

Did the Hurricanes Wash Away the Hate?

In the midst and aftermath of the destruction caused by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, I saw a number of comments in social media marveling at how people came together and served each other regardless of race, religion, or any other “us/them” division. Immediately before the hurricanes, the subject of hate was hot and furious in the various media. Then suddenly people weren’t talking about it. Something much bigger and much more immediate consumed our attention.

So that left an intriguing question: did the hurricanes wash away the hate?

Alas, no.

It didn’t take long before a third hurricane, Maria, decimated America’s own Puerto Rico, and the horrific humanitarian crisis became fodder for politically-related contempt and ugliness in the media. This was immediately followed by the mass shooting in Las Vegas that remains a mystery.

What in the world is going on?

In answering a question about signs indicating the end times, GotQuestions.org writes, “An increase in false messiahs, an increase in warfare, and **increases in famines, plagues, and natural disasters**—these are signs of the end times. In [Matthew 24:5-8], though, we are given a warning: we are not to be deceived, because these events are only the beginning of birth pains; the end is still to come.” (emphasis mine)

Paul writes this to Timothy about the end times:

You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only

themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. **They will be cruel and hate what is good.** They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that! (2 Timothy 3:3-5, emphasis mine)

This sure sounds like 2017, doesn't it? The subjects of cruelty and hate are front-page news stories, whether we're learning of new beheadings or accusations of new hate groups. Recently, CNN published the Southern Poverty Law Center's "hate map," which lumps together true hate-fueled organizations with Christian ministries holding to historic biblical orthodoxy. I follow this story because two years ago, SPLC put Probe Ministries on their hate map for being "anti-LGBT." And since I am the one who writes most of the content for Probe.org on sexuality and gender issues, they were mainly pointing their finger at me.

So while some people were wondering if the hurricanes had washed away the hate, I found myself writing a number of answers to email and social media posts assuring people that no, Probe is not a hate group, and inviting them—as I always have—to identify any words of hatred on our website. No one has ever shown me any hateful words. (I don't think we've ever written any hateful words to begin with, but I have always vetted anything I've written on the subject of LGBT by first submitting it to friends who used to identify as gay or lesbian.) But simply writing about homosexuality as not God's design, and the truth that Jesus Christ changes people and sometimes that includes people's same-sex attractions, is purportedly potential fuel for those who would commit violence against LGBT people.

(What's interesting is that an armed man used the SPLC hate map to attempt to commit violence against the Family Research Council as retribution for their inclusion on the hate list. The SPLC doesn't seem to have a problem with that.)

As my pastor says, "Truth sounds like hate to those who hate the truth." There are so many cultural lies about God's design for sex and identity that when we proclaim God's truth in a culture that embraces lies, we get called hateful and discriminatory.

No, the hurricanes did not wash away the hate; they just distracted us for a time, I think. I do believe we are seeing the birth pangs of the end times, and the world is going to continue to get darker and more hostile to those holding a biblical worldview. My prayer is that we will be faithful to stand for what is right and true no matter the cost.

Even when we're slimed with false accusations of hate.

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Knowing the End of the Story

Nov. 8, 2011

The other day, on a friend's recommendation, I started watching *So You Think You Can Dance*, which is like *Dancing With the Stars* only with people who actually can dance. I found it on a cable station, and watched several episodes. Then I discovered that I was watching last season's shows, so

I googled the program and found out who won.

Knowing the outcome changes the way I view the competition. A judge's critical assessment of a performance is just a bump on the road when I know the dancer will eventually win in the end.

That's one of the many reasons for reading and studying the Bible. When we know how the story is going to end, it helps us process the meaning and impact of the slings and arrows of living in a fallen world, and we don't have to be undone by them.

We know that in the end, God will set everything right.

In the end, He will see that good triumphs over evil.

In the end, Jesus will be crowned King over all, and He will reign in His kingdom here on earth, and those who have been faithful will be rewarded with opportunities to reign with Him, to serve in His kingdom. (For a mind-blowing explanation of the difference between the kingdom and heaven, check out Curtis Tucker's new book *Majestic Destiny*.)

It is faithfulness that qualifies us for a place in the kingdom (which is different from receiving eternal life, which is a free gift with no strings attached). And faithfulness is proven by our responses to the challenges and tests of this life. It's about choosing to trust in the goodness and love of a sovereign God instead of resorting to our own methods of making life work. It's about resisting temptation to conform to the world's mold. It's about waiting on the Lord's timing instead of taking matters into our own hands when He doesn't seem to be moving fast enough for us.

