

## **Eschatology: Four Approaches**

This morning, we begin the second lesson in our series on "Eschatology." This series is a study of what is popularly called "the end times." One of the challenges about studying eschatology is that there are so many details that we can easily drown in a sea of triviality. It helps to take a step back, to look at the big picture. Before we get into specific passages and specific topics, we need to look at eschatology as a whole, in an overview fashion.

### **Four Approaches to Eschatology**

Throughout the history of the church, there have been four basic approaches that have been articulated regarding eschatology. Each of these four approaches makes sense within themselves. Intelligent, godly men have held to each of these four positions.

Each approach begins with a set of principles. Often, these principles are not consciously adopted, but they are unconsciously assumed. They function on the level of presuppositions. That is, they are subconsciously or unknowingly adopted. We will briefly define each approach before taking a look at each one in detail.

**Futurism** interprets most of the prophecies as still awaiting future fulfillment (hence, "Futurism"), with the bulk of the prophetic texts being fulfilled at the end of history.

**Historicism** interprets most of the prophecies as being fulfilled evenly throughout the history of the church (hence, "Historicism") by specific events.

**Idealism** interprets most of the prophecies as being fulfilled throughout the history of the church, but in a general way, not in specific events (hence, "Idealism").

**Preterism** interprets most of the prophecies as already fulfilled in the past (prater is Latin for "past", hence, the name Preterism), specifically in the first century AD.

#### **1) Futurism**

Futurism interprets most of the prophecies as still awaiting future fulfillment. All prophecy is "future" when it is written, but a Futurist holds that most of the prophecies are still future today. These prophecies will be fulfilled at the end of history. The great tribulation, the number of beast, the antichrist are all yet to be fulfilled. They will occur near the end of the world.

The uniqueness of Futurism is their belief in a future "millennium." That is, Futurists expect Jesus Christ to return and to reign on the earth as King for a long time (perhaps exactly one-thousand years). The millennium is not an era of perfection, as sin will still be present. The eternal state takes place after the millennium. There are actually two main views of Futurism in our day:

- a) Some hold that the millennium is a return to Judaism. That is, God will remove the church from the world and re-establish Israel as a nation on earth, with Jesus Christ ruling in Jerusalem for exactly one thousand years. The temple will be rebuilt, the priesthood will be reestablished, and animal sacrifices will resume.

This form of Futurism is called "Dispensationalism," and is probably best known today by the popular Left Behind series. John MacArthur and Chuck Swindoll are two of the most well-known Dispensationalists.

- b) Other Futurists hold that the millennium is a time of peace and tranquility for the church. Jesus Christ will return to earth and reign as King for a long period of time (perhaps exactly one thousand years), at the end of which, many Jews will be converted. John Piper and Wayne Grudem are two of the most well-known Futurists.

Because Futurism is the dominant approach to eschatology in twenty-first century America, we will be interacting with it at various points throughout our series.

#### **2) Historicism**

Historicism interprets most of the prophecies as being fulfilled evenly throughout the history of the church by specific events. That is, the fulfillment of prophecy is not concentrated in a narrow block of time, either in the past or in the future. Rather, prophecy is fulfilled gradually throughout history.

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For example, in Revelation 2-3, Jesus writes letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. Historicists view these seven churches as symbolic of seven periods of church history. Thus, the key is to figure out which of the seven letters describe the church today.

Historicism became especially popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as many of the Protestants interpreted the book of Revelation as describing their struggle against the Roman church. Thus, the great harlot of Revelation 17 is the Catholic church. The pope is the antichrist.

Historicism was the dominant view during the Reformation and Puritan era. In fact, the original version of the Westminster Confession of Faith names the pope as the antichrist. Many of the greatest theologians in church history were Historicists, with Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards being two of such giants.

However, there are very few Historicists today. As the church has grown older, most have realized the arbitrariness of applying specific prophecies to contemporary situations. Thus, Historicism is by far the minority position today. As such, we will rarely interact with Historicism in our series on eschatology.

### **3) Idealism**

Idealism interprets most of the prophecies as being fulfilled throughout the history of the church, but in a general way, not in specific events. We are not to look for a chronology in prophecy because the purpose of prophecy is to communicate general ideas, not specific events. The great tribulation, the millennium, and the antichrist are being fulfilled throughout church history. Hence, we ought not look for a specific period of great tribulation. Rather, the entire church age is a period of great tribulation for the church.

Likewise, Idealists believe that Revelation and other prophecies teach general truths about how the church is persecuted. So, rather than looking for a specific person to identify as the antichrist or the beast, Idealists believe that these are general terms for evil and opposition to Christ. The vivid descriptions of seals and trumpets and bowls are descriptions of the spiritual warfare that takes place in the heavens between angels.

The attractiveness of Idealism is that it focuses on Jesus Christ, rather than obsessing over the latest theories on who the antichrist is. Idealism is the majority position in the PCA and most Reformed churches. Kim Riddlebarger and Michael Horton are two of the most well-known Idealists.

The weakness of Idealism is in over-generalizing the Scriptures and missing the intended meaning of specific referents. While we will not be giving a full critique of Idealism, we will, from time to time, point to some Scriptures that do not seem to fit well with Idealism.

### **4) Preterism**

Preterism interprets most of the prophecies as already fulfilled in the past, namely in the first coming of Christ. Preterists observe that many of the prophecies are centered around the time period between the ascension of Jesus and the judgment of Jerusalem in AD 70. Thus, the great tribulation happened to the early church. The beast and false prophet were first century figures. The book of Revelation has been mostly fulfilled for almost two thousand years.

