

Agony, Irony, And Victory In Inaugurated Eschatology: Reflections On The Current Amillennial-Postmillennial Debate

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How can we dare to speak of the victorious reign of Christ and his church in our culture? David F. Wells spoke for many Christians when he made the following observation in a 1996 essay entitled "Our Dying Culture":

What is striking about our culture today is that its corruption is not simply at the edges. It is not simply found among the cultured elite ... It is not simply found among postmodern academics ... or among vicious street gangs, or among rappers who spew forth obscenities and violence, or among the venders of pornography, or in the bizarre and unashamed revelations of deeply private matters that are aired on television talk shows. What is striking is that this corruption is ubiquitous. It is not located in this or that pocket of depravity, but is spread like a dense fog throughout our society. It is even spread by those who are safe, ordinary, dull, and dimwitted, not merely by the incendiary and bellicose, the subversive and anti-social.¹

Quoting Robert Bork, Wells summarizes, "Wherever one looks, the traditional virtues of this culture are being lost, its vices multiplied, its values degraded—in short, the culture itself is unraveling."²

So again, in light of our present cultural agony, how can we dare to speak of the victorious reign of Christ and his church in our culture or any culture? Paraphrasing Gary North, there has to be more to Christianity's victory in history than its hypothetical cultural defeat in history.³ The problem is particularly acute for those of us who affirm an inaugurated eschatology according to which the ascended Christ, as Victor over Satan, sin, and death, is said presently to exercise the right to rule and fill the earth to the glory of the Father by his Spirit and according to his word.

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In this essay, I propose to begin the task of addressing this problem by establishing the thesis that, in keeping with the teaching of Gen 3:15 and the book of Revelation, a fully biblical inaugurated eschatology must recognize that perseverance in faith⁴ despite persecution is victory for the church in history. I shall attempt this task, first, by reviewing critically the recent interaction between amillennialists and postmillennialists and, then, by turning to the theology of victory in Gen 3:15 and in the book of Revelation. At the center of recent interaction has been the issue of the church's future cultural victory in history. Missing

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¹ David F. Wells, "Our Dying Culture," in James M. Boice and Benjamin E. Sasse, eds., *Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 25-26.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ Gary North, *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler, TX: Institute of Christian Economics, 1991), 184.

⁴ Throughout this essay, I shall presume that faith is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6), "faith with good works" (Jas 2:14-26). See the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chap. 16.

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from the discussion, in my view, has been an in-depth appreciation that the church's perseverance in faith despite persecution is her present, indeed her perpetual, supra-cultural victory in history. What follows divides into three segments, the first summarizing the Reconstructionist postmillennial thesis, the second summarizing the amillennial position, and the third defending the amillennial thesis.

I. The Reconstructionist Postmillennial Thesis: Agony Now, Victory Not Yet

The thesis of Reconstructionist postmillennialism regarding the church's victory has been ably represented in the writings of Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.,⁵ Gary North,⁶ and the late Greg L. Bahnsen.⁷ Their contention is straightforward. According to Gentry:

The postmillennial conception of victory is of a progressive *cultural* victory and expansive influence of Christianity in history... . The personal status of the believer and the corporate standing of the Church in salvation *is* ... one of present victory—in principle... . The distinctive postmillennial view of Christianity's progressive victory, in time and in history, into *all of human life and culture*,

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is postmillennialism's application of the doctrine of Christ's definitively completed salvation.⁸

Gentry adds:

The postmillennial kingdom in history grows on the basis of the God-blessed—positive sanctions—proclamation of the gospel of God's saving grace. God's Word does not return to Him culturally void. As God's kingdom expands in history, it produces an explicitly Christian and biblical culture—Christendom—by means of the comprehensive application of biblical law. In this sense, the kingdom of God is a true civilization, one which rivals all other civilizations in history.⁹

North states the matter more bluntly:

If neither we [Christians] nor our covenantal successors will ever be able in history to apply the Bible-specified sanctions of the heavenly King whom we represent on earth, then Christians cannot be said ever to reign in history. The language of reigning would then be both misleading and inappropriate. The issue here is simple: *Christians'*

⁵ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Calling in a Fallen World* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990); idem, "Whose Victory in History?" in Gary North, ed., *Theonomy: An Informed Response* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 207-30; idem, *He Shall Have Dominion* (2d. ed.; Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1997); idem, "Postmillennialism," in Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 1-57.

⁶ E.g., Gary North, *Millennialism and Social Theory* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990). See also n. 3.

⁷ E.g., Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991); idem, "Westminster Seminary on Pluralism," in Gary North, ed., *Theonomy: An Informed Response* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 89-111; idem, "Westminster Seminary on Penology," *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, 112-34; Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided: the Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

⁸ Gentry, "Whose Victory in History?," 215 (emphasis his).

⁹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 146.