Knowing how the Big Story will end helps us put the small stories of our lives into perspective. But knowing how we got here, by studying the histories recorded in the Bible, also provides perspective.

I have a friend who is baffled and confused—well, actually, *terrified* is more accurate—because everything she's ever counted on to make life work is being taken away. She finds herself divorced, without custody of her children, no job, and no idea how she will pay next month's rent. None of it makes sense to her.

But I've been reading the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah through Malachi) this year, and what's happening to her makes a lot of sense to me. God is lovingly taking away all the props that she has been depending on to make life work so that she can learn that that He is good, that He is her provider, that He is enough. And because she doesn't yet know Him—she really just has some ideas about Him—she doesn't know that she can trust Him.

Just as God cured the idolatry of His people by stripping them of all His gifts and benefits that they blindly attributed to the false gods they worshipped, I believe God is removing everything except Himself from my friend's life. It's a scary place, but it doesn't have to be a hopeless place. God has a way of setting up crazy situations where we are given a front-row seat to what He's about to do to reveal His heart to us.

Studying the Bible's stories and lessons helps us see that. Looking backward, and looking forward.

Where there will be dancing!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/knowning_the_end_of_the_story

Christians in the World

Don Closson looks at three books on how to live the Christian life in 21st century America: Radical, The Next Christians, and To Change the World.

Introduction

Have you ever heard a sermon that tried to convince you that our earthly possessions should be looked at more like a hotel room rather than a permanent home? The point being that earth is a nice place to visit, but it's not a believer's final destination.



As aliens and strangers, our real residence is with God which usually implies a heavenly spiritual existence that is completely foreign to our current one. In a bit of a twist, a recent article in *Christianity Today* argued that most evangelicals have things backwards. We are wrong if we think that at Christ's return the wicked will be "left behind" and the righteous will be taken away to a heavenly abode. It's the wicked who will be removed while the righteous remain on earth. The author's conclusion is that we should be more caring about this world because it, not heaven, will be our eternal home.

How we view "final things" or the "end times" impacts how we live today. There is a heated debate going on about the priorities of those who desire to live out a biblical worldview. Should we be focused on restoring this world, redeeming it for God, or on offering the lifeboat of salvation in order to save some from impending destruction along with the rest of the cosmos? Are we to be mostly about creating a restored culture through our Spirit empowered efforts, or are we seeking salvation for a redeemed people leaving restoration of the world to special acts of God?

In this article I will focus on three popular books that offer

different perspectives on how Christians should prioritize their lives: *Radical* by David Platt, a mega-church pastor from Birmingham, Alabama; *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons, a conference speaker who has created an organization to encourage dialogue about the purpose of the church; and *To Change the World* by James Hunter, the lone academic, a professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia.

Platt's book is simple and straightforward. He tells his story mostly by giving examples of people in his church who were radicalized by the gospel. Lyons' book is a polemic against what he calls a gospel that only tells half of God's story. Hunter gives us a scholarly tome, calling Christians to humility when it comes to changing the culture in which we dwell. Although these books are different in significant ways, they all present an argument against the so-called American dream of runaway materialism and extreme individualism.

Three different books, espousing a similar message, told with both passion and thoughtfulness. Join me as we consider how Christians are to dwell on earth as aliens and strangers.

Becoming a Radical

The strength of David Platt's book *Radical* is its simplicity. He pleads with us to believe what Jesus says and then to obey it. But like most things in life, his simple admonition hides nuances and assumptions that beg further explanation.

Platt fills his book with example after example of Christians making radical life decisions as they reject both the American dream and the typical American way of doing church. He argues that "[W]e as Christ followers in American churches have embraced values and ideas that are not only unbiblical but that actually contradict the gospel we claim to believe."[^{\[1\]}](#) After introducing himself as one of the youngest pastors to

lead a mega-church, he admits that the “bigger-is-better” tendency in our churches is hard to support in Scripture.

Platt’s concerns are worthy of much soul searching and careful interpretation of God’s Word. But about halfway through the book I found myself both attracted to, and frustrated by, the many stories of life change among Platt’s congregants as well as his own struggles over how to lead his church in a way that is Christ honoring. For example, Platt’s discussion of Luke 9 results in this sentence: “We *do* have to give up everything we have to follow Jesus. We *do* have to love him in a way that makes our closest relationships in this world look like hate. And it is entirely possible that he *will* tell us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor.”[\[2\]](#) Unfortunately, when I looked for principles to know when and to what extent Jesus is asking me to do these things, I didn’t find that Platt offered any.

