

Preterism¹

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In recent years a system of interpreting biblical prophecy known as preterism has invaded the church, bringing confusion and division to many congregations that have historically held to the future return of Jesus Christ. Promoted by popular radio teachers such as Reformed scholar R.C. Sproul, whose book *The Last Days According to Jesus*, advanced the moderate preterist position, preterism has made inroads into evangelical seminaries and stimulated public debates on Bible college campuses. Although most Christians have never heard of the teachings of preterism, its approach to prophecy diminishes the prophetic hope of the church while undermining the basis of the prophetic promises for Israel.

What is Preterism?

Preterism, which is derived from the Latin *preter* (“past”) holds that most (if not all) of the prophetic events of the Old and New Testament have already been fulfilled. Like historicism, a view that interprets the Book of Revelation as symbolic of the history of the church, preterism spiritualizes prophecy in order to make it fit historical events in the church age. However, unlike historicism, preterism seeks to fit certain (if not all) prophecies relating to Christ’s second coming and the restoration of Israel into a specific historical event in the past. As moderate preterist Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. explains, “Matthew 24:1-34 (and parallels) in the Olivet Discourse was fulfilled in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In Revelation, most of the prophecies before Revelation 20 find fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70).”² Preterists contend that Jesus’ use of the term “this generation” in His Olivet Discourse requires fulfillment in the first-century, and R.C. Sproul in particular, argues that it is impossible to refute the skeptics charge that Christ’s words failed unless this interpretation is adopted. Futurism, by contrast, believes that the literal fulfillment of messianic prophecy in Christ’s first advent was sufficient to prove the veracity of His words and to confirm that His prophetic teaching likewise is to be interpreted literally. Thus, the Olivet Discourse and the Revelation will find fulfillment in the future, particularly during the end time during the Tribulation and the Millennial Reign of Christ.

Two types of preterism today contend with each other for primacy. The first is partial or moderate preterism (the most popular version) which while arguing that most prophecy (such as the events of the Tribulation) was fulfilled in A.D. 70, still understand some prophetic texts teaching the second coming of Christ and the bodily resurrection to have a future fulfillment. Partial preterism, therefore, holds to two second comings of Christ, one that occurred in A.D. 70 as a parousia and as a day of the Lord for the purpose of judging the Jewish nation, and one that will occur universally at the climax of human history as the final and ultimate day of the Lord. Leading advocates of partial preterism who have published popular defenses of their position include R.C. Sproul, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth

¹ This paper was first published as an edited article and side bar in *Israel My Glory* (January-February 2005).

² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 159.

L. Gentry, Jr., as well as the late David Chilton (who changed to full preterism after his books were published).

The second form of preterism is full or extreme preterism which contends that all prophecy (including the second coming and the bodily resurrection) was fulfilled by A.D. 70. Full preterism sees no future climax or consummation of history but maintains that believers have been spiritually resurrected and the creation spiritually restored so that the church presently exists in the eternal state or the new heavens and new earth.

The Development of Preterism

According to Thomas Ice, Executive Director of the Pre-Trib Research Center and one of the foremost experts on preterism, there is no evidence of any preterist interpretation in the history of the early church through the Reformation.³ The first appearance of preteristic interpretation was in a commentary on Revelation by the Spanish Jesuit Luis Alcazar (1554-1613). His position was that of triumphalism, which interpreted symbols in the Revelation as the victory of the Roman Catholic Church over paganism and especially over the Jews, whose divine rejection was finalized in A.D. 70. However, the leading Jesuit commentator of the period, Cornelius Lapide (1567-1637), rejected Alcazar's preterism as "new and against the usual interpretations," "mystical rather than literal," "is allegorical," and because it "makes assertions without proof."⁴ The first Protestant preterist was Hugo Grotius (1538-1645), a Dutch Arminian who also originated the heretical governmental view of the atonement, while Henry Hammond (1605-1660), who followed Grotius approach, introduced to British soil. However, both of these men were more historicist than preterist, and their views were largely ignored by their contemporaries, although post-Reformation groups such as the Huguenots denounced their views, with one of their leaders Pierre Jurieu (1637-1713) stating that preterism "dishonors its authors" and constitutes "a shame and disgrace not only to the Reformation, but also to the name Christian."⁵ Even so, the form of preterism that appeared to this point was mild. While the English Protestant scholar John Lightfoot (1602-1675) also adopted a mild preterism, the preterist interpretation was not seen in Protestant scholarship until the 1800's when it emerged as a product of German rationalism. This liberal school, which rejected supernatural revelation and originated biblical higher criticism, adopted the preterism as a means to avoid predictive prophecy and give a naturalistic interpretation to the Book of Revelation through a comparison with the apocalyptic literature of the Aprocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. With the spread of German rationalism from Europe, the preterist interpretation became established in Protestantism in the British Isles and the United States and influenced later evangelical academics such as J. Stuart Russell (1816-1895) and Moses Stuart (1780-1852) whose works represented the modern forms of preterism. The popular rise of partial preterism among American Protestants of the Reformed tradition can be traced to the 1970's and the Christian Reconstruction movement through the influence of the late Greg Bahnsen and its popular promotion by his students David Chilton, Kenneth L. Gentry,

