard A. Ramsey, *Zion's Glad Morning* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1990).

philosophy driving most evangelical Christian strategy for over a century, though not all dispensationalists acknowledge it, was lucidly expressed by Bishop Ryle in 1879:

I believe, finally, that it is for the safety, happiness and comfort of all true Christians to *expect as little as possible from churches* and governments under the present dispensation... and to expect their good things *only from Christ's second advent* (emphasis added).

This strategy, while not often acknowledged openly, has come down to recent times in various forms. Typical is the late J. Vernon McGee's frequent quip concerning the church: "You don't polish brass on a sinking ship." The God who inspired Ephesians 3:10,11 cannot be pleased with that.

Consistent dispensationalists inherently regard the church today as a sinking ship and assume it could never overcome, even by the power of God, the forces of darkness in this age. Theologically, they regard the church as a mere parenthetical intercalation in God's greater plan for Israel. The church is almost finished. Consequently, the encroachment of worldliness is often regarded, sometimes even applauded, as a sign of the inevitable triumph of wickedness signaling the "soon-coming" rapture. Recent decades have demonstrated that there is virtually no spirit left to "polish the brass" on God's stately ship of the church — and with all the carnal theatrics, it is getting pretty tacky and very tarnished. It's heartbreaking, but there seems to be little hope among leaders that *a deliberate, resolute quest for biblical integrity and unity in truth* would so triumph that groups clinging to unbiblical man-centered distinctions would simply melt away, as implicit in Christ's farewell prayer (John 17:17-23).

#### *The Minority Strategy*

The first line of strategy of the minority is fervent prayer in faith. We do not mean to imply that our dispensational brethren are not a people of prayer and faith. But on the one specific point of a church-wide revival to the extent of actual-

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin Goodspeed (quoting Ryle), *Messiah's Second Advent* (1900; Reprint, Millennium III Publishers, 1997), p. 214.

izing the Great Commission and seeing righteousness cover the earth in the church age, their theology prevents a prayer of faith for that.

Lest it escape the reader's attention, a prayer cannot be effectual unless it is in accordance with the will of God: "*if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us*" (1 John 5:14). If it is God's plan that things get irreversibly worse until Christ comes, one cannot effectually pray *in faith* for God to reverse this order and save the 5 billion through the agency of the church *before* Christ returns. To put it another way, *a premillennialist cannot pray in faith for a postmillennial result!*

It is a serious problem when the majority of believers cannot pray effectually or consistently for the central and most urgent aspect of Christian calling and duty! It should be clear that the destiny of numerous souls are implicated in these theological issues. But we believe God is now calling a people back to eschatological truth and giving them a Spirit of prayer and supplication. Meanwhile, those who say "Oh, these doctrines don't matter" should themselves be the object of our prayers. We know good brethren who pray and act like postmillennialists but hold slavishly to premillennialism.

In addition to prayer for God's power, the minority strategy will be to mobilize for a massive long-range offensive for truth and against the gates of hell, to reassert a Christian worldview, to evangelize the 5 billion, to defeat the forces of darkness in every aspect of life, church, and culture as follows:

- Change the *character of contemporary evangelism* to correspond to that of the first century and the Great Awakening.
- Resolve the unresolved issues in ecclesiology, address the sin of Christian discord and seriously seek unity in truth according to John 17:17-23.
- Join the battle for men's minds, utilizing every appropriate means of influence, through church, school, technology, business, art, science and culture, to establish a biblical worldview throughout every culture on earth.

- Acquire and utilize all types of the extensive technologies available in this Information Age and mobilize them in the service of all aspects of truth.

### ***History Repeats Itself- by God's Providence***

The only two times in history when there has been widespread, protracted revival these two factors, *The Evangelical* and *Inspirational Imperatives*, have been prominent among a large percentage of God's people. When these two factors are compared with what God has revealed, the evidence is very powerful that widespread, protracted revival will not happen without them. If this generation wants to see such a revival, there must be some serious theological adjustments in the hearts of God's people back to both these *Imperatives*. If we do that and still do not have immediate revival, we are better for it, but where is there a shred of proof that we can have great revival while abusing those two biblical truths?

