

Eschatology and the Westminster Standards

By C. N. Willborn

On the face of it, the topic of eschatology may seem a bit less than interesting, unless of course you're a dispensationalist and then just the word—"eschatology"—gets your blood pumping. Well, a cursory reading of the Westminster Standards does leave one wondering just how much "eschatology" there is in the doctrinal standard of Presbyterians. I would submit to you that there is just enough and no more, but there may be more than one might think at first glance. The Westminster Divines were careful on every doctrine to avoid extremes. While being fully cognizant of the historical issues as well as the currents flowing all about them, the Divines were cautious when expressing themselves on a number of doctrinal heads, including eschatology. R. L. Dabney explained it this way: "They were well aware of the movement of early Millenarians, and of the persistence of their romantic and exciting speculations among several sects.... [But when it comes to the nature and duration of the millennial glory] the Assembly will not dogmatize, because these unfulfilled prophecies are obscure to our feeble minds. It is too modest to dictate a belief amidst so many different opinions."¹

Even though the divines were cautious and, some would even say, moderate when it came to doctrines like Adam's fall into sin,² the imputation of Adam's sin to his progeny, the lapsarian question, origin of the human soul, and millennialism, it should not be concluded that they said nothing on the subjects or left them to the fanciful imagination of man. Again, as Dabney suggested, the divines crafted doctrinal statements "so far as Scripture teaches it, *and there it stops*" (Dabney, 5:128). They did speak to the topic before us; they went so far as they thought the Scripture taught, and the onus is upon me to do some justice to it in brief space. Therefore, what I propose to do in this paper is to examine the historical currents of the 17th century so that we may understand the sources better, examine the biblical theology of the

Standards, and finally make some observations on the systematic statements of the Standards.

HISTORICAL WAVES IN THE 17TH CENTURY

"In the century after Luther's death," wrote Peter Toon, "Protestantism in general, and the English Puritans in particular, showed a great interest in the doctrine of last things."³ Among the name brand Puritans who entertained and advanced chiliaistic views were such notables as Jeremiah Burroughes (Burroughs), Thomas Goodwin, William Bridge, and the first prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, William Twisse. English Puritans were not alone, however, in their curiosity as eschatology garnered attention in Scotland as well. Scottish advocates of a millennial thought included Commissioners to the Assembly—George Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford, and Robert Baillie—and David Dickson, James Durham, and John Brown of Wamphray.

Not all chiliaistic movements or strands of thought were "mainstream." You are perhaps familiar with the extreme sects of this period such as the Fifth Monarchist. This millennial movement was based on an

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1. R. L. Dabney, *Discussions*, 5 vols. (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1999) 5:130-131.

2. Their "moderate" view of original sin is seen in at least two areas: 1) They were cautious not to eviscerate man of his *imago primitivus*, while staunchly teaching total depravity (the fall affecting man in the totality of his being); and, 2) a less than dogmatic position on "contrary choice" and/or "necessitarianism" in relation to the fall.

3. Peter Toon, *Puritans, the Millennium, and the Future of Israel* [hereafter *Puritans*] (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970) 8.

interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the kingdom of which Daniel prophesied to follow the "fourth kingdom," as described in Daniel 2:44—"And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people."⁴ This "Fifth Kingdom" would usher in a new kingdom on earth. As a political-religious movement, Fifth Monarchism hoped to reform the English Parliament and so marshal in the imminent coming of Christ's Kingdom.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of all millennial positions as if they were of an extreme form. In 1559 the Geneva Bible⁵ set forth a number of millennial themes, which became standard fare for Protestants and especially Calvinists. One of the motifs developed in the Geneva Bible was that of the "godly prince." Genevan eschatology involved recognition of a "godly prince" and that helped forge their historiography. A prominent seventeenth century proponent of the "godly prince" historiography was the Irish Puritan, James Ussher. His own commitment to the "godly prince" kept him from attending the Westminster Assembly. Although invited, he declined because the "godly prince," Charles I, had forbid the meetings of Westminster. The "godly prince" motif was based upon a Genevan reading of various Scripture passages and the attending "marginalia" of the Geneva Bible. For instance, an oft cited passage was 2 Kings 11:12—"Then he brought out the king's son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, 'Long live the king!'" Concerning "the testimony" and the role of the king, the Geneva note reads—"Meaning, the Law of God ["the testimony"], which is his [the king's] chief charge, and whereby only his throne is established." Later, commenting on 2 Kings 11:17, the Genevan commentators said: "That both the King and the people should maintain the true worship of God and destroy all idolatry;" and, again, "That [the king] should govern and they obey in the fear of God." The "godly prince" doctrine understood that the civil crown would lead the way for the church to destroy the Antichrist. However, once the "godly prince" of Britain was intimately involved with the Antichrist, this position was untenable (here

I refer to Bishop Laud's Romanizing of the Church of England and the self-assertion of the Anglican body as the purest part of the Roman Church). A different reading was necessitated.

Another current influencing the thinking of the Westminster period dates back to the contemplations of Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Theodore Beza, the latter being a noted disciple and successor of Calvin in Geneva. These men made an advance on the all pervasive Augustinian amillennialism by anticipating the future conversion of the Jews. This was certainly a shift from the view of Luther who had no place for the Jew at the end of time and believed himself to be living in the shadow of the second advent of Christ and the last judgment. The "advanced amillennial" position as I call it—whereby Jews shall be converted in mass at some future point—became staple fare for consumption by Reformed Christians. The wide circulation of Peter Martyr Vermigli's commentary on Romans and the Geneva Bible saw to it. The marginal notes on Romans 11:15 in the Geneva Bible speak plainly saying, "It shall come to pass that when the Jews come to the Gospel, the world shall as it were quicken again, and rise up from death to life." Again, from the comments on vv. 29 and 30 we read "because the covenant made with that [Jewish] nation of life everlasting cannot be frustrated and vain . . . and afterward [i.e., the fullness of the Gentiles] the Jews being inflamed with emulation of this mercy which is showed to the Gentiles, might themselves also be partakers of the same benefit, and so it might appear that both Jews and Gentiles are saved." Within the context of the Geneva Bible the reference to Jews is to the Jewish Nation, not random individual Jews who might come to faith.

