

Where Did All the Christians Go?

By Ed Stevens -- *Then and Now Podcast* -- May 19, 2013

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Thank you for joining us here on *Then and Now* for another look at first century history.
- B. **Before we begin I want to let our new listeners know that there is a Lesson Outline available for each of these Podcasts:** Each of them are in PDF format. Most listeners like to have it open in front of them as they listen. If you don't have the PDF, simply email me and request it. If you are planning on being a regular listener, and would like to receive the PDF as soon as it is ready, without having to request it each time, simply email me and ask to be put on the **PDF List**. The PDF contains all my lesson notes and resource references, so that you do not have to write them down while listening. It is free for the asking. My email address is: <preterist1@preterist.org>
- C. Let's pray before we begin --
Our Heavenly Father, the Only True God, who fills the heavens and our hearts. We praise you for sending your Son to redeem us from our sins. Be with us here in these studies as we look at how You sovereignly and providentially acted in history to build Your Kingdom. Teach us how to seek your kingdom first in our lives, and live in such a way that we bring much glory and honor to You. It is in the Name of Your Son and our Savior Jesus, that we pray. Amen.
- D. I want to thank those of you who emailed me in the last two weeks and gave me some feedback about the material we are presenting here. It is so encouraging to know that you are listening, and that you are understanding what we are saying.
1. **One dear sister wrote:** "Thank you for your diligent study and then sharing with those of us who are not capable of doing that. Your work is very much appreciated."
 2. **A fellow preacher said:** "I know how I was tempted to think the preterist view was going to require a lot of rethinking and I was scared, but I am so glad I had my deep Reformed foundation that made me realize we only needed to replace one spoke of the wheel because it was so badly fragmented and apply some glue to some of the other cracked spokes and not have to replace the whole wheel. Thanks for all your work and your commitment to hold on to the things that don't need changing."
 3. **One brother wrote:** "This is good information about the Seven Churches. It will baffle the futurists who date the book of Revelation in 95 AD."
 4. **In regard to our switch from Covenant Key to a new hosting network,** another brother had this to say:

I have every confidence that your podcast ministry will ... continue to prosper because our Lord wills it. Your stewardship and advancement of the truth is admirable, and in my opinion, unparalleled in our day, for addressing such a range of essential Christian teachings. You do well, once again, to stay the course, and not give in to compromise.

5. **One gentleman asked a really good question:** *"When, in your estimation, did the true Christians come back into existence after 70 AD?"*

[Ed's Reply] That is a great question — just the kind of question I love to deal with here on the Then and Now Program! The gospel seed was planted in the hearts of countless myriads all over the Roman and Persian worlds before the End came. A few of those gospel seeds began to sprout immediately after the Parousia. But it was a real small trickle of living water at first. That is the way it is pictured for us in Ezekiel 47. It starts out small and gradually grows into a mighty rushing torrent. It was not until 40 years after AD 70 that we see a significant number of Christians begin to show up on the historical radar screen. All the church historians refer to that first generation after AD 70 as the “dark or obscure period.” They all wonder why there was such a lack of writings and activity and visibility of Christians during that period.

6. Another dear brother commented that: "The podcast on **"What happened to the seven churches?"** was outstanding. This is important information for the prophecy reformation. Keep it up brother!"

[Ed's Reply] That was a great encouragement, dear brother. You would not believe the number of books I consulted online and in my library to nail all that down. This kind of information will help all of us in our teaching of others. You are going to enjoy the next podcast also, which will deal with the activity of the Gnostics, Judaizers, and other heretics in that generation right after AD 70. Fascinating stuff! And it is finally exposing the fallacious presuppositions and expositions of the futurists. Most of the historians of the past two hundred years have complained about the darkness, obscurity, confusion, and doctrinal chaos of that generation right after AD 70, but were clueless on how to explain it. None of them even imagined the possibility of a rapture. The closest they ever got to explaining the void of true Christian writings was to say that all the true Christians were killed in the Neronic persecution. Yet, we all know that they were not all killed. Jesus stated in three different places that “some of them” would live and remain until the Parousia (i.e., the “elect”), and that when He returned He would find some faith on the earth (not a lot, but at least some). So there would have been some true Christians still around after AD 70 to set the record straight, IF there was no rapture. That is what most of our fellow preterists just don't get! And that is exactly what these podcasts are designed to accomplish.

