

Post Millennialism: A Catalyst for Reform

The 1830s, 1840s and 1850s was one of the four great periods of reform in American History. The others being the Progressive Era, the New Deal and the Great Society/Civil Rights/Women's Rights Movements. The reform movements of the ante-bellum period targeted such things as temperance, women's rights, anti-slavery, public education, prison reform, prostitution, dueling, healthy eating, care for the mentally impaired, and so forth. Eventually many of these movements were overshadowed in the 1850s by the anti-slavery movement.

While there are many reasons to support these various reforms, the explanation for the intensity of the overall movement in this era is closely linked to post-millennialism. This concept was an important feature of the Second Great Awakening, particularly as it evolved in western New York (the Burned-over District) under the influence of the evangelist Rev. Charles Grandison Finney.

In Christian teaching there will be an end of times. There will be a second coming of Christ and a last judgement. Usually there is reference in this end of times cycle to a "millennium." That is, a thousand years of peace and harmony that will reign on Earth. Generally, Christians have held "pre-millennialist" views. That is the belief that the second coming of Christ will usher in the millennium.

There is, however, an alternate view in which the millennium will precede the second coming. This is known as "post-millennialism" (that is, Christ will come *after* the millennium.) The important point for our purposes is that "post-millennialism" encouraged the reform of society as a precursor to the millennium and that it would be ushered in by human agency rather than divine influence.

In the religious enthusiasm that swept through western New York in the 1820s and 1830s, the ideas of post-millennialism seemed to dominate. Given the common belief that America had a unique role to play in God's plan, it was not a difficult stretch for many American's to believe that once their personal conversion was achieved, they should focus on perfecting society in order to initiate the millennium here on Earth.

Again, there are other reasons to support such things as abolition and public education but there can be little doubt that post-millennialism was well represented among the leadership as well as the rank and file of these various reform movements. Nor is there any doubt that a center of post-millennial ideology was western New York and that these views were carried into the Upper Great Lakes region by migrants out of New York.

While not all settlers held these religious and reform ideas, the majority of people who came to Michigan and Oakland County in the territorial and early statehood periods were certainly influenced by them.