Preterism and the Church's Witness

(And: how I came to embrace full preterism)

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Bible Version
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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

Introduction

The (full) preterist view of eschatology holds that virtually all biblical prophecy was fulfilled in the 1st century AD. According to this view, Jesus' return, along with the Tribulation, Millennium, Judgment, and Resurrection, have already happened. They are all in our past.[1]

Like other preterists, I adopted "partial preterist" notions prior to embracing full preterism.
Partial (or "orthodox") preterism holds that much of Matthew 24 has reference to first-century events, but that some aspects look beyond to Jesus' return at the end of time.
In this scheme, the fall of Jerusalem was a pointer to, and guarantee of, the Final Judgment.
Many partial preterists also regard 2 Peter 3, and much of Revelation, as relating to first-century events.

I first encountered partial preterism in Dr. Cornelis Vanderwaal's *Search the Scriptures* series.
Vanderwaal applies Matthew 16:28, all of Matthew 24 – 25, and Matthew 26:64 to Jesus' first-century coming in judgment against the Jews.[2]
In his Volume 7 (Matthew-Luke), section headed *The Son of Man Comes* (Matthew 24:1 – 25:46), Vanderwaal writes the following (page 52):

> *The end of the age*. What the disciples actually asked Jesus was: "What will be the sign of your coming (*parousia*) and the close of the age?" (24:3). They spoke not of the *world's* ending but of the end of the *age*, by which they meant the age that would come before the time of the Messiah's appearance. The Messiah would bring the "coming age," the last days.

[1] Perhaps the only prophecies yet to be fulfilled are those relating to the general conversion of the Jews (in Romans 11:11-32). Certain other prophecies are in the process of being fulfilled — notably those that anticipate the conversion of all nations to Christ through the gospel (e.g., Ps 2:8; 86:9; Dan 7:14; Rom 4:13; Gal 3:8; Rev 15:4).

[2] Cornelis Vanderwaal, *Search the Scriptures* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1978), Volume 7: Matthew-Luke.
His comments relating to Jesus' first-century coming are found on pp. 42 (Mt 16:28); 48-52 (Mt 24:1 – 25:46); 53-54 (Mt 26:64).
Unfortunately, Vanderwaal didn't spell out in detail how he thought Matthew 25's parables, and the Sheep and Goats Judgment, were fulfilled in the 1st century. Vanderwaal served as a minister in several Reformed churches and wrote many works on exegesis, prophecy, ecumenism, and church history.

I was further influenced by the following partial preterist works:
An Eschatology of Victory (J. Marcellus Kik).
The Time is at Hand (Jay Adams).
The Days of Vengeance (David Chilton).

Other contemporary Reformed theologians who have embraced this (limited) version of preterism include R.C. Sproul and Kenneth Gentry.

My first encounter with the full (consistent) preterist view was via the internet in the 1990s.
Of all the Scripture references employed by preterists, the one that convinced and converted me was Jesus' remarkable declaration in Matthew 16:27-28:

> [27] *"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.*
> [28] *Truly, I say to you, there are <u>some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom</u>."*

What could be plainer:
Some of those present would live to witness Jesus' return as King and Judge!

Other verses that convinced me included the following:

- Jesus' promise in the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24:34).
- Jesus' promises to the churches in Revelation (Rev 2:25; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).
- Revelation's claim concerning the imminent fulfillment of its prophecies (Rev 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10).
- The statements of Hebrews (Heb 10:25, 37), James (Jas 5:7-9) and Peter (1Pet 4:5, 7, 17).
- Paul's assumption that some of his readers would live until the Resurrection (1Cor 15:51; 1Thes 4:15).

The choice really boiled down to this: Were the New Testament (NT) writers, and Jesus himself, mistaken concerning the time of fulfillment, or has the Church through the centuries been mistaken?
Given the impossibility of the first option, one has to conclude that the Church is at fault.
The Church has missed Jesus' coming because it has misunderstood the <u>nature</u> of that coming.
And also, the nature of events tied to his coming: the Tribulation, Judgment, Resurrection, and Millennium.

