

## The End of the Jewish Age in Preterist Interpretations of Matthew<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Even though preterism has gained some traction in modern Christendom, the teaching of preterism may not be gaining much ground among Protestants in North America.<sup>2</sup> In a recent phone survey of Protestant pastors on January 8-22, 2016, two questions surfaced the current state of affairs.<sup>3</sup> First, in response to the question – “when will the biblical rapture occur?” – only 1% responded as preterists. Second, in response to the query – “which view illustrates your views on Antichrist?” – 6% said they believe that the Antichrist arose as a figure in past history, the lowest of the categories. This does not mean that there has been no increase of scholarly attempts to propagate the view among Christians. Likewise, this low turnout for preterism does not suggest that futurists can ignore this doctrinal position in its defense of biblical truth. With that in mind, this case study will provide an analysis of an older work defending moderate preterism, R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus*.<sup>4</sup>

One of the major arguments in Sproul’s presentation of preterism is that biblical teaching about the “end of the age” refers to the end of the Jewish age and not the end of the present age in which we live. In this way, the end-of-the-age passages are used to support the idea of past fulfillment in AD 70 when the Jewish age ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. He comments: “Fundamental to preterism is the contention

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<sup>1</sup> This article is taken from a section of two older articles: Mike Stallard, “A Review of R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*,” *The Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (March 2002): 55-71 & “A Review of R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism, Part II*,” *The Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (August 2002): 184-202. In the rework, the section on R. C. Sproul’s use of Matthew to promote preterism is reproduced with some modifications for presentation at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics. Other tangential but important sections are included as well.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief summary of the history of preterist interpretation and its problems, see Randall Price, “A.D. 70: Preterism’s Prophetic Dead End,” *Israel My Glory* (January/February 2005): 21-22, 26; “The Rise of Preterism,” *Israel My Glory* (January/February 2005): 23. Preterism comes from the Latin word for *past*. While it is possible to label views of any individual passage as to whether it happened in the past, future, or some other option, the label is used mostly to describe one’s view of the end-time passages involving the tribulation period and the Second Coming focusing mostly on Daniel, Revelation, and the Olivet Discourse. Other books would also be important for this debate (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah among others). The issue is whether the tribulation and Second Coming passages in those texts are fulfilled in the past (preterist), present (historicist), future (futurist), or in a timeless way (idealist).

<sup>3</sup> The survey was sponsored by Charisma Media. The published summary I have in PowerPoint was done by LifeWay Research. I assume this is a digest of the overall survey. Of course, we all know how polls sometimes mislead, mostly because of our experiences with American political polls. So we must always be cautious with such information. This poll was allegedly random and included a good cross-section of various groups. About one thousand pastors were called.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998). Sproul represents moderate forms of preterism and rejects full or radical preterism as heresy since it denies the future physical resurrection of believers. He should not be caricatured as if he is a full preterist.

that the phrase “the end of the age” refers specifically to the end of the Jewish age and the beginning of the age of the Gentiles, or the church age.”<sup>5</sup>

### The Parables of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Olivet Discourse

In making his presentation on this point, Sproul begins with James Stuart Russell’s exposition of the Matthew thirteen “kingdom of heaven” parables.<sup>6</sup> Crucial to the preterist viewpoint here is the fact that the so-called end-of-the-world passages speak only of an “age” or “epoch” (αἰών). Therefore, in texts such as Matthew 13:39b-40 (“the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire; so shall it be at the end of the age”), it is possible from the preterist viewpoint to see the “end of the age” as not referring to the end of the Church Age (or end of the tribulation), but as the end of the Jewish Age with the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of a new (Church?) age. The imagery of fire and judgment would be the visitation of God upon the nation of Israel through the Roman armies led by Titus.

There are several flaws in this handling of the phrase “end of the age” in Matthew thirteen. No futurist will deny that the term “world” or “age” refers to an epoch. However, which age or epoch is in view? Several factors in a holistic reading of Matthew lead to the conclusion that “the end of the age” refers to the end of the Church Age with the added future tribulation period of seven years (i.e., the time of the Second Coming) and not to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

First, Sproul’s preterist interpretation of “end of the age” is inconsistent with the use of the term in the overall flow of biblical theology in Matthew. In Matthew, the phrase “end of the age” occurs five times: three in Matthew thirteen (13:39, 40, 49), in the opening questions of the disciples in the Olivet Discourse (24:3), and in the Great Commission (28:19-20). While the preterist can vaguely tie 24:3 in with his interpretation of Matthew thirteen,<sup>7</sup> it is much more difficult to harmonize it with 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age* [emphasis supplied].” If the preterist were consistent, he would be forced to say that the promise of protection and the command of the Great Commission may only stand true until AD 70. Preterism could certainly fit this limitation into the scheme of Acts, which was completed before AD 70. But all of the epistles are written during the history of Acts, and from a preterist viewpoint, even the book of Revelation predates the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> On what biblical theological grounds, then, would outreach, evangelism, and training be based?

