

Did Jesus Already Come Back: A Look At Preterism

SUMMARY: Full preterism is not an acceptable interpretation within evangelical eschatology. The Scriptures themselves do not teach such a position, and the Church has not consistently held to such a position. Finally, the nature and timing of both the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead do not allow such a position.

The word “preterism” is derived from the Latin *praeteritum* which means “the thing which is past.” It is a theological school of interpretation which views prophecy as having already been fulfilled, primarily in the judgment of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. There are basically two versions of this interpretive position: partial and full preterism.

Partial preterism views some or even most of the events of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25), Revelation, and the other prophecies of the Scriptures as being fulfilled in the past (typically the time of fulfillment is pointed to as the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 A.D.). For partial preterists, there are a few prophecies which are yet to be fulfilled and are thus future, including the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the renewal or re-creation of the heavens and Earth. Full preterism (sometimes called hyper-preterism) understands all prophecies and promises to have been fulfilled in the past such that no prophecy of Scripture has yet to be fulfilled. Most full preterists believe that the prophecies were fulfilled in the fall of the temple in 70 A.D., while others might say that final fulfillment occurred with the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century A.D.¹ Because all prophetic events are thought by them to be fulfilled in the past, full preterists deny a future bodily return of Christ, a physical resurrection at the end of this age, and a physical renewal of the present heavens and Earth.

The Village Church currently has no specific teaching on the proper school of interpretation of texts such as the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation. Elements of historic, futuristic, partial preteristic, and idealistic interpretations are acceptable within certain bounds. Therefore, this paper will not attempt to deal with the validity of historicism, futurism, partial preterism, or idealism.² Rather, this paper will attempt to highlight the reasons why full or “hyper” preterism “is not a legitimate evangelical option,”³ and thus is not acceptable for teaching or preaching within the context of The Village. In opposing this position, the paper will focus on four primary arguments against full preterism: the relevant texts which full preterists use, the history of interpretation within the Church, the nature of the return of Christ, and the nature of the resurrection.

1 Given that the most common streams of full preterism argue for a 70 A.D. return, most of the arguments of this paper will concentrate on that particular view. Certainly some of the more minor and technical arguments would be somewhat different in opposing a 5th century full preterist interpretation.

2 Most commentaries on the book of Revelation should give ample coverage of the meanings of these terms.

3 From the introduction to the book of Revelation in the forthcoming ESV Study Bible. The introduction can currently be accessed at <http://www.esvstudybible.org/images/excerpt-revelation-intro.pdf>.

Misinterpretation of the Text

The most often used passage to attempt to prove the full preterist position is Matthew 24:34.⁴ The disciples had just asked Jesus about the destruction of the temple and His return (parousia) and Jesus responds by speaking about increasing tribulation and persecution which eventually consummates in His coming. This statement is then followed by the assertion in verse 34 that “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Full preterists interpret this verse to mean that the generation to which Jesus refers is the generation to which He is speaking, i.e. 1st century. Since the early to mid 1st century generation was not to pass away until Christ returns, then Christ must have returned sometime before the generation passed away, i.e. He must have returned prior to the 2nd century.

On first glance, this interpretation seems logical. However, what it fails to recognize is that verse 34 is preceded by a pertinent parable which drives the subsequent interpretation. Here is the relevant context:

Matthew 24:32-35 From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

From the surrounding context, we can see that Jesus’ reference to “this generation” was not specifically aimed toward His 1st century hearers, but rather toward those who “see all these things.” What things? The things which He has just described as signs of His coming: tribulation, the abomination which causes desolation, false prophets, severe astrological anomalies, etc. Therefore, it is clear that Jesus is not saying “you who hear this will not pass away before all is completed,” but rather “the generation which sees these signs will also see My coming.” He is saying that once the “branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves” we can know that “summer is near.” He is not saying “the branch is now tender and thus summer is near.” By failing to take into account the surrounding context, full preterists misinterpret the passage and thus miss out on the entire thrust of the text. While full preterists use many other passages to assert their position, each of these interpretations can be shown to suffer from the same disregard for or misunderstanding of the appropriate context.

4 Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Traditional Reflection

While some preterists would assert that their position was the understanding of the early church, evidence of such is severely lacking. Though partially preteristic tendencies are found in the patristic period, hyper-preterism was not seen as an orthodox understanding of Christ's revelation. Rather, the consistent testimony of the Church fathers is that, at the very least, the distinct hopes of a physical return of Christ, physical resurrection, and a renewed heavens and earth awaited them in the future.

