



A Response to Steve Gregg's Defense of Hank Hanegraaff's Partial Preterism

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My comments will be divided into two basic categories. First of all, several areas in which we are in agreement will be mentioned. Second, comments on numerous points of disagreement with his defense of partial preterism, a view he shares with Hank Hanegraaff, will be discussed.

Points of Agreement with Steve Gregg

First, Steve Gregg is correct in acknowledging that Hank Hanegraaff's view is a form of "partial preterism." He chides Hank on his unwillingness to admit he is a partial preterist "for fear of alienating listeners." He also observes that Hank's phrase "exegetical eschatology" does not "reveal anything about the specific content of his eschatological ideas." We agree that is not a descriptive phrase. Indeed, it appears to be a misnomer.

Second, Gregg rightly points to an inconsistency in Hanks view when he claims that he is using a "literal" method of interpretation when in fact he takes much of prophetic revelation in a non-literal way. Indeed, it would be more forthright to admit that it is not really a literal method of interpreting these prophetic texts at all.

Third, we also agree with Gregg's criticism of Hank's identification of the Neronian persecutions with "the Great Tribulation." Of course, Gregg has his own problem of identifying it with only Judean believers. This does not solve the problem for preterists, for the many things predicted to happen to them simply never happened before A.D. 70—unless, of course, one completely allegorizes away the literal meaning of the text of Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6-18. For these texts speak of one third of the stars falling from the sky, one third of human beings destroyed, and all the life in the sea dying! Surely, virtually everyone would agree that these events did not literally occur in A.D. 66-70. Hence, the only way to maintain their preterist view is to allegorize these scriptures.

Fourth, Gregg agrees with my criticism that Hank makes a false either/or dichotomy between the resurrection and the rapture, insisting that the former, not the latter, is the suffering believer's real hope. But if this is so, then why do preterist like Gregg insist that terms like "soon" and "in a little while" have to refer to a first century event in order to be relevant to the believers to whom they were written? After all, they claim the resurrection is still future after 1900 years.

Fifth, Gregg agrees with me against Hanegraaff that it is an illegitimate argument to say that we should not believe something if "there is not a single passage in Scripture that teaches" it. If so, then we could not believe in the Trinity or inerrancy. However, Gregg then goes on to argue fallaciously that the pretribulational rapture should be rejected. We have shown elsewhere that there is good biblical grounds for accepting a pretribulational rapture (see Systematic Theology, vol. 4, chap. 17). In spite of all these arguments, Gregg confidently supposes that his one "four term fallacy" argument confuses different aspects of the "last day" and leaves no room for a pretrib rapture. By the same logic one could prove that there is no room for a Second Comings of Christ because His First and Second Coming are sometimes placed together in one Old Testament text (e.g., Isa. 61:1-2 cf. Lk. 4:19; Acts 2:17, 20) or are both viewed as part of the "last days" (Heb.1:2 cf. 2 Pet. 3:3-4). Likewise, there is no reason why the resurrection of the righteous cannot encompass both those who are resurrected before the tribulation and those who die after that and are resurrected at the end of the tribulation.

Points of Disagreement with Steve Gregg

Of course, there were many things on which Gregg agrees with Hank Hanegraaff in defense of their common view of partial preterism. A number of them will be noted here.

First, Gregg wrongly assumes there is a difference between the "historical-grammatical" and "literal" method of interpretation. In fact, the Latin title for the view is *sensus literalis* (the literal sense). Preterists and amills often mis-characterize the literal method as leaving no room for symbols and figures of speech. This is simply false (see *ibid.*,

vol. 4, chap. 13).

Second, Gregg unsuccessfully attempts to avoid the heresy of full preterism by claiming that the whole book of Revelation could have been fulfilled in A.D. 70 and the Second Coming and resurrection could be mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. This fails to note that the word “resurrection” always means physical resurrection in Scripture and that Revelation 20:6 speaks of the “first resurrection.” Further, to deny Revelation 19 is about the Second Coming is to miss the very climax of the Book of Revelation itself. The same is true of Revelation 22:12 which speaks of Christ’s Second Coming and his rewards. This is to say nothing of the final judgment scene of the “great white throne” in chapter 20 which did not occur in A.D. 70. This being the case, partial preterist are inconsistent in using the references to “soon,” “shortly,” and “near” to refer to A.D. 70, for then they must admit that there is no future resurrection and Second Coming—which is the heretical view of full preterism. As demonstrated from the Greek, “shortly” (*tachu*) means “quickly” or at a rapid rate. And “at hand” (Phil. 4:5; Jas. 5:8) means imminent, not necessarily what will happen in a short time. Likewise, even Gregg admits that terms like “a little while” (Haggai 2:6-7) can mean hundreds of years. Time is relative to God (2 Peter 3:9). If so, then their argument for preterism fails at this point. As for Hebrews 10:37, Gregg offers only his “opinion” without reasons that it is about A. D. 70, when it is clearly about Christ’s Second Coming as both the language and context indicate. For it speaks about our “reward” and “heaven” (vv. 34-35).