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>6</sup> James Stuart Russell (1816-1895) was a Scottish pastor in the Congregational tradition who authored the book *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming* (1878). Russell advances the view of full preterism. There is virtually no New Testament text that speaks of the future end-times. Even the future, physical resurrection of believers is suspect. While Sproul correctly rejects this full preterism for a more moderate view, he nonetheless uses Russell as the foil for his own presentation on many points.

<sup>7</sup> The preterist makes the connection by spiritualizing the Second Coming description in Matthew 24:29-50.

<sup>8</sup> Sproul, *Last Days*, 140-41.

The preterist seems to be left with only “application” and no direct teaching on the matter. However, as far as this reviewer is aware, preterists are not known for this particular approach to the Great Commission.<sup>9</sup>

It is much more plausible, taken at face value, “the end of the age” refers to the end of the age we Christians now live in (counting also the tribulation to follow). Several textual indicators lead to this conclusion. One must begin by asking, “Is the parable of the sower in Matthew thirteen a discussion of the sowing that takes place *only* until AD 70?” The timing of the sowing that takes place is the same as the timing of the growing of the wheat and tares in the second parable of the chapter. The overall flow of the book of Matthew would indicate that chapter thirteen marks a turning point. In chapter twelve, there is the highlighting of significant opposition to the kingdom message of Christ on the part of the Jewish leaders. Jesus’ parables in chapter thirteen accent the fact that something new is going to take place that the Jewish leaders were not expecting, namely, that there would now be a time when kingdom citizens would be raised or produced (i.e., the Gentiles) that they were not expecting to be in the kingdom. This is the mystery spoken of in the passage.<sup>10</sup> Yet the calling out of kingdom citizens, whether in the parable of the sower or in the parable of the wheat and tares, continues until the end of the age. The development of Jesus’ turn to the Gentiles that begins in Matthew thirteen (recall that in Matthew ten the disciples were only sent to the house of Israel) continues with his anticipation of the Church or *ecclesia* (Matt. 16:18). It would seem then that the most comprehensive approach to the text is to view the term “end of the age” in Matthew 13:39-40 as a reference to the end of the future tribulation period and not the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In other words, the end of the age is better seen as the end of the Gentile mission and not the beginning of it as preterists would hold.

Second, Sproul’s preterist interpretation cannot properly handle the phrase “end of the age” as it occurs in Matthew 24:3. The above conclusion from Matthean biblical theology is reinforced when one examines the details surrounding the phrase “end of the age” as it is used in Matthew 24:3 when the disciples asked Jesus “what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?” Contextually, the timing of the end of the age is easy to determine. The end of the age culminates with the actual Second Coming of Christ as described in verses 29-31:

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<sup>9</sup> The point here is that this is a complication within the preterist system. It is possible to take the Great Commission passage in Matthew 28:19-20 as irrelevant to the Church today and still maintain an outreach teaching based upon such doctrines as the body imagery and associated teachings in Pauline theology. However, such an approach is more problematic when one is a preterist since AD 70 becomes a wrap up in many respects of prior teaching. The burden of proof is on the preterist to show why each strand of teaching in the epistles has post-AD 70 application. It is this reviewer’s conviction that it is not valid theologically, even for a dispensationalist, to bifurcate automatically the teachings of the New Testament narratives (Gospels and Acts) from that of the epistles. One will find both continuities and discontinuities.

<sup>10</sup> For more detail on this particular development of the biblical theology of Matthew, see Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980) and Mike Stallard, “Hermeneutics and Matthew Thirteen, Part 1: Preliminary Hermeneutical Concerns,” *The Conservative Theological Journal* 5 (August 2001): 131-54. For an exposition of the kingdom parables of Matthew 13, see Mike Stallard, “Hermeneutics and Matthew Thirteen, Part II: Exegetical Conclusions.” *The Conservative Theological Journal* (December 2001): 324-59.

