

A Brief History of Covenant Eschatology

by Sam Frost

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It is my contention, based on my research, that Covenant Eschatology is enjoying a status today that it has never enjoyed in the history of the Church. Part of that reason is the Internet. Information no longer exclusively belongs to the academic world. Such a change in information technology, namely the printing press, was a factor in the Reformation (16th century), whereas before, knowledge belonged to the educated. Freedom of thought found in the Renaissance, coupled with Luther's radical individualism and freedom of the conscience soon brought about a change more encompassing than Luther ever imagined. It brought with it many headaches as well.



Covenant Eschatology has always been around in some form or another. The Gnostic expressions of Christian appropriation saw itself as living in the time of the 'fullness' of God's grace and mercy. Certainly, Athanasius, champion of orthodoxy, could write in the 5th century that "death has been swallowed up in victory" through the resurrection of Christ and this victory is now enjoyed by all Christians "all over the world."

Those early Christians, documented so well by the historian Eusebius, saw the Fall of Judaism and the subsequent Fall of Rome (312 C.E.) as universal victories of the reigning King Jesus. These two events were seen as *fulfillments* of Scripture. Thus, Bishop Augustine could not see the reason for a 1,000 year reign after the Second Coming of Christ, for the First Coming of Christ had rendered the world into His mighty power. That is, *Christ was already reigning and the Church was already ruling.*

It can be very easy, then, to see that such a view of the Kingdom of God could merge into the Holy Roman Church. Now that the Church obtained the Purple in Rome, what else could these people do but rule and protect her domains? When the Crown is offered by God Himself, as Eusebius certainly saw it, you take it.

For our brief study here, however, it is important to know that a shift in Eschatology from the "in the yonder" to the "right now" helped pave the way for a European domination. After the Reformation, this sense of dominion-oriented Christianity did not cease in the least. The English Parliament, Cromwell's Parliament, was thoroughly Puritan and Presbyterian. The Mayflower Compact, penned by the first Americans, was thoroughly Puritan. Those English ships did not set sail for Columbus' lands of "milk and honey" (as they were called) just to find new and exotic trees. They set sail for dominion.

The dominion that occupied these thinkers was, by and large, Post-millennialism. Both the Post and A-millennial schools share many things in common (Bishop Augustine worked out an A-millennial model). The Second Coming of Christ occurs and there is no earthly reign that follows.

The issue, then, was, What does the Church do with all of those dominion passages of

God's Kingdom found in the Prophets? Simple: the "time is *now*." However, what does one do with those passages that speak of terrible times in the "last days"? More than that, what does one do with the book of *Revelation*?

By the 18th century, a Preterist school, as it came to be called in the 19th century, attempted to answer those questions. The Reformed Scholastic Period of the 17th century hashed out a difficult and intricate system of Protestant doctrine that is still felt today. Keep in mind that this is just one hundred years from Luther's initial move towards a break with the Mother Church. The openness of critical studies into the Bible and experimentation with new models apart from Roman theology (though working within its Aquinian categories of Latin theology and terminology, often championing Augustine and Athanasius) launched a new era in Christian studies.

The Church was no longer the supreme voice for matters of faith and practice. *Interpretation* and *hermeneutics* became the means by which the Bible would proclaim *itself*. *Sola Scriptura* (note the Latin) became the foundation on which Protestantism and its dizzying variances were built. Just after 200 years, a case for Covenant Eschatology was blossoming.

The studies of the Hebrew Bible, never before done (since Jews were regarded as outside the Kingdom), yielded further studies into the Talmud and other Jewish literature. By the time we come to Bishop John Lightfoot, one of the signers of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1649), a case was being made that *II Peter 3* was actually the wars of the Jews and Romans in 66-70 C.E. I ask the reader to note that it makes no sense for the dominion mandate of Post-Millennialism to end in a universal conflagration supposedly taught in *II Peter 3*.

