

Historicism: Is it Tenable?

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The historicist approach to Scripture, in particular the book of Revelation, is the approach of the Reformers and historic Protestant commentators (e.g., John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, Isaac Newton, Matthew Poole, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, E.B. Elliott, and others). It is characterized by a number of interpretations and presuppositions.

First, the book of Revelation is said to prophesy the entire church age from the apostles to the second coming of Christ. Thus, one will find interpretations that teach that the breaking of the seven seals in chapters 6 and 7 refers to the barbarian invasions that conquered the western Roman Empire. Many historicists will argue that the scorpion and locusts that come out of the bottomless pit (chapter 9) refers to the great Muslim armies that conquered Asia Minor and attacked the eastern Roman Empire. Many assert that the horses with stinging tails and fiery mouths are later Turkish Muslim invaders. One of the few things that all historicists agree upon and could be called a central feature of their system is that the beast of chapter 13 is the Roman papacy. The historicist view was formulated at the height of papal power and influence; consequently, historicists regard the great enemy of the church throughout most of its history to be the papacy. In fact, in the historicist system, the complete overthrow of the papacy virtually coincides with the beginning of the millennium (which in their interpretation is a literal 1,000 year golden age) where biblical Protestantism is the dominant worldview and force on planet earth. Note Matthew Poole's commentary on Revelation 19:20:

The issue of this great battle will be the total ruin of all the enemies of the church, their bodies being made meat for the fowls of the heaven, their souls cast into the bottomless pit of hell. The secular part of antichrist is here meant by *the beast*; the ecclesiastical antichrist, by *the false prophet*, that had cheated credulous princes and credulous people, with his pretended miracles, into an idolatry that was but the image of the old idolatry of the heathens, in worshipping the demons, and the images of such as were in great estimation amongst them while they were alive. *These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone*; both these, the laic and secular popish party, and all their church party, that should be left to this day, shall all now be destroyed. In a matter of fact, not likely to appear in the world yet for two hundred years or more, and thus darkly foretold, who can be positive and particular? But this seemeth the sense of it, upon the former hypotheses: That *the beast* with the *seven heads and ten horns* mentioned chap. Xiii. 1, are antichrist, beginning with those Roman emperors that favoured the idolatry introduced by the bishops of Rome, and ending in the universal bishop, or popes of Rome, and their clergy, who quickly wormed out of the emperor's power, and for one thousand two hundred and sixty years reigned, setting up idolatry and superstition, and corrupting the doctrine of faith, and for the latter six hundred years of time, persecuting the true church of Christ more notoriously.¹

The view that the book of Revelation sets before us a *chronological history* of the entire church age has serious problems. A major problem with this view is that it is simply assumed and not proved.

¹ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1685] 1963), 3:1001. It is noteworthy that Poole, writing before 1685, says that the papacy will be overthrown in about 200 years. This indicates that Poole, along with most modern scholars, place the beginning of the papacy with Gregory I (A.D. 590-604). The 1,260 years according to the historicist system should have come to an end around the Civil War (ca. 1850-1864). This obviously did not occur.

In fact, it seems to contradict the plain teaching of the book. When the book of Revelation introduces itself, it tells its readers how to view the prophecies within the book: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly [*en tachei*] take place” (1:1). Then as if to make sure that His audience does not misunderstand the time indicator of verse 1, He repeats Himself in verse 3 using different though synonymous terminology: “Blessed is he who reads...who hears...and keeps those things which are written in it [this prophecy[]; for the time is near [*kairo eggus*].” The expressions “shortly take place” or “what must soon come to pass [*en tachei*]” as well as “the time is near [*kairo eggus*]” tells us that Revelation is not concerned with all of church history or only the end of the world but *primarily with events that were soon to happen*, that were very relevant to the audience that received the Apocalypse. These time indicators inject a note of urgency to the readers. The book of Revelation repeatedly states that its prophecies relate primarily to the time at hand (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10), not world history or only the distant future. This teaching on an *imminent fulfillment* is restated twice at the end of the book: “the Lord God of the holy prophet sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place [*genesthai en tachei*]” (22:6); “Do not seal the words of the prophecy, for the time is at hand” (22:10).

Gentry’s remarks on the clear indicators of imminency are right on the mark:

The *text-bracketing temporal indicators*, pointed to by preterists cannot be lightly dismissed. John is writing to seven historical churches (Rev. 1:4, 11; 22:16), which are expecting troublesome times (Rev. 2:3). He testifies to being with them in “the tribulation” (Rev. 1:9, *en te thlipsei*). He expects those very churches to hear and understand (Rev. 1:3; 22:7), because of *the nearness of the events* (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10). One of the agonizing cries from his fellow sufferers receives emphasis. In Revelation 6, the martyred souls in heaven plead for God’s righteous vindication: “They cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest *a little while longer*” (Rev. 6:10-11).

Original relevance, then, is the lock and the time-texts the key to opening the door of Revelation. What terms *could* John have used to speak of contemporary expectation other than those that are, in fact, found in Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10 and other places?²

This emphasis on an imminent fulfillment should not be ignored or dismissed because we come to the text with a prophetic paradigm or with preconceived notions. Modernist scholars take the obvious meaning of the time indicators seriously but then commit the fatal error of arguing that the first generation of Christians expected Jesus to return soon, but were obviously mistaken. They err because they reject the inspiration and infallibility of the sacred Scriptures and do not understand the difference between a literal bodily coming and a coming in judgment.

Historicists’ Attempts at Circumventing the Time Indicators

Historicists have various arguments with which they attempt to counter the plain meaning of the Greek text that John expected the fulfillment of the bulk of the prophecies to occur *shortly* or *soon* after he recorded them.

(1) Historicist expositors do not accept the clear meaning of the Greek text but give it a little twist to fit into their system. Instead of accepting what the passage says (that these things [plural] are about to come to pass), they teach that the fulfillment of the prophecies would *begin* to come to pass soon. Matthew Poole says, “We may allow him to say, those things should be *shortly*, which soon after

² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 164.

should begin to be effected, though not finished till Christ's second coming."³ He then rejects the orthodox or partial preterist view because he believes Revelation was written after the destruction of Jerusalem. Matthew Henry's comments are similar: "These events...would begin to come to pass very shortly."⁴ While we have great respect for these godly-eminent commentators and read out of them almost daily, it is simply poor exegesis to read something into the passage that is not there so that it will fit into our presuppositions or our eschatological system. While the historicist twist is not as bad as those who hold the spiritual interpretation or the futurist view,⁵ it nevertheless refuses to take the text at face value. Those historicists who accuse us of heresy for not accepting the old traditional Protestant view are not condemning us for adding to Scripture but for accepting the plain meaning of Scripture. When examining the time indicators, the question must be: How would the original audience have understood these words?