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

It is clear that all the tribes of the earth did not mourn in AD 70. There was no appearing of Jesus “in the sky.” There were no clear cosmic signs fitting this description at that time.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the language of the Son of Man “coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” references the description of Daniel 7:13-14. There the Son of Man receives the everlasting kingdom from the Ancient of Days (in context, a literal, earthly and concrete kingdom). Yet the description of the timing of this event in Daniel appears to be the destruction of the little horn coming out of the fourth empire (Dan. 7:7-11) who is described in the same terms as the willful king of Daniel 11:36. The actions of this willful king continue until his destruction at a time that also leads to a literal resurrection from the dead (Dan. 12:2) and the rescue of the Jewish people (Dan. 12:1). These events do not harmonize at all with a preterist interpretation, which focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem (not a rescue) and must be taken in a non-literal way to fit into that particular scheme. It is far better to accept the expression “end of the age” as coinciding with the literal, future Second Coming of Christ.

Third, Sproul’s interpretation of the phrase “end of the age” does not take into account Jesus’ teaching on rewards, which is given in the context. This is true for occurrences of the expression in both Matthew 13:39-40 and 24:3. In Matthew 13:41-43, the end of the age is described as a time when “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43).<sup>12</sup> This language is consistent with the imagery of Daniel 12:3 which asserts “and those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.” It is clear, as we have seen, that the context of this Daniel passage is the final resurrection and restoration of the nation of Israel (12:1-2). Thus, the imagery of the righteous ones shining as a reward as it is cited in Matthew 13:43 is better understood as taking place at the future post-tribulational Second Coming and not in AD 70.

A similar conclusion can be drawn about Matthew 24:3. As part of the answer Jesus gives to the question about “the end of the age,” we find these words: “Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions”

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<sup>11</sup> Sproul does try to deal with this particular issue and actually suggests, as do most preterists, that cosmic signs did occur in conjunction with the destruction of Jerusalem. A brief section later in the paper will deal with this particular issue.

<sup>12</sup> It is also true that the destruction of Jerusalem did not lead to the removal of “*all* stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness” (Matt. 13:41; emphasis supplied).

(Matt. 24:45-47; NASB). Do such words speak of temporal rewards or do they better fit the time of the Second Coming. Several factors point to the latter. There is the reference to the Second Coming in the preceding context, which we have already reviewed (Matt. 24:29-31). There is the following context, which speaks of a judgment scene with rather serious words such as eternal life and eternal fire (Matt. 25:41-46). Taken as a composite, all of these elements seem to fit a Second Coming setting more than an AD 70 temporal destruction of Jerusalem.

### I Corinthians 10:11 and the Ends of the Ages

Although this passage is not from Matthew's Gospel, it is included in the discussion for completeness. Sproul, following Russell closely, notes that one of the most crucial passages to suggest the nearness of the last days to the apostles is 1 Corinthians 10:11, which says "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Concerning this verse in context Sproul comments "Here is mentioned 'the ends of the ages' that have come upon the Jews. This text supports the thesis that 'the end of the age' means 'the end of the Jewish age.'<sup>13</sup> The context of the cited passage is the rehearsing of the sins of the Israelites, which should serve and were meant to serve as a warning to the Corinthians (vv. 1-10). Does the summary of verse eleven so readily suggest the end of the Jewish Age as Sproul suggests?

While there is a large body of diverse literature on this one verse and phrase, there are some things in Sproul's interpretation that need to be checked. First, he says rather casually that the ends of the ages have come upon the Jews. The text does not clearly say this. The antecedent of "whom" (οὓς) is usually taken to be the Corinthians by way of "our" (ἡμῶν) in the phrase "our instruction." While it is possible that the antecedent is "them" (ἐκεῖνους), i.e., the Israelites, mentioned earlier in the verse, the burden of proof is on Sproul to show why Paul's antecedent would not be the nearest possibility in the text. There would need to be something in the context to make it plain. The only factor driving Sproul's conclusion here may be a prior theological commitment. This possibility is reinforced by Sproul's casual presentation of the passage without comment on the other more likely exegetical possibilities. Consequently, the idea that the end of the ages has come upon the Corinthians does not fit so nicely into a discussion of the end of the Jewish Age in AD 70.

Second, Sproul quotes Russell approvingly without comment on a couple of other points where opposing viewpoints are not even discussed.

The phrase "the end of the ages"...is equivalent to "the end of the age" . . . and "the end" [*to telos*]. They all refer to the same period, viz. the close of the Jewish age, or dispensation, which was now at hand...It is sometimes said that the whole period between the incarnation and the end of the world is regarded in the New Testament as "the end of the age." But this bears a manifest incongruity in its very front. How could the *end* of a period be a long protracted duration?

