

The following paper was adopted in 1978 by the Presbyterian Church (US), a predecessor denomination to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1983 the Presbyterian Church (US) and the United Presbyterian Church (USA) reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

# ESCHATOLOGY

## THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

TWELVE THESES AND A  
POSITION PAPER  
ADOPTED BY THE 118TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
FOR GUIDANCE AND STUDY IN THE CHURCH

The 118th General Assembly (1978) took the following actions with regard to the paper on “Eschatology.”

- 1. That the 118th General Assembly adopt the paper, *Eschatology: the Doctrine of Last Things*, and commend it to the Church as an interpretive study of the doctrine of eschatology.**
- 2. That the 118th General Assembly adopt the following twelve theses as a position statement on the doctrine of eschatology .**
- 3. That the 118th General Assembly reaffirm the 1944 General Assembly, PCUS, position regarding dispensationalism. (Cf. *Appendix to the study paper*).**
- 4. That the Stated Clerk be instructed to print the twelve theses together with *Principles of Faith Related to Eschatology*, distribute them to all ministers and churches of the PCUS and announce that the interpretive study document is available for study.**
- 5. That this paper be referred to the Stated Clerk with the instruction that it be printed and made available for purchase at the earliest possible moment.**
- 6. That in the light of Section IV (A & B) of the paper, the General Assembly Mission Board be instructed to include the principles set forth as it designs its mission programs and curriculum material.**

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# Preface

The following 12 Theses were adopted by the 118th General Assembly (1978) “as a position statement on the doctrine of eschatology.” They were distributed to all ministers and churches along with the “Principles of Faith Related to Eschatology.”

- (1) The desire to know more of the unknown, including the future, is an authentic human characteristic.
- (2) The biblical tradition affirms the importance of this human concern by revealing that the course of time flows between God's sovereign Acts of Creation, Redemption, and the Consummation of His purpose.
- (3) The reality of God's Kingdom was proclaimed by the prophets, manifested in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, is present with us now, and will be fully manifested at our Lord's return.
- (4) Following the Westminster Standards, we insist that God holds the time of the Consummation unknown in order to preserve in us a sense of immediacy and urgent watchfulness, and we refuse to tame that hope into a set of speculative predictions.
- (5) God's sovereignty is the first and most important affirmation in our understanding of God's final purpose, such purpose assured by the work of Jesus Christ; and God is on His way toward the fulfillment of His purpose wherein he will be all in all.
- (6) The Cosmos will at last be redeemed in all its fullness from its bondage to sin, decay and death; not as the end result of any historical process which may now be observed, but purely and only because God has determined that it will be so.
- (7) The reward God gives to those who trust His power to complete the work of redemption is hope; not the optimistic conviction that by our own account we bring in the Kingdom, but the assurance that we can learn to prefigure and show it forth in some measure in our lives.
- (8) The hope for the Consummation includes the challenging possibility for resistance to the evil of the world and for the faithfulness of the Church to the end.
- (9) In light of the fact that God's purpose, revealed and accomplished in Christ Jesus, will be brought to full fruition, our response is to work to make visible the reality of God's love, and to declare the Good News that in Jesus Christ the future is secure.
- (10) Confidence in the future vindication of God's way with evil and the redemption of the world enables us as a Community of Faith, Hope and Love to commit ourselves collectively to the struggle against corruption and decay, ready always to make common cause with people of good will everywhere who seek to preserve the earth and to both maintain and enhance life.

(11) There is considerable latitude for variations in eschatological position within the Reformed Tradition, but strong principles from other branches of Reformed theology provide boundaries which must be preserved. There is but one overarching covenant of grace, one covenant people, one salvation, one return of Christ, one general resurrection and one Last Judgment.

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# ESCHATOLOGY, THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

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## Background

In 1944, the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, presented a report refuting dispensationalism, which was adopted by the General Assembly (1944 GA *Minutes*, pp. 123-127, and see Appendix).

While noting that dispensationalism is a premillennial position the 1944 General Assembly specifically noted that the report was “not in any sense a criticism of premillennialism as such.”

Nearly three decades later (1973) the 113th General Assembly referred an overture concerning premillennialism and other forms of eschatology, from the Transylvania Presbytery to the Council on Theology and Culture for the following action which subsequent General Assemblies have continued:

- a. to deal with this question, preparing in that connection an interpretive study of eschatological doctrine which will reflect what is in accord with the system of doctrine set forth in the Confession of Faith and the catechisms of this church; and
- b. to prepare for presentation for adoption to a future General Assembly an interpretive statement of belief in the area of eschatology which will reflect the system of doctrine set forth in the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church and will, therefore, set forth the understanding which the Presbyterian Church in the United States has to eschatology in its various dimensions. (Cf. 1973 GA *Minutes*, p. 48).

## Introduction

The Christian Faith is eschatological to the core. We are saved by hope, hope for a future centered in a predestined Person, Jesus Christ, not in a prewritten program. The shape of that future is distorted when the problems or portents of a particular period lead us to fashion a system we then impose upon the Bible to support a chart of events, so that hope changes its focus from the Savior ever with us to the supposed signs of the times heralding His Coming.

Presbyterian Standards derive *from* the Bible and are not brought *to* the Bible. To satisfy as fully as possible the charge required by the General Assembly, there follows a detailed interpretive statement on Eschatology consonant with Presbyterian Confessional Standards.

The statement is constructed for logical flow, beginning with the observation that from the outset of human history, the unknown, of which future time is an element, is always a lure to human curiosity, a truth evident even in the enquiries of Bible writers themselves, and in the history of eschatological projections both religious and secular (I). The Reformed heritage stands as a beacon in time, avoiding pitfalls of futurism in a deliberate, theologically consistent, frame of reference viewing the future within the clear limits God has imposed. This Reformed heritage continues through pre-Westminster, the Westminster event itself, and post-Westminster trends (II). Eschatology is shown to have its base in Creation and Redemption (III). The clear implications for personal faith and corporate mission are stated (IV). A listing of eight principles, as drawn from the 1944 paper is provided to aid in forming an eschatological position consistent with the Reformed Faith (V). The 1944 statement appears as an Appendix.

## I. Context

### A. *Lure of the Unknown*

Curiosity about the Unknown is a universal proclivity. It may be constrained by fear, deluded by fantasy, or encouraged by hope. If fear prevails, then ignorance, superstition, and bondage generally follow. When fantasy predominates, then reality, responsibility, and reason are often forsaken. Where hope pervades, then discovery, understanding, and freedom usually flourish.

The plucking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden dramatized human curiosity at once both wishfully tasting a possible future joy, as well as fearfully testing a potential future judgment: The promise of a seed which would bruise the serpent's head brightened the bleak future human venture had produced, with a shining hope of reconciliation, a to-be-restored Eden, and a sense of the overruling sovereignty of God.