Third, if a prediction about an event hundreds of years yet in the future can be relevant to the readers (as Gregg admits about the resurrection/rapture), then there is no reason why distant predictions of how God will defeat evil and bring in everlasting righteousness cannot be relevant to the immediate generation to whom the prophecy was first given. No matter how distant Christ Second Coming is, it is relevant to our lives today, just as the predictions about His First Coming were relevant to Old Testament saints, even though they were made hundreds of years in advance. Paul comforts the Thessalonians with the prediction of the resurrection of loved ones which is already nearly 2000 years later and still not fulfilled (1 Thes. 4:13-18). So, contrary to Gregg, this does not make God a “tease.” For God is offering now the greatest comfort possible, namely, that eventually all suffering, pain, and death will be over (Rev. 21:1-4). We can take a lot now, if we know it will all be over later (cf. 2 Cor. 4:17).

Fourth, as for Rev. 22:10, Gregg totally overlooks our point that Daniel’s prediction was not fulfilled in John’s day because John was not told it was fulfilled in his day but only that it could now be understood by those who read it. But even Gregg has to admit this interpretation is “possible,” and his rejection of it is on the subjective grounds that he finds it “unconvincing” and “awkward.”

Fifth, Gregg reveals his hermeneutical colors when he rejects the literal nature of the plagues in Revelation claiming they are “apocalyptic” in contrast to the other similar biblical plagues like those on Pharaoh that were admittedly “historical.” The root problem with preterism, of both kinds, is the rejection of a consistent application of the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. Amazingly, Gregg believes that in the same “Olivet Discourse” there are many “genres [which] call for a different hermeneutic.” Indeed, he suggests there are three different hermeneutics in this one passage—part is “literal language, part is apocalyptic language, and part is parabolic”! No wonder preterism engenders such confusion.

Sixth, like other preterist Gregg has difficulty with the fact that many of the earliest Fathers rejected this view. Indeed, Ireaneus who knew the apostle John’s disciple Polycarp rejected preterism, as did Victorinus and Eusebius after him. Gregg’s comments about them not accepting the canonicity of Revelation are both unsupported and irrelevant. The point is that they rejected the preterist position. Likewise, for his own private anti-patristic and allegoristic interpretation of these events, he dismissed a continuous strain of Fathers from just after the apostles through the fourth century who were opposed to preterism (see our Systematic Theology vol. 4, 665-668).

Seventh, Gregg points to early signs of apostasy in the NT as evidence against the argument that John wrote Revelation late. But this overlooks several import facts. There was nearly a generation between the time of Christ and the apostasy that characterized the church of Paul’s, Peter’s, and Jude’s epistles. Likewise, there is nearly another generation between the 60s and Domitian’s reign under which John wrote. Despite local problems earlier, the general character of the churches in Revelation differs significantly from those before A.D. 70.

Eighth, Gregg speaks against the literal interpretation as “a low view of prophesy” that claims a “prophet cannot discuss future developments before they arise.” Yet he seems blissfully unaware that this is precisely what the preterist do with Matthew 24-25 and the bulk of the Book of Revelation.

Ninth, Gregg dismisses the cumulative weight of ten arguments for the late date of Revelation (which strongly opposes

preterism), using statements like “How do we know?” “This is not self-evident” and “This is as subjective as the previous point.” But he provides no definitive response to any objection or to the overall weight of all the objections to an early date for Revelation. And, unlike the futurists view, preterism is completely dependent on an early date for the Book of Revelation. Hence, the strong evidence for a late date for Revelation (after A.D. 70) is a strong argument against preterism.

Tenth, he wrongly argues that several possible literal interpretations of a passages, as futurists have of some texts, is justification for preterists taking different allegorical interpretations of these literal events. This is an insightful example of a false analogy.

