

# The Road Back to Preterism

## *A Brief History of Eschatology and the Church*

By

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In this article we briefly explore the history of eschatological interpretation in the church, its origin, departure, and return to Preterism.

### **Preterist Beginnings: Christ and the Apostles**

Any discussion of eschatology's history in the church should begin with Jesus and the apostles, for they are the fount whence our instruction flows. And here there can be no dispute: Jesus and the apostles taught the immanence of the eschaton, and looked ahead to the same events to which we now look back. Jesus' very ministry began with the clarion call that the eschatological kingdom long foretold by the prophets was "at hand."

"Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the gospel." (Mk. 1:14, 15)

The term translated "at hand" is from the Greek *eggidzo* and means to approach or draw nigh unto. It is used both *spatially*, as in approaching unto a city or place (Mk. 11:1; Lk. 18:40; Acts 9:3), and *temporally*, as near in time. When used temporally, it conveys the idea of that which must "shortly come to pass." (Rev. 1:1; cf. 1:3; 22:10) Thus, on the night he was betrayed, the third time having found his disciples sleeping, Jesus said, "Sleep on now and take your rest; behold, the hour is *at hand* (*eggiken*), and the son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; behold he is *at hand* (*eggiken*) that doth betray me." (Matt. 26:45, 46)

Jesus fixed the coming of the eschatological kingdom within the span of the apostles' lives when he stated "Verily I say to you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power." (Mk. 9:1) The kingdom's coming in "power" spoke to the judgments that would attend Christ's coronation and kingdom. (Cf. Rev. 5:1-11:15) During his ministry, the Lord alluded to the nearness of these judgments, saying, "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you." (Lk. 11:20; cf. 10:9, 11) The coming of the kingdom was contemporaneous with the second coming of Christ. (Matt. 16:26, 27; II Tim. 4:1) Jesus expressly stated his coming would occur before the apostles had evangelized all of Israel (Matt. 10:23; cf. Jno. 21:22); the Sanhedrin would see Jesus coming in clouds of heaven in judgment upon the Jewish nation (Matt. 26:64; Mk. 14:62), within that very generation. (Matt. 23:36, 39; 24:30, 34)

Moving from the gospels to the epistles, we find the disciples were unanimous in holding to the imminence of Christ's coming and kingdom. Paul said the "time is short" (I Cor. 7:29); the night of sin and death was "far spent;" the eschatological day "was at hand." (Rom. 13:11, 12) God would "finish the work and cut it short in righteousness: because a short work will the Lord make upon the

earth.” (Rom. 9:28) He would bruise Satan under their feet “shortly.” (Rom. 16:20) The Hebrew writer urged his readers to exhort one another as they saw the eschatological day approaching, for it was a “very little while” (Grk. *micron hoson, hoson*) and he that was to come would come and not delay. (Heb. 10:37) James said the coming of the Lord “draweth nigh” (Grk. *eggiken*), it was at the very the door. (Jam. 5:8, 9) Peter said the end of all things was “at hand” (I Pet. 4:7); John, that it was the “last hour.” (I Jno. 2:18) Jesus told the churches of Asia “behold, I come quickly;” the time is “at hand.” (Rev. 22:10, 12, 20; cf. 1:1, 3)

There can be no successful contradiction: Jesus and the apostles taught the immanence of the eschaton in relation to those that were then alive.

### **Kingdom’s Nature Misunderstood**

If the *timing* of the eschatological kingdom was not left in doubt, its *nature* was clothed in ambiguity. In Jesus’ day, the expectation was that the kingdom announced by the prophets was essentially *political*; the Messiah would be a national liberator who would restore the Davidic throne, deliver Israel from Roman servitude, and propel the nation to world dominance.

The danger inherent in such teaching is apparent, and Jesus was always careful that his instruction about the kingdom not open him to charges of sedition. Jesus usually did not speak directly to the nature of the kingdom, but only indirectly, through parables. (Matt. 13:10, 11; Mk. 4:33, 34) Although this protected him from being accused of teaching sedition against Rome, the cryptic nature of his teaching often left details of the kingdom and eschaton unclear in the mind of his disciples. Thus, at the climax of his ministry, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem reverberated with anticipation of his obtaining the government over Israel: Large crowds followed him from Jericho (Matt. 20:29-21:1); the whole city of Jerusalem was moved at his arrival (Matt. 21:10); the crowds cried “Hosanna...blessed be the kingdom of our father David that cometh in the name of the Lord.” (Mk. 11:10) The mother of Zebedee’s children petitioned the Lord that her sons might occupy the chief places in his kingdom. (Matt. 20:20) A few days later at the Passover, we learn that the disciples have swords, as if they expect to be called upon to forcibly advance Jesus’ claim to the nation’s head. (Lk. 22:38) When Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples ask whether he would then restore the kingdom to Israel. (Acts 1:7)

To a certain extent, the confusion extant during Jesus’ earthly ministry continued during the apostles’ lives. For example, John indicates that, because Jesus said he would live until his return, the saying went abroad that John would not die, but would be wondrously “raptured” to ethereal realms above at Christ’s coming. (Jno. 21:19, 20; cf. Matt. 16:26, 27) Paul found it necessary to reiterate his instruction to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians thought the crisis marked by the “man of sin” was immediately upon them; Paul reminded them that not until “he would let” (Claudius) was taken out of the way would Nero ascend the throne and eschatological harvest (gathering by martyrdom) break out. (II Thess. 1-11; cf. Rev. 14:12-16) All this to say that details of the eschaton were not fully understood from the very start, even amongst those that accompanied Jesus.

The confusion that obtained during the lives of Christ and the apostles was compounded after their deaths. The almost universal martyrdom of disciples under Nero and the Jews left with church with few capable of correctly expounding the eschatology of the kingdom and coming of Christ. The picture that emerges in the centuries following the apostolic age is one of great confusion: There is a great diversity of opinion concerning the nature of the eschaton among the patristic writers; their writings betray a fundamental lack of comprehension; they are as men groping in darkness after something they cannot see. Indeed, men are not even certain which books are to be received as

canonical and which are not. Irenaeus thought there would be three levels of resurrection corresponding to individual worthiness;<sup>[1]</sup> Tertullian thought there would be a millennial reign of Christ on earth";<sup>[2]</sup> Lactantius thought the earth would be wondrously regenerated during the millennium, and all creatures restored to their primal state in the garden.<sup>[3]</sup> Notwithstanding these rather obvious errors, strands of Christ's and the apostles' original Preterism were either preserved or recovered, and may be clearly identified in the warp and woof of early church eschatology. Here are a few examples:

## **Patristic Writers**

### *The Last Days*

Eusebius states that the "last days" (translated "end of the days" in the LXX – Gen. 49:1) referred to the destruction of the Jewish state and polity:

"For we must understand by 'the end of the days' the end of national existence of the Jews. What, then, did he say they must look for? The cessation of the rule of Judah, the destruction of their whole race, the failing and ceasing of their governors, and the abolition of the dominant kingly position of the tribe of Judah, and the rule and kingdom of Christ, not over Israel but over all nations, according to the word, 'This is the expectation of the nations.'" <sup>[4]</sup>

### *"This Generation" and the Days of Vengeance*

In his Olivet discourse, Jesus spoke of his second coming and of the "days of vengeance" upon the Jewish nation in which all that had been written would be fulfilled. (Lk. 21:22) Jesus indicated this would occur within his own generation. (Matt. 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:31) Modern day "prophecy experts" claim that this is a reference to our own or some future day, but the early church thought otherwise. St. John Chrysostom of Antioch (A.D. 375) refers to this, indicating its fulfillment in that generation:

