

# The Historical Challenge That Preterists Face

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast --Nov. 25, 2012

## INTRODUCTION:

- A. That was a great introduction, Larry! This is exciting! Our first podcast on a new preterist network. I am delighted to be here on Covenant Key FM. Thank you so much, Larry and Jen, for inviting me to be a part of it.
- B. I cannot imagine the incredible amount of time, money, and effort that Larry and Jen must have expended in the last couple of months putting this together. They deserve our gratitude and our support.
- C. Before we begin, why don't we thank God for providing this new broadcasting network for us to use in teaching His Truth, and dedicate it for the advancement of His Kingdom and for bringing Him much glory --

*Great God of this infinite universe, infinitely and uncompromisingly Holy, Eternal, Immortal, Invisible, who dwells in unapproachable light, and who alone possesses immortality, the One and Only True Sovereign of all the Ages -- We ask for Your blessings upon this new podcasting network, and upon our studies and fellowship here. May our efforts build your Kingdom in the hearts of many people all over the world, so that Your people will be blessed and bring glory and honor to You and Your Son, who redeemed us with His blood. It is in His Precious and Holy Name that we pray. Amen.*

- D. Before jumping back into our historical study, I want to take a few minutes to tell you what has been happening in the last two months of our downtime, then we will map out our historical journey ahead.

## I. The Past Two Months:

Since our final podcast on AD70.net at the end of August (nine weeks ago), I have been doing a lot more historical research in preparation for this series of podcasts on the final decade before the End, finishing all the coursework for my Masters Degree, starting work on my Masters Thesis, and preparing for our annual exhibit booth at ETS (coming up in about two weeks).

## II. The Exhibit Booth at ETS:

- A. This is our 14th annual exhibit booth at the Evangelical Theological Society:
  - 1. There are over 4000 members of this theological society from all over the world. It is an association of conservative Christian theologians, seminary professors, pastors, writers, publishers, and ministry leaders, who meet together each year to share their latest research, books, and media. They present hundreds of lectures on all areas of Christian doctrine and practice.
  - 2. It floats around all over the country, at a different city every year.
  - 3. Last year we were in San Francisco (with Brian Martin and Michael Loomis).
  - 4. This year we will be in Milwaukee with Don Preston, William Bell, Larry Siegle, Parker Voll, Edmund Lee, and myself, all working in the exhibit booth together.
  - 5. Larry is planning to bring his recording equipment and do some interviews of

- some of the two thousand conservative scholars who will attend this year.
6. He will probably produce a wrap-up report of the event, where all six of us booth workers get together on the last night and talk about what we saw, heard and experienced there at ETS. We will probably post that podcast report here on Covenant Key when we get back from the ETS trip.
  - B. This is a huge opportunity to rub elbows with the movers and shakers in the conservative evangelical world. These are the guys who write all the theological books and teach in the seminaries and lead all the major Christian ministries. Our exhibit booth gets us right into the middle of where all the activity is focused. Half or more of the attendees will come by our exhibit booth, giving us the opportunity to get the preterist message into their eyes and ears. Every year we have seen hostility against Preterism weakening, resistance decreasing, plus objectivity and receptivity increasing. We are reaching out to conservative evangelical scholars, the very ones who take the Bible seriously, and who understand the significance of the TIME statements. The liberal scholars don't believe the Bible is inspired, accurate, and authoritative, so they are ambivalent about the preterist view. It is a waste of time trying to influence them toward the preterist view, since they have no problem with Jesus and the apostles being mistaken about the time of His return. But the conservative evangelicals get it! They see the value of Preterism. We are providing them ammunition to fire back at the liberals and skeptics. It is critical for us to be there every year, sharing the preterist solution to the skeptical attack.
  - C. As you can imagine, this is very expensive event. The exhibit booths are not cheap. And all the travel, lodging, and food expenses for three days puts a heavy strain on our budget for several months. If you like what we are doing there, and want to support it and have a share in all the good fruit that comes from it, simply email me and let me know that you want to help. I will get you connected. Those who make a donation of \$25 or more will receive a free CD with the two-hour audio report of last year's ETS exhibit booth in San Francisco. My email address is <preterist1@preterist.org>

