The Second Coming

Signs of Christ’s Return and the End of the Age

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CROSSWAY BOOKS
A PUBLISHING MINISTRY OF GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS WHEATON, ILLINOIS
I believe Christ will literally return victoriously to earth one day in bodily, visible form. My convictions on this point are as emphatic as my belief in Christ Himself. My faith in the future return of Christ is as firm as my certainty about past redemptive history. Furthermore, I would argue that the fact of the Second Coming is a cardinal doctrine of Christianity. It is the end and goal of God’s purpose on earth, and the divine climax will be as precise and purposeful as every other revelation of God. Those who abandon the hope of Christ’s bodily return have in effect abandoned true Christianity.

The Danger of Denying the Second Coming

This is a vital issue today. More and more people who want to call themselves Christians are disavowing any expectation of the Second Coming. For example, liberal theologians long ago gave up their belief in the literal return of Christ. Some of them simply spiritualize all the prophetic Scriptures, claiming the only “Second Coming” of Christ occurs as He is received into individual hearts. Others go even further, treating the apostles’ hope of Christ’s return as a myth and a false expectation—essentially rejecting the biblical promise of the Second Coming and taking their place with the scoffers (cf. 2 Pet. 3:3-4). And that kind of error is precisely what we might expect from those who start with a low view of Scripture, as theological liberals do.

But lately even some traditionally conservative, professedly “Bible-believing” Christians have attacked the doctrine of Christ’s
literal, bodily return. A view fast gaining notoriety is hyper-preterism (sometimes called full preterism or “realized eschatology” by its advocates). Hyper-preterists build their whole theology on a misunderstanding of Christ’s words in Matthew 24:34: “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.” They insist this means that every last detail of Bible prophecy had to have been completed before the death of those people living at the time He spoke, and actually was fulfilled in A.D. 70, during the turmoil and political upheaval that ensued when Jerusalem was sacked by Rome and most of its inhabitants were slaughtered.

In other words, according to hyper-preterists, Christ’s Second Advent, the resurrection of the dead, and the Great White Throne judgment are all past events—so that absolutely no prophecy of Scripture remains unfulfilled. There is no future hope of Christ’s return at all, they say. Hyper-preterists even claim that the universe in which we now live is the “new heavens and new earth” promised in passages like 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21. That means this earth on which we now live is permanent. Sin and evil will never be finally eradicated from God’s creation. Satan has already experienced as much defeat as he will ever experience. There is no tangible reality or physical existence beyond the grave. At death the believer simply becomes an eternally disembodied spirit, passing into the presence of God on a purely spiritual plane, with no hope of any future bodily resurrection. The souls of the wicked are similarly cast out of God’s presence in a disembodied state.

So what do hyper-preterists do with the multitude of statements in Scripture that seem to contradict their view? For example, what of the promise of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17? “The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” What of 1 Corinthians 15:22-24? “In Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ
the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.” What of verses 53-54? “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” And what of the dire judgment described in 2 Peter 3:10? “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat.”

Taking a page from the liberals’ handbook, hyper-preterists allegorize the meaning of those and all other prophetic passages, claiming they describe spiritual, not literal, realities. In other words, for the sake of interpreting Matthew 23:36 with an unwarranted wooden literalism, they will sacrifice the plain sense of every other prophecy about the return of Christ and end-times events.

This approach to Scripture ultimately has disastrous consequences for almost every fundamental doctrine of Christianity. For example, it obviously destroys the hope of any future resurrection of the dead. Hyper-preterists claim the complete fulfillment of the resurrection of the dead described in Revelation 20:4-15 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 already took place around A.D. 70. According to them, it was a spiritual, not a bodily, resurrection—and it is the only resurrection that will ever occur. Hyper-preterists have thus given up any hope of a literal, bodily resurrection of the saints.

What of Christ’s Second Coming? That too was a spiritual event that occurred in the church’s first generation, they say; and there is no reason to expect a future literal fulfillment. Thus renouncing not only the plain meaning of Scripture but also every creed and doctrinal standard ever affirmed by any significant church council, denomination, or theologian in the entire history of the church, they deny that Christ will ever return to earth in bodily form.

