

B·I·B·L·E & L·I·F·E

Bible Teaching Newsletter

of Biblical Doctrine & New Testament Assembly Life

Vol. 13. No. 5

Nov. 1, 2006

Preterism Examined

by David Dunlap

Reformed theology has long argued for a variety of Amillennial views concerning prophecy. However, since the 1970's, a theologically dangerous viewpoint called *Preterism* has begun to gain influence and popularity in Reformed circles. Preterism, although first propounded by Roman Catholic scholars five hundred years ago, is experiencing a new wave of interest these days, due to the encouragement of popular radio personalities such as R.C. Sproul and Hank Hanegraaff. Sproul openly admits he is a "partial Preterist" espousing his views in his book *The Last Days According to Jesus*. Hank Hanegraaff, host of the radio program "Bible Answer Man" and president of *Christian Research Institute*, has defended some Preterist positions on recent broadcasts. At the heart of the Preterist view is the notion that Jesus returned in A.D. 70 when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem.

What is Preterism?

The term *Preterist* is the Latin word for "past." Preterists believe that all the major events of Bible prophecy have already occurred. Therefore, they view the major prophetic passages of Scripture, such as the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation, as being already fulfilled. Preterism is the exact opposite of *Premillennialism*, which views these prophecies as yet to be fulfilled in the future.

Moderate Preterists, such as R.C. Sproul, claim they believe in a future second coming, but still insist on interpreting the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation as basically already fulfilled in the past. As a result, they reject such basic concepts as: (1) the rapture of the Church; (2) a literal seven-year tribulation period; (3) a literal Antichrist; (4) the conversion of Israel; (5) the Battle of Armageddon; (6) a 1000-year millennium; (7) the future binding of Satan.

In contrast to the basic beliefs of pre-tribulational Premillennialism, moderate Preterists believe that God is finished with biblical Israel. They see no prophetic future for national Israel. The fact that the State of Israel exists today is blamed on "ignorant premillennialists" who supported the Balfour Declaration, which eventually led to the formation of the modern nation of Israel in 1948. While most Preterists would insist they are not anti-Semitic, their theology certainly leans in that direction.

The History of Preterism

This view was first developed in the late 1500's by a Jesuit friar named Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613). His purpose was to defend the Catholic church against the attacks of the Protestant Reformers. He denied the Reformers' charge that the book of Revelation was a prophecy about the apostasy of the Roman church. Instead, he argued that Revelation concerned itself with the Church's struggles

**"The Preterist
view simply
does not
account
adequately for
the claim of
Revelation to
be a
prediction of
the future if
one intends to
take its claim
seriously."**

Dr. Merrill Tenney
Professor of Theology,
from *Interpreting Revelation*

during its early years. Chapters 4 through 11, he stated, were interpreted as depicting the church's fight against Judaism, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Chapters 12 through 19 were viewed as the Church's struggle against paganism, ending with the fall of Rome in A.D. 476. Chapters 20 through 22 were interpreted to be a symbolic description of the glories of papal Rome. Using this clever approach, Alcazar was able to limit the range of Revelation's prophecies to the first 500 years of church history.

However, a more radical form of Preterism gained popularity in the latter part of the Twentieth century and is today the most widely-held version of this interpretive approach. This approach sees nearly all the prophecies of Revelation as fulfilled prior to A.D. 70 at the destruction of Jerusalem, except for the resurrection of believers and the second coming of Jesus Christ. It assigns the tribulation to the fall of Israel, the great apostasy to the first-century church, and the last days to the period between Jesus' ascension and the destruction of Jerusalem. The Beast is viewed as a symbol of Nero in particular and of the Roman Empire in general. The false prophet is equated with the leadership of apostate Israel. Needless to say, anti-Semitism is common among Preterists.

Preterist Beliefs

Moderate Preterists link their belief system to a Reformed view of prophecy in which the church becomes the new "Israel" and must bring in the Kingdom on earth in order to prepare the world for the return of Christ. Most Preterists believe the following:

1. Nero was the Antichrist or Beast. There will be no future individual Antichrist.
2. The tribulation period is already past. It occurred when the Roman army besieged Jerusalem in A.D. 66-70.
3. Christ "returned" in the clouds in A.D. 70 to witness the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army.
4. God replaced Old Testament Israel with the church. Therefore, all the biblical promises to Israel belong to the church.
5. Armageddon already happened in A.D. 70. The fall of "Babylon" refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.
6. Satan is already bound in the abyss and cannot hinder the spread of the Gospel. Revelation 20 has already been fulfilled.
7. We are already in the millennium, but it is not literal. Some Preterists equate the entire church age to the millennium. The 1,000 years are not literal but figurative, even though they are mentioned 6 times in Revelation 20.

Preterist Assumptions Examined

The basic assumptions of Preterism rest on passages that refer to Christ coming "quickly" (ie., suddenly) (Rev. 1:1), or passages such as "this generation will not pass" (Matt. 24:34). They insist that, because of these passages, the Lord's coming must be related to and limited to the first century. By contrast, Premillennialists believe that Christ's coming is imminent and, therefore, could occur at any moment. Allow us to examine two passages which Preterists frequently marshal in support of their position: Matthew 24:34 and Matthew 16:28.

Matthew 24:34 "Verily I say unto you, this generation *shall not pass*, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away."