Polycarp (c. 110-120 A.D.) - *I bless you for because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the number of martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. (The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 14:2. In Holmes M.W. The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translations. Baker Books, Grand Rapids (MI), 2004, p.239).*

Justin Martyr (c. 135 A.D.) - *But, in truth, He has even called the flesh to the resurrection, and promises to it everlasting life. For where He promises to save man, there He gives the promise to the flesh. For what is man but the reasonable animal composed of body and soul? Is the soul by itself man? No; but the soul of man. Would the body be called man? No, but it is called the body of man. If, then, neither of these is by itself man, but that which is made up of the two together is called man, and God has called man to life and resurrection, He has called not a part, but the whole, which is the soul and the body (Lost Works of Justin Martyr published by T&T Clark 1867, link <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txv/martyr7.htm>).*

Clement of Rome (c. 95 A.D.) - *Let us consider, beloved, how the Lord continually proves to us that there shall be a future resurrection, of which He has rendered the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising Him from the dead. Let us contemplate, beloved, the resurrection which is at all times taking place. Day and night declare to us a resurrection. The night sinks to sleep, and the day arises; the day departs, and the night comes on. (Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 1 Clement of Rome in his first epistle to the Corinthians, this is also known as '1 Clement' in some places).*

The witness of the early church points not in the direction of the full preterist position, but rather toward a vehement opposition against that which is today called full preterism. Belief in a past return and resurrection at the time of the writing of 2 Timothy⁵ was explicitly condemned as heretical and the early fathers believed that the same condemnation was deserved for such a

5 2 Timothy 2:16-18 *But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.*

belief during the early centuries of the church. Church fathers clearly expected and hoped for a physical resurrection coinciding with a future and physical return of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the very least, we have to admit that men who were alive during and/or immediately after 70 A.D. and living in the general area of Jerusalem, some of whom were disciples of the Lord's apostles themselves, had not the faintest inclination that they were already resurrected or that the Lord had already returned.⁶

The Return of Christ

The return of Christ is an essential doctrine within orthodox Christian confession. Nearly every New Testament writer explicitly refers to the coming of Jesus. Here is a brief overview of relevant texts:

- Matthew 24:44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.
- John 14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.
- Acts 1:11 ...and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."
- 1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.
- Hebrews 9:28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.
- James 5:8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.
- 2 Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.
- 1 John 3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.
- Revelation 22:20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

So important is this event that Paul, in his letter to Titus, calls it "our blessed hope" (Titus 2:13). It is quite obvious from a biblical perspective that the return of Christ is critical to Christian theology.

6 See also the Didache 10:5; 16:1ff (first century); Ignatius; Trallians 9:2; Smyrnaens 2:1; 6:1; Letter to Polycarp 3:2 (early second century); Polycarp 2:1; 6:2; 7:1. See also Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr.

Full preterists do not deny the return of Christ, but rather reinterpret the event as a spiritual return which was accomplished in the destruction of the temple. They would claim that the return of Christ was future from the perspective of the biblical writers, but is now from the vantage point of the 21st century to be viewed as having taken place in the past. It is very important to note that full preterists are forced to ignore any and all evidence for dating the relevant Biblical texts post-70 A.D. If a canonical book which mentions the future return or resurrection was written after 70 A.D. then the position would be logically and chronologically untenable. Though dating of the texts is notoriously difficult, nearly every major New Testament scholar would date at least some of the relevant canonical texts after 70 A.D.

The main point which we would like to discuss is the tendency to spiritualize the return of Christ and thus deny its physicality. It is important to note that no text even implicitly suggests a merely spiritual return of Christ. Rather, a number of texts suggest just the opposite. First, Acts tells us that Christ will return in the same way in which He ascended into heaven.⁷ His ascension was literal and physical; therefore, it seems certain that His return will share at least those characteristics. Second, 1 Thessalonians teaches that *“the Lord himself will descend from heaven”* not merely His spirit.⁸ Third, His coming is often called an *“appearing”* which rather strongly implies visibility. This theme of visibility is woven throughout the language of the biblical text. Revelation 1:7 says *“he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.”* Matthew 24:27 says, *“For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”* The hope and expectation of the New Testament authors, and Christ Himself, was a personal, physical, visible return at the end of the age.

The Resurrection of the Dead

The resurrection of the dead is another critical Christian doctrine. It was a primary dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees and was therefore one of the few times in which Jesus publicly aligned Himself with the Pharisaical party. This same debate was also seen as a major element to Paul’s theology as he viewed his persecution as revolving around the possibility of resurrection, starting with Jesus as the firstfruits and then extending outward from Him.⁹

7 Acts 1:9-11 *And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*

8 1 Thessalonians 4:16 *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*

9 See Acts 23:6-8 *Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Phari-*

As with the return of Christ, full preterists do not deny the doctrine, but rather reinterpret it to suit their own theological convictions. Resurrection is therefore reconceived as being mere spiritual life, with little or no physical reference.

