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# The Millennium in the Restoration Movement:

## A Brief Historical Portrait

BY DAN G. DANNER

There have been basically three points of view of the millennium within Restoration history: postmillennial, premillennial, and amillennial perspectives. While it is not advisable to linearize in a hard-core or unbending sense, these points of view followed a relatively chronological order, with many of the pioneers of the movement advocating a postmillennial interpretation of Rev 20:1–10.

### Alexander Campbell and Postmillennialism

In the wake of the Second Great Awakening on America's western frontier, Alexander Campbell became founder and editor of the *Millennial Harbinger* on January 4, 1830. Perhaps in reaction to the views of William Miller and the Millerites, who were proclaiming that the Lord was coming in 1843, Campbell looked at the millennium in a radically different way: the "consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian scriptures" marking the "universal spread of evangelical influences" prior to the second coming.<sup>1</sup> Campbell's optimism about the movement of which he was a part gave him the hope and expectation that the "ancient Gospel" was the instrument of converting "the whole human race" and "uniting all Christians upon one and the same foundation."<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that Campbell gave varying views of the millennium wide exposure in the early issues of the *Harbinger*. The literal reading of the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic passages in the millennium construct, which generally produce a pessimistic, this-worldly perspective and a flight to the glories of an otherworldly thousand-year reign of Christ, were viewed by Campbell as characteristic of writers and preachers in the British Isles. Obviously, America and the New World was a different story!

Campbell had read Joseph Towers' work on biblical prophecy and mentioned him in the *Harbinger*. Towers' *Illustrations of Prophecy* had been written from England in 1796, indicating that Campbell's millennial ideas had been ruminating for some time. The *Christian Baptist* "and a greater popular following than Campbell had originally anticipated worked the soil for him."<sup>3</sup> For Campbell, the world was getting better; scriptures were being spread; science, education, agriculture, commerce, and nature all were combining to bring on a better day. A new political, moral, and religious revolution was fast advancing—"And do not all these operations indicate that much . . . will certainly be done to bless the human race, without the aid of a new dispensation?"<sup>4</sup> In short, a new American epoch was bringing



about the culmination of the Reformation, fevering to a high pitch an early utopia in which Christ shall reign in spirit and truth.

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In 1841 Campbell's interest and writing on the millennium intensified. He examined the three principal theories of the millennium—continuous historical interpretations, the literalist/futurist interpretations of the Millerites, and postmillennialism. In contrast to all three, yet clearly in concert with the postmillennialists, Campbell believed that all the saints will be raised when the Lord first appears (not just the martyrs); when Christ appears the second time, the dead shall be raised and we shall all be changed. The nations will be judged and the final separation between the good and the bad will be made. The new heavens and a new earth shall then be the dwelling place of Jehovah God, the center of the universe, the throne of the Eternal One, and all things will be subdued to him.<sup>5</sup> To Campbell, Rev 20:1–10 should not be interpreted literally. The idea of God's kingdom's not having yet been established was repugnant to him. His repudiation of Millerism in 1841–42 seemed to bear fruit, for he was happy to report that “our brethren are becoming less imaginative and more rational on the subject.”<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in 1843, however, Campbell began to subdue his eschatological interests. He seemed to diminish his writing on the subject, although as late as 1856 he continued to affirm that the Bible affords God's people grounds to believe that the church will arrive at a state of prosperity that it has never before enjoyed. It may be in the second millennium of recorded Christian history, but it shall continue for at least a thousand years. The Jews will convert to Jesus as the Christ, genuine Christianity will spread throughout the world, and Christ will reign spiritually in glory. When he addressed the baccalaureate class at Bethany College in 1858, he proclaimed that they were “standing upon the experience

of 5,862 years, lacking only 138 years of the Millennial Age.”<sup>7</sup>

A few years later, a tired, somewhat discouraged, and physically broken man opined that papalism, paganism, Islam, and Protestant sectarianism had not yet been annihilated; pure, apostolic Christianity had not yet won the day. The original golden age of pristine Christianity must conquer all fabricated forms of religion, “consummated in their full import and significance, antecedent to the triumphant reign of the Lord Jesus over a ransomed world.”<sup>8</sup> The millennium of Alexander Campbell would have to wait a season; the Civil War threatened in the wings, and the bloodbath of history would carry on the legacy of the fall for the remainder of *this* millennium.