The position sounds so bizarre that some may wonder if it seriously deserves to be refuted. How could anyone claim to believe the
Bible while denying that Christ will return bodily to earth? But the position has garnered an outspoken and influential following, especially among young believers with more zeal than knowledge. Judging from the high visibility and increasing numbers of people touting these views on the Internet and in other forums, it appears they are having phenomenal success proselytizing other undiscerning souls to their view.

The bodily return of Christ is not a point on which the Scriptures are ambiguous or unclear. As the disciples watched the resurrected Christ ascend into heaven, Scripture tells us, “Two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:10-11, emphasis added). He ascended in a visible, bodily form; he will return from heaven “in like manner.” Nothing could be more plain.

Hyper-preterists have a ready response to that argument though: they deny that Christ ever truly ascended into heaven in bodily form. They must take this position in order to preserve the “like manner” parallel between Christ’s ascension and His return to earth. Carrying the same poisonous hypothesis still one step further, some extreme hyper-preterists even deny that Christ was raised bodily from the dead. After all, 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 suggests that Christ was the “firstfruits” of all who will rise from the dead. His resurrection is therefore the pattern and prototype for everyone else who is to be raised from the dead. But having already swallowed the notion that believers are raised in a spiritual sense only, many hyper-preterists seem to have no qualms about also concluding that Christ Himself rose only in a spiritual sense from the grave. And thus they deny even the bodily resurrection of Christ. This destroys the very heart of all Christian doctrine. “For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Cor. 15:16-17). The apostle Paul seemed to have a theology very much like modern hyper-preterism in mind when he penned that verse.
Since they already deny so many cardinal doctrines of Christianity, it is no wonder that hyper-preterists are often seen slipping even further into unorthodox ideas. To give one example, Ward Fenley (arguably hyper-preterism’s most influential author) claims that Christ actually *became* a sinner on the cross:

He was not made sin while He lived His life. Yet upon the cross He became every terrible and unholy thing we ever committed. . . . My contention is that in Christ’s immeasurable love for His children, He actually became everything we were in such a real way that He would go so far as to even pray to the Father, “Thou knowest My foolishness; and My sins are not hid from Thee.”

The hyper-preterist error is exactly like that of Hymenaeus and Philetus, who “strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past . . . they overthrow the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:18). The apostle Paul was not reluctant to speak plainly about the seriousness of such soul-destroying error. Nor should we be hesitant to point out the dangers posed by such a serious departure from biblical truth. It is, after all, *heresy* of the worst stripe to deny the bodily return of Christ, and this particular brand of that heresy is currently overthrowing the faith of many.

The Folly of Sensationalizing the Second Coming

I believe the fact of the Second Coming is a cardinal doctrine. However, I must hasten to add that many of the details of biblical prophecy are surrounded with mystery, and it is a serious mistake to speak with dogmatic certainty about matters that are really nothing more than sheer conjecture. Jesus Himself said, “Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is” (Mark 13:32-33). How could anything be more mysterious?
Yet at the opposite end of the spectrum from the hyper-preterists are people who seem to want to sensationalize everything Scripture says about future events. They typically do this by imposing modern headlines as an interpretive grid on the Scriptures. This has been an increasingly popular, but completely disastrous, approach to Bible prophecy for more than a hundred years. I have in my library several books from various authors dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, all of them indulging in speculation about how certain people and current events supposedly fulfill this or that prophecy. One book published around 1917 suggested that the events leading up to World War I could only portend the Apocalypse. That book suggested the generation living then would undoubtedly be the generation to be caught away in the Rapture.

Twenty-five years later another group of authors observed the rise of Hitler and suggested that the Führer perfectly fit the biblical description of the Antichrist. Some of those books predicted the Rapture would occur shortly, after which Hitler would gain world domination and the Tribulation would begin. Others claimed the Antichrist was Benito Mussolini or Josef Stalin. They all turned out to be wrong.

After World War II many books were published claiming that the founding of modern Israel had already triggered the countdown to Armageddon, which could not be more than forty years away. Those predictions were all made with great fanfare and solemn gravity. And there was a proliferation of such books right through the mid-1980s. All of them proved wrong.