Hunger for that future is like a fragment of iron in the human heart, drawing us even through the blackest night toward the lodestone of a golden age. The restless quest for some assured foresight into the share of the future is common to all cultures, in all ages. Constrained by fear, it accounts for ancient oracles and omens, fortunes from palms and tea leaves, astrological charts and daily horoscopes, tarot cards and crystal balls, rabbit's feet and wood knocking, and both religious and secular futurologies. Deluded by fantasy, curiosity conjures up a dream, disdains full responsibility, tilts at windmills, and expects the rainbow to move the pot of gold to us. Inspired by hope, it has enlarged the encyclopedia of knowledge, opened the secrets of mind and matter, landed men on the moon, and by God's revelation of His purposes assured us that "all human history should be consummated in Christ, that everything in Heaven or earth should find its perfection and fulfillment in him" (Eph. 1:10, Phillips).

It is not strange, therefore, that inspired writers of the Old Testament prophecies were curious as to the who and when of events they described: "The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and enquired about this salvation: they enquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory . . ." (I Peter 1:10-11 RSV).

Nor is it strange that Jesus' followers were hoping the Resurrection meant the future was then impending, and so asked, "Wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" To which Jesus replied-nor should we today forget for a moment-"It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has placed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). No date was set, nor was the validity of an "earthly kingdom" assured. The focus was to the task given, the commission to bear witness to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, making disciples of all nations, all this under the assurance of Christ's presence with them to the end of the age.

### B. *Historical Roots of Futurism*

In the early Christian centuries, the Church, suffering relentless persecution under successive imperial edicts, clung hard to the hope of Christ's immediate coming. This *premillennial* dogma, known as *chiliasm* (from the Greek word for a thousand years), combined the Jewish expectation of an earthly Messianic Kingdom with Christ's return to earth. (Cf. C. below for millennial definitions.)

With the victory of Constantine (312), and the Council of Nicea (325) the pressure of persecution was exchanged for the power of privilege, quickly moving from welcome toleration to establishment as the official religion of the Empire. It was not long before Augustine (354-430) was to reinterpret the millennium as spiritually fulfilled in the life of the Church, a time he judged then already in process after which Christ was to return in judgment following a

last outburst of evil. The Augustinian view can be called *post-millennial* since it held that Christ returns following the millenium, or *amillennial* since it held that with Christ's return final judgment and the eternal state immediately ensue with no time-bound period involved thereafter.

The year A.D. 1000 approached with visions of terror for multitudes fearing the approaching Last Judgment. After the year A.D. 1000 came and passed, a strictly amillennial view was proposed which held that the thousand years was totally symbolic, having no reference to actual time. In the course of time, others recaptured a literal thousand years by teaching that only a part of the period extending from Christ's First Advent to the Second is the actual millennium. Among the dates proposed for the start of the millennium are the coronation of Charlemagne in A.D. 800 (Hengstenberg), and the Council of Trent in A.D. 1560 (Durham).

By the early 16th century, it was largely held that the millennium was passed and the Church was in "the little season" following (Revelation 6:11). The Reformers identified the Pope as the Antichrist, and central to the Roman Counter-Reformation was the Jesuit effort to propound an eschatological dogma which would relieve the papacy of that stigma. Two important interpretations were offered:

(1) Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613) proposed that the entire book of Revelation had already been fulfilled at the time of the pagan Roman empire under Nero, the "real" Antichrist, and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) or by the fall of pagan Rome (A.D. 410). This explanation was not then accepted but it was the forerunner of the "preterist" (time that is past) views of the book of Revelation.

(2) Francisco Riberia (1537-1591) in 1590 published a five hundred page exposition of the book of Revelation, the main points of which became the official Roman Catholic eschatological position of that time and marked the real beginning of the "futurist" school: (a) from and including chapter 4, the book of Revelation describes events yet future; (b) the Antichrist would be a man who would destroy the Christian Faith as such, rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem, and be initially accepted as the Messiah by a regathered Jewish nation; (c) the leadership worldwide of the Antichrist would continue for three and a half years; (d) the final conflict of nations with the Antichrist would center in the Middle East, specifically in Palestine.

Three centuries later, in 1826, this forceful futuristic influence entered mainstream Protestantism. Samuel Maitland, curate of Christ's Church, Gloucester, published a widely-read book supporting the Riberian position and critical of the whole Reformation. James Todd, professor of Hebrew at the University of Dublin, converted to Maitland's futurism and published supportive pamphlets and books. John Newman, leading figure of the Oxford (tractarian) movement, published a pamphlet endorsing Todd's futurism, and in less than five years converted fully to Rome. Contemporary with the Oxford Movement, a Scottish Presbyterian, Edward Irving, gave support to Riberian futurism with his dynamic preaching. His deep sense of the general apathy of Protestant Christians in his day convinced him the Churches would never complete the task of worldwide witness to the Gospel. Irving felt, as so many do today, that God must spark the Church with a reappearance of miraculous powers and gifts. By 1831, the "gift of tongues" was in evidence among Irving's followers, but the center of hope was not on power to the Church to perform its task but as a sign of the approaching Second Advent of Christ.

It was at this time that a new dimension was given to the emerging futurism: the concept of the rapture of the Church before Christ's coming. This idea of the two-stage coming of Christ

(first, for His Church, then with His Church) is attributed to Maggie MacDonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland who, it is claimed, came to this understanding in a trance (1860). Very soon afterwards, John Nelson Darby, a founder of the Plymouth Brethren Movement, fully expounded the rapture concept in his books, developing the scheme of dispensationalism. It remained for W. E. Blackstone with his 1878 book, *Jesus Is Coming*, and Dr. C. I. Scofield's *Reference Bible* in 1909 to popularize thoroughly the premillennial interpretation within the dispensational format. A certain intellectual and theological respectability was further afforded in the publication of Lewis Chafer's seven volume *Systematic Theology* (1948). The dispensational system in the 1970's is popularized and propagated notably by Hal Lindsey, Salem Kirban, John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, and James M. Boice; by Zondervan Press; by many radio and television religious programs; by some religious educational curriculums, notably Scripture Press; by many Bible colleges and institutes; and by Dallas Theological Seminary and its theological quarterly, *Bibliotheca Sacra*.

Our twentieth century has witnessed the accelerating fragmentation of Christendom, both within the mainline denominations, and by the emergence of splinter and independent churches, cults, and new denominations, often with an eschatological plank a central issue. Cults hardly Christian in any real sense, such as Sun Moon's Unification Church, boasting a potential living second Messiah heralded by "signs of the times," continue to appear as well.

### *C. Summary of Millennial Definitions*

Before proceeding to the next section, it is important to identify briefly the main millennial positions. All millennial theories relate the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 to the interval of human history prior to the last Day or introduction of the Eternal State. Each view also clearly reveals distinguishable attitudes regarding human history and the role and prospects for the Church in history.

### *C. Summary of Millennial Definitions*

#### *1. Historic Premillennialism (Chiliasm)*

Historic Premillennialism holds that Christ will return to the earth prior to the Last Day in order to exercise rule over the nations for a thousand years in the last stage of human history. It is pessimistic concerning the role and prospects of the Church in human history; therefore it posits another age, the millennium, between Christ's return and the Last Day, during which Christ rules in person over a theocratic kingdom to which all the nations of the world are subject.