(2) Modern historicists frequently argue that the preterist interpretation of the book of Revelation is really just a late Roman Catholic view concocted by the Jesuit scholar Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613) in order to refute the Protestant view and protect the papacy from the Reformers' attacks. The problem with this view is that it is simply not true. Eusebius (ca. A.D. 310), the great church historian, after discussing Josephus' account of the destruction of Jerusalem, says that it was a fulfillment of Matthew 24 (the orthodox or partial preterist view of Matthew 24 was also held by the Covenanter David Dickson and the particular Baptist scholar John Gill). "Preterism is well-established in Matthew 24:3-34, as many early church fathers recognized."⁶

Early in the sixth century Andreas of Cappadocia wrote a commentary on Revelation that is still in existence. Though he did not take the *preterist* approach, he knew of some who did. Commenting on Revelation 6:12, he wrote: "There are not wanting those who apply this passage to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Titus." Also at Revelation 7:1, he wrote: "These things are referred by some to those sufferings which were inflicted by the Romans upon the Jews." Another commentary on Revelation written (probably) in the sixth century by Arethas says of Revelation 6:12: "Some refer this to the siege of Jerusalem by Vespasian." On Revelation 7:1, Arethas writes: "Here then, were to befall the Jews in their war against the Romans, in the way of avenging the sufferings inflicted upon Christ." At 7:4: "When the Evangelist received these oracles, the destruction in which the Jews were involved was not yet inflicted by the Romans."⁷

³ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:949. Regarding the statement in verse 3, "the time is at hand" or "the time is near" Poole says, "For the time is at hand; the season for the accomplishment of these things is nigh, not past, but the time when they begin to happen is not very far off" (Ibid.). Interestingly, the historicist David Steele in his *Notes on the Apocalypse* (1870) says not one word regarding the time indicators in verses 1 and 3 (see pp. 15-19).

⁴ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:1119.

⁵ The spiritual view, which holds that the visions are lessons that transcend any particular time or place, teaches that the time is always near. The day of the Lord or second bodily coming, we are told, is *always imminent*. While we agree that we should all live as though Christ will return today (Mk. 13:35), the second bodily coming could not be imminent, for the whole world (i.e. planet earth) has to be disciplined.

The futurist interpreter tells us that the word "shortly" means that when the prophecies (that are about 2,000 years off in the future) begin to come to pass, they will take place "quickly." The problem with this interpretation of *en tachei* is that the immediate context ("the time is near," v. 3) renders it impossible. The translation "shortly" or "soon" must be maintained. Futurists and some historicists argue that the expression "the time is near" (v. 3) must not be viewed according to human time but according to how God reckons time. Since a thousand years to God is as a single day (2 Pet. 3:8), the events of Revelation can involve thousands of years of history (historicism) or can take place thousands of years in the future (futurism). Since this epistle is written to human beings and not God, such an interpretation is untenable and forced. Would the original audience interpret "shortly," "soon," "about to happen," or "the time is near" as a few thousand years in the future?

⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. *He Shall Have Dominion*, 163.

⁷ Steve Gregg, Editor, *Revelation: Four Views A Parallel Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 39-40.

The preterist approach to Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation existed and was well known over one thousand years before the writings of Luis de Alcazar. But what about those historicists who insist that all the members of the Westminster Assembly were historicists? Regarding such an assertion, we should keep in mind a few things. (a) We are not to determine our interpretation of prophecy by counting heads. Historicism was the dominant position of Protestants for over two centuries, but it is not the dominant position of the church throughout its long history. Today, it is held by a small minority of Christians and its predictions regarding the papacy have been proven false by the passage of time (this is discussed below). (b) The great scholar John Lightfoot, who participated in the Westminster Assembly (1643-49), was a preterist. In his commentary on Matthew 24:34 Lightfoot writes, “Hence it appears plain enough, that the foregoing verses [of the Olivet Discourse] are not to be understood of the last judgment, but, as we said, of the destruction of Jerusalem. There were some among the disciples (particularly John) who lived to see these things come to pass. With Matt. xvi. 28, compare John xxi. 22.”⁸ He even believed that 2 Thessalonians 2 refers not to the second coming but Christ’s coming in judgment upon the Jewish nation.⁹ After his death, his Latin commentary was finished by the like-minded German scholar Johann Christian Schoettgen (1687-1751). Schoettgen regarded “the man of sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2:3f as all the *unbelieving* Pharisees, rabbis, and teachers of the law who opposed Christ, His apostles, and the gospel. He applied this passage to the papacy and the entire Roman Catholic clergy.¹⁰ One should be careful not to see a monolithic view of prophecy when different views did, indeed, exist.

(3) Historicists will also affirm the late date for the book of Revelation (ca. A.D. 96) as proof that the book could have nothing to do with God’s judgment on the Jews or the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70). This view, which is common among modern commentators, is not based on the internal evidence of the book itself but rather upon an ambiguous statement of Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202). His statement (as interpreted by those who favor a later date) places the writing of the Apocalypse “toward the end of Domitian’s reign [A.D. 81-93].” Irenaeus is the only source for the late date and other old Christian sources are only appealing to him.¹¹ Those who argue for a later date say that the

⁸ John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew – 1 Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [1859] 1989), 1:320.

⁹ John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot* (London: J.F. Dove, 1822), 3:230-234. See Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1994), 352-366.

¹⁰ See DeMar, 357-358.

¹¹ Steve Gregg writes, “In *The Beast of Revelation*, Dr. Kenneth Gentry marshals seven strong reasons, some linguistic, some contextual, and some logical, for interpreting Irenaeus’ statement as meaning that John—not the vision—was seen during the principate of Domitian. For example, earlier in the passage, Irenaeus refers to ‘all the...ancient copies’ of Revelation. This presupposes that the book had been around a good long while before this statement was written. If there were ‘ancient copies,’ was not the original more ancient still? Yet, in Irenaeus’ estimation, the time of Domitian’s reign was not considered to have been very ancient history, for he speaks of it as ‘almost in our day.’ How could Irenaeus speak of ‘ancient copies’ of a work the original of which had been written ‘almost’ in his own time? With reference to his mention of Domitian’s reign, there are grounds for believing that Irenaeus was speaking of the time of John’s last being seen by the brethren, rather than the time of John’s having seen the apocalyptic vision. Gentry paraphrases what he believes to have been Irenaeus’ thought as follows: ‘It is not important for us to know the name of the Beast (or Antichrist), which was hidden in the number 666. Were it important, why did John not tell us? After all, he lived almost to our own era, and spoke with some men I have known.’ Gentry’s arguments, modern sentiments notwithstanding, present a formidable case for the early dating of the Apocalypse. I have encountered no treatment of the dating of Revelation more thorough than his dissertation on the subject” (*Revelation: Four Views*, 18). A literal translation of the Greek version of Irenaeus’ statement, which is found in two different places in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* (A.D. 310), reads: “But if it had been necessary to announce his name plainly at the present time, it would have been spoken by him who saw the apocalypse. For [he or it] was not seen long ago but almost in our time, at the end of the reign of

persecution fits better with Domitian's reign which was empire wide than with Nero's which was more local and sporadic. In response to this argument, we need to keep in mind that: (a) there was severe persecution going on of Christians during the 60's by both Jews and Romans; and, (b) the book is prophetic and could certainly describe events that occurred during Domitian's reign.