E. There were a couple more questions that were expressed by two very dear listeners this week. Both questions are related, so I will answer them together:

1. One person asked **how all these historical studies relate to my response** to our critics in Mathison's book.
2. Another person wondered if **I might be getting a little too carried away** with all this historical study. He did not see the purpose for it.

[Ed's Reply to Both Questions] There is definitely a method behind all the madness here. The response to our critics in Mathison's book is the main reason for all these historical studies here. For example: Dr. Charles Hill wrote one of the chapters in Mathison's book, clearly pointing out the challenge that subsequent church history after AD 70 poses to the preterist view. We preterists have not taken his historical arguments seriously enough, nor answered them convincingly. As we have seen in past studies here, there is a critical historical documentation problem facing ALL preterists (not just us rapture preterists). For instance, Dr. Hill says in net effect, "How can we be expected to take a serious look at the preterist view when not a single Christian after AD 70 spoke up to claim that the Parousia occurred then? We have their statements about a whole range of other lesser important details, but not one single word from any of them about the Parousia having occurred in AD 70. Why didn't at least one of them speak up and set the record straight, especially when they heard some of the post-70 Christians start teaching that the Parousia was still future? At the time Dr. Hill wrote his critique, I was not in a position to provide a substantive scholarly response to his challenge. So, I took some refresher courses on New Testament Greek and plunged myself into the study of first century Jewish and Christian history. These podcasts are the direct outcome of those historical studies. The material that I am developing and sharing here will eventually be put in book form, and will supply the historical substance that our critics are demanding, and which has been so lacking in times past. In regard to getting a little too carried away with these studies, I suppose it is possible that I am. However, I do not believe that is the case. I do not want our critics to think that we do not take their arguments seriously, nor spend the time and effort to answer them substantively and convincingly. I sometimes wonder if I am not taking it serious enough. So, that is the reason behind all this diligent historical study that we are doing here. It will all be used in our response to the critics like Dr. Charles Hill, who are demanding that we run the historical gauntlet that they have thrown down in front of us. So far, I have been the only one to take that challenge seriously enough to do the kind of historical research that is necessary. I wish some other preterist leaders would join me in this effort, but I don't expect that very many will rise to the challenge, because it is difficult and time-consuming. Furthermore, if a preterist does not take the rapture position, then he has NO credible solution to the historical challenge. Since so many preterist leaders hate the rapture idea so passionately, it is easy to see why they have no interest in looking at church history. It offers no solutions that they are

willing to accept, so they sweep it under the carpet and pretend that there really is no historical problem after all. Or, they wave their magic hyper-spiritualizing wand over the historical problem and declare it solved in some kind of mystical, spiritual, symbolic, apocalyptic, or covenantal sort of way. Our critics are not fooled by that kind of wimpy response. The ONLY solution I have found to the historical dilemma posed by our critics, is the rapture. If there was no rapture, then there was NO Parousia either! The two events stand or fall together. Without a rapture, there is no reasonable explanation for the silence and absence of those pre-70 saints after AD 70. Some may think that is an unwarranted exaggeration. If so, then please provide a more reasonable solution that really answers the historical challenge of our critics like Dr. Charles Hill. I would love to have it, but so far no one has provided it. So, until they do, I am going to continue diligently developing the rapture solution. It is the only explanation I have found that makes any sense out of the historical data that we have coming from the late first and early second century time period. I encourage all of our listeners to hang in there with me, as we journey back into the first century to find the solution to this historical enigma.

Where Did All the Christians Go?

Last time we looked at the seven churches of Asia (Turkey) that are addressed in the book of Revelation, and noted that they vanished from the historical scene after AD 70. We looked at both internal biblical and external historical evidence, which suggests that those churches in Asia were wiped out by the Neronic persecution and the Jewish revolt shortly afterwards.

We suggested that this devastation of the churches by the Neronic persecution goes a long way toward explaining why there was such a void of orthodox Christian writings after AD 70, as well as why there was such a proliferation of unorthodox writings by the Gnostics, Judaizers, and other heretics shortly after AD 70.

However, the **Neronic persecution** and its associated **great apostasy** is not the total explanation, since there were some survivors of that persecution and apostasy, who had experienced the Parousia, and would have been able to set the record straight about it later, if they were still alive on earth afterwards. We suggested that the rapture easily explains why they never reappeared afterwards to correct the false teachers and claim the fulfillment of the Parousia.