Periods of great world upheaval and crisis have tended to spawn and multiply despair in society, and premillennial visions within Christianity.

#### *2. Postmillennialism*

Postmillennialism expects a future millennium or latter-day prosperity of the church prior to Christ's coming. It holds that the return of Christ introduces, not a temporal kingdom but the eternal state. It does, however, expect a period before the return of Christ and the end of the age in which the Church will have fulfilled its task in the world.

The Reformed tradition, for the greater part of its history, has shown more affinity and support of the postmillennial perspective than for other interpretations. This is due largely to the Reformed emphasis upon the sovereignty of God, the belief that Christ is

now Lord over all spheres of human life, and the conviction that the Christian community has been empowered by the Holy Spirit to call and work for the full promulgation of the Gospel and the transformation of culture and society to accord with the mind and will of Christ.

### 3. *Amillennialism*

Amillennialism holds that there will be no future golden age upon the earth for the Church. Whatever rule Christ exercises within history is in the spiritual sphere, in the souls of individuals, or in the life of the Church. It contains no vision of hope for its future prior to the Last Day when Christ returns to institute the eternal state and manifests His glorious Kingdom.

Optimistic amillennialism agrees with the above except that it holds the Church will nearly have finished its task. Days of spiritual awakening and missionary advance have generally reinforced postmillennial and optimistic amillennial expectations.

### 4. *Dispensational Premillennialism*

Dispensationalism gives premillennialism a complete system. Human history is regarded as a series of ages (dispensations) in which man is tested with respect to some aspect revealed of God's will. In each case man fails, is judged by God, and then set on the trail under new covenant conditions. The seven ages are labeled: Innocence (in the Garden); Conscience (to the Flood); Human Government (from Babel); Promise (from Abraham); Law (from Moses); Grace (from Christ); Kingdom (the coming millennium). The age of Grace ends with the unseen coming of Christ *for* His Church (the Rapture), both the living, and by partial resurrection, the dead in Christ. A period of seven years ensues on earth marked by an international treaty of peace, including a protectorate of Israel. This seven years is "the time of Jacob's troubles" a leftover of the 70 times 7 years, or 490 years, promised as judgment captivity to Israel, but which lasted only 483 years. Midway, the Antichrist reveals himself, claiming to be the Messiah, and institutes a controlled world economy and hounds the Jews for their refusal to worship him. Christ appears *with* His Church and legions of angels to quell the Antichrist forces, bind Satan for a thousand years and establish the millennial kingdom under the reestablished throne of David on earth and by the Church out of the New Jerusalem hovering visibly in space above the earth. Following the millennium, man rejects the era of enforced peace and plenty by following the then-released Devil in an effort to conquer the Holy City. The uprising is crushed. The general resurrection then occurs, the Final Judgment, the renovation of Heaven and Earth, and the dawn of eternity.

This elaborate futurology has a number of strong appeals. First, it seems to accommodate affairs and events of the modern world to prophetic Scriptures, as other millennial theories have done in the past. Second, it places a benediction on the "world's mess" which only Christ can correct in visible power, eliminates social responsibility other than the Christian's duty in citizenship and provides joy in every sign of approaching calamity, for calamity demands Parousia. Third, it makes Divine Election absolute, and freedom of the human *will* is actually lost in the detailed chart of established future events. Nonetheless, it is based upon many assumptions which violate Reformed theology (cf. Section V and Appendix following).

## **II. Eschatology in the Reformed Tradition**

#### *A. Up to the Westminster Assembly (A.D. 1647)*

The first Protestant Reformers inherited the traditional Augustinian eschatology developed in his City of God. The millennium of the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation was seen as a symbolic representation of the whole span of time from before Christ to the Last Judgment and the Kingdom of Christ was institutionalized in the visible Roman Catholic Church. From the Council of Ephesus (431), which condemned belief in a literal, future millennium, the Augustinian interpretation was dominant in Roman Catholicism and later mainline Protestantism. The only premillennialists of the Reformation period were found among the radical reformers such as Thomas Muntzer who was involved in the Peasant's Revolt (1524-25) and the militant Anabaptists who took over the town of Munster (1534).

Martin Luther, a traditional Augustinian, believed that he was living at the close of history and interpreted prophecies of Daniel and Revelation to contain forecasts of events relating to his time, such as the decline and overthrow of the Papacy. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession contains a rejection of the premillennialism of the Anabaptists.

Calvin likewise had an Augustinian approach to the thousand years of Revelation 20. Its time reference was to the whole of Christian history rather than to events at the end of the age. Calvin stressed the Ascension and the Return of Christ as the two decisive appearances of the Lord by which the life of the Church and the Christian in the intervening period are to be determined. The date of the return is unknown to us that we might be expectant and ready for it. The Church must nonetheless proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. Only at the second Advent of Christ will the glory and power of His Kingdom be fully manifest. He will come to judge the godless and to complete the redemption of the faithful who now live in hope of the resurrection and of the blessed life of the world to come. The return of Christ and the general resurrection have as their purpose full redemption and share in Christ's triumph over his and our enemies in the ultimate establishment of the rule of Christ or its culmination in the eternal Kingdom of God.

Calvin was critical of historic premillennialism which he saw as making the rule of Christ a temporal and transient kingdom, thereby dissolving the true hope which is directed to the eternal Kingdom. To Calvin, Revelation 20 spoke of the spiritual rule of Christ over individuals in their earthly life until the completion of their course at death and in the general resurrection. At the same time, Calvin believed that Christ's Kingdom, already established, would have a yet greater triumph in history before the Consummation. He did not explicitly include a general conversion of the Jewish people in his vision of the course of Christianity, but he was confident that the enemies of Christ, such as the Turks and the Papacy, would be defeated. The second Helvetic Confession (1566) is a Reformed creed following Calvin that specifically condemned premillennialism as being in the category of "Jewish dreams."

The Augustinian historicist approach continued to be popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among some of the Reformers and successors of Calvin, such as Bucer, Francis Lambert, Beza, Peter Martyr, and the editors of the Geneva Bible, appeared a belief that the Jewish people would be converted to Christianity and that through their conversion the Church on earth would experience great blessing. Belief in the future conversion of the Jews became widely diffused in England, Scotland, and New England in the seventeenth century. The Puritans followed Calvin in believing the Gospel would progress throughout the world. This understanding of the future is *not* explicit in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, but it can be seen in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (answer to Question 191), the *Westminster Directory of Worship* ("Of Public Prayer before the Sermon"), and the writings of the Westminster divines.

While a few were moderate premillennialists, the great majority expected the propagation of the gospel and Kingdom of Christ among all nations, the conversion of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles, and the fall of Antichrist. The common Augustinian eschatology is affirmed in the *Westminster Confession*, compatible with either its amillennial or postmillennial forms.

