What is preterism and why is it an important challenge today?

First then the rationale behind this study. I was first exposed to preterism through an apostolic blog on the internet about six-seven years ago. Moreover, on a trip to the United States to attend and preach at conferences about four years ago, it was evident that this teaching had claimed adherents even among some of our own ministers who are doctrinally sound in every other way. It soon dawned on me that they were quite convinced that those who believed in Pre-tribulation (the belief that Jesus would return in the clouds to take the church away before the commencement of the Tribulation period of seven years and return physically with the church after this period at Armageddon) were peddling a fallacious doctrine. I engaged in debating informally on a couple of occasions with these dear men of God and was further persuaded that they were in error. The last few years have indicated a rise in their numbers which I attribute to poor Bible prophecy knowledge and the fact that they have mostly heard one side of the story. Even on our website blog (http://www.apostolicinternational.org/blog/?p=3), the proponents of preterism are actively seeking to make their views heard. On a couple of occasions I have been asked to prepare a response to preterism and I trust this will be the first of many.

To capture the essence and the broad outlines of this theory of interpreting Bible prophecy I will refer to the writing’s of Kenneth Gentry, a preterist:

The term “preterism” is based on the Latin preter, which means “past.” Preterism refers to that understanding of certain eschatological passages which holds that they have already come to fulfillment… The preterist approach teaches, for instance, that many of the prophecies of Revelation and the first portion of the Olivet Discourse have already been fulfilled in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In Revelation, most of the prophecies before Revelation 20 find fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem (A.D.70). (Gentry as cited in Lahaye and Ice 2003:18)

It is important to understand that there are degrees or a spectrum of preterist viewpoints.
a) **Mild Preterism**: Preterism was first propounded in a systematic manner only in the 16th cent by a Jesuit friar called Alcazar and remained the dominant preterist version until the 19th cent. Alcazar believed that the book of revelation symbolically depicted the church’s battle with, first, Judaism and then paganism which culminated in its final victory over pagan Rome. Alcazar was fully aware that the reformers, like Martin Luther, cast the Pope in the role of the biblical Antichrist and thus some interpret Alcazar’s mild preterism as an attempt to draw attention away from the Pope (Leroy E. Froom).

b) **Moderate (or partial) Preterism**: This is today the mainstream version. The quote from Kenneth Gentry above illustrates this position and thus needs no further commentary. It is necessary to state that they do believe in a partial return of Christ and fulfillment of Bible prophecies in A.D. 70.

c) **Extreme Preterism**: This is also called full preterism. They contend that the Second coming of Christ has occurred in A.D. 70. They rule out any future coming of Christ. In addition, and more shockingly, they postulate that there is no physical resurrection of believers in the future since bodily resurrection has occurred in A.D. 70 and we now are resurrected spiritually.

If preterism is true, then it will have a grave impact on traditional Bible prophecy understanding. Some of the implications would include the following: No Great Tribulation can be expected during the reign of the antichrist (Matt 24: 21), no great apostasy as stated by the apostle Paul (I Tim 4:13); all references to the “last days” in the Bible refer to the span of time between the Lord’s Advent and A.D.70; the designation “antichrist” does not envisage a future evil person but is a generic term drawing attention to the wickedness of the age prior to the destruction of Jerusalem; a denial of the “Rapture” which they hold will coincide with the Second Advent of Jesus; The Second Coming itself will occur after the Millennium; the Beast was a metaphor for Nero and the Roman Empire; the False prophet was the elite religious leadership of Israel; The Great Harlot of Revelation 17 was Jerusalem itself; The Millennium was inaugurated in A.D. 70 and is going on now but will terminate when Jesus returns. They believe that Christians are ruling now; they advocate “Replacement theology” which teaches that Christ destroyed natural Israel and the church has supplanted Israel. Furthermore, the Lord has no future plan for natural Israel; The New Jerusalem is not a literal city but actually the church now and forever; No such place or event as Armageddon which really is a symbol for the destruction of the enemies of the Lord.

Allow me to counter their flawed beliefs one by one. For a further exhaustive study, I highly recommend the excellent book *The End Times Controversy* by Tim Lahaye and Thomas Ice (see bibliography) which has served as the primary source for this article.
• Gird up thy loins like a man and answer thou...

Job 38:3 Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.

I intend, with the Lord’s help to take some of preterisms misguided assertions to task at this juncture. The assertions are selected randomly and might cut across the preterist spectrum of viewpoints.

**Preterist assertion 1: No Great Tribulation can be expected during the reign of the antichrist (Matt 24: 21).**

Revelation chapters 6-19 describes some pretty distressing and frightful events that include 21 severe judgments upon the inhabitants of the earth. Seven seals, trumpets and vials (bowls) signal the unleashing of divine catastrophes of unprecedented suffering. Amongst others, water is turned into blood, three colossal earthquakes (one is called the largest ever recorded rev 16:18). Other judgments include a global war that annihilates 25% of the population (Rev 6:8); three more plagues that devastate and kill one-third of the world (Rev 9:18); the antichrist causes people to worship him or face death (Rev 13:16). The question preterists of all shades must answer is: when did these events occur before or during or after A.D 70 up to our present time? Unless they allegorize them (which is what many of them do), or manipulate history, they must concede these prophecies to be futuristic since history fails to mention any of them.