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<sup>13</sup> Sproul, *Last Days*, 89.

Especially how could it be longer than the period of which it is the end? More time has already elapsed since the incarnation than from the giving of the law to the first coming of Christ: so that, on this hypothesis, the end of the age is a great deal longer than the age itself.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of precision is evident in Russell's statement. For example, he does not even seem to notice the plural "ends" and "ages" in "ends of the ages" in his translation. Robertson and Plummer comment as follows:

'The ages' are "the successive periods in the history of humanity, and perhaps also the parallel periods for different nations and parts of the world"...In what sense have the ends of these ages reached us as their destination? 'The ends' of them implies that each one of them is completed and summed up; and the sum-total has come down to us for whom it was intended. That would seem to mean that we reap the benefit of the experience of all these completed ages. Such an interpretation comes as a fit conclusion to a passage in which the Corinthians are exhorted to take the experiences of the Israelites as lessons for themselves.<sup>15</sup>

While it is not at all clear that Robertson and Plummer are correct in their own interpretation, their observation of the plural forms points out that the interpretation of the passage is not as simple as Russell (and Sproul) would have the reader believe. In fact, most commentators mention the fact that the phrase "ends of the ages" is an obscure one in this context. Sproul's handling of it makes the naïve reader think 1 Corinthians 10:11 is as clear as John 3:16.

A second way in which Russell's comment above shows imprecision is his appeal to *telos* (end) as a point-in-time termination. The word itself can be used in such a way, although it often carries with it a different nuance. Fee argues that "whichever option one takes, almost all agree that Paul's point is that he and the Corinthians belong to the period that marks the end of the ages (translated 'fulfillment' in the NIV [cp. NEB]) as a way of expressing the nuance 'goal.'"<sup>16</sup> Many theologies argue for the present reality of the eschatological kingdom during the church age under an already/not yet scheme. Others, such as traditional dispensationalists, would see the present age as the terminal age, that is, the particular dispensation that wraps up human history before the establishment of the messianic kingdom. In general, one could argue from the context that the Corinthians were already in the era that is under consideration. Paul was asking them to correct present behavior based upon past historical examples, not based upon what was about to happen (i.e., destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D). In the end, there is an uncomfortable

<sup>14</sup> Russell, *Parousia*, 197-98. Sproul cites this passage from Russell in *Last Days*, 89-90.

<sup>15</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 207. See also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 458-59 and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 743-46. The most comprehensive treatment is that of Thiselton. It is beyond the scope of this particular paper to deal with the "already" and "not yet" issues that surround discussions about this specific text.

<sup>16</sup> Fee, *First Corinthians*, 459, n. 45.

lack of precision in Sproul's reliance upon Russell's terse comments in dealing with what he calls one of the "crucial passages" about the nearness of the last days to the apostles.

### The Start of the Church Age

One can also sense a lack of precision in another matter as he reads through *Last Days*. Recall that earlier it was seen that Sproul takes the term "end of the age" as marking off not just the end of the Jewish age, but also the beginning of the age of the Gentiles or Church Age.<sup>17</sup> Now here we must assume that Sproul, as a Reformed theologian is talking at a different level than most covenanters do when they talk about the start of the Church. Most covenant theologians believe in one people of God soteriologically and programmatically. For them, the Church started with either Adam or Abraham.<sup>18</sup> The Church of the New Testament, the "new Israel" is either a replacement or continuation of national Israel as the people and program of God. However, granting that Sproul is talking about the start of the Church in a "new or different sense" consistent with his overall Reformed theology that has its absolute start earlier, one still must ask the question: "Does the New Testament really teach the start of the Church in AD 70 in any sense?" The answer to that question is an unqualified "No!"

Certainly the Gentile mission begins before AD 70. It appears to be going full steam under Paul's leadership for more than two full decades before that time. Theologically, it is a relatively easy task to show also that Pauline theology teaches that the Church, which is the body of Christ, is defined in terms of the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). But when did the baptism of the Spirit begin? In Matthew 3:11 John the Baptist says it starts in the future. Jesus in Acts 1:5 said it was future "not many days from now." In Matthew 16:18 the Church is future.<sup>19</sup> The reasonable conclusion is that Acts chapter two is the beginning of the baptism of the Spirit and the beginning of the Church, which is His body. Peter later confirms this when he looks back to the time of Acts chapter two and hails it as a "beginning" of the baptism of the Spirit (Acts 11:15-16). The Bible clearly teaches then that the Church along with the baptism of the Spirit begins on the Day of Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus. It says nothing at all about the Church or Church Age starting at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sproul, *Last Days*, 71ff.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 570-72. Berkhof starts his survey of the Church in the various dispensations with the Old Testament patriarchs.