The internal evidence favors an early date as well. In Revelation 1:7 we read, "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth [or 'land'] will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen." Gary DeMar writes,

Those who pierced Jesus have been dead for nearly two millennia. This helps explain Revelation 1:7 where the same wording is used. Those who "see" Him are "those who pierced Him" (cf. John 19:7). John is telling us that those who pierced Jesus experienced His covenant wrath. Revelation 1:7 must be referring to a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment, before that generation passed away (Matthew 16:27-28; 24:34). "The crucifiers would see Him coming in judgment—that is, they would *understand* that His coming would mean wrath on the land (cf. The use of the word *see* in Mark 1:44; Luke 17:22; John 3:36; Rom. 15:21)."

Equating "seeing" with "understanding" is not Scripture twisting. It is a common biblical metaphor. In John 12:40 Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:10 to explain why some have not believed His message. Notice how "seeing" is equivalent to "understanding":

Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they *see with their eyes*, hear with their ears, *understand* with their hearts, and repent and be healed (Isaiah 6:10).

In quoting Isaiah, Jesus states that Jehovah "has blinded their eyes" (John 12:40). This is not a physical blinding. The blinding is spiritual. To be blind is not to understand; to see is to understand and believe. "To open their eyes" is an expression used by the biblical writers to describe recognition and understanding (Acts 26:18; cf. 1 Kings 8:29, 52; 2 Kings 2:16; 19:16; Isaiah 35:5; 42:7, 16). The eyes of the disciples "were opened" by Jesus and "they recognized Him" (Luke 24:31).¹²

This interpretation is strongly supported by the broad context of Scripture. In Matthew 24:30, Jesus takes the expression from Zechariah 12:10-12 and applies it to the destruction of Jerusalem. But instead of mourning in repentance over her sins, she will be mourning in terror over her coming destruction. There is no reason to apply Revelation 1:7 in any other sense. If it is objected that this view does not take into account the positive promises of Zechariah, we need to keep in mind the New Testament teaching that God's judgment of Israel (her excommunication) will result in great blessings for the whole world and even Israel herself will turn to the Lord after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (see Rom. 11:1-12, 15, 23-24). Another exceptionally strong support is our Lord's words to the high priest at His trial: "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mk. 14:62).

Another support is found in Revelation 11:8, which tells us the fate of the two witnesses: "And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified." Historicists argue that "the great city...where our Lord was crucified" has to be Rome. They must say this because: (a) After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the city can no longer be a persecutor of Christians. That which has been demolished is no longer

Domitian" (David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* [Dallas: Word, 1997], lviii). "[T]he one who saw the Apocalypse' [John of Patmos] is the logical subject of *eorathy*...what Irenaeus had in mind was to comment on *how long* the author of Revelation had lived, not on *when* he had written Revelation" (Ibid, lix.).

¹² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 161-162.

relevant to the prophecy (if Revelation was written after A.D. 70, Jerusalem would no longer be the evil persecutor which spiritually is comparable to Sodom and Egypt); and, (b) The great enemy of true Christians in Revelation (according to historicists) is the papacy and the apostate Roman Catholic Church which is persecuting and murdering the true witnesses of Jesus Christ. Because of their presuppositions, historicists are forced to ignore the plain and obvious meaning of verse 8. The exegetical gymnastics and interpretative contortions involved in making the text teach what it does not say are shocking.¹³ If the text is taken at face value, then Israel and Jerusalem is still standing and at least some of the prophecies of the book involve apostate Israel.

That the verse means what it says is proved by the following observations: (a) The statement “the city where our Lord was crucified” is not symbolism or apocalyptic imagery but is designed to explain where the apostasy and persecuting power is located. To argue that Jerusalem is a symbol of Rome because it was under Roman authority or because Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers is absurd. It is a grasping after straw. (b) Revelation 11:1-2 clearly sets the scene in Jerusalem and nothing in 11:3-13 suggest or warrants a change of scene. Even if we interpret the measuring of the temple in verse 1 symbolically as true New Covenant believers or the faithful church of Christ who worships God in spirit and truth, the explanatory statement, “And they will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months” in verse 2 clearly refers to the fact that Jerusalem will be destroyed by an invasion of Gentiles. Historicists are forced to over allegorize passages that do not fit their theory. The Gentiles, we are told, are those who bring Gentilism back into the church. The temple is said to be the church of Christ (which makes sense) but then we are told that the court and the holy city represent ‘people who come under the name of the Christian church.’”¹⁴ (c) The idea that the original audience could somehow figure out the convoluted understanding of verse 2 and 8 common among historicists is incredible. If one is careful not to over allegorize in order to uphold a certain prophetic paradigm, the chapter (which we acknowledge is difficult) makes much more sense.

In addition, the prophecy of Daniel 9 tells us that all special revelation came to an end by the time the holy city and sanctuary were destroyed in A.D. 70.

The angel Gabriel told Daniel that the “seventy weeks” were to end with the destruction of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:24-27); and that period would also serve to “seal up the vision and prophecy” (Dan. 9:24). In other words, special revelation would stop—be “sealed up”—by the time Jerusalem was destroyed. The

¹³ For an amazing display of Scripture twisting on behalf of the historicist understanding of verse 8, see John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3:770. The historicist David Steele takes a different approach saying, “The *place*, where the witnesses lie dead is pointed out by three places well known in sacred history, Egypt, Sodom and Jerusalem. But these are to be understood mystically. The place resembles Egypt for idolatry and cruelty to the people of God; it is like Sodom for literal and spiritual pollution; and Jerusalem, where our Lord was crucified afresh and put to open shame in the persons of his slain witnesses” (*Notes in the Apocalypse*, 143). Let us carefully note how he twists the passage. The passage reads, “And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8). We are told specifically that the great city *spiritually* is called Sodom and Egypt. Steele is correct in saying Egypt and Sodom tell us what the great city is like. Egypt is the great oppressor of the saints. It is the nation from which Israel had to be delivered. Sodom is the great figure for sexual immorality, unfaithfulness, and hostility to true holiness. But Steele is incorrect when he says Jerusalem also must be viewed mystically. In fact, he completely ignores the grammar and obvious meaning of the text. After noting that the great city is spiritually called or identified with Egypt and Sodom, there is a separate statement about the place: “where also our Lord was crucified.” There is nothing about the separate statement identifying it as spiritual, mystic, or allegorical. Sodom and Egypt tells us the character of the great city *not* the place. The place where our Lord was crucified (Jerusalem) identifies the geographical location and tells us that Jerusalem is like Egypt and Sodom. Any other interpretation is forced and unnatural.