This thesis, however, is not presented as proof of the validity of Postmillennial eschatology. The validity of any doctrine must be established by Scripture. For a full scriptural analysis of eschatology, again I refer the reader to my book, *Zion's Glad Morning*.

As to *The Evangelical Imperative*, the issues inherent in it have been discussed in my latest book *Facing Eternity*.<sup>4</sup> It presents a transcendent, personal, communicating, law-giving God (contrary to the reconstituted god of modern evangelicalism) and traces His redemptive purpose through Christ from creation to the Cross. (See also *The Pillar*, Spring 1994 and Spring 1995). Therefore, the remainder of this booklet will be devoted exclusively to demonstrating historically that *The Inspirational Imperative* was a pervasive concept and did in fact mold the mind-set, the worldview and vision, of a large percentage of the Christians during the two periods of great revival - the 1st and early 2nd centuries and the 18th and 19th centuries.

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<sup>4</sup>Willard A Ramsey, *Facing Eternity* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1999).

## II. THE EFFECT

### OF ESCHATOLOGY ON REVIVAL

#### *The First and Early Second Centuries*

The churches of the first century, fresh from the counsel of Christ and the apostles, must surely have had their eschatology together as far as it had been revealed to them. Furthermore, they were essentially united in the apostolic doctrines; their power in the Gospel and their influence for righteousness was unparalleled in Christian history. We must realize, however, that the book of Revelation, the only book in the Bible that categorically mentions the millennium by a time designation, was not written until all the apostles except John had died. Thus, unless Christ had specifically revealed it to them, and He may have, it is not feasible that the churches would have had a complete, mature, and organized eschatology until after the Scriptures were complete and widely distributed.

#### *The Future Vision of the Early Church*

But what did they understand about future things? Without denying other powerful factors, they knew:

- Christ commissioned the church to "make disciples of all nations" and He would be with them (Matt 28:19, 20).
- Christ was their reigning king ascended to the right hand of God as the legal heir to David's throne (Acts 2:29-36) for the specific purpose of bringing all His enemies into subjection (Psa. 110:1; 1 Cor. 15:23-26; Heb. 10:12, 13).
- From this heavenly session He would gain, by His limitless power, the victory through the Gospel as He worked on behalf of His earthly agency, the church (Eph. 1:19-23).
- The church was thus guaranteed that it could *conquer* the "gates of hell" (Matt 16:18,19), *actually* "disciple all nations" (28:19, 20) against incredible odds (2 Cor. 10:4, 5; Eph. 6:12) through much tribulation (John 15:18-21; Acts 14:22); that Israel would be converted (Rom. 11:15, 25-33); and finally the "principalities and powers" would come to know God's "manifold wisdom" through the church according to God's "eternal purpose" in Christ ( Eph. 3:10, 11).

This much we know they understood; and like Joshua and Caleb they were ready to march into the jaws of death if necessary to take the territory for their reigning King! Their weapons were not carnal — as so many are today — "but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God ..." (2 Cor. 10:4, 5 NKJV).

Herein we clearly see *The Inspirational Imperative* working at its best. And the result is history. The fateful lightning of God struck with great reviving power, and the early church turned the world "upside down" for a hundred years.

### ***The Spiritual Power Declines***

But alas, it is a sad fact that before the death of the last apostle the seeds of eschatological error had already been sown, this vision of victory was truncated, and accordingly the power of the church began to decline by mid-second century. During that critical time between the writing of the final book of the New Testament Scripture (c. A.D. 98) and the time when all these inspired writings were collected, accepted, and distributed throughout the early church (well into the fourth century), there was a period of vulnerability when false doctrines were difficult to treat; and they arose in profusion. There was the Judaism of Paul's day, then Gnosticism, premillennial Chiliasm, later the paracletism of the Montanists, etc.

