The Millennium in the Reformed Tradition

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In the Reformed tradition there is no consensus concerning the nature of the millennium referred to in Revelation 20. In fact, apart from one notable exception, one will find no references to the millennium in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed confessions. That exception is found in the Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession written by Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor at the Grossmiinster in Zurich. There we read:

We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matt., chs. 24 and 25, and Luke, ch. 18, and apostolic teaching in II Thess., ch. 2, and II Tim., chs. 3 and 4, present something quite different (Chapter XI). The author of the article "Chiliasmus" in Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart even goes so far as to say that chiliasm, i.e., millenarianism" is basically incompatible with the Catholic and Lutheran concept of the church and "was quickly and energetically rejected by the reformers." This statement is extreme, for the only support given for it is the Augsburg Confession (Confessio Augustana), 17 and the reference above from the Second Helvetic Confession. Moreover, the sixteenth-century reformers generally ignored the issue.

However, it was not only the magisterial reformers and confessions which had little interest in a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth prior to the consummation of all things. The word "millennium" does not appear in most histories of doctrine or standard theologies by Reformed theologians. Notable exceptions are the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck; and in the twentieth century the American Presbyterian theologians Loraine Boettner, Floyd Hamilton, and James Boice, the Reformed Church in America theologian Albertus Pieters, and the Christian Reformed theologians D.H. Kromminga and William Hendriksen. The two most significant contemporary treatments of the various millennial views are G.C. Berkouwer's The Return of Christ, and Anthony Hoekema's The Bible and the Future. The most recent comprehensive treatment is The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options, by the Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz.

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Those in the Reformed tradition generally embrace Covenant theology. This system of theology evolved after the Reformation. It explains all relationships between God and man from the beginning to the end of time under the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, and (sometimes) the Covenant of Redemption. [In contrast to this, dispensationalists emphasize the covenants that are mentioned in the Bible, such as the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant.] Reformed/Covenant theologians teach that Old Testament Israelites and New Testament believers are Popular millennial movements, however, returned in strength with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Although not a millennial thinker, Martin Luther used powerful apocalyptic rhetoric and repeatedly called the pope the Antichrist. American millennialism split into two traditions: premillennialism (the belief that Jesus will come before the millennium and inaugurate it) and postmillennialism (the belief that Jesus will come after the millennium inaugurated by an inspired mankind). The former tends to be catastrophic. According to premillennialism, the seven years before the advent of Jesus will be marked by the Rapture (the rescue of the living “saints” by the Lord), war, disease, famine, and the coming of the Antichrist.