Platt leaves little room for interpretation when it comes to the words of Jesus. Is it possible that Jesus used rabbinic hyperbole or exaggeration common to the Jewish teachers of his day when making his more drastic comments about holy living? Even though Platt occasionally tempers his remarks with an “I don’t have all the answers” or “I have more questions than answers,” he writes as if his reading of the text is obvious and conclusive.[\[3\]](#)

Platt’s book *Radical* is intended to shock culturally captive Christians out of their American Dream stupor and to become serious Christ followers. His one-year dare at the end includes activities from which all believers would benefit. We should be praying for the entire world, reading through the entire Word, sacrificing our money for Kingdom purposes, reaching out to those in other cultural settings, and committing ourselves to multiplying church communities. I just wish that Platt had given us a little more nuanced guidance as to when and to what extent Christians should live a radical life.

Restoring Eden

Of the three books we are examining in this article, I anticipated the arrival of Gabe Lyons' book *The Next Christians* the most. I had read glowing endorsements and was hoping not to be disappointed.

The first of three sections in the book describes how the world has changed in its perception of Christianity. Although there is much good information here, Lyons resorts to the phrase "perfect storm" once too often in describing our current cultural milieu. He is right to describe attitudes towards believers in post-Christian America as mostly negative, but I am cautious about his complaint that our situation today is somehow unique.[{4}](#)

Lyons describes the church's response to social change as either separatist or cultural. The separatists are characterized by judgmental withdrawal from society, aggressively defending a Christian America that no longer exists. They reduce the Christian's task to saving a few souls via evangelism in ways often offensive to our pluralistic society. It's not a pretty picture. According to Lyons, we are far too influenced by the remnants of the Fundamentalist movement that did battle with modernism at the beginning of the last century.

Cultural Christians seek to blend into the culture rather than judge it, and define the Christian life as primarily doing kind things for others. These self-identified Christians place tolerance high on their list of virtues and are working diligently to avoid topics or actions that might alienate their neighbors. Lyons argues that they have conformed to the culture in a way that relinquishes any hope of having significant impact.

Lyons endorses a third category which he calls *restorers*. He describes these people as those who "envision the world as it

was meant to be and they work toward that vision. Restorers seek to mend earth's brokenness."[\[5\]](#) They are optimistic, and see "that God is on the move—doing something unique in our time."[\[6\]](#) Their mission is to see "how things ought to be," and then to commit their lives to making it so.[\[7\]](#)

In a manner similar to Platt's book *Radical*, Lyons chastises Christians who focus too much on the Gospel message of redemption and emphasizing a salvation that offers escape from this fallen world. By putting restoration back into God's story we don't have to wait for God to give us a new heaven and earth, we can experience it now.

Lyons' call to action is an expansive one and it immediately raises questions about what a restored world should look like; what specific form should our political and economic systems take? He seems to assume that we should know the answer to these questions but I am not so sure that it's that obvious.

A Faithful Presence

We will now consider the most academic of the three books we are examining, James Hunter's book *To Change the World*. Not only is Hunter's book one third longer than the other two, it is far more abstract in content. Where the other two books give significant space to stories of lives changed by a biblical calling, Hunter devotes less than three pages to real life examples. What we do get is a thoughtful overview of how most Christians wrongly pursue political power in the name of Christ.

According to Hunter, Christians can be broken down into three distinct groups: the Christian Right, the Christian Left and the Neo-Anabaptists. The Christian Right seeks to win the culture war. In its eyes, Christian America is disappearing and needs to be defended. Secularism has conquered the media, academia, and government, resulting in a culture that rejects

biblical values and corrupts our children.

In many ways the Christian Left and Neo-Anabaptists look a lot alike. They are hostile towards an unrestrained market economy and capitalism itself. They also share a sharp loathing for the Christian Right. But they differ dramatically regarding the believer's relationship to government. The Left see the government as a partner while the Neo-Anabaptists see it only as a coercive force that uses violence to enforce its will.

Hunter argues that all three groups seek political power in order to change the culture, a goal that will inevitably fail. He spends a large portion of the book explaining why changing a culture is far more difficult than most appreciate. Cultures are more complex and resilient than we think and cannot be changed by just putting new ideas in people's minds.

In the end, Hunter calls Christians to what he describes as a faithful presence. Rather than defending against the secularization of culture, trying to be relevant to it, or even seeking purity from its negative effects he calls for another response that lends authenticity without sacrificing coherence and depth to our faith.