### *B. Westminster Confession and Catechisms*

The understanding of eschatology in the Westminster Standards grows out of the writers' convictions about the authority of Scripture and how we are to read it. An impression of “proof-texting” is given, unfortunately, by the Scripture references appended to the *Confession* and *Catechisms*. However, these proofs were added after the documents were completed. The substance of the Westminster Standards does not often betray a narrow focus on one or two selected passages. The intent was to wrestle with the full range of the witness of Scripture. If we follow the Standards' position on Scripture, conclusions about what “the Bible says” are to be arrived at in light of the entire canon.

#### 1. “*That Day Unknown*”

“As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity, so he will have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come, and may be ever prepared to say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly,’ Amen.”  
*(Westminster Confession of Faith XXXV:3)*

The passages in the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms* that deal with our hope for the future show no interest at all in making Scripture yield a set of predictions about the future. Indeed, XXXV:3 insists that God holds the time of the Day of Judgment unknown in order to preserve the immediacy and urgent watchfulness of our expectation of that day. The Westminster divines would oppose as “carnal security” the attempts to pin down that day by piecing together out of Scripture a set sequence of events.

The usual sense of “carnal security” is present in this passage, i.e., a failure to trust in the power of God and dependence on the things of the flesh for security. There is, however, a closely related and special use of the phrase in the context of XXXV:3. We are indulging in “carnal security” when we create a scenario of the future, for the result is that our trust is placed in that scenario instead of in the Lord, and we watch, not for Christ, but for the next event on the timetable. Such a misplaced trust is, very likely, not the intent of most modern writers who interpret Scripture and produce schedules; it is nevertheless the effect of what they do with the Bible. They move the focus away from the coming Day of the Lord to the debate about which stage we happen to be in just now, and they encourage an approach to the Bible that has less to do with faith and more to do with fantasy and using the Bible as a crystal ball.

Many places in Scripture speak of the future victory of Christ, and, quite obviously, each passage talks about this future in some sequence, there being no other way to put words on paper. It is not surprising that interpreters of Scripture would want to compare these various sections of the Bible and work them into some agreement so that they would all fit into a comprehensive schedule. The fact that the Westminster divines made no attempt at such a prediction and that they insisted that God wants “that day unknown” is evidence that they found

it injudicious to reduce the wealth of Scriptural images about God's future to a precise scenario of the future.

## 2. *Scripture Interprets Itself*

“All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear to all, yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

“The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

*(Westminster Confession of Faith I:7-9)*

Westminster's disinterest in developing a scenario of the future from the Scripture is not to be construed as a merely negative position, as though the divines could not make up their minds and so were silent. It is legitimate to understand their refusal to boil the biblical hope down to a schedule as testimony that we trust in God; not in special knowledge (XXXV:3). We can also see that this position is based on a particular understanding of how to read the wealth of images which are used to point to the coming of Christ. Chapter One of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* recognized that certain parts of Scripture are not altogether plain, and that some question is possible in regard to their true and full sense. By their acceptance of God's declaration that the actual time of the Day of the Lord is kept unknown, it is implicit that the Westminster divines understood these biblical images for the future to be one of the areas which is not clear and need not be clear. These less plain passages are interpreted in the light of others that are more plain, such as “of that day and hour no one knows” (Matthew 24:36) and “the day of the Lord will come like a thief” (II Peter 3:10). This is the way in which the *Westminster confession* allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture, listening not merely to the words of one or two texts, but to the full chorus of Scripture.

Drawing together all Scriptures pertinent to a particular subject to grasp the entire witness of Scripture can be a legitimate and helpful method of research. Care must be taken, however, not to violate the specific original context of each Scripture so gathered. A most serious error is made, especially in dealing with so-called prophetic segments, when neglect is given to the primary meaning of passages usually and obviously fulfilled at the time or closely subsequent to their utterance. Even more serious is to develop a set interpretation of Old Testament images and events and to impose that interpretation upon New Testament passages as though this were Scripture interpreting Scripture. The New Testament clearly indicates examples and limits of the spiritual lessons afforded by Old Testament persons, events and symbols (e. g., John 3:14, 15; Acts 2:14-21 and 8:25-35; I Cor. 10:1-11; Hebrews 11).

When the *Confession* has surveyed all the Scriptural witness, the hope for our future is focused on the Resurrection, the Return of Christ, and the Day of Judgment. These events are treated with reserve and without an attempt to organize a lot of the details. Within this understanding of God's future, we are free to read the varied images of the hope for that future, paying attention to their uniqueness and particular emphasis, without having to destroy them in order to force them into some imagined sequence.

### 3. *The Hope for Church and World*

While the *Westminster Confession of Faith* does not devote major attention to the future of the Church and world in the time before the end, its chapter on providence provides a solid basis for hope. In V:4, the sins of men and angels are said to be restrained by God's "most wise and powerful bounding." That the Church has cause for hope is spelled out in V:7, "As a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof."

To fill out our understanding of the hopes which the Westminster Standards have for the Church and world in this time before the Last Judgment, we turn to the Larger Catechism, question 191.

Of the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come," the Larger Catechism says that in these words "we pray: that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed." While there are those who identify "the kingdom of sin and Satan" with this fallen world, the Catechism does not make such an equation. In fact, the very next phrase says that in this petition we also pray that "the Gospel (be) propagated throughout the world." The destruction of the kingdom of sin and Satan is set down as parallel to the propagation of the gospel and with the growth and sanctification of the Church.

The Larger Catechism has none of that pessimism which would write off the Church or the world as hopelessly in the grip of Satan. The hope for the Kingdom of God includes the hope for the overcoming of sin and Satan in this world before the time of the end as well as for the flourishing of the Church.

### *C. Reformed Tradition Since Westminster*

The clearest creedal statement among the English heirs of Calvin affirming what may be termed a latter-day glory concept for the Church on earth is found in the *Savoy Confession of Faith* (1658): "In the latter days Anti-Christ being destroyed, the Jews called, and the adversaries of (Christ) 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."

Along with a growing interest in the Jewish people and the advance of the Church, Biblical expositors of the 17th century gave more attention to the thousand years of Revelation 20. There was wide acceptance of the belief that the millennium had reference neither to the past nor the present, but to the future. In fact, before the end of the seventeenth century an interest in eschatology and in the future of the Jews became a European phenomenon. The expectation of an era when the knowledge of Christ and faith in Him would be universal took form in millennial categories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Premillennialism did not gain general recognition among Protestants until after the rise of the Irvingite Catholic Apostolic Church, Plymouth Brethren, and Millerite Adventist movements of the first half of the nineteenth century. Premillennialism spread a mood of pessimism, regarding the Church as an institution without a future.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, were in the main favorable to an optimistic postmillennial view, that a future period would be brought about by preaching and the means of grace, under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit, continuing and expanding on Calvin's view that the gospel would make progress throughout the world.

The majority of English-speaking heirs of Calvin were optimistic about the future of the Church on earth. The evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth century emphasized and reinforced the conviction that Spirit empowered preaching was the divine means for extending the Kingdom of Christ. The great modern missionary movement and the proliferation of voluntary benevolent societies rose out of the context of a belief that through the work of the Holy Spirit and in fulfillment of divine promises Christianity would possess and affect the whole earth. Local revivals, missionary expansion, and benevolent enterprises were seen as the first ripples of a movement that would engulf the earth.