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*possession of the judicial authority to impose negative civil sanctions or the private economic power to impose both positive and negative cultural sanctions.*¹⁰

For the Reconstructionist postmillennialist, then, the church's victory in history consists in her gradual emergence as the organon of world culture, particularly in her exercise of the power to impose positive and negative sanctions (given in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28).¹¹ Notice too that the exercise of this power is the *sine qua non* of the church's victory: it is indispensable to and inseparable from any talk of the church's victorious reign.

This contention is not asserted arbitrarily; it is based in socio-theological argumentation. According to the Reconstructionist, the personal and the cultural/corporate/social (i.e., familial, ecclesial, and civil) are linked ethically, judicially, eschatologically, and, therefore, historically by the principles of definitive and progressive sanctification.¹² Notice how this works out. First, there is the principle of definitive sanctification: "God grants judicially the *perfect humanity* of Christ to each individual convert to saving faith in Christ. This takes place at the point of his or her conversion."¹³ Then, there is the principle of progressive sanctification: "[T]his implicit, *definitive* moral perfection is to be worked out in history. We are to strive for the mark. We are to run the good race (strive to win it, by the way; not to

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hope for a covenantal tie, i.e., pluralism). We are to imitate Christ's perfect humanity."¹⁴

The application of these principles of sanctification does not, however, terminate with the individual. Rather, "these same dual concepts ... apply to corporate groups, especially covenantal associations, and above all, the Church ... [and] also to the family and the State."¹⁵ Since dual sanctification applies to the institutions of culture as well as to the individual, we may speak of moral progress that is civilizational as well as personal.

Now we must notice the link between personal and cultural moral progress and Christ's victorious kingship. The former derives from the latter, and the conception of the latter takes its shape from Psalm 110 and 1 Corinthians 15. Note Gentry's remarks: "[T]he sessional kingship of Christ began at His First Advent and ... the exercise of that kingship is coextensive with the entire era... . And since begun, Christ's sovereign rule will continue 'until' all of his enemies become his footstool."¹⁶ Furthermore, says Gentry, "Christ's present continuing reign is a *progressive, unfolding reality*: 'For He must reign ... until He has put all His enemies under His feet' [1 Cor 15:25]. His present reign ... seeks its *historical manifestation* through the *present* progressive abolishing of 'all rule and all authority and power' [1 Cor 15:24]."¹⁷ Stated differently, "the postmillennial advance of the kingdom of Christ in history will gradually and effectively remove all external opposition to the gospel."¹⁸ Gentry summarizes this point aptly:

¹⁰ North, *Millennialism and Social Theory*, 87 (emphasis his).

¹¹ See, e.g., *ibid.*, 4-5. In North's words (*Millennialism and Social Theory*, 39-40), "God's stipulations (laws), Gods historical sanctions, and Gods kingdom triumph in history are a unit."

¹² *Ibid.*, 60-70; *idem*, *Westminster's Confession*, 168-71, 175.

¹³ North, *Westminster's Confession*, 168 (emphasis his).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁶ Gentry, "Whose Victory in History?" 211.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

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Jesus Christ currently possesses [the] reality [of sovereign rule], claims its title and authority, and actually exercises it in history. But He sovereignly directs His people progressively through time to seek the historical manifestation, the contemporary development and unfolding, of this glorious reality on earth and among its inhabitants... . The gradual, historical unfolding of the implications of the kingship of Christ [in future cultural victory] does not in any way deny the contemporary eschatological reality of its heavenly status and present reality... . In fact, this heavenly position of Christ, when coupled with the prophetic promises of Scripture, demands just such a progressive unfolding in history.¹⁹

II. The Amillennial Thesis: Victory-in-Agony Now

The most recent and articulate exponents of the amillennial position vis-à-vis the Reconstructionist view are Richard B. Gaffin²⁰ and Robert B.

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Strimple.²¹ Gaffin begins with certain formal, structural observations. He says, "Most assuredly, the eschatology of the New Testament is an 'eschatology of victory'—victory presently being realized by and for the church, through the eschatological kingship of the exalted Christ (Eph 1:22)."²² To differentiate his vision from the Reconstructionist's, Gaffin insists that Christ's eschatological kingship is not merely a future hope, whether in history or not; rather, Christ's kingship "begins already at his first coming culminating in his resurrection and ascension. Already at and dating from Christ's exaltation, 'God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.'"²³ Clearly, according to Gaffin, "the *entire* period between his exaltation and return, not just some segment toward the close, is the period of Christ's eschatological kingship, exercised undiminished throughout (through the eschatological, Pentecostal presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church)."²⁴ Thus, Gaffin concludes, "the eschatology taught in the New Testament [is] a realized-eschatological and therefore decidedly optimistic amillennialism, optimistic about the victory—present (and past) no less than future—being realized in and through the church."²⁵

