

First Generation AFTER the End – Series Introduction

by Edward E. Stevens

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MY PODCAST LISTENERS HAVE repeatedly urged me to explain the historical situation of Christianity immediately after AD 70, so this article will begin a new series focused on that *first generation after the End*.

The most remarkable feature of this period is the *silence* and *absence* of all true Christians. Prior to the Neronic persecution (the great tribulation), the apostles were extremely busy in missionary journeys, edifying the saints, and writing epistles to the scattered churches throughout the Roman Empire. But all of that activity abruptly ceased when the *Neronic persecution* broke onto the scene in AD 64. No more inspired New Testament writings were produced after that, nor were there any uninspired writings from any true Christians for almost 40 years.

The majority of living saints were either killed in the Neronic persecution or fell away in the apostasy, leaving alive *only a small remnant* scattered throughout the Roman world. Those remaining saints were forced into hiding as they anxiously waited for the tribulation to be *cut short* (Matt 24:22, 29; 1 Thess 1:6-10; 2 Thess 1:6-10) and for their *rescue* before the wrath was poured out (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9, 23; 2 Thess 1:5-10).

The tribulation was *cut short* by the outbreak of the Zealot rebellion in May of AD 66. And *immediately after that*, the angelic armies were seen in the sky over Judea, signaling that the Parousia had begun. Then two weeks later, on the evening of Pentecost in AD 66, those remaining living saints were *rescued* (caught up, gathered, saved) before the wrath was poured out on their persecutors (Matt 24:29-31; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9).

There Was a Silence Afterward!

Many historical theologians and patristic scholars are baffled by this *silent* and *dormant* period. Williston Walker noted that “the forty years from 70 to 110 remain one of the *obscurest* portions of church history” (*A History of the Christian Church*, Third Edition, pp. 39ff). Wayne McCown described it as “an *obscure dark period* when [we are] not sure what was going on” (Lecture at *Northwestern Seminary*, Rochester, NY, on Sept. 16, 2004). Philip Schaff states that “there is no other transition in history so radical and sudden, and yet *so silent and secret*. The stream of [Christian history] is for a short time *lost to our view*, and seems to run underground” (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, electronic edition).

These scholars are at a loss to explain how and why “the original community . . . disappeared from history without a trace” (Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, pp. 18, 111). They call it a “gap” (John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, p. 312).

C.F.D. Moule complained that “it is hard to believe that a Judaistic type of Christianity . . . would not have . . . made capital out of this signal evidence [destruction of Jerusalem] that they, and not non-Christian Judaism, were the true Israel. But in fact our traditions are silent” (*The Birth of the New Testament*, p. 123).

Rupert Furneaux asks: “How did Christianity record this event of epoch-making consequence to itself? The answer is by silence, complete and absolute . . . the fate of the original followers of Jesus went unrecorded in Christian literature until the fourth century” (*The Roman Siege of Jerusalem*, pp. 246-248).

Thus, it is no surprise that this silence poses a HUGE historical dilemma for all full preterists because futurists use it as evidence for a non-occurrence of the end-time events.

Dilemma for All Full Preterists

Of the 100-plus persons mentioned by name in the New Testament, not a single one of them ever reappeared after AD 70 to claim that the BIG THREE eschatological events had just occurred (*Parousia*, *Resurrection*, and *Judgment*). We would have expected to hear from at least a few of those who experienced those events if they were still around afterward. They should have been claiming the fulfillments with their eyewitness testimony. Instead, as Charles Hill notes, those pre-70 saints were completely *silent* after AD 70:

Perhaps we all know how things that should be at the center can slide off to the periphery. But this is not the case here. We do not even find this [full preterist] understanding of eschatology at the periphery. An early Christian writer who is even *aware* of a [full preterist] eschatology in the church *has yet to be found* (Keith Mathison, editor, *When Shall These Things Be?* p. 107).