Other pioneers in the Restoration movement held views similar to Alexander Campbell, only to change to an altered form of eschatology and premillennial, futurist, and literal interpretations of Rev 20:1–10 and other apocalyptic passages. This was true of Barton W. Stone and Walter Scott, especially the former, whose premillennial views were echoed in the *Christian Messenger* in the 1830s. Clearly, Elias Smith's premillennial view influenced many of these early Restoration premillennialists; Scott went so far as to suggest that Smith's writings were the only sensible work on the subject he had seen.<sup>9</sup> But most pioneers followed the example of Robert Milligan and championed Alexander Campbell's postmillennialism.

### Premillennialism in the Restoration Movement

Between 1865 and 1921, Disciples and Christians flirted with various premillennial views. The Civil War and the antecedents and repercussions thereto wiped away hopes for the better day of Alexander Campbell. Instead, dark clouds of racism, sectionalism, and deprivation dissipated dreams and left hopelessness and a tragic sense of history as only normal for the time. It is in times such as these that Christians from the very beginning of their drama with the Risen One have become otherworldly premillennialists.

Moses E. Lard thought that all God's children “shall meet . . . on the margin of the empty tomb and there greet each other.” In the first resurrection all the righteous will be raised; in the second resurrection, all the wicked. In between stand one thousand years of millennial bliss.<sup>10</sup> The world is getting no better and



probably will be similar when Christ comes to reign again on the earth. The wicked will be destroyed along with the pope as the "son of perdition." Lard did not expect the conversion of Jews to Christianity; his view was not complex. Satan will be bound for a thousand years, and there will be a sinless and blissful time for the saints to reign with their king.

Earl West attributed Lard's premillennialism to his melancholy moods and despondent nature.<sup>11</sup> Hardly necessary, however, are such means. J. T. Briney, T. W. Brents, James A. Harding, and others adumbrated premillennial views. Even the *Gospel Advocate*, certainly no bastion of premillennialism, gave press to such views. Between 1865 and 1921, other controversies seemed to focus attention away from the millennial question as restorationists debated instrumental music, war and peace, and missionary societies. Still, the *Firm Foundation* carried on discussions between premillennialists and those ill-disposed to interpret apocalyptic literature literally and futuristically. These Disciples and Christians who were premillennial in their eschatology simply interpreted the book of Revelation literally, understanding an earthly thousand-year reign of Christ with the saints at his second coming. The period also had its dissenters, such as Isaac Errett, David Lipscomb, Tolbert Fanning, and J. W. McGarvey. These restorationists anticipated the amillennial point of view that seemed to bring down the curtain on the millennial controversy stirred by one of the movement's most gifted and sensitive theologians, R. H. Boll.

## Premillennialism in the Restoration movement reached its zenith in the life and writings of R. H. Boll.

Premillennialism in the Restoration movement reached its zenith in the life and writings of R. H. Boll. A staff writer for the *Gospel Advocate*, Boll wrote the first, or front-page, column entitled "Word and Work." In 1915 Boll began to address in the *Advocate* some "Short Talks on Revelation" in which he asked questions about the need to interpret the book of Revelation in light of God's people as a "waiting people," awaiting

the coming of the Lord.<sup>12</sup> One of the *Advocate* associate editors, F. W. Smith, wrote in the *Advocate* that Boll's interpretations had been disturbing to several churches because of their "future kingdom" character. Boll resented the direction the discussion seemed to be headed and asked for a better forum. Subsequently, there were two conferences between these principals of the *Advocate*, with the result that Boll felt misrepresented and demeaned. His column did not appear in the *Advocate* from July to November of 1915. In the November 4 issue, however, his name reappeared, Boll having written that matters had been amicably repaired and that his views were between "me and the Lord Jesus Christ," others notwithstanding.<sup>13</sup>

But church politics played their usual role in the outcome of such matters, for Boll resigned from the *Advocate*, claiming that the verbal agreement between the editors and him had been violated. Boll had not wanted the full statement of the agreement made public, and the editors apparently acquiesced by not affixing the agreement under the name of Boll, only a *statement* that an agreement had been reached. The editors could and would make the agreement public if Boll was deemed to have violated it. The editors obviously felt Boll did violate the agreement; he felt that he had been betrayed and demeaned, and so he resigned.<sup>14</sup> The next year, 1916, Boll began to publish his own periodical, *Word and Work*, taking a sizable number of the *Advocate* staff with him to his headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky.