With the preceding formal, structural observations as backdrop, Gaffin introduces a crucial clarification. Arguing chiefly from Paul (in 2 Cor 4:7, Phil 3:10, and Rom 8:18–26) but also from the "cross bearing" passages of the Gospels, Gaffin urges that "[o]ver the interadventual period in its entirety, from beginning to end, a fundamental aspect of the church's existence is (to be) 'suffering with Christ'; nothing, the New Testament teaches, is more basic to its identity than that."²⁶ And what does this suffering entail? Nothing less than "all the ways in which [the] 'weakness-existence' [of the Christian's fallen creaturely experience] [Rom 8:26] is borne by faith, in the service of Christ—the mundane, 'trivial' but

¹⁹ Ibid., 213-14.

²⁰ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism," in William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 197-224.

²¹ Robert B. Strimple, "An Amillennial Response to Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.," in Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 587-1; and idem, Amillennialism, *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond*, 83-129.

²² Gaffin, "Theonomy and Eschatology," 216.

²³ Ibid., 203.

²⁴ Ibid. (emphasis his).

²⁵ Ibid., 210.

²⁶ Ibid., 211.

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often so easily exasperating and unsettling frustrations of daily living, as well as monumental testing and glaring persecution."²⁷ As Paul reminds the church in Rom 8:37, says Gaffin, it is "not 'beyond' or [only] after' but 'in all these things ... [that] we are more than conquerors.' Until Jesus comes again, the church 'wins' by 'losing.'"²⁸ Accordingly, Gaffin summarizes, "any outlook that fails to grasp that, short of Christ's return, [the NT's] eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering—an eschatology of (Christ's)

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'power made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9)—confuses the identity of the church."²⁹

Strimple's exposition of the amillennial vision provides further insight into the amillennial concept of victory.³⁰ With Gaffin, Strimple notes that "the New Testament clearly points us to the resurrection and exaltation of Christ as the beginning of [his mediatorial] reign (see Acts 2:36; Eph 1:20–23; Phil 2:9–11; Heb 1:3; 10:12–13; 1 Pet 3:21–22)." When Strimple reaches his discussion of 1 Corinthians 15, there we find the language of victory emerging. He writes, "In 1 Corinthians 15:24–27 the apostle rejoices in the mediatorial dominion that Christ is now exercising with the goal of putting all his enemies under his feet."³¹ Again, Strimple says, "[I]t is specifically Christ's reign of conquest over his enemies that Paul has in view in 1 Corinthians 15. When that conquest is complete and every enemy has been destroyed, that particular *kind* of reign [i.e., mediatorial reign] will have reached its end."³² And when is that end reached? Strimple answers, "The mediatorial reign of Christ reaches its climactic end when he destroys the last enemy, death, by raising to life his people [1 Cor 15:54–55]."³³ "That will be the last act Christ will accomplish as he puts all enemies under his feet and 'hands over the kingdom to God the Father'"³⁴ (1 Cor 15:24–28).

To this point, Strimple has given us a reign of conquest and dominion by Christ, begun at his personal resurrection and ending at his people's resurrection. But now, what does Strimple want us to make of the interval between Christ's resurrection and his people's resurrection? As he himself puts the question, "[W]hat is the nature of Christ's present kingdom?"³⁵

Intent as he is to debunk the Reconstructionist answer to the question, Strimple does more to answer the question negatively than positively. This, I believe, is the weakness in Strimple's exposition, but it still contains important insights. According to Strimple, the nature of Christ's present kingdom is seen in "the blessings Christ is pouring out on his church *now* by the Spirit."³⁶ Moreover, it is a kingdom through which the reign of truth will be extended,³⁷ resulting in the successful completion of gospel proclamation to all nations, thereby gathering the elect remnant from throughout the earth.³⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 214.

²⁸ Ibid., 216 (emphasis his).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See n. 21.

³¹ Strimple, "Amillennialism," 111.

³² Ibid., 112 (emphasis his).

³³ Ibid., 111.

³⁴ Ibid., 110.

³⁵ Strimple, "An Amillennial Response," 61.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

³⁸ Ibid., 62.

