

Wednesday, September 18, 2013



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An Open Letter to Moderate Preterists

Dear Brothers in Christ,

I am glad to have the opportunity to write to you today, as your work in eschatology has helped me immensely in my study of the last things. I have not yet reached enough conclusions to hold to a certain position, so I hope you will remember that I am not your enemy. In this letter I am going to bring up some points I find problematic to your view, and hopefully you can give me biblical answers. Let me also further declare I am not a full preterist. As I already said, I am still in the stage of searching for the truth.

Nevertheless, I still see some problems with your view. In chapter eight of The Last Days According to Jesus by R.C. Sproul, the author deals with identifying the Antichrist. As a part of this chapter, Dr. Sproul looks at the man of lawlessness spoken of in II Thessalonians 2. He first quotes verses three through eleven and then goes on to demonstrate that this individual was a contemporary of Paul. Cited with approval are B.B. Warfield and Gary DeMar, who also believe that the man of sin lived during the first century. I would venture to say most postmillennialists and moderate preterists agree. My problem is this: what about the first two verses of the second chapter? The lead-in to the man of lawlessness is as follows, "Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come." (II Thessalonians 2:1-2) Paul then goes on to talk about the necessity of some falling away and the man of sin being revealed first. So then, why would R.C. Sproul leave out these first two verses? Was it just an oversight? Or, did he see it as problematic to connect the contemporary man of lawlessness to the coming of Christ and the gathering?

I would not think so, because Dr. Sproul did seem to say the coming of Christ and gathering happened during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Matthew 24:30-31 reads, "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." The author examines this passage in pages 41 through 46 of his book, and while he notes some problems he has with J. Stuart Russell's application of the passage, he seems to agree with Russell's conclusions. If so, then Christ did come and have a gathering at the destruction at Jerusalem. Once again, my question remains. Why then did he leave out II Thessalonians 2:1-2?

I am convinced it was not simply an oversight. To admit that these first two verses happened along with the destruction of Jerusalem provides certain problems. As one can easily see, II Thessalonians was the second letter written to the Thessalonians. While there is some scholarly debate over the order of these letters and the authorship, most conservative scholars attest to this order. If this is the case, then the Thessalonians received the following words from Paul first, "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend to heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first." (I Thessalonians 4:15-16) This is the well-known section dealing with the rapture and the resurrection of the dead. Notice that these events are to happen at "the coming of the Lord" (verse 15). Now, is the coming of the Lord spoken of here different than the coming of the Lord spoken of in II Thessalonians 2:1?

would say Matthew 24:30-51 and II Thessalonians 2:1 are with Christ's coming in judgement in 70 AD, while His coming in I Thessalonians 4:15 is yet in the future. But could this be the case?

Let's step into the shoes of the Thessalonians for a minute. The first letter we receive from Paul describes that when Christ comes all Christians will join Him, both living and dead. This was a great comfort since many were worried that those who died would not join Christ at His coming. Paul then goes on to tell us that the Day of the Lord will come upon us as a thief in the night (5:2). We need to always be on guard and constantly ready – "let us watch and be sober" (5:6). Many of us realize that the time is near! Some decide to quit whatever work they are doing to wait. Others, believing it is just around the corner, sell off all of their possessions and give away all of their money. We may have even heard that the Day of the Lord has come. It is here! Paul once again desires to straighten us out, and writes his second letter to us. In it, he speaks of ways we know of Christ's coming and our gathering to Him. The apostle says to not be fooled; that the falling away must come first and the man of sin must be revealed. Therefore, do not be idle, there is work to be done! Do not give up on this life, there is still time left! Can anyone here doubt that the coming Paul deals with in II Thessalonians 2:1 is the same as the coming he already described in I Thessalonians 4:15? He seems to be correcting those Thessalonians who understood his first letter wrongly.

If we are to say these two comings are separate events, then I would have to argue that Paul misled the Thessalonians. Nowhere does he differentiate the two; nowhere does he let the reader know that he is speaking of two different comings and two different gatherings. Obviously, we cannot accept the idea that Paul misinformed the Thessalonians. The only other solution is to understand that Paul was speaking of the same event. Any division between the two then is arbitrary and seems to be done to protect one's presumptions.

So, if these two sections of scripture are dealing with the same event, then only one of two conclusions can be reached. First, they happened at Christ's coming at the destruction of Jerusalem. If this is the case, then the full preterists are right. The rapture and the resurrection of the dead have already happened. All of Bible prophecy has been fulfilled. The other alternative is that Christ has not yet come as Paul described, and we are still awaiting his arrival. This also means that the man of lawlessness has yet to be revealed, and that he was not a contemporary of Paul's (and he may not be our contemporary either). This admission destroys postmillennial idea that the worst for the church is behind us and that we can look forward to a "Christianized" world, and it also eliminates the moderate preterist's answer to the imminence problem in eschatology. By Sproul's and others testimony, Paul certainly seemed to indicate that the man of sin was to come shortly after Paul's letters. So, what is the answer? What did Christ and Paul mean?

I do not pretend to have all of the answers. As I said at the beginning, I am searching. However Sproul and other moderate preterists tend to bring up more problems than solutions. This is ultimately the reason for this letter. If I am wrong in my analysis, then please correct me. Show me exegetically how Paul was communicating two different comings of Christ and gatherings to the Thessalonians. Otherwise, the only option I see available is to forsake your understanding of eschatology in favor of either full preterism or a- or pre-millennialism.

Please feel free to write me with your answers or comments. I only seek to understand the bible better, and to know Christ. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Because of His grace,

John Divito

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