Building a faithful presence requires that our leaders care more about discipleship than fighting the culture war or gaining political power. Christ followers today have faith but lack a vision for living that is distinct from the larger post-Christian culture. For Hunter, "A theology of faithful presence means a recognition that the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God."[\[8\]](#) Hunter realizes that the New Heavens and New Earth will be God's restoring work, but by honoring God through our relationships and our tasks we will taste something of His kingdom now.

Summary

In this article we have considered three stimulating and passionate books, *Radical* by David Platt, *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons and *To Change the World* by James Hunter and have been left with three overlapping pictures of what it means to be a Christ follower in the current American culture. Is the Christian life about being a radical, being as counter-cultural as possible? Is it restoring the world to a pre-fall condition? Or is it as simple as being a disciple maker?

The apostle Paul certainly lived a radical lifestyle, but he was limited by a couple of parameters. Paul talks about being free from the expectations of men and yet careful not to give offense in any way that might hinder the gospel.^{9} He was culturally sensitive enough to know what actions or words might keep people from hearing the good news. He said that he became all things to all men so that some might be saved. He conformed to the culture enough to communicate the transcendent truth about Jesus.

Paul says very little about reforming Roman society, the government, commerce, or education. He seems to be much more concerned about the culture within the church than he does the culture at large. He writes, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?”^{10} His desire was for Christ followers to live out the “one another” passages that fill the New Testament. To be loving, encouraging, building up, and bearing with one another in a way that will draw outsiders to the gospel.

What about Gabe Lyons’ strong emphasis on restoration? In my mind the issue is one of priorities. Most Christians would like to see their efforts result in some degree of healing and restoration in our society. But is healing and restoration of America our first priority? This might be true if one holds the view that Christians must take over society prior to Christ’s return, as do some postmillennialists. But for those

who believe that Christ will return as a conquering king to a world in rebellion, there is no expectation or responsibility for Christians to restore the planet. These differing positions show, once again, the relevance of theology to everyday life.

International speaker and author Os Guinness describes clearly our first priority as believers. He writes, "All that we do must be first and last for Christ and His kingdom, not for America, or the West, or democracy, or whatever. The 'first things' must be first again, and everything else must be viewed only a bonus or a by-product, and not our prime concern."^[11] Since God has chosen to build his kingdom through the church, it is Christ's church that should receive our primary efforts.

Notes

1. David Platt, *Radical* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010) pg. 3.
2. Ibid., pg. 12.
3. Ibid., pg. 3.
4. Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) pg. 11.
5. Ibid., pg. 47.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pg. 60.
8. James Hunter, *To Change the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pg. 95.
9. 2 Corinthians 6:3.
10. 1 Corinthians 5:12.
11. Os Guinness "Os Guinness Calls for a New Christian Renaissance," *Christian Post*, www.christianpost.com/news/51309/

“How Can Elijah and Enoch Be Killed in Glorified Bodies?”

Elijah and Enoch were taken by God. [In Genesis 5:24, Enoch “walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” In 2 Kings 2:11, Elijah “went up by a whirlwind to heaven.”] Therefore, I assume they are in a glorified body. How can they be killed if they are in a glorified body?

Thanks for your question. I’m guessing that you’re assuming that Enoch and Elijah will be the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11. This interpretation may (or may not) be correct. The two witnesses are never named, and there is no way to know whether these two individuals are Enoch and Elijah or not. They may be two entirely different people, who come in the spirit and power of Enoch and Elijah, say, without actually being those two men. This would be similar to the ministry of John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah (see Luke 1:17). This actually makes more sense to me.

However, if Enoch and Elijah are the two witnesses then, yes, they will have to be in non-glorified bodies that are still subject to death. But we shouldn’t think that Enoch and Elijah have already received glorified bodies. After all, the resurrection of the righteous dead has not yet taken place (except for Jesus). Enoch and Elijah, along with all the other saints, are still waiting to receive their glorified bodies. This won’t happen until the resurrection mentioned in Revelation 20. Finally, since Enoch and Elijah never actually died, if this interpretation is correct, then we might view this as their time to do so. Thus, while I am personally

inclined to take the former view (above), I do not think there is any problem adopting the latter view I've just enunciated. Of course, the truth may be different than either of these views, but we don't need to concern ourselves with that right now.

Hope this helps.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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Four Views of Revelation

Dr. Patrick Zukeran presents a summary of four of the major approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation and its meaning for the end times: the idealist, the preterist, the historicist, and the futurist views. For each, he presents the basic approach, strengths of the approach and weaknesses of the approach. Recognizing that God is the central mover in all of these, he encourages us to keep these questions from dividing Christians in our mission of sharing Christ with the world.