While the amillennial position adjusted for a national Jewish conversion that would usher in the Last Judgment, a sturdy postmillennialism was also waving the flag for the mass conversion of Jews. In the post-millennial scheme, the blessings upon the Jewish nation would precipitate and attend a remarkable and unparalleled revival among Gentiles. The post-millennial optimism is illustrated in the Geneva Bible notes already quoted above, but particularly the notes on Romans 11:15—"it shall come to pass that when the Jews come to the Gospel, the world shall as it were quicken again, and rise up from death to life." Here one sees the exuberance with which the Geneva Bible anticipates the conversion of the Jewish people and the remarkable quickening of the world "from death to life," which results from the Jewish blessings. Interestingly, this positive view of and hope for the Jewish people was shared by amillennialists and

4. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Crossway Bibles (2001).

5. Britches (originally "Breeches") Bible was the common name of the Geneva Bible on account of its translation of Genesis 3:7—"...they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves breeches."

post-millennialists and a growing premillennial body of ministers and scholars.

It is also noteworthy that a premillennial movement was producing a sizeable body of literature in the first half of the seventeenth century. Even in Calvin's day there were those who held a premillennial styled view, provoking his sharp tongue to dismiss the resuscitation of this old view as "too puerile to need or to deserve refutation."⁶ In the seventeenth century there was a renewed interest in this position. Applying the humanist cry of *ad fontes*, the Protestant Reformers and their progeny were avid students of the Scriptures, but also of the early church fathers. This was certainly true when it came to the subject of last things or end times. In Justin Martyr and Irenaeus the Puritans found a view akin to what we would term historic premillennialism. Christ would appear before the millennium, which was designated as a literal one thousand years, at which time the righteous would be "raised from the dead, to be given real, fleshly bodies. In the millennium, creation would be restored to its primal state and placed at the service of the righteous" (Toon, *Puritans*, 12). At the end of the millennium the new Jerusalem would come down to earth and judgment would begin. Judgment required a second resurrection—the first being the dead in Christ before the millennium—whereby the unbelieving dead, who have been "in a suitable place devoid of light and blessing," will be raised to face the holy and righteous One (Toon, *Puritans*, 13–14).

Joseph Mede was a particularly influential writer on the millennial topic, as was Johann Alsted. Their 1627 publications *Clavis Apocalyptica* (*Key to the Apocalypse*) and *Diatribes de mille annis Apocalypticis*, respectively, stimulated considerable millennial interest. These tomes "introduced a millenarian eschatology that was well received on the continent, in England, and as far as colonial North America."⁷ Involved in the chiliasm of Mede and Alsted was a strong dose of anti-popery. Since Luther, Protestants had identified Rome and the Papacy with the "man of sin" and Anti-Christ (2 Thess. 2) and the whore of Babylon (Rev. 19) and so anti-Romanism was a growing part of apocalyptic thought, thus making the fall of Romanism part of their optimism, their hope. Mede was especially effective in framing the Protestant "struggle against Rome within a grand apocalyptic drama."⁸ On this aspect of eschatology all positions were agreed.

In the English edition to Mede's work William Twisse wrote: "for may it be said of Mr. Mede in reference to this Exposition of the Revelation, Many interpreters have done excellently, but he surmounteth them all" (Cited in Jue, 105). Twisse-styled admiration for Mede was present

at the Westminster Assembly to such a degree that the Scotsman Robert Baillie wrote home from the Assembly complaining of those Divines who were enamored with "chiliasm" (Jue, 105). All of this shows the prevalence of millennialism in and about the Westminster era, but especially a brand of pre-millennialism.

Before moving on we should observe certain characteristics of this premillennialism. First, the millennium of Goodwin and others was wedged "between this world and the end of the day of judgement." This was a triumphant period, which would stand out in stark contrast to the darkness of the present age. This differed from the view of William Perkins who set forth expectations of a "state of glory, of a glorious church on earth," which would see masses of Jews and Gentiles converted during a thousand years of gospel expansion.⁹ Goodwin was pessimistic about the church age and Perkins was optimistic. The millennium was a radical era at the end of history for Goodwin; while Perkins held out for the increasing triumph of the gospel in this age.

A second characteristic of the premillennialism of Goodwin, Burroughes and others was "a future millennium bounded by two resurrections." A third characteristic of the seventeenth century premillennialism of note is that the thousand years shall be inaugurated when some "part of heaven" will come down to "rule this world" (Gribben, 47).

With all of this said about millennial beliefs, Crawford Gribben's warning is a healthy one. He warns against drawing concrete conclusions from any comparison of the eschatological schools of the seventeenth century. "Apocalyptic beliefs," he wrote, "remained in a state of flux throughout the seventeenth century and each writer must be read in his or her own right without bringing to bear upon him or her the eschatological expectations which the succeeding centuries have accumulated. It is never enough simply to claim of an individual that he or she was a member of a particular eschatological party" (Gribben, 32). In other words, there was variety enough within schools that no

6. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 3.25.5.

7. Jeffrey K. Jue, "The Active Obedience of Christ and the Westminster Standards," in *Justified in Christ*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Ross-shire: Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2007) 105.

8. Jue, 105. For a helpful discussion of this topic, see also Peter Toon, *Puritans*.

9. Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology 1550–1682* [hereafter *Puritan*] (Portland, Ore.: Four Courts Press, 2000) 47.

one can claim to represent “the premillennial” or “the post-millennial” or, for that matter, “the amillennial” position¹⁰ and certainly no one should equate one-for-one today’s descriptions (i.e., post-millennial, etc.) for those of the seventeenth century. Dogmatism should be cast out the door, to paraphrase Dabney, even when describing positions within schools of the period.

Part of the reason for Gribben’s warning certainly relates to one last note of a historical nature and that is hermeneutic. While a premillennial view was to be found in the early church, there was also developing in the Alexandrian school of Clement and Origen an hermeneutic that involved the literal, but stressed more of the plain sense of Scripture when it came to apocalyptic literature. Augustine took up the plain sense approach (versus a radical literalism) and with the third ecumenical council (Ephesus 431), we have the condemnation of a literalistic interpretation of a future millennium as superstition (Toon, *Puritans*, 14).