### III. Masters Thesis on the Epistle of Barnabas:

- A. Another thing that I have been working on during the last two months while we were off the air, was to finish all the coursework for my Masters degree, and start doing the research for my Masters Thesis.
  1. My thesis will be on the topic: Redating the Epistle of Barnabas
  2. Critics of Preterism use the Apostolic Father writings, especially the Epistle of Barnabas, to prove that the Parousia, Resurrection and Judgment could not have happened in AD 70, because all of these Apostolic Father writings which were supposedly written in the first generation after AD 70, were still teaching a future Parousia, Resurrection, and Judgment.
  3. Based on the methodology and suggestions of John A. T. Robinson in his book, Redating the New Testament, I decided to see how far we can go in redating the Apostolic Father writings before AD 70.
  4. The perfect test case for this would be the **Epistle of Barnabas**, since everyone dates it AFTER AD 70. If it can be redated before 70, then the rest of the Apostolic Fathers might also be redated before 70.

5. That would very effectively rob our critics of some of their most damaging historical arguments against Preterism. That is why I decided to do my Masters Thesis on this topic: *Redating the Epistle of Barnabas*.

B. Some of us may be wondering how our critics can legitimately use the uninspired Church Father writings to attack Preterism, and how redating them before AD 70 would make any significant difference. I believe a look at Dr. Charles Hill's statements in Mathison's book will help us see the significance of it.

#### IV. Chuck Hill's Historical Arguments Against Preterism:

A. I want to read a few statements from Dr. Charles Hill, one of our major critics, to help us see how important our redating the Apostolic Fathers really is. Keep in mind that this historical attack by Chuck Hill and others is directed at **the whole Preterist movement**, not just a few isolated segments of it. So it is for all of our benefit that we deal honestly and thoroughly with his criticism. Here is what he says about the historical problem that the Preterist view needs to deal with:

1. [Max King] argues, as well he must, for the general unreliability of the church fathers and their untrustworthiness in eschatology in particular – citing Irenaeus as his only example. **King is apparently aware that early church history offers little or no support for his understanding of eschatology. Therefore, we find hints, in several places in his writings, that the New Testament understanding of eschatology was virtually lost [after AD 70]. Our brief review of early Christian literature shows that it must have been lost with brehtaking swiftness and comprehensiveness. But what can account for this sudden disappearance of true Christian eschatology?** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 94-95, boldface mine, ees]
2. *Could the church have missed the eschaton?* After just a cursory review of the early non-canonical evidence of Christian eschatology, certain questions inevitably spring to mind. The first is, How could it possibly be that the very people who were taught about the consummation of redemptive history by the apostles, and *who lived through this consummation*, missed the great event when it happened? [Max] King says, "This 'soon' coming of Christ was not some isolated, off the beaten path event. It encompassed all of the events in Scripture that were tied to the eschatological coming of the Son of man, such as the judgment, the end of the world (age), the new heaven and earth, etc." [King, *TCTP*, p. 13] **And yet we find no trace of any awareness on the part of the church that these things happened in A.D. 70. Instead, all Christians continued to look for the blessed hope after it had already supposedly come. That the very people who experienced the momentous consummation of God's promises in Christ should not have noticed it when it happened, would be cause for the greatest possible astonishment.** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 105-106, boldface mine, ees]