The Debate

One of the most intriguing books of the Bible is the book of Revelation. The imagery of the cosmic battle in heaven and on earth makes it a fascinating book to study. However, much debate surrounds the proper interpretation of this



apocalyptic work. Is this book a prophecy of future events yet to take place, or have the prophecies of this book been fulfilled?

Two popular authors highlight the debate that continues in our present time. In his hit series *Left Behind*, Tim LaHaye writes a fictional account based on his theological position that the events of Revelation will occur in the future. Popular radio talk show host Hank Hanegraaff responded by attacking the theology of LaHaye. In his book *The Apocalypse Code*, Hanegraaff asserts that the events of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. He criticizes theologians like LaHaye for taking a hyper-literal approach to Revelation.[\[1\]](#) The debate has raised some confusion among Christians as to why there is such a debate and how we should interpret the book of Revelation.

The issues at the core of the debate between Hanegraaff and LaHaye are not new. Throughout church history, there have been four different views regarding the book of Revelation: idealist, preterist, historicist, and futurist. The idealist view teaches that Revelation describes in symbolic language the battle throughout the ages between God and Satan and good against evil. The preterist view teaches that the events recorded in the book of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. The historicist view teaches that the book of Revelation is a symbolic presentation of church history beginning in the first century AD through the end of age. The prophecies of Revelation are fulfilled in various historic events such as the fall of the Roman Empire, the Protestant Reformation, and the French Revolution. The futurist view teaches that Revelation prophesies events that will take place in the future. These events include the rapture of the church, seven years of tribulation, and a millennial rule of Christ upon the earth.

Each view attempts to interpret Revelation according to the laws of hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation.

This is central to the debate about how we should approach and interpret Revelation. The idealist approach believes that apocalyptic literature like Revelation should be interpreted allegorically. The preterist and historicist views are similar in some ways to the allegorical method, but it is more accurate to say preterists and historicists view Revelation as symbolic history. The preterist views Revelation as a symbolic presentation of events that occurred in AD 70, while the historicist school views the events as symbolic of all Western church history. The futurist school believes Revelation should be interpreted literally. In other words, the events of Revelation are to occur at a future time.

The goal of this work is to present a brief overview of the four views of Revelation and present the strengths of each view as well as its weaknesses. It is my hope that the reader will gain a basic understanding and be able to understand the debate among theologians today.

The Idealist View

The first view of Revelation is the idealist view, or the spiritual view. This view uses the allegorical method to interpret the Book of Revelation. The allegorical approach to Revelation was introduced by ancient church father Origen (AD 185-254) and made prominent by Augustine (AD 354-420). According to this view, the events of Revelation are not tied to specific historical events. The imagery of the book symbolically presents the ongoing struggle throughout the ages of God against Satan and good against evil. In this struggle, the saints are persecuted and martyred by the forces of evil but will one day receive their vindication. In the end, God is victorious, and His sovereignty is displayed throughout ages. Robert Mounce summarizes the idealist view stating, "Revelation is a theological poem presenting the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It is a philosophy of history wherein Christian

forces are continuously meeting and conquering the demonic forces of evil.”{2}

In his commentary on Revelation, late nineteenth century scholar William Milligan stated, “While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents; we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, both for the exhibition of the principles which govern the history of both the world and the Church.”{3}

The symbols in Revelation are not tied to specific events but point to themes throughout church history. The battles in Revelation are viewed as spiritual warfare manifested in the persecution of Christians or wars in general that have occurred in history. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically-inspired political opposition to the church in any age. The beast from the land represents pagan, or corrupt, religion to Christianity. The harlot represents the compromised church, or the seduction of the world in general. Each seal, trumpet, or bowl represents natural disasters, wars, famines, and the like which occur as God works out His plan in history. Catastrophes represent God’s displeasure with sinful man; however, sinful mankind goes through these catastrophes while still refusing to turn and repent. God ultimately triumphs in the end.

The strength of this view is that it avoids the problem of harmonizing passages with events in history. It also makes the book of Revelation applicable and relevant for all periods of church history.{4}

However, there are several weaknesses of this view. First, this view denies the book of Revelation any specific historical fulfillment. The symbols portray the ever-present conflict but no necessary consummation of the historical process.{5} Rev.1:1 states that the events will come to pass

shortly, giving the impression that John is prophesying future historical events.