In the first three centuries of American Christianity virtually all of the leading scholars, missionaries, and evangelists of the Reformed tradition in America, if not also in Great Britain, advocated a postmillennial vision of the future. These included John Cotton, Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Hopkins, Timothy Dwight, Archibald Alexander, Albert Barnes, Lyman Beecher, Charles and A. A. Hodge, W. G. T. Shedd, Benjamin B. Warfield, Thomas Smyth, James H. Thornwell, William Swan Plumer, F. R. Beattie, T. V. Moore, Moses D. Hoge, John L. Girardeau, Robert L. Dabney, and nearly all of the Southern Presbyterians at least through the first quarter of the twentieth century.

In the later part of the nineteenth century, there began currents which would contribute to the breakdown of the postmillennial consensus. Post millennialism showed a tendency to lose itself in social reform, identifying with the national interest, and with institutional growth. Such secular vision of the future focuses upon humanity in general in terms of social, biological and technological progress rather than upon the future of the church in this world or the next. From the point of view of millennial theology in the 20th century the increasing popularity of premillennialism was in part a protest against the secularization of hope for the future, as well as reaction to despair over liberal theology, evolutionary theory, and the higher critical study of the Bible.

Disillusionment brought about by two world wars and what many see as the decline of western civilization played a part in diminishing the attraction that the Reformed Faith had for the postmillennial vision. At the same time, premillennialism and amillennialism have been characterized by a defeatism that has tended to discourage the fulfillment of the church's mission and task since both traditionally expect a constant progression of evil. Quite apart from any vision of the future, the latter half of the twentieth century has seen among evangelicals and fundamentalists the emergence of "uneasy conscience" and efforts to add some degree of social concern to the traditional evangelistic witness.

Until recently, Presbyterians have had an affinity for a type of postmillennialism that labors in faith and hope for the manifestation of Christ's Kingdom and His spiritual conquest of the world in this age. Only within the past century has amillennialism in a modern form gained a new as tendency in American Presbyterianism. In the rise of fundamentalism, the older Princeton theologians and the premillennialists made common cause against liberalism. A pessimistic evaluation of the institutional church and its prospects produced a readiness to accept amillennialism or to ally with premillennial fundamentalism, and to separate from the major Presbyterian denominations. Since 1967, conservative elements in both major Presbyterian denominations have appeared working within the structure of the churches to provoke a resurgence of personal and pulpit evangelism, to commend social activism at a purely personal level, and to direct the courts of the Church away from making social, political or economic pronouncements.

None of the older categories are adequate as eschatological systems but are still descriptions of certain attitudes. A contemporary statement of eschatology in keeping with the Reformed Faith affirms that the Kingdom of Christ will not appear in all its fullness until the Advent of Christ, hence we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” But already established in the course of human history and in the hearts and lives of the Christian community, we celebrate “for Thine is the kingdom.” To pray the Lord's Prayer and to fulfill Christ's Great Commission requires love for God and neighbor, faith in God whose Spirit uses and blesses human proclamation and deeds for the advancement of His Kingdom, and assured hope that His Kingdom is universal and invincible in its sweep. This accords with a theology of hope, in the direction of a modification of the Augustinian eschatology known as the postmillennial or latter-day glory vision of the church's future in this world and age.

### **III. Eschatology in Biblical Perspective**

The critical basis for eschatological reflection in the Reformed Tradition remains the Scriptures, taken as a whole and in a multiplicity of imagery. Numerous passages noted in this present section serve to point the way, not so much as proof-texts but rather as showing one part of Scripture clarifying another. As the Scriptures are studied, a major correlation begins to emerge between God's intention in Creation and Redemption which is most instructive for eschatology.

In a similar response to the Scriptures, the *Confession of Faith* described creation as the “manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness” (IV.1). The *Larger Catechism* (A.14) declares the works of creation and providence, which includes God's mightiest deed, Redemption, to be the means whereby the eternal decrees of God are effected. Thus we affirm Creation as God's good gift and the setting where God's acts of redemptive care are wrought. Further, the consummation of God's purpose is consonant with the initial act of our Creator (X.1,2:XXXV, 1-3). The implications of Creation and Redemption for our view of eschatology are crucial.

#### *A. The End as the Fulfillment of God's Purpose in Creation*

The Old and New Testaments confess God as Creator and Redeemer. All which was called into being by the powerful Word of God is testimony to God's eternal and invincible sovereignty. God's sovereignty is the first and most important affirmation in our understanding of God's final purpose. From the nothingness of chaos God commanded lightfilled order (Gen. 1:2-5). God established the earth and heavens and exercises dominion over all creation (Ps. 24:1-2, 93:1-2). Humankind is the culmination of God's creative activity with special privileges and responsibilities (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8), but God's sovereignty is in no way compromised (Gen. 2:8ff, 11:1ff). Because God alone is Creator and Redeemer, God alone is worthy of our adoration, faithful confidence, and reverent obedience (Ps. 95; Is. 40:12-31). Indeed, any other response is foolishness of the worst sort. Because God is sovereign Creator of all that is, there is no other who can successfully challenge divine goodness and care: the clay does not command the hand of the Potter (Jer. 18:1-12; Is. 45:9-13; Romans 9:20, 21).

The act of Creation is viewed as the first of God's acts of grace which establish and define the meaning of history. Life is not a meaningless, purposeless, valueless accident. The whole of existence as well as each individual who inhabits the earth is part of a creation initiated and accomplished by God (Gen. 1; Ps. 8; Is. 48:12-13). Creation is described in historical terms,

rather than in metaphysical language. In Genesis, the creation account is ordered by a sequence of days and events culminating with Sabbath rest. Ephesians talks about the coming of Christ as “a plan for the fullness of time” (Eph. 1:9-10), thus underscoring the biblical view that history is to be viewed and evaluated in the light of God's saving deeds. God's intention of fellowship and communion with humankind evidenced in the creation account is at work as history unfolds, beginning with Adam and Eve and continuing into the future “to them also which shall believe on me through their word” (John 17:20).

Indeed, the whole of creation has been given hope for God's redemptive purpose to be realized fully and finally (Rom. 8:19-23), the end assured by God through the work of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:9-10; Col. 1:15-20). God's power and sovereignty as Creator and Redeemer become the basis on which hope for new acts of deliverance, even the consummation of all things (Rev. 4:9 - 5:14, 21:1-4), can be articulated (Is. 43:1-7). From the Creation to the end of time, God is on the way toward the fulfillment of the divine purpose when in fact every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God (Phil. 2:9-11) and God will “be everything to everyone” (I Cor. 15:28 RSV).

The imagery chosen to describe the hoped-for future is generally drawn from creation before human sin destroyed the proper relationship between God, humans, and the whole created order. In other words, vision of the future is expressed in the language of God's new creation. Since the perception and will of humankind has been distorted and corrupted by sin (Is. 1:2-3; Rom. 1:18-27) and the whole of creation affected by human transgression (Hos. 4:1-3; Rom. 8:20, 21), hope rests in God's power and intention to create anew. A time is envisioned when a new heart and a new spirit, sensitive and responsive to God, will be given to humankind in order that obedience might forever displace rebellion and the desolated land might become as Eden (Ez. 36:22-36). A new covenant will be instituted and written on the human heart that all may know and revere God (Jer. 31:31-34).