The understanding that *Matthew 24* largely dealt with those wars was seen as early as John Chrysostom (6th century). Eusebius more than paved the way that *Daniel 9* and *Matthew 24* were largely referring to those events. However, what would happen, textually speaking, if *II Peter 3* was *also* referring to that event? The reason I mention the brief history of the Reformation is the freedom of thought theoretically could *allow* someone like a John Lightfoot or a John Owen (the "Prince of Puritan preachers") to posit that *II Peter 3* was indeed in reference to 70 C.E.

It does not take a historian to see the connection that I am making under the rubric of development within Christian doctrine. The ramifications of positing that *II Peter 3* was indeed merely an apocalyptic portrayal of C.E. 70 were not seen immediately. This interpretation was largely ignored if even known. But it was there. Someone made the connection. By the 19th century, J. Stuart Russell, just over three hundred years of the Reformation and its principles of interpretation, made an even more startling connection: the book of *Revelation* was dealing with 70 C.E.

Milton S. Terry, theologian of the late 19th century, wrote his mammoth *Biblical Hermeneutics* (which is still one of the textbooks I studied at Whitefield Theological Seminary). Terry followed Russell to a T. However, and this is important, Terry

expounded on the principle of hermeneutics that came out of Reformation scholastics.

Thus, *it was the principles that developed from the Reformation that paved the way for Covenant Eschatology*. The Bible was now largely being seen through historical eyes. Biblical criticism exploded. Only one thing remained: the creeds of the church have always taught the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ.

Russell and Terry both maintained that God, at some point in time, would indeed end the world. Both saw the millennium as the church age – and the millennium in *Revelation 20* ends. *This view was properly called, Preterism*. It maintained an 'end' of the world, even though most prophecies in the Bible had been fulfilled.

During the middle of the 20th century, higher critics of the Bible began to see that Jesus had indeed imagined that he would 'return' in that generation to bring about the New Heavens and the New Earth. However, some disagreed with that notion and posited that Jesus *never* said anything like that. Instead, the 2nd century church and its rabid preoccupation with the 'end of the world' and the 'soon return' of Christ placed those words in Jesus' mouth, thus giving their views biblical authority.

Ironically, it was in this academic cradle of Eschatology that the search for the Historical Jesus was born. There was a problem, and no doubt 70 C.E. figured into the solution somewhere, but 70 C.E. was hardly the 'end of the world' and we are hardly in the "new heavens and the new earth." No one could say that the "resurrection of the dead" took place then. Well, someone did say it. His name was Max King.

In surveying the history of Covenant Eschatology, I cannot find in print, prior to King, a view that constructed the model he put forth. When King originally began to construct this view in 1971, he was unaware of the works of others who had come before, such as the development of the ideas found in Eusebius, Augustine, Turretin, Lightfoot, Owen, Russell and Terry.

Answering critics who said that his work was not "scholarly" enough, King launched into a fifteen-year period of research interacting with higher critics such as Bultmann, Schweitzer, Dodd and Cullmann, all heavy hitters in the theological world. Cullmann's 'mid-point' Eschatology, Ladd's 'already-not yet,' Dodd's 'realized eschatology,' and Schweitzer's de-eschatologized 'historical Jesus' informed King's position, whether in reaction to their contentions, or modifications of them on various points.

Equally, Evangelical scholars such as Herman Ridderbos, George Eldon Ladd, and Charles Hodge contributed to King's arguments. J.A.T. Robinson's monumental study on Paul's 'body' language provided a plank on which King could continue to forge an eschatological view entirely unique from its predecessors, but owing a great deal of gratitude for their works as well.

In many ways, King's eschatology started from the same approach as Dodd's 'realized eschatology.' Both saw the inauguration of the kingdom. However, unlike Dodd, King

actually posited that the Second Coming of Christ took place around the events of 70 C.E. Still further, he posited that the logical, *consistent* treatment of Scripture must yield that the resurrection of the dead took place as well. Proposing that the kingdom was not just inaugurated, but consummated, was radical.