<sup>19</sup> The debate over the meaning of *ecclesia* in Matthew 16:18 is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>20</sup> A corollary to this imprecision that appears in Sproul's analysis involves the timing of the start of the messianic kingdom. Sproul is unclear as to his millennial position. In his closing comments in the book when he presents the various views, he naturally critiques premillennialism the most although throughout the entire survey he is trying to be descriptive and not prescriptive. He cites some negative concerns about the optimism of postmillennialism in a post-Christian era (*Last Days*, 202). He says nothing negative about amillennialism. If his position is amillennialism, then he may have a problem with his use of AD 70 as a point in time marking off the change from one age to another. Most amillennial covenant theologians start the messianic kingdom with the First Advent of Christ, often targeting the ascension of Christ (which coincides with the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2). See Anthony Hoekema, "Amillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 177-79; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 351-52, 569. Berkhof is the clearest about the significance of the ascension relative to the ruling of Christ

## What “Generation” Will Witness the End?

Perhaps the most frequently discussed text in debates between preterists and futurists is found in the Olivet Discourse. There Jesus tells his audience in the context of the parable of the fig tree, “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34). Sproul argues, as do most preterists, that the term “this generation” has to refer to the contemporary audience of Jesus. Thus, within the lifetime of most of them, the events described in the Olivet Discourse must be fulfilled. The most likely time related to that would be the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 in light of the mention of the destruction of the Temple by Jesus at the beginning of the discourse (v. 1-3). It would not mean, according to the preterist, some future generation of Jews in a coming tribulation period. Sproul asks what meaning the statements would have for the original audience, if this were the case.<sup>21</sup>

Such arguments, on the surface at least, sound plausible. Other passages in Matthew that use the words “this generation” or the word “generation” seem to speak to the contemporary generation of Jesus’ time (Matt. 11:16, 12:39, 41, 42, 45). The use of the word “generation” in the other Gospel accounts also seems to support this conclusion (e.g., Luke 11:50, 51; 17:25; Mark 8:38). However, the strongest passage in Sproul’s favor (in an initial reading) is one verse near the end of the preceding section to the Olivet Discourse. As Jesus wraps up his denunciation of the Pharisees, he says, “All these things shall come upon this generation” (Matt. 23:36). In the context, “all these things” refers to the judgment upon the nation of Israel due to their past and continuing sins, especially their mistreatment of the prophets (v. 29-35, cp. also v. 38: “your house is left unto you desolate”). Thus, for the futurist to change to a different future generation later in Matthew 24:34 seems to be incongruous.

What can be said from the futurist vantage point in response to these arguments? The futurist would point out that a study of the details of the text will unravel the surface reading of the preterists. *First, it must be pointed out that the word “generation” is not a technical term.* Neither is the expression “this generation.” The context must help to determine its meaning and implication in any given text. *Second, there is a clear shift to a future generation that is given by Christ Himself in Matthew 23:39.* Here Jesus points to the future hope of Israel and the receiving of the Messiah by the nation. Surely, this optimism cannot fit into the preterist scheme that sees the events being described as the coming of Christ in judgment. Rather, it is much more straightforward to recognize the textually-based transition to ultimate deliverance in Matthew 23:39 and interpret the

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in the present age. Usually there is a coinciding of the existence of the Church and the spiritual reign of Christ in the world through the Church. If the Church does not start until AD 70, then what does Sproul do with the ascension in his own scheme if he follows the majority, Reformed view of amillennialism? If he is postmillennial, he may be able to handle this question more easily because the options appear to be more varied and flexible in that scheme. One important feature in Sproul’s presentation, which may require analysis relative to these issues, is his conviction that the “last days” in the New Testament refer to the time from John the Baptist until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (*Last Days*, 85-87).

