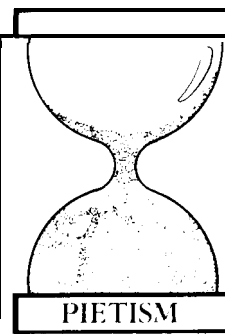


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## DISPENSATIONALISM IN TRANSITION A REPORT ON AN ESCHATOLOGY SYMPOSIUM

by Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., Th. D.

### Introduction

After lying quietly in the background of eschatological debate, preterism is receiving renewed interest from evangelicals. With futurism dominated by naive exegesis and sensationalist date-setting among dispensationalists, preterism was assured a market for those tired of being duped. They are weary of boarding what they believe to be the last train out. Preterism stands as a virtual Statue of Liberty bidding to forlorn dispensationalists, beckoning them: "Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses." I have a growing file of letters of "converts" to preterism and postmillennialism.

But with the arising of orthodox preterism there has arisen a form of preterism that is heterodox. There are good Christians who are sound in every other fundamental, but who are unorthodox in one area. And that area has to do with the eschatological complex of end-time events: the Second Advent and the resurrection of the body. In this newsletter I will simply give a report on a preterism symposium I attended recently, since I do not think you will be reading about it in *Christianity Today*.

### The Covenant Eschatology Symposium

This past January 18-22 I participated in an eschatology symposium near Orlando. The purpose of the symposium was to consider preterism. Some participants were preterists, others were not. Some preterists were orthodox preterists, some were not. The opening statement was presented by Art Buckner, president of Covenant Study Center in Napa, California, which sponsored the event. His brief presentation was entitled: "Preterism in Eschatology: A Challenge to Reformed Theology."

Buckner stated: "[T]o this point in time, there remains a significant lack of sober, constructive and consistent efforts on the part of reformed theologians to examine with true candor and thorough scholarship, the preterist influence on eschatological hermeneutics. The purpose of this Symposium is to initiate a series of events that brings preterism under the scrutiny of the light of reformed doctrine. In order to accomplish this, we have sought to bring together this group of respected scholars, representative of most, if not all, of the 'already-but-not-yet' timeline."

Underwritten by California Christian businessman, Garrett E. Brown, we were flown in from afar (except for the local RTS participants) and treated to a delightful and enlightening week. All the speakers were housed at the scenic Lakeside Inn in spacious rooms, were treated to a dinner-theater on a riverboat, enjoyed special singing from an excellent Christian recording artist, were provided ample opportunities of

fellowship along with abundant meals, and much more. We had such a good time while there that had Tommy Ice been there he would surely have declared, "The kingdom of God has truly come." (Of course, had he been there and had he done that, we would have greatly reduced his wine rations!)

### The Participants and Format

Attending this closed door symposium were a number of noted scholars. And I was there, too! From Reformed Theological Seminary-Orlando were R. C. Sproul, Reggie Kidd, and Roger Nicole. Westminster Theological Seminary was represented with the presence of Robert Strimple, Dan McCartney, and Richard Gaffin. Also there were Chuck Hill of Northwestern College, Greg Beale of Gordon Conwell College; Jim Jordan of Biblical Horizons; Max King and Tim King of "The Living Presence" ministries; and from Christ College were Jerry Crick and myself.

Each participant had a slotted time for presenting hour-long papers on pre-assigned topics. Each presentation was followed with an hour or more of spirited discussion, vigorous cross-examination, and energetic debate.

The symposium was extremely enlightening to me. It was good to get to know the scholars I had never met before. I look forward to future opportunities of interaction with them. Unfortunately, I had the fearful role of presenting the lead-off paper. This was almost immediately upon disembarking my plane. (I complained of jet lag, but that did not carry much weight since I had flown north to south and therefore crossed no time zones!) My paper was on the date and theme of Revelation. The discussion and cross-examination after my presentation were vigorous and the challenges penetrating.

I enthusiastically anticipated further opportunities during the week for a public forum defense of my position against the thought-provoking challenges to my presentation. Particularly interesting to me were those from Greg Beale, who will soon be publishing a commentary on Revelation. But my expectations fell to the ground: Immediately after me, Tim King presented his paper. And once he and his father, Max King, had spoken, the attention of everyone was focused on hyper-preterism, which they call "covenanteschatology." The Kings very graciously endured intense scrutiny and critical inquiry.

I will introduce a view of the papers presented. Space prohibits an introduction to all of them,

### My Paper

I will only briefly mention my paper since my views are probably well-known to my readers, in that they are found in

my *Before Jerusalem Fell* and *He Shall Have Dominion*.

I opened with a presentation of a succinct case for the early date of Revelation. Upon finishing that I developed the judicial theme of Revelation, tracing the forensic flow from the judgment throne of God (Rev. 4), through the issuing of the divorce decree against His wife, Israel (Rev. 5), resulting in the administration of Israel's capital punishment for spiritual adultery (Rev. 6-19) and Christ's turning to take a new bride, the Church (Rev. 20-22).<sup>2</sup>

#### Tim King

Tim, a Christian businessman from Houston, Texas, is a very gracious, knowledgeable, and committed Christian, who follows quite closely his father's thinking on eschatology. He provided a study entitled "The Context of Last Things." It was a study of eschatological imminency in the New Testament writings, which are apparently drawn from the teachings of the Olivet Discourse.