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The nature of Christ's present kingdom is also that of a kingdom in conflict with Satan,³⁹ and in that struggle "*sufferings* are [the church's]

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characteristic mark."⁴⁰ Following Heb 3:7–19, Strimple urges that the church's self-conception is shaped not by Israel's conquest of Canaan (as Gentry would have it⁴¹), but by Israel's desert experience.⁴² And, though the reign of truth will be extended during those desert days, the church will endure persecution, apostasy, and the Antichrist, as the forces of evil gather strength, especially toward the end.⁴³ Nevertheless, the church's struggle ends in historical victory over Satan when Christ returns to give relief to his people and retribution to his enemies.⁴⁴ As Gaffin puts it, "No success of the Gospel, however great, will bring the church into a position of earthy prosperity and dominion such that the wilderness with its persecutions and temptations will be eliminated or even marginalized... . Such prosperity and blessing for the church are reserved until Christ returns."⁴⁵

III. In Defense of the Amillennial Thesis: Irony and Victory-in-Agony Now

The preceding rehearsals of the Reconstructionist and amillennial positions have exposed basic differences in each understanding of the church's victory. Certainly, those differences are shaped in part by distinctive approaches to biblical covenant and law. As important as that issue is, it is not my concern here. Rather my concern is with what is being dismissed by Reconstructionists and needs to be refocused and reasserted by recent amillennialists, namely, the importance of the church's perseverance in persecution for our understanding of her victory. Note the following.

Of the two most recent amillennial proponents Gaffin does the most with the concepts of perseverance in suffering and victory when he insists that the NT's eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering and then appeals to Paul's words in Rom 8:37 to support his claim.⁴⁶ In my view, the apostle's understanding of the relationship between the church's victory and suffering in Romans 8 reflects a theologically fundamental consideration in this discussion. Gaffin has done well to discern it, but I believe his exposition needs to be refocused and elaborated. On the other hand, Strimple is clearly committed to describing the present reign of Christ as victorious in the successful preaching of the gospel to the nations. Beyond this important factor, however, he says little about the victory of the church as a present reality. Space limitations may have been a consideration in Strimple's presentation. Still, based on what he has set forth, Strimple's inaugurated eschatology comes across as "victory now for the One (Christ) and not yet for the many (the church)."

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³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 63 (emphasis his). He cites as proof Rom 8:18; John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:36; 1 Cor 1:5-10; Phil 1:29; 3:10; 1 Pet 4:12-19.

⁴¹ Gentry, "Postmillennialism," 30; *idem*, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 25859.

⁴² Strimple, "An Amillennial Response," 63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁵ Gaffin, "Theonomy and Eschatology," 223-24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

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The advocates for Reconstructionism, on the other hand, see the church's persecution in markedly different terms. Gentry's interaction with Gaffin on this point is revealing. In Gaffin's exposition, he cites 2 Cor 4:7ff.; Phil 3:10; and Rom 8:17 as leading proofs that "suffering with Christ" is constitutive of the church's identity. In response, Gentry urges that Gaffin overreaches with his citation of these texts by equivocating on the meaning of the terms *suffering* and *victory*. Gentry's point is that "suffering with Christ" need not be generalized beyond the experience of the apostolate and the 1st century church, nor is the idea of "suffering with Christ" necessarily inclusive of the suffering of persecution. With this last point as backdrop, Gentry clarifies the postmillennialist's vision of cultural victory. He points out that, while postmillennialism does not promise the eradication of suffering connected with indwelling sin and fallen creaturely mortality, it does promise "the reduction to negligible proportions (at least) of suffering for the faith"⁴⁷— this, as a result of the gradual removal of all external opposition to the gospel.

North sharpens the picture even more. The issue, he says, is the amillennialist's hermeneutic of persecution. Citing Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction*⁴⁸ as evidence, North identifies what he calls the amillennialist's hermeneutical "principle of the disguised victory."⁴⁹ He writes: "We see this principle ... illustrated most graphically at the cross: what appeared to be Satan's greatest victory was in fact his judicial seal of doom."⁵⁰ But, North insists, this interpretation is valid "only because of what followed: Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God in heaven."⁵¹ Says North, Christians must affirm not only the reality of Christ's resurrection and ascension in history, but also *the consequences* of these events, including their social and cultural consequences. North concludes: "Amillennialism's hermeneutic of persecution is therefore not valid as a primary classification device to evaluate the entire work of the Church in history. There is more to the progress of the Church in history than its persecution."⁵²

The preceding paragraphs, I believe, clearly justify my concern about the general lack of emphasis placed on the church's perseverance in persecution for understanding her victory. Reconstructionists basically dismiss it as irrelevant. Amillennialists have broached the subject, but their discussion needs a fresh elucidation. In what follows, my purpose is to demonstrate that a fully biblical inaugurated eschatology must recognize that perseverance in faith despite persecution *is* victory for the church in history.

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Before we examine key texts that establish this point, however, we must digress for a moment to consider the antithesis between blessing and curse in the Bible.⁵³

Fundamental to all of biblical understanding of history is the duality of destiny represented in the concepts of blessing and curse, life and death, salvation and judgment,

⁴⁷ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 474 and Appendix B. In an earlier version of the statement here quoted, Gentry ("Whose Victory in History?" 229) was more triumphalist, stating that postmillennialism promises the "removal" of suffering for the faith.

⁴⁸ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, [1983] 1990).