Eleventh, it is amusing that Gregg uses a third century heretical teacher, Origen, as a basis for his amillennial view and dismisses earlier second century orthodox Fathers as a basis for futurism. Further, contrary to Gregg, Renald Showers (in *Maranatha, Our Lord, Come!*) has demonstrated that the very earliest Fathers believed in an imminent coming of Christ, not just the fourth century Ephraem. This is to say nothing of the inspired writings of the NT which proclaim Christ’s imminent return repeatedly (Jn. 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 1:7-8; 15:51-53; 16:22; Phil. 3:20-21; 4:5; Col. 3:4; 1 Thes. 1:10; 2:19; 4:13-18; 5:9, 23; 2 Thes. 2:1; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:28; Jas. 5:7-9; 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 1 Jn. 2:28-3:2; Jude 21; Rev. 2:25; 3:10; 22:7, 12, 20). Passages like “The Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:5) and “the coming of the Lord is at hand” (Jas.5:8) can hardly mean anything other than imminent, unless one is a full preterist and denies a literal future Second Coming, claiming Christ returned in the first century. He summarily dismisses all this with a vague “for all anyone can say” and a guilt-by-association with the Word of Faith movement!

Twelfth, after rejecting the early Fathers who were opposed to preterism, Gregg inconsistently appeals to the early Fathers to justify his amillennial views. He speaks of the pretrib beliefs before Ephraem in the fourth century as unsupported by earlier Fathers. Yet, he criticizes futurist who use the early Fathers to support their view (see “Sixth” above).

Thirteenth, he rejects the dispensational belief in a literal restoration of Israel which is firmly based in the historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture (see Geisler, *ibid.*, chap. 15). Yet he claims to hold the historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

Fourteenth, Gregg makes the shocking statement that “to spiritualize the first resurrection may indeed be a violation of some arbitrary, humanly devised ‘literal...method of interpretation,’ but what of it?” First of all, the literal method is not humanly devised nor arbitrary. It is an undeniable method of interpretation since one cannot deny it without using it. So, the literal method of interpretation is literally undeniable. Here again, the root problem of preterism is laid bare. To use its own word, their interpretations of prophesy “spiritualize” a lot of prophecy. Incredibly, Gregg brushes off the inconsistency of taking one resurrection literally in the same passage which uses the same words to describe both resurrections by appealing to another passage in a different context that is talking about regeneration (Eph. 2:1), not resurrection. Even more strangely, he uses another text which is speaking about two literal resurrections (Jn. 5:28f) of the “dead” bodies “in the graves” which will “come forth” at the command of Christ to justify that there is only one physical resurrection. He ignores the sound exegesis of George Ladd (in *The Blessed Hope*), who is not a dispensationalist, but who demonstrates that Revelation 20 is speaking about two literal resurrections. Indeed, the very historical-grammatical hermeneutic which Gregg claims to embrace demands such an interpretation.

Fifteenth, Gregg incorrectly separates the “literal method of interpretation” from a “proper reading of the text.” But he surely would object if one considered it proper not to take these words of his literally. To show how blinded one can be by his own hermeneutical presuppositions, Gregg claims “there is no meaning of Revelation 20 plainer than the amillennial one.” Nothing could be further from the fact, since the same phrase “lived again” is used by the same author in the same text, one before and one after the “thousand years.” And Gregg admits it is a literal resurrection. Further, the two resurrections are said to be separated by “a thousand years,” a term used six times in five verses. Finally, the “thousand years” has a beginning and an end that is “finished.” The bookends of this literal time period are said to be two different literal events, one of which is called “the first resurrection.” Oddly enough, the amills take this to be the spiritual one (when the term “resurrection” is never used spiritually in the NT), and the other resurrection (which is not even called that as such) they believe is the literal resurrection. If one can use such a twisted contorted logic on this text, there is no surprise what a preterist can do with the same hermeneutical gyrations on other texts like those of Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6-18. And perish the thought of what the preterist could do with the historicity of early Genesis or of the Gospels if they would ever become consistent with their allegorical interpretation!