But in eschatology there arose two new influences to quench the simple incendiary zeal of the 1st century and to paralyze and polarize the churches of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The first of these influences that arose to eclipse *The Inspirational Imperative* was *premillennialism*. It was first introduced by Cerinthus,<sup>5</sup> a quasi-Christian gnostic Jew called by Eusebius the "arch heretic." He was opposed by the Apostle John. Then Papius, one of the more orthodox church

William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), Vol. II, p. 390.

fathers, popularized and sensationalized premillennialism. As it gradually became a widespread doctrine later in the 2nd century, the revival power gradually declined.

The second influence was the spiritualizing and allegorical philosophy of the Alexandrian school, essentially *amillennialism*, which opposed, and finally overcame the premil doctrine, according to Neander, about A.D. 255.

As the Catholic movement merged with the Roman state, the Donatists and other groups from the west and later the Paulicians from the east, both having been persecuted and banished by the Catholics, made their way to the protective mountains and valleys of southern Europe. There they were sequestered many centuries before emerging, c. 1200, as Waldensians or evangelical Anabaptists. Records of this period are too meager to be certain of their eschatology.<sup>6</sup>

An amillennial understanding of eschatology typically dominated the Catholics throughout the dark ages as well as the early reformers. Neither of these were characterized by *The Inspirational Imperative*, revival, or great spiritual and moral influence at the grass roots of society. Persecutors they were, both in doctrine and practice.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly, this is brief, yet it is accurate. For a fuller discussion of eschatology in history, I refer the reader, again, to my larger work.<sup>8</sup>

*The 18th and 19th Centuries*

A century after the Reformation, things began to change. The significant thing about the period from about 1600 and for the next two centuries was that the Christian world, particularly the Baptists, Puritans, and other nonconformist movements, were longing for revival. Their changing mood, as reflected in their changing eschatology, became a vision of hope out of great confusion and centuries of oppression.

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<sup>6</sup>They were not premil. For fuller analysis, see Ramsey, *Zion's Glad Morning*, pp. 269-272.

<sup>7</sup>See Samuel Chandler, *The History of Persecution* (London: Hull, 1813)

<sup>8</sup>Ramsey, *Zion's Glad Morning*, pp. 238-288.

Among the earlier writers to set forth an eschatology trending back toward *The Inspirational Imperative* of the 1st-century church was an Englishman, Thomas Brightman (1562-1607). His scheme was very complicated, the details of which I could never accept. But he saw the strongholds of Satan coming down and true Gospel victories being won in this age through the agency of the church. Brightman wrote:<sup>9</sup>

. . . thou mayest more fully rejoice, receive with all tidings of the final destruction of the Turks presently, after the destruction of Rome (Papacy).  
 ... And lest anything should yet be wanting to the full heap of joy, there thou mayest know that the calling of the Jews to be a Christian nation is hereunto joined and with all a most happy tranquility from thence to the end of the world....

Toon remarks, "Brightman's eschatological scheme may be described as a form of postmillennialism . . ." Others, after Brightman, promoting this theme were Henry Finch, William Gouge, John Cotton, and John Owens. This doctrine, known as the "latter day glory," became a part of the Congregationalists' confession of faith entitled the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*. In chapter 20 of that confession there appears a paragraph indicating the strong anticipation of the conversion of the Jews and a general revival which were growing expectations of the day. It reads in part as follows:

... so according to his promise we expect that in the latter days Antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of his dear Son broken, the churches of Christ being enlarged and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed.<sup>10</sup>

Toon further says:

The development of the doctrine of the latter day glory of the church on earth also took place in Scotland \_\_\_ Perhaps the most persuasive advocate of this pristine postmillennialism was James Durham (1622-1658)...."

The "latter day glory" played a powerful role in creat-

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Brightman, *A Revelation of the Revelation* (1615), as cited by Peter Toon, *Puntan Eschatology 1600 to 1650* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., Ltd., 1970), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>Toon, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup>Toon, p. 40.

ing a vision of hope for better times as the hearts of God's people longed for an awakening. Until early in the 18th century a pall of deadness continued to pervade the Christian world. The Reformers had retained the oid state-church sacralism of the Catholics, which is the enemy of Holy Spirit revival and fertile soil for corruption, persecution, and spiritual deadness.