<sup>21</sup> Sproul, *Last Days*, 56-65. Sproul interacts with the view that *genea* refers to “race” or “people” such as the Jewish race. Thus, Matthew 24:36 would be a promise that the Jews would survive to see the coming of the Lord (Second Coming or AD 70 depending upon viewpoint). This article will assume for sake of argument that *genea* in that passage is not used in that way. It is a popular but minority view.

following section, Matthew 24:1ff as a description of the events leading up to that deliverance. Seen in this light, the futurist is not abandoning literal hermeneutics to suggest “this generation” in Matt. 24:34 can refer historically to a future generation that sees the future tribulation leading to the Second Coming of the Messiah. The local context governs the time-reference to the text and not any alleged global reference elsewhere. This conclusion is bolstered when one notes that there is no repentance and joy for Israel associated with the historical destruction in AD 70.<sup>22</sup>

The **generation** (*genea*) of people living in that future day will see the completion of all the events. Jesus was not referring to the generation listening to Him then, for He had already said the kingdom had been taken from that group (21:43). That first-century generation would experience God’s judgment. But the generation that will be living at the time these signs begin to take place will live through that period and will see the Lord Jesus coming as the King of glory (emphasis original).<sup>23</sup>

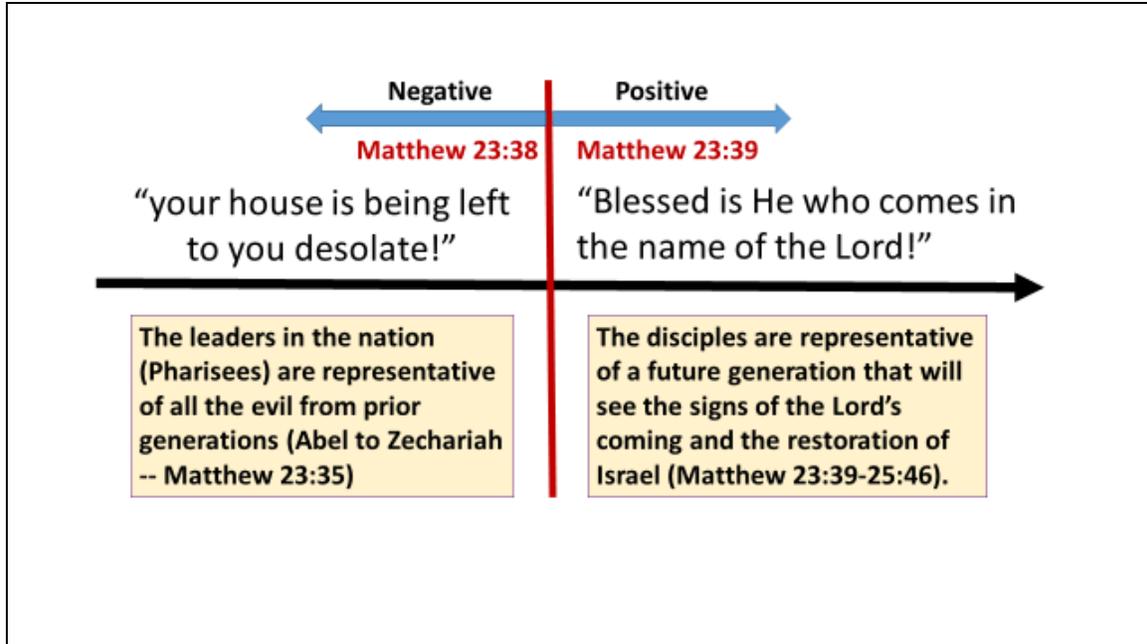
*Third, the reference to “this generation” in Matthew 23:36 is tied to prior generations.* In Matthew 23:35, Jesus portrays the scribes and Pharisees, i.e., the current generation, as the ones who killed the righteous from Abel to Zechariah (v. 35). In what way did the contemporary generation of Jesus’ day do these awful deeds? The idea is that the current generation is simply representative of how mankind in general, and the nation of Israel in particular, had mistreated the prophets and the righteous. In light of the use of “this generation” in Matthew 23:36 to represent other generations from the past, the futurist asks why the apostles, who were Jesus’ audience in the following Olivet Discourse, cannot be representative of a repentant future generation in Matthew 24:34.<sup>24</sup> There is a certain symmetry to Matthew’s presentation (see figure below).

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<sup>22</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse” (Unpublished paper delivered at the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, December 13, 1995), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Louis A. Barbieri, “Matthew” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 78.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Gundry comes close to exploring this line of reasoning although his reliance upon double fulfillment should be rejected (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 490-91).