And now, as we enter a new millennium, there is more such speculation than ever. Religious television networks abound with mock newscasts where self-styled experts in Bible prophecy continue to explain each week’s headlines as if every major news event were a direct fulfillment of some specific Bible prophecy. Christian bookstores are filled with speculative books on Bible prophecy, including the latest fad—novels that fuse current events with prophecies drawn from Scripture in a fictional format. All of this
further encourages people to interpret Scripture in light of modern headlines instead of vice versa.

Worse, despite Jesus’ plain statement, “you do not know when the time is,” there is no shortage of speculation about dates (and even some dogmatic date-setters) in the evangelical world. In his 1970 mega-bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey broadly hinted that he believed Christ would return by 1988:

The most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. Even the figure of speech “fig tree” has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the “fig tree” put forth its first leaves.

Jesus said that this would indicate that He was “at the door,” ready to return. Then he said, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34 NASB).

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs—chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.

Lindsey’s 1970 language sounds restrained compared to the more confident pronouncements he made as the forty-year target approached. In his 1980 book *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, Lindsey wrote, “The prophets told us that the rebirth of Israel—no other event—would be the sign that the countdown has begun. Since that rebirth, the rest of the prophecies have begun to be fulfilled quite rapidly. For this reason I am convinced that we are now in the unique time so clearly and precisely forecast by the Hebrew prophets.” Lindsey further stated that he believed the Rapture and the start of the Tribulation would occur in the 1980s.
The forty-year time frame starting in 1948 was seized by others who transformed it into even more explicit dogma. As 1988 began, Edgar Whisenant published a book that quickly became a runaway best seller, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Whisenant boldly assured readers that he had unlocked the mystery of the prophetic timetable, and the Rapture would occur during September 11-13, 1988, during Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, also known as *Yom Teru’ah* or the Day of the Blowing of the Shofar (described in Numbers 29:1). Undaunted when his deadline passed, Whisenant changed the date of his prediction to 1989 and wrote a new book, *89 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1989*. But having discredited himself with the earlier false prediction, he had difficulty whipping up much excitement about the subsequent prediction (which, of course, turned out to be wrong too).

The date-setters were not finished, however. A few years later Harold Camping, president and general manager of the Family Radio network, published a book titled *1994*, in which he predicted the Lord’s return on September 7, 1994. Camping based his prediction on numerology, the founding of modern Israel, and other signs of the times. On his radio broadcasts he repeatedly claimed to be “more than 99 percent certain” his prediction was accurate. It wasn’t.

There have been numerous lesser-known date-setters in recent years, and of course every one of them has been wrong. Every time this happens, it undermines the credibility of the Gospel in the minds of unbelievers who have heard such predictions and confuse them with the true Christian message. So many failed predictions also diminish Christians’ confidence in their teachers. And, I fear, it subverts many people’s expectancy that the Lord could return at any time. There is little doubt that the rise of hyper-preterism reflects a reaction to the shameless hype and unfulfilled predictions of evangelical end-times “experts” after so many decades of misguided predictions.

It doesn’t help that the same self-styled experts change with the times, adjusting their interpretations of specific prophecies to match quickly-moving events. About thirty years ago Bible prophecy gurus

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were declaring confidently that the Soviet Union’s rise to super-
power status was loaded with biblical significance. Many believed
that the Bible contained hints suggesting Russia would attack
Jerusalem, and this conflict would usher in Armageddon. And when
the 1980s turned out not to be the countdown to Armageddon but
instead brought about the demise of communism, the fall of the
Iron Curtain, and the breakup of the Soviet empire, the same self-
proclaimed authorities on Bible prophecy simply adjusted their pre-
dictions accordingly and began to claim that even the fall of
communism was clearly foretold in Scripture.

Current events are no guideline for interpreting Scripture. Those who continually adjust their understanding of Scripture to accommodate the latest headlines are treating Scripture like a wax figure that can be shaped in any form that suits their purposes. This is not how to handle the Word of God with integrity.

Furthermore, our preparedness for Christ’s return should not be affected one way or the other by world events. As we shall see throughout our study in this book, Christ taught that we should be expectant and ready for Him to return at any time; and he also taught us to be prepared and stay faithful even if He tarries longer than we suppose. So true readiness for Christ’s return involves both expectancy and patient endurance. Unfortunately, all the hype and sensationalism that characterizes most modern teaching about Bible prophecy actually undermines both sides of the balance.