⁴⁹ North, *Millennialism and Social Theory*, 233.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁵³ For the thoughts in this digression, I am dependent on W. A. Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Winona Lake, IN: Carpenter Press, 1984), chap. 5.

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victory and defeat. From the creation of man⁵⁴ in the OT to the judgment of man in the NT, blessing and curse stand in antithetical relationship to one another. On the one hand, we have blessing, the essence of which is all that fosters man's fruitfulness and assists him to achieve dominion: everything that promotes his life and victory. On the other hand, we find curse, the essence of which is all that hinders man's fruitfulness and resists his dominion: everything that furthers his death and defeat.

Sharpening our understanding of the antithesis between blessing and curse is their contingency upon man's obedience. Of this fact Deuteronomy 28 stands as a perpetual illustration. According to 28:1–14, the blessings of God were the consequence of man's obedience; conversely, according to 28:15–68, the curses of God were the consequence of man's disobedience. Such antithetical pronouncements are consistent with the two ways of life and death foundational to the biblical worldview. Accordingly, we see the law setting before Israel decisions of life and death, for good and evil; the prophets declaring salvation and judgment, victory and defeat; the sages expounding wisdom and folly; the apostles writing of Spirit and flesh, light and darkness.

A question arises, however: In representing blessing and curse as it does, does the Bible present this antithesis as an essential dualism, or even a moral pessimism, such as we see in the ancient cognate cultures? If not, how does the Bible resolve the theological—indeed, eschatological—tension of an apparent dualism of equally ultimate and contradictory words from God? In answer to these questions, the Bible consistently affirms the vindication of good over evil, of light over darkness, of life over death, of blessing over curse. This affirmation derives from the Bible's monotheism, according to which benediction and malediction are traceable to the one beneficent purpose of the singularly sovereign and wise God. In that purpose, God resolves the theological tension by transforming curse into blessing for the remnant he chooses in grace, thereby promising them final salvation. Note W. A. Gage's comments on this point:

It is from one God that prophetic words of good and evil come forth. "Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and evil go forth?" (Lam 3:37–38). This one God displays his wisdom by infallibly accomplishing good purposes

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out of the evil designs of man (cf. Gen 50:20). God vindicates his one beneficent purpose in prophetic pronouncements by appending a word of comfort (*Heil*) to a word of woe (*Unheil*), the ultimate irony of transforming cursing into blessing.⁵⁵

In biblical revelation, then, we find a denial of the ultimacy of evil and, thus, grounds for the believer's hope in the vindication of good. The Bible's eschatology, expressed in its pronouncements of blessing and curse, is indeed a true moral optimism, an eschatology of victory, wherein God makes curse the way to blessing, death the way to life, for his believing people.

We must now turn to key biblical texts that establish my contention concerning victory for the church in history. I turn first to Gen 3:15, where we find the paradigm on which we shall focus, and then to the book of Revelation where John bears witness to perseverance in persecution as victory for the church.

⁵⁴ By the term *man*, I mean human beings, male and female.

⁵⁵ Gage, *Gospel*, 45.

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The oracles of destiny in Gen 3:14–19 provide the biblical paradigm or model for prophetic pronouncement. Aside from their poetic form, the most striking feature of the oracles is their ironic content. That is to say, God's curses here express the eschatologically significant moral principles by which he achieves victory over his enemies. God sees to it that the means by which his enemies would defeat him end up being the very means by which he defeats them; in addition, the actual results effected by God are the opposite or a greater degree of the results intended by his enemies. In Genesis 3, then, we find statements of retributive irony and redemptive irony.

In God's judgment on the serpent (3:14), there is retributive irony: in sin, the serpentine adversary had sought to be the most high; in judgment, he would become the lowest; the most crafty of creatures would become the most accursed. There is also retributive irony in God's judgment on the woman (3:16): in sin, the woman had desired to lord it over the man; in judgment, the man would desire to lord it over her.⁵⁶ Finally, in God's judgment on the man (3:19), there is again retributive irony: in sin, the man as a creature of dust had sought to be like God; in judgment, God would return him to the dust.

The prophetic oracle of Genesis 3, however, contains a pronouncement of redemptive irony as well as pronouncements of retributive irony. We say this because in God's curse on the serpent in 3:15, there is a gospel of victory over the serpent.

By sin, the serpent had converted the woman into his ally and made her the mother of all the wicked and perishing; by the grace of redemptive judgment, however, God will convert the fallen woman into an enemy of the serpent and into the mother of all the righteous and living. By sin, the serpent makes all the woman's seed into children of the devil; but by the grace of redemptive judgment, God determines to make a division among

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the woman's fallen seed, promising to convert a remnant into children of God.⁵⁷ By sin, the serpent had subdued man; by the grace of redemptive judgment, however, God ordains that one son of the woman will subdue the serpent. By so much, God initiates the moral and spiritual conflict between the seed that will yet culminate in the fulfillment of God's original purpose for man.