³ Thomas Ice, "The History of Preterism," *The End Times Controversy*. Edited by Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), pp. 42-46.

⁴ As cited in LeRoy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1950), 2:506, 512.

⁵ As cited in Jean-Robert Armogathe, "Interpretations of the Revelation of John: 1500-1800," in John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen J. Stein, editors, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 2:198.

Jr., and Gary DeMar, as well as R.C. Sproul (who became a preterist in the 1990's). The rise of full preterism can be credited to the Churches of Christ and specifically to one of their pastors, Max R. King, whose disciples include present full preterists Don K. Preston, John L. Bray, and John Noe.

Preterism's View of Israel

Preterism teaches that the purpose of Christ's second coming in A.D. 70 was to judge the Nation of Israel and end the Jewish age. Like historicists, preterists argue that the spiritual promises made to Israel were misunderstood as national promises and therefore with the rejection of Christ the spiritual promises passed to the Church, the true Israel. Preterism, however, which forces the fulfillment of most prophetic texts into the events of the First Jewish Revolt, and particularly the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple, especially views the destruction of the Jewish People as the central focus of prophecy. As preterist David Chilton states: "The Book of Revelation is not about the second coming of Christ. It is about the destruction of Israel and Christ's victory over His enemies in the establishment of the New Covenant temple ... Revelation prophesies the judgment of God on apostate Israel; and while it does briefly point to events beyond its immediate concerns, that is done merely as a 'wrap-up,' to show that the ungodly will never prevail against Christ's Kingdom."⁶ For preterists, the Jews are the true enemies of Christ and their overthrow by the Roman army, sent by Christ to do His bidding, is the triumph of Christ over antichrist. In fact, Christ came (spiritually) in the judgment by the Roman army (hence, a judgment-coming), fulfilling His promise "to come quickly." The Jewish Temple is likewise seen as the center of spiritual apostasy and the as its destruction as the fulfillment of the abomination of desolation, which was God's holy judgment for the wicked crucifixion of Christ by the Jews.

Preterists, therefore, reject any aspect of a future for ethnic Israel (apart from the Church) and contend that any eschatological system that looks for a restoration of Israel and its Temple as heretical, for such would be tantamount to rejecting Christ and restoring blasphemy. Preterist Gary DeMar explains: "There is nothing in Jesus' teaching in this Gospel [Matthew] which suggests that after this period of judgment there will be a restoration ... the Apocalyptic Discourse (ch. 24) moves away from Jerusalem ..." and: "Does the Bible, especially the New Testament, predict that the temple will be rebuilt? It does not ... To make the temple of stone a permanent structure in the light of Jesus' atoning work would be a denial of the Messiah and His redemptive mission."⁷

Problems with Preterism

The Date of the Book of Revelation

In order for preterism to fit the prophecies of the Book of Revelation into the events of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem it is necessary to date the composition of the book before A.D. 70. Preterists understand the necessity of dating the book early (A.D. 64-67) in the time of Nero's reign, confessing that "If the book was written after A.D. 70, then its contents manifestly do not refer to events

⁶ David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985), p. 43.