The Mystery of the Second Coming

Perhaps it is worth emphasizing again that eschatology, the branch of theology that deals with future things, is more enveloped in mystery than any other theological discipline. This is true by God’s own design. Remember that even Christ, while on earth, said neither He Himself nor the angels in heaven knew the timing of the Second Coming: “Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is” (Mark 13:32-33).
How could Christ, still fully God even while He was incarnated in human flesh, not know something as important as the timing of His own return? This certainly cannot mean He literally gave up His omniscience, for if He had actually divested Himself of any of the divine attributes, He would in effect have given up being God (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8). Besides, Christ’s omniscience is affirmed in many important instances in the Gospel accounts (e.g., John 16:30; 18:4; 21:17). But Scripture teaches that He was nonetheless truly human in every sense as well (Heb. 2:14-18). It appears that He was able to refrain from calling His omniscient knowledge to His conscious human mind when it was the Father’s will for Him to do so (John 5:30); yet He did so without ever actually divesting Himself of omniscience or any other aspect of His deity. For example, He never gave up His omnipotence either (cf. John 10:18). Yet while on earth, because it suited the Father’s plan, Christ willfully restrained the operation of His boundless divine power, so that His human body was subject to the normal limitations of human flesh (John 4:6). He voluntarily subjected the use of all His divine attributes to the perfect will of the Father (John 5:19; 8:28). Surely this truth alone is a supreme, impenetrable mystery!

But no subject in all of Scripture is ever said to be more mysterious than the timing of Christ’s return. No one but the Father knows the time; not Jesus during His earthly ministry, not the angels in heaven, not anyone else on earth—and particularly not those who make the boldest claims about knowing the secret details of God’s prophetic agenda!

Since Christ Himself said He did not know the timetable of His return, isn’t this a matter on which it behooves us all to show the utmost humility?

It is also instructive to remember that even prophets writing under divine inspiration were often left with mystery concerning the precise meaning of what they wrote—especially when it came to the who, what, and where of prophecies about future things. The apostle Peter wrote, “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would
come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Pet. 1:10-11). They did not understand, for example, how the prophecies of suffering and glory could be reconciled. Many of these things were mysterious to everyone, until Christ Himself explained them privately to the disciples after His resurrection (Luke 24:25-27).

That’s why it is fitting that at the very beginning of this study we should acknowledge the depth of the remaining mystery surrounding the details of Christ’s return. While the fact of the Second Coming is certainly a cardinal doctrine of Christianity, many of the specifics regarding how and when it will occur are, by the testimony of Scripture itself, set in the midst of incomprehensible mystery. And we must never lose sight of that. Detailed prophetic schemes and speculative eschatological timetables should never be treated as incontrovertible or fundamental dogma, nor made a principal test of orthodoxy and fellowship.

Unfortunately, this happens all the time. I know people who want to make eschatology the primary litmus test of all theology. Many of them are novices in the faith. They would not be prepared to give a coherent account of the doctrine of justification by faith. They may be ill-equipped to defend any of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. But they consider themselves experts on the timing of the Rapture or the meaning of the seven seals in Revelation 5—7. Or they are convinced that there will be no Rapture or literal earthly kingdom at all, and they regard anyone who doesn’t see things their way as an adversary. Such people, it seems, are constantly spoiling for a debate on eschatological fine points.11

Others who fall into this trap are by no means novices. They may be Christian leaders or theology professors, but they become imbalanced in their passion for a particular eschatological perspective, and they allow their zeal for these doctrines to become a barrier to fellowship with brethren who may disagree.
I know a man who insists that eschatology should be the starting point for the Christian worldview, and everything else we believe should be subject to our understanding of God’s prophetic timetable. I can’t imagine a more backward approach to either eschatology or the formulation of a Christian worldview. Our worldview ought to begin with the most vital and incontrovertible doctrines of Christianity—the matters on which Scripture speaks with the most clarity and the least amount of mystery. Eschatology is critically important insofar as it tells us the end of God’s redemptive work and the culmination of His saving purpose. Certainly the hope of Christ’s return is essential to the Christian worldview. But the speculative details of someone’s eschatological timetable are not the proper focus or starting point. And there is no reason to isolate eschatology above the other theological categories as if prophetic details about the future were the most important features.