¹⁴ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3:975.

Canon of Holy Scripture was entirely completed before Jerusalem fell.¹⁵

(4) Historicists will argue that the preterist interpretation cannot be true for the book contains descriptions of the final judgment and the last judgment did not come to pass “soon” or “shortly.” As a partial preterist who accepts the obvious fact that the second bodily coming of Christ and final judgment have not yet occurred, I understand this objection. But this objection is really only applicable to full preterists or pantelists who are dangerous heretics. Orthodox or partial preterists accept the fact that the saints are shown the end of history or final judgment to give them hope. The introduction of the book says, “...things [plural] which must shortly take place” (Rev. 1:1). It does not say that everything within the whole book is about to take place. It is common in prophecy for the divine message to jump with little or no explanation from events soon to come to pass to events in the distant future. This is one reason why the Jews did not understand the difference in time between Christ’s life of humiliation and suffering and the glorified messianic King’s victorious kingdom. In the Olivet Discourse, our Lord shifts between the destruction of Jerusalem which took place in A.D. 66-70 to the end of the world and final judgment thousands of years in the future with absolutely no explanations. Given this fact, the historicist objection to the obvious meaning of the time indicators and the partial preterist interpretation thereof is not sound or legitimate.

Are Days Really Years?

Second, the historicist interpretation dogmatically advocates the view that days in the book of Revelation represent years. According to this system, God is revealing in symbolic language the *exact* prophetic time period. The period of 1260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6) refers to a literal 1,260 years. On this principle, forty-two months (Rev. 11:2) also becomes 1,260 years. This view is not based on anything within the book of Revelation itself but is borrowed from the symbolism of the seventy weeks of Daniel (cf. 9:24ff; in this chapter it literally reads “sevens”) and/or from Ezekiel 4:4-6. Here the prophet was required to lie on one side for 390 days and another side 40 days to represent the years of judgment that God placed upon Israel and Judah. Note, however, that in the immediate context, Ezekiel is told, “I have laid on you a day for each year” (v. 6). The determination that days equal years in the book of Revelation is not exegetical but rather flows from the presupposition that the book reveals the entire church age. If we are to attempt to figure out what the 1260 days or 3½ years symbolize from other portions of Scripture, we only need to turn to Daniel 7:25 where we have “a time and times and half a time” which is 3½ or a broken 7 which symbolizes a period of persecution or eschatological distress. In Daniel it does not represent 1,206 years. As Edward J. Young notes,

The purpose of these designations of time is to set forth more definitely the last stage of the power of the little horn as a period of time the length of which is measured by God. The word used is different from that in the first part of the verse (seasons) and is in itself a chronologically indefinite expression. This fact shows that “a chronological determination of the period is not in view, but that the designation of time is to be understood symbolically” (Keil). The view that the word means a year is based upon an appeal to Dan. 4:16; 12:7 and Rev. 13:5 and 11:2, 3 where the expression 42 months and 1260 days are employed interchangeably. However, as the exposition has shown, the “seven times” of 4:16 need not represent seven years, and it is surely questionable whether in other passage periods of time are indicated which are to be taken chronologically. Hence, it seems best to take the present passage symbolically. What, however, is the meaning of the symbolism? Apparently the expression is intended to indicate the half of seven times, but, if so, what is the meaning of this half? This period, a

¹⁵ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 5.

time, times and half a time, apparently stands for a period of testing and judgment which for the sake of God's people, the elect, will be shortened (cf. Matt. 24:22).¹⁶

Perhaps a historicist could appeal to Daniel 12:11-12 which says, "And from the time that the daily sacrifice is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days. Blessed is he who waits, and comes to the one thousand three hundred and thirty five days." Whether one seeks to apply this passage to Antioch Epiphanes and beyond or to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and beyond there is no way to take these days as literal years.

The refusal to see the 1260 days as symbolic of an indeterminate period of time (or perhaps of literal days), places the historicist in the same quagmire as premillennial dispensationalist authors who set specific dates which are, after a period of time, proven to be false. Many of us are old enough to remember Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* where he implied a second coming of Christ around 1988 or Edgar C. Whisenant's book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Is In 1988*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1949] 1972) 161-162.

¹⁷ If one carefully reads solid Protestant works on church history or the papacy, most scholars identify the first pope either as Leo I (A.D. 440-461) or Gregory I (A.D. 590-604). If the 1260 years is applied to Leo I, the complete and final overthrow of the papacy should have occurred in 1700. If it is applied to Gregory I, it should have occurred by 1850. If we take Gregory I's final year, it should have occurred by 1864. This great and final overthrow of anti-Christ and his minions has not yet occurred. Historicists however disagree widely over the particulars of the prophecies in the book of Revelation and the starting date is no different. Some of the dates offered are: A.D. 1 (Joachin); 455 (Mede); 533 (Cunningham); 538 (when the Ostrogoths abandoned their siege of Rome); 576 (Beugel); 606 (when Phocas declared himself to be the supreme head of the church); 608 (Elliott); 660 (Melancthon); 672 (Grinness); and 727 (Fysh) (see Steve Gregg ed., *Revelation Four Views*, 219). The very latest date offered would take us to 1987 which also was not the year of the final destruction and end of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church. Remember that, according to Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, and many other historicists, the 1260 days represent the 1260 years which is from the beginning of the anti-Christ's reign (and the papal church) until the anti-Christ's complete destruction and overthrow. A time will come when historicists will either have to admit they are wrong or make great alterations to their prophetic paradigm. In the meantime, this exceptionally serious problem is ignored or historicists keep moving the date for the beginning of the rise of the papacy later and later contrary to the clear evidence of church history. This reminds me of the equivocations of the premillennial dispensational authors in the early 1990s when the predicted date of 1988 did not pan out.

It is important to keep in mind that there was not unanimity among Presbyterians on eschatology in the seventeenth century. While they strongly rejected premillennial views, some, such as Baillie, still held to the old Augustinian view without being disciplined or disfellowshipped. "It is worthy of note that the first decades of the 17th century coincided with the rise of interpretation of Scripture which focused on a future millennium rather than a past one typically running from 300 to 1300, as had been the case previously. Joseph Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* [Key to Revelation] of 1627 was published in English translation in 1642 with a recommendatory preface by William Twisse, the first chairman of the Westminster Assembly. It predicted a future millennial reign of the saints beginning no later than 1715. The same year John Archer's 59 page booklet *The Personall Reign of Christ on Earth* appeared. Thomas Goodwin had been co-pastor with Archer at Arnhem in 1639-40 and had similar views. He believed antichrist (the papacy) would be overthrown in 1666. Reformed teacher at Herborn, Johann Alsted's quite brief and sober *Diatribes de mille annis apocalyptic* issued in 1627, was published in English in 1643 as *The Beloved City*, advocates a full future millennium beginning about 1694, with Christ in heaven but the resurrected martyrs governing for him on earth. It was a time of considerable ferment....The Scots were generally more sober in their prophetic view and rejected the distinctives of the pre-millennial scheme characteristic of many Independents. Baillie seems in the Augustinian mould so far as the millennium is concerned. Nevertheless, Gillespie thought the reign of the beast (the papacy) would shortly end and he counts the time of a more glorious and peaceable condition for the church to have begun in his own time, most probably in 1643" [See Gillespie's sermon preached before the House of Commons on March 27, 1644 in *Sermons Preached Before the English Houses of Parliament by the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly of Divines 1643-1645*, ed. Christopher Coldwell, Dallas: Naphtali, 2011, 341-342]; (Rowland S. Ward, "Introduction" in Christopher Coldwell ed., *The Grand Debate*, XXIV).

