



Becoming Closer

The Rise of PreMillennialism

Related to the demise of Historicist approach Theologically bound to "new" denominations. The appeal of being "in on the secret" - especially in a time when Christians are a minority.

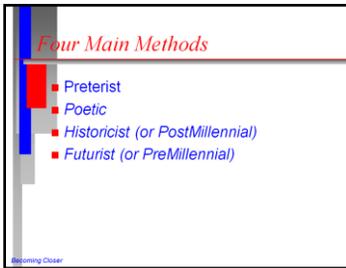
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Of course, if the Historicist approach had continued in popularity this approach would now be a minor footnote. It is not; it is the dominant thinking on Revelation today, especially among evangelicals and fundamentalists -- the groups most likely to think about it. The demise of the Historicist approach left a vacuum; the futurist approach was not invented to fill it (it dates from the Plymouth Brethren in 1830) but was available at hand.

One big reason for its success is that it appealed to the number of "new" denominations and sects which have arisen, particularly in America. Having no long traditions of scholarship in this area, and given to the thunderous in preaching, this approach had great appeal. It allowed these sects to be "different" in a significant way without doing any particular violence to the Scripture. Indeed, the method tends to be much more literalist than others. For example, some interpreters hold that "stars falling from the sky" in Revelation are just that -- astronomical phenomena, ranging from comets to actual stars "falling" somehow (e.g...., going out). This method of interpretation -- fundamentalism, or hyperorthodoxy -- when applied to Revelation produces the futurist approach. God created the heavens and the earth in six literal days (a theory almost unknown in the early church) so of course these signs and wonders are literal ones too. (This also explains why there are so many versions of this).

There is one other factor: the secret society. In a society in which most people consider themselves as Christians (or are hypocrites hoping God won't know the difference) the appeal of knowing the meaning of Revelation is one of scholarship: "The Right Reverend Jessup, up late nights, poring over old history books, writing out his commentary on Revelation." If you understood Revelation in the historicist sense, you were both educated (in history) and studied (in the Bible).

In a society where most people are not Christians, and the name of the Christian is despised (you "right wing fundamentalists," you), the human psyche naturally reaches for support. One way that support is given is to feel that you are "in the know." You are a member of the secret society, the outcasts, the ones who know the deadly secret. It helps bind the church together. Coupled as it is (next slide) with evangelism, it is a very powerful glue.



Throw up overview slide from Visio on Revelation; then the Preterist interpretation.



Becoming Closer

Invective

“I don’t know any PostMillennialists; I don’t even eat Post Toasties”

“Any scheme that implies that John is speaking in a kind of code language about events purely contemporary with him ... should not be regarded with the same respect due a believer.”

The first of these quotes is from a radio evangelist (I think it was Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel). He holds strongly to the futurist (aka Hal Lindsey) view. He’s talking about historicists.

The second is from author Fred P. Miller (a contemporary historicist writer), referring to the preterist interpretation.

Both quotes demonstrate a relatively common phenomenon, the invective which sometimes enlivens the debate about which interpretation is correct. Revelation seems to bring out a passion in interpreters which is not found in any other book. The warning to be delivered here is that such passion is not in keeping with the spirit of the Gospel; for example:

(Titus 3:9-11 NIV) But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. {10} Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. {11} You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

It is my intention to avoid all such divisiveness; therefore, we will present all four approaches, and delve into the three which accept the inspiration of Scripture.



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Preterist Viewpoint

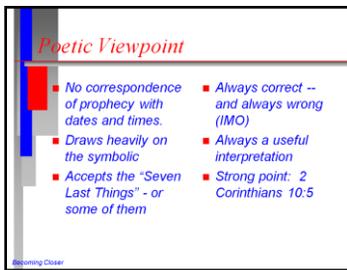
Dates originally from the early church
 Most (or all) of the events are during the Roman Empire
 Popular among liberals and Roman Catholics
 Taken to extremes, it is very poor interpretation.
 Often used to sidestep the existence of prophecy
 Not covered in this class.

(Begin with overview slide)

This particular view originated with a “historicist” perspective as applied by the early church fathers. They correctly concluded that it prophesied that the Roman Empire had to fall. In short, they took the book to be prophetic of the future and went from there. Liberal scholars have picked this up and (with a little magic on the dates) have turned it into a “non-prophetic” work. The original view, however, still retains much of its validity; it’s just that the passage of time has rendered the interpretation obsolete due to new evidence (i.e....., more history). You can see why it’s popular with liberals; it denies the existence of prophecy about the future (as they interpret it). It’s popular with some (but by no means all) Roman Catholics because it uses the “historicist” method but eliminates the Roman *Church* from being any of the evil portrayals so clearly linked with Rome in the text. (This desire to avoid attacking the Roman Catholic Church is also a major factor in the popularity of the futurist approach).