This was the state of affairs as the doctrine of the latter day glory began to take root among the nonconformists as well as some individuals in the establishment churches. The longing and prayerful attitude for revival in those days is well expressed in the words of Thomas Boston (1716):

Are you longing for a revival to the churches, now lying like dry bones, would you fain have the Spirit of life enter into them? Then pray for the Jews. "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world; what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead."<sup>12</sup>

In America also the earnest expectation for the outpouring of God's blessings continued. A Mr. Adams of New London urged:

Oh! that the Lord would arise and have mercy upon Zion, that the time to favour it, the set time may come, that the whole earth may be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea!<sup>13</sup>

Murray, commenting upon the ground-swell of hope that culminated in the Great Awakening, wrote:

Though a number, like the Simeons and Annas of another day, thus waited for a divine visitation, when the great revival of the eighteenth century at last began in the late 1730's, it was unexpected by the mass of nominal Christians. And even those who had long prayed for a new outpouring of the Spirit were to be astonished at both the extent and power of the work.<sup>14</sup>

The postmillennial position, with its promise of revival and the triumph of Christianity through the agency of the church, gave renewed Impetus to the longing for revival felt among the nonconformist brethren and continued to develop and spread:

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<sup>12</sup>As quoted by Iain Murray, *The Puntan Hope* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 114.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. <sup>14</sup>Murray, p.

In both Old and New England as well as in Scotland the eschatological doctrine now usually called postmillennialism has continued . . . [and] the belief in the conversion of the Jewish people to Christ accompanied by worldwide rich spiritual blessing for the church of Christ before the Second Coming of Christ has remained constant.<sup>15</sup>

*Jonathan Edwards — Prelude to Revival*

In the mounting tide of optimism, hope, and the spirit of fervent prayer arising out of the return to a biblical view of eschatology, there was no greater advocate than Jonathan Edwards. He was one of the prominent leaders during the Great Awakening, but his theology, particularly his eschatology, played a significant part in paving the way:

A group of Scottish ministers organized a movement to devote regular hours every week to concerted prayers for a revival of religion; Edwards joined in their program and in 1747 published a piece of propaganda for it, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth*. The booklet gives further hints of the fascination he found in the doctrine of the millennium, which he had already expounded in the sermons of 1739. The emphasis is remarkably strong upon the triumph to be achieved "on earth."<sup>16</sup>

Like Daniel, when he was convinced by Scripture that the Jews were to return from Babylon, he was driven by that hope to fervent prayer (Dan. 9: 1f). Just so, thousands of Christians were driven to their knees believing the truth that God's purpose is to reclaim the world through the Gospel. Only those who believe this truth will be motivated to prayer in that way. There is no doubt that our premillennial and amillennial brethren are concerned for the people of this earth, for revival, and for the power of the preached Gospel; but they in fact believe that things will only get worse until Jesus returns and that there will not be a golden age, a worldwide victory for the church through the Gospel. Need I say it is impossible to pray a prayer of faith for that which one believes cannot happen? Only postmillennial eschatology is

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<sup>15</sup>Toon, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup>Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1949), p. 198.

consistent with a spirit of effectual fervent prayer for long sustained revival for the church — just as they prayed before the Great Awakening:

... [Edwards] interpreted prophecy to say that the immediate precursor of the thousand years will be that "there shall be given much of a spirit of prayer to God's people... unitedly to pray to God in an extraordinary manner, that he would... pour out his Spirit... and advance his spiritual kingdom in the world." At one point he attempted actually to organize the project.<sup>17</sup>

The surge of postmillennial faith that preceded and sustained the Great Awakening has been more than vindicated by the power of the great outpouring of God's blessings on those very people. Certainly we see this as we consider the vision of Edwards, who experienced at least as great a manifestation of revival as anyone, but there were others:

Yet, before we dismiss the [post]millennial lore as so much foolishness, let us note that Sir Isaac Newton, after his crisis of 1692, devoted the rest of his life to studying the fulfillment of prophecies,... and reached the conclusion that the millennium could not be far off....