"Was their house left desolate? Did **all the vengeance** come upon **that generation**? It is quite plain that it was so, and no man gainsays it." <sup>[5]</sup>

### *Abomination of Desolation*

Christ's Olivet discourse warns believers to flee Judea and Jerusalem when they saw the "abomination of desolation," which Luke equates with Jerusalem being surrounded by armies. (Lk. 21:20) Origen indicates this was fulfilled in the war with Rome begun under Nero and concluded under Vespasian and Titus:

But let this Jew of Celsus, who does not believe that He foreknew all that happened to Him, consider how, while Jerusalem was still standing, and the whole Jewish worship celebrated in it, Jesus foretold what would befall it from the hand of the Romans. For they will not maintain that the acquaintances and pupils of Jesus Himself handed down His teaching contained in the Gospels without committing it to writing, and left His disciples without the memoirs of Jesus contained in their works. Now in these it is recorded, that '**when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed about with armies, then shall ye know that the desolation thereof is nigh.**' But at that time there were no armies around Jerusalem, encompassing and enclosing and besieging it; for the siege began in the reign of Nero, and lasted till the government of Vespasian, whose son Titus destroyed Jerusalem, on account, as Josephus says, of James the Just, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, but in reality, as the truth makes clear, on account of Jesus Christ the Son of God." <sup>[6]</sup>

## *Elijah and the Beast*

The Old Testament prophets announced *three* figures or persons that would mark the time of the eschatological kingdom and end: The Messiah, the beast/little-horn of Daniel seven, and the “Elijah” foretold by Malachi. (Mal. 3:1, 2; 4:5, 6; cf. Isa. 40:3-5) We know the identity of the Messiah, and Jesus indicated that Malachi’s Elijah was fulfilled in John the Baptist. (Matt. 11:7-15) Thus, the only remaining personage to be identified is the antichrist or beast. The early church believed that Nero personified the beast. Thus, the second coming *should have* occurred within the immediate reaches of the eschatological figures of John and Nero. Primitive Christians understood this, but misunderstood the *nature* of Christ’s second advent. Therefore, when John and Nero passed from history and the world did not end in the manner primitive believers supposed it should, they were faced with the problem why Christ failed to return when prophesied. The solution was that Elijah and Nero would appear a *second time* on the world stage preceding the end! This is much like modern dispensationalists who, faced with Rome and the Jerusalem temple having passed from history, believe that there will be a “revived” Rome, a third temple with a revived priesthood and Sanhedrin, together with another Elijah.<sup>[7]</sup> Reflecting the belief in a second Elijah and reappearance of Nero, Commodianus (A.D. 240), bishop of North-Africa wrote thus:

“Hear ye how the prophet foretold concerning him [the antichrist]. I have said nothing elaborately, but negligently. Then, doubtless, the world shall be finished when he shall appear. He himself shall divide the globe into three ruling powers, when, moreover, **Nero shall be up from hell, Elias shall first come** to seal the beloved ones.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Nero’s rising up from hell refers to Revelation 11:7 and 17:8, concerning the beast that would rise from the bottomless pit. Thus, Commodianus believed it was necessary that both Nero and Elijah *reappear* so the world could end in the manner he supposed. Sulpicius Severus (A.D. 360-420) makes similar comments:

In the meanwhile **Nero**, now hateful even to himself from a consciousness of his crimes, disappears from among men, leaving it uncertain whether or not he had laid violent hands upon himself: certainly his body was never found. It was accordingly believed that, even if he did put an end to himself with a sword, his wound was cured, and his life preserved, according to that which was written regarding him, -“**And his mortal wound was healed,**” -to be sent forth again near the end of the world, in order that he may practice the **mystery of iniquity.**<sup>[9]</sup>

Although Sulpicius erroneously concludes that Nero’s life was somehow wondrously preserved and will appear again, he correctly identified Nero with the “beast” and “man of sin.” (Cf. Rev. 13:3; II Thess. 2:7)

## *Man of Sin*

One of the chief eschatological passages of the New Testament is II Thess. 2, which speaks of the “man of sin” whom the Lord would consume at his coming. (II Thess. 2:3, 8) Tradition among primitive Christians identified St. Paul’s “man of sin” with St. John’s “antichrist” and Revelation’s “beast,” many holding that these were references to Nero. In his fourth homily on II Thessalonians, St. Chrysostom (A.D. 347 to 407) states,

“For the **mystery of lawlessness** doth already work.” He speaks here of **Nero**... But he did not also wish to point him out plainly: and this not from cowardice, but instructing us not to bring upon ourselves unnecessary enmities, when there is nothing to call for it.”<sup>[10]</sup>

### *He who lets*

II Thess. indicates that the man of sin could not come to power until “he who lets” and “what withholdeth” was taken out of the way. (II Thess. 2:6, 7) This has long been recognized as referring to Claudius Caesar and the restraining power of the *religio licita* –religions whose practice was protected by Roman law. Tertullian (A.D. 145-220) thought Rome was the restraining power alluded to by St. Paul, saying “What obstacle is there but the Roman state.”<sup>[11]</sup> This is echoed by several patristic writers. Victorinus, in his commentary on the Apocalypse, states:

“And after many plagues completed in the world, in the end he says that a **beast ascended from the abyss**...that is, of **the Romans**. Moreover that he was in the kingdom of **the Romans**, and that he was among the **Caesars**. The Apostle Paul also bears witness, for he says to the Thessalonians: **Let him who now restraineth restrain**, until he be taken out of the way; and then shall appear the **Wicked One**, even he whose coming is after the working of Satan, with signs an lying wonders.’ And that they might know that he should come **who then was the prince**, he adds: ‘He already endeavours after the secret of mischief’ – that is, the mischief which he is about to do he strives to do secretly; but he is not raised up by his own power, nor by that of his father, but by command of God.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Victorinus here connects the “beast” from the abyss with the Roman empire and the “Wicked One” with the one who was prince when Paul wrote (Nero), and would follow his father (Claudius) to the throne.<sup>[13]</sup>

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) is even more explicit:

“Some think that these words refer to the **Roman empire**, and that the apostle Paul did not wish to write more explicitly, lest he should incur a charge of calumny against the Roman empire, in wishing ill to it when men hoped that it was to be everlasting. So in the words: **‘For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work’** he referred to **Nero**, whose deeds already seemed to be as those of Antichrist.”<sup>[14]</sup>

### *Origen’s Astonishing Statements*

Dispensationalists to the contrary notwithstanding, Origen states that Daniel’s seventy weeks were fulfilled in the coming of Christ;<sup>[15]</sup> But what is more astonishing by far, Origen indicates that the eschatological “coming” of the Lord with “fire” is to be understood figuratively of the destruction of Jerusalem, as maintained by Preterists:

"And if the voices of the prophets say that God "comes down," who has said "Do I not fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord," the term is used in a figurative sense For God "comes down" from His own height and greatness when He arranges the affairs of men, and especially those of the wicked...So if God is said anywhere in the holy Scriptures to "come down," it is understood as spoken in conformity with the usage which so employs the word...But as it is in mockery that Celsus says we speak of "God coming down like a torturer bearing fire," and thus compels us unseasonably to investigate the words of deeper meaning, we shall make a few remarks...The divine word says that our God is a "consuming fire," and that "He draws rivers of fire before him"...But when He is said to be a "consuming fire," we inquire what are the things which are appropriate to be consumed by God? And we assert that they are wickedness and the works which result from it, and which, being figuratively called "wood, hay, and stubble," God consumes as a fire. The wicked man, accordingly, is said to build up on the previously-laid foundation of reason, "wood, hay, and stubble." If, then, any one can show that these words were differently understood by the writer, and can prove that the wicked man literally builds up "wood, or hay, or stubble," it is evident that the fire must be understood to be material, and an object of sense. But if, on

the contrary, the works of the wicked man are spoken of *figuratively* under the names of "wood, or hay, or stubble," why does it not at once occur (to inquire) in what sense the word "fire" is to be taken?...for (the Scripture says) "The fire will try each man's work of what sort it is." <sup>[16]</sup>

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A few chapters later, Origen states:

We do not deny, then, that the purificatory fire and the destruction of the world took place in order that evil might be swept away, and all things be renewed; for we assert that we have learned these things from the sacred books of the prophets...And anyone who likes may convict this statement of falsehood, if it be not the case that the whole Jewish nation was overthrown within one single generation after Jesus had undergone these sufferings at their hands. For forty and two years, I think after the date of the crucifixion of Jesus, did the destruction of Jerusalem take place." <sup>[17]</sup>

"All things renewed" refers to Rev. 21:5, and shows Origen understood that Revelation spoke to the destruction of Jerusalem and that we are living in the new heavens and earth.

