

PREPOSTEROUS PRETERISM

by Laurence A. Justice

I have in my possession a post card I recently received in the mail. Superimposed on a background of a beautiful sunset are the words “The Second Coming of Jesus Christ Already Happened.” My first reaction to this card was, What? What wacko sent this and who would even print such a thing?” After looking into the matter I found that the person who sent this card is no isolated loony with too much time on his hands. Instead he is one who has been caught up in an error that is having increasing influence on modern Christians.

This error is called preterism, P-R-E-T-E-R-I-S-M, and those who believe this way are called preterists.

Some time ago I preached a message which I called “Bible Prophecy and the Year 2000” in which I pointed out that as the new millennium approaches there will be a tremendous upsurge of emphasis on and interest in Bible prophecy. The first ripples of this surge came in 1987 with publication of the book “Eighty Eight Reasons Why the Rapture Will Come in 1988.” Now larger waves of this interest and emphasis are beginning to swell and preterism is part of these larger waves.

In this message we want to consider preterism and measure it by the word of God. First of all,

WHAT IS PRETERISM?

The word *preterist* and its relative *preterit* means simply, past or by-gone. When this word is used of a verb tense it refers to an action as being perfectly past or finished. When used to refer to a person, a *preterist* is a person who is primarily concerned with the past.

According to the “Random House Dictionary Of The English Language” when this term is used of a person’s view of biblical prophecy, a preterist is “one who maintains that the prophecies in the Apocalypse have already been fulfilled.”

Preterism includes one’s views, not only of the book of Revelation, but of all other biblical prophecy as well. Preterism is the opposite of and contrasts with futurism which sees the books of Daniel and Revelation and much other biblical prophecy as having its fulfillment still in the future rather than in the past.

The options available in looking at Bible prophecy are that prophecy is either basically predictive or basically descriptive. The preterist relegates that which is to be future to the past.

It is very important to understand that there are different kinds and degrees of preterists. There are what are sometimes called full preterists and there are what are called partial preterists. Full preterists believe that all prophecy in scripture has already been fulfilled. Partial preterists believe that only some of the prophecy in scripture has already been fulfilled.

This matter becomes confusing when we realize that there are partial preterists among

premillennials and among amillennials and among post millennials. Hal Lindsay and Jack Van Impe who call themselves premillennials make good money mixing preterism and futurism in their books on prophecy.

Now where did this type of thinking come from? Well, preterists base many of their theories on the non-biblical apocryphal book of I Maccabees. This book claims to be a history of the Maccabean wars in which Israel struggled to be free from the successors of Alexander the Great who were called the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. I Maccabees 1:54 declares that Antiochus Epiphanes, a Seleucid king, was the little horn of Daniel and was the one who actually set up the abomination of desolation of which Daniel 12 speaks.

Preterists also love to quote Josephus as an authority for their thinking. Flavius Josephus was a Jewish army general and historian who wrote an eyewitness history of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem between 66 and 70 AD. Josephus, an unregenerate, unbelieving Jew who was not in sympathy with the cause of Jesus Christ, declared that Daniel's writings were fulfilled in the Roman general Titus's conquest of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Eusebius, the so-called father of church history who lived in the fourth century AD also bought Josephus' interpretation of Daniel's prophecy as being fulfilled by the Romans. Because of its heavy reliance on the views of I Maccabees and Josephus, preterism may properly be called Maccabeanism or Josephusism.

Most Bible historians today recognize the Jesuit priest Alcasar who died in 1613 AD as being the originator of modern preterism. Other fairly well known preterists include F.W. Farrar, an Anglican clergyman who lived from 1831 to 1903 and was Chaplain to Queen Victoria and who in 1879 wrote "The Life & Works Of St. Paul" which is still studied today.