With the consummation of God's purpose, peace and order will come to the whole of creation. No more will there be those who hurt or destroy (Is. 11:6-9, 65:25). Death will no longer threaten and break relationships; tears will be wiped away forever (Is. 25:8; Rev. 21:3-4). Human need will be met by the hand of God abundantly and freely (Is. 25:6, 55:1-2; Rev. 21:6). The transformation will be such that some can speak of a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65:17-18, 66:22-23; Rev. 22:1). God the Creator and Redeemer is sovereign. The divine purpose gives meaning to history and will be brought to consummation. That which God began at the Creation will reach completion and fulfillment.

### *B. God's Act in Christ, Basis for Hope in the Future*

Because God has acted in Jesus Christ to redeem and reconcile the world to Himself (II Cor. 5:18-19), we have basis for hope and a message of good news. Anxiety about and dread of an unknown future are displaced by hope founded on God's word and deed in Jesus of Nazareth and the conviction that nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:37-39).

The Church boldly affirms that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:15-20).

God's creative Word became flesh and dwelt among us that we might know God (John 1:1-18). Jesus, Lord and Christ, is the basis of all true existence and provides a sure foundation for our hope (I Cor. 8:1-6).

Jesus Christ has revealed God's intention in the world. Jesus is the "likeness of God" (II Cor. 4:4), the New Adam (Rom. 5:12-14), the "first fruits" (I Cor. 15:20). In Jesus, humankind has been given a new beginning; a new community has been instituted. The old walls of division and hate have been broken down and a new possibility has been provided (Eph. 2:11-22). Those in Christ have become part of God's new creation (II Cor. 5:17). That God's purpose is riot yet fully realized is not denied for there *is* yet pain, suffering, death; but Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33). The ultimate victory is certain, triumph is sure (I Cor. 15:20-28).

Our hope rests, therefore, in that One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 1:8, 17; 22:13). The Lamb who was slain has become Lord forever and ever (Rev. 5, 14, 21), and the Lamb is none other than Jesus, the embodiment of God's love and the revelation of God's intention to save.

This means then that we wait with eager expectancy for that time when God will dwell with us and "wipe away every tear . . . and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more . . ." (Rev. 21:3-4). We hope for the time when God will give to the thirsty "water without price from the fountain of the water of life" (Rev. 21:6).

#### **IV. Implications for Individual and Church**

In the light of the history of eschatological thought and theory; a theological discipline we have shown in this paper to be remarkably sensitive to the ups and downs of the human condition; and of Westminster's sanguine insistence upon the inevitable but unknowable date of the Day of the Lord, we must enquire, then, as to the purpose of eschatological elements in the Bible for individual and corporate faith and life.

Biblical revelation, speaking in the eschatological vein, employs the language of hope. It does so not in some weak, ambivalent mode, but with a deep, powerful affirmation: the cosmos will at last be set free from its travail and redeemed in all its fullness from its bondage to sin, decay and death. And this will come about not as the end result of any historical or physical process which may now be observed, but purely and only because God has determined that it will be so. God will vindicate Himself, making good His announced intention to redeem the world through the Person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ—and this purpose of God will not be thwarted in any sense. His redemptive activity will bring every knee to bow throughout the cosmos (Phil. 2:10); and even God's foes and those who are afar will acknowledge and celebrate His Kingship.

##### *A. Implications for Personal Faith*

The eschatology of the Bible addresses the individual with a powerful call to a life of trust and obedience. The eschatological hope buoys up the individual with confidence that God's redemptive purpose will not be thwarted. Far from inviting the individual to lapse into a quietistic mood of waiting for escape from this "vale of tears" or of ticking off the unfolding "signs of the times," the eschatological thrust of the Bible calls the individual into action. Jesus' own life is set before us as the example of One who participates already in God's eschatological Kingdom. Jesus' life reveals that anticipatory living—living which discloses the character of life in the fully-manifested Kingdom—involves active work at unmasking and over coming evil in

its many forms; constant effort to be on the side of those in need; ministries of healing and teaching; profound trust in God; and proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation to all.

From the example given us by Jesus, undergirded by the eschatological content of the bible, and blessed with hope; there flows a kind of life appropriate to the individual who is tilted toward the future. It consists of daily participation in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is inspired by the intervention of prayer and the imitation of Christ, and is displayed in the propensity to love, a deep commitment to justice, and the determination effectively to oppose any interests which degrade or endanger the quality of human life.

### *B. Implications for the Mission of the Church*

The implications of Bible eschatology are similar when they are applied To the whole people of God, the *Church*.

Without a vision for the future, any community, religious or secular, cannot long survive. That is why the teleological dimension of our heritage is so precious. The confidence in the future vindication of God's way with evil and the redemption of the world enables us as a community of faith, hope, and love to put ourselves collectively on the line in the struggle against corruption and decay. It enables us to enter into this struggle as vigorously as if it were the eve of the Last Day, yet without being forced to the despair, the haste, the sectarianism that accompany the conviction that world history has played out its predestined course and the Day is actually at hand.

The vision of God's planned future vouchsafed by the Cross and Resurrection enables the church to continue and intensify its evangelical mission-thrust impelled above all by the joyous conviction that God's redeeming will cannot be thwarted and people can be helped and led even now to the point of sharing in His Kingdom.

Faith in God's purpose enables us as a community of believers to make common cause with persons of good will everywhere in the effort to preserve the earth as a healthy, life-supporting place. Christians are by no means the only people who deeply cherish the world and life within it. In our own time, and in response to the same unremitting crisis which has excited new theological interest in eschatology, secular analyses and projections of the future have appeared in great numbers. Physical scientists, social planners, novelists, and dramatists, as well as philosophers and theologians of other religions have responded to the threat of overpopulation, nuclear war, pollution of the natural environment by modern industrialization, economic inequity, world hunger, and the insatiable consumption of the world's resources by the affluent nations. For some, doom is only a matter of time. Others, particularly the pseudo-Christian cults and new religions, despair of effecting change in the direction of events and counsel their followers to concentrate on the inner psychic renewal of the individual and the security of membership in the sect. Yet others see human inventiveness and the development of new resources as means adequate to overcome world problems; these futurists call for renewed dedication to the task of protecting and enhancing the quality of human life.

Our eschatological faith enables us to join with the latter category of people in preparing the way so that the nation and the world can make the necessary but difficult decisions about energy consumption, population control, food distribution, and warfare. Our eschatological hope for the future can urge us into creative engagement with those who are even now with the tools of politics, space exploration, genetic engineering, and other technologies and ideologies shaping the worldly future. Our goal in this engagement can be to find allies in the fight against those

developments which threaten the future of humankind, and to support those which strongly point in the direction of the New Jerusalem of the biblical hope.