My advice to budding systematic theologians is this: master the fundamental issues of soteriology, hamartiology, pneumatology, Christology, bibliology, theology proper, and other essential points of Christian doctrine before settling into such a dogmatic stance on the eschatological fine points.

It’s fine to have strong opinions on these matters. As far as Scripture allows, my own eschatological convictions are firm and definite, as you will note throughout this book. But given the mystery that surrounds so much of the prophetic revelation about the future, these are not matters on which we should be quarrelsome and quickly contentious. Our detailed prophetic diagrams should not be made tests of orthodoxy or grounds for separation from other believers. Aside from the aspects of Bible prophecy that are essential to the Christian message—such as the fact of Christ’s bodily return, the resurrection of the dead, and the final triumph of Christ over all His enemies—these are not issues that should divide us from other Christians with whom we disagree.

Too many people are pugnacious about their views on the mysteries of biblical eschatology. Detailed prophetic calendars, dispensational charts, and debates about the order and arrangement of all
the prophetic events simply do not warrant the amount of attention, the intensity of debate, or the level of intramural rancor they often generate between Christian brethren.

Worse, far too many Christians actually do break fellowship with other Christians who differ with them on speculative and secondary eschatological issues. But our humility as we approach such mysterious matters ought to be accompanied by charity for others whose perspectives are different.

Remember, despite the wealth of detailed prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Jesus’ first advent, only a few people recognized the event when it occurred. Among these were the Magi—astrologers and occult practitioners who probably had little understanding of the Old Testament and very likely thought of Jehovah as a foreign deity. They were led to Christ by a star (Matt. 2:1-12). There were the shepherds to whom Christ’s birth was announced by angels (Luke 2:8-18). There was also Simeon, a devout Israelite who had received a private revelation assuring him he would not die until he had seen the Messiah (vv. 25-35). And there was Anna, a godly widow who recognized the infant Christ—possibly also by a special revelation, for Scripture refers to her as “a prophetess” (vv. 36-38).

In other words, despite the many Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah’s coming—the fact that He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), the fact that He would be virgin-born (Isa. 7:14), the fact that He would be preceded by a prophetic forerunner coming in the spirit and power of Elijah (Mal. 4:5-6; Isa. 40:3-4)—apparently no one relying on Old Testament prophecies alone recognized Him at His birth. History records that there was a high level of Messianic expectation in Israel around the time of Christ’s coming, but when He arrived, He met no one’s expectations.

It could very well be that every one of the modern “experts” in Bible prophecy will turn out to be wrong about the timing and the details of His Second Coming as well. Christ Himself seemed to suggest this when He said, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son
of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44; cf. Luke 12:40).

**Be Ready!**

Clearly, then, much mystery clouds our full understanding of many of the features of our Lord’s return. But if you think that is an excuse for ignorance, skepticism, or apathy on the whole subject of the Second Coming, think again. Repeatedly in Scripture we are urged to discern the signs of the times, to be watchful, and to be ready. Underscoring the mystery of His return for the disciples, Christ reminded them many times, “The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” But the corollary He inevitably stressed was: “Therefore you also be ready” (Luke 12:40). He rebuked people for being oblivious to the signs of the times: “Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matt. 16:3). The apostle John began the record of His apocalyptic visions with this promise: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3).

So these are issues we must study and gain a keen awareness of while we seek to deepen our understanding. We cannot afford to shelve eschatology just because it presents us with inscrutable features or back away from it just because it is such fertile ground for disagreement. We’re commanded to know the signs of the times, to remain watchful, and to be ready whether Christ returns immediately or waits another thousand years. Scripture does give the diligent student plenty to be certain about.

Scripture is full of prophetic promises; so you cannot study Scripture without finding yourself neck-deep in eschatology. Faithful students—realizing that all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness—will study the prophetic portions of Scripture with the same diligence and enthusiasm they give the rest of God’s Word.

I believe the prophetic passages of Scripture should be handled
like any other portion of God’s Word. The plain meaning of a text is the preferred interpretation. There’s no reason to spiritualize or devise allegorical interpretations of Scripture if the literal sense makes good sense. Only if the context of a passage gives some compelling reason to assume the language is symbolic should we look for figurative meaning. Where the plain sense of Scripture makes good sense, there is no reason to seek any other sense.