Max King was aware of this *silence* and admitted that “we do not know what took place in the immediate post-apostolic period” (*The Cross and the Parousia*, p. 751). And Don Preston agrees that this *silence* is *perplexing* for all full preterists, and that he has “no easy answer” for it:

Stevens is correct to say that we have no [post-70 Christian] authors who point to AD 70 as the time of Christ’s final coming, the judgment, and resurrection of the dead. This silence is indeed perplexing . . . for which we have no easy answer (*We Shall Meet Him in the Air*, pp. 286, 287. Brackets added).

Thus, both major branches of full preterism (CBV and IBV) *agree* that there was a silence after AD 70, and that those *few faithful saints* who remained alive until the Parousia never showed up afterward to

document the occurrence or claim the fulfillment. However, we *do not agree* about what caused that silence and absence, so let's look at how each view explains it.

Collective Body View (CBV) Explanation of the Silence

The **CBV view**, as represented by Don K. Preston, suggests that one of the main reasons why *none* of the saints after AD 70 claimed fulfillment of the end-time events is because “the *majority* of the church fell away” into Hellenistic error, which “resulted in a loss of understanding of Hebraic thought [CBV] before the Parousia” (*Morning Musings*, Mar. 19, 2012 and FaceBook group *Thing of the Past*, Aug. 2, 2021). In other words, “the church was so heavily influenced by Hellenistic thought that . . . the proper understanding of eschatology [CBV] was lost before the Parousia” so that “*very few faithful elect saints* were left alive at the time of the Parousia” (Facebook group *Thing of the Past*, July 31 and Aug. 2, 2021).

Preston was asked: Did any of those “very few faithful” remaining saints retain their understanding of CBV at the time of the Parousia, or had every one of them completely lost it before the Parousia just like the majority did? Preston quoted Luke 18:8 (“When the Son of Man comes, will he even find faith on the earth?”) and said “it was doubtful” whether Jesus found anyone faithful at His coming, much less anyone who understood the CBV view (Facebook group *Thing of the Past*, Aug. 3, 2021).

He also suggested that since all of the Christians after AD 70 were “Hellenized Greeks who did not understand the very nature of Hebraic Apocalyptic” [i.e., the CBV view], it explains why they “invented a new [Hellenistic-oriented] eschatology” (Facebook group *Thing of the Past*, April 2021; and *Morning Musings* #180. Romans 11. March 2012).

Thus, Preston seems to believe that every one of those few remaining saints lost their understanding of the CBV before the Parousia, and doubts whether Jesus found any faithful saints at His coming. However, this contradicts his other contention, based on Mark 9:1, that “Jesus is patently saying that some would live until the Parousia, beyond the Parousia, and look back in time [before they died] to realize that the Parousia had already happened” (*We Shall Meet Him in the Air*, p. 304).

Thus, on the one hand, CBV critics of the rapture claim that “some of those standing there” remained alive on earth after the Parousia with the ability to look back and realize that the Parousia had occurred. But, on the other hand, those same critics admit that not a single post-70 saint ever claimed that it occurred. Yet, in order for Jesus’ statements in Mark 9:1 to be true, at least some of them must have realized that the Parousia occurred. And, since there is no evidence of them realizing it on earth, we must conclude that they realized it in heaven after they were caught up to be with Christ.

We Have Enough Information

When I shared the above comments with Preston for his review before publication, he agreed that it is a “valid and true” representation of his position, but then noted that “*since only a small percentage of the*

ancient writings have been translated, we simply do not know if any ancient sources recorded the fulfillment or not” (email, July 22, 2024).

While all of us full preterists continue to cherish the hope that an early church manuscript might one day be found which claims the fulfillment of all end-time events or reveals the post-70 saints’ awareness of the full preterist view, *we need to face the probability that no such document ever existed in the first place.* If all of those *few faithful* remaining saints were raptured, then none of them would have been left on earth afterward to write any documents or claim the fulfillments.

How Many Faithful Saints Remained?

We need to know how many faithful saints still remained alive at the Parousia. Both CBV and Individual Body View (IBV) agree that the Neronic persecution and apostasy eliminated the *majority* of remaining saints. However, there is disagreement about how many faithful saints remained alive at the Parousia. CBV advocates tend to minimize the number because it is easier to explain how only a very few scattered saints might have failed to notice the Parousia. Nevertheless, there are many indications in various New Testament texts that it