**Preterist assertion 2. No great apostasy as stated by the apostle Paul occurs in the end time (I Tim 4:13)**

2Th 2:3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for [that day shall not come], except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;

1Ti 4:1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

Here the apostle gives a chronological order: first there must be a great apostasy before the antichrist emerges. It stands to reason that there cannot be an apostasy among nations who have never accepted the Gospel earlier. There is a unanimous consensus among scholars and laymen alike that Christianity has declined and waned in influence in the West, which for over a thousand years was perceived (whether correctly or incorrectly is not the issue here) as the main custodian of Christendom (with all its creeds, dogmas, missionary activities etc). Today, we use the term secular to describe the spiritual status quo. John Wolffe, in his book, *Religion in History: Conflict,*
Conversion and Coexistence, maps out not only the decline of Christendom and Christian influence in the west, but observes that “a plurality of beliefs and practices” and “diversities of spiritualities” have filled the vacuum left.

First, there is what can best be encapsulated by the phrase “the decline of Christendom”…evident as a general process throughout Western Europe (McLeod and Ustorf, 2003)…In explaining the collapsing influence of the churches, the emphasis has shifted from sociological processes to more abrupt cultural changes…the decline of Christendom …does not imply disaster for Christianity as a committed and explicit belief system. However, it does imply a retreat into a counter-cultural or sub-cultural environment…completing a kind of full circle to the situation of Christianity in the first three centuries of its existence before Constantine.” At the same time, Christendom in Europe is being succeeded not by a wholly secular culture, but by one in which a plurality of beliefs and practice exists, including other major world religions, and the diversity of spiritualities and beliefs apparent in the “Mind, Body, Spirit” sections of any large bookshop.” (Wolffe 2004: 309).

My argument is that if the great “falling away” the apostle warned us about is evidently all around us (I haven’t even touched on the issue of gay priests, denial of the existence of hell etc), and preterists flatly deny this, then I must conclude forcefully that they are implicating themselves in this web of deceit the apostle warns about. They stand condemned by virtue of their denying the great apostasy.

Preterist assertion 3. All references to the “last days” in the Bible refer to the span of time between the Lord’s Advent and A.D.70.

If this incredible assertion is true then conversely, there is no “last days” to speak of at all. The last days are basically over between the Lord’s Ascension to heaven and A.D.70. That this is outrageously ridiculous can be easily demonstrated by analyzing Isaiah 2.

Isa 2:1 The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

Isa 2:2 And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

Isa 2:3 And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
Isa 2:4 And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

According to Isaiah, the Lord will Himself judge the nations in the “last days” and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks. If the last days is past, according to preterism, why haven’t the nations beaten their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks? Why isn’t Jesus ruling the world from Jerusalem? The United Nations might have this very same inscription from Isaiah outside their building but any casual observer of world events can confirm that the opposite is true in many cases. Nations are rather acquiring more weapons of mass destruction and richer ones are happily providing them with these sophisticated weapons. Clearly “last days”, in this case, is a reference to the Millennium reign when another prophecy of Isaiah and Zechariah will be fulfilled:

Isa 9:6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace

Zech 14:9 And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one.

I would hasten to add that the context determines the usage of “last days”. At times sound Bible hermeneutics demands we understand it to refer to the “Rapture”, the Great Tribulation or Second Advent.

Preterist assertion 4. The designation “antichrist” does not envisage a future evil person but is a generic term drawing attention to the wickedness of the age prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. Partial preterism declares that Nero was the Beast of Revelation.

Amazingly, and unabashedly, moderate or partial preterists interpret Revelation13s antichrist to refer to the Roman Emperor Nero. They argue that he persecuted the church severely and forced many to worship him. What they ignore is that Nero’s persecution of Christians was limited to Rome and never even reached Asia Minor where many of the early churches were located. On the contrary, the Bible declares that the antichrist’s iron rule will be global using commerce as a tool:

Rev 13:7 And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations.
Furthermore, the apostle Paul declares that the antichrist will desecrate the Temple in Jerusalem – the abomination that causes desolation.

2Th 2:4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

2Th 2:8 And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:

History tells us that Nero never was in Jerusalem and, even if he was, when was he destroyed by the “breath of Christ?”

Lahaye and Ice effectively undermine any attempt to cast Nero in the role of antichrist:

*Actually, Nero was a poor excuse for an Antichrist. He was a wimpy emperor who preferred to act on the stage of his day and recite poetry than be Caesar of Rome, and he died by suicide at 31 years of age. Admittedly, the man was evil, like most of his predecessors, but he doesn’t even come close to being “a king of fierce countenance” (Daniel 8:23) or the king who makes a covenant with Israel for seven years and breaks it in three and one half years (Dan 9:26, 27)...And, as we have seen, Nero was not destroyed by the coming of Christ, but committed suicide by cutting his own throat in A.D. 68. To make him the Antichrist Takes intellectual gymnastics that makes a mockery out of both biblical scholarship, for he died Two years before the destruction of Jerusalem occurred, which is when preterists claim that Christ returned. (Lahaye and Ice 2003: 13).*

- **Conclusion**

This initial appraisal of preterism should alert us to the dangers inherent in its teaching. Chief among these dangers is that a denial of futuristic prophetic events like the Great Tribulation, the great apostasy, the teaching of the “last days”, and the emergence of a literal personal antichrist would serve to lull the church to sleep like Delilah did Samson on her lap. It could prove to be too late when the Philistines come. We cannot add or deduct from the word of God neither are we free to distort its message by employing an inconsistent hermeneutical approach. The apostle words would serve as an apt conclusion here:

Tts 2:13 Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;
Bibliography