Second, reading spiritual meanings into the text could lead to arbitrary interpretations. Followers of this approach have often allowed the cultural and socio-political factors of their time to influence their interpretation rather than seeking the author's intended meaning.[{6}](#) Merrill Tenney states,

The idealist view . . . assumes a "spiritual" interpretation, and allows no concrete significance whatever to figures that it employs. According to this viewpoint they are not merely symbolic of events and persons, as the historicist view contends; they are only abstract symbols of good and evil. They may be attached to any time or place, but like the characters of Pilgrim's Progress, represent qualities or trends. In interpretation, the Apocalypse may thus mean anything or nothing according to the whim of the interpreter.[{7}](#)

Unless interpreters are grounded in the grammatical, historical, and contextual method of hermeneutics, they leave themselves open to alternate interpretations that may even contradict the author's intended meaning.

The Preterist View

The second view is called the [preterist](#) view. *Preter*, which means "past," is derived from the Latin. There are two major views among preterists: full preterism and partial preterism. Both views believe that the prophecies of the Olivet discourse of Matthew 24 and Revelation were fulfilled in the first century with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Chapters 1-3 describe the conditions in the seven churches of Asia Minor prior to the Jewish war (AD 66-70). The remaining chapters of Revelation and Jesus' Olivet Discourse describe the fall of

Jerusalem to the Romans.

Full preterists believe that all the prophecies found in Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70 and that we are now living in the eternal state, or the new heavens and the new earth. Partial preterists believe that most of the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem but that chapters 20-22 point to future events such as a future resurrection of believers and return of Christ to the earth. Partial preterists view full preterism as heretical since it denies the second coming of Christ and teaches an unorthodox view of the resurrection.

Church historians trace the roots of preterism to Jesuit priest Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613).[\[8\]](#) Alcazar's interpretation is considered a response to the Protestant historicist interpretation of Revelation that identified the Pope as the Anti-Christ. However, some preterists contend that preterist teachings are found in the writings of the early church as early as the fourth century AD.[\[9\]](#)

Crucial to the preterist view is the date of Revelation. Since it is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, preterists hold to a pre-AD 70 date of writing. According to this view, John was writing specifically to the church of his day and had only its situation in mind. This letter was written to encourage the saints to persevere under the persecution of the Roman Empire.

Preterists point to several reasons to support their view. First, Jesus stated at the end of the Olivet Discourse, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34). A generation usually refers to forty years. The fall of Jerusalem would then fit the time Jesus predicted. Second, Josephus' detailed record of the fall of Jerusalem appears in several ways to match the symbolism of Revelation. Finally, this view would be directly relevant to John's readers of his day.

There are several criticisms of this view. First, the events described in Jesus' Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 4-19 differ in several ways from the fall of Jerusalem.

One example is that Christ described his return to Jerusalem this way: "[A]s lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Mt. 24:27). Preterists believe this refers to the Roman army's advance on Jerusalem. However, the Roman army advanced on Jerusalem from west to east, and their assault was not as a quick lightning strike. The Jewish war lasted for several years before Jerusalem was besieged, and the city fell after a lengthy siege.^{10} Second, General Titus did not set up an "abomination of desolation" (Mt. 24:15) in the Jerusalem Temple. Rather, he destroyed the Temple and burned it to the ground. Thus, it appears the preterist is required to allegorize or stretch the metaphors and symbols in order to find fulfillment of the prophecies in the fall of Jerusalem.

Another example of allegorical interpretation by preterists is their interpretation of Revelation 7:4. John identifies a special group of prophets: the 144,000 from the "tribes of Israel." Preterist Hanegraaff states that this group represents the true bride of Christ and is referred to in Rev. 7:9 as the "great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language." In other words, the 144,000 in verse 4, and the great multitude in verse 9 are the same people.^{11} This appears to go against the context of the chapter for several reasons. First, throughout the Bible the phrase "tribes of Israel" refers to literal Jews. Second, John says there are 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a strange way to describe the multitude of believers from all nations. Finally, the context shows John is speaking of two different groups: one on the earth (the 144,000 referenced in 7:1-3), and the great multitude in heaven before the throne (7:9). Here Hanegraaff appears to be allegorizing the text.

Robert Mounce states,

The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign on God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message or his work was so helplessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray.[{12}](#)

Mounce and other New Testament scholars believe the preterists' interpretations are not consistent and utilize allegorical interpretations to make passages fit their theological view.

Second, the preterist position rests on a pre-AD 70 date of writing. However, most New Testament scholars date the writing of the book to AD 95. If John had written Revelation after AD 70, the book could not have been a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem. This presents a significant argument against the preterist position.

Preterists point to several lines of evidence for a pre-AD 70 date of writing. First, John does not mention the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. If he had been writing two decades after the event, it seems strange that he never mentioned this catastrophic event. Second, John does not refer to either Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (Mt. 24, Mk. 13, Lk. 21) or the fulfillment of this prophecy. Third, in Revelation 11:1, John is told to "measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there." Preterist argue that this indicates that the Temple is still standing during the writing of Revelation.[{13}](#)

The preterist view, particularly the partial preterist view, is a prominent position held by such notable scholars as R. C.