I will not be covering this approach in this class for these reasons:

- As defined by modern liberals, it denies the inspiration of the Scripture
- As defined by the church fathers, it lacks the knowledge of the last 1000 years of history -- history which would have been important to them. In this sense, it is largely superseded by the historicist approach.



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Poetic Viewpoint

No correspondence of prophecy with dates and times. Draws heavily on the symbolic
 Accepts the “Seven Last Things” - or some of them

Always correct -- and always wrong (IMO)
 Always a useful interpretation
 Strong point: 2 Corinthians 10:5

Begin with overview slide

Many of the listeners will believe that the poetic view denies the inspiration of the Scripture. It does not; it merely views this as the use of images to tell the truth (a concept which should be very familiar to a television bound, non-reading American public).

The reasons for “always correct”:

- First, it is highly useful in training the imagination to Christian thought.

We see this idea in the Scripture:

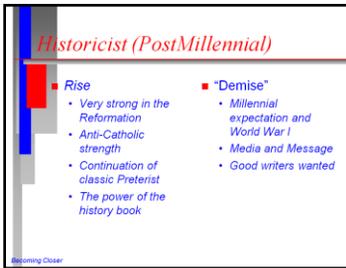
(2 Cor 10:5 NIV) We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

- Next, this type of interpretation (remember our example from Revelation 11:19, where we saw the ark of the covenant?) is generally correct. Scripture often has a symbolic application. All the details of the Tabernacle and the Temple were meant to teach symbolic lessons to the Jews.

It is also “always wrong”: it denies that Revelation is talking about the future in detail (i.e....., this symbolism matches thus and such an event). It seems to me this is contrary to the sense of the book. See Revelation 4:1 and 17:9-10, for example.

For those who object that “no Christian could possibly...” I would point out two examples of this:

- InterVarsity Press (no “liberal” publishing house) in its “The Bible Speaks Today” series, takes this viewpoint.
- The guest speaker for this year’s Staley lectureship at PCC, Dr.... Thompson, took this viewpoint (and was not booed off the stage). It seems to me that good and reasonable Christians can accept this viewpoint. It also seems to me that the viewpoint is useful to some extent. It seems too that it is not, all in all, correct.



Becoming Closer

Historicist (PostMillennial)

Rise

Very strong in the Reformation
 Anti-Catholic strength
 Continuation of classic Preterist
 The power of the history book

"Demise"

Millennial expectation and World War I
 Media and Message
 Good writers wanted

Begin with overview slide

This approach assumes that the work of John is a more or less continuous prediction of the history of events *affecting the church*. (One of the false objections raised against it is, "where's the rest of world history?" This book was meant to be understood; can you imagine the puzzle that Aztec history would have been in prophetic writing before 1492? God is not the author of confusion.) As such, it is a continuation of the *early* (not contemporary) Preterist viewpoint. It says, "these events will happen." It also therefore carries the burden of saying when they will happen, and what those symbols mean in historic events. The viewpoint rose in the early Reformation (it would have been death to have held this point of view during the Inquisition!) and was strongly held by a number of great figures, including Martin Luther and Isaac Newton (who wrote more theology than he did physics). It was, until the twentieth century (and indeed until the last half of that) the dominant form of interpretation of Revelation. Its rise starts with the Reformation. The Reformationists, reading the works of the early church fathers, picked up their method and extended it to account for history since then. This quite naturally led them into the conclusion that the Roman Catholic church -- more particularly, the papacy -- played a large and evil part in history. The theory itself might not have prevailed had it not been for an atheist: John Gibbon. He wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Suddenly, all the dates of the Roman Empire were at the fingertips of every Bible scholar -- and variations on this theory exploded into existence. You did not have to be a professor of theology at a university with a large library to interpret this book; you just needed Gibbon, perhaps one other history since then, and your Bible.