Note that several theologians from earlier centuries were also partial preterists.
Scholars such as Henry Hammond (1605-1660), John Lightfoot (1602-1675),[3] and John Owen (1616-1683) regarded much of the Olivet Discourse, along with 2 Peter 3 (the destruction of the world by fire), as finding fulfillment in the Jewish-Roman War, and particularly in its culmination — the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

One of the earliest proponents of preterism was Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) in the Netherlands, whose views apparently inspired John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

[3] For Lightfoot's preterist views, see the article on this website: *John Lightfoot — an early preterist*.
John Lightfoot is sometimes confused with the 19th century bishop of Durham, J.B. (Joseph Barber) Lightfoot (1828-1889).
There was also an Oxford clergyman, John Prideaux Lightfoot (1803-1887).

How could the Church have been mistaken for 1900+ years?

I offer the following suggestions:

1. Preterist expectations (of first-century fulfillment) were certainly part of the Church's original teaching:
   Every single NT author expected Jesus to return soon — certainly in his readers' lifetime.
   That expectation was based on Jesus' own promises!
   Jude refers to the need to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).[4]
   By this he means the body or system of doctrine that the apostles had taught.
   That this apostolic faith was fundamentally preterist may be deduced from Jude's own expectation of imminent judgment, as well as his claim that the prophesied "last time" had arrived (Jude 1:14-19).
2. Despite unanimity concerning the timing, there seems to have been early confusion as to what would actually transpire when Jesus returned. NT authors sought to correct such faulty notions and assumptions. See John 21:22-23; 1 Corinthians 15:12ff.; 2 Thessalonians 2:1ff.; 2 Timothy 2:17-18.
3. Most of the apostles and other early leaders perished before AD 70 — many as martyrs under Nero.
   The preterist view waned with their passing. By the 2nd century most church leaders were Gentile converts from paganism. An unimaginative, excessive literalism led many of them to apply Old Testament (OT) prophecies not to the present gospel/kingdom/Church age, but to an as-yet-future millennial kingdom.
   Such a hermeneutic meant that the Olivet Discourse and the Apocalypse remained similarly unfulfilled.
   The early Church Father Irenaeus (ca. 130-202 AD), bishop of Lyon, is a case in point. On the one hand Irenaeus claims that the Church of his day enjoyed an unbroken succession of teachers from the apostles, and that John lived not so long ago, almost in his own day. As a youth he personally attended some lectures of Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (ca. 70-155 AD), who was himself (supposedly) taught by John.
   Yet when discussing the number 666 Irenaeus confesses his own ignorance and claims that John never revealed the riddle's solution. Irenaeus hesitantly offers three possible (but unlikely) solutions.[5]
   He assumes that Revelation depicts future events, so for him Nero wasn't even a contender.
   All of which shows that the significance of Revelation was lost to the Church very early on in its history.[6]
4. For much of Christian history, the Bible has been inaccessible.
   Ignorance and superstition characterized the pre-Reformation Church — both its leaders and its people.
   Thanks to Luther and the printing press, the Bible became accessible to the masses.
5. Church tradition and confessional requirements ensure that the Church is inherently conservative.
   Now this a good thing: innovation (especially of a doctrinal nature) is almost always bad.
   Confessional statements can indeed be helpful, and churches that lack them often drift over time.
   The problem arises when tradition and confessions become idols — when church leaders interpret Scripture in light of the confessions rather than listening to Scripture itself.
   When that happens, church leaders nullify (neutralize) the word of God by their tradition (Mk 7:13).
6. Partial Preterism has been advocated by competent theologians since the 17th century, but their views and writings remained confined to academic circles. Their views didn't filter down!
   Even today, the (otherwise) thorough training afforded to ministers, for example, in Reformed seminaries, doesn't seem to lead to an awareness of the preterist view. Why is that?

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[4] Jude urges his readers to contend for the truth because numerous false teachers had infiltrated the churches (Jude 1:4) and were promoting new doctrines at variance with what the apostles had taught.

[5] See Kenneth Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* (Fountain Inn, SC: Victorious Hope Publishing, 2010), pp. 205-208.

[6] Nevertheless, there remained some awareness, even until the 5th century AD, that at least some of Revelation's prophecies concerned Nero and the fall of Jerusalem. See Kenneth Gentry's online article *Preterism in History*: https://postmillennialworldview.com/2019/05/03/preterism-in-history/.

Why is preterism growing today?

Preterism is a grass-roots movement.
This has to be so, because church leadership is inherently resistant to change.