For that reason, I believe premillennialism best reflects the correct understanding of Scripture. Premillennialism is the view that Christ will return to earth to judge the world and establish His kingdom here for 1,000 years, during which Satan will be bound. Revelation 20 alone seems to settle this question definitively, and I know of no other passage of Scripture that would suggest any different scenario. On the contrary, all the Old Testament prophecies about the kingdom harmonize best with premillennialism.

Nonetheless, there are two other popular approaches to biblical eschatology. One is amillennialism, an interpretation that regards the reign of Christ described in Revelation 20 as an invisible, spiritual reality of indeterminate duration rather than a literal thousand-year earthly kingdom. Amillennialists believe the kingdom exists in a spiritual sense right now, and the next event on the prophetic calendar will be the return of Christ, followed immediately by the final judgment.

The other common approach to biblical eschatology is postmillennialism. This view suggests that the church will establish the earthly kingdom of Christ through preaching (and, according to some, through political means). Unlike amillennialists, postmillennialists believe in a literal earthly kingdom, but most believe Christ will reign over that kingdom from heaven, after which He will return to earth and institute final judgment.

Many commentators and theologians whom I respect hold to amillennialism or postmillennialism. Having studied carefully the arguments for all views, however, I am convinced premillennialism alone has solid exegetical support. Amillennialists and postmillennialists tend to hold their views because of theological, rather than tex-
tual, considerations. Both views require extraordinary handling of the prophetic passages of Scripture, demanding that the interpreter allegorize or spiritualize the meaning of such texts, rather than employing the same historical and grammatical principles of interpretation we apply to the rest of Scripture. But if we simply interpret the prophetic passages by the same hermeneutical method we use for the rest of God’s Word, premillennialism emerges naturally from the text. A simple reading of Revelation 20 will reveal this; its plain, ordinary meaning is simply a succinct statement of premillennialism.

This book is therefore not so much an argument for premillennialism as it is a straightforward exegesis of some key biblical texts—most notably Christ’s longest and most important eschatological message, the Olivet Discourse. My hope is that as you are exposed to the Word of God on these matters, it will stir in your heart a sincere expectation and earnest longing for Christ’s return. And may that, in turn, spur you to an even deeper study of your own.
Notes

Introduction

1. Throughout this book, eschatological and theological terms that are italicized when they first appear are defined in the glossary at the end. Hyper-preterism should be distinguished from preterism, though they share a similar hermeneutical approach and would interpret many Bible prophecies the same way. Simple preterism suggests that the “Tribulation” prophecies of Matthew 24 and Revelation were fulfilled in early church history. (Most would say these events occurred in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in A.D. 70.) Hyper-preterism presses the same hermeneutic to a far-fetched extreme (thus justifying the “hyper-” label). Hyper-preterists argue that not just the Tribulation prophecies, but every prophetic promise of Scripture has already been fulfilled. (See main text for more details.)

I strongly disagree with the preterist approach to prophecy, and it is clear that the hermeneutical approach taken by preterists is what laid the foundation for the hyper-preterist error. Nonetheless, the charge that hyper-preterism is a sub-Christian heresy does not necessarily apply to simple preterism. Hyper-preterism’s denial of fundamental doctrines such as the literal resurrection of the dead and the bodily return of Christ is what makes that view such serious heresy, not the hermeneutical method per se.


3. Best-selling author and Christian Reconstructionist David Chilton began to espouse hyper-preterist tenets a few years before his death in 1997. Perhaps partly because of Chilton’s influence in the Reconstructionist movement, and partly because the movement has always been warm toward the preterist approach to Bible prophecy, the Christian Reconstructionist movement has shown a particular susceptibility to hyper-preterism.

Walt Hibbard, founder of the mail-order Christian book service Great Christian Books (GCB), also embraced hyper-preterism and was aggressively peddling hyper-preterist literature in the front pages of his book catalogs before GCB went out of business in early 1999. One of the works Hibbard was promoting most vigorously is hyper-preterism’s main manifesto, Ward Fenley’s The Second Coming of Jesus Christ Already Happened (Sacramento: Kingdom of Sovereign Grace, 1997). Several large hyper-preterist Web sites are now promoting the view via the Internet.