Space prevents more examples. None of the writers above were Preterists; one and all still looked for Christ to come a second time. Yet, their writings evidence definite Preterist strains and influences. They are like men being pulled in two directions: backward to the events of the first century and forward to the purported end of the cosmos. Unable to reconcile their conflicting eschatologies, they synthesized futurism and preterism, inventing fantastic notions about Nero and Elijah returning a second time. How can this be accounted for? We submit that the original Preterism of Christ and the apostles was never fully lost, but was handed down by tradition and preserved by diligent study of the scriptures, and continued to manifest itself, even when the larger truths about Christ's second coming were totally lost or obscured.

## **The Departure From Preterism**

### *Chiliasm*

(A.D. 175 – A.D. 400)

Eschatology had been the especial concern of first century Christians. The gospels and nearly every epistle assume Christ's imminent return. "Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of

the Lord draweth nigh.” (Jm. 5:8) But in the centuries following A.D. 70, the church’s attention turned from eschatology to apologetics. Great effort was made to show that every detail of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection was prophesied in the psalms, the prophets, and the law. The study of eschatology waned as men applied their efforts to more basic doctrines of redemption. Examples may be seen in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian who wrote “apologies,” defending the faith and proving that Jesus was Christ. This is as it should be. The doctrines of faith and redemption are the most important and it was natural and desirable that men employed their efforts to establish the fundamentals of the new faith. However, the result was that men’s understanding of eschatology and comprehension of the prophetic method and language grew weak and attenuated. “Chiliasm” grew up (from “chilia,” Greek for “a thousand”), which placed a literal construction upon the language of the prophets, asserting that the earth would be wondrously regenerated and Christ reign for a thousand years. Lactantius (A.D. 260-330) could thus write:

But He, when He shall have destroyed unrighteousness, and executed His great judgment, and shall have recalled to life the righteous, who have lived from the beginning, will be engaged among men a thousand years, and will rule them with most just command...Then they who shall be alive in their bodies shall not die, but during those thousand years shall produce an infinite multitude, and their offspring shall be holy, and beloved by God; but they who shall be raised from the dead shall preside over the living as judges...About the same time also the prince of the devils, who is the contriver of all evils, shall be bound with chains, and shall be imprisoned during the thousand years of the heavenly rule in which righteousness shall reign in the world, so that he may contrive no evil against the people of God...Throughout this time Beasts shall not be nourished by blood, nor birds by prey; but all things shall be peaceful and tranquil. Lions and calves shall stand together at the manger, the wolf shall not carry off the sheep, the hound shall not hunt for prey; hawks and eagles shall not injure; the infant shall play with serpents.<sup>[18]</sup>

This sort of approach betrays the most fundamental misunderstanding of the *usus loquendi* (Lat. “manner of speaking”) of the prophets. It never occurs to the writer that the prophets spoke figuratively and poetically of the things they described. Chiliasm was quickly repudiated by the thinking church and later condemned as heretical by the Augsburg and Helvetic Confessions.<sup>[19]</sup> However, in England, where these confessions had no authority, chiliasm was revived by Mede, Sir Isaac Newton, and Whiston.<sup>[20]</sup> Later, it was picked up by Darby and Scofield and woven into the fabric of modern day Dispensational Premillennialism, where it has been secretly promoted and served with advantage Jewish Zionists who have bent Anglo-American foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East to their purpose.

### ***Allegorical Method***

(A.D. 400 - A.D. 1200)

Another development was the rise of the spiritualizing method of Alexandria. After the destruction of Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria became the heart of the Christian faith. As we have seen, traces of the contemporary-historical method show themselves in writers during this period. However, in the third century, Alexandria rose to predominance as the intellectual center of Christianity through the genius of Clement and Origen. Alexandria had been associated with an allegorical interpretation of scripture since the days of Philo Judaeus (20 B.C. - A.D. 50). According to this method, the historical narratives of scripture are abstracted from real life and turned into allegories of morals and doctrine. Thus, Joseph’s brethren stripping him of his coat, casting him into a pit, and selling him into Egypt becomes a free-ranging allegory about knowledge vs. ignorance:

“Also, in the case of Joseph: the brothers having envied this young man, who by his knowledge was possessed of uncommon foresight, stripped off the coat of many colours, and took and threw him into a pit...Otherwise interpreted, the coat of many colours is lust, which takes its way into a yawning pit.” And if one open up or hew out a pit,” it is said, “and do not cover it, and there fall in there a calf or ass, the owner of the pit shall pay the price in money, and give it to his neighbour; and the dead body shall be his.”<sup>[21]</sup> Here add that prophecy: The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel hath not understood Me.”<sup>[22]</sup> In order, then, that none of those, who have fallen in with the knowledge taught by thee, may become incapable of holding the truth, and disobey and fall away, it is said, Be thou sure in treatment of the word, and shut up the living spring in the depth from those who approach irrationally, but reach drink to those that thirst for truth...This then is the type of “the law and the prophets which were until John.”<sup>[23]</sup>

Applied to Revelation, the spiritualizing method meant that the contemporary-historical parameters of the book were lost or ignored and it was treated allegorically instead. The allegorical method of Alexandria exerted great influence upon leading thinkers in following centuries. The great personalities of the beginning of the medieval period, Eusebius, Jerome, Tyconius, and Augustine, understood apocalyptic symbolism in terms of the struggle between good and evil in every age, rather than specific events in history or the world’s end.

Augustine, for example, saw Revelation in terms of a spiritual allegory telling the story of redemption. Although the Antichrist and Elijah were literal characters who would appear in history, for Augustine they are merely actors upon a larger allegorical stage in which two cities co-exist: One group, citizens of Babylon, living in sin and unbelief, the other, citizens of the City of God, sojourning here in faith. On a superficial level, Augustine’s interpretation and method has a certain appeal: There are indeed two classes of men dwelling upon earth; those that are saved and those that are lost. Identifying the saved and lost with the two cities portrayed in Revelation loosely approximates the truth. However, upon closer examination this method is shown to be completely inadequate: If Babylon is a symbol for the lost and the City of God for the saved, what do the *other* cities in Revelation symbolize and who are their inhabitants? (Rev. 16:19) Moreover, how is it that the beast and kings of the earth combine together to desolate the great city and burn her with fire? (Rev. 17:16, 17) If Babylon is the symbolic city of unbelievers, where would these dwell after they have destroyed their supposed home? And what about the all the language of Christ’s imminent coming so prominent in the letters to the seven churches and other passages in Revelation? (Rev. 1:1, 32:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 10; 16:15; 22:7, 10, 12, 20) If these are to have any meaning, they must be understood in terms of the contemporary-historical circumstances of the original recipients, not an allegorical treatment of the text.