Philip Mauro who worked and wrote in the early years of the twentieth century has been very influential among preterists. Leading contemporary preterists include Max King and Ed Stevens who are both Campbellites. Alarming to me is the fact that the present day upsurge of the twisted thinking of preterism is taking place largely, though not exclusively, among those who call themselves Baptists. Probably the most visible and vocal preterist today is John L. Bray of Lakeland, Florida who is a Southern Baptist evangelist.

Bray's book "The Rapture of The Christian" is being mailed free to Southern Baptist pastors around the country and somehow a copy of it has fallen into my hands and I have recently finished reading it. By the way, the post card which I mentioned at the outset of this message is actually an advertisement for something called the SOVEREIGN GRACE PRETERIST SEMINAR in San Diego, California, July 31-August 1, 1998 and the address for those with questions is KINGDOM OF SOVEREIGN GRACE in Sacramento, California.

Next let us consider the matter of

WHAT PRETERISM TEACHES

There are three major things they teach at which we shall look here.

First preterists teach **that the prophecies of the book of Daniel have already been fulfilled.**

Preterism views Daniel 11 as being a history of Alexander the Great's successors up to and including the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes in verses 21-32. Preterism says that Antiochus Epiphanes was the little horn of Daniel's visions. Whenever anyone says Antiochus was the fulfillment of any part of the book of Daniel, that person is either a preterist or has been influenced by preterism.

Preterism rejects the application of Daniel's writings to the second coming of Christ. Preterists find fulfillments of Daniel's prophecies in persons and events which preceded even Christ's first coming. Preterists would close the book of Daniel for good and keep it closed.

Secondly preterists believe **that the prophecies of the book of Revelation have already been fulfilled.**

They don't see any prophecies in the book having to do with a future coming of Jesus Christ. Instead these people hold that the book of Revelation is a record of the conflicts of the early churches with Judaism and paganism.

F.W. Farrar believed that Revelation was written in the summer of 68 AD and he actually said that the third section of the book, the "things which shall be hereafter," all took place between 68 and 70 AD surrounding the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans. According to Farrar everything in chapters 4 through 19 of Revelation took place in the troublous times when Nero began to persecute Christians in 64 AD.

John L. Bray says in his book "The Rapture Of The Christian" that the tragic holocaust of 67 to 70 AD when the Romans crucified thousands of rebellious Jews **was** the great tribulation.

Farrar saw the beast of Revelation 13 as being the emperor Nero and most shocking of all he said that "...the fall of Jerusalem (in 70 AD) was in the fullest sense, the Second Advent of the Son of Man..." Farrar and other preterists say that the reason we know that Revelation has already been fulfilled is because of the word "quickly" which is used in Revelation 2:5,16,3:2,11:14 and 22:20.

Let's look at two of these uses of the word "quickly" just to see what these preterests are talking about. Look at Revelation 11:14. John is writing about the great Woes of the tribulation here when he says, "The second woe is past; and, behold, the third woe cometh **quickly**." Now look at Revelation 22:20. "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come **quickly**. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Preterists reason that if the Lord said he would come *quickly* He certainly would not have waited 2,000 years to come back.

A third thing which preterists teach is **that Jesus Christ has already returned.**

Joe V. Thomas, pastor of the Orthodox Baptist Church of Pensacola, Florida, said in a 1998 letter to pastors on his mailing list; “The great deception in the religious world today is...that the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the events associated with it are yet to occur in the future.”

Preterists teach that Jesus Christ returned in the year 70 AD when the Roman army conquered and destroyed Jerusalem.

Here’s what John L. Bray in his book, “The Rapture Of Christians” says:

“I have come to the conclusion that the event which we have termed ‘the Second Coming of Christ’ actually took place in the first century during that generation of people who lived in the time of Christ, according to the prophecy and predictions of both Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. All teaching, therefore, concerning the resurrection and judgment connected with the second coming of Christ must be studied and understood in the light of this context.”