At this point we reach a crucial consideration for our purposes, namely, the means by which the one seed would conquer the serpent. Here is disclosed a very profound irony, the irony of redemptive victory. By sin, the serpent had delivered man to the curses of death and defeat, hoping thereby to frustrate God's original commission to man. But God sees to it that the means by which the serpent and his seed intended to defeat him end up being the very means by which he defeats them; in addition, the actual results effected by God are the opposite or a greater degree of the results intended by the serpent and his seed. By the grace of redemptive judgment, God appoints the death of one as the way to new life for many; he ordains the weak, even in death, to conquer the strong; he transforms curse into blessing. How can this be? Because in God's bittersweet sovereignty over the conflict, the one righteous seed will inflict suffering unto death (a head wound) on the serpent, as the serpent inflicts suffering unto death (a heel wound) on the woman's one righteous seed. Thus does God promise that one of the woman's seed will succeed where Adam had failed: this last (eschatological) Adam

⁵⁶ Though her desire will be to rule her husband, she will find herself ruled by him. Cf. Gen 3:16 with 4:7. See Umberto Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Manes, 1959), 16566.

⁵⁷ See Genesis 4 for the story of the first generation of this gracious division of the seed into the redeemed and the fallen: righteous faithful Abel and wicked faithless Cain.

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will be victorious over the serpent where the first (protological) Adam had been defeated, and that victory will come by means of the curse of death.

In sum, the pre-fall history of man had an eschatology of victory: Gen 1:28/ 2:15–17 had expressed the hope that, through God's Spirit and according to God's Word, the world—including the serpent—would be ruled and filled by man male and female to God's glory. As enunciated in Gen 3:15, the post-fall history of man also has an eschatology according to which the last Adam and his seed will fulfill God's mandate for man. The entrance of sin and death into the world through the first Adam will, therefore, not frustrate God's original purpose for man. Rather, in the victory of that one righteous son and the remnant he redeems, the earth will yet be ruled and filled by a righteous immortal seed of man to the glory of God.

While there would doubtless be value in tracing this eschatology of victory through the pertinent OT and NT passages,⁵⁸ space requires that we turn

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to the NT book in which the vocabulary and images of victory are the most prominent, namely, the book of Revelation. Therein it is striking to note that John applies the language of victory both to Christ and to his people, and he does so in the ironic pattern of Gen 3:15.

First, in the book of Revelation, John presents Christ's redemption of the church in images deriving from the victory theme associated with God's redemption of Israel at the Passover. In 1:5–6, as John describes the Lamb's redemptive work, he clearly evokes a comparison to the Lord's redemptive work in the Exodus (Exod 12:21–28; 19:6). John's rehearsal of the Exodus imagery tells us that we are to understand the church's redemption as a new Exodus, involving the Lamb's victory (Rev 5:5) over his enemies, including all the sins of his kingdom-to-be (1:5). That the victory of Christ took place at his death is clear from John's reference to his blood (1:6). Without at all denying the victory in Christ's resurrection, the irony of victory in Christ's death is palpable.

In 5:5–10, we again encounter the Exodus imagery. Now, however, the vocabulary of victory (nika) is explicit since the lion and root imagery associated with the Davidic dynasty is also applied (v. 5) to interpret the qualifications of Christ. The references to David are significant for two reasons. First, the Davidic king was charged specifically with the mission of waging victorious holy war on behalf of God's people so as to make them secure and pure for fellowship with God at Zion's temple. Christ is here identified as that victorious warrior. Second, John unmistakably places the holy war victory of this lion in the past by stating that he "has overcome" (ēnikhs). The seer's point is clear: the lion has *already* waged victorious holy war⁵⁹ against the malevolent forces that threaten the church. In this fact, we find the basis and hope of the repeated exhortations to the churches to overcome in chapters 2 and 3. To these exhortations we shall return. For now the question is when and where the lion won his victory.

The answer comes in 5:6 and 9. Though Christ is introduced as a victorious lion, he is seen as a slain lamb standing. Omnipotent ("seven horns") and omniscient ("seven eyes") in

⁵⁸ E.g., God effects the redemption of Israel at the Passover through the death of a sacrifice. Of course, the gospel of redemption from sin by the death of a sacrifice was the perpetual and manifest testimony of the Levitical sacrifices. The Servant Song of Isa 52:13-53:12 testifies as well to the irony of salvation victory through the death of the Servant. For a fuller exposition of the OT and NT passages dealing with the death of Christ as victory over the devil, see Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), esp. chap. 8.

⁵⁹ We take the verb ēnikhsen as a consummative or effective aorist. See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 350.