Sproul, Hank Hanegraaff, Kenneth Gentry, and the late David Chilton (who later converted to full preterism after the publishing of his books).

The Historicist View

The third view is called the historicist approach. This view teaches that Revelation is a symbolic representation that presents the course of history from the apostle's life through the end of the age. The symbols in the apocalypse correspond to events in the history of Western Europe, including various popes, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and rulers such as Charlemagne. Most interpreters place the events of their day in the later chapters of Revelation.

Many adherents of this position view chapters 1-3 as seven periods in church history. The breaking of the seals in chapters 4-7 symbolizes the fall of the Roman Empire. The Trumpet judgments in chapters 8-10 represent the invasions of the Roman Empire by the Vandals, Huns, Saracens, and Turks. Among Protestant historicists of the Reformation, the antichrist in Revelation was believed to be the papacy. Chapters 11-13 in Revelation represent the true church in its struggle against Roman Catholicism. The bowl judgments of Revelation 14-16 represent God's judgment on the Catholic Church, culminating in the future overthrow of Catholicism depicted in chapters 17-19.[\[14\]](#)

There are several criticisms of this approach. First, this approach allows for a wide variety of interpretations. Adherents have a tendency to interpret the text through the context of their period. Thus, many saw the climax of the book happening in their generation. John Walvoord points out the lack of agreement among historicists. He states, "As many as fifty different interpretations of the book of Revelation therefore evolve, depending on the time and circumstances of the expositor."[\[15\]](#) Moses Stuart echoed the same concern in

his writings over a century ago. He wrote, "Hitherto, scarcely any two original and independent expositors have agreed, in respect to some points very important in their bearing upon the interpretation of the book."[\[16\]](#)

Second, this view focuses mostly on the events of the church in Western Europe and says very little about the church in the East. Thus, its narrow scope fails to account for God's activity throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Finally, this view would have little significance for the church of the first century whom John was addressing. It is unlikely they would have been able to interpret Revelation as the historical approach suggests.

Prominent scholars who held this view include John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, C. H. Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry. This view rose to popularity during the Protestant Reformation because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has declined in popularity and influence.

The Futurist View

The fourth view is the futurist view. This view teaches that the events of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation chapters 4-22 will occur in the future. Futurist divide the book of Revelation into three sections as indicated in 1:19: "what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." Chapter 1 describes the past ("what you have seen"), chapters 2-3 describe the present ("what is now"), and the rest of the book describes future events ("what will take place later").

Futurists apply a literal approach to interpreting Revelation. Chapters 4-19 refer to a period known as the seven-year

tribulation (Dan. 9:27). During this time, God's judgments are actually poured out upon mankind as they are revealed in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Chapter 13 describes a literal future world empire headed by a political and religious leader represented by the two beasts. Chapter 17 pictures a harlot who represents the church in apostasy. Chapter 19 refers to Christ's second coming and the battle of Armageddon followed by a literal thousand-year rule of Christ upon the earth in chapter 20. Chapters 21-22 are events that follow the millennium: the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and the arrival of the heavenly city upon the earth.

Futurists argue that a consistently literal or plain interpretation is to be applied in understanding the book of Revelation. Literal interpretation of the Bible means to explain the original sense, or meaning, of the Bible according to the normal customary usage of its language. This means applying the rules of grammar, staying consistent with the historical framework, and the context of the writing. Literal interpretation does not discount figurative or symbolic language. Futurists teach that prophecies using symbolic language are also to be normally interpreted according to the laws of language. J. P. Lange stated,

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted – that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.[*{17}*](#)

Charles Ryrie also states,

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any

meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.[{18}](#)

Futurists acknowledge the use of figures and symbols. When figurative language is used, one must look at the context to find the meaning. However, figurative language does not justify allegorical interpretation.

Futurists contend that the literal interpretation of Revelation finds its roots in the ancient church fathers. Elements of this teaching, such as a future millennial kingdom, are found in the writings of Clement of Rome (AD 96), Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), Irenaeus (AD 115-202), Tertullian (AD 150-225) and others. Futurists hold that the church fathers taught a literal interpretation of Revelation until Origen (AD 185-254) introduced allegorical interpretation. This then became the popular form of interpretation when taught by Augustine (AD 354-430).[{19}](#) Literal interpretation of Revelation remained throughout the history of the church and rose again to prominence in the modern era.

