

Eschatology in American History

By [Doug Reed](#)

In this article we will take a look at how eschatological beliefs have shaped the history of the United States and what we can hope for in the future.

It is a well known fact that eschatological beliefs have shaped politics in recent years. Dispensationalist thought has help lead to the United States' unconditional support of Israel, and if you study the history of Zionism, you will see that eschatological beliefs had a great deal to do with the founding of the Jewish state. In many respects the birth of Israel was a self-fulfilled prophecy. Those who believed Israel would have to be reborn before Jesus returned had no small part in the events of 1948.

Apparently, what we are seeing today is not new. Eschatology has shaped America from the very beginning. We know that many today think of the United States as the great Babylon of the book of Revelation. However, that was not always that case. In fact, at its inception America was thought to play another character in the book of Revelation. That's right, the New Jerusalem! Oh, how times have changed.

Christopher Columbus, who was an avid prophecy student, wrote this near the end of his life:

“God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoken of it through the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the spot where to find it.”

If you study the history of prophetic beliefs you will see that the times help shape people's understanding of the signs of the times. Many of the Puritans had strong postmillennial beliefs. They felt that the new world was ordained by God to help usher in Christ's millennial kingdom. This belief reached a fever pitch around the time of the American Revolution. The first Great Awakening began about 25 or 30 years before the Revolutionary war. This amazing revival caused many preachers to proclaim that American was God's instrument to usher in His kingdom. It was widely believed that Israel in prophesy was a type of America, and that the throne of Christ's coming kingdom would be somewhere in the 13 colonies. I suppose the regathering of Israel was the migration to the new world.

In the 18th century Jonathan Edwards said that America would be the land where God would

“begin a new world in a spiritual respect, when he creates the new heavens and the new earth.”

John Adams in 1765 wrote the settling of America was,

“the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.”

Even the motto on the great seal of the United States currency may have had eschatological influence. It reads NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM with the years 1776 in Roman numerals.

Translated this means “A new order of the ages.” Contrary to paranoid futurist beliefs, Charles Thompson who chose this motto did not have secret “new age” thought in mind, but he may have been influenced by the popular belief of that day that the United States would be used to usher in Christ’s millennial kingdom.

Later in the 1830’s the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed that American religious and political values were so intertwined as to be inseparable.

An early 19th century hymn expressed the common thought of the day.

*“The great reform is drawing near
Long looked for soon will come
The time will move both earth and sea
Just like glorious Jubilee.”*

The colonists had their tribulation scenarios just as many do today. King George took the role of the Antichrist. The stamp act was the mark of the beast. Someone calculated that the words “Royal Supremacy in Great Britain” equaled 666 in the Greek and Hebrew. Without a doubt eschatological belief played a role in leading the colonies into war with Great Britain. What was coming from the pulpits had a great influence on the American mindset. This understanding could even be seen in one of the Revolutionary War battle cries, “No king but Jesus!”

This belief reached an all time high with the victory over England. It was widely believed that the United States would go on to usher in the kingdom. The year most believed to be the beginning of the millennial reign of Christ was the year 2000!

Although premillennialism, the more negative brand of millennialism, was muted in this time, it had its proponents. Preterists say that the idea of the rapture did not appear until the nineteenth century. However a fellow named Cotton Mather may have been the first to speak of it. Around the time of the Revolutionary War he wrote that the earth would be consumed by fire, but the saints would be caught up in the air before this happened.

When speaking of prophetic belief in America, historian Paul Boyer wrote:

“...One approach will flourish and then wane, to be replaced by another, or by an interval when prophetic belief recedes. But then, under different circumstances, the picture changes: apocalypticism again looms large; long-dormant interpretive approaches take on new vitality.”

What is that old saying? Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it.

A good question to ask is what caused the change in the eschatological paradigm in the United States to change from postmillennial to premillennial? Postmillennialism is optimistic and activist. Postmillennialists had a great deal to do with founding the United States. They were very optimistic about the future and believed it would get better and better. They were also social activists and were heavily involved in issues like the abolition of slavery. The premillennialists were and are very negative. They believe things will get worse and worse. They are not totally passive, however, their thought is that the world is a sinking ship, and they work to save as many people off of it as possible.

Our brother Waidmann wrote an interesting article awhile back saying that the fall of a paradigm begins with an anomaly. That is something the system can't explain. Premillennialism began its rise to dominance in the late 1850's or so. That date should give us a clue what the first great anomaly against the postmillennial mindset was. The Civil war. Brother turned against brother in the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil. The country was literally ripped in two.

The second great anomaly was the industrialization of America. This caused great social upheaval and in many cases fear. Social upheaval invites end of the world speculation in every instance.

However, anomalies alone may not be enough to change a paradigm. There has to be a mindset available to replace the ruling paradigm and someone to present it. Enter *John Darby*. He started preaching in the United States in 1859. What timing! Things were just about to get bad in a hurry. Darby was a charismatic, tireless fellow with great power of persuasion. He and folks who would come later such as *Moody* and *Schofield* started a grassroots movement that grew with incredible speed. Then came the Schofield Bible, and the rest is history.

This makes me believe that the anomaly alone does not change eschatological paradigms. The second great factor is the pulpit. What is being said from the pulpit shapes people's perception of events. For example, was the Civil War a step forward or back? The abolition of slavery made this country a better place, yet for a premillennialist to admit that anything could be getting better destroys his paradigm.

The same goes for today. For Premillennialism to be correct, the world has to be a worse place than it has ever been. And in fact, most premillennialists probably believe that the world is deteriorating. Yet, we could argue that the world is a better place than it has ever been and using history beat them soundly in a debate. So, the perception of events that came from the pulpit might be as important as the events themselves in this battle between pre and postmillennialism.

Now, this begs the question—what is it going to take to get folks to throw out millennialism altogether, and instead of looking at current events to shape their eschatology, look at the clear fulfillment of prophesy in the first century? Dispensationalism will eventually encounter anomalies and collapse, but if we cannot change the focus, another form of millennialism will replace it, and the cycle will continue.

Food for thought:

Here are some interesting questions we can ask using the historical data. The postmillennial worldview was that the kingdom of God was coming. How did that view effect the people of God and their influence on society?

The dispensationalist view is that the kingdom cannot be achieved or experienced in this dispensation. How would this affect the people of God and their influence on society?

The Preterist view is that the kingdom of God is here—not coming as it was in the first century and not postponed. What potential impact should this worldview have on the people of God?