I offer the following reasons for the increasing acceptance of full preterism:

1. The internet democratizes knowledge.
   Plebs like myself can evaluate theological arguments. We can examine different viewpoints.
   And just as Martin Luther made devasting use of the printed tract (thanks to the newly-invented printing press), so modern preterists are making good use of the internet.
   Christians can communicate and network internationally. They can examine any topic, anytime.
2. Many Christians are disillusioned with foolish futurist views.
   I am thinking especially of premillennial dispensationalism — the ludicrous interpretations of Scripture, the failed predictions, the absurd focus on the Middle East and on the latest prophetic signs.
   So much nonsense taught by prominent Bible teachers!
3. We won't today be killed for "heresy" — handed over by church authorities to the State for execution.
   The rule of law prevails, along with the right to question and challenge.
   For such we can be profoundly thankful.

Needed: An Optimistic Eschatology!

The Church today has a depressing view of the future. Our enemies are everywhere winning.
Our only hope is to be raptured out of this mess, or for Jesus to return and transform the world.

But what the Church really needs is a new eschatology — a faith-enhancing and prayer-promoting worldview.
An understanding that:

- Jesus through his death and resurrection has inaugurated a new world order (Revelation 21 – 22).
- In him the Throne of David has been fully restored (Lk 1:32-33; Ac 2:30-36; Rev 3:21; cf. Isa 9:6-7).
- Jesus rules the world from the heavenly Zion/Jerusalem (Ps 2:6; 110:1-2; Rev 22:3).
- All nations belong to him as his reward and inheritance (Ps 2:8; Dan 7:13-14; Ac 15:16-17).
- The nations will be won for him through the gospel (Mt 28:18-20; Gal 3:8; Rev 15:4).
- Christians live with him in "Jerusalem", and co-rule with him over the nations (Rev 22:5; Dan 7:27).
- The Church (his Bride) is the earthly manifestation of this city, serving as a light and ministering gospel healing to the nations (Rev 21:24; 22:1-2, 17).

John's visions in Revelation were given to brace the first-century Church for the coming persecution.
Those who first heard or read it would be blessed and strengthened (Rev 1:3).
John saw and wrote probably in AD 64, just prior to the outbreak of Nero's brutal persecution.
What these Christians most needed was a worldview of victory:

- That they weren't just a small sect but were part of a great multitude destined for heaven (e.g., Rev 7:9ff.).
- That their enemies were wholly under God's control and were merely acting to fulfill his predestinating purposes (e.g., Rev 17:17).

Isn't that the very worldview we need today?

Preterism and Christian Unity

The Christian Church has ably dealt with major issues in its history:
In the early Councils, biblical truths relating to Jesus' divinity and humanity, and the Trinity, were defended.
Errors of various types were exegetically refuted by church leaders (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine).
The Reformation restored soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and the doctrine of Scripture.

But eschatology has never been adequately thrashed out.
Today's contradictory schools of eschatology are largely based on differing interpretations of John's obscure 1000-year "millennium" (Revelation 20).[7]
The Church needs to re-examine its eschatology. It needs to ditch outmoded views.
It needs to take the New Testament's immanence statements seriously.
And it needs to examine OT prophecies to see what light these shed on the timing and nature of the Parousia.

Preterism has the potential, in the longer term, to promote Christian unity.
But before achieving that it will cause much division. Leaders with vested interests will oppose the truth.

The Apologetic Value of Preterism

Preterism has the potential to overcome some major objections to Christian orthodoxy:

1. The Jews primarily reject Jesus because he (supposedly) failed to inaugurate the kingdom of God.
   According to the OT prophets, Messiah would inaugurate God's eternal kingdom — his reign of peace and justice.
   Preterism, with its emphasis on prophetic fulfillment, can show that the kingdom has indeed come.
   That it is spiritual in nature — not to be thought of as a socio-political entity like that of David and Solomon.
   It's a kingdom whose citizens own Jesus as Lord and Savior; it grows through the proclamation of the gospel.
   Yet it does influence a nation's culture as more and more Christians exert a positive influence.
2. Many liberals and skeptics defend their positions by pointing to the (supposedly mistaken) eschatological expectations of Jesus and the early Christians.
   Albert Schweitzer and Bertrand Russell are classic examples.[8]
   Again, preterism can overcome such objections by showing how Jesus' (and his followers') expectations were indeed fulfilled.
3. The notion of a yet future Parousia, after 2000 years, seems ludicrous to many people.
   Past fulfillment, on the other hand, isn't merely Scriptural; it's also eminently reasonable.
   Broaching the concept to non-Christians may very well pique their interest.
   (Indeed, I have personally witnessed one instance of this.)