Finally, it must be pointed out that Jesus' statement to His contemporary disciples using "this generation" in Matthew 24:34 to refer to a future generation is one way of expressing an open-ended timetable. If some event could happen in Jesus' contemporary generation but might not *and* it could happen in a later generation at some point instead, one way to express that would be to speak to the present audience as representative of any possible generation. This way of talking would certainly not be foreign to the Jewish mindset since Old Testament prophecies contain numerous examples of near and far elements mixed within the same prophetic train of thought (e.g., see Joel and Daniel) and they contain gaps or interludes within their fulfillment.<sup>25</sup> One of the concerns that futurists have about preterists is their lack of flexibility in predictive texts, especially the so-called "nearness" texts that are open-ended with respect to time. Perhaps their approach flows from a deficiency in understanding the way Old Testament prophecies are presented as a background to how New Testament prophecies are expressed.<sup>26</sup>

### Other Hermeneutical Considerations

Throughout the discussions in the preceding parts of this paper, the hermeneutical disagreements between Sproul's preterism and premillennialism's futurism have mostly been implicit. In this brief section, a couple of basic hermeneutical and methodological

<sup>25</sup> See J. Randall Price, "Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, edited by John R. Master and Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 133-65.

<sup>26</sup> For an example of how Sproul handles "nearness" texts, see *Last Days*, 85-90, 97-98. It is interesting in this discussion that Sproul appears to use the word "imminent" to mean "immediate" or "soon" and not as "an any-moment event" as futurists often do (135). This makes wading through the arguments of preterists like Sproul more difficult since he seems to be using a different language in the discussion. Note that Sproul does seem to allow for near/far or primary/secondary ideas or some such dichotomy in discussing texts in some cases (189).

distinctions will be explicitly analyzed. First and by far the most obvious hermeneutical issue is that of *literal hermeneutics versus spiritualization of the text*. Sproul is aware of the issues in this debate. He applauds Luther's demand for a *literal sense* of the text, a sense that Sproul takes as a *literary sense*. By this he means that one "should interpret the Bible according to the manner in which it was written." In this way subjectivity would be kept to a minimum. However, Sproul adds that this approach is basically the recognition of the particular genres of the Bible. Narrative is to be read as narrative, poetry as poetry, apocalyptic as apocalyptic. There is a measure of truth to this when one understands that there is a reading of the text using the grammatical-historical approach (i.e., literal hermeneutics) that leads to genre discovery. Genre is primarily a classification and not a regulation of the text.

The real problem, however, lies in the way that Sproul uses the genre of apocalyptic to undermine a straightforward reading of the text. He acknowledges that the "graphic imagery of the events accompanying the parousia function as the chief reason many, if not most, commentators view this segment of the [Olivet] discourse as being not yet fulfilled."<sup>27</sup> He further comments "Russell and Calvin agree that the language employed in biblical prophecy is not always cold and logical as is common in the Western world, but adopts a kind of fervor common to the East."<sup>28</sup> This statement presumably sets up a discussion of allowing things in the text to be taken in a non-literal way. Sproule gets to this point when he discusses the interpretation of the Olivet Discourse:

Part of the confusion concerning biblical interpretation stems from contemporary usage of the term *literal*. *Literal* today usually refers, not to the technical sense in which Luther used it, but to the interpretation of poetic images and the like as straight-forward didactic or indicative language. To take every text "literally" in this sense is not to interpret it according to the genre in which it is written, but to interpret it in a plain indicative sense. When the Olivet Discourse is subjected to such a wooden literalism, the crisis of parousia-delay is created. The cataclysmic events surrounding the parousia as predicted in the Olivet Discourse obviously did not occur "literally" in A. D. 70. Some elements of the discourse did take place "literally," but others obviously did not.<sup>29</sup>

While it is true that people often confuse the *literal versus figurative* at the level of expressions in a text with *literal hermeneutics (grammatical-historical) versus allegory* at the level of overall approach to reading a text (a technical discussion in the field of hermeneutics), it is not at all clear that futurists are the ones who are confusing the two. The context of the discussion would suggest that Sproul is concerned about liberals, futurists, and preterists across the board as involved in the confusion. Consequently, Sproul goes on to suggest three general options for handling the Olivet Discourse:

1. Interpret everything literally with the result that some of Jesus' predictions failed to come to pass;

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<sup>27</sup> Sproul, *Last Days*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

2. Interpret the events surrounding the parousia as literal and the time-frame references figuratively;
3. Interpret the time-frame references literally and the events surrounding the parousia figuratively.<sup>30</sup>

The first option is that of many liberal higher critics. The second option, to Sproul, is where futurists are in the handling of the text. The third option is the preterist handling of the Olivet Discourse. However, does the second option really fit the way that most futurists handle the words of Christ in this section of Scripture?