In his paper he presented his "consistent" preterist viewpoint, which avers that all of biblical prophecy comes to fulfillment in A.D. 70. He spent a good deal of space countering the "moderate" preterism of J. Marcellus Kik (which I hold) on Matthew 24 and the transition passage. He notes that "As the Olivet Discourse provides the cornerstone of Covenant Eschatology -the Book of Revelation brings to light its capstone" (p. 24).

#### Dan McCartney

Dan McCartney, Associate Professor of New Testament at Westminster Seminary, delivered careful exegetical presentation of the Olivet Discourse, which is a course he teaches at Westminster. He argued that just as 2 Samuel 7:14 speaks both of Solomon and Christ, so the Olivet Discourse speaks of both A.D. 70 and the Second Advent. He holds to a mixed-view of Matthew 24, which is common among amillennial scholars. He analyzed various interpretive suggestions for the identity of the Abomination of Desolation.

He argued that prophetic fulfillment in Matthew 24 does not imply the end of its fulfillment. He noted A.D. 70 was dependent upon the greater Cross-event a generation earlier. He suggested that if A.D. 70 is given too major a role, it overshadows the Cross, particularly in hyper-preterism. He then urged that the tribulation be seen as equivalent to the Church Age. McCartney pressed the point that there was no unambiguous coming of Christ in A.D. 70, despite the apparent emphasis on the public nature of His coming.

#### R. C. Sproul

R. C. Sproul is a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, as well as being President of Ligonier Ministries. His presentation was a spirited employment of orthodox preterism as an apologetic response to Albert Schweitzer, C. H. Dodd, and other radical scholars. He noted that Bertrand Russell pointed to the Olivet Discourse's failure of fulfillment as a reason he (Russell) would not be a Christian.

Sproul noted that preterism offers a plausible response to radical scholarship, showing there is no "delay" of the imminent parousia of Christ. He expressed a new, but deep interest in preterism for untangling numerous problems in the New Testament. At the same time, he vigorously opposed

what he felt were gnostic tendencies in King's view.

#### Max King

Max King is the recently retired pastor of Parkman Road Church of Christ in Ohio. With his son, he also is a very gracious Christian gentleman. I enjoyed getting to know him, even if I do not agree with him. He is the author of several works on preterism, most importantly: *The Spirit of Prophecy* and *The Cross and the Parousia*. His writings are beginning to have an influence in drawing Christians away from the historic, creedal view of the resurrection.

King's presentation was entitled "The Abrahamic Covenant." It was a study of the divine promises of a land and seed from the perspective of Israel's covenants. His aim was to demonstrate the relevance of his consistent preteristic eschatology to the incorporation of the gentiles into Israel. He argued that it would be impossible for the church to supplant Israel in the plan of God. He argued that the resurrection occurred in the first century and was the spiritual transformation of Israel into its New Covenant phase.

King argues that "Israel's messianic restoration promises and prophecies go hand in hand with her resurrection promises and prophecies . . . . If Israel receives God's promise to their fathers, it will be through resurrection or not at all. Apart from resurrection there is no promise fulfillment in any way, shape, or form" (p. 10). "Christ came to the world below to depart from it through death and resurrection, thus opening the way for Israel to enter into the 'world above' (John 8:33), the world of the promise (Rom. 4:13)" (p. 11). Christ's "resurrection marks the beginning of the resurrection (Acts 4:1-2). Firstfruits signal the imminency of the harvest out of which the first grain is cut. Was not Israel the standing harvest from whom Christ was 'cut off' and offered unto God . . . ." (p. 19).

He later notes: "Many appeal to 1 Corinthians 15 to establish resurrection from biological death as that which gives victory over sin and death. . . . [I]n 1 Corinthians 15 his focus is on the 'harvest' (the Old Testament saints) and their organic bond with Christ . . . . [T]he organic bond between the firstfruits and the harvest (Christ and Israel) is such that the offering and acceptance of the firstfruits leads to the gathering of the harvest . . . . [I]n 1 Corinthians 15 [Paul's focus] is primarily on the harvest, the Old Testament dead" (p. 22).

His argument is extremely complex and involved. But the result is clear: There is no future bodily resurrection or Second Advent, in that the resurrection promise occurred in the first century at the "Second Advent" of Christ.

#### Conclusion

Space prohibits mentioning the other presentations. Needless to say, once both Kings had spoken all heaven broke loose. At that point, the entirety of the attention of the symposium turned to the "Covenant Eschatology" view, which being interpreted is hyper-preterism.

1. Chuck Hill is author of *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Future Hope in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

2. If interested, copies of the paper, "The Book of Revelation and Eschatology," are available from me for a cost of \$3. Write to me at: 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636

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