Here’s another quote from the same book: “When Christ came in 70 AD he raised all the Old Testament saints (from the dead)...the dead were raised then and the living Christians did not precede them. The living Christians also would be resurrected but at the time of their death, not at some long, distant, future time away....dead Christians were resurrected when Christ came in AD 70...”

“What happens to a Christian when he dies? He leaves his old body and receives his resurrection body at that time.” “Christians no longer have to wait until a future second coming of Christ to obtain their new bodies.”

The main point of all of John L. Bray’s writings seems to be that Jesus Christ returned as the Roman army to destroy Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Joe V. Thomas said in the above quoted letter to pastors that “The judgment day occurred at the Second Coming in 70 AD.”

Preterists try to make Matthew 16:28 mean that Christ was predicting the time of his second coming to be in 70 AD. “Verily I say unto you, There be **some standing here**, which shall not taste of death, **till** they see the Son of man **coming** in his kingdom.”

In his book “Matthew 24 Fulfilled” John L. Bray says that the Lord Jesus was saying here in Matthew 16:28 that he would come back before some of his disciples died. Matthew 24:34 is a favorite proof text of preterists for teaching that Christ Himself said that he would return in 70 AD. The Lord is speaking of his Second Coming here and He says, “Verily I say unto you, **This generation** shall not pass, till **all** these things be **fulfilled**.”

Preterists reason that a generation is a period of forty years and since the Lord said that that generation would not pass away until all the things he had been saying about his return should be fulfilled, and since a generation was a period of forty years, forty years from the time the Lord made this statement would put the time at about 70 AD, therefore preterists conclude that the Lord Jesus was predicting that his return would be in 70 AD.

Along these lines John L. Bray says in the above quoted book, “Where do we get it from that there is yet in our future to be a Second Coming of Christ? Why would God put off for thousands of years into the future that which he promised would take place in that generation? It doesn’t really make sense does it?...Jesus and the writers of the New Testament clearly taught that the Second Coming of Christ would occur in their generation in that century.”

Finally and most importantly in this message on preterism is the matter of

WHAT GOD’S WORD TEACHES

First of all let us consider what the Word of God teaches **about the book of Daniel**.

Prophetic events in this book have most definitely **not** all been fulfilled. As we have seen in our Sunday evening studies in Daniel, especially those in chapters 7,8 & 10-12, these prophecies pertain to “the end” climaxing in the Second Coming of Christ, the destruction of the little horn or Antichrist, the restoration and conversion of Israel, the resurrection of the dead, the rewarding of the righteous and the reign of Christ on the earth.

Events in Daniel 10-12 are specifically stated to be yet in the future. They are said in Daniel 11:40 to be “at the time of the end.” This is decisive in denying preterist attempts to find Antiochus Epiphanes in this part of Daniel because Antiochus died 163 years before Christ came the first time.

Also the Lord Jesus specifically states in Matthew 24:15 that the setting up of the abomination of desolation was still future when He (Christ) was living on earth. “When ye therefore **shall see** the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand).”

Antiochus could not possibly have set up the abomination of desolation in 164 BC because Jesus Christ, 194 years later, spoke of this event as still being future. No, the Lord Jesus Christ rejected the preterist view concerning the book of Daniel and nowhere do those who try to make Daniel entirely history fail more miserably than here in Daniel 10-12.

2. Next let us consider what the word of God teaches **about the book of Revelation**.

As we have pointed out, preterists teach that the prophecies in this book have all or mostly been fulfilled already. Revelation is a book of prophecy! Seven times the word prophecy is used to describe the contents of this book. Revelation 1:3 is one example. “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.” The other six instances are in Revelation 11:6, 19:10, 22:7,10,18,19.

Prophecy means two things: 1. It means forthtelling or proclaiming God’s message and 2. it means foretelling. Much prophecy is purely predictive.