Among the Anabaptists, for instance, and among the Puritan sectaries of the English Civil Wars, [postmil] chiliasm was a mighty engine of revolution<sup>8</sup>

Edwards saw the millennium as the initiative of the sovereign God over all nations invading the domain of Satan by the instrumentality of His people through the Gospel (see Eph. 3:10,11).

[Edwards] expected a period, the thousand years of the Revelation, of "the church's great prosperity," located between what we now experience as history and the final Kingdom of God.

The millennium will be inaugurated by the destruction of one great component of fallen history, "Satan's visible kingdom...."

The event will be an event of this age; it "will not be accomplished all at once ... but... is a work which will be accomplished by... use of the ordinary means of grace," made savingly effective by a decisive "outpouring" of the Spirit "for the wonderful revival and propagation of religion." "Heresies, and infidelity and superstition" in the church "will then be abolished." The "kingdom of Antichrist," that is, the papacy, "shall be utterly overthrown." The oppression of the Jews will cease and they "in all their dispersion . . .

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<sup>17</sup>Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian, A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 134.

<sup>18</sup>Miller, pp. 319-21.

shall wonderfully have their hearts changed ... and ... flow together to ... Jesus." And thereupon finally "one nation shall be enlightened . . . after another, one false religion ... exploded after another."

. . . "It will be a time of great light and knowledge" shared over the whole earth and especially noteworthy among races now thought inferior. "It shall be a time when religion shall in every respect be uppermost in the world.

... The saints have hitherto ... been kept under.... But now they shall be uppermost." "There shall be universal peace.... Then shall all the world be united in one amicable society." "It will be a time of excellent order in the church of Christ." It "will be a time of the greatest temporal prosperity."<sup>19</sup>

After the millennium, Edwards believed Satan would again be loosed a little season (see Rev. 20:4, 7), a short return to a decadent and sinful order which would soon be terminated by the second coming of Christ:

... at the end of the thousand years, "there will be a very great apostasy...." The renewed "wickedness of the world will remarkably call for Christ's immediate appearing." Only then, after the millennium and after a great recrudescence of Satan's kingdom, "Christ will appear in the glory of his Father" and "that new heaven and new earth... which had been building up ever since Christ's resurrection, be completely finished."<sup>20</sup>

### ***Postmillennialism and Grass-Roots Revival***

Turning now from Edwards to consider persons who have been less prominent in history, we will consider a few examples from the "grass roots" where the postmillennial vision and the pursuant revival spirit touched thousands of individuals and communities not in the historical limelight. A person typical of this class was Daniel Marshall.

Under the influence of the hope of the latter day glory, in the mid-eighteenth century Daniel Marshall, a Baptist preacher, was typical of many among the Baptists in the Great Awakening period. We can easily see in his life the zeal and godly impulse a biblical eschatology gives to the preaching of the Gospel. His son, Abraham Marshall, writes of his father and of others who were stirred by this vision of hope :

Firmly believing in the near approach of the "latter-day glory," when the Jews, with the fullness of the Gentiles, shall hail their Redeemer, and bow to his gentle scepter; a number of worthy characters ran to and fro, through

<sup>19</sup>Jenson, pp. 130,131.

<sup>20</sup>Jenson, p. 134.

the eastern states, warmly exhorting to the prompt adoption of every measure tending to hasten that blissful period ... One, and not the least sanguine, of these pious missionaries, was my venerable father.

It may possibly be thought that Mr. Marshall was the subject of delusive hope; and culpably enthusiastic when he left New England, with a family, to roam under the rising beams of the latter-day glory, as he supposed, for the conversion of souls. But let this matter be fairly considered, and it will appear, that his most sanguine expectations must have, so far, been fully realized.... missionaries have gone out, literally, into all the world; and sinners, of all descriptions, have fallen, by thousands, beneath the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.<sup>21</sup>

There was a second wave to the revivals that accompanied the Great Awakening in the first half of the nineteenth century. The God-ordained means of faithful preaching of the Gospel by the power of God is the means for evangelism in any age, and when God's people have held this eschatology of hope there have been powerful results. On into the nineteenth century this hope inspired churches in local communities to powerful revival. In Virginia, for example, in the early nineteenth century Taylor tells<sup>22</sup> how another Baptist minister, John Jenkins, exhorted his people:

While we are often hearing of the triumphs of the cross in foreign countries; while our ears are cheered with the animating news, that the gracious work is spreading in every direction in our highly favored country; while thousands of heaven-born souls are daily emerging from darkness into the marvelous light of the gospel, mingling their prayers with the elders saints, and uniting their voices in lofty songs to God and the Lamb—we remain still and inactive; our harps are hung upon the willows; and we pass it off, by faintly saying, "we wish we could see a revival amongst ourselves," But why is it thus with us? Is the Lord's ear heavy, that he cannot hear? or, is his arm shortened, that he cannot save? Not so, we must look for the cause at home. Let every preacher, every deacon, and every private member of the church, examine himself strictly, as in the presence of the living God, and if he finds that he has been remiss, or negligent in any Christian duty, let him repent, return, and do his first works; let every church be stirred up to use all diligence in all the duties of her charge. In short, a reformation must first begin amongst professors, before we can expect to see it among the unconverted.

It is apparent that a biblical eschatology would focus the attention of churches on the harvest, on correcting wrongs,

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<sup>21</sup>James B. Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers* (Richmond: Yale & Wyatt, 1838), pp. 15, 20, 21.

<sup>22</sup>Taylor, pp. 352-353.

purging corruption, cleansing the churches, and sharpening the implements of harvest. John Jenkins' work is an example. One must first have a biblical hope before he can seriously make this response. The latter-day-glory principle says more than that there is coming a day when the Gospel will have great power again. It demonstrates that because the Gospel (not the second coming) *is* the "power of God unto salvation" to be preached in hope by normal, clean, human agencies, it will work toward revival at any time. The Bible is clear that there can never be any other way of salvation but the preached Gospel (1 Cor. 1:21) received *by faith* - not by *sight* of the glorified Christ occupying an earthly throne in Jerusalem terrorizing unbelievers with a rod of iron. There will never be another person saved after Jesus is "revealed from heaven" (2 Thess. 1:7-10).

John Jenkins had it right. After the above sermon was preached, he baptized over 250 converts that year (1801-2) in a single country church.

The purpose of God inherent in the postmillennial vision was the driving energy of the Great Awakening. And even though God's timing for the millennium was not yet, it was that period of revival and optimism that made this nation what it was in perhaps its finest hour.

### ***Postmillennialism and the American Revolution***

Ideas have power. And if there was ever an idea for which Americans should be grateful, it is postmillennialism. Humanly speaking, it is entirely possible that without its pervasive influence in the thoughts of patriots who sacrificed themselves for the independence of this nation, there might never have been a United States of America as we know it.

The eschatological vision that drove the revivals is the same vision that drove the Revolutionary War, by which God put in place the foundation of a free nation. Will He not build upon that foundation — not by war but by truth — greater things even yet when His people return to the former vision.

The following excerpts by Charles Royster show the

## ***Postmillennialism and the American Revolution* 19**

continuing eschatological vision that fired the first Great Awakening now fueling the indomitable spirit of the Revolution:

The union between such absolute moral ideals and American national identity had important psychological origins in the continent-wide religious revivals of a generation before the revolution. The Great Awakening left no single doctrinal or institutional heritage that would thereafter define American character exclusively, but it did foster a communal concern with righteousness. . . . The popular aspiration to attain an absolute ideal for a whole nation and the examination of the heart's conformity to that ideal were revolutionary legacies of the Great Awakening.<sup>23</sup>

. . . Americans expected the revolution to inaugurate not just a period of greater public morality but a new era of harmony never before known... America would have political freedom, artistic and scientific greatness, and immense wealth. Agriculture and commerce would thrive; poverty and ignorance would fade...<sup>24</sup>

Despite the declines since this nation has departed from its former confidence, *God has been remarkably true to the aspirations of those patriots* and has blessed this nation above any perhaps since the days of Solomon. Its bounty proves again that "Righteousness exalteth a nation" (Prov. 14:34).