Augustine’s method also comes short in terms of Revelation’s millennia. For Augustine, the father of modern-day Post-millennialism (though Amillennialists claim him too), the binding of the dragon and reign of the saints for a thousand years spoke to conversion and regeneration. Connecting Christ’s parabolic binding of the strong man (Matt. 12:29) with Revelation’s millennia, Augustine thought Rev. 20:1-7 symbolized Christ binding the devil, permitting men to reign with him by knowledge of the gospel and remission of sins:

“Now this binding of the devil took place not only at the time when the church began to spread beyond the land of Judaea into one nation after another, but it is taking place even now and will continue to the end of the age, when he is to be loosed, because even now men are being converted from the unbelief in which he held them into faith, and beyond doubt men will go on being converted to the end of the age. And that strong one is bound in every instance for any man who is taken from him, being, as it were, a piece of his goods; and the pit in which he is shut up is not exhausted with the death of those who were alive when he was first shut up, but others have been born and replace them, and this goes on to the end of the age.”<sup>[24]</sup>

The similarity between the free-ranging allegorizing of Clement and Augustine's explanation of the first resurrection comes through in this passage fairly well. Like Clement who has Joseph's being cast into a pit represent the battle between knowledge vs. ignorance, for Augustine, the binding of the dragon represents faith vs. unbelief. The devil blinded men through sin and ignorance, but knowledge of the gospel binds the devil, setting men free. Overlooking the historical context Revelation spoke to, Augustine wanders through the pages of scripture looking for an explanation of John's imagery and ends up treating it as a type of allegory instead, much as he does the great city, Babylon. The text is anchored to no specific historical referent, but floats about through the centuries, mystifying readers who are stymied as much by Augustine's explanation as they are the symbolism of the passage.

The dragon (Rome, Leviathan, the world civil power) was symbolically cast into the bottomless pit (hades, tartarus) upon receiving a mortal wound to its head in the collapse of persecution that arose over Stephen, portrayed in Revelation twelve. (Rev. 12:13-17; cf. Acts 9:31; Rev. 13:3, 14) It was bound there during the reign of Claudius who maintained a policy affording the church the protection of law, even to the point of banishing the Jews from Rome for rioting against Christians. (Acts 18:2) However, upon the ascent of Nero, the restraining power of the *religio licita* was taken away, and the dragon and beast were loosed to persecute anew the church. (Rev. 17:8; 20:7-10) Thus, the symbolic thousand-year binding of the dragon begins and ends *before* the reign of the martyrs.

John describes martyrs beheaded for not receiving the mark of the beast as living and reigning with Christ in what is termed the "first resurrection." (Rev. 20:4, 6) The first resurrection therefore has to do with the souls of the departed dead in paradise, not the regeneration of those presently living. (Cf. Matt. 22:31, 32; Lk. 16:19-31; 23:43) The martyrs die under Nero and the persecuting power of the empire (the beast). They reign with Christ in hades paradise "a thousand years" until the general resurrection. (Rev. 20:5) The common symbol of a thousand years does not point to a single millennium, but to the timeless nature of the hadean realm. In the material realm, time is marked by the movement of bodies through space. But the spiritual realm exists apart from the time-space "continuum"; time as we know and experience it does not exist there at all. Hence, one day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. (Ps. 90:4; II Pet. 3:8) The longest any man lived on earth was Methuselah, who lived 969 years. (Gen. 5:27) The thousand years thus exceeds the span of all earthly life. Therefore, living and reigning with Christ a thousand years points to the fact that the souls of the martyrs have left earthly existence and entered the spiritual realm above. It is more than a little significant that Greco-Roman tradition had it that the dead dwelt in hades a thousand years before attaining new lives.<sup>[251]</sup> The symbol of a thousand years would therefore have been uniquely discernable to the Greek and Latin speaking disciples of the first century, who could thus face the prospect of martyrdom with assurance God had prepared a place of rest for them in paradise pending the general resurrection. (Cf. Rev. 6:9-11; 14:9-13)<sup>[261]</sup>

### *Apocalyptic*

(A.D. 1200 – A.D. 1500)

The allegorical method of Tyconius and Augustine dominated interpretation of Revelation for the next eight hundred years. The late medieval period saw a marked change in approach to eschatology and Revelation. Most noteworthy, this period witnessed a proliferation of "new" revelations as unstable souls predicted and prophesied the coming of Antichrist coupled with variations upon utopian millennial themes. The historical moorings of Revelation were completely lost to sight; eschatological interpretation was governed by subjective impression of contemporary events. The leading apocalyptic writer of this era, whose influence was to be felt for the next three centuries, was Joachim of Fiore.

Joachim of Fiore, an abbot of the Cistercian order, wrote three major treatises of an apocalyptic nature, and more than a dozen lesser writings. He met with many of the important personalities of the day, including pope Lucius III, pope Innocent II, Richard the Lionhearted, Emperor Henry VI, the Empress Constance, and Frederick II. Joachim believed that all the major events of the history of national Israel were typical and prophetic of events that would overtake the church. For example, Joachim identified seven major “persecutions” suffered by the Jews<sup>[27]</sup> and believed on that basis the church would undergo the same before the world’s end:

“For we should remember that the Hebrew people bore seven special persecution in which without doubt the seven special tests of Christians are signified. The Apostle testifies to this when he says that ‘all things happened to them in figure’ (I Cor. 10:11). Just as in the Old Testament, when the seven tribulations were finished, the Savior who was to redeem the human race came into the world, so when just as many persecution against the Church have been completed, the punishing Judge of this world will make his appearance.”<sup>[28]</sup>

By this direct “concordance” between the Old and New Testaments, Joachim believed the events of the past, present, and future were clearly identifiable in the scriptures and that the world’s end could therefore be pinpointed. Another of Joachim’s beliefs that was foundational to his system was that the history of the world was made of three *status* or ages, consisting of forty-two generations each. These status overlapped; the beginning of one overlapping the end of another. The first answered to the law and began with Adam; the second answered to the gospel and began under Uzziah; and the third began under St. Benedict. The third status Joachim believed would succeed and completely displace the gospel/church age in A.D. 1260 and would fulfill the imagery of Rev. 21 and 22, the new Jerusalem. Joachim thought the third status was to be marked by the perfection of the church, which would be organized along monastic lines with two great orders of monks leading disciplined and contemplative lives (this is why it began with Benedict).

We think that in him who was seen sitting on the white cloud and was like the Son of Man (Rev. 14:14) there is signified some order of just men to whom it is given to imitate the life of the Son of Man perfectly...Wherefore, just as in him who was like the Son of Man there is to be understood a future order of perfect men preserving the life of Christ and the apostles, so in the angel who went forth from the temple in heaven is to be seen an order of hermits imitating the life of the angels.<sup>[29]</sup>

Joachim’s belief that present and future events were predictable, together with his belief in the imminence of the coming third *status*, meant that Revelation and other eschatological scriptures were to be interpreted in light of *contemporary events*. Saracens, Moslems, Mongols, Tartars, princes and popes all became the stuff of eschatological interpretation. The imminence which marked eschatological expectation also tended to produce a fanatic, lunatic fringe, particularly in the Franciscan order.