3. ***Could the church have so completely misunderstood the nature of the eschaton? And if it were conceivable that the Christians who lived through the climactic end of the age were by some imponderable set of circumstances so dull as to have missed it, there would still remain other serious complications. We would at least expect that they, as churches trained by the apostles themselves, should have known what kind of events they were looking for. They should at least have known what the resurrection was, what the judgment was, what the end of the age was, and what the new heavens and new earth would be. [cf. King, TCTP, p. 740] What then are they doing [after AD 70], not only still looking for these events to occur, but believing them to be of a completely different nature than what the apostles had taught them to expect? How is it that Christians, not just in some isolated backwater, but all over the Empire, including apostolic churches, expect that the return of Christ will actually be visible to the world "as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west"; that the coming resurrection will be a bodily one; that all of humanity will then be judged, individually recompensed, and assigned their eternal lots; that then a new age will dawn "in which righteousness dwells"?*** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106, boldface mine, ees]
4. If "fulfilled eschatology" is true, then indeed King's judgment on the early church is more than justified – truly, "there is no light in them." The early church then failed to comprehend even the first principles of the apostles' teaching on all the great essentials of eschatology; they failed to grasp the very terms of discourse. [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106-109, boldface mine, ees]
5. ***Could the apostles have failed so miserably? Are the New Testament Scriptures so impenetrable? If such a horrendously dismal assessment of the early church could be maintained, it would inevitably carry with it a stinging reproach of the teaching abilities of the apostles, rendering their mission all but an unqualified disaster. Can we really conceive of the apostles and their coworkers as such weak and ineffective teachers that they failed to pass on to the next generation not just the details, but the very core and framework of biblical eschatology, the "sum and substance" of the gospel? Perhaps we all know how things that should be at the center can slide off to the periphery. But this is not the case here. We do not even find this understanding of eschatology at the periphery. An early Christian writer who is even aware of a hyper-preterist eschatology in the church has yet to be found.*** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106-109, boldface mine, ees]

Nobody is insisting that the whole church must have understood Paul. But surely it is not too much to ask that **somebody understood him and perpetuated at least the core of his eschatology**, the sum and substance of his gospel, or at least the true meaning of his terms of discourse. Or, if nobody understood Paul, that somebody understood Peter. Or, if even Peter was too hard to comprehend, that somebody understood John, or James, or Luke, or Matthew, or the author

of Hebrews. **Can we really believe that all these New Testament authors were unable to secure the transmission of their basic eschatological teaching to the next generation, leaving these teachings to vanish without a trace?** Can we really believe that it remained for someone in the late nineteenth or twentieth century to rediscover the core of New Testament eschatology? [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106-109, boldface mine, ees]

Many, I trust, will find that conclusions like these place too high a demand on their credulity, especially when to read the New Testament in a way that preserves a more or less traditional futurism makes infinitely better sense of the New Testament historical environment. [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106-109, boldface mine, ees]

6. *Can so little be made of the great change effected by the eschaton? An extremely negative judgment against the competency of the apostles and the intelligence of those taught by them throws up a glaring irony. **How is the wholesale departure of the church for an alien eschatology conceivable, given that we are talking about the church that itself supposedly experienced the freshness of the arrival of the new age? King seems to speak of the eschaton as if all of its great transactions would not really effect any change in individual Christians, [cf. King, TCTP, pp. 669, 556] but rather would bring about the completion of a status already enjoyed by Christians, a full and sudden revealing of something that had been taking place in Christians since the Cross. [cf. King, TCTP, pp. 639, 641] I fear that this slights what the New Testament writers say about the great change to be effected at the Last Day. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul avers that the ignorance that he then experienced would be remedied when the perfect would come. His dim vision would then cease; he would then "understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." Where then is the perfection of knowledge that Paul so earnestly expected? How paradoxical it is that the very generation which attained consummate fullness of knowledge when the perfect came, saw that knowledge evaporate virtually overnight! How utterly unimaginable it is that those who became like him when he appeared, for they saw him as he is (1 John 3.2), not only did not recall the experience for us, but, apparently, were no different for it! Or, rather, the only observable change is that their spiritual understanding was plunged suddenly into the abyss, from which it has yet to be recovered! ...When Paul says that the night is far spent and the day is at hand (Rom. 13:11-12), [Max] King explains that the nighttime was still lingering in the apostolic age and that the daytime is the era of Christianity. [cf. King, TCTP, pp. 277, 479, 673, 731, and esp. 521-522] Yet, according to King, the church has been off base ever since "the day" arrived! [cf. King, TCTP, pp. 560, 703, 756, and 671-672] Surely we were much better off during the last watch of the night, when at least we had the living, apostolic word!*** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106-109, boldface mine, ees]