America would change in character as well as in extent. The religious beliefs of many revolutionaries encouraged them to prepare and strive for the imminent coming of the promised thousand-year rule of Christ's law on earth — the millennium. This era would bring the final and perfect earthly achievement of the national righteousness and Christian love that the revolution expressed.... The certainty of the millennium's coming relied not just on prophetic calculation but on God's promise of American victory. Some learned opinion set the beginning of the millennium around the year 2000, but juniors at Yale and an anonymous pamphleteer said "e'er long" and "nigh even at the very door." Chaplain William Linn prayed for the Sixth Pennsylvania Battalion in March 1776 "... may the peaceful reign of king Jesus soon commence, when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and the inhabitants thereof learn war no more...."

When the millennium came to an independent America, people would be united by love and would be free from former evils....

. . . As an imminent fulfillment for many Americans and as an inspirational expression of hopes shared at least in part by almost all revolutionaries, the millennium pervaded people's understanding of the revolution....

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<sup>23</sup>Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War, The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 152-3.

... Chaplain Ammi Robbins ... May 4, 1776: "I never had so clear an idea of the hazards and fatigues of soldiers and sailors as this day. Poorly and weak, and the sea made me very sick, vomited till I could vomit no more." May 5, 1776: "Discoursed to the people in *our* boat, on the millennium."<sup>25</sup>

. . . The millennial vision of the future enjoyed wide appeal because its assurance responded to the threat that selfishness would ruin Americans' hope for national and individual happiness. Such anxiety demanded a surer promise of immortality than the security of political institutions could alone provide. . . . When revolutionaries talked about the meaning of being an American — a citizen of the independent United States — they demanded that character match ideals...<sup>26</sup>

After the Revolution, the revivals began anew and lasted, with brief interludes, until after the Civil War.

### ***The Pall of Gloom Returns***

As it was in the second century, when premillennialism and amillennialism arose, the pure, spiritual impulse of first-century revival died away. Likewise, in the late 19th century, with the resurgence of premillennial doctrine, the impulse of God's fateful lightning in Holy Spirit revival also nearly disappeared.

Although the influence of eschatology on revival is the subject of this paper, the ingenious strategy by the kingdom of darkness against the powerful spirit of revival is too remarkable to pass over. As we noted in the "Introduction," there are two identifiable factors common to protracted revival. We called these two factors 1) *The Evangelical Imperative*, and 2) *The Inspirational Imperative*. We must credit Satan with a high degree of intelligence and cunning, and we would expect him to analyze these basic factors and attack them. After 125 years of revival, he was prepared, and God permitted him to fire a double-barreled broadside at the two imperative factors of the revivals. After an incubation period of several decades, the two volleys were ready and were fired, historically speaking, almost simultaneously. The first was launched against *The Evangelical Imperative*

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 155-7.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 159-60.

in 1859. It was Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The second was launched independently against *The Inspirational Imperative* essentially in the same decade. It was J. N. Darby's second hand pretribulation rapturism in a premillennial vehicle. The unbelieving world and modernist Christians went after *Darwinism*. The fundamentalist Christians went after *Darbyism*. Those two errors effectually shut down both imperatives suddenly and simultaneously.

These two volleys, fired just before the Civil War, began to take effect immediately after the Civil War. Darbyism spread like wildfire, beginning a steady erosion of the spirit of revival. A general decline has now continued for over a hundred years, coincident in history with the rise and progress of premillennial dispensationalism. This great error has eclipsed the vision of God's people, and we suffer the results in spiritual powerlessness which, over the decades, has trickled down as moral decadence in our society.

Though [post]millennialism has become strange to "mainline" American Christians, this is a recent development. Until well after the Civil War . . . America's major Protestant bodies expected the thousand years. And the doctrine has deeply marked American attitudes, in ways which still persist and the noting of which may uncover our closeness to Edwards.