The injunction which is borne from the promise of the consummation of God's purposes in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11) comes to us with fresh impetus in our perilous times. It is this, as it always has been: "Do all you have to do without grumbling or arguing. So that you may be blameless and harmless, faultless children of God, living in a warped and diseased age, and shining, like lights in a dark world. For you hold in your hands the very word of life" (Phil. 2:14-16, J. B. Phillips).

Neither nihilistic despair nor romantic idealism is a proper response to the declaration of God's purpose in Jesus Christ. Rather, we work to make visible in the world the reality of God's love, which is graciously transforming us even now, and we continue to declare the good news that in Jesus Christ the future is secure. God's purpose will indeed be brought to consummation. And we have heard the good news that the One who will stand as Judge is none other than the One who gave Himself to show forth God's love for the world.

## V. Principles of Faith Related to Eschatology

This present paper (1978) should be taken in conjunction with the previous (1944) report dealing specifically with dispensational premillennialism as "out of accord with the system of doctrine set forth in the Confession of Faith" and which is incorporated in this paper as an Appendix.

The principles affirmed in the 1944 report have broader application to a sound eschatology than merely a refutation of dispensationalism which does violence to them all. Those principles "inform" eschatology and ought not be compromised for the sake of any futuristic scheme. Those principles are here repeated in eight positive *affirmations*, with Confessional and sample Scriptural references cited. They hold true for evaluating any millennial concept, and for such interpretations as may be given to any passage or segment of Scripture.

1. There is but one overarching Covenant of Grace.  
(WCF, Cha. VII; note Acts 13:32, 33; Romans 9:31, 32; Galatians 3:6-8, 17, 29).
2. There is but one covenant people of God.  
(WCF, Cha. XXVII, Secs. 1, 2; note Acts 10:34-36; I Cor. 10:1-4; Heb. 11:39, 40).
3. There is but one salvation.  
(WCF, Cha. VII, Secs. 3, 5; note John 5:24; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:30).
4. There is but one destiny for God's covenant people.  
(WCF, Chap. VIII, Sec. 5; note John 17:2; Eph. 1:11, 14).
5. There is but one unified written revelation of God.  
(WCF, Cha. I, Sec. 9; VII, Sec. 6; note II Tim. 3:16, 17).
6. There is but one King, always in control.  
(Shorter Catechism, 26, 28; Longer, 45; note Daniel 4:17; I Cor. 15:25).

7. There is but one resurrection.  
(WCF, Cha. XXXIV, Sec. 2; note John 5:28, 29; Acts 24:15).
8. There is but one future judgment.  
(WCF, Cha. XXXV, Sec. 1; note John 5:28, 29; Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:11, 12; 1 Cor. 5:10).

## APPENDIX

From the 1944 GA *Minutes*, pp.123-127:

### THE QUESTION AS TO WHETHER THE TYPE OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION KNOWN AS DISPENSATIONALISM IS IN HARMONY WITH THE CONFESSION OF FAITH

The Ad Interim Committee appointed by the Assembly to consider this question (*Minutes*, 1941, p.60; 1943, p.46) presents the following report.

Before calling attention to certain doctrines which we believe to be out of accord with the Standards of our Church, we desire to define the terms *Dispensation* and *Dispensationalism*.

The word "Dispensation" is used by both the *Confession of Faith* and by Dispensationalism. Both systems use it in the sense of "an administration" of some purpose or plan of God, but they differ on the question of *what is administered*.

That which is "administered" is made very plain in the *Confession of Faith* (Ch. VII, Sec. 5-6), where, speaking of the Covenant of Grace, we read, "This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies . . . Under the gospel, when Christ the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed, are the preaching of the word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper . . . There are not, therefore, two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations."

Here it will be seen that the administration of God's purpose under the law (the O. T. dispensation) is stated to be different in *form* as we know it was in organization and ceremony, from the administration under the gospel (our own dispensation), but the point which the *Confession of Faith* emphasizes is that these two dispensations do not *differ in substance*, but there is *only one and the same Covenant of Grace* to be administered under the various dispensations. Students of the Reformed Faith have differed as to the number of dispensations into which we may properly divide the dealing of God with man since the fall; but they have all agreed, in accordance with our *Confession of Faith*, that these various dispensations are all administrations of *one and the same Covenant of Grace*.

The opposing viewpoint, on the other hand, as presented by Dr. L. S. Chafer, is as follows: "Since there is so much in the *Confession of Faith* which is in no way related to this discussion and which is the common belief of all, the issue should yet be narrowed to the difference which obtains between Dispensationalism and Covenantism. The latter is that form of theological speculation which attempts to unify God's entire program from Genesis to Revelation under one supposed Covenant of Grace. That no such covenant is either named or exhibited in the Bible and that the covenants which are set forth in the Bible are so varied and diverse that they preclude a one-covenant idea, evidently does not deter many sincere men from adherence to the

one-covenant theory.” (Chafer, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, editorial on “Dispensational Distinctions Challenged,” Vol. 100, No. 399, p.338).

Thus the “various and diverse” covenants are set over against the “one Covenant of Grace,” i.e., one plan of salvation, which is central to our Church’s view of the teaching of the Bible. All acquainted with dispensational thought know what Dispensationalists mean by their rejection of the Covenant of Grace; they do not hold that God has one plan of salvation for all men, but that He has had various and diverse plans for different groups. (Chafer, *Grace*, p.135). Some of the chief points of divergence will be pointed out below.

Dispensationalism, therefore, as shown above, rejects the doctrine that God has, since the fall, but one “plan of salvation” for all mankind and affirms that God has been through the ages “administering” various and diverse plans of salvation for various groups.

Such dispensational teaching is expounded by many in our day, but we shall limit our quotations to the writings of two outstanding exponents of Dispensationalism: Dr. C. I. Scofield (especially as found in certain notes in the *Scofield Reference Bible*) and Dr. L. S. Chafer, who has written extensively on this subject. They both teach a dispensational view of God's various and divergent plans of salvation for various groups in different ages, although they do not agree on all inferences which may be drawn from this fundamental starting point.

## I. THIS FUNDAMENTAL DIVERGENCE OF DISPENSATIONALISM FROM THE COVENANT THEOLOGY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MANIFESTS ITSELF IN MANY WAYS, SOME OF WHICH ARE THE FOLLOWING:

### A. The Rejection of the Unity of God's people.

1. The *Confession of Faith* clearly teaches that God has one people who were brought into saving relation with Him, some under the law, others under the gospel dispensation. The *Confession of Faith* calls this one people of God “The Church.” (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. XXV, Sec. 2). Whatever may be the national destiny of the Jewish people, according to the *Confession of Faith*, their becoming a spiritual blessing to the world and to the Church will be contingent upon their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and thereby becoming a part of the Church.

2. Dispensationalism teaches that God has at least two distinct peoples, namely, the Jewish nation and the Christian Church. He has distinctly different purposes for them, and each of these two peoples is united to Him by various and diverse covenants quite different in character. (*Dispensationalism* reprinted from *Bibliotheca Sacra*, No. 372, Vol. 93, p.396ff., esp. p.448).