"The Preterist view, in general, tends to destroy any future significance of the book; therefore it becomes a literary curiosity with little prophetic meaning."

Dr. John Walvoord
Former President of Dallas Seminary, from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.

The word *generation* should be interpreted in light of the phrase “all these things”. Careful Bible teachers have countered the Preterist view by observing that the generation which sees the Olivet birth pangs will be the same generation which sees the birth. In looking at this verse in this way, the “generation” of which the Lord was speaking was a future, “last days” generation. Jesus was telling his disciples that the generation that sees the beginning of the these things, will also sees its end. When the signs come, they will proceed quickly; they will not drag on for many generations. It will happen within a generation.

Matthew 16:28 “Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”

The disciples saw the very coming and glory of the Son of Man in his kingdom when He was transfigured (Matt. 17:1-8). This was a preview of Christ in the glory of His future kingdom. However, we are permitted by Scripture to view the transfiguration of Christ as the coming kingdom in miniature? It seems that Peter understood it in this way, for he writes: “...the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory,...when we were with Him in the holy mount” (2 Pet. 1:16-18). Bible commentator William MacDonald explains:

Are we justified in looking upon Christ’s transfiguration as a pre-picture or miniature of His coming kingdom? Yes, we are. This is made abundantly clear in 2 Peter 1:16-18. There Peter is describing his experience with Christ on the mount. There can be no doubt that he is referring to the Mount of Transfiguration...the power and coming refer to His second advent.¹

TWO HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEMS

A. Date of the Book of Revelation

For the prophecies of Revelation to fit into the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, it is necessary for the date of the writing of Revelation to have been prior to A.D. 70. The language of Revelation is predictive; therefore, its prophecies look forward to fulfillment, not backwards. Therefore, most scholars place the writing of Revelation at about A.D. 95. Bible scholar Mark Hitchcock explains:

While Preterism has many weaknesses, the Achilles’ heel of this view is the early date the proponents assign to the book of Revelation. The external evidence for a late date of Revelation (A.D. 95) is overwhelming...²

B. Nero as the Antichrist?

Hank Hanegraff writes: “Nero is rightly identified as the Beast of Revelation—the archetypal Antichrist—because of the unique and horrible quality of the “great tribulation” he ignited. The horror of the great tribulation included not only the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, but the persecution of the apostles and prophets who penned the Scriptures and formed the foundation of the Christian Church.³

Joining Hank Hanegraff, most Preterists go to great lengths to show that the Roman Emperor Nero was the antichrist of Revelation 13. However, does Nero fulfill the many details given concerning the Beast throughout Scripture? A careful reading of Scripture shows that Nero falls far short of the biblical standard. Ignoring the rest of Scripture for the moment, the book of Revelation alone reveals the following aspects concerning the Beast: (1) Literally killed and resurrected (Rev. 13:3); (2) Globally rules over *every* tribe and nation (Rev. 13:7); (3) Has a high-profile accomplice who performs literal miracles (13:13);

“If Preterists are correct, some of the most astute students of Scripture and leaders of the early church utterly missed the fulfillment of the very prophecy that Jesus indicated no one in the world would possibly be able to miss.”

John MacArthur

—from *The End Times Controversy*, Harvest House, 2003

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3116 Gulfwind Dr, Land O' Lakes, FL 34639

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November 2006

• INFORMATION •

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge and is supported entirely by the free will offerings of the Lord's people. checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

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(4) An image of the Beast is given the breath of life (Rev. 13:15). Were any of these true of Nero? Not one! Finally, Nero was already dead when John penned the book of Revelation at about A.D. 95. Clearly, Nero is unable to meet the biblical description of the Antichrist or Beast of Revelation.

Practical Implications

Destroys the Literal Meaning of the Bible. Once you start arguing that the language of prophecy cannot be taken literally, you are not that far removed from failing to take the rest of the Bible literally. Preterists are following the dangerous path of nineteenth century liberalism, which began denying predictive prophecy and soon rejected the literal interpretation of the doctrines of creation, the virgin birth of Christ, His vicarious death and His resurrection.

Diminishes the Hope of the Believer. The Bible warns us: "there shall come scoffers in the last days...saying, where is the promise of his coming"(2 Pet. 3:3-4). Preterism sets aside the biblical commands to "watch" and "be ready" for the coming of Christ. It limits those commands to the first century believers prior to AD 70. With this in mind, how do we celebrate the Lord's Supper which "shows forth the Lord's death until He comes"(1 Cor. 11:26)? Is the phrase "until He comes" to be limited to A.D. 70? Are we to stop celebrating the Lord's Supper because He already came A.D. 70?

Every Christian should be concerned about the spread of Preterism. Historically, no prophetic view has more insidious implications than Preterism. It was the poison which spread German rationalism and liberalism into many once-vigorous evangelical denominations. May every Christian seek to equip himself to defend the Scriptures from this subtle attack.

Endnotes

1. William MacDonald, *Matthew: Behold Your King*, (Kansas City, KS: Walterick, 1974), p. 197-198
2. Mark Hitchcock, *The End Times Controversy: The Stake in the Heart—AD 95 Date of Revelation*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), p. 150
3. Hank Hanegraff, *Who is the Antichrist?*, Christian Research Journal, Vol. 28, Number 01, 2005, p. 54

Suggested Reading

Tim LaHaye, Tom Ice (ed.), *The End Times Controversy*, Eugene, OR:Harvest House, 2003