The Franciscan order is named after Francis of Assisi. A fanatic and eccentric who claimed to hear voices from God and spoke to animals, Francis began his career as an intemperate preacher a few years after the death of Joachim in 1202. Renouncing all earthly possessions and subjecting himself to a severe discipline of fasting and self abnegation, Francis roamed the countryside begging and working to support himself while he preached his particular version of the gospel. He soon attracted followers and founded three orders of mendicants (Lat. *mendicare*, “to beg”) whose distinguishing feature was their belief that a life conformed to Christ required that men live in poverty. On or about the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (14 September) in A.D. 1224, after protracted fasting and praying, Francis fell into a vision in which he “saw” the seraphim. He thereafter purportedly received the “stigmata,” the five wounds of Christ upon the cross, allegedly witnessing to a life perfectly conformed to the crucified Christ – a superstitious error derived from St. Paul’s statement in Galatians, saying, he bore in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. (Gal. 6:17)

Given the fanatical nature of its origin and rule, it is not surprising that the Franciscan order soon became a hotbed of Joachimite apocalyptic expectation. Many Franciscans believed that their commitment to poverty and monasticism identified them as the future order of monks, preserving the life of Christ and the apostles, which Joachim had written about. It is with this view that in A.D. 1250, a young friar named Gerardo of Borgo San Donnino issued a work called the *Introduction to the Eternal Gospel*, which was an interpretation and summary of Joachim's three major works. Gerardo's *Introduction* claimed that the third status would arrive in A.D. 1260, signaling the total abrogation of the church of the second status, including the substitution of Joachim's writing for the Old and New Testaments. Gerardo's work created such a scandal that a papal commission was held at Anagni under Alexander IV in A.D. 1255, which condemned the *Introduction*, but not Joachim himself. Gerardo was imprisoned for life and the minister general of the Franciscans, John of Parma, was forced to step down from his position.

The blow to Joachimism in the Franciscans was only temporary; Bonaventure, Parma's successor, was thoroughly Joachimite in orientation and caused the infection to further spread in the order. Bonaventure synthesized Joachim's doctrine of three *stata* with teaching from early patristic writers (*viz.*, Hippolytus) which had it that the world consisted of seven ages and as many millennia. According to Bonaventure, Joachim's third status answered to the fabled millennial age of the seventh epoch of earth's history:

In the seventh age we know that these things will take place – the rebuilding of the temple, the restoration of the city, and the granting of peace. Likewise in the coming seventh age there will be a restoration of divine worship and a rebuilding of the city. Then the prophecy of Ezekiel will be fulfilled when the city comes down from heaven (Ezek. 40); not indeed that city which is above, but that city which is below, the Church Militant which will then be conformed to the Church Triumphant as far as possible in this life. Then will be the building and restoration of the city as it was in the beginning. Then there will be peace. God alone knows how long that peace will last.<sup>[30]</sup>

The history of apocalyptic frenzy among the Franciscans reaches unto the latter half of the fifteenth century. The Great Schism (A.D. 1378-1418) witnessed three popes reigning simultaneously, one from Avignon, one from Rome, and a third from Pisa. The schism was healed by the Council of Constance, which deposed the Avignonese and Pisan popes, allowed the Roman pope to resign, and elected a new pope, Martin V (A.D. 1417-1431). As a necessary condition to reform the church, the Council declared its supremacy to the pope and established a timetable for future reform councils, which Martin and his successor preceded to undercut. Thus died hopes for reform of the medieval church. However, the fact of the schism fueled apocalyptic expectations. Dissident offshoot groups of Franciscans called "Fratricelli" (Little Brothers) circulated a new generation of private revelations. The reformation and perfection of the church continued to be a recurring theme; the carnal church was called the whore of Babylon; the coming perfected church of the third status/seventh age was identified with the new Jerusalem. More and more the papacy was interpreted as the actual or mystical antichrist. The drama finally drew to a close when, after nearly three hundred years of spurious claims of new revelations and irresponsible exegesis of biblical texts, the Franciscan order was reined in following a period of inquisition and executions by papal authorities on the one hand, and determined resistance and assassinations on the other.

This brief summary does not cover all the movements and interpretive schools of the late medieval period. Many did not subscribe to the apocalypticism of Joachim and the Franciscans, notably, the Dominican scholastic, Thomas Aquinas. However, it does represent the dominant trend and literature of the period. In its failure to see the historical context of Revelation, its interpretation of apocalyptic material in terms of contemporary events, its characterization of the Catholic church as Babylon, and

the pope as antichrist, the latter medieval period anticipated themes of the Reformation, the next stage in the road back to Preterism.

### *Continuous Historical*

(A.D. 1500-1700)

The method of interpretation that came out of the Reformation is called the “Continuous Historical.” This approach finds in the imagery of Revelation a continuous, chronologically sequential panorama of history reaching until the world’s end. The first to use this approach was Nicolas of Lyra (A.D. 1329) in his *Postilla*. A Franciscan who rejected the apocalypticism of Joachim and his fellow Franciscans, Nicolas proffered a continuous-historical interpretation of Revelation beginning in the first century and reaching to his own time. The continuous-historical method was introduced into the Reformation by Luther. Luther was much indebted to Nicolas and adopted his approach, but, unlike Nicolas, Luther unreservedly equated papal Rome with the beast and Babylon the harlot. Other reformers followed Luther, finding in Revelation’s imagery allusions to papal Rome and the Reformation. The faithful church was the woman who was hid of God 1,260 days in the wilderness. (Rev. 12:6, 14) Using the day-for-a-year approach, it was thought the 1,260 days were the number of years from the church’s apostasy under the popes, until the Reformation. In seeing papal Rome as the beast and harlot, the Reformers were following themes first advanced by the Franciscan Joachites. The Joachites were also the first to see allusions to their own time in the 1,260 days of the woman hiding in the wilderness, predicting that the year A.D. 1260 would bring in the fabled third status.

The continuous-historical method has few modern proponents. Its traditional interpretation equating the beast and harlot with papal Rome has not withstood serious scrutiny; no reputable scholars embrace it today. By far the greatest objection to the continuous-historical method is that Revelation is arranged more in terms of *theme* than order in *time*. The recapitulatory nature of Revelation was first noted in writing by Victorinus:

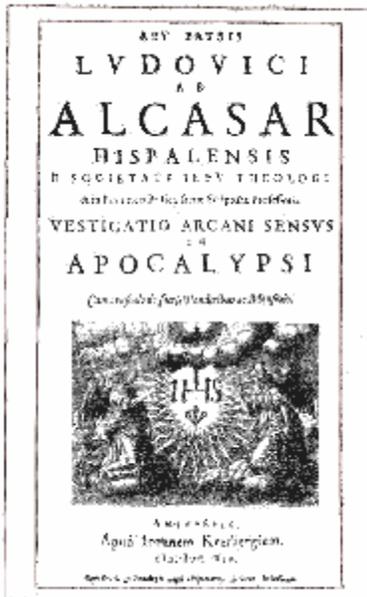
“We must not regard the order of what is said, because frequently the Holy Spirit, when He has traversed even to the end of the last times, returns again to the same times, and fills up what He had before failed to say. Nor must we look for order in the Apocalypse; but we must follow the meaning of those things which are prophesied.”<sup>[31]</sup>

Thus, each vision often retraces the steps of its predecessor, portraying the same period from a different perspective, but extending progressively further in time and event toward its ultimate climax. Thus, the day of the Lord or parts thereof are portrayed no fewer than *five* times. (Rev. 6:12-17; 11:15-19; 14:19; 16:19-21; 20:11-15) The eschatological war against the saints is also portrayed several times under different names and symbols: in Rev. 16:16 it is portrayed under the imagery of the battle of Armageddon; but in Rev. 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 it is described as the battle of Gog and Magog. The binding of the dragon and beast in Rev. 20:1-3, is first alluded to in 11:7 and 17:8. Indeed, the whole of chapters 17:1 through 20:11 is a parenthetical recapitulation of events described in chapters 13-16. Perhaps the most obvious proof that Revelation is thematically arranged is the fact Christ’s coronation is portrayed in chapters four and five, but his birth and ascension are portrayed in chapter twelve! In attempting to interpret Revelation in a continuous, chronologically progressive manner, the continuous-historical method is at hopeless odds with the thematic and recapitulatory structure of the book.