There is an aberrant form of Preterism which holds that all prophecy has been fulfilled, and we are in the eternal state right now. Sometimes this is called "Full Preterism." However, this view has been universally condemned.

It is important to note that Preterists do believe that there are still some prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled. Jesus will return; there will be the resurrection and the final judgment.

The popularity of Preterism has waxed and waned throughout the centuries, but it has enjoyed a comeback in the past few decades. RC Sproul and Hank Hanegraaff are two of the most well-known Preterists. Preterism is the approach that we are going to take throughout this series.

### **A Primer on Preterism**

We will spend the next couple of months looking at texts and topics from a Preterist approach, but let's quickly survey a couple of features of Preterism.

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### **Time Texts**

Preterists pay special attention to the time texts throughout the Scriptures.

#### **The Olivet Discourse**

For example, near the end of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus makes this statement:

*Mark 13:30*

In other words, everything that Jesus has been speaking of in verses 1-29 is going to happen within one generation. Jesus spoke this in AD 30, which means that by AD 70 (one generation), all of these things had to have been fulfilled. Look what this includes:

*Mark 13:19*

Jesus says that the great tribulation will occur before that generation passes away.

*Mark 13:26*

Jesus also says that the coming of the Son of Man will occur before that generation passes away.

*Mark 13:27*

Jesus states that the gathering of the elect by the angels will occur by AD 70. It might be hard to understand how the tribulation, the coming of the Son of Man, and the gathering of the elect could have happened in the first century, but Preterists insist upon taking the time texts seriously.

*Mark 13:30*

There are good and reasonable explanations for how the tribulation, the coming of the Son of Man, and the gathering of the elect took place within a generation. We will examine more of these in two weeks when Nathan teaches on the Olivet Discourse.

#### **The Book of Revelation**

The Book of Revelation also contains many time indicators.

*Revelation 1:1*

The content of the book of Revelation was going to take place shortly.

*Revelation 1:3*

The time of the fulfillment of this prophecy was near, not an indefinite period of time away.

*Revelation 22:6*

At the end of the book, God confirms that these things will take place shortly.

*Revelations 22:7*

Jesus also states that he is coming quickly. All of these time texts point toward a more immediate fulfillment of these prophecies. Thus, Preterists hold that the book of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century. This might seem difficult to understand at first because this means that the seals, the trumpets, the bowls, the beast, the false prophet, the binding of Satan, etc., took place in the first century. However, if we take the time texts seriously, we will find that there are good and reasonable explanations for these prophetic details. We examine the book of Revelation in more detail over a four week period starting at the end of February.

### **Prophetic Language**

Preterists observe that throughout the Bible, prophecies that seem to describing the end of the world are actually describing something less than that.

#### **Isaiah and Prophetic Language**

For example, consider Isaiah's prophecy against Babylon.

*Isaiah 13:1, 17, 19*

God is going to raise up the Medians to overthrow and destroy the Babylonian kingdom.

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However, look at how Isaiah describes this:

*Isaiah 13:10, 13*

It sounds as if Isaiah is describing the end of the world, and he is, in a sense. However, he is not describing the end of the physical universe but the end of the Babylonian world. God often uses imagery of the heavens to describe nations. The sun often refers to kings. The moon refers to the queen, and the stars refers to other leaders. This goes back to Joseph's dream.

*Genesis 37:9*

The sun is Jacob. The moon is Leah. The eleven stars are his brothers. Thus, when Isaiah writes that the heavens are shaken and the sun, moon, and stars are darkened, he is saying that Babylon's rulers are going to be overthrown and their kingdom is going to fall.

### **Jesus and Prophetic Language**

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus has been predicting the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple when he uses imagery strikingly similar to Isaiah.

*Mark 13:24-25*

Has Jesus all of a sudden shifted from talking about the destruction of the temple to describing the end of the world? Not at all. Jesus is talking about the end of the Jewish world. The Jewish leaders will be overthrown and the Jewish world will come to an end with the destruction of the temple.

### **John and Prophetic Language**

The apostle John gives a similar description.

*Revelation 6:12-13*

John's language has been taken by many to be a description of the end of the world. However, this is not the end of the world, but the end of a world, namely, the end of the Jewish world. Thus, we need to be careful about passages that seem to describe the "end times." They are probably describing the end of a nation or an era rather than the end of the universe.

### **The Last Days of What?**

The "End Times" is often described as the "Last Days." A few passages speak about the last days.

*2 Timothy 3:1*

The common assumption is that "the last days" describes the last days of the universe. However, the author of Hebrews indicates that he was already in the last days.

*Hebrews 1:1-2*

The author of Hebrews was in the last days. Unfortunately, many attempt to argue that the last days began in the first century and continue even today, so that, two thousand years later, we are still in the last days. According to this view, we will still be in the last days until Christ returns, even if that is 100,000 years from now. Of course, this not only drains "last days" of any significance, but it gives "last days" precisely the opposite of its normal meaning.

A more natural way of understanding "last days" is that it is referring to a specific era. Preterists hold that "last days" refers to the "last days of the Old Covenant" or "last days of the temple" or "last days of Jerusalem." All of these describe the situation leading up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

### **Conclusion**

A Preterist approach starts with these two principles.

- 1) We take the time texts seriously, letting the time language function naturally. We are willing to rethink the details of "end times" texts in light of the time indicators.
- 2) We carefully examine the Old Covenant prophecies to see how the prophets of old used language and symbols. We find "end times" prophetic language can be applied to specific situations, such as the end of a nation or era.