“Luther and Calvin fell back into the Augustinian interpretation of the matter,” explains Toon, “and denied the possibility of a future millennium.” The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), for example, taught that the idea of a future golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment was “Jewish dreams” which ought to be condemned. Instead, Matthew 24 and 25, 2 Thessalonians 2, and 2 Timothy 3 and 4 were to be understood as teaching that “the end of the age is described as a time of terrible tribulation and trial for the saints” (Toon, 19). In Toon’s opinion, the tendency of the early Reformers “to dismiss the possibility that Revelation 20 taught that there was to be an earthly millennium in which the saints would reign with Christ,” was due to their conflict with millennial-crazed, militant Anabaptists like Thomas Müntzer (Toon, 19).

But, as I have already indicated, there was also a hermeneutic at work that fueled the differences. The premillennialists abandoned in degree an Augustinian and Calvinian approach to apocalyptic literature and offered a milder form of millennialism than the Anabaptists for example, while sharing Calvin’s persecuted view of the present age (Gribben, *Puritans*, 30).

10. For an example see Gribben, *Puritan*, 32: John Alsted “advanced a postmillennial reading of Revelation which included a physical first resurrection” (in *The Beloved City* [1643]), while John Cotton offered a postmillennial apologetic that included “an allegorical reading of the first resurrection” (in *The Churches Resurrection* [1642]).

11. Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1980) 28; see also, Vos, *Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1986) 33, 37.

It is important then to understand the historical milieu for Westminster as one marked by millennial speculations. There were degrees of interests and differing perspectives owing to politics, hermeneutics, and predispositions toward popery. Certainly views such as anti-popery and Jewish conversion nosed into the Standards. Nevertheless, when it comes to any number of millennial issues the Standards reflect moderate views from the period. Thus, one may say that the chiliarist hoopla of the period had little effect upon the final statements of the Standards. Westminster is, to a point, an inclusive document.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

Having looked at the historical context, I now move to a discussion of the biblical theological content of the Standards. What do I mean by the biblical theological content? I am in rather classic fashion distinguishing “biblical” from “systematic” theology. Not in a hostile manner mind you, but in a formal, academic way. In the last section of this paper I will look at the content of the Standards from a logical, subject-oriented perspective or as the content stands in its systematic expression, but for now I wish to observe the teaching of the Standards from a revelational-historical perspective. But of particular focus for this study is the close relation between the eschatological and the temporal.

I think it is extremely important that eschatology not simply conjure notions of futurity. Many of you, as I, were nurtured in ecclesiastical traditions where eschatology was simply the study of future things. That simply will not do. We should become more and more conscious of the intrusion of eternity in the realm of temporality. Also, if you will, we must consider the movement of the temporal into eternity *before* the last things. So, I want to look at the Standards’ teaching from the perspective of eternity and temporality intersecting. There is the reality of the future that touches this life, just as this life touches the life to come. Geerhardus Vos articulated this viewpoint when he wrote: “the higher world so interposes in the course of the lower as to bring the conflict to a crisis.”¹¹ In other words, there is the realization for Christians that their “citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20). It is not simply that the truth of future hope and our expectation of Christ’s advent at the consummation of the ages changes the way we think about life, but rather God’s “purposes on earth are already being realized, and their manifestations reflect

his character.”¹² Real things are happening on earth to believers; the kingdom in heaven is coming to manifestation on earth now, just as the church has been praying for two millennia.

Some may wish to call this “inaugurated eschatology,” while others may frame it as “realized eschatology,” but I am not very happy with either designation.¹³ The former suggests (on the face of it at least) that something with a future consummation has begun now. While this is true, it does not properly, I think, cast the mind onto the intrusive nature of the eschaton into history. The latter—“realized eschatology”—suggests too quaintly that eschatology is “already” realized and too easily draws the mind away from a future hope. Neither of these designations offer accurate mental images for my reading of the biblical teaching on eschatology. I would like to use the phrase “eschatological realism” (and have at times), but that coupling is used in various disciplines and for various purposes and is rendered largely suspect in many circles.¹⁴ So, in the end, I am left with A. A. Hoekema’s term—inaugurated eschatology—as most palatable and, perhaps, best suiting my understanding of the eternal bleeding into the temporal with real consequences for individuals, the corporate church, and the world. (I reserve the right to use “eschatological realism,” but without the unnecessary baggage.) Inauguration of the eschaton, for me at least, suggests that that which is heavenly or eternal is regularly, even continually, moving in upon history so that we are consciously realizing the eschaton *now*. But this does not mean that this is all there is, for there is also a future consummation and realization of those things promised for the new heavens and new earth for which we wait—“our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

An excellent introduction to what I am suggesting is the eschatological tenor of temporality as seen in the doctrine of adoption where we “already” enjoy benefits of royal children in this age and “we wait eagerly for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). The “already/not yet” obliges us to acknowledge the mysterious link between the eternal and the temporal. We do not live in a Kantian universe, where the noumena and phenomena exist as separate spheres. Rather the eternal is regularly, even continuously, engaging with and seeping into the temporal.

Furthermore, our Catechism tells us that there are “benefits which *in this life* do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification,” namely, “assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Spirit, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the

end” (WSC 36, emphasis added).¹⁵ We are enjoying some of the benefits of our inheritance even now—the eternal mixing with or touching the temporal. For example, the assurance of God’s love comes in a number of ways, but one most important way is the testimony or witness of the Holy Spirit directly with the spirit of the adopted child—“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). Charles Hodge paraphrased it this way: “The Spirit of God produces in our spirit the assurance that we are the children of God.” Then he comments: “How this is done, we cannot fully understand, any more than we can understand the mode in which he produces any other effect in our mind.”¹⁶ In this work of the Holy Spirit within the life of the believer we see illustrated the eternal touching the temporal in a way that will only fully be realized in the eschaton.

