I am postmillennial, and postmils like to speculate about the long view. We like to ask questions like: What is the church and world going to be like after another several millennia of evangelism, baptism, teaching, discipline, Eucharistic merriment? What kind of political system will exist? How will the church worship? What will the economy look like? What kinds of technological advances will be retained and which will be dispensed with as incompatible with God’s commandments?

To be postmillennial is to be committed to the claim that the state of creation, over time and in time, will be recognizably as the prophets predict: Zion will be raised as the chief of the mountains, nations will beat tanks into tractors, chemical weapons into fertilizers (napalm – a sign of millennial bliss?), peoples from the four corners will be eager to hear the instruction of Jesus, and will live by it. Wildernesses will turn to gardens, wild animals – and bestial humans – will be pacified.

Yet, some qualifications are in order. My first instinct in answering the question, “what will the church and world look like in a thousand years?” is to say, “Who knows?” We can’t determine this with the infantile categories we’ve got now. We’re only beginning to understand Scripture, or the world. How can we possibly know in detail where it’s all going?

The problem with predictions is not only that we operate with infantile categories and possess only the most rudimentary knowledge, but also that we have no way to anticipate historical contingencies. The future surprises; that’s why it’s called the future. No postmil in 1500 could have had the slightest inkling of the state of the church in 2010, and we can hardly do better in predicting the state of the church in 2523. We follow the Spirit, and there is no way to peek around the side of the fiery cloud to catch a glimpse of the path ahead. We shouldn’t even want to, given that the walk is by faith and not sight.

What kind of government will the church have two or three centuries from now? What kind of worship? Here’s my bold prediction: There won’t be any one system. There never will be. The church will not look the same everywhere. Assuming there’s still a China in the year 3000, I expect Chinese Christians to worship in Chinese, sing Chinese music, produce Chinese Christian art, take inspiriting from Chinese biblical scholars and theologians. Mutatis mutandis, global dittos.
Not only cultural differences, but historical contingencies (again) will shape things differently in different places. A church that has a half-century conflict about the genealogies of 1 Chronicles (Christians can fight about anything) is going to be a different place than a church that had a century-long battle over the chapter numbering in Isaiah. To give an actual example: African churches who put their first roots down in Proverbs and Hebrews will look different from Protestant churches firmly planted in Romans.

The same goes for political, economic, social, and cultural systems. The gospel will penetrate and transform them all, but that does not mean that in the year 4822 every nation will have adopted a version of the U.S. Constitution or organized what we would recognize as a free market economy. There will be constants: Nations will become more peaceable, less aggressive and arrogant, more just and more free. Economies will be organized to encourage productivity and charity, and businesses will not operate by or appeal to greed – which is to say that what we know as the advertising industry will have withered away. But no two constitutions will be the same, and no two economies either.

As a postmil, I’m not committed to believing that all unbelievers will be converted, or that every nation will be completely and absolutely conformed to the word of Christ. All will be hugely more sanctified than now; but even then, some more, some less. As I understand Revelation 20, we’re in the millennium now, and so the messiness we experience is not a “pre-golden age” reality but a “golden age” reality. We’re not waiting for another epoch of redemptive history, in which all the rough edges are going to be smoothed. We’re in the last age before the consummation already, and in this age the seed planted by Jesus and His Spirit is growing into a tree that will cover the earth. Over time, many rough edges will be smoothed; some more, some less.

Most crucially (in the etymological sense): The church will never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever transcend the cross. What form cross-bearing will take when Isaiah 2 is more fully realized is difficult to say. But it will be there. Jesus didn’t say, “Take up your cross for a while and follow me; soon enough, you’ll be able to toss it on the dust heap.” It’s “take up your cross” from here to the eschaton. Whatever we say about “latter day glory,” we must never forget that we follow a crucified and risen Savior to the end.