The Thousand Years of the Millennium

Another interpretation of historicism or classical postmillennialism that is almost certainly in error are the ideas that: (1) the millennium of Revelation chapter 20 follows the rest of the book *chronologically*; (2) the thousand years of Revelation are to be taken literally; and, (3) the thousand years are a literal period of gospel victory or a golden age when all the nations have been converted to Christ. The basic idea of historicism is that the total and final overthrow of the papacy will coincide with a 1,000 years of peace and prosperity. According to classical postmillennialism, the destruction of the papacy will coincide with a great worldwide revival and the imposition of Christian ideals by converted rulers or Bible-believing civil magistrates. Once the anti-Christ is destroyed, society will be reorganized. David Steele writes, “The Roman imperial *throne* of ecclesiastical domination shall be destroyed...now the effect of the seventh trumpet becomes a fact in history. – ‘The kingdoms of this world,’ which had been controlled by the beast, and bewitched by the sorceries of the lewd woman, ‘are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.’”¹⁸

These three elements of classical postmillennialism or historicism are in error and can easily be disproved by the analogy of Scripture and sound principles of interpretation. Let us examine each one in turn. First, the Bible teaches that the binding of Satan and the beginning of the millennium occurred at Christ’s first coming, not in our future. This statement is firmly established by looking at other non-apocalyptic passages that tell us when the binding of Satan took place. The binding refers to certain restrictions on the devil, not a complete cessation of the devil’s influence. The binding is so that the devil can no longer deceive the nations (Rev. 20:3) as he once did. Something happens in redemptive history that results in Satan being unable to perform his wickedness as he once did. There are a number of passages which connect this binding to the first coming of Christ.

In Matthew 12:28-29, we learn that the binding of the devil began during Jesus’ ministry: “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house” (cf. Lk. 11:20-21). The implication of our Lord’s statement is plain: Christ’s casting out of demons was proof that Jesus was binding the strong man (Satan) in order to plunder his house. The power of Satan over the nations is broken by the incarnation of Christ and in particular, His bloody cross and empty tomb. Thus, Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Savior of the world (Jn. 3:16-18) and the light of the world (Jn. 8:12; 9:5). Prior to the incarnation, the nations (i.e. the Gentiles) remained under Satan’s power of deception and influence. Outside of Israel, the whole earth was filled with idolatry and wickedness. The Gentiles had “walked in their own ways” (Ac. 4:16). Only Israel possessed the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2), had the saving truth of special revelation, and walked according to God’s laws. Once Christ had achieved a definitive victory over Satan, sin, and death at the cross and resurrection, God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Ac. 17:30).

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes beautifully summarizes some of the best evidence for this position:

The casting of the dragon into the abyss, therefore, we understand as coinciding with his being cast down from heaven as previously recorded in 12:7-9. This accords with the statement made by Christ when the seventy whom he had sent out returned with the joyful news that in his name even the demons were subject to them: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy” (Lk. 10:17-19). This assertion indicates that “the strong man” is bound and confined, as also does the declaration of Jesus as he approached the ordeal and the victory of the cross: “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out;

¹⁸ *Notes on the Apocalypse*, 268.

and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn. 12:31f.). So, too, the risen Lord commissioned his apostles with these words of encouragement: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:18f.). No longer is “the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9) able to deceive the nations. It is Christ who wields the power and the authority throughout the universe, who draws all men to himself, and who sends out his servants to make disciples of all nations; for it is he, not the devil, whose destiny is “to rule all the nations” (12:5). That Christ is the one who is stronger than Satan is plainly seen also in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where we read that in his incarnation the Son of God partook of our human nature, “in order that through death he might render ineffective him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Heb. 2:14f.).

This evidence leads to the conclusion that the thousand years during which Satan is bound and confined had their beginning with the incarnation of the eternal Son, and in particular with the achievement of the purpose of the incarnation, namely, the conquest of Satan and his realm of the cross of Calvary and the redemption of man by the grace that flows from the cross – a conquest confirmed and assured by Christ’s resurrection from the dead and his ascension and enthronement in glory at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3; 12:2).¹⁹

David Chilton concurs and notes why Christ’s victory and binding is connected to the destruction of apostate Jerusalem:

The whole message of the New Testament (cf. Eph. 4:8; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14) stresses that Satan was definitively defeated in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. It is absolutely crucial to remember that in speaking of Christ’s “Ascension”—His Coming to the Throne of the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:13-14)—we are speaking not only of His single act of ascending into the Cloud, but also of the direct and immediate consequences of that act: the outpouring of the Spirit on the Church in A.D. 30 (Luke 24:49-51; John 16:7; Acts 2:17-18, 33), and the outpouring of wrath upon Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 (Dan. 9:24-27; Acts 2:19-20). Pentecost and Holocaust were the Ascension applied. The final act in the drama of the *definitive* (as distinguished from the *progressive* and *consummative*) binding of Satan was played out in the destruction of the Old Covenant system. This is why St. Paul, writing a few years before the event, could assure the Church that “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20).

For all these reasons, it is generally suggested by both modern postmillennial and amillennial authors that the binding of Satan, **so that he should not deceive the nations any longer**, refers to his inability to prevent the message of the Gospel from achieving success. And, as far as it goes, this interpretation certainly has Biblical warrant: Before the coming of Christ, Satan controlled the nations; but now his death-grip has been shattered by the Gospel, as the good news of the Kingdom has spread throughout the world. The Lord Jesus sent the Apostle Paul to the Gentile nations “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18). Christ came “to rule over the Gentiles” (Rom. 15:12). That Satan has been bound does not mean that all his activity has ceased. The New Testament tells us specifically that the demons have been disarmed and bound (Col. 2:15; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6)—yet they are still active. It is just that their activity is restricted. And, as the Gospel progresses throughout the world, their activity will become even more limited. Satan is unable to prevent the victory of Christ’s Kingdom. We will overcome (1 John 4:4). “Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen” (Acts 28:28).²⁰

¹⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 210-211).

²⁰ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 502-503.