The futurist view is widely popular among evangelical Christians today. One of the most popular versions on futurist teaching is dispensational theology, promoted by schools such as Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute. Theologians such as Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and Dwight Pentecost are noted scholars of this position. Tim LaHaye made this theology popular in the culture with his end times series of novels.

Unfortunately, there have been and continue to be popular preachers who mistakenly apply the futurist approach to connect current events to the symbols in Revelation. Some have even been involved in setting dates of Christ's return. Although their writings have been popular, they do not

represent a Biblical futurist view.

Critics of this view argue that the futurist view renders the book irrelevant to the original readers of the first century. Another criticism is that Revelation is apocalyptic literature and thus meant to be interpreted allegorically or symbolically rather than literally. Hank Hanegraaff states, "Thus, when a Biblical writer uses a symbol or an allegory, we do violence to his intentions if we interpret it in a strictly literal manner."[\[20\]](#)

One of the key elements in the debate, particularly between preterists and futurists, is the date of writing for Revelation. Preterists argue for a pre-AD 70 date while futurists hold to a date of AD 95. There are several reasons for the later date. First, Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, states that John wrote Revelation at the end of Emperor Domitian's reign, which ended in AD 96. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John. He thus had a connection with a contemporary of the Apostle John.

Second, the conditions of the seven churches in Revelation appear to describe a second-generation church setting rather than that of a first-generation. For example, the Church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7) is charged with abandoning their first love and warned of the Nicolaitan heresy. If John had written Revelation in AD 65, it would have overlapped with Paul's letter to the Ephesians and Timothy. However, Paul makes no mention of either the loss of first love or the threat of the Nicolaitans. Ephesus was Paul's headquarters for three years, and Apollos served there along with Aquila and Priscilla. The church of Smyrna did not exist during Paul's ministry (AD 60-64) as recorded by Polycarp, the first bishop of the city. Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22) is rebuked for being wealthy and lukewarm. However, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul commends the church three times (2:2, 4:13, 16). It would likely take more than three years for the church to decline to

the point that chapter 3 would state there to be no commendable aspect about it. Also, an earthquake in AD 61 left the city in ruins for many years. Thus, it is unlikely that in a ruined condition John would describe them as rich.

Preterists who favor the AD 70 date pose the question, "Why doesn't John mention the fall of the Temple which occurred in AD 70?" Futurists respond that John wrote about future events, and the destruction of the temple was twenty-five years in the past. He also wrote to a Gentile audience in Asia Minor which was far removed from Jerusalem. Preterists also point to the fact that the Temple is mentioned in chapter eleven. Futurists respond that although John mentions a temple in Revelation 11:1-2, this does not mean it exists at the time of his writing. In Daniel 9:26-27 and Ezekiel 40-48, both prophets describe the temple, but it was not in existence when they described a future temple in their writings.

What did Jesus mean in Matthew 24:34 when He said, "[T]his generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened"? The common futurist response is that Jesus was stating that the future generation about which he was speaking would not pass away once "these things" had begun. In other words, the generation living amid the time of the events He predicted will not pass away until all is fulfilled.

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is a fascinating book, and the debate regarding its interpretation will continue. Despite our various views, there are some common threads upon which Christians agree.^{21} All views believe that God is sovereign and in charge of all that occurs in history and its ultimate conclusion. Except for full preterism and some forms of idealism, all believe in the physical second coming of Christ. All views believe in the resurrection from the dead. All believe there will be a future judgment. All believe in an eternal state in which believers will be with God, and

unbelievers will be separated from Him. All agree upon the importance of the study of prophecy and its edification for the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, the debate among Christians has often been harsh and hostile. It is my hope that the debate would continue in a cordial, respectful manner which will challenge every believer to accurately study and interpret the Word. We all await the return of our Lord and together with the saints of all ages say, "Amen, come Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20)

Notes

1. Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 20.
2. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 43.
3. William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 153-4.
4. Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 20.
5. Robert Mounce, 43.
6. Robert Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 31-2.
7. Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 146.
8. Steven Gregg, 39.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, ed., *The End Times Controversy* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 377.

11. Hanegraaff, 125.

12. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 42.

13. Evidence for the AD 95 date of writing will be presented in the futurist section.

14. Steven Gregg, *Four Views of Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 31, 217, 309, & 399).

15. John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 19.

16. Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart & Co., 1847), 35.

17. J. P. Lange, *Commentary of the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Scribner's, 1872), 98, quoted in Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.

18. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.

20. Hanegraaff, 14.

21. Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Conviction Without Compromise* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 333.

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