Sanctification offers another example of eschatological realism or inaugurated eschatology. Paul tells us, in no uncertain terms, that we *are* sanctified—“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified (ἡγιασμένοις – perfect passive participle) in Christ Jesus . . .” (1 Cor. 1:2).¹⁷ He says to a church full of worldliness and silliness that some definitive holy change has transpired in them. Not that it *shall* (although Scripture does teach a progressive and future sanctification), but that it *has been done to you*.¹⁸ Our Standards teach

12. K. E. Brower, “Eschatology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 459.

13. A. A. Hoekema (*The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979] 1), prefers the term “inaugurated eschatology” while others use “realized eschatology.” If I were to choose one of these I’d prefer the former since the latter implies, at least, a lack of recognition of “future eschatology.” I prefer “eschatological realism” because it seems to me to hold the eternal and temporal together better, thus biting away at Kantian distinctions, which I deem deadly to the Christian worldview. But for reasons spelled out above and in the following note, I choose not to use it without qualification.

14. For example, <http://www.priestsforlife.org/columns/columns2006/06-11-20eschatologicalrealism.htm> and in numerous World Council of Churches documents. You can back up in history and find it in social gospel proponents like Shailer Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1928) and it even has “theology of hope” usage, which renders it too suspect for some.

15. Citations from the Westminster Confession (WCF) and Larger and Shorter Catechisms (WLC; WSC) are from, *The Westminster Confession* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976).

16. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans* (1864; repr., Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950) 267. Hodge is but one example of those taking this view of the Holy Spirit’s immediate witnessing/assurance in and to the believer.

17. I believe we see similar intent in 1 Corinthians 6:11 where Paul speaks to the church as ἡγιασθητε, an aorist passive indicative.

18. See John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) 2.277–284.

definitive sanctification implicitly (if you are not willing to grant explicitly) when it reads: “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them are *further sanctified* really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: ... to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (WCF 13.1, emphasis added). First comes the definitive sanctification then comes the *further* and continual work of the Holy Spirit unto the practice of sanctification or holiness. Indeed, the holiness which is required of us in *eternity* is ours through the Spirit’s mighty application of Christ’s perfection to the elect *now*—eternity is entering temporality and producing a leavening effect in the world.

We can look at this from another doctrinal perspective, that of “union with Christ.” The Shorter Catechism tells us that redemption is made ours or applied to us by the Holy Spirit “working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling” (30). This union with Christ is not simply one of *soul* to eternity, but involves the *body* as well. “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection” (WSC 37; LC 86). While the human body lies decomposing, awaiting the resurrection, it does so united to Christ! So, prior to the resurrection, while the soul enjoys the felicity of glory, the body waits patiently united to Christ. Here we see the “already” or an eschatological aspect of the “not yet” resurrection—the body, in its decayed state, is united to Christ. Upon the resurrection of the body, the deceased Christian will remain united to Christ in his glorified body. This union with Christ, explains Francis Beattie, “is not a material or mechanical one, but is an important result of the mystical union which the believer sustains to Christ. Indeed, it is a factor in that union which relates to both natures of the person of the believer.” The union we have with Christ through effectual call and believing faith “is never so broken even by death as to be incapable of restoration. The germ of resurrection remains, and bond of union abides.”¹⁹ We then may look forward to the resurrection, not so much because

of the certainty of the power of Christ (as is the case for the bodies of the unjust at the resurrection, WCF 32.3), but because of our union with the resurrected Christ. Thus our eschatology involves our union with Christ in our complete nature—body and soul. In temporality (which includes death) our union looks backwards in history to our virtual union with Christ in his resurrection and forward to our bodily/real resurrection at his second advent.

Simply stated, we should notice that our bodies, while decomposing or in a decomposed state, are united to eternity on the simple, yet mysterious basis of union with Christ. There is, in this sense, no time when our temporality is not touching or joined to eternity and moving toward eternity. Our bodies in life and death are part of the eschatological reality of union with Christ.

Concerning the soul of man, there is the eschatological reality of eternity prior to the reunion of body and soul at the resurrection. Notice from our Confession that “the souls of the righteous, being then [i.e., at death] made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest of heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies” (WCF 32.1). Yes, the soul is waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, but the blood-bought souls are at death “received into the highest heavens” where they “behold the face of God,” which requires “perfect holiness,” without which, the Scriptures tell us, “no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Further, Paul teaches us that to be absent from the body is to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8; see also Phil. 1:23—“be with Christ;” Acts 3:21 where Christ is said to be in heaven until the restoration). There have been remarkable stories of saints witnessing the “light and glory” as they await death’s moment and as they pass from this life into the “highest heavens” to “behold the face of God.” James Henley Thornwell, in his final moments of earthly life, expressed his mortal experience with light and glory in memorable utterance: “Wonderful! Beautiful! Nothing but Space! Expanse! Expanse! Expanse!”²⁰ While inhabiting the body and this earth for the last few moments, Thornwell was eschatologically borne along into the heavens. Heaven backed into earth; eternity into temporality. B. M. Palmer, Thornwell’s friend and preacher of fame, preached it this way: “‘Lord, increase our faith!’ So shall we hourly feel the spell of *that bright world which throws back its glory upon this*, taking the gloom out of sorrow and the sting out of death.”²¹

According to Westminster, this eschatological reality of eternity is true for the unjust as well as the just:

19. Francis Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards* (1896; repr., Greenville, S.C.: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1997) 386.

20. Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875) 524.

21. Benjamin M. Palmer, *Sermons*, 2 vols. in 1 (1875; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 2002) 2.404, emphasis added.

“And the souls of the wicked are at their death cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day” (WCF 32.1; LC 86). We learn this sad truth from our Lord’s lesson in Luke 16:23–24. The unnamed rich man is contrasted to the poor man Lazarus. The rich man cried out to Abraham for relief—“have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.” In this passage we observe the body and soul separated, awaiting the great day; by inference the body decays in the tomb; the soul languishing in torment of the fiery flame of hell, awaiting with dread the general resurrection. Likewise, Jude 6–7 speaks of the abode of the unrighteous as “undergoing [υπερχουσαι] a punishment of eternal fire” just as the dispossessed angels who fell from their abode in eternity.