The biblical evidence connecting the binding of Satan to Christ's first coming is overwhelming. What is the evidence for the historicist view? There is none at all. It is based on the *presupposition* that the book is chronological; that the days are years and that the papacy is the great enemy of the church in history that must be defeated and obliterated before the millennium begins. It is a matter of, if one accepts A then B follows and then if one accepts B, C makes perfect sense. But if any of the building blocks of this interpretation which are *presuppositions* are disproved, the whole system collapses. Perhaps this is the reason that modern historicists are unwilling to defend their positions exegetically against modern postmillennial exegetical critiques which are devastating to the old Puritan view.

The only response I have heard is that this is the position of the original Westminster divines, therefore, it must be true. This common response is implicitly Romanist and dangerous for Bible believing Presbyterian churches. It assumes that councils cannot err even though our own Confession says they can (WCF 31.4); and that the churchmen of the seventeenth century were both infallible and perfectly united on eschatology, which is not true. It assumes that the Westminster divines wanted to make historicism (a highly speculative interpretation of a difficult book) a crucial matter of faith that if not totally accepted merited church censure and division (such a view is almost certainly in error).²¹ It assumes that, in the area of eschatology, the church got everything right in the seventeenth century and no further research or progress can or should be attempted. It expects modern Christians to ignore obvious mistakes (e.g., if the days are years the papacy should be history and we should be in the golden age right now; Jerusalem cannot be Rome; the book clearly contains elements of recapitulation; etc.) and simply rest on the wisdom of the fathers. Such thinking has more in common with Trent than Geneva. We should not be expected to check our brain at the door so we can uphold a dubious, poorly researched tradition. For the most part, historicist commentaries on Revelation are not exegetical. The commentators spend most of their time attempting to plug events from history into the symbolism of the book. While such efforts are very interesting, they are essentially speculative and, using standard principles of biblical interpretation, they cannot be proved either true or false. The applications of all the various positions are generally the same and often are very useful however. But "if the prophecies' meaning cannot be identified with certainty, *even after their fulfillments*, the value of the prophecies to the readers of any period, whether before or following the fulfillments, is in serious question."²²

Moreover, since historicism holds to a flux of different meanings, it seems rather irrational and unfair to criticize those who do not accept the flux. In my study of the two witnesses of Revelation, I encountered several different interpretations before I decided a study of the historicist position was too complex and fragmented to be of much use (once again, the application regarding the need to be faithful witnesses and suffer persecution for Christ and endure to the end is useful and is taught by expositors of every school). Regarding historicism, Moses Stuart writes, "Hitherto, scarcely any two original and independent [historicist] expositors have been agreed, in respect to some points very important to their bearing upon the interpretation of the book."²³ One scholar has noted that "at least fifty different systems of interpretation have arisen from the historical view alone."²⁴ Historicism, as a system of interpretation, is a hydra with hundreds of heads. There are some differences among partial preterists as well as amillennial interpretations of the book; but, we understand that the book is difficult and do not accuse our historicist brethren of being heretics or being unworthy of the holy supper.

²¹ The Westminster Confession of Faith says, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them [2 Peter 3:16]."

²² Steve Gregg ed., *Revelation: Four Views*, 37 (emphasis added).

²³ Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Andover, MA: Allen 1845), I:V; in *Ibid*, 36.

²⁴ John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 19; in *Ibid*, 37.

People who are in a school of thought that is very fragmented and contradictory should learn some humility.

I would ask my historicist brothers if it makes sense from a biblical and logical perspective to regard a partial preterist postmillennialist as a heretic worthy of church discipline when historicist commentators and scholars from the beginning up to the present have had a complete inability to agree upon specific fulfillments of the vast majority of prophecies in the book? *A* cannot be *non-A* at the same time. *B* cannot be *non-B*. Obviously, since most historicists disagree over a number of important prophecies, simple logic tells us that most historicist interpretations *cannot be true*. They, in fact, are false. Dogmatic historicists who want to treat partial preterist interpreters of the book of Revelation as heretics have not carefully thought through their intolerant, arrogant, and often irrational assumptions.

The Historicist Understanding of the Thousand Years

According to historicism (or classical Puritan postmillennialism), the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 follow the overthrow of the papacy and refers to a literal 1,000 year period. Having noted that their chronology is all wrong because they misidentify when the binding of Satan occurred (a serious error in exegesis caused by ignoring the analogy of Scripture and imposing an eschatological paradigm on the text), we turn our attention to the 1,000 years in Revelation 20. If we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, the meaning of the 1,000 years is rather obvious. In the Bible, the number 1,000 (a large, rounded off number) is used to indicate a fullness of quantity. The number 10, which often indicates a full quantity, is multiplied (10x10x10) to indicate a great, vast period.

Thus, God claims to own “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). This of course does not mean that the cattle on the 1,001st hill belongs to someone else. God owns all the cattle on all the hills. But He says “a thousand” to indicate that there are many hills, and much cattle (cf. Deut. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 68:17; 84:10; 90:4). Similarly, the thousand years of Revelation 20 represent a vast, undefined period of time.²⁵

Hughes writes,

The thousand years may be defined as the period between the two comings of Christ, or, more strictly, between the return of the ascended Son to glory, his mission to earth completed, and the loosing of Satan “for a little while” (verse 3 above). The latter, however, is the final event of this period and it ends, as we have seen, in the conclusive defeat of Satan and his hosts at Christ’s second coming. This is the perspective clearly delineated in the assertion of Hebrews 10:12f., that “when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down (enthroned) at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet” (cf. Ps. 110:1); and this is precisely what St. Paul affirms when he writes that “he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25).²⁶

²⁵ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 507.

²⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 212. Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.’s comments are helpful: “The proper understanding of the thousand-year time frame in Revelation 20 is that it is representative of a long and glorious era and is not limited to a literal 365,000 days. The figure represents a *perfect cube of ten*, which is the number of quantitative perfection. The thousand here is no more literal than that which affirms God’s ownership of the cattle on a thousand hills (Psa. 50:10), or promises Israel will be a thousand times more numerous (Deut. 1:11), or measures God’s love to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9), or expresses the desire for a thousand years in God’s courts (Psa. 84:10), or compares a thousand years of our time to one of God’s days (Psa. 90:4).

The millennial designation, then, is John’s visionary portrayal of the kingdom of Christ, which was established at

For the historicist to interpret a number used symbolically in Scripture (and now used in a highly symbolic book) literally does not make any sense; especially in light of the fact that it will lead to date setting. The date setting of the 1260 days has been a failure and attempts to set a date for the second coming will be a failure as well. The millennial era has already lasted almost 2,000 years and it may continue for a few thousand more. We simply do not know. It is a period where Jesus is subduing the nations by the gospel, attended by His Spirit. Although Old Testament prophecies indicate a period of gospel success when biblical Christianity will be the predominate worldview and will be the covenanted religion of many nations, there is not any solid or sound exegetical reasons for teaching that the golden age will last 1,000 years, it may be far less or even much more. We do not know.