But if there was a rapture in AD 66, as I have suggested, then why is it that we see some supposed "Christians" still alive on earth immediately after AD 70? Who were these folks? Were they true Christians? If so, why were they left behind? Did the rapture really occur, after all???

There are three basic kinds of so-called "Christians" that emerged out of the darkness into the spotlight right after the destruction of Jerusalem: (1) the **Gnostics**, (2) the **Judaizers**, and (3) the **other heretics**. We need to be familiar with them, so that we will understand what was happening, and why it happened in that particular way.

In future sessions, after we finish our studies of the Jewish War, and begin looking at the first generation after AD 70, we will take a closer look at these three groups of heretics and their activity during that first generation after AD 70, but for right now we

simply need to be introduced to them, and be aware of their pre-existence BEFORE AD 70, so that when we see them appear in full force afterwards, it will not seem so strange to us. We will know what is happening and why.

These three groups of supposed "Christians" (i.e., the Gnostics, Judaizers, and other heretics) were already in existence and somewhat active BEFORE the Parousia, but were held in check by the Apostles and their co-workers.

However, after the apostles and other true Christians were removed from the earthly scene, these heretical groups were no longer under any restraints, and immediately took advantage of the situation. We will focus especially on the group of Unitarian Judaizers from the Jerusalem church who fled to Pella and other areas outside Judea before the Neronian persecution and before the war broke out in Judea.

Gnostics

Many church historians question whether the Gnostics were in existence before AD 70, since we don't have any writings from them before then. However, the NT documents do reveal that they were indeed in existence at that time ("science" falsely so-called), and were held in check by the apostles and their co-workers.

We will deal with the Gnostics in greater detail later when we get into the history of the first generation AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem.

Other Heretics and Syncretists

The New Testament mentions numerous heresies that were already in existence before the Jewish revolt, but were suppressed and restrained by the apostles and their co-workers.

Heretics such as: (1) Simon Magus, (2) Nicolaitans, (3) Hymenaeian Heresy, (4) Cerinthus, etc.

We will also deal with these in more detail, when we get into the history of the first generation AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem. For right now, however, we simply need to be aware that these heresies were already in existence before AD 70, and began to proliferate afterwards.

The Judaizers in Pella

I have searched for the earliest and best information I could find about this group of supposed Christians who allegedly left Jerusalem before the war began and fled to Pella and other cities of the Decapolis and outside Palestine. What does history tell us about these folks?

Most of them were **Ebionites** (the "poor") along with some others called **Nazarenes**. The group of Jewish Christians called Ebionites had four main errors, two of which were fatal to their salvation:

- (1) Still required circumcision and lawkeeping AFTER the temple was destroyed,
- (2) Denied the Virgin Birth and Deity of Christ,
- (3) Advocated an earthly reign and physical kingdom of the Messiah just like the Jews did, and
- (4) Set up a fleshly relative of Jesus as a monarchical bishop over them to rule the church until Jesus returned to sit on his throne in Jerusalem.

Does this sound like **true Christians** to you? If they were, then it plays right into the hands of the Romanists, Millennialists, Judaizers, as well as the Unitarians who deny the Deity of Christ, just like these Ebionites did.

But Apostle Paul unequivocally condemned the Judaizers in his letter to the Galatians, and said that by requiring circumcision and law-keeping, they had "severed themselves from Christ" (Gal. 5:4; cf. Gal. 1:9; 5:2). They were under a curse. They had fallen away from Christ and back into the error of Judaism. This was the problem with the Ebionites there in Pella.

Futurists and Preterists both have greatly misunderstood the character of these supposed "Christians" in Pella, most of whom were Unitarians and Judaizers who were under the leadership of fleshly relatives of Jesus, and were looking for a literal reign of Jesus on a physical throne in Jerusalem (four strikes against them, two of which were fatal). Since Jesus did not set up a physical throne in Jerusalem in AD 70, it is easy to see why these Judaizing millennialists did not see it as the Parousia.

And because they were Unitarians and Judaizers, and NOT true Christians, they did not get raptured out of there at the Parousia. They were like the five foolish virgins who did not properly prepare for the coming of Christ, and like the wedding guest who did not have his wedding garments on when Christ returned. Consequently, they were left out of the experience of the Parousia and did not know that it happened.

We will look more at these three groups of heretics in future studies, but this is a quick introduction to the historical situation that we find in the first generation after AD 70. Here we find silence and absence of the true Christians, and a proliferation of the Gnostics, Judaizers, and other heretics to fill the void left by their absence.

Conclusion

Patristic scholars are baffled by the silence of the true Christians at this time, especially in view of the hyper-activity of the Gnostics, Judaizers, and other heretics. And our futurist critics use that silence of the true Christians as evidence against the occurrence of the Parousia. They reason, and rightly so, that if the true Christians who experienced the Parousia were still around afterwards, they would have claimed the fulfillment, especially when they heard their fellow Christians saying that the Parousia was still future. So, this is a documentation problem for the whole preterist movement, NOT just for the rapture preterists. And the only preterists who have a reasonable explanation for this silence, are those who believe in the first century rapture. The rapture solves the historical dilemma.

Without a rapture, there still would have been some pre-70 Christians left around on earth to document the fulfillment of the Parousia, and to correct all the heresy and false

teaching that was popping up everywhere. But we do not see any of that. There is not a single pre-70 Christian left around anywhere to be found. No one to silence the heretics, and claim the fulfillment of the Parousia.

We know that the pre-70 saints were not all killed in the Neronic persecution, and that not all of them fell away in the great apostasy. Jesus clearly indicated in Matthew 24 that his "elect" (those true Christians whom He had chosen) would live and remain until the Parousia, at which time He would send forth His angels to gather them together from the four points of the compass (Matt. 24:31). So, unless those elect ones were raptured out of there, they should have still been around after the Parousia to correct the heretics and claim the fulfillments. Since they were not still around doing that after AD 70, it implies that they had been gathered up by the angels, just as Jesus had promised.

But the Judaizers, Gnostics, and other heretics were still around, and very active in promoting their heresy and producing written documents, some of which have survived, and the rest of which we know about. We know what they were teaching. The second and third century church fathers quoted them and refuted them. But the question remains, where were the true Christians right after AD 70 when these false teachers began to spew out their nonsense? Why didn't they rise up against the false teachers and set the record straight? Why are the heretics the only ones who are saying anything about Christianity at this time? Why is it that we do not see anyone begin to refute them until the early or middle decades of the second century?

We have a lot of heretical writings from that very time period still in existence. Why don't we have some writings from the true Christians right after AD 70 refuting those heretics and claiming the fulfillment of the Parousia? How can it be that the writings of the true Christians were not preserved, but the writings of the heretics were preserved? And if there were some writings of the true Christians which were not preserved, why don't we at least know about their original existence, as we do for the heretical writings that are no longer extant? No one expects all of them to still be in existence, but surely it is not expecting too much to have as many of them still around as there are heretical writings still in existence, and to at least know that the others which are no longer around were in existence in the late first century! But we don't even have that! Why is there such a disparity in representation between the heretical writings and the orthodox writings? Surely, if there were any pre-70 Christians still around in the decades immediately after AD 70, they would have been challenging the heretics and documenting the fulfillments. Some of their writings would have survived, and the rest we would still know about -- just like we do for the heretical writings. But there is a strange lack of writings here for the true Christians. The historians have noticed this silence and have labeled this generation right after AD 70 as "the dark or obscure period."

The only way we can determine what was really happening with Christianity during the period right after AD 70 is to look at the writings that have survived. The historical record is there for all to see. And it tells us not only what was actually happening then, but also what was NOT happening, or what was happening so far below the radar that it

was not significant enough to be noticed in the historical record. The fact that none of the true Christians from the pre-70 generation show up on the post-70 radar screen to challenge the heretics and document the fulfillments, is extremely significant historically. Patristic scholars are baffled by that anomaly, and futurist critics use that lack of documentation as evidence against the occurrence of the Parousia. So, this is a documentation problem for the whole preterist movement, NOT just for the rapture preterists. And the only preterists who have a reasonable explanation for it, are those who believe in the first century rapture. The rapture solves the historical problem.

Well, that will just about wrap it up for this time. If any of our listeners have questions or comments about what we looked at here in this session, do not hesitate to email me. Please send me some feedback, positive or negative. I would love to hear from you. My email address is: **preterist1@preterist.org**

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Thanks so much for tuning into this podcast. Lord willing, we will see you next week.