⁷ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*. 4th ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), pp. 52, 61.

surrounding the fall of Jerusalem.”⁸ However, if the dating of the book was so crucial to the interpretation of its message why did not John clearly indicate somewhere in its 404 verses the time of its writing? However, as Mark Hitchcock, who has written a doctoral dissertation on the subject, concludes: “I do believe that the case for the late date (A.D. 95) can be proven at least by a preponderance of the evidence, if not beyond a reasonable doubt.”⁹ This evidence includes the external testimony of the most reliable of the early church fathers such as Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) who made the unambiguous declaration: “For if it were necessary that the name of him [antichrist] should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been told by him who saw the apocalyptic vision. For it [the Revelation] was seen no long time ago, but almost in our generation, toward the end of Domitian’s reign.”¹⁰ In addition, the internal evidence favors the late date in the time of Domitian. This support includes the condition and description of the seven churches in Revelation 1-3 (which make no mention of Paul’s missionary journeys), John’s banishment to Patmos (rather than execution as with Peter and Paul under Nero), and the prophecy of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-22:5), which implies that the old Jerusalem has already been destroyed.

Lack of Historical Agreement with First Century Fulfillment

If preterism bases its interpretation of prophecy on the events of A.D. 70 fulfilling the biblical text, then the historical record should support such details. However, the opposite is the case. For example, such a detail as the direction of Christ’s advent [to Jerusalem], in Matthew 24:27 is compared with lightning flashing from *east to west*, whereas the Roman army, which Preterists interpret as fulfilling this prophecy, advanced on Jerusalem from *the west to the east*. Even if we take this simply to mean the Roman army advanced “like lightning” (i.e., quickly), the historical record reveals a very slow assault on Jerusalem, the war being for several years before Jerusalem was even besieged! For this reason in many cases a “correlation” can only be made through the eschatologically biased interpretation of Josephus (such as associating divine signs with the Roman army’s impending conquest), reinterpreting the text to fit the preferred historical data (such as taking “the clouds of heaven” as the dust kicked up by the Roman army’s advance), or by taking statements that do not fit the historical events of the great Jewish revolt as hyperbole (such as the unprecedented and unsurpassed nature of the Tribulation), in order to claim first-century fulfillment. Even the central concept of preterism, that Christ’s judgment-coming was to finally end the Jewish nation, cannot stand in light of Judaism’s continued vitality and the return of the modern State of Israel. The historical consequences for Israel in the aftermath of A.D. 70 were indeed critical, but not only did the Jewish people and Jewish nationalism survive, but the hope for the restoration promised by the prophets increased. Moreover, the “Temple consciousness” perpetuated through a spiritual transference to the synagogue by rabbinic Judaism also expressed itself in tangible ways. Whenever circumstances favored the rebuilding of the Temple, there existed an activist movement among the Jewish who returned to Jerusalem to attempt this effort. Today, the Roman Empire is long vanished and the Jewish people are again in the Promised Land, in control of the Holy City and its Temple Mount, and making plans to rebuild the Temple. Is it reasonable to accept the events of A.D. 70 as a fulfillment of God’s program for the Jews but not accept the events that followed as also part of His on-going divine plan? Such an interpretation accords much better with

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 140.

⁹ Mark Hitchcock, “The Stake in the Heart – The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation,” *The End Times Controversy*, p. 125.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3.

Jesus' statement in the Olivet Discourse that when He comes the Jewish people are to "straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). Clearly this text teaches that Christ's second coming involves redemption for Israel, not destruction.

As a result of such historical and textual incongruities, Robert Gundry comments concerning the preterist's interpretation of a first-century fulfillment: "Whether writing just before, or right after 70 C.E., Mark [or any of the other gospel writers] is not liable to have suffered from very much ignorance of what went on. From beginning to end, then, the events and circumstances of the Jewish war disagree with the text of Mark [and also Matthew and in part, Luke] too widely to allow that text to reflect those events and circumstances."¹¹ If the historical correlation with an A.D. 70 fulfillment for the Olivet Discourse fails, and preterism depends on such a fulfillment for the maintenance of its eschatological system, then preterism itself fails as a viable eschatological interpretation.

The Interpretation of "This Generation"

Preterism argues that the textual basis for interpreting prophecy as having been fulfilled in the past is Jesus' use of the phrase "this generation" as only and always having reference to the first-century generation to whom He spoke. Futurism, by contrast, accepts some uses of "this generation" as having reference to those *to whom* Jesus spoke and other uses as having reference to those *about whom* Jesus spoke, with context being the determining factor. For example, the use of "this generation" in Matthew 23:36 is applied as an indictment (in context) to the generation of the "scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 23:29) whose actions against Jesus demonstrate their affinity with previous persecutors of the Prophets (verses 30-35). Jesus' then pronounces sentence with the words "all these things shall come upon this generation." The phrase "these things" must also be interpreted in its context. In this case, the next verse (verse 37) describes "these things" as the future experience of Temple desolation. It is important to observe here that even though now historically past, "this generation" in context was a *future* generation at the time of its being originally spoken by Jesus and being recorded by Matthew. It was future from the perspective of the sins "this generation" (in context) would yet commit (complicity in the crucifixion) and the judgment they would receive (the Roman destruction in AD 70 (Luke 21:20-24).