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the fullness of the Spirit ("seven spirits"), "the slain lamb thus represents the image of a conqueror who was mortally wounded while defeating an enemy. Christ's death, the end-time sacrifice of the messianic lamb, becomes interpreted as a sacrifice that not only redeems but also conquers."⁶⁰ G. K. Beale's comments are as brilliant as they are important for the purposes of this essay:

There is no doubt that v 6 portrays Jesus as resurrected and that the resurrection is crucial to his overcoming. He conquered death by being raised from the dead. But the present victorious effect of the Lamb's overcoming resides not only in the

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fact that the Lamb continues to "stand" but also in the fact that it continues to exist as a slaughtered Lamb... . In addition to the resurrection, the defeat of death was itself ironically a victory for Christ. That is, Christ as a Lion overcame by being slaughtered as a Lamb, which is the critical event in chap. 5... . Consequently, the Lion conquers initially by suffering as a slain lamb.⁶¹

Beale continues by posing and answering the pivotal question:

But how is the paradox of "conquering through suffering" to be understood more precisely? ... Christ himself overcame by maintaining his loyalty to the Father through suffering and finally death (cf. 1:5). He was physically defeated but spiritually victorious. He willingly submitted to the unjust penalty of death, which was imposed on him ultimately by the devil. As an innocent victim he became a representative penal substitute for the sins of his people. While he was suffering the defeat of death, he was also overcoming by creating a kingdom of redeemed subjects over whom he would reign and over whom the devil would no longer have power... . Therefore, while Jesus was being defeated at the cross, he was nevertheless beginning to establish his kingdom... . This does not mean that the Lamb's resurrection is not conceived as a victory but only that there is an intention to highlight the death as a victory.⁶²

Clearly, for John, God has seen to it in Christ that the means by which the serpent and his seed intended to defeat him end up being the very means by which he defeats them. Though the Satanic serpent and his seed had intended Christ's death as his defeat, yet God reverses that intention and constitutes it as the means of his victory over them for his persevering people.

Dramatically for our purposes, the irony of Christ's victory becomes the pattern of the church's victory in history, at least in the book of Revelation. This is clear from the following considerations.

First, in 1:5–6, 9, John identifies believers with Christ in his resurrection and kingship: as he is "the ruler of the kings of the earth," so he has made them a kingdom. *That* the church has already been constituted as a kingdom is as sure as her release from (the bondage of) her sins by his blood (1:5; 5:9–10). *Whether* and *how* the church reigns now as a kingdom is

⁶⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 351.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 352-53 (emphasis his).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 353-54. Perhaps we can state Beale's point this way: in his death (as well as his life) the Lamb was victorious over sin; in his resurrection, he was victorious over death. Beale (358-59) goes on to remark that

[T]he Lamb's overcoming through death is a presupposition for his worthiness to receive sovereign authority.... The hymnic interpretation (vv 914) of the vision (vv 18) underscores Christ's death, not his resurrection, as the explanation of what it means in v. 5 that Christ "conquered" ... That the interpretative hymns in vv 914 make no explicit mention of the resurrection is astounding and underscores the ironic nature of Christ's victorious death.

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debated. Remember North's challenge: "If neither we nor our covenantal successors will ever be able in history to apply the Bible-specified sanctions of the heavenly King whom we represent on earth, then Christians cannot be said

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ever to reign in history."⁶³ John, however, sees the victorious reign of the saints in history as he and his community are joint participants in the kingdom now in Jesus (1:9). As Beale aptly observes:

The exercise of rule in this kingdom begins and continues only as one faithfully endures tribulation. This is a formula for kingship: faithful endurance through tribulation is the means by which one reigns in the present with Jesus. Believers are not mere subjects in Christ's kingdom. "Fellow partaker" underscores the active involvement of saints not only in enduring tribulation, but also in reigning in the midst of tribulation. Such kingship will be intensified at death (e.g., 2:10–11) and consummated at Jesus' final parousia (cf. 21:1–22:5).⁶⁴

Beale continues:

This ironic exercise of rule is modeled on that of Christ, who revealed his veiled kingship on earth before his exaltation by enduring suffering and death in order to achieve his heavenly rule (cf. 1:5). Just as Christ ruled in a veiled way through suffering, so do Christians, which argues against the proposal that saints do not exercise kingship until the final coming of Christ when they are exalted over their enemies.⁶⁵

