

Preterism

By Royce Smith

What is preterism? The Wikipedia Encyclopedia defines preterism as “a variant Christian eschatology which holds that some or all of the Biblical prophecies concerning the Last Days (or End Times) refer to events which actually happened in the first century after Christ’s birth. The term preterism comes from the Latin, praeter, meaning ‘past.’” Advocates of preterism are known as preterists.

Preterism is an old heresy that has experienced a resurgence in recent years among all evangelical denominations including Sovereign Grace Baptists. That preterism is not considered an orthodox eschatological view is evident from its not even being mentioned in older Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. This writer searched in vain through many well-known books dealing with eschatology or Bible Prophecy for information on preterism. The sparsity of references to preterism in books written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests it is a novel concept to this generation.

As it is with other schools of thought in eschatology, preterists are not in full agreement among themselves. Some consider themselves partial or classical preterists; others call themselves full or consistent preterists. Partial preterists believe that prophecies concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, the antichrist, the great tribulation, and the day of the Lord were fulfilled in AD 70. They distinguish, however, between “the last days” and the “the last day.” Therefore, the last coming of Christ, the resurrection, and the final judgment are still considered future by partial preterists. The full preterists believe all these events are historical, having occurred in AD 70.

Nearly all partial preterists are either a-millennialists or post-millennialists. Obviously, preterists and futurists (those who believe these Biblical prophecies are yet future) differ on their interpretations of the Scriptures in which these prophecies appear. While this article will examine some of these passages, it will especially seek to expose the false premises or pre-suppositions on which this heresy is founded.

THE EARLY DATE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

In order to sustain their view that either most or all major prophecies were fulfilled in AD 70, the preterists are forced to presume the Book of Revelation was written before AD 70. The traditional date of the writing of the Book of Revelation by the Apostle John is AD 96. This late date is based on the testimony of Irenaeus who wrote about AD 180 of the Revelation: "For it was seen, not a long time ago, but almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian." Clement of Alexandria confirmed the testimony of Irenaeus. In the Fourth Century Epiphanius wrote that John's exile to the Isle of Patmos occurred between AD 41-53 in the reign of Claudius, but he strangely claimed John was 90 years of age at the time. Thus, Epiphanius seems to have been the first to advocate that Revelation was written before AD 96.

In modern times, such "stalwarts of truth" as Westcott and Hort have advocated the early date of the Revelation, suggesting it was written under Nero's reign about AD 68 or 69. This writer puts very little credence in these corrupters of the Word of God, for it was Westcott and Hort who undermined the credibility of the Received Text with all their theories about the sacred text of the Greek New Testament.

The preterists must prove that Revelation was written before AD 70, else the first premise of the preterists falls. If this premise falls, it causes their whole system to collapse. That this system of eschatology is unstable is

thus evident from the fact it is partially built upon the rotten foundation of a pre-supposition that is not well-founded in church history.

THE END OF THE MOSIAC COVENANT

Another of the weak premises on which preterism is built is the belief that the Mosaic Covenant did not cease until Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. This is indeed a strange view to this writer. What saith the Scriptures to this assertion? Jesus said, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). The beginning of the end of the Mosaic Covenant started with John the Baptist. There was a transition period between the beginning of John's ministry and its final fulfillment in the death of Christ. That it officially ended when Christ died is argued by the Apostle Paul, writing of Christ, said, "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days" (Col. 2:14-16). If the law were still in effect at this time (about AD 61), then men certainly could have judged what the Colossians ate and drank, what days they observed, and how they kept the sabbath days. But the law having been done away when Christ died, they were not to permit anyone to judge them in any of these matters.

The law was fulfilled when Christ died, not when divine judgment fell on Jerusalem in AD 70. Speaking of the cessation of the law in 2 Corinthians 3:6-11, Paul specifically declared "For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious" (2 Cor. 3:11). The Apostle thus maintained the law had been done away when he wrote the second letter to the Corinthians about AD 57. Therefore, if the law was done away when it was fulfilled in Christ's death and was said to be done away when Paul wrote Second Corinthians, then the law was not in effect until

Jerusalem fell in AD 70, when it finally ended, according to preterists. Thus, another of the flimsy premises on which Preterism is built has given way to the clear teachings of Scripture and simple logic concerning those teachings.

THE USE OF THE TERM QUICKLY

Another premise on which preterism is founded is the term "quickly" used often by our Lord with reference to His Second coming (Rev. 22:7, 12, 22). The Greek word tachy, translated "quickly" in these passages is from the same stem as tachos which is translated "speedily" in Luke 18:8, and "shortly" in Romans 16:20; Revelation 1:1; 22:16. Both of these terms are relative, not absolute. Is coming in two years coming "quickly" or "speedily"? If Revelation were written in AD 68 and Christ came in AD 70, then He came "quickly" according to the Preterists. But to many people, two years would not be coming quickly. For this reason, we have to view these terms relatively, not absolutely.

The promise in Romans 16:20 asserts that "the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." Will the preterists argue that this promise has been fulfilled? If so, when was it fulfilled? How was it fulfilled? What did the destruction of Jerusalem have to do with Satan's being bruised under the feet of the Roman saints? Surely any thinking person would not be so credulous as to believe that "shortly" in this case meant but a few years. Would any right-thinking person build an entire system of eschatology on a term that is obviously used relatively, not absolutely?

THE END OF THE AGE VERSUS THE END OF THE WORLD

Another of the faulty premises on which preterism is built is the substitution of the word age for the word world in the phrase the end of the world. Following the Westcott-Hort text and all modern translations which have replaced the end of the world with the end of the age in Matthew 24:3,

the preterists argue that the age referenced in this passage is that of the law which ended in AD 70.

If age is the correct translation in Matthew 24:3, then it must also be correct in Matthew 28:20. Indeed, all modern translations render the last part of this passage, "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (NASB, NKJV). Now the Sovereign Grace Baptist preterist has painted himself in a corner here: according to his belief that age refers to the period which ended in AD 70, the Lord would then have only promised to be with His churches until AD 70 in Matthew 28:20, for if aion means age in Matthew 24:3, then it also must mean age in Matthew 28:20. Another problem in Matthew 28:20 for the preterist is the term always. Why would the Lord have promised to be with His churches always when He would actually only be with them until AD 70? If quickly must be interpreted absolutely, then so must always. As a matter of fact, always is a much more absolute term than quickly.

There was a reason the translators of the King James Version translated aion as world rather than age. Aion speaks of the world under the aspect of time whereas kosmos which is also translated world views the world under the aspect of space, according to Trench in his Synonyms of the New Testament. The translation age fits the philosophy of spiritists and other new-age advocates. Accordingly, there is no world to come in Mark 10:30; it is only another age to come as the new-agers advocated in the hit song of the 1960's entitled Age of Aquarius. If there are only ends of ages and no end of the world, then one would have to conclude that the world will last forever. Indeed, it seems preterism, especially full preterism, offers no clear teaching on how this world will ever end.

THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE RESURRECTION

Partial preterists and full preterists differ on this point, as has been mentioned. Full preterists deny the future bodily resurrection of the saints

who have died since AD 70. They are in agreement with Hymenaeus and Philetus of whom Paul wrote saying, "Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2 18). Modern preterism is overthrowing the faith of many today. The future bodily resurrection of the saints is one tenant of the faith which they are seeking to overthrow.

This is an egregious heresy. According to the Apostle Paul, if there is no bodily resurrection of the saints, then Christ is not raised (1 Cor. 15:12-44). Some preterists contend our Lord does not now have the physical body which He had following His resurrection. If that be the case, then how could the angels have declared to the disciples who watched the Lord ascend into heaven, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). While the saints will not be resurrected with their mortal bodies of flesh and blood, they will nevertheless have immortal bodies of flesh and bone like our Lord has, which bodies are sustained by spirit, not blood (1 Cor. 15:50-54). According to the Apostle John, "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

THE PURPOSE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance given to the Lord's churches until He comes again (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Those who consider themselves full or consistent preterists have a real problem here. If Christ has already come, then there is no reason for the churches to observe the Lord's Supper. According to the Apostle Paul, the Lord's Supper is to be observed to show His death only until He comes. This writer knows of one church which has ceased to observe the Lord's Supper since it has embraced the full preterist view of Biblical prophecy.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

A major difference between preterists and futurists is their interpretations of the Olivet Discourse of our Lord as recorded in Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21. This discourse occurred in response to the disciples' question to the Lord's statement concerning the buildings of the temple being destroyed. They came to Him and said, "Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matt. 24:3).

Most futurists or pure Biblicists will acknowledge that much of this discourse was fulfilled in AD 70. Certainly the temple was destroyed as was the city of Jerusalem. But there are many events yet to occur, as a close examination of this discourse will reveal. Luke's account of this discourse points out this fact. Luke 21:8-23 deal with the events leading up to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70. Luke 21:24 is the transitional verse, foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jews among the nations until the times of the Gentiles is fulfilled, an event alluded to by Paul in Romans 11:25. Then Luke 21:25-28 describe those events which are yet future and will occur following the fulfillment of the times of the Gentiles. Thus, Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse gives the chronological exposition of this important teaching. The accounts of Matthew and Mark must be interpreted in light of Luke's chronology of prophesied events.

The more one studies preterism, the more he marvels that so many have believed its precepts. Preterism takes away the Blessed Hope of our Lord's return. It denies we shall ever be bodily resurrected to stand before the Lord as even Job of old anticipated (Job 19:24-27). This system of eschatology has no answers for how this evil world will ever end. Consequently, preterism has nothing in it to commend itself to this writer or to edify his soul.