## R. H. Boll's Dispensationalism

Boll was convinced that the early church was premillennialist, often quoting from the histories of Schaff, Gibbon, and Mosheim to corroborate that his own view was not a "modern innovation."<sup>15</sup> Boll's position included the personal return of Jesus from heaven to retrieve the saints upward and, after certain affairs have been attended to, the return of Jesus with them in full view of the entire world. Next comes the millennium of warless bliss, when the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ.

What brought Boll under the most suspicion regarding his eschatology was his view of the kingdom of God. The church is *not* the kingdom, but those in the church are in the kingdom "in its present stage," a "vestibule" of the kingdom.<sup>16</sup> The kingdom thus reaches its most



Once again, rationalism and common-sense Baconism won the day, this time by undermining the hermeneutics that allowed literal interpretations of apocalyptic passages of scripture.

glorious state during the millennium. What this did, in effect, was to undermine the importance of a church fresh from its own successful inception, a church that was quickly maturing into an ecumenical, denominationless body of Christians that viewed itself as the new-age replica of primitive, apostolic Christianity in all its truth and splendor, unadulterated by human hands and ideology. It was never Boll's premillennialism that got him crossways with the Nashville establishment; it was his downplaying of the importance of a new body of denominationless Christians who believed they were restoring the ancient order.

Like most premillennialists, Boll saw the present age as evil and ruled by Satan and his hosts. The whole creation is groaning awaiting its redemption. In their famous debate, Boll and the *Advocate* representative, H. Leo Boles, argued their cases. The debate was covered in the *Advocate* initially and later published as a separate book, in 1928. Boles articulated an amillennial position that became the characteristic interpretation of the millennium in the post-Boll years. But the premillennial controversy lingered for another half-century in the Restoration tradition, often surfacing during turbulent political and economic times on the American landscape.

### Amillennialism from 1922 to the Present

Although premillennial views would continue up through the current time, the Restoration tradition seemed to settle into amillennialism. It is fair to say that the Boll controversy shook the movement to such an extent that it recovered only slowly and in stark reaction to any form of literalism. Once again, rationalism and common-sense Baconism won the day, this time by

undermining the hermeneutics that allowed literal interpretations of apocalyptic passages of scripture. Homer Hailey was of the opinion that "the most serious of the issues to confront the churches of Christ had been that of premillennialism" and that the crux of the controversy was the literal interpretation of Rev 20:1–10 and the establishment of a premillennial kingdom of Christ on earth that included the restoration of the Jews to Palestine.<sup>17</sup>

Foy E. Wallace Jr. reacted to Boll's premillennialism by calling it "one of the rankest forms of modern sectarianism."<sup>18</sup> James D. Bales argued that Boll's view of the church distorted the majestic picture we see in Paul's epistles; that the church was only in existence as a forced postponement of the real kingdom, the result of the Jewish national rejection of Jesus' messiahship, seemed incongruous to him.<sup>19</sup> Reactions were strong and ugly. T. B. Wilkinson called the Boll movement a "modified form of Russellism,"<sup>20</sup> and L. L. Brigrance wrote in behalf of Freed-Hardeman College that the institution would reject any form of "'Bollshevism' in the church or state."<sup>21</sup>

But premillennialism would not die among restorationists. Daniel Sommer, Flavil Hall, J. R. Clark, and Charles M. Neal continued Boll's legacy and wrote and published in the *Apostolic Review* and *Word and Work*. What made the premillennialism of these men different from earlier voices like Lard and Brents was their view of the church and the resultant dispensationalism associated with J. N. Darby and the Scofield Reference Bible.<sup>22</sup> The amillennial view simply undercut a dispensational (and to Restoration amillennialists, deprecating) view of the church by affirming that Christians are living in the millennium *now*. Because of Christ's resurrection and victory over Satan and death, our first resurrection was with him at the watery grave of baptism, and with Satan bound for a nonliteral thousand years, we await the parousia and the second resurrection. After all, both Paul and John are New Testament witnesses to the foretaste of the new age we have even now.