From the preceding we may confidently say that the disembodied soul—whether believer or unbeliever—is marked by consciousness. W.G.T. Shedd explains that though the deceased party—righteous or unrighteous—is separated from his earthly tent (body), “Consciousness accompanies the spirit everywhere, and flows right on from time over into eternity, without a break.... The shining stream of consciousness sinks out of the sight of those who remain here, only to reappear in greater brilliancy as it pours itself into the sunlit sea beyond.”²² Shedd illustrated this by referencing William Wordsworth, who in 1802 stood on the shores of France, looking toward his native England, and with emotions swelling wrote: “I with many a fear for my dear country, many heartfelt sighs, among men who do not love her, linger here.” Ninety years later, Shedd wrote, Wordsworth is as distinctly conscious as he was in 1802. “He lives in a world as real as that of France, and is subject to an experience as positive and clear as that which dilated him on the margin of the English Channel” (Shedd, 227). At death, the soul of the believer lives on in heightened realization of the “already” consciousness, consciously *awaiting* the resurrection and the reunion of soul to glorified body.

But we must not forget another mournful truth about the unbeliever. I have spoken of the torment or misery of the unrighteous *after* death, but what about in this life? Horror, terror, and misery are a mark of life *now* for the unrighteous, the unbelieving person. The Scriptures tell us that all men, Jews and Gentiles, those within the covenant community and those without, have the law written on their heart. This is a truth about image bearers we learn from the apostle Paul: “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires,

they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 12:12–16). Notice that this will take place “on that day,” which is certainly a reference to the day of judgment, but, and this is a large, pregnant *but*, that which is certain to occur on that great and awful day is already being realized *now*. Calvin poignantly crafted it this way: “[Paul] refers this process of accusation and defense to the day of the Lord; not that it will then first commence, for it is now continually carried on, but that it will then also be in operation; and he says this, that no one should disregard this process, as though it were vain and evanescent.”²³ With the etchings of God’s law embedded upon the soul constantly reminding every man of his failings, his shortcomings, is this not misery and torment? Certainly it is. Is not the wrath of God a present reality for unbelievers? It most certainly is—“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains [NASB, “abides”] on him” (John 3:36). The wrath of God is presently abiding or remaining upon the unbeliever. Calvin is again poignant when he brings the force of this to bear not simply upon the truth of reprobation, but upon the present consciousness of God’s anger, his displeasure. The “simple meaning to be what I have stated,” wrote Calvin, “that death hangs over all unbelievers, and keeps them oppressed and overwhelmed in such a manner that they can never escape. And, indeed, though already the reprobates are naturally condemned, yet by their unbelief they draw down on themselves a new death.”²⁴ The eternal wrath is even *now* seeping into temporality and effecting lives. This should surely affect the church and her zeal for evangelizing the world.

Now, allow me to return to a consideration of one last doctrinal point from our Standards concerning death. As Robert Shaw has noted, death marks “the termination of all sin and sorrow, and an entrance into eternal life.... [Death] is their release from warfare—their deliverance from woe—their departure to be with

22. W.G.T. Shedd, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy* (1893; repr., Minneapolis, Minn.: Klock and Klock, 1981) 229.

23. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 19, “Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans” (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989) 99.

24. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 17, “Commentary on the Gospel According to John” (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989) 142.

Christ.”²⁵ Consciousness in the eschatological “light and glory” is free from sin and sorrow. We may deduce the absence of sin and sorrow from the fact that heaven is a place of absolute holiness where sinners may not enter (Heb. 12:14). Likewise, the new heavens and new earth will be free from sin and sorrow—“death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things [i.e., the things related to the world of sin] passed away” (Rev. 21:4). With death the just are already taken beyond the bounds of the realm of sin—“today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43); “to die is gain ... my desire is to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:21, 23). Again, this is suggested if not explicitly taught in 2 Corinthians 5:1—“if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Concerning the latter passage, Calvin understands the “building from God ... eternal in the heavens” to be a reference to “the blessed condition of the soul after death,” not the final reunited body and soul. The soul’s ascent to glory is “the commencement of this *building*, and the glory of the final resurrection is the consummation of it.” I would agree with Calvin: “This exposition will correspond better with the Apostle’s context.”²⁶ So, with the soul “already” in heaven, in the presence of God and the Lamb, a place where pure holiness is required, we may conclude that no sin and sorrow are there. This state of holiness—free from sin and sorrow, the habitat for souls of all predeceased saints—shall come down to inhabit the new heavens and new earth where all effects of sin are absent. The apostle John wrote of this transition from heaven to the new heavens: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 20:2, 4). Therefore, the state of souls at death and in heaven is “already” free of sin, waiting for the consummation when not only the heavens shall be free of sin and sorrow, but the restored creation—the new heavens and new earth—shall be sin free. Again, with our focus on this one doctrinal point, we see the eschatological emphasis of the Standards as they reflect the eschatological tint of special revelation—there is the

temporal already/intermediate not yet and the intermediate already/glorified not yet.

So, the case I’ve tried to make in this section is that the Standards have more “eschatological content” than one may first think when eschatology is viewed not simply as a thing of the future, but one of abiding eternal/temporal relations. The eschatology of the Standards then is by no means solely or even largely futuristic. Much of the eschatology developed in the Standards should be viewed from a most encouraging “already” perspective. To conclude this section and to reinforce my thesis, take the case of the Standards’ teaching on Christ’s kingdom. The kingdom is said to be present to those who are poor and persecuted; indeed, the kingdom is the present reality for those who are poor in spirit and persecuted in body—“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3); “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10). Further, as Thomas Boston has so ably argued, there are a number of ways Christ rules eschatologically in the now. He rules through the church and her offices. Through the church the eschaton seeps into time. This is illustrated very simply in the relationship between the church and salvation or redemptive history. Salvation is attributed to God throughout the Holy Scriptures. We also have clear teaching in the Scriptures that salvation comes through the preaching of the word by men called of God to hold the office of pastor-teacher in the church. Our Standards rightly tell us then that outside of the visible church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2). Through the church, the Head of the church mediates the eternal covenant of grace, which finds its manifest expression in time. Heaven, therefore, is seen backing in upon the earth through the church as she heralds the gospel, administers the sacraments, and exercises the keys of the kingdom variously, but particularly through discipline.