## Academic Rebirth of Preterism

(1800s)

Preterism experienced a brief rebirth in midst of the Reformation when the Spanish Jesuit Luis De Alcazar (1554-1613) published his commentary called *Investigation of the Hidden Sense of the Apocalypse*. Alcazar proposed that Revelation applied to Christianity's triumph over Judaism and pagan Rome. According to Alcazar:



- \* Revelation chapters 1-11 describe the rejection of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.
- \* Chapters 12 - 19 describe the overthrow of Roman paganism (the great harlot) and the conversion of the empire to the church.
- \* Chapter 20 describes the persecution and judgment upon the antichrist, identified as Nero Cæsar (54-68 A.D.).
- \* Revelation 21 -22 describe the triumph of the new Jerusalem, the Roman Catholic Church.

In attempting to understand Revelation in terms of the historical circumstances of its recipients, Alcazar employed the scientific canons of literary criticism and thus came very close to a correct understanding of the book. However, in ascribing the final victory to the Roman Catholic Church, Alcazar struck a sour note at a time when Europe and the world was committed to breaking ties with papal Rome. Preterism's rebirth was thus abortive and would have to wait almost three hundred years before it received serious attention again.

In the mid- to latter eighteenth hundreds, scholars began to realize the preterist context of Revelation and related eschatological events. Some of the preterist titles of this period include:

- Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1845);
- J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (1887);
- F.W. Farrar, the late canon of Westminster, *The Early Days of Christianity* (1891);
- Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (1890) and *Biblical Apocalypics* (1898). Concerning the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15 and the "latter days" Terry stated:

"The seventh trumpet, as we understand this book, is the symbolic signal of the end of the old dispensation and the consequent beginning of the new era of the kingdom of Christ on earth (comp. xi, 15). But the Old Testament prophets contemplated the appearance of the Messiah and the going forth of the new word of Jehovah as occurring "in the end of the days" – that is, the last days of the eon or dispensation under which they were living...This "end of the times" belongs, not to the era of the new dispensation, but to the concluding days of the old...It is a serious error, therefore, when learned exegetes persist in assuming that the phrase "the last days," as employed in the Scriptures, means the period of the new Christian dispensation." (Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics*, (Eaton & Mains, NY, 1898; reprinted 1999 by Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR), p. 361)"

With the exception of Russell's *Parousia*, the above titles were "partial Preterist" – the assumed that at least *some* of Revelation's imagery remained to be fulfilled. At this stage, Preterism was merely

academic, existing only in scholarly circles. It would be another hundred years before Preterism would become a grass roots movement. Because at this stage Preterism existed only at academic levels, it was destined to be eclipsed by a rebirth of chiliasm in the form of Dispensationalism.

### *Dispensationalism*

(1800-1900s)

Dispensationalism is probably the dominate approach to eschatology today, particularly in the United States. It usually credited as the child of John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren. Darby believed in the future salvation and restoration of national Israel. He believed that Old Testament promises and prophecies to Israel were not fulfilled in the church or New Testament. Dispensationalists deny that the church replaced Israel as God's covenant people, arguing instead that ethnic Jews are still the object of God's special promises. Dispensationalists believe that Jesus came to set up an earthly kingdom over the Jews and world. However, when the Jews allegedly rejected Jesus (but see Jno. 6:15), God's plan was foiled, the prophetic clock of Daniel's 70 weeks was stopped, and the church was created instead as a type of "parenthesis" in God's larger plan. Thus, instead of being the culmination of God's plan, the cross was supposedly an *unforeseen contingency*. Dispensationalists believe in an "any moment" "rapture" of the church. Once the church is wafted away, the prophetic clock of Daniel will resume ticking and the seventith week ensue. During the 70<sup>th</sup> week, national Israel will again assume center stage, the temple be rebuilt, and the Old Testament sacrificial system resumed. After this, Dispensationalists believe the second coming will occur and there will be a millennial reign of Christ on earth at Jerusalem. Darby's and the Brethren's writings influenced protestant ministers in America, including D. L. Moody, James Brookes, J. R. Graves, A. J. Gordon, and C. I. Scofield.

Dispensationalism gained grass roots enthusiasm where preterism of the 1800s failed largely through the Bible Conference and Bible Institute movements. Beginning in the 1870s, various Bible conferences sprang up around the U.S. These conferences were not started to promote Dispensationalism, but proponents of this new theology promoted their program at the conferences. In time, conferences like the American Bible and Prophetic Conferences (1878—1914) would actively promote Dispensationalism. In the late 1800s, several Bible institutes were founded that taught Dispensational theology. These included The Nyack Bible Institute (1882), The Boston Missionary Training School (1889), and The Moody Bible Institute (1889), the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (1907), and the Philadelphia College of the Bible (1914). However, Dispensationalism received it greatest promotion by Cyrus Scofield. The publication of Scofield's Reference Bible by Oxford University Press in 1909 was a wind-fall for advocates of Dispensationalism. *The Scofield Reference Bible* became the leading Bible used by American Evangelicals and Fundamentalists for the next sixty years. Finally, following WWI, many dispensational Bible colleges were formed. Foremost of these was Dallas Theological Seminary (1924). Dispensationalism thus began to be taught in an academic setting, influencing generations of college students.

The basic suppositions of Dispensationalism are heretical in that they deny that the cross and church represent the culmination of God's soteriological purpose in Christ, insisting instead that God's program is somehow still centered in ethnic Jews. Logically, if the Jews had not rejected Christ and he had established his earthly kingdom at that time, the cross would not have occurred and there would be no salvation of the human race. Dispensationalism's teaching that there is to be a resumption of the temple service also denies the cross of Christ and represents a reversion to the types and shadows of the Law. Yet, it was their very adherence to the temple and its service that marked out the Jews as the enemies of Christ in seeking to perpetuate a system founded in denial and unbelief: "He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an

oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol." (Isa. 66:3) As long as the temple service on earth endured, it stood in denial of Christ's priesthood in heaven. Return to the temple service is nothing less than apostasy from Christ. "For if I rebuild again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor." (Gal. 2:18; cf. Heb. 10:26-29; 13:8-10) Far from coming to establish an earthly kingdom and re-institute the temple service, Christ's second coming was to *destroy* these types which stood in denial of his Sonship, substitutionary death, and atoning blood: "A voice of noise from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice of the Lord that rendereth recompence to his enemies." (Isa. 66:6; cf. Matt. 24:3, 34; Acts 6:13; Heb. 9:26-28; 10:37; 12: 27, 28)

Dispensationalists have been taking a beating in recent years from debaters of the Preterist camp, and today they will no longer accept challenges to debate. Let us hope this is a sign that the sun is beginning to set on his dangerous doctrine.

## **Modern Preterism's Beginnings: the Churches of Christ**

(Early to Mid 1900s)

The Preterist movement today originated largely in the churches of Christ. The Churches of Christ have their origin in the American Restoration Movement of the early 1800s. The movement placed a strong emphasis in departing from traditional forms of worship and organization, and man-made creeds and dogmas, in favor of returning to the Bible as the all sufficient rule of faith and practice. "*Christ our only creed, the gospel our only plea, the Bible our only rule of faith and practice*" was one of the movement's leading slogans. Because it was a movement whose emphasis was on doctrinal reform, the Church of Christ placed unusually strong emphasis on personal Bible study and an unmatched command of the scripture in members and leaders alike. Emphasis on the need for doctrinal correctness and the movement's traditional abhorrence of creeds created an environment conducive to recovering New Testament Preterism.