This view is really only a more subtle form of Platonic¹⁰ tendencies to contrast body and spirit. The material world is reconceived as being less inherent to our nature and thus a merely spiritual existence is acceptable.¹¹ In other words, according to full preterism, we will share in a resurrection, but resurrection does not include the material world -- only that which is essentially spiritual. The Scriptures however do not play the physical off of the spiritual as though they are in opposition.¹² Rather, the text goes to great lengths to show the inherent value not only of spirit, but also of flesh.¹³

Paul deals with the issue of a pre-resurrected, post-death existence in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 and concludes that *“while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”* This current tent is our *“earthly home”* which is our physical body. This particular body is beset with all the weaknesses which are innate to a fallen existence. Therefore, we groan as we await something better. The full preterist, by denying a future bodily resurrection, is forced to concede that that which is better is merely casting off the current body. However, Paul’s hope is not that we might be *“unclothed,”* but rather that we might by *“further clothed”* by putting *“on our heavenly dwelling.”*

This language of groaning is also used by Paul in Romans 8:18-25 in which he discusses the very real longing of a physical world. As the creation groans due to the futility to which it has been subjected, so too do those with the Spirit groan as *“we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons.”* What does this adoption entail? Paul equates our complete adoption with *“the redemption of our bodies.”* Paul’s hope was not eternal spirituality.

It is clear from the biblical text that the resurrection is not merely spiritual. Furthermore, it is apparent that this event is a future happening which will occur *“on the last day.”*¹⁴ The future, bodily resurrection was made possible and certain by the past, physical resurrection of Christ Jesus.

sees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.

10 So named because of the relevant teachings of Plato on the matter.

11 This dichotomy between the physical and spiritual helps to explain why the promise of a new heavens and earth is interpreted by preterists as a non-physical reality.

12 The contrast between flesh and spirit especially in Johannine and Pauline literature is not referring to the two distinct aspects of man, but rather to the fallen nature versus the new nature (that which is born of and influenced by the Spirit).

13 Thus the importance of creation, incarnation, etc.

14 John 11:24 *Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’*

Conclusion

It is evident that full preterism is not an acceptable interpretation within evangelical eschatology. First, the Scriptures themselves do not teach such a position. Second, the Church has not consistently held to such a position. Finally, the nature and timing of both the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead do not allow such a position. Ultimately, full preterism so completely reinterprets Christ's return and the general resurrection that the Scriptural and traditional meanings have been completely replaced by a hyper-spiritual view of both. Such a hyper-spiritual view is completely unrelated to the historic meanings of the hope of return and resurrection. Therefore, though the full preterist may use the words "return" and "resurrection" they do not do so in a way which accords with the orthodox understanding of what those words actually meant within the context of the Scriptures. To speak of a merely spiritual return or resurrection is really to not speak of a return or resurrection at all as the Biblical authors use those concepts. Only by ignoring large portions of Scripture and thousands of years of Christian commentary and hope can one affirm the basic tenets of this school of thought.

Within the context of the Scriptures, Christ's return is associated with a general resurrection of the dead, the destruction of death,¹⁵ the final judgment and defeat of Satan,¹⁶ and a new heavens and new earth. As we scan the world today, we see that Satan's activity has not been completely halted, death is still enjoying its reign over men, and we live on the same earth upon which the prophets and apostles also walked. Therefore, we are left with only two possible options, only one of which is appropriate. First, we can deny the inspiration and thus inerrancy of the text and conclude that Matthew, Luke, Paul, Peter and John were mistaken. Or, and this is the only truly Christian option, we can decisively conclude that Jesus has not yet returned and fix our hope on that future and glorious day.

We certainly understand the tension which exists between the language of the soon and near return of Christ and the delay of thousands of years which the church has experienced. However, as Peter wrote¹⁷ in the 1st century, that which seems to be a delay

15 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

16 Revelation 20:7-10

17 2 Peter 3:1-13 *This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation. For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some*

to us is only so because of our limited understanding of the nature of God's relationship with time. Whether Christ returns tomorrow or 10,000 years from now, it is still soon and near, at least from God's perspective. The day of the Lord will surely come, whether we see it in our lifetimes or not. Though it has been nearly 2,000 years since He ascended into the heavens, we should not grow weary of waiting, we should not doubt or scoff, but we should rather remember that His timing is not like ours and He is surely faithful to complete what He has promised. Let us echo the words of Paul, *Maranatha*.¹⁸

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count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

18 *Maranatha* is Greek for "Our Lord, come!" from 1 Corinthians 16:22.