Chapters 4-19 of Revelation refer to the same seven year period as does the seventieth week of

Daniel 9:20-27, the tribulation. This part of Revelation had not been fulfilled as of the writing of the book of Revelation because Revelation still speaks of the tribulation as being future at the time when Revelation was written. The Lord's great prophetic discourse in Matthew 24-25 which has much to say about the coming tribulation is also mostly still future as far as its fulfillment and thus is in harmony with the book of Revelation.

Everything from the fourth chapter to the end of the book of Revelation is still future but preterism renders both Daniel and Revelation meaningless to us because it makes both of these books speak only of events which took place in the far distant past either in the Inter Testamental period or in the first century after Christ.

Thirdly let us consider here what God's word says **about the Second Coming of Christ.**

The book of Revelation is all about the Second Coming of Christ, His personal appearing. Seven times Revelation states that Christ will come again. Revelation 1:7, 2:25,3:3,3:11,22:7,12,& 20. The book of Revelation opens with "he cometh" in 1:7 and closes in 22:20 with "Even so, come Lord Jesus."

The apostle John actually wrote the Revelation in 95 or 96 AD, 25 years after the preterists say that Christ returned in 70 AD. Something is wrong with their dates, fatally wrong as far as their system is concerned. Revelation 1:7 says, "Behold, **he cometh** (or is yet to come - future tense) with clouds; and **every eye shall see him**, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen."

Acts 1:11 says that when the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection his disciples saw him as he went and the angel told them the Lord would come back that very same way as they had seen him go. "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."

If Christ came back in 70 AD, why did no one see Him? If some did see Him why did they not say that they had seen Him? Why didn't anyone see him come back if he came the same manner in which he went away? Revelation 1:7 says that when Christ comes back every eye shall see him but nothing like this happened in 70 AD nor at any other time from that day till this. How will we know when the Lord Jesus comes back? God's word says that we shall see Him and if we see Him we won't have to be told that he has come back.

How in the world can preterists expect us to see the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD as the Second Coming of Christ? Several verses promise that Christ's coming will be "quickly." For example the Lord Jesus says in Revelation 22:7, "Behold, I come **quickly**..." Because of such statements preterists say that this just adds to the evidence that Christ came back within forty years from the time he said this.

Well, it may not appear to us that the Lord is coming quickly or shortly because 2,000 years have elapsed since these words were spoken and still they have not been fulfilled. But II Peter 3:8-9 answers these "quickly" arguments. Here the scripture says, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of

this one thing, that **one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise**, as some men count slackness; but **is long-suffering** to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” Peter says here that God measures time differently than we do and time means nothing to Him. What seems like an eternity to us is but the blink of an eye with Him.

In Matthew 24:34 where the Lord was talking about His return and events surrounding that return He says, “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” The word *generation* does not as the preterists claim refer to a period of forty years time. Instead it refers to what we call a **progeny** or offspring or issue.

Often in his earthly ministry the Lord Jesus spoke of a wicked, perverse, crooked, adulterous generation or progeny meaning people with the same attributes and character. “Generation” in Matthew 24:34 does not mean forty years of time but **progeny**. This progeny, this wicked offspring with these wicked characteristics, shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled.

Now look at Mark 13:32. Here the Lord Jesus says in speaking of his return, “But of that day and that hour **knoweth no man**, no, not the angels which are in heaven, **neither the Son**, but the Father.” Here the Lord says that during his earthly ministry not even He Himself knew the date of his return.

But the preterists contradict the Lord Jesus and say that he actually did know when he would return and that he actually predicted what they call the “time frame” of his coming. Listen, a forty year “time frame” is still a time. It is still a date so the preterists have the Lord predicting the time of his return even though he had said that he did not know that time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion preterism tends to destroy any future significance of Bible prophecy and reduces that prophecy to little more than a literary or historical curiosity with little if any meaning for today. Worst of all, preterism takes away the blessed hope from God’s people and thus robs God’s people of their comfort and encouragement as they face the difficulties and trials and troubles of this old wicked world.

In light of the clear statements of God’s word then, preterism is truly **preposterous!**