### ***Foy E. Wallace Jr., the Father of Modern Preterism?***

If there is a single individual that can be credited as the father of modern Preterism it is the Church of Christ preacher, evangelist, author and editor, Foy E. Wallace Jr. Wallace was a leading figure in the Churches of Christ coming out of the 1930s. A superb speaker, able debater, and writer, he quickly rose to national prominence in the Churches of Christ, holding numerous meetings across the U.S. each year. Wallace also served as editor of the Gospel Advocate (Nashville), a leading monthly publication within the Churches of Christ. In his role as editor, writer, and preacher, Wallace would help define the issues and establish the norms that would shape the church for the next fifty years.

One of Wallace's contributions toward the modern Preterist movement was his attack upon Dispensationalism (Premillennialism). Premillennialism threatened to enter the Churches of Christ in the early twentieth century through Robert H. Boll, a prominent preacher, who also served as editor of the Gospel Advocate. Boll became enamored with the Premillennialism of Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and began writing Premillennialist articles for the Gospel Advocate (circa 1910). Boll was forced to resign, but continued to teach and disseminate Premillennialist doctrine within the church, gaining a following.

The Premillennial movement within the churches of Christ was destroyed primarily by Foy Wallace Jr. during his four year (1930-1934) tenure as editor of the Gospel Advocate and in two debates with Charles Neal. The first Wallace-Neal debate was held in Winchester, KY., Jan. 2-6, 1933, and was

later published in book form. Neal affirmed "The Bible clearly teaches that after the second coming of Christ and before the final resurrection and judgment, there will be an age or dispensation of one thousand years during which Christ will reign on the earth." Wallace also started a publication entitled the *Bible Banner* to refute Premillennial doctrine and would publish *God's Prophetic Word* (1946, revised 1960), a volume of several hundred pages, which today remains one of the most thorough treatments exposing Premillennial errors. Central to Wallace's refutation of Premillennialism was proof of the restoration of the Davidic throne and kingdom in Christ beginning with his ascension.

The other side of Wallace's contribution to the modern Preterist movement was his commentary on Revelation, published in 1966. Wallace devoted forty-five pages to defending the early date for composition of Revelation, and demonstrated throughout that Revelation's major theme was the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Although Wallace's commentary was merely partial Preterist, seeing in Revelation twenty's millennia imagery extending beyond the first century and into the indefinite future, it remains a favorite in Preterist circles today.

Wallace's efforts to establish the historical, first century context of Revelation and the fulfilled nature of the Davidic kingdom and throne in Christ's church paved the way for later generations in the Church of Christ to arrive at the full Preterist position.

### ***Preterism Reaches the Grass Roots***

(Mid to later 1900s)

One of the earliest advocates of fulfilled eschatology was Max R. King, a preacher from Warren, Ohio. King published a book entitled *The Spirit of Prophecy* (1971), in which he argued that Christ's second coming occurred in A.D. 70. King's book drew fire and a debate was held between King and Jim McGuiggan (1975), a prominent writer and preacher in the churches of Christ. King soundly defeated McGuiggan. The debate was later published as the McGuiggan/King Debate (1975). King's able defense established that there was more to Preterism than met the eye and required closer looking at. Subsequent attacks upon "Kingism" in brotherhood papers and periodicals only served to give the movement publicity and win more to its side.

Other Church of Christ preachers whose studies independently led them to the full Preterist position and who would join forces with King included Jack Scott (Pinole, CA/ Kalispell, MT), Don Preston (Ardmore, OK), and William Bell (Memphis, TN). Together these, with Ed Stevens (Bradford, PA) and John Noë (Indianapolis, IN) (more below), would become the leading edge of the Preterist movement in the 1980s and 1990s, writing articles and reasoning with those that would meet them in public debate. King has since lost significant influence in the movement due to peculiar beliefs about the nature of the eschatological resurrection (the "corporate body" view). According to King, all New Testament passages about the resurrection have their primary application to the spiritual resurrection of Christ's mystic body from Judaism's "sin-death;" the individual's personal resurrection from hades is only secondarily alluded to, if at all. Although embraced by many in the early days of the movement, most preterists have moved away from King on this position. Few today see reference to the resurrection of a corporate body anywhere in the New Testament, it being the general consensus that the eschatological resurrection spoke to the resurrection of the soul from hades; Christians dying today go straight to heaven. King's son, Tim, is presently at the head of *Presence Ministries*, an organization King founded to promote preterism, but has taken it in a direction that has further alienated it from mainstream preterism.

Ed Stevens espoused partial Preterism while at Texas Tech in 1972 through Foy E. Wallace Jr.'s commentary on Revelation, and was well on his way to full Preterism in the mid '70s while studying at

Sunset School of Preaching in Lubbock, Texas, a Church of Christ institution, where he met King and obtained a copy of his book *The Spirit of Prophecy*. King was then engaged in the written debate with McGuiggan, who was an instructor at Sunset. Few have advanced the cause of Preterism like Stevens. Versed in computers and HTML when the industry was still young, Stevens established an early presence for Preterism on the internet. Stevens would go on to leave the Church of Christ, joining the Reformed Church, carrying the message there, and winning many to the cause. His *International Preterist Association* continues to be a leading voice in Preterism today.

Don Preston came into the movement in the early nineties and is perhaps the most studied and able voice in Preterism today. Don is testimony to what one man can do with the support of a congregation behind him. His position as preacher at the Ardmore Church of Christ, where he has served for 15 years, has enabled him to devote much time and effort to the cause. Don has published numerous articles, books, and tracts, and met many big names in debate, including Tommy Ice, F. LaGard Smith, and James Jordan.

Other Church of Christ ministers that have published Preterist works include Jesse Mills (*Results of Fulfilled Prophecy*, 2001, *Commentary on Daniel*, 2003; *Commentary on Revelation*, 2004); Gene Fadely (*Revelations, Kingdoms in Conflict*, 1995; *Hebrews, Covenants in Contrast*, 1996; *Prophecy: Year 2000 and Beyond*, 1998); Tom and Steve Kloske (*The Second Coming: Mission Accomplished*, 2003), and Kurt Simmons (*The Consummation of the Ages*, 2003).

Non-Church of Christ names that have risen to the top of the movement include John Noë and John Anderson. Noë has been active in the movement since the early nineties. Noë is the first full Preterist to be awarded a PhD (2003). Noë's published works include *The Apocalypse Conspiracy* (1991), *Beyond the End Times* (1999), *Shattering the Left Behind Delusion* (2000), and *Dead in their Tracks* (2001). Noë has also recently had a Preterist article - *An Exegetical Basis for a Preterist-Idealist Understanding of the Book of Revelation* - accepted and awaiting publication in *JETS (Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society)*, which he has been a member of for many years. John Anderson has hosted a weekly radio broadcast since Feb. 2001, which has carried the message of Preterism to untold thousands across the U.S. and around the world. John joined Don Preston in debating Tommy Ice and Mark Hitchcock (2003), and has hosted a conference in Sparta, NC, since 2001, featuring many leaders from within the movement.

Today, Preterism has leaped over all denominational boundaries and claims champions and adherents from every major church in Christendom.