Pointing out the past fulfillment of Jesus' promises is likely to have a strong apologetic value:
Jesus has kept his promises → He's trustworthy → He <u>is</u> the Messiah.

[7] The most sensible millennial school, postmillennialism, has much in common with full preterism in its view of the future.
[8] See Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*. Lecture given at the Battersea Town Hall on Sunday 6th March, 1927, under the auspices of the South London Branch of the National Secular Society. Russell's lecture can be viewed online: https://users.drew.edu/~jlenz/whynot.html.

Evangelism and the Proclamation of the Kingdom

What if the Church started to proclaim the fact that Jesus has already come, just as he promised?
What if we were to emphasize his present reign — that the kingdom is here already?
That the world is under new management (so to speak), with Jesus as its CEO?
Proclaiming the kingdom ought to be an integral part of evangelism (Ac 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).
After all, the gospel is "the good news of the kingdom of God" (Lk 4:43; 8:1; 16:16).
Jesus' present reign should serve as a prime incentive for repentance — for one to "join his team" (Mt 4:17; Ps 2:10-12).

An Appeal for Tolerance

Premillennial dispensationalism is usually tolerated as being within the pale of orthodoxy.
Yet some of the things it advocates really are quite heterodox.
Two examples of apparently "acceptable heresy":

1. Its notion of a rebuilt temple, complete with animal sacrifices.
   But any such reinstitution would constitute a blasphemous denial of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice.
2. Its notion of Jesus' future 1000-year reign from a literal throne in Jerusalem, coupled with its denial of his present reign despite clear biblical affirmations to the contrary (Mt 28:18; Ac 2:30-36; Rev 3:21; Ps 110:1-2).
   Remember, expectations of a political reign led the Jews to crucify their Messiah.

The point being this: Is preterism any worse than premillennialism?

Our Privileged Era

As noted earlier, preterist eschatology and the meaning of Revelation were lost very early on.
The fact that 666 refers to Nero was rediscovered independently by several German scholars in the 1830s.[9]
This identification came to be widely accepted by Bible scholars.[10]
The significance and interpretation of John's visions in Revelation have been largely deciphered by recent commentators. To give just one example, Kurt Simmons has written a detailed verse-by-verse exposition of Revelation, and of Daniel as well.[11]

Listening intently to Scripture, preterists today are:

- Interpreting Revelation according to its own time statements.
- Taking Jesus' promises seriously.
- Appreciating the apostolic expectations concerning the imminence of the Parousia, Judgment, etc.
- Building on the good work of earlier partial preterist authors and theologians.

My hope is that the biblical truths of preterism will soon be taken up by the whole Church, and that Christians everywhere will come to appreciate the fulfillment of all of God's promises and purposes.
Soli Deo Gloria.

[9] "Nero Caesar", transliterated from its Greek form (Νερων Καισαρ) into Hebrew characters, gives *Nrwn Qsr.* These (Hebrew) letters each have numerical values; together they total 666. See my article on this website: *The Number of the Beast (666)*.
[10] Gentry lists some of these scholars in *Before Jerusalem Fell*, p. 200.
[11] See Kurt Simmons' website: http://preteristcentral.com.

Appendix: Eschatology — an undeveloped doctrine

The following is from Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*.
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House (5th printing, 1988).
Excerpt from page 1150, chapter entitled "Introduction to Eschatology":

> Because theology is usually defined and refined in response to challenges and controversies, and the number of major debates over eschatology has been few, **it has remained relatively undeveloped in comparison to such doctrines as the nature of the sacraments and the person and work of Christ**. These latter doctrines, being more central to the Christian faith and experience, were extensively treated at an earlier point. James Orr observed that as church history advanced, different doctrines predominated. The usual order of theological studies reflects the order in which the various doctrines attained prominence. Orr suggested that, in keeping with this sequence, eschatology would be the dominant matter on the modern theological agenda.[1] Whether it has been the supreme topic might be disputed, for in our century a great amount of attention has been given to revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet it is certainly true that in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, eschatology has received closer examination than it ever had before.
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> [1] James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952 reprint), pp. 20-30.

[Emphasis added. End of quote.]

Comment: Hopefully in response to the preterist challenge, churches and their leaders will reexamine Scripture and come to a more unified and biblically faithful understanding of eschatology.