The irony is astounding. [This darkness of understanding] struck the church, according to hyper-preterism, concurrently with the church's attainment of its ultimate state of perfection. It does not seem to me that one can have it both ways. If one wants to argue for a radical nosedive of the church as soon as the apostles left the scene somewhere around A.D. 70, then I do not see how one can argue that it was precisely then that the church also attained the consummation of its hope, its full measure of knowledge and sanctification, its final state of conformity to the image of Christ. [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 106-109, boldface mine, ees]

7. If all the Christians implicitly understood the terms of Paul's discourse during his ministry (including cryptic uses of such expressions as "the creation" in Rom. 8:19-22 and "the elect" in 2 Tim. 2:10, which are said to refer to Israel), and if right up until the end Christians were looking for Jerusalem to be destroyed as the fulfillment of the eschaton, then **how can it be that all this changes as soon as we hear from any Christian sources after A.D. 70? I do not see how one can have it both ways. If the vocabulary of the common, apostolic eschatological teaching" was generally understood, then the wholesale departure of the entire early church for another understanding cannot be accounted for. Or, if it was not understood, then the apostles' abilities as teachers must be called into question and [Max] King's argument for a "clear" and "obvious" hyper-preterism falls to the ground. If the apostles' own hearers did not understand them, how can we be expected to understand them?** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 117-118, boldface mine, ees]
8. **The hyper-preterist may try to make peace with the discomfiting anomalies of history by viewing them as an indication of the abysmally low level of spiritual apprehension in the subapostolic age. But then this conclusion will belie his other contention that his view would have been the same one preached universally by the apostles and received by the congregations they founded. If this claims to be the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3), we have to conclude that the delivery was never quite made. Somebody – no, everybody – fumbled the faith away [in AD 70]. In addition, the hyper-preterist will then have the troubling paradox that the generation which experienced God's final perfecting of his saints is the very generation which let the faith slip through its hands.** [Hill, *WSTTB*, pp. 118-119, boldface mine, ees]

#### **V. Let Me Summarize Chuck Hill's Argument and Offer a Solution:**

- A. Now, just in case we missed the implications of what Chuck Hill was saying here, let me summarize his arguments:
- B. Hill points out that there is not a single Christian writer for at least two centuries after AD 70 who claims that the BIG THREE eschatological events (Parousia, Resurrection, Judgment) occurred in AD 70 -- not even the heretical writers on the fringe of Christianity recognized the fulfillment and reported it.

- C. Furthermore, every single Christian writer, for at least two centuries after AD 70, who mentions the BIG THREE events, says that they are still future.
- D. Max King claims that the saints before 70 understood the nature of fulfillment correctly, and knew what kind of events to look for. When those BIG THREE events occurred, they should have been able to recognize it and know that they occurred. However, the saints after 70 seem totally unaware of the fulfillment, and not a single one of them was teaching the spiritualized concept that Max King says they all understood before AD 70. It appears that the clear understanding that they supposedly had before 70 was gone with the wind after 70. How can that be? How did they so suddenly and completely lose all understanding of the nature of fulfillment, and all awareness that the BIG THREE events had already occurred? If they actually did have a correct understanding of the nature of fulfillment before AD 70, as Max King claims, how in the world could they so suddenly and completely lose that understanding after 70?
- E. How can it be that the pre-70 saints understood this perfectly beforehand, but missed it when it actually happened? Whose fault was it that they missed it? The apostles, or the Holy Spirit who inspired them? Or did they simply not understand the NATURE of fulfillment at all, and missed it because it was not what they were expecting to happen? Their ignorance and confusion AFTER AD 70 has serious implications for their understanding and expectations BEFORE 70.
- F. This implies that all those pre-70 Christians who lived through the BIG THREE events in AD 70 and remained alive on earth afterwards were totally unaware of the fulfillment. They completely missed the fulfillment at AD 70, even though they were expecting to see, hear, and experience the great relief, rescue, and reward that was promised. Did they experience those things? Or were their expectations left unfulfilled, and they kept quiet about it after 70 because of their embarrassment over the non-experience of their expected relief, rescue, and reward? Did they actually receive that relief, rescue, and reward, but simply not know that they did? That would mean that their expectations were wrong. Who gave those expectations to them? What does that imply about the teaching of the inspired apostles and Jesus Himself? Now we see why the skeptic and atheist is so quick to reject the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.
- G. If any of those pre-70 saints were still around after AD 70, why didn't they know about the occurrence of the BIG THREE events, and acknowledge that they had occurred, and speak up, and set the record straight when their fellow Christians started saying that the BIG THREE events were still future?
- H. Why didn't they teach the Way more accurately to those post-70 Christians who were teaching a totally different nature of fulfillment for the BIG THREE events than what the apostles had taught the pre-70 saints. They were silent on both the TIMING and the NATURE of fulfillment.
- I. Who failed to tell the next generation about the occurrence of the BIG THREE events? Why did they fail? How could they fail to teach the fulfillment if they were guided by the Holy Spirit into all the truth, as Jesus had promised? Their silence after AD 70 raises the question whether they actually got what they were promised.
- J. Hill points out the promise of the Perfect in 1 Cor. 13:12. If the Perfect indeed arrived in AD 70, and they now "knew fully" and now saw "face to face" as they

were expecting, then how could they not have known that the Perfect arrived, and that the BIG THREE events had occurred? You would think that at least one of them would have recognized the arrival of the Perfect and reported it. Hill points out how utterly inconsistent it is to think that "the very generation which attained the perfection of knowledge when the Perfect came, saw that knowledge evaporate virtually overnight!" Hill says that this darkening of their understanding "struck the church concurrently with the church's attainment of its ultimate state of perfection." How could the understanding of the church take such a nosedive at the very time it supposedly "attained the consummation of its hope, its full measure of knowledge and sanctification, and its final state of conformity to the image of Christ? As he says, "truly the irony and paradox here is astounding!" He concludes by suggesting that if the preterist view was the true faith that was once for all delivered to the pre-70 saints, then every one of them who lived beyond 70 "fumbled the faith away" afterwards. "The generation which experienced God's final perfecting of his saints is the very generation which let the faith slip through its hands.

- K. If Apostle John was still around after AD 70, as some fellow preterists think, why didn't he speak up and set the record straight? Surely he would have known that his book of Revelation had been fulfilled and that the Lord who promised to come shortly had done so! Did he suddenly have a total loss of memory? Was an inspired apostle actually afraid to speak up after AD 70 for fear of persecution, after having been exiled for his testimony about Christ before AD 70? How can this be? There is a serious historical problem here which we preterists have been very reluctant to deal with.
- L. We need to feel the weight of these historical arguments, and answer them convincingly. It will not do to just sweep them under the carpet and ignore them, or give them the quick brush-off like so many of us have done in the past. We can do better than that.
- M. Our solution to these historical problems will be two-fold.
  - 1. First, we will show that several of the Apostolic Father writings were actually written BEFORE AD 70, thus making them useless as futurist evidence against us. This widens the gap between the pre-70 writers and the first writings after AD 70. It creates a more extended period of silence than was recognized before (from 70 to 110). But that only works for a handful of the earliest church father writings (those known as the Apostolic Fathers). This still leaves another handful of early second century church fathers who definitely wrote after AD 70.
  - 2. This is where the plot thickens and the full weight of Chuck Hill's arguments come to bear upon all preterists. This is where we have been weighed in the balance and found lacking in our response. Hill has shown exhaustively that there is no easy nor clear explanation for the silence and confusion of the Christian writers after AD 70. If any of those pre-70 saints were still around on earth, their silence and confusion after experiencing the BIG THREE events is inexplicable. Why didn't even one of them speak up and set the record straight when their post-70 brethren started saying that the BIG THREE events were still future?



3. It does no good to argue, as some fellow preterists have, that MOST of the pre-70 saints were killed in the Neronic persecution, and therefore were not around after AD 70 to announce the fulfillment. That still means that SOME of them DID survive the Neronic persecution, and would have been around afterwards unless they were raptured. We absolutely know that some of the pre-70 saints survived the Neronic persecution and remained alive until the Parousia. Jesus said "some of them standing there" would not taste death until His return, and he said that the great tribulation (the Neronic persecution) would be cut short so that some of the saints would remain alive until His Parousia. So it accomplishes nothing against Chuck Hill's historical arguments to suggest that MOST of the pre-70 saints were not around after 70. We still have to explain why the FEW who did live and remain until the Parousia did not speak up afterwards and set the record straight when their post-70 brethren started teaching that the BIG THREE events were still future. As we noted, this becomes a critical issue in the case of any of the apostles like John who may have remained on earth after the Parousia. All Chuck Hill needs to clinch his argument is to prove that ONE single pre-70 saint actually lived through the Parousia and remained alive on earth afterwards. If there was no rapture, then Chuck Hill has his proof.
4. Chuck Hill admitted that the only easy solution to this preterist problem is the one that J. S. Russell suggested in his Parousia book, a rapture. Of course, Chuck Hill ridicules that idea as totally unacceptable, but it is interesting that he sees it as the only easy way to get around the problem of having post-70 Christians totally unaware of the occurrence of the BIG THREE events. All the Christians who knew about the Parousia were gone. The ignorance and confusion of the post-70 writers shows that they could not have been Christians at the time of the Parousia. They did not become Christians until later. They had no apostles or pre-70 saints around to set the record straight and clear up their confusion. They remained unaware that the BIG THREE events had occurred.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

- A. Now we can see why redating the Apostolic Father writings before AD 70 will strip away some of the most powerful arguments of our critics like Dr. Charles Hill.
- B. But this kind of historical reconstruction requires a high level of research and scholarship to respond in a meaningful and significant way.
- C. This is why I am doing my Masters Thesis on the Epistle of Barnabas. It is our opening shot across the bow of the futurist historical ship.
- D. This kind of research and writing takes a lot of time and effort. But it is worth every minute of it, to answer our critics and edify fellow preterists. We need faithful partners to pray for us and support us while we do this kind of historical work. We need one-time donations, end-of-the-year gifts, and ongoing monthly supporters to buy us the time to work on this project. If our gracious Lord has put it on your heart to help, please email me right away before you forget. My email address is <preterist1@preterist.org>
- E. In exchange for your support, I will send you one of the PDF's that I have written in response to Dr. Charles Hill. It is entitled, "The First Generation After AD 70."

- F. The history of Barnabas and his Epistle dovetails nicely into our study at this point, because his martyrdom on Cyprus appears to have occurred at about the same time Paul arrived in Rome for his first imprisonment there (AD 61). The Epistle of Barnabas had already been written before his death. These events provide some additional pieces of the historical puzzle that we can use to reconstruct the dates for our NT books, and better understand their meaning for the first century saints.
- G. Next time we will get back into this historical study, picking back up where we left off previously -- at AD 62 while Apostle Paul was under house-arrest in Rome. This is just four years before the Jewish war with Rome began in AD 66, and just two years before the Neronian persecution broke out in the summer of AD 64. From here onwards we will be dealing with the great tribulation upon the church and the outpouring of wrath upon her persecutors. Josephus calls this critical time "*the revolution (revolving or changing) of the ages*" [Josephus *Wars* 6.250 (6.4.5)] -- the changing from one age to another. This is the most critical part of first century history that all of us preterists want to know about, so stay tuned.

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If any of this material has raised any questions for you,  
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There are a lot of great supplementary articles posted on our website,  
plus books and audio/video media for purchase. Go there and browse all you want.  
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If you would like a couple of great books which detail all of these events, I would recommend **ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS** by F. F. Bruce, which is available for order at our website ([www.preterist.org](http://www.preterist.org)), and **JEWISH BACKGROUNDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** by J. Julius Scott, which is available from Amazon.com. Be sure to get a copy of my book, **First Century Events**, which deals with the Roman, Jewish, and Christian events of the first century. We will be using it as a study guide here in our studies of the first century. You can purchase it from our website: [www.preterist.org](http://www.preterist.org)

**Some further recommended reading:**

Josephus *Antiquities* and *Wars* (sections which deal with the Herodian rulers)