### ***The Attack upon Preterism***

(Early Twenty-first Century)

Beginning in the late eighties, Preterism received an enormous boost from some of whom would later be among its most vitriolic opponents. In 1983, R. C. Sproul Sr., a leading voice in the Reformed Church, wrote the foreword to a republication of J. Stuart Russell's *The Parousia*. Russell's book, written in the late 1800s, took a full preterist position regarding the second coming, arguing that Christ returned in the events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Although Sproul stopped short of giving full endorsement to Russell's conclusions, the republication of *The Parousia* by Baker Books, a leading publishing house, with Sproul's name appended, gave Preterism an enormous boost, taking it from the fringe and thrusting it into mainstream Christendom. Baker Books would later publish Sproul's *The Last Day's According to Jesus* (1998), in which Sproul made the case that most New Testament passages traditionally understood to speak to the end of the world actually spoke to the destruction of Jerusalem. In his book, Sproul mentioned by name several advocates of

full Preterism, including Ed Stevens and Max King, giving further credit and exposure to the movement. Sproul also discussed, but did not decide, various views about the resurrection, leaving, or appearing to leave open the distinct possibility that the full Preterist position was viable.

In 1989, Kenneth Gentry Jr. published *Before Jerusalem Fell*. Gentry's book argued from both external evidence of patristic writers and internal evidence from the text itself that Revelation was written before, and is about, the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Gentry's book has since undergone several reprints and has contributed significantly to the cause of Preterism. Other works of Gentry include his contribution to a commentary on Revelation (*Four Views of Revelation*), *Perilous Times* (1999) and *The Beast of Revelation*, each of which argues a first century context for many eschatological passages.

Unwilling or unable to go the whole way to full Preterism, still clinging to the empty promise of Postmillennialism, Gentry has written numerous articles bitterly declaiming against Preterism and Preterists. Sproul Jr., whose father authored *The Last Days According Jesus*, has also shown himself to be of the same ilk by becoming also outspoken enemy of Preterism. Both men contributed to a book edited by Keith Mathison entitled *When Shall These Things Be, A Reformed Response to Hyper-Preterism* (2005) - a surprisingly weak, but bitter attack on full Preterists, particularly Ed Stevens. This book has created a chilling effect upon many who were looking at full Preterism, but a response is in the offing, featuring the contributions of many leaders in the movement (including the present writer), and is due to be published by Ed Steven's *International Preterist Association* in November of 2006. We predict that this attack on full Preterism will backfire when readers see how contributors respond to the objections put forward in Mathison's book. The result will be a wind-fall for truth! As has so often been true in the past, the more the truth is attacked, the more it prospers and grows.

## Conclusion

The original Preterism of Christ and the apostles never perished. Although other schools of interpretation have come and gone, Preterism has always remained. Its reemergence as a grass roots movement in the Churches of Christ in the mid-twentieth century was the result of the ministry of Foy E. Wallace Jr. a generation before, and its members unflinching zeal for the truth. By letting the Bible speak to readers directly (*sola scriptura*), rather than through the voice of antiquated creeds and confessions whose utility has long since vanished, the original Preterism of the New Testament was recovered. Today, the truth, long hemmed in by ecclesiastical authorities and tradition, has broken out and promises to sweep the field. Let the enemies of Preterism be ware!

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### Notes:

<sup>[1]</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, xxxvi, 1, 2; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, p. 567.

<sup>[2]</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, III, xxv; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 342.

<sup>[3]</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, XXIV; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, p. 219.

<sup>[4]</sup> Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, VIII, ccclxxv; Ferrar ed.

<sup>[5]</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily LXXIV*)

<sup>[6]</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsus*, II, xiii; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, p. 437

<sup>[7]</sup> John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (1966, Moody Press), pp. 126, 176, 178, 189, 197,199.

<sup>[8]</sup> Commodianus, *Instructions*, XLI; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, p. 211. Cf. Hippolytus, *Treatise on the Antichrist*, 44-46; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. V, p. 213; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, VII, xvii; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII, p. 214; Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ad Rev. 7:2; 12:6, 7-9; 14; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII, p. 356. See also, Augustine, *City of God*, XX, xxix, where the writer devotes a whole chapter to the future coming of Elijah, without once understanding that Malachi wrote of John the Baptist.

<sup>[9]</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Sacred History*, II, xxviii-xxix; emphasis added. Lactantius (A.D. 260-330) makes remarks about Nero commonly interpreted in reference to Revelation's beast. See *Of the Manner in which the Persecutors Died*, Chpt. II; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, p. 302.

<sup>[10]</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Sacred History*, II, xxviii-xxix; emphasis added. Lactantius (A.D. 260-330) makes remarks about Nero commonly interpreted in reference to Revelation's beast. See *Of the Manner in which the Persecutors Died*, Chpt. II; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, p. 302.

<sup>[11]</sup> Tertullian, *Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh*, XXIV; cf. *Apology*, XXXII.

<sup>[12]</sup> Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ad 11:7; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII, p. 354; emphasis added.

<sup>[13]</sup> Victorinus' commentary is semi-preterist throughout: Jerusalem and the temple still exist; Nero is the beast; his death is indicated by beast receiving a wound to the head; the seven heads point to Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, and Nerva

Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ad 11:8; 13:13; 17:10, 11, 16; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII, pp.355, 357, 358.

<sup>[14]</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XX, xix; cf., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, xxv-xxviii; Lactantius, *Divine Inst.* VII, xxv; emphasis added.

<sup>[15]</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, IV, vi; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, p. 353.

<sup>[16]</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsus*, IV, xii, xiii; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, pp.501, 502.

<sup>[17]</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, IV, xxi-xxii; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, p. 505, 506.

<sup>[18]</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, XXIV; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII, p. 219.

<sup>[19]</sup> Article XVII: Of Christ's Return to Judgment. They [the scriptures] condemn also others who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.

<sup>[20]</sup> See generally, R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (1920, Edinburgh), p. clxxxiv.

<sup>[21]</sup> Ex. 21:33, 36.

<sup>[22]</sup> Isa. 1:3

<sup>[23]</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Stomata*, V, viii; Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II, p. 457.

<sup>[24]</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XX, viii; Loeb ed.

<sup>[25]</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Bk. X, 315-320; Virgil, *Aeneid*, Bk. VI, 734-769; cf. Justin Martyr, *1<sup>st</sup> Apology*, VIII, Ante-Nicene Fathers, p. 165.

<sup>[26]</sup> This, of course, means that there are two millennia that are not coterminous. Augustine recognized the problem inherent in the single millennium model, but could not solve it. "This last persecution by Antichrist will last for three years and six months, as we have already

said, and as is stated both in the Apocalypse and by the prophet Daniel. Though this time is brief, it is rightly debated whether it belongs to the thousand years during which it is said that the devil is bound and the saints reign with Christ, or whether this short span is to be added to those years and is over and above them. For if we say that it belongs to the thousand years, then it will be found that the reign of the saints with Christ extends not for the same length of time as the binding of the devil, but for a longer time...How, then does Scripture include in the same limit of a thousand years both the binding of the devil and the reign of the saints, if the binding of the devil is to cease three years and six months before the reign of a thousand years of the saints with Christ? Augustine, *The City of God*, XX, xiii; Loeb ed.

<sup>[27]</sup> 1) Egyptians, 2) Midianites, 3) other nations during period of the judges, 4) Assyrians, 5) Chaldeans, 6) Medes and Persians, 7) Greeks under Antiochus.

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<sup>[29]</sup> *Exposition on the Apocalypse*, ibid pp. 136, 137.

<sup>[30]</sup> *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, 5:405-6, 408; ibid. p 200. Franciscan commentaries on Revelation included Peter Olivi's *Lectura* and Ubertino of Casale's *The Tree of Life of the Crucified Jesus*, both of which are nothing if not a complete "Franciscanization" of Revelation.

<sup>[31]</sup> (Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ad 7:2; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, p. 352.)