Other Problems with Historicist Timing

The historicist view which essentially makes the papacy and Roman Catholic Church the central enemy of the true church that must be destroyed before the millennium can begin has other serious problems. First, there is the issue of audience relevance. It seems rather odd that the audience which was being persecuted by Jews and Romans would take a lot of comfort from help over 1,500 years in their future. Why pass over the persecution of the apostolic church and first generations, as well as the Jewish apostasy which resulted in Christ's death and the first persecutions in order to focus on the papacy of the Middle Ages and Reformation period. It seems that those who came up with the Protestant historicist view of Revelation were guilty of reading their own experiences into the prophecy. Given the great corruption and power of the papacy at that time, this view is understandable.

Second, historicists ignore the fact that the more recent events of world history do not fit their paradigm at all. If we take into account the history of the past few centuries, the historicist view is totally untenable. The Roman Catholic Church does not have political, persecuting power. It is not torturing or cutting the heads off of Christians. It is a danger theologically, but is impotent and seriously compromised with modernism and secular humanism. The papal church cannot control her own members, let alone Protestants. In the two most Roman Catholic nations (Ireland and Spain), abortion is legal and sodomites can openly "get married." The Roman Catholic Church rarely even disciplines or excommunicates its own errant members. The great Romanist persecuting beast of the late Middle Ages and Reformation period that led to the historicist position is now toothless, ecumenical, antinomian, and exceptionally weak.

If the historicist position were true or accurate, the great enemy preceding the millennium would not be Romanism, but secular humanistic statism in all its forms. Communist states during the twentieth century tortured and murdered more Christians than the Roman Empire and papal church combined. The current president of the United States (Barrack Hussein Obama) and the democratic party are a far greater threat to Christians than the Roman Catholic Church. If the book of Revelation is a chronological history of the Christian church to the second coming, why does it focus on the papacy right before the millennium when it is almost irrelevant and ignore the *millions* of Christians murdered

Christ's first coming. Revelation 20:1 clearly establishes the passage as a *vision*; John opens with: "and I saw" (Rev. 20:1a). This is strongly suggestive of its symbolic import and is evidence against a strictly literal interpretation of the one thousand years. In addition, the first event seen in the vision is the binding of the angel Satan with a chain, which surely is not literal (especially since His binding is shown to be spiritual elsewhere: Matt. 12:29). Revelation 20:4-6 speaks of the saints living and reigning with Christ, which is elsewhere presented as *a spiritual reality in the present experience of God's people* (1 Cor. 13:21-22; Eph. 1:3; 2:6; Col. 3:1-2). This reigning of the saints with Christ on thrones pictures the kingdom of Christ, which is already established (cf. Chapter 11). His kingdom, then, is defined chronologically as *a complete and perfect time*" (*He Shall Have Dominion*, 335-336).

by Communists and fascist dictators? Must we cling to a human tradition even though it has been disproved by history? Are we heretics for pointing out obvious errors in the historicist system that cannot be explained? Must we stop using our brains and simple logic to satisfy ignorant traditionalists? Would God focus our attention on those who killed many thousands, yet ignore those who killed many millions? It is noteworthy that in the areas where Protestant interpreters could not simply attach sections of the book to past events in history (i.e. events in their future), they have all been wrong. If the millennium was in our future (we have demonstrated above that it is not) and Revelation described the events immediately preceding it, the papal church would play, at most, a minor role.

Third, another great problem with historicism that reveals that it is a product of Europeans who are thinking Eurocentrically is its silence on churches outside of Europe and the West. Remember, the book of Revelation is supposed to be a panorama of church history till the second coming. Why then does it focus on the papacy and the destruction of the papacy and ignore the Eastern Orthodox communions that hold sway in Greece, Ukraine, Russia, and most Eastern European countries? This territory is far larger than Western Europe and contains over 200 million people. The overthrow of the papacy would do nothing for the eastern churches that also deny justification by faith alone and worship idols (*icons*). The Russian Orthodox Church is in league with Vladimir Putin, who is a gangster and mass murderer. These apostate wicked churches do not look to Rome or bow before the pope.

In addition, what about places like Africa, China, and South Korea? If current trends continue, there will be more Christians in Asia than in Europe. Why is the book of Revelation silent regarding this worldview shift? Is God only concerned with churches in Europe? Historicism, like modern dispensational futurist interpretations, is biased and clearly reflects the time in which it was developed. As the decades move on and things radically change in Europe, America, and the rest of the world, historicism will be more and more irrelevant because it will be more and more obvious that it is erroneous. To demand that we cling to a teaching as if it was a clear doctrine—easily probable from Scripture—when as a matter of fact, historicists cannot even agree among themselves on most things and their view has such serious problems, is not exegetical, rational, or charitable. It is a stubborn, ignorant, and foolish position rooted in a faith in human traditions. Until these exegetical and historical objections are answered, we are justified in questioning the holy fathers on this matter. Scripture always trumps human opinions.

This refusal of modern historicists to face reality has serious consequences for real life applications. While I recognize the wickedness of the papal church and have written and preached often against it, one must not inordinately rail against the papal church to the neglect of our most dangerous and current threat which is secular humanistic statism. The persecution in the United States is coming from Christian liberals and atheists, not bishops or cardinals.

Are Non-Historicist Views of Revelation Unconfessional?

One of the interesting things about this discussion of the serious insurmountable problems associated with historicism is the response of historicists. Instead of interacting with my arguments and attempting to refute them exegetically or logically, the response has been: “That’s unconfessional.” Regarding this response, we need to make some important observations. First, it is at best only an appeal to a non-inspired human authority (a subordinate standard of the church) and is at worst simply an *ad hominem* attack. If the Westminster Standards demand that Christians adhere to a particular theory regarding the book of Revelation (which everyone acknowledges is a difficult, apocalyptic book full of symbolism and metaphors), this would be out of character with the rest of the Standards which

are very careful to focus on clear, easily provable doctrines.

Second, the Westminster Standards do not speak specifically on the book of Revelation. It is assumed on the basis of the teaching found in 25:6: “There is no other head of the Church, but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof; but is that Anti-christ, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God. [Col 1:18; Eph. 1:22; Matt. 23:8-10; 2 Thess. 2:3-4, 8-9; Rev. 13:6].”