Sixteenth, to borrow his own term, Gregg becomes “dislodged from reality” by denying that “orthodoxy is dependant on a proper literal...interpretation of the Bible.” How one can consistently hold orthodox theology on any other basis. Take for example the unquestioned orthodox belief in the literal death and literal resurrection of Christ. How can one derive this from Scripture with anything but a proper literal interpretation of Scripture? And yet by the same non-literal method of interpreting prophecy used by preterist, one would have to deny the orthodox teaching of the literal death and resurrection of Christ. In point of fact, full preterism is doctrinally unorthodox and partial preterism is methodologically unorthodox.

Seventeenth, one cannot help but be amazed at the audacity of some preterists. Gregg actually charges that I have not read the “majority of writers in the earliest centuries of Christianity.” How does he know this? In fact, I have read all of them and virtually all of their published writings. Further, I never asserted that they all employed a consistent “literalistic method” of interpretation, as Gregg alleges. I only contented that many of them, some of whom were close to the apostles, rejected the inconsistent partial preterist methodology.

Eighteenth, Gregg dismisses a massive array of unconditional promises that are based on the historical-grammatical interpretation which says that there will be a literal restoration of ethnic Israel to their land (see our Systematic Theology, vol. 4, chaps.14-16). None of the passages he cites deny this future for Israel, and numerous passages he does not cite affirm that there will be one (Gen. 12-17; 2 Sam. 7; Psa. 89; Mt. 19:28; Acts 1:6-8; Acts 3:19; Rom. 11, and many more). So strongly are these texts in favor of a literal restoration of the land and throne promises to ethnic Israel that even some non-premills like Vern Poythress and Anthony Hoekema have been forced to acknowledge such a future for Israel. And not to see that Paul is speaking of ethnic Israel in Romans 9-11 (which he calls Israel “my kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:2) to whom God gave “the covenants” and “Promises” (9:4) is a bold act of exegetical blindness. And it is this same “Israel” in this same passage of which Paul says they will be “grafted into their own olive tree” (11:24) because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29). Ironic as it may seem, a fundamental problem with reformed amillennialism is that it does not believe in unconditional election—at least not for Israel! As for the clear literal truth that Jesus will literally come again with his literal twelve disciples who sit on twelve literal thrones and reign over the literal “twelve tribes of Israel” (Mt. 19:28), the best Gregg can offer is “the suggestions” that “this is not the only way in which Matt. 19:28 can be interpreted.” Of course, it isn’t; there is the spiritualistic way Gregg interprets it as “a present reality.” But this is certainly not the result of the historical grammatical hermeneutic preterists profess to accept. Nor is his contention that Jesus “unambiguously” established His kingdom at His first coming, as any literal understanding of numerous passages reveals (see Matt. 19:28; Acts 1:6-8; 3:19-21; Rom. 11:11-36). For an example of straining out a hermeneutical gnat and swallowing a doctrinal camel, Gregg declares of Revelation 20 that “the passage says ‘a thousand years.’ It does not say, ‘a literal thousand years.’” The passage also says “the Devil” (v. 2) and not “a literal Devil,” but does this give us warrant for denying a literal Devil. It also speaks of “nations” (v. 3), martyrs (v. 4), “heaven” (v. 1), and even “Jesus” (v. 4). But surely all these are literal. Sure, there are figures of speech used in the text like “key” (v. 1), but the literal method of interpretation has always allowed for figures of speech about literal realities (see *ibid.*, chap. 13). It simply insists that the figures of speech and symbols are about literal realities (cf. Rev. 1:20).

Nineteenth, when confronted with the obviously literal land promises to Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 13-15), Gregg replies, “I don’t find the word ‘literal’ in any of the passages cited.” Yet, he later says these literal promises were literally fulfilled in the days of Joshua—something that could not be true since they are repeated after Joshua’s time (Jer. 11:5; Amos 9:14-15; Acts 1:6-8; Acts 3:19-21; Rom. 11). As for insisting on the use of the word “literal” to determine whether a passage is literal, I would suggest that he look at the death and resurrection of Jesus passages again. The last time I looked the word “literal” was not in the resurrection accounts. Nor do I find it in Genesis 1-3. But there again, consistency of hermeneutic is not a primary characteristic of the preterist position. Further, it is far from “clear” that Heb. 4 or Gal. 4 teaches there is no ethnic fulfillment of the ethnic promises to Israel. On the contrary, it is a denial of both God’s unconditional grace and of the historical-grammatical interpretation of numerous passages already mentioned. Just because Abraham has a spiritual seed does not mean there are no promises for his ethnic offspring.