This analysis by Sproul of futurism is a case of critique from within his own system rather than showing a real inconsistency on the part of the futurist approach from within its own system. Does the futurist really take the time-frame references figuratively? The answer is absolutely not! Sproul is assuming that his analysis of “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 is correct (see the above discussion). However, we have shown that the future time-frame reference in Matthew 24:34 is consistent with the context, both grammatically and historically. That is, the passage from a futurist interpretation made sense with respect to the language used at that time and to the historical context of the original audience as shown in the text. This is nothing more or less than literal interpretation or grammatical-historical interpretation. The futurists are literal in the Olivet Discourse taking into account any customary figures of speech. *The preterist position fails to show how futurists take the time-frame references as figurative.* In doing so, the preterist may be revealing that he is practicing his own version of “wooden literalism” with respect to the time references cited in Scripture. In actuality, he is doing so while admittedly taking the *events* of the Olivet Discourse as entirely non-literal. Sproul mentioned that most commentators see the graphic portrayal of the events in the Olivet Discourse as evidence that AD 70 is not in view. There is a reason for that. The graphic portrayal of those events, taken at face value (i.e., literally), gives a clear portrayal of a Second Coming. There is no need to look for hidden meanings.

With respect to literal hermeneutics one must also note the spiritualizing of passages that deal with the resurrection of the dead. To his credit, Sproul rejects full preterism’s spiritualizing of *all* biblical teaching concerning the resurrection of the dead.<sup>31</sup> However, his presentation does not do full justice to the problem which moderate preterism still has with respect to various resurrection passages. For example, one cannot separate the details of the Olivet Discourse from the Old Testament book of Daniel. The connection is made explicit with the reference to the Abomination of Desolation (Matt. 24:15). Yet the description of the Antichrist’s (willful king’s) last battle during the time of the tribulation period or day of the Lord judgment (alluded to earlier) leads the reader to understand that his destruction occurs followed by the restoration of the nation of Israel and a particular resurrection from the dead (Dan. 11:36-12:1-2).<sup>32</sup> It is hard to spiritualize the teaching on resurrection here since the text explicitly teaches a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 160-70.

<sup>32</sup> Many (not all) dispensationalists see this particular resurrection as the resurrection of Old Testament and tribulation saints who had died. It would be separated from the resurrection of deceased church saints, which occurs at the rapture.

resurrection from the “dust of the earth” (Dan. 12:2). Yet the moderate preterist is forced to do so in this passage in his attempt to maintain consistency in all of the related passages and to make its fulfillment take place in AD 70.

Another methodological issue is the appeal to historical similarities that Sproul often makes to establish AD 70 as the time frame for the fulfillment of passages such as the Olivet Discourse. However, the Bible interpreter cannot cite historical events as fulfilling Bible texts on the basis of mere similarities. One example will suffice to suggest an exaggeration on the part of Sproul. He cites Josephus’ account of cosmic signs (stars, comets, and lights) to suggest fulfillment of the cosmic signs cited in various tribulation passages such as Matthew 24:29: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.” Sproul even mentions that Josephus noted that many Jews had false prophetic hopes due to many of the signs. He goes on to quote Gary DeMar’s discussion concerning the comet of AD 60 and Halley’s Comet of AD 66.<sup>33</sup> These descriptions are all nice particulars but there is no matching of the details. In fact, the similarity is somewhat remote and timing is certainly off. What Sproul ends up with is something rather vague. Is the fulfillment of Bible prophecy dependent upon such hazy connections? The futurist maintains that prophetic *detail* will be fulfilled and that what is needed is *identity not remote similarities*. Since such identity for tribulation passages has not occurred in history, the futurist expects future fulfillment for all end-time predictions.

### Conclusion

As seen in this analysis, futurist dispensationalists go in a widely divergent path of interpretation than preterists when it comes to Matthew’s Gospel and, indeed, the entire Word of God.<sup>34</sup> From the dispensational perspective, the preterist removes the eschatological focus entirely from Matthew’s emphasis on the King and the coming kingdom. This is a great loss to the Church. The larger problem beyond the Gospel of Matthew is that the Christian life is left with a diminished, expectant hope for tomorrow. It is this hope that forms one of the major incentives for living life to the full at the present time. Of course, the real indicator adjudicating the difference between futurists and preterists is exegetical accuracy in the various texts and proper integration of those texts into the whole. When all is said and done, the dispensationalist has the upper hand.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 116-24.

<sup>34</sup> The assertion of differences with Sproul over preterism is not a statement about his spirituality. We agree about many things, just not prophetic interpretation. If someone wants to learn about the holiness of God, Sproul would be a major, positive source. I have met some preterists whom I believe to be godly men. Dispensationalists should be careful and not let their critique of doctrinal positions necessarily seep over into other personal areas when it is not warranted.