Even though in context Jesus may refer to the future "this generation" as "you," this is a conventional usage of language with respect to reference and does not have to ultimately apply to a present audience.¹² Such usage is found in Old Testament prophetic sections. For example, Moses uses language similar to Jesus when he says "So it will be when *all of these things* have come upon *you* ..." (Deuteronomy 30:1a). Even though he is speaking to the present generation ("you"), it is evident from the context that his words speak about a future generation that will live thousands of years later and into the eschatological period. "This generation" (the "you") are those who will have already suffered the judgment of exile (verse 1b), captivity (verse 3), been regathered and restored (verses 4-5), and received spiritual regeneration ("circumcision of heart," verse 6). The future sense of "this generation" in a

¹¹ Gundry, *Mark*, p. 755.

¹² That the scope cannot be limited to a present audience is obvious from the fact that such usage cannot mean only those who heard the message or who were currently part of the present generation, since others who were not present and who were yet to be born must be included while some would certainly have died before the events were fulfilled and no longer be part of that generation, especially since it is still *future* from the perspective of the speaker.

judgment context sets a precedence for its interpretation in contexts that are both judicial and eschatological. If the desolation experienced by “this generation” in Matthew 23:36 can be understood as a future fulfillment that came some 40 years later, it should not be a problem to understand the Tribulation judgment as a future fulfillment that will come on the generation that will experience it at the end of the age. However, the difference is not simply a span of time, but the nature of that time as eschatological. For the “this generation” of Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30, and Luke 21:32, “all these things” (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:28) must refer contextually to the events of the “Great Tribulation,” the conclusion of “the times of the Gentiles,” the coming of Christ in glory, and the regathering and redemption of Israel, all of which are not only declared to be future by Jesus at the time of speaking (Mark 13:23), but also cast in typical eschatological language (for example, “end of the age,” “such as not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, *nor ever shall*,” “powers of the heavens will be shaken”).

The Dangers of Preterism

Every teaching has consequences for the spiritual life, and therefore, the teachings of preterism must be considered for their practical dangers. Preterism teaches that Christ has already returned (spiritually), and in its extreme form that He will never return again bodily. However, the divine declaration in Acts 1:11 that “this same Jesus will come in just the way you have watched Him go into heaven” contradicts this tenet of both partial and full preterism. The verdict, then, is that this teaching is false teaching, and as such not only distorts the prophetic program and denies the blessed hope (Titus 2:13) but promotes the deception that there will be no end to history and (with full preterism) that evil has been eradicated from the world and believers are living in the eternal state. Such false doctrine also prevents Christians from obeying the manifold commands of Scripture directed to those who are waiting for Christ’s coming (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Such practical admonitions given in light of Christ’s return as “awaken ... behave properly” (Romans 13:11-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-10), “live sensibly, righteously, and godly” (Titus 2:12), and “purify yourselves” (1 John 3:3), have no meaning to those who believe His coming is past not future. Preterism also corrupts the understanding of the present work of Satan and his demons by teaching Satan was crushed and bound at the cross and apostasy is a thing of the past. Yet, the Scripture states that “our struggle is ... against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12), that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19), and that “in the later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). How, then, can Christians obey the commands such as those to “resist the devil” (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9) or to “avoid such men as these [apostates]” (2 Timothy 3:5). Moreover, this approach to prophecy affects the way Christians understand God’s purpose for the Jewish People and their political views toward the existence of the modern Jewish State. Preterism replaces Israel with the Church, teaching that “ethnic Israel was excommunicated for its apostasy and will never again be God’s Kingdom.”¹³ If Israel’s future salvation and restoration (Romans 11:25-27) in God’s program is abrogated, then so is God’s promised blessing for the world (Romans 11:12) in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:3).

¹³ David Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, p. 224.

The Apostle Peter summed up the divine verdict toward preterist when he wrote: “Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’” (2 Peter 3:3-4).

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