With lines drawn debates were inevitable, as they have been wont to be in our tradition since its beginning. The debate between Foy Wallace and Charles Neal in 1933 got so heated that after three nights at the First Christian Church in Winchester, Kentucky, the board



of the church requested that the debate be moved to a different location! Nonliteralists propounded their amillennial views in the 1940s and 1950s and set the stage for modern (and postmodern) hermeneutics within the movement. G. C. Brewer, for example, was rather curt in his view:

I do not know anything at all about the millennium. I do not know what Revelation 20:1–6 means and I will not venture a guess or spin a theory. All my thinking and believing is independent of this passage. With me it is not a pivotal point at all.<sup>23</sup>

While not quite so curt, Athens Clay Pullias spoke for a restorationist amillennialist mainstream when he addressed a lectureship crowd about the millennium. When Jesus died, rose, and ascended into heaven, the David Lipscomb president affirmed, his kingdom was established, and he currently reigns over it today. Some day he will return to judge the world and deliver the kingdom to the Father.<sup>24</sup> Whatever is unfulfilled still awaits fulfillment.

What would enhance this historical portrait is a more recent descant on how restorationists understand the millennium. Perhaps what has been portrayed herein might become incentive and inspiration for such a venture.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Campbell, "Prospectus," *Millennial Harbinger* 1 (4 January 1830): 1. Cf. Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1956), 2:303.

<sup>2</sup> *Millennial Harbinger* 1 (4 January 1830): 58.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frederick West, *Alexander Campbell and Natu-*

*ral Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 166.

<sup>4</sup> A Reformed Clergyman, "McCorkle Reviewed—No. 4," *Millennial Harbinger* 7 (April 1836): 161.

<sup>5</sup> See "The Coming of the Lord—No. II," *Millennial Harbinger* 5 (February 1841): 52.

<sup>6</sup> "The coming of the Lord—No. IX," *Millennial Harbinger* 5 (September 1841): 424–25.

<sup>7</sup> West, 213.

<sup>8</sup> "Christology—Christocracy," *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (August 1861): 465.

<sup>9</sup> A. S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1870), 183–86.

<sup>10</sup> Moses E. Lard, "A Theory of the Millennium," *Lard's Quarterly* 2 (October 1864): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Earl Irwin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1949), 1:287.

<sup>12</sup> R. H. Boll, "Short Talks on Revelation: How John Saw the Son of Man," *Gospel Advocate* 57 (11 February 1915): 121; "The Attitude of God's Church," *Gospel Advocate* 62 (9 December 1915): 1233.

<sup>13</sup> "Brother Boll's Statement," *Gospel Advocate* 62 (4 November 1915): 1110.

<sup>14</sup> See "Brother Boll's 'Restatement,'" *Gospel Advocate* 62 (9 December 1915): 1241.

<sup>15</sup> R. H. Boll, "The First Resurrection and the Millennium," *Word and Work* 23 (April 1930): 115–16.

<sup>16</sup> R. H. Boll, *The Kingdom of God* (Louisville: Work and Word, n.d.), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Homer Hailey, *Attitudes and Consequences in the Restoration Movement* (Los Angeles: Citizen Print Shop, 1945), 242–43.

<sup>18</sup> Foy E. Wallace Jr., *The Certified Gospel* (Lufkin: Roy E. Gogdill, 1948), 236.

<sup>19</sup> James D. Bales, *The Kingdom: Prophesied and Established* (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1957), 12.

<sup>20</sup> T. B. Wilkinson, "Modified Form of Russellism," *Firm Foundation* 51 (23 October 1934): 1.

<sup>21</sup> L. L. Brigrance, "The Boll Evil," *Gospel Advocate* 76 (23 August 1934): 814.

<sup>22</sup> See Harry A. Tansil, "An Exegesis of Revelation 20.1–10" (master's thesis, Abilene Christian College, 1959), 51.

<sup>23</sup> G. C. Brewer, *Contending For the Faith* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1955), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Athens Clay Pullias, "The King and His Throne," *Gospel Advocate* 82 (21 March 1940): 266.