These last words speak both to amillennialists and to postmillennialists.⁶⁶

That the ironic victory of Christ is the pattern of the church's present victory in history is also borne out by Christ's promises to the "overcomers" in the letters of Revelation (see 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26–27; 3:5; 3:12; 3:21). Again, space limits extended elaboration. Suffice it to say that the promises⁶⁷ disclose that "overcoming" consists in persevering in faith and good works (particularly witnessing)—even unto death—in the face of persecution, temptation to compromise, and complacency. Moreover, as is evident from 3:21, this ironic conception of victory is modeled on the example of Christ himself. Strikingly, Beale observes, believers who overcome the world by refusing to compromise with it may be sure that the world will "overcome" them. "Hence, the church that perseveres in its witnessing faith wins a victory on earth even though it suffers earthly defeat."⁶⁸ That such irony is John's notion of victory is further confirmed when he describes the beast as overcoming the saints by imposing a form of physical suffering on them (11:7; 13:7), and when he describes Christ and the saints as overcoming the beast by maintaining their faithful testimony while enduring such suffering (5:5–6; 12:11; 15:2; 17:14).⁶⁹

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When it comes to our conception of the victory of the church, we see that it follows the ironic principles of Christ's victory. God sees to it that the means by which the beast and his

⁶³ See n. 10.

⁶⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 201.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 201–2. See also the summary remarks on 171–72.

⁶⁶ And to dispensational premillennialists as well.

⁶⁷ The promises of which the overcomers partake pertain to their share in final redemptive judgment (e.g., Rev 2:2627) and final salvation (e.g., Rev 2:1011).

⁶⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 269.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 270.

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worshippers intend to defeat the church end up being the very means by which she defeats them. Though the beast and his worshipers intend the church's affliction as her defeat, yet God reverses that intention and constitutes her perseverance in affliction as the means of her victory over them in history.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe we are justified to say with Beale that John's Apocalypse reveals the nature of the church's present reign. Like Jesus' initial kingship, the church's kingship consists now in conquering by maintaining her faithful witness in the face of trials (e.g., 2:9–11, 13; 3:8; 12:11); in overcoming the powers of evil (e.g., 6:8 in relation to 6:9–11); in subduing sin in her members' lives (see chaps. 2–3); and in beginning to rule over death and Satan by identification with Jesus (cf. 1:5–6, 18). The church's endurance, then, is part of the process of conquering.⁷⁰

The focus of our study has meant that key issues in a complete eschatology of victory could not be treated here. For example, Greg Bahnsen poses a legitimate question: "Do our inevitable sufferings issue in greater or lesser manifestation of Christ's saving rule on earth, breaking the power of sin?"⁷¹ We may also ask with Gentry whether Paul's teaching on Christ's defeat of his enemies in 1 Cor 15:20–28 requires a postmillennial vision or not.⁷² Indeed, in Rom 8:35–39, does Paul not join John in teaching the irony of victory through perseverance⁷³ and thus obviate the need for the postmillennial vision in 1 Corinthians 15? On these questions and others, the discussion should continue.

Meanwhile, however, this study makes clear that the church's present victorious reign is not merely in principle. We can and must talk about the church's victory in history, whether she ever emerges as the organon of world culture or not. In affirming this reality, we must be careful, however: it is vital to maintain the link between victory and perseverance in suffering (for what is right; see 1 Pet 2:19–20; 3:13–17; 4:15–16). As the letters of Revelation 2–3 make clear, the ironic conception of victory identified herein does not apply to the church wherever and whenever she is complacent or compromising and thus failing to persevere in faith and good works. Such

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a church can and should never be described as victorious. On this point, amillennialists and Reconstructionists should agree.

This study also makes clear that the so-called amillennial hermeneutic of persecution, though it may have been insufficiently or inconsistently applied, is valid. It finds its validity precisely in the eschatologically significant principles of redemptive irony by which God achieves victory over his enemies. God is seeing to it that the means by which Satan's anti-kingdom intends to defeat Christ's kingdom-church end up being the very means by which the latter defeats the former. Moreover, while Satan's anti-kingdom intends the suffering—even unto death—of Christ's kingdom-church as her defeat, God reverses that intention and

⁷⁰ Ibid., 201-2.

⁷¹ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, 52. Gentry [*He Shall Have Dominion*, 473 (emphasis his)] poses a similar question: "Is Christ's resurrection-power limited to the upholding of believers in times of persecutorial suffering?"

⁷² See Gentry, "Whose Victory in History?" 210-13; idem, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 253-56.

⁷³ See Beale's comments (269-70) on this very point.

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constitutes her perseverance in suffering as the means of her victory over her enemies in history. Through these principles of redemptive irony, then, it becomes clearer *that* and *how* Christ's church can be said to be *perpetually* victorious in history: following the example of Christ, she perseveres in faithfulness despite persecution.⁷⁴

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Converted to PDF by Robert I Bradshaw, January 2004.

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⁷⁴ Gary North is right: there *is* more to Christianity's victory in history than its hypothetical cultural defeat in history. In this connection, he is fond of bantering with non-postmillennialists by saying, "You can't beat something with nothing!" To tweak North's nose a bit, the upshot of this essay is that, in the irony of redemptive victory, the church *does* beat something with nothing - nothing except its perseverance in faith and good works.