Its "demise" (it is by no means dead, but it is no longer the dominant interpretation) came about not by theological reasoning but by elements which affected its popularity:

- First, many of its most popular authors -- writing at a time when dense, complicated prose was popular -- were in the middle to late 19th century. Some of them made the assumption that the Millennium was almost upon us (we take the history we have, match it to all of Revelation we can -- poor technique, but understandable. Everyone wants to know the date of the return.) The expectation of the common Christian in late Victorian times (i.e....., the English speaking world) was that the millennium was just around the corner. What was just around the corner was World War I. Some of the events in that war -- the communist revolution in Russia; the fall of the Ottoman empire and the taking of Jerusalem, all in 1917 -- should have served as startling confirmation of the method. Instead, people asked, "what Millennium?" (Interestingly, those who propound this method now place the Millennium at a much later date, such as about 300 years from now -- and many now are premillennial historicists).
- Second, the authors of the "futurist" theory belonged (at that time) largely to churches which were not "mainstream." The theory arises out of dispensationalism; such churches typically did not see themselves continuously connected with the early church (as, say, a Lutheran would). They were open to the radical method of establishing God's kingdom; they were open to other radical methods, too -- like broadcasting on the radio. "Fringe" churches broadcast long before "mainstream" ones took it up in earnest. To this day, the bulk of religious broadcasting is fundamentalist in tone.
- Finally, the writers of the historicist theory in this century have tended to be, for reasons that escape me, dull. There is no historicist equivalent to Hal Lindsey.

Kindly note one thing, however: not one of these arguments has anything to do with whether or not this interpretation is *correct*. It may be correct (IMO); it is not popular.

<i>Historicist (Good News & Bad)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>In Favor</i> • The most obvious interpretation • Most Christians of most times • Can produce stunning predictions • Scholarly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Opposed</i> • Historicists don't always agree on past dates interpretations • Definite anti-Papacy bias • Tends to "put off" the coming of Christ • Scholarly

Becoming Closer

Historicist (Good News & Bad)

In Favor

- The most obvious interpretation
- Most Christians of most times
- Can produce stunning predictions
- Scholarly

Opposed

- Historicists don't always agree on past dates interpretations
- Definite anti-Papacy bias
- Tends to "put off" the coming of Christ
- Scholarly

In favor:

- It is the most obvious interpretation. If you sat down with no preconceived notions, this is the interpretation method you would come up with. It is the interpretation the early church fathers came up with, and they studied at John's feet. The only difference is that we now have more data to work on.
- It is the interpretation of most Christians of most times. We tend to see the church in "today" mode; we forget that the church stretches through time as well as space (despite the message of Revelation!) Often, we forget to consider the thoughts and ideas of other church members simply because they are not walking around on top of the planet (or aren't members of our particular little club). When you see an idea accepted by most Christians of most times, it's at least worth a hard look (the Abraham Lincoln principle).
- It can produce some stunningly accurate predictions; particularly when the fulfillment has happened. For example, Barnes, writing in 1851, predicted that by 1917 the power of the Turkish Sultan would be abolished (after several hundred years); and that Russia would become the enemy of the church by that time. The communist revolution and the fall of the Ottoman Empire -- both happened in 1917. His most modern student (Miller) predicted in 1966 that Russia would cease to be an enemy of the church, interpreting the fire fall from heaven as spiritual revival -- *which would start in the Ukraine*. (Anyone here know how to pronounce Melitopol?)
- Finally, it is by far the most scholarly of approaches, for it unites the theology found in the Bible with secular history. It unifies truth in a visible way.

Opposed to that, we have these arguments:

- If this interpretation was all that obvious, one may argue that the historicists should therefore be able to get their dates right -- together. They don't. Anyone with a couple of history books and a cross reference book can create his own timetable, based on his own theories (theological or otherwise). The classic for this is Emanuel Swedenborg, who founded his own religion on it. (Those familiar with the Wayfarer's Chapel in Palos Verdes -- a popular wedding and funeral spot -- have seen one of the church buildings of Swedenborgianism.)
- The interpretation sees the Papacy (and by implication, the Roman Catholic church) as an evil figure. Such an interpretation tends to alienate both Roman Catholics and those who believe in the ecumenical movement. It also tends to divide the body of Christ. (Advocates of the theory state they are opposed to the Papacy -- not Roman Catholics.)
- The interpretation (especially in the twentieth century) tends to put off (and thus fall into the trap of forecasting) the date of the return of our Lord. It thus may tend to lull the Christian into thinking that Christ's return cannot happen soon, which is contrary to the statement in Revelation and elsewhere that we must watch for His return. Insofar as it does not build up the body of Christ, such an interpretation should be rejected.
- It is also the most scholarly of approaches -- and most of us are ignorant of history. We don't like (nor trust) scholarship in this age; we like and trust feeling. It may not be a valid argument against the theory, but it does explain in some part why it is not more easily accepted.