5. Ward Fenley, “Psalm 69: The Sins of Christ” (http://www.preterist.net/articles/index.htm). Historic Protestant orthodoxy has long held that our guilt was imputed to Christ, and that He paid the penalty for it, suffering the full wrath of God against sin. But we deny that Christ was made a sinner in the sense Fenley’s remarks suggest. Remember that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believers in precisely the same way as our guilt was imputed to Christ. But we are not thereby automatically made righteous. We are justified while we are still sinners (Rom. 4:5). Similarly, Christ bore our guilt without being made unrighteous. Fenley’s remarks are an affront to Christ, who could never be personally defiled by sin, even while bearing the guilt of multitudes whom He saved (Heb. 7:26).


8. Ibid., 43.


11. I received a letter from one such zealot the very day I began work on this book. He said he had always found my books and tapes to be a blessing, but recently someone informed him I hold a premillennial perspective of biblical eschatology, and as a consequence he had completely lost confidence in me as a teacher. He said he had noticed that I often quote approvingly from men like C. H. Spurgeon, Iain Murray, and some of the leading Puritans. And he suggested that if I had really read their works and agreed with these men, I would know that amillennialism is the only biblically defensible approach to eschatology. He hinted that my citing these men approvingly without embracing their eschatological views is not entirely honest, and he suggested in the future when I quote them I should consider adding a disclaimer noting that I differ with their eschatological position.

But in point of fact, these men were not amillennialists. Spurgeon was a premillennialist, and Iain Murray is a postmillennialist. Murray’s book *The Puritan Hope* suggests that postmillennialism was the predominant view of the Puritans too. I have profited greatly from the writings of all these men, but that does not obligate me to accept every nuance of their theology, nor is a disclaimer necessary when I quote them with agreement. Our differences all involve secondary matters, not things essential to the Christian faith and fellowship.

12. There are several varieties of premillennialism. “Historic premillennialism” and post-tribulationalism virtually eliminate any distinction between the Rapture and the return of Christ, placing both events immediately after the seven-year Tribulation period. The “prewrath” view and midtribulationism suggest that the Rapture will occur during the Tribulation. I hold to pretribulationism, the view that the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation begins. Pretribulationism
is the only variety of premillennialism that preserves the expectation of Christ’s imminent appearing discussed in chapter 2. A thorough examination of each variety of premillennialism is far beyond the scope of this book. But many of my exegetical reasons for holding the pretribulational view will be clear as we work through our Lord’s Olivet Discourse in chapters 3—10.

Chapter 1: Why Christ Must Return


2. The primary reference of Hosea 11:1 is to the Old Testament nation of Israel, called out of Egypt. But Israel herself was a prophetic type (a symbolic prefiguring) of Christ—and therefore typologically, Israel’s sojourn in Egypt prophetically foreshadowed the infant Christ’s flight into Egypt. Hosea 11:1 is therefore cited as a prophecy of the infant Christ in Matthew 2:15.

3. In modern times the word dowry usually conveys the idea of money or property brought by the bride to her husband at a marriage, but in biblical times the dowry was a gift bestowed by the bridegroom and his family on the bride (cf. Gen. 34:12).

Chapter 2: Is Christ’s Coming Imminent?


Chapter 3: Christ’s Greatest Prophetic Discourse

1. The disciples’ expectation of an immediate, literal earthly kingdom was so deeply ingrained in their thinking that even after Christ rose from the dead, they still expected Him to establish His earthly reign immediately. The last question they asked Him before He ascended to heaven was, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). His death and resurrection had not lessened their anticipation of the earthly kingdom but heightened it. Surely now that He had conquered even death, He would unveil his glory to the world and establish the never-ending kingdom.

   And notice that Jesus’ reply in Acts 1 is no rebuke for thinking the kingdom would be a literal, earthly one. In fact, He tacitly affirmed that His kingdom would indeed be established on earth, but not according to their timetable: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (v. 7). Thus without dashing their hope of an earthly kingdom He called them to a ready preparedness while they waited for God’s timing to be manifest.

2. The Western Wall, which remains standing even today, was part of the retaining wall built when the temple mount was expanded to make room for the immense structure Herod wanted to build. As such, it held up the temple’s outer court, but it was not part of the temple building per se; so it is no exception to Christ’s prophecy that not one stone of the temple would be left standing.