Furthermore, Boston reminds us that Christ defends, sustains, and supports His church *now*. “Christ executes his kingly office in conquering his enemies, and those of his people. This conquest is twofold. (1.) When now he takes away their power in part. Thus is the devil conquered already, that he has not all the world so at his will, and under his yoke of slavery, as before the coming of Christ, when he ruled among the nations with an unlimited sway.” This defeat of Satan had its virtual reality in the perfect earthly life and atoning death of our mediating King and also finds expression “in the day of converting grace, when the power of these enemies is broken, and the captives are delivered from the tyranny and bondage in which they were formerly held.”²⁷

25. Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith* (repr., Inverness, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1973) 315.

26. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989) 20.218.

27. Thomas Boston, *Complete Works of Thomas Boston* (hereafter *Complete Works*), 12 vols. (1853; repr., Wheaton: Ill.: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1980) 1.483.

Thus, we may say with Boston that Christ is ruling and reigning *now*, already, eschatologically.²⁸

This is not to deny, of course, that there is “a complete conquest remaining, which will be at the last day, when Christ will gather all his people into one glorious company, transport them into those mansions of bliss which he has prepared for them, and reign over them for ever in heaven” (Boston, 1.483). Indeed, there is a “complete conquest remaining” when “his enemies [have been] put under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25) and this when the end has come, “when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24).

While eschatological realism/inaugurated eschatology is taught in the Westminster Standards, this is not the manner in which most people read the Standards. This is most likely due to the fact that the Standards do not speak in contemporary “inaugurated” language. In fact, Professor Derek Thomas is correct in saying: “The Westminster symbols, do not, of course, allude specifically to a realized or inaugurated eschatology as such, but unconsciously there are allusions to it in some of its pronouncements.”²⁹ I find it regrettable that the Standards are not more pronounced, more overtly “eschatological” and certainly it is sad that many have never read the Standards through “eschatological” eyes. Hopefully the present section may go a goodly way in reversing this lamentable fact.

SYSTEMATIC TEACHINGS ON ESCHATOLOGY IN THE STANDARDS

In the final section of our consideration, I wish to briefly survey the systematic teachings of the Standards. In Larger Catechism 191 we have considerable seed for systematic development in the Divines’ consideration of the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer—“Thy kingdom come.” In this petition the Standards teach us that we pray for a number of things “to come.” While this prayer and the subsequent answering from our Lord infer temporal eschatologizing of the earth, it certainly carries with it future implications. Now we turn to the future theology of the Standards.³⁰

Chapter 32 treats “Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead.” What happens to man at death, both the righteous and unrighteous, is summed up in WCF 32.1—the bodies of both “return to dust and see corruption” and the souls of both “immediately return to God who gave them.” The righteous souls are made perfect in holiness and received into God’s glory. The unrighteous, on the other hand, “are

cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness” until the “judgment of the great day.” Keep in mind that both body and soul are from the time of death waiting for “the great day.”

Intermediate State and Immortality

There is an *intermediate state* spoken of here and it is necessitated by the “immortal subsistence” of the soul, which is related to both temporality and eternity. It is important for us to realize that the “immortal subsistence” of the soul has its opponents. Professors Bavinck and Berkouwer, for example, are squeamish about the soul’s immortality, referring immortality to the entire man. More problematic, in my opinion, is the view of Philip Hughes and his conclusion that the Westminster language “may be overdogmatic.”³¹

The Standards simply teach, as Thomas has said, that “*something* survives physical death, and that something is man’s soul, the conscious existence of personality in the intermediate state between death and resurrection.” This immortal “something” is not an “inherent indestructibility, or even superiority,” but is linked to the “prospect of future reunion.”³² This would pertain to both the righteous and the wicked for both the righteous and wicked shall be resurrected for eternal purposes.

This immortal subsistence is for the righteous a continuation in bliss and the bliss is summarily stated as beholding the face of God (WCF 32.1). The Larger Catechism explains to “behold the face of God” as “communion in glory which the members of the invisible Church have with Christ” (WLC 82). In theological parlance, this is the *visio Dei* or beatific vision. But the Scriptures tell

28. In fact, we probably ought to think of Christ’s present rule and reign upon and from the throne of glory as eschatological and not spiritual as it is sometimes spoken of. Spiritual carries baggage that is unnecessary and may conjure something less personal and powerful and real.

29. Derek Thomas, “The Eschatology of the Westminster Confession and Assembly,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, vol. 2, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004) 311.

30. The “future theology” is unfortunately one of the reasons eschatological realism has been neglected. Standard treatments of eschatology, especially in systematic theologies, have promoted this reductionism. Charles Hodge’s systematic theology is a prominent example.

31. Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989) 400. See G.C. Berkouwer, “Immortality,” in *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatic series, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1962).

32. Thomas, “The Eschatology of the Westminster Confession and Assembly,” 332–333.

us that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; see also 1 John 4:12 and 1 Tim. 6:16). On the other hand, we are told “the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod. 33:11). However, immediately the LORD explains that Moses may see his glory but “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). Clearly there is much left to mystery when it comes to the *visio Dei*, but that should not diminish our expectancy to “behold the face of God.” Our LORD’s blessing upon the church is just this—“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). No doubt this “beholding,” this “seeing” is related directly to our union with Christ. The Larger Catechism says so—“communion in glory . . . with Christ.” The disciples saw God in the God-man—“If you had known me you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him, and have seen him” (John. 14:7). Jesus confirms here that he was and is the exegete of God—“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has *made him known*” (John. 1:18 emphasis added to stress ἐξηγήσατο). Outside of union with Christ there is no seeing God; but in union with Christ one shall behold the face of God, yet this will not diminish the mystery, which cloaks the truth. Why? For God is incomprehensible and we shall for eternity come face to face with his incomprehensible being through “the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). In addition, we should not forget that the third person of the holy Trinity, promised by our Lord and now with us and in us (John. 14:17), was given to the church to “guide you into all the truth . . . and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John. 16:13). Surely our desire and ability to “behold” the face of God, to “see” God is dependent upon the exercise and grasp of truth, the biblical truth of God’s person. And so the role of the Spirit in realizing this covenant promise is essential. Thus, eschatological realism is Trinitarian.