<i>Futurist (Good News and Bad)</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In Favor • Strongly evangelistic in tone. • Impossible for a Christian to prove it wrong • Eyes on the Second Coming • Ecumenical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Opposed • Impossible for a Christian to prove it right. • Ignores 1900 years of scholarship. • Tendency to be too literal -- and judgmental.

Becoming Closer

Futurist (Good News and Bad)

In Favor

- Strongly evangelistic in tone.
- Impossible for a Christian to prove it wrong
- Eyes on the Second Coming
- Ecumenical

Opposed

- Impossible for a Christian to prove it right.
- Ignores 1900 years of scholarship.
- Tendency to be too literal -- and judgmental.

In favor:

- Particularly in Hal Lindsey's works, but consistently in others as well, Revelation is seen as an evangelistic tool. Time is short, eternity is long, hell is hot, but Jesus saves (and by the way, look out for the Tribulation). It is difficult to find fault with someone whose view is that the Scripture should produce repentance leading to salvation.
- It is particularly convenient in that there are no embarrassing predictions -- only possibilities. The interpretation is quite clear. Chapter 1 is an introduction; chapters 2 and 3 are the entire history of the church age. Next comes the Rapture. Therefore, if you are a Christian, you are never in the position of explaining why this or that prediction didn't happen on schedule; you simply state that the events haven't happened yet. Almost by definition, anything you say is of the form, "Look, this or that development *could mean* that the Lord is coming soon, for it could be a preliminary to {event} in Revelation." Since all those events (from Rapture to Millennium) take place in seven literal years, anything going on now could be a precursor. Since you explicitly state that you don't know when Jesus is coming again -- and even the heathen get only seven years notice -- how can you be held responsible for poor theology or scholarship?
- The interpretation forces the Christian to pay attention to the idea that Jesus could come back (in the Rapture) any time. I might not even finish this lesson before He returns. While this is possible in the historicist interpretation as well (though not likely), it is prominent in the futurist. This is very much in accord with what the Scripture teaches: **Watch!**
- There is no real anti-Catholic bias to this interpretation. It is "anti-Rome" -- but only after the Rapture, when all true Christians, including obviously devout Catholics, have been removed from the planet. It therefore tends to promote the unity of the church.

Opposed to this interpretation, we have the following:

- As it is impossible to prove wrong, it is impossible to prove right. If it's right, we'll all be gone before the debate can begin. If it's not, we have at least a thousand years before the evidence shows up.
- It is cut off from 1900 years of Christian thinking. It says, in effect, that everyone else who ever looked at the problem got it wrong. They didn't just miss the dates being matched with the symbols, they had the entire scheme of interpretation wrong. And that includes the early church fathers, who got it from (according to some) John himself.
- There is an unfortunate tendency for this interpretation to become far too literal (despite the evidence of Daniel to the contrary). Because this is such a new interpretation, only 150 years old, we have not had sufficient time to weed out the extremists. The indefectibility of the church takes time.

Summary

- *Preterist -- the liberal view*
- *Poetic -- always true, always insufficient*
- *Historicist -- most studied, least popular*
- *Futurist -- the view of most fundamentalists today.*

© Learning Center

Sum things up to review each method, and then segue into what they have in common (more or less):



Becoming Closer

The Seven Last Things

Resurrection of the Dead The Tribulation

The Second Coming of Christ Armageddon

The Millennium

The Judgment

New Heaven and New Earth

References for each:

- Resurrection: Daniel 12:1-2
- Tribulation: as such, found only in Revelation 7:14
- Second Coming: Acts 1:11
- Armageddon: Revelation 16:13-16 (found only here)
- The Millennium: Revelation 20:1-5 is the only explicit reference, but see also Isaiah 11:6-10.
- The Judgment: the entire 25th Chapter of Matthew would do for openers.
- New Heaven and New Earth: 2 Peter 3:10-13

The references are by no means exclusive; they are merely meant to provide a starting point. The truth of the matter is this, no matter what your interpretation of Revelation. If you are a Christian who trusts the Scripture as the Word of God, you will find this:

- The day will come when Christ shall return to judge both the living and the dead.
- All will be raised to see that judgment, and the criterion will be your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The world will try its best to stop this -- but without possibility of success.
- After our Lord's return, there will be the New Heaven and New Earth - - occupied by those who love the Lord.

Time is short, eternity is long; Hell is hot -- but Jesus saves!