

The New Last Days Scoffers

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The Second Coming of Christ is one of the fundamental doctrines of Scripture. Jesus emphatically said, "I will come again" (John 14:3). The questions raised by believers over the centuries have always been "When?" and "How?" The answers to these questions divide Christians into various views of eschatology ("last things"). Some believe He will come before the Tribulation. Some believe He'll return during it; and some after it. Some believe He will come at the end of the Church Age and some think He will come after the millennium.

One of the most bizarre interpretations of eschatology is the view that He has already come back! No, I'm not talking about the Jehovah's Witnesses who think Jesus returned in 1914. I'm talking about a viewpoint called Preterism, which teaches that Jesus returned in AD 70 when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem.

You may be thinking that no sensible person really believes that Jesus already came back. Well, it may surprise you to know that Preterism is experiencing a new wave of interest these days thanks to the encouragement of popular radio personalities like R.C. Sproul and Hank Hanegraaff. Sproul openly admits he is a "partial preterist" and Hanegraaff claims he is seriously considering it.

I have watched various eschatologies come and go over the past 40 years. Some last a few weeks (like "88 Reasons the Rapture will be in 1988") and some a few years (like the fast-fading so-called "Pre Wrath view"). But none have had more insidious implications than Preterism – the idea that Jesus already came back and we missed it! In fact, the Bible warns us: "there shall come scoffers in the last days...saying, where is the promise of his coming" (II Peter 3:3-4).

What is Preterism?

The term preterist is Latin for "past." Thus, preterists believe that Bible prophecy was fulfilled in the past. Therefore, they view the major prophetic passages of Scripture, such as the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation, as already fulfilled. Preterism is the exact opposite of Futurism, which views these major biblical prophecies as being fulfilled in the future.

Extreme preterists, who prefer to call themselves "consistent preterists," hold that all Bible prophecy was fulfilled in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. They view this event as the Second Coming of Christ and reject any belief in a future return of Christ.

Thus, they deny a future bodily resurrection of believers and a literal return of Christ to earth. Extreme preterists believe we are already in the "New Heavens!" Their view is not only ludicrous, but it is also heretical and places them outside the parameters of biblical orthodoxy.

Moderate preterists, like R.C. Sproul, claim they still 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: Rapture of the Church; Literal Seven Year Tribulation Period; Literal Antichrist; Conversion of Israel; Battle of Armageddon; 1000-year Millennium; Future Binding of Satan.

In contrast to the basic beliefs of 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 an "accident of history" perpetrated by "ignorant premillennialists" who supported the Balfour Declaration that eventually led to the formation of the modern state of Israel in 1948. While most preterists would insist they are not anti-Semitic, their theology certainly leans in that direction. One of the symbols of the current preterist movement is an artist's rendering of the smoldering ashes of Jerusalem in AD 70, as though they are rejoicing in the destruction of the Holy City.

Preterist Beliefs

As a rule, moderate preterists tie their belief system to a postmillennial vision 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. There will be no future individual Antichrist.
2. The Tribulation Period is already over. It occurred when the Roman army besieged Jerusalem in AD 66-70.
3. Christ "returned" in the clouds in AD 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 AD 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 as the Millennium. The 1,000 years are not literal but figurative, even though they are mentioned six times in Revelation 19-20.

The basic assumptions of preterism rest on passages that refer to Christ coming "quickly" (Revelation 1:1), or "this generation will not pass" (Matthew 24:34). They insist these 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. Darrell Bock of Dallas' Theological Seminary counters the preterist view, observing: "What Jesus is saying is that the generation that sees the beginning of the end, 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."

Fallacious Reasoning

Preterists insist they are defending the Bible by making its prophecies fulfilled in the past. That way, they can't be accused of making false assumptions about the future. In other words, their interpretive methodology might be called: "back up and punt!" By confining predictive prophecy to a past fulfillment they eliminate any real need for eschatology. However, their fallacious reasoning and flimsy logic leaves them supporting a series of ridiculous conclusions that fly in the face of the whole history of biblical interpretation.