Resurrection of the Body

Coupled to the final chapter of the Confession is the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. *First*, the resurrection of the body is a real expectancy based upon “the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20; also v. 23 and Col. 1:18ff.) the resurrection of Christ. The Standards do teach a literal, bodily resurrection for all—righteous and wicked. *Second*, the Standards teach one general resurrection for all. There is no hint of or *proviso* for multiple resurrections, such as those found in premillennialism. Chapter 32.2 and 3 teach us that the resurrection “at the last day” shall be of “all the dead.” It

proceeds immediately to define the “all,” as “The bodies of the unjust” and “the bodies of the just;” one “to dishonour” and one “unto honour.” The body of the just, in being raised “unto honour,” is to “be made conformable to His own glorious body.”

In relation to the resurrection we learn in the *third* place that the return of Christ and the Judgment are clearly represented as successive events without an intervening historical interruption (WLC 56, 87–90; and WSC 37–38). The Shorter Catechism illustrates this without possibility of confusion: “At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity” (38). Note that the open acknowledgement and acquittal “in the day of judgment” attends “being raised up in glory” and both of these events are “at the resurrection.”

The Larger Catechism clearly encompasses all men as well as angels in this event: “Immediately after the resurrection shall follow the general and final judgment of angels and men . . . At the day of judgment, the wicked shall be set on Christ’s left hand, . . . to be punished with unspeakable torments . . . forever” (88–89). The Standards teach one general resurrection for all men and angels without any interim between resurrection and final judgment.

The Last Judgment

Related to the resurrection, as I have just shown, is “The Last Judgment.” The Standards speak of the judgment with the same certainty as the New Testament speaks. This judgment will be consistent with God’s character and so will be a righteous and impartial judgment—“He will judge the world in righteousness” (Rom. 2:5, 11). This just and impartial judgment extends to those having heard the gospel and those whose consciences are indelibly etched with the law of God (Rom. 2:12–16). Thus, the Standards say “all persons that have lived on 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” (WCF 33.1).

The *telos* or goal of this judgment is the manifestation of God’s glory in mercy and justice. The “eternal salvation of the elect” (WCF 33.2) shall magnify his mercy toward sinners, while the “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” (WCF 33.2) shall magnify his justice. The Standards spell out one other intention for The Last Judgment and that is for the present utility of the doctrine. In the final paragraph of the Confession of

Faith we read: "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" (WCF 33.3). The systematic teaching of the Scriptures, of which the Standards are a summary, is that judgment is real and ought to be preached for conviction of sinners, consolation of saints, and the glory of the triune God.

Finally, I should also draw attention to the polemical nature of the Standards in regard to future or last things. It should not surprise you (although I venture to say, many Protestants may well be surprised; even "subscribers" to Westminster) to find that Scriptural doctrine, as summarized in the Westminster Standards, was contra-Romanism. This is clearly seen in passages such as the original version of the Confession where the papacy is ruled the "man of sin" and "Antichrist" (25.6) and the mass is said to be "most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect" (29.2). We find the same polemic consistently applied to Rome's heretical teaching concerning the dead and purgatory. Purgatory for Rome is a place of punishment for the purpose of purifying and preparing the soul for final acceptance before the thrice holy God.³³ The Confession says the souls of all men go *immediately* into the presence of God or "into hell." Additionally, and clearly anti-Rome, the Confession says, "Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none" (WCF 32.1). This stance clearly denies another practice of Rome, that being supererogation,³⁴ whereby prayers, almsgiving, mass, and the likes, which are performed by others may be accounted to those in purgatory.³⁵ Such a clear denial of Christ's once for all work of atonement is curtly (and rightly so) dismissed by Westminster. The Confession stands strongly against Rome on purgatory and this for the honor of Christ and His all-sufficient salvation.

The Standards' denunciatory posture toward purgatory would also apply to a theory such as post-mortem evangelism, taught in various forms by men of no small regard, such as Bavinck and Shedd.³⁶ This view posits the possibility of repentance for some after death. Death, however, is the final enemy (1 Cor. 15:26) and the Standards tell us that upon death "the souls of believers are ... made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory" (WSC 37). Furthermore, "the souls of the wicked are at their death cast into hell ... till the resurrection and judgment of the great day" (WLC 86). A passage such as Luke 16:19–31 should be sufficient to silence most on the speculative matter of post-mortem hope.

There is also in the Standards an outright denial of

soul-sleep since the soul goes immediately into the presence of God. And, finally, there is a polemic against annihilationism. Contrary to the accommodations of men like Philip E. Hughes, John Stott, and John Wenham, the Standards, I believe, set forth the clear teaching of Scripture. The retributive and penal justice of God against the unrighteous is eternal. There is a place where the worm does not die (Matt. 25:41; Mark 9:43–48) and the fire is described as unquenchable and eternal, where the objects of God's wrath "will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10).

Which "Ism" is Confessional?

Finally, I must say a word about the brand of millennialism taught in the Westminster Standards. There have been some who have boldly made the Standards out to be premillennial. For instance, one premillennialist has asserted that the Westminster Confession is "the strongest premillennialist symbol of Protestantism."³⁷ Again, another premillennialist placed this kind of assertion right on the face of his little book, *Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Reformed and Premillennial Study of Christian Basics*.³⁸ Perhaps Messrs. Froom and Khoo are reading the Bible Presbyterian Church edition that has been dispensationalized to refer to "the visible, personal and premillennial return of Christ."³⁹ Otherwise, there is no basis for such claims. On more sure

33. Purgatory is defended by Rome on the basis of a peculiar reading of extra-biblical material in 2 Maccabees 12:46. The doctrine was set forth at the council of Florence (1439) and the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

34. *Supererogation*: To pay out more than is due, i.e., to do more than is morally required; from the Latin *super* (over and above; beyond) and *erogare* (to pay out; payment).