Twentieth, as to the promise that the land promises to Israel would be “forever,” Gregg says two things: 1) The Hebrew word for “forever” (*olam*) does not always mean eternal. While this is true, it is also true that it can. And when it does not, it certainly means a long period of time. But Israel has never occupied all the land designated in these promises for a long period of time. As all good interpreters know, the meaning of a word is discovered by its context. And the context of Psalm 89:37 declares that the Davidic covenant will be “established forever like the moon.” And the last time I looked the moon was still in the sky! 2) Greggs wrongly assumes God’s promises to Abraham and David were conditional, but they clearly were not. Abraham was not even conscious when God made a unilateral unconditional promise to him (in Gen. 15:12), and Psalm 89:31-36 declares that even “if they break my statutes,” God promised “Nevertheless My loving

kindness I will not utterly take from him, nor allow My faithfulness to fail. My covenant I will not break, Nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed will endure forever, and his throne as the sun before me.” As Paul said of this same God, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). God has not given them back the land yet, but will in the future when the remnant returns to Him (e.g., see Gen. 13:17 and Deut. 30:16-20).

Twenty-first, to illustrate how wrong the allegorical method can be, Gregg boldly proclaims against the literal historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture, calling it “flawed,” saying that “the apostles believed that God had fulfilled the promise that David’s seed would sit upon a throne when Jesus arose and ascended to the right hand of God.” This flatly contradicts a literal interpretation of Scripture for several reasons. First, the Old Testament predictions about a descendant of David were about a Messiah who would sit on a literal throne of David and reign from Jerusalem and have literal descendants (2 Sam. 7; Isa. 11; 24; 32; 55; Psa. 89). Second, Jesus affirmed that he and his disciples would reign on literal thrones when he returned (Mt. 19:28). Third, the last thing Jesus said before he left earth in response to when he would “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6-8) was it was not for them to know when he would do it but that in the interim they should preach the Gospel to all the world. Only two chapters later Peter preached that if Israel would repent God would restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 3:19-21). Finally, later the apostle Paul speaks of the literal restoration of ethnic Israel as an event yet to come after the fullness of the Gentiles has come (Rom. 11:24-26). A reasonable historical grammatical interpretation of these texts will inform a seeking reader that the Davidic covenant was not fulfilled by an invisible, spiritual reign from heaven where Christ is at God’s right hand. Rather, it awaits a literal fulfillment when Christ will reign from a throne on earth (in Jerusalem) of all Israel who inherited the land promised unconditionally to Abraham (Gen. 13-17) from Egypt to Iraq.

Finally, Gregg offers no arguments against the clear biblical promises that God has made these Abrahamic and Davidic promises with an immutable oath (as Heb. 6:17 and Psa. 89:20-37). These powerful arguments are simply dismissed by Gregg with the curt comment: “Sorry, but the New Testament writers simply disagree with Geisler’s claim that these promises ‘have never been fulfilled.’ See Luke 1:70-75 and 2 Corinthians 1:20.” We have already shown above that this is not the case. And there is nothing in Luke 1 nor 2 Cor. 1 to the contrary. Check them out. The first one is simply a prediction that the Messiah, son of David, would come and fulfill this covenant. It says nothing about whether it was completely fulfilled in Christ’s first coming and present session at the right hand of God. The second text (2 Cor. 1:20) is misapplied for several reasons: 1) That Christ fulfilled salvation promises does not mean he fulfilled the land and throne promises to Israel. 2) Even some reformed theologians (like Poythress and Hoekema) admit that there is still to come a literal fulfillment of these promises made to Israel. 3) Historical-grammatical interpretation of Old Testament land and throne promises cannot be allegorized away by amills and preterist misapplication of New Testament texts. As we have demonstrated elsewhere, this kind of twisted interpretation of Old Testament text is not exegesis but eisegesis. Indeed, it is a retroactive eisegesis that reads back into the Old Testament texts a meaning that was never there either in the expressed intention of the author or as understood by the people to whom he wrote (see *ibid.*, chap. 13).

In brief, Gregg’s attempt to rescue the partial preterist position he shares with Hank Hanegraaff is a failure. It rests upon a methodologically unorthodox way of interpreting Scripture. If this same method were used on the Gospel narratives of the resurrection of Christ, the preterist would also be theologically unorthodox. Thus, while partial preterism itself is not heretical, its hermeneutic is unorthodox, and if applied consistently, would lead to heresy, as indeed it does in full preterism.

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