### B. The Rejection of One Way of Salvation

1. The *Confession of Faith* teaches that there is but one plan of salvation—that men are saved only in Christ, by grace through faith. (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. III, Sec. 5; VII, Sec. 3; VIII, Sec. 6; X, Sec. 1, 2, 4).

2. Dispensationalism, magnifying the distinction which is made between law and grace (which dispensationalists hold to be mutually exclusive—Chafer, *Grace*, p.231ff.), agrees that men are NOW saved by grace through faith, but teaches that in other dispensations men have been saved by “legal obedience.” “The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ . . .” (Scofield *Reference Bible*, p.1115; also see Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, pp.415-16; *Grace*, pp.123, 124-126). It also holds that after the present age of grace, there will be a reversion in the kingdom age to an extreme system of meritorious obligation. (Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, pp.416, 440, 441, 443; *Grace*, p.223).

### C. The Rejection of One Destiny for All of God's People

1. The *Confession of Faith* teaches that God's people, the righteous, go into “everlasting life” (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. XXXIII, Sec. 2) which is also spoken of as “an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.” (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. VIII, Sec. 5). The wicked shall be cast into everlasting torment. Such is the final destiny of the saved and the lost, different and distinct groups which will enjoy different blessings according to the purpose of God.

2. Dispensationalism teaches that the two groups of God's people, the Jewish Nation and the Christian Church, are entirely distinct bodies, and in the millennial kingdom will enjoy different blessings, the Jews enjoying earthly and material blessings, and the Church spiritual and heavenly blessings. Some Dispensationalists, like Dr. Chafer, continue this distinction in destiny into eternity, holding that in eternity there are three groups: the lost in hell, the earthly people of God on earth forever, and the Church, the heavenly people of God in heaven forever. (*Dispensationalism*, p.448) .

### D. The Rejection of the Bible as God's One Revelation to His One People

1. The writers of the *Confession of Faith* had not heard of the Dispensational method of “rightly dividing the word of truth” for it was not taught in their day. However, all acquainted with the view of the Reformed Church know that the Church has held that “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son” (Hebrews 1:12). The *Confession of Faith* states that God has given His people (which the *Confession of Faith* calls the Church) a unified and progressive revelation, culminating in the revelation in Christ, and most clearly expressed in the New Testament which was written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who led the Apostles to see the purpose of God in Christ. (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. I, Sec. 1, 2; VII, Sec. 6).

2. Dispensationalism rejects both the unity of God's revelation and the fact that God's purpose is “held forth with more fullness” (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. VII, Sec. 6) in the New Testament than it is in the Old. Dispensationalism holds that large portions even of the New Testament are for the Jewish Nation, not for the Church. In speaking of the Scriptures for the Church, Dr. Chafer says, “The Scriptures addressed specifically to this company are the Gospel by John-especially the upper room discourse-the Acts and the Epistles.” (*Dispensationalism*, pp.406-07) Dispensationalism declares that the Sermon on the Mount is for the Jews of the Kingdom period, and is “law not grace.” (*Scofield Reference Bible*, pp.989, 1230; *Dispensationalism*, p.443). The Lord's Prayer and the Great Commission are assigned by some to the Jews of the “tribulation” period, and not to the Church. (*Grace*, pp. 174, 179, 181).

## II. THERE ARE ALSO DISPENSATIONAL DIVERGENCIES FROM THE CONFESSIONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE WORK OF THE EXALTED CHRIST

A. The *Confession of Faith* speaks of the kingly work of Christ and what is included in the exaltation of Christ. A study, for example, of answers 26 and 28 of the *Shorter Catechism* will show that Christ, “sitting on the right hand of God the Father,” is now exercising His kingly function, “in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.” (It should be noted that the *Larger Catechism*, in answer to question 45, devotes twice as much space to His kingly as to the prophetic and priestly work.)

The second function of the Exalted Christ taught by our *Confession of Faith* is His coming to judge the world at the last day. This “judgment” naturally is the climax of his victorious activity in “subduing all his and our enemies.” All that then remains will be the pronouncement of the final verdict.

B. Dispensationalism rejects or minimizes the present kingly office of Christ, and deviates from the conception of the Resurrection and Judgment, as set forth in our Standards.

1. Dispensationalism teaches that Christ is not now exercising His kingly power, but is only Head of the Church. It reserves the kingly work of “subduing his and our enemies” exclusively to the kingdom dispensation which will follow his second advent. (*Scofield Reference Bible*, note on p.990).

2. The *Confession of Faith* speaks of the Resurrection as follows: “At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed; and all the dead shall be raised up with the self-same bodies . . .” (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. XXXII, paragraph B). The *Larger Catechism*, in answer to question 88, states that “Immediately after the resurrection shall follow the general and final judgment of angels and men . . .” In dealing with the Judgment, the *Confession of Faith* says, “God hath appointed a day, wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father. In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged; but likewise all persons, that have lived upon the earth, shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds; and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.” (*Confession of Faith*, Ch. XXXIII, paragraph I. See answers to questions 85, 86, 87, 88 of *Larger Catechism*).

Dispensationalism teaches a series of resurrections and judgments, spaced over more than a thousand years. It is the opinion of your Committee that the above statement of the *Confession of Faith* does not admit of a multiplicity of resurrections and judgments as taught by many Dispensationalists.

## CONCLUSION

It is the unanimous opinion of your Committee that Dispensationalism as defined and set forth above is out of accord with the system of the doctrine set forth in the *Confession of Faith*, not primarily or simply in the field of eschatology, but because it attacks the very heart of the Theology of our Church, which is unquestionably a Theology of one Covenant of Grace. As Dr. Chafer clearly recognizes, there are two schools of interpretation represented here, which he rightly designates as “Covenantism” as over against “Dispensationalism.” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 100, No. 399, p. 3381).

In fact, the divergence of Dispensationalism from the Covenant Theology of our Church is so obvious to Dr. Chafer that he suggests a revision of the Standards of the Church so as to make room for those who no longer hold to the Reformed tradition of a Covenant Theology. (*Ibid.*, p.345).

Inasmuch as there is some difference of opinion concerning the status and use of such a report, your committee desires to state that it does not understand that the Assembly instructed it to provide a statement of doctrine which shall be a substitute for, or an amendment to, any doctrinal statements contained in the Constitution of the Church or any part thereof. Nor does it understand that this report, if approved by the Assembly, is to be regarded as an amendment to

ordination vows of ministers, ruling elders, or deacons. It is simply an interpretative statement which may be used by the Presbyteries as they deem wise.

Your Committee wishes also to make the following statement of clarification: Most, if not all, adherents to the type of Dispensationalism dealt with in this report hold the Premillennial view of our Lord's return; but not all Premillennialists accept this form of Dispensationalism. Therefore, the Committee wishes to make it clear that it has endeavored solely to consider the particular type of Biblical interpretation defined above, and known as Dispensationalism and that it understood the assignment of the Assembly to limit it to this task. In view of this fact, this report should not be considered as in any sense a criticism of Premillennialism as such.

Respectfully submitted,

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