35. If any one has doubts as to whether Rome clearly denies the complete and sufficient work of Christ, the twin doctrines of purgatory and supererogation should settle the issue!

36. See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Studies in Dogmatics series, trans. James E. Davison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976) 159–162. Berkouwer discusses Herman Bavinck's theory of the "possibility" of repentance after death" (160). See also W.G.T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure and Unmixed* (1893; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986) 120–121.

37. LeRoy Froom cited in Gribben, *Puritans*, 17.

38. Jeffrey Khoo, *Theology of the Westminster Standards: A Reformed and Premillennial Study of Christian Basics* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1997).

39. See 33.1 in *The Constitution of the Bible Presbyterian Church* (BPC, 1998) 29. For a nice, succinct account of the formation of the Bible Presbyterian Church see George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack Publishing Co., 1974) 245–296. Included is a survey of the Confessional amendments, which reflected "modern dispensationalism," but particularly a specific brand of premillennialism.

historical and theological footing, Peter Toon asserts that the Confession is amillennial, while others assert the Standards to be boldly postmillennial.⁴⁰

While some have been willing to categorize or label the eschatology of the Standards, others have been more cautious. R.L. Dabney epitomizes a moderate temperament toward the eschatological system of Westminster when he writes that the divines expressed “prudent moderation” (Dabney, *Discussions*, 5.130–31). Though the Assembly exercised modesty, it stood against premillennialism. Dabney builds his case against premillennialism from the Confession—“Christ shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the world” (WCF 32.2)—and the supporting Scripture. The general resurrection against two physical resurrections is another opponent to premillennialism. More recently Derek Thomas has concluded that it is “doubtful as to whether premillennial views are in harmony with the Westminster Standards.”⁴¹ Dabney concludes that the Standards are postmillennial, but without precision. This agrees with James de Jong’s assessment: “Westminster’s formulation must be seen as a deliberate choice of mind, unsystemized, postmillennial expectations.”⁴²

40. See Peter Toon, *Puritans*, 114 and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “The Westminster Standards (1640s) set forth a Postmillennial Hope,” in *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute of Christian Economics, 1992) 90.

41. Thomas, “The Eschatology of the Westminster Confession and Assembly,” 359.

42. James de Jong cited in Gribben, *Puritans*, 17.

43. A quick reading of Gribben and Toon reveals the differences.

44. In the “Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God” we are to pray “for the conversion of the Jews.”

45. Matthew 24:12–14 speaks of the progress of the gospel, but the simultaneous distress in the world: “... because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

46. This paragraph is adapted from R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1878; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985) 838.

47. Graeme Goldsworthy, “The Gospel in Revelation,” in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Bucks, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2000) 163–164. Reminding his readers that “the millennium” as a one thousand year period is found only in Revelation 20:1–10, he goes on to say, “I see the millennium as only one of many pieces of imagery which contribute to the overall pattern of John’s revelation” (164). Christ’s person and work is the substance of hope and encouragement for the church, this “gives meaning to the whole Bible” (162).

48. Thomas, “The Eschatology of the Westminster Confession and Assembly,” 356 says: “... it is surprising that the Confession itself contains almost no reference to this dominant eschatology.” Dabney says the same thing in *Discussions*, 5.130.

49. For a brief biblical exposure to the prospects of a new heavens and new earth, see Robert A. Webb, *The Christian’s Hope* (1914; repr., Greenville, S.C.: GPTS Press, 1994) 82–95.

So with this breadth of opinion existing, which is it? Well, it is *not* a premillennial document. Dabney and Thomas are correct. Even though premillennialists like Goodwin were in the Assembly, the extremes of pre-Adventism did not squirm their way into the documents. In saying this, I should caution you that the premillennialism of that day and much, if not most, of the popular brands of the nineteenth and twentieth century ought to be distinguished.⁴³

The eschatology of Westminster is plain old vanilla flavored eschatology. The Confession sets forth a great hope. There is the certainty of one general resurrection where the redeemed are raised “in power, spiritual, incorruptible, and made like to his glorious body” (WLC 87). The righteous will be then “openly acknowledged and acquitted ... for ever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity” (WLC 90). This hope is precipitated by and anticipated because of the development and secular overthrow of Anti-christ (2 Thess. 2:3–9; Dan. 7:24–26; Rev. 17–18); through the global preaching of the gospel and the general triumph of Christianity over all false religions (Ps 72:8–11; Isa. 2:2–4; 55:1–5; Dan. 2:44–45; 7:14; Matt. 28:19–20; Rom. 11:12, 15, 25; Mark 13:10; Matt. 24:14); the “general and national return of the Jews to the Christian Church (Rom. 11:25–26; WLC 191—“Thy Kingdom come”—we are to pray that “the Jews [be] called”),⁴⁴ and “a partial relapse [i.e., simultaneous with the conversion of the Jews and fullness of the Gentiles] from this state of high prosperity into unbelief and sin” (Matt. 24:14; esp. Rev. 20:7–8).⁴⁵ Out of the seemingly darkness of this partial lapse, as Dabney puts it, the second advent will take place. Then Christ shall judge all—the resurrected and the living.⁴⁶ Please notice that emphasis in the Standards is on Christ and the gospel hope, not the “millennium.”⁴⁷

This is a plain-vanilla, free-of-artificial-flavoring, Westminsterian eschatology, systematically set forth. The Westminster period amillennialism and postmillennialism can be described this way. It is free from the trappings of matters of disagreement such as the “latter day glory,” which was prevalent during the days leading up to and including Westminster.⁴⁸ It “expresses no opinion regarding the Millennium” (Thomas, 320), and does not even speak to the new heavens and new earth, an omission that personally saddens me.⁴⁹ It contains reference to Jewish conversion at the end, but this was common belief to both amillennial and postmillennial

Continued on Page 311.