Let me put this another way: if the prior views of *Matthew 24* and *II Peter 3* are seen in light of 70 C.E., then the logical conclusion is that the resurrection of the dead and Second Coming of Christ must also be seen here. However, this logical inference was not deduced previously. In fact, it was not even considered. One of the reasons, perhaps, is that the creeds and confessions are all unanimous that the Second Coming and resurrection of the dead (that is, the "self-same body" in the casket) will one day be reformed and reunited with its soul. This being the case, Christian theology had been ingrained with this *framework*, and it was hard, even for Terry and Russell, to step outside of that framework.

By and large, regardless of what millennial scheme one adopted, the Christian framework had a beginning and an *end* to the world, closed by the Second Coming and Final Judgment of all souls. King posited that all of those things are so connected that it would make no sense to parcel them out over thousands of years. So, what does one do, then, with the resurrection of the dead?

King's solution was to first show that the Bible never taught or expected a *physical* resurrection of the dead, save Christ's. While King put forth this view in his earlier work, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, it was the main focus of his later and much more developed work, *The Cross and Parousia Christ*. This was what Dr. Kenneth Talbot has called Neo-Preterism. It was a bold new step.

Earlier, George Bush (not the President), a the theologian of the 19th century, wrote that the 'body' in the casket does not necessarily come out of the casket intact. Origen, in the 3rd century, held this idea as well. So did some of the Gnostic writers. Thus, according to King, the resurrection was a resurrection of souls from Hades, and was invisible to the naked eye.

There was another problem, however. Paul is very clear about the continuity of the "body." "*It is sown, it is raised.*" The same 'it' that was sown is the same 'it' that will be raised. The 'it' is clearly in reference to the "body," for Paul is answering the question: "in what *body* are they raised?"

It is very easy to see why Christianity has been insistent on the "self-same body" resurrection. If the "body" there is the individual physical body, then *it* will also be raised. King's solution to this dilemma was to redefine "body" in a soteriological sense, and not in an individual or physical sense. Again, he derives some of his thoughts from Ridderbos, Robinson and the general shift of scholarship to read Paul in Hebraic rather than just Hellenistic terms.

King's work, done in the 1970s and 80s, has given rise to preterist circles throughout the

world. By the 1990s there were several groups, websites, churches, and conferences being hosted. These came with more books and publications, some from those who worked closely with King such as Don Preston, Jack Scott and William Bell. Edward Stevens, who at first followed King's scholarship, came to reject King's 'corporate body' resurrection schema for another direction.

Many from the Reformed reconstructionist, Post-millennial camps became "preterists" themselves, while maintaining a Reformed ideology (often hard, if not impossible in some cases, to do). There are more publications than ever before on this subject, but mainstream scholarship and the press has yet to really pick up on it.

Transmillennialism, a term coined by Tim King, is forging ahead with understanding our times as the 'age to come.' That is, if these things have indeed happened, then what and how are we to live and perceive our world of men and things? There are sharp differences among Transmillennialists and pop Preterists.

Some have created their own idiosyncratic form of Preterism, like Kurt Simmons' 'Bi-Millennialism.' Following Russell, Ed Stevens recently argued that the "rapture" of the saints literally took place in 70 C.E. We might bemoan shoddy Preterist exegesis on the Internet, but there is a deeper, more studious expression growing in the published literature.

What all of these schools agree on is that the Second Coming took place, and, therefore, we are not 'eagerly awaiting' for one to happen in our day. Theology, and by that I mean justification by faith, sanctification, church-life, ethics and morality, politics and philosophy within Christendom has all been done within the framework that one day all of this will come to an end.

By contrast, Transmillennialism and various forms of preterit scholarship are attempting to work out a full-fledged worldview without an end in sight. This has, to my knowledge, never been done. Only the future will tell us if, in fact, Russell and King have paved the way to a brighter, braver, bolder tomorrow for Christianity in general, and the world at large, by laying the foundation stones of Covenant Eschatology.

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