The focus of 25:6 is on three things: (1) Jesus Christ is the *only* head of the church. (2) The pope of Rome *is not in any sense* the head of the church. (3) He is rather a wicked counterfeit, “that Antichrist,” an apostate who exalts himself above everyone and is really against God and Jesus Christ. A partial preterist can honestly believe and swear allegiance to all three of these statements. Note that the authors of the Confession were careful not to say “the antichrist” but “that antichrist.” If they had said “*the* antichrist” they would have placed themselves in conflict with the apostle John who tells us not to think in terms of only one antichrist but many. Therefore, if we change “that” which indicates one particular antichrist *among many* to “the,” we distort the Confession and deny Scripture. It is important to keep in mind that there are only four passages of Scripture which expressly mention “antichrist” all in the epistles of John (1 Jn. 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7). John corrects the false notion of antichrist that had arisen among Christians in his own day; he declares that antichrist is not something far off in the future but a *present reality*. Second, he says that antichrist is not a single individual but a large group of people. Third, he defines antichrist not as a person (a coming world leader) but as a current movement: “Little children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, *even now* many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour” (1 Jn. 2:18). Many Christians in John’s day had heard that antichrist (singular) was coming. John responded by saying that *even now* many antichrists (plural) had arisen. The verb “have arisen” or “have come” (*gegonasin*) indicates that these antichrists arose in the past and were still present. The presence of these antichrists proved that “it *is* (present tense) the last hour” (2:18). Thus it is evident that John (who wrote the book of Revelation) rejected the idea of a future, singular antichrist; instead, he warned Christians of a heretical movement (or movements). There are *many* antichrists. “For *many* deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 Jn. 7). “Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son” (1 Jn. 2:22). ““These antichrists who have arisen’ says John, ‘belonged to us, but they were not of us.’ In other words, they took up the Christian position, claimed they were Christian, they professed to be teachers of the Christian Church, and yet they have been separated from the Christians in order that it would be clear to all that they were not of them. In other words, they claimed to delight in the true religion and yet they destroyed it.”²⁷ John focused the attention of his readers upon one, or perhaps two, heretical movements. The first, probably Gnostic in origin, denied the real humanity of Jesus Christ (2 Jn. 7). The second, probably Jewish in origin, denied that Jesus was the Messiah (1 Jn. 2:22). “John clearly applies the conception of the one antichrist (*ho antichristos*) to the generic tendency to promote lies about the identity of Christ.”²⁸ “Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is *now already* in the world” (1 Jn. 4:3). “Antichrist is not an individual, malevolent ruler looming in our future. Rather, *Antichrist was a contemporary heretical tendency* regarding the person of Christ that was current among many in John’s day.”²⁹

Many historicists are not satisfied with the fact that partial preterists can believe and swear to

²⁷ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Walking with God: Studies in I John* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 100.

²⁸ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 373.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 374.

the three points of the Confession of Faith 25:6. They argue that one must accept historicism to be confessional for two reasons. (1) They assert that the Westminster divines were all historicists and therefore one must accept historicism to be confession. Regarding this argument, we respond with the following observations: (1) The authors of the Westminster Standards believed in many things, but we are only required to affirm what the Standards *actually teach*. The authors of the Confession probably believed that the sun, planets, and stars all rotated around the earth. But we are not required to believe this to be confessional. There were supralapsarians as well as sublapsarians. There were minor differences respecting reprobation. There were even a few differences regarding the place in which the active and passive obedience holds in the gospel system. But they agreed as to what was written in the Standards and did not expect us to read their minds or go beyond the Standards in order to adopt the Standards. In other words, one does not need a Ph.D. in church history or historical theology to be faithful to the Standards. (b) If we are required to affirm *everything* the authors of the Standards believed, whether explicitly taught in the Standards or not, then the Westminster Standards are really not our subordinate standard. Instead, one has adopted a system of which the Standards are only a small part. One is actually following a Romanist kind of exaltation of tradition where the standard is really something akin to Rome's unanimous consent of the fathers. The great danger here is that instead of tradition serving as a help or guide in matters of doctrine *under sola Scriptura*, tradition becomes a co-authority alongside of Scripture. (This is the great error of the Steelites.) This does not mean that I am opposed to a diligent search and careful study of the history and theology of the church as a help in discerning the truth. But, as Protestants, we must be willing and able to defend everything we believe, confess, and teach by appealing to Scripture using standard Protestant rules of interpretation (historical, grammatical, theological). If we cannot do this, then we are placing our faith in non-inspired sinful men and not the Word of God. Presbyterian historicists who simply appeal to the fathers without being able to prove their position from Scripture or answer the serious objections to their position using the Bible are no different than Romanist theologians who ask their ignorant followers to have an *implicit* faith in church authorities. I am simply unwilling to place my faith in obvious errors of interpretation due to bias (e.g., Jerusalem equals Rome) or positions that obviously contradict history (e.g., the papacy will be overthrown after 1,260 years, etc.)

(2) The best argument for the Confession advocating historicism is the fact that the third teaching of 25:6 regarding the character of the "Pope of Rome" or papacy is based on an allusion or free paraphrase of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4: "Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." The confession substitutes "that exalteth himself in the Church" for "he sits as God in the temple of God." There is no question that these verses are crucial for the historicist understanding of Scripture. But among historicists, there are some who say such statements can be applied to the Roman Emperors first, for verse 7 says that the evil "mystery of lawlessness" was "already working." If the partial preterist agrees with the Confession's description of the pope and teaches that it is a legitimate *application* of the text, how can they be accused of being unconfessional? Lightfoot, a member of the Westminster Assembly, was a partial preterist and was not treated as a heretic or disciplined.

Historicism is an old and respectable system of eschatology that was accepted by most Protestants for over a century and a half. But a number of its teachings are based on difficult passages and some of its predictions have not come to pass. Given the many serious, exegetical, and historical problems associated with it, those who want to make its acceptance a term of communion are going beyond the teaching of Scripture and are not acting with common sense or Christian charity. The argument that one must accept it hook, line, and sinker to be confessional is dubious and

unsupportable. If the Confession demands the acceptance of a certain interpretation that can be *disproved* then it should be amended to reflect reality.³⁰

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³⁰ The association of the papacy with anti-Christ is a late development that began with John Wycliffe (ca. 1330-84, English Reformer) and his followers called Lollards, John Huss (ca. 1369-1415, Bohemian Reformer), Savonarola (1452-98, Italian reformer), and Gailer of Kaisenberg. Most of the fathers of the ancient church saw 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 as fulfilled in the Roman Emperor. Chrysostom and many after him see a fulfillment in Nero (this is the view of the partial preterist Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.). Irenaeus (*Adv. Hoer.* v.25) and Cyril of Jerusalem believed that sitting in the temple of Jerusalem should be taken literally but it refers to a rebuilt temple. Theodoret saw a fulfillment in the rise of Gnostic heresies. Augustine (*de Civ. Dei*, 19, 20) views the man of sin collectively as referring to a prince and his followers. “On the whole, the interpretation of the Fathers is simply textual. Only as to how the prophecy adjusts itself to the temporary horizon of the Apostle, on that point they have little to say. It is not until the third century that some (and first Commodian) adopt the idea, that Nero will come again as Antichrist. Then in the middle ages fantastic notions were propagated about Antichrist as an ungodly tyrant” (C.A. Auberlen and C.J. Riggerback, “The Two Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians,” in John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960], 134.). The fact that the church fathers who could read, think, and write in Greek did not see the historicist view proves the passage is difficult and that it could be applied to political leaders.