... in this most American Protestantism followed [Edwards] until after the Civil War.<sup>27</sup>

The eclipse of the revival spirit was being prepared even as the last of the major revivals were in process. This eclipse began in earnest right after the Civil War as a result of the influence of John Nelson Darby who revived the premillennial doctrine along with the spread of pretribulation rapturism, a new end-time view originating c. 1830.<sup>28</sup> During seven visits to the United States over a 15 year period from 1862 to 1877, coincident with and following the Civil War, Darby

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<sup>27</sup>Jenson, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup>Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1995), pp. 249-255. This book covers the history, with the intriguing plots and cover-ups in the background of pretribism from the *originator*, to the later *revisionist plotter*, to the on-going cover-up by *contemporary revisionists*.

spread the premil/pretrib doctrine throughout the country.

According to Dave MacPherson, perhaps the world's foremost scholar on the history of pretrib rapturism, Darby called this new view the "*new wine*." And indeed it has proved to be, intoxicating almost the whole of the evangelical and fundamentalist movement. Darby, MacPherson says, was not the originator of this view but was the "great *popularizer*."<sup>29</sup>

The eclipse of revival coincides exactly with the time of a remarkable change in the eschatological views of large numbers of Christians. According to Jenson:<sup>30</sup>

In the period immediately after the Civil War, American preachers changed in remarkable lockstep from postmillennial to premillennial views ... Thus the abandoning of postmillennialism must also be seen as a secularization; Christianity's affirmation of Christ's final victory lost its previous animating connection with American's moral-political life. . . .

Now, over a century later, this eclipse of hope is becoming more apparent with every day that passes as the following questions illustrate quite well:

Why is there such a pessimistic vein in many sectors of evangelical Christianity? Is it because most of us are a-millenarians or pre-millenarians? Is it because we expect the world to grow worse and believe we can do very little about it, apart from praying for the return of our Lord?<sup>31</sup>

Runia's question gets to the heart of the problem. For a century the earth has been scorched with premillennial doctrine. First there was Darby and Scofield. Then virtually all fundamentalist and evangelical seminaries, Bible colleges, and preachers promoted it, along with the millionaire authors who have enriched themselves with false sensationalistic and date-setting paperbacks marketed by multiplied millions, in the last two decades of the 20th century, to a gullible and untaught Christian readership. This saturation of the Christian mentality with a premil worldview not only killed the great revival spirit, but now, a century later, our whole cul-

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>30</sup>Jenson, p. 183.

<sup>31</sup>Klaas Runia, "Evangelical Responsibility in a Secularized World," *Christianity Today*, Vol. XIV, No. 19 (June 19,1970), p. 13.

ture has undergone a moral melt-down. Gradually "revivais" became local, sporadic, and shallow — not wide-area, long-term, grass-roots movings of the Holy Spirit. They became tactically planned campaigns — shallow substitutes produced by promotional efforts built around popular personalities to circumvent the distressing absence of the powerful visitations of the Holy Spirit as in former times.

Many churches holding premillennial theology, which inherently ascribes failure to the church, are fulfilling their own prophetic views; with swelling church-roles, things *are* getting worse — for now. Undisciplined, shallow, and carnal churches are forced to maintain a sense of "euphoria" by dynamic personalities, entertainment, feel-good teaching, a man-centered gospel, doctrinal shallowness, and neglect of biblical church discipline. This will continue until Christians turn back again to God's eschatological target.

Now without multiplying examples, it is more than clear that the principles inherent in a postmillennial eschatology have demonstrated their power. The only periods of time when God's people have predominantly held this simple biblical eschatology, there has been powerful revival, i.e., in the 1st, the 18th, and 19th centuries. God has demonstrated His pleasure toward this eschatology of hope that accords with the truth of His plan and purpose.

I now submit these four propositions:

- ◆When the 1st-century church held to the biblical outlook of future things, they had great power in the Gospel.
- ◆When premillennialism and amillennialism arose as widespread doctrines in the second and third centuries, the power and effectiveness of the early church declined.
- ◆In the 18th and 19th centuries when many Christians returned to a biblical prophetic outlook, postmillennialism, the Gospel again had power and a Great Awakening swept over the Western world.
- ◆Then, again, when God's people forsook that biblical eschatology and returned to premillennialism two centuries later, the revival power again declined.

These are the stubborn facts; we would do well to take heed.

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