For example, the idea that Satan is already "bound" is clearly contradicted by Peter's statement: "the devil, as a roaring lion, wanders about seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:8). The Apostle Paul refers to Satan as the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2). One would have a difficult time convincing Peter and Paul that Satan was already bound by the power of the cross. If Satan is bound today, why are the nations still deceived?

If we are already in the Millennium, why is there still war in the world? When did the lion lay down with the lamb? And when did the nations beat their weapons into plowshares? If the 1,000 years are only symbolic, then is the reign of Christ only symbolic? If God broke His everlasting covenant with Israel, how do we know He will not break His covenant of everlasting life with us?

If God is finished with ethnic Israel, why did Paul ask: "Has God cast away his people?" And why did he respond so emphatically, "God forbid!" (Romans 11:1)? Why did Paul

ask of Israel, "Have they stumbled that they should fall?" And why did he respond again: "God forbid!" (Romans 11:11)? Why did Paul state that "blindness in part has happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles comes" (Romans 11:25)? Why did he believe, "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26) if God is already finished with Israel?

If the Church replaces Israel and becomes the Kingdom of God on earth, why did the disciples ask Jesus at the ascension: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). That was the perfect opportunity for Jesus to tell the disciples that He was finished with Israel and that they were the new "Israel." But He did not! He simply told them it was not for them to know that time which the Father has predetermined for Israel to have the kingdom (Acts 1:7).

Practical Implications

Theologian Tom Ice writes: "Because of the current spread of preterism, pastors and teachers need to be prepared to defend orthodox eschatology from this attack." Those who believe that Christ already came back in AD 70 can hardly obey our Lord's command to "keep watching" until He comes (Matthew 24:42).

Preterism rests on a faulty hermeneutic and raises serious concerns for sincere students of Scripture. Consider the following; Preterism:

1. 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 not taking the rest of the Bible literally either. Preterists are following the dangerous path of liberalism which began denying predictive prophecy and soon rejected the literal interpretation of creation, the flood, the virgin birth of Christ, His vicarious death and bodily resurrection.
2. Distorts the Promise of the Second Coming. Placing the return of Christ in the past robs the Church of a confident expectation about the future. We are left on earth trying to "make the best of it" without any real hope of divine intervention. It leaves the Church trying to "bring in the Kingdom" without the King.
3. Diminishes the Hope of the Believer. Preterism negates the biblical commands to "watch" and "be ready" for the coming of Christ. It limits those injunctions to the first century believers prior to AD 70. In fact, it limits every biblical command related to the return of Christ. The phrase "until He comes" would have to be limited to AD 70. How can we "build the church" (Matthew 16:18) or "occupy until he comes." In fact, how do

we celebrate the communion service to “show forth the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Corinthians 11:26)? Should we stop celebrating the Lord’s Supper because He already came in AD 70?

4. Deprives Israel of Her Future. Preterists insist that God is finished with Israel. Many of them teach that it is actually Jesus who breaks the covenant with Israel in Daniel 9:26-27. In essence, Preterism pits Jesus against Israel and therefore smacks of anti-Semitism. Preterists actually teach that the “Babylon” of Revelation 17-18 is Jerusalem! Therefore, the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 represents Christ’s ultimate triumph over unbelief.

5. Denies the Power of Christ. While most preterists would insist they are defending the power of Christ, they are actually denying it. They are trying to “bring in the Kingdom” without the King. And might I add, they are fighting a losing battle! Christianity is under attack like never before. We are not winning the battle for world dominion and we never will. Yes, the church will continue to grow (Matthew 16:18), but so will the resistance of Satan (1 Timothy 4:1). God will continue to do marvelous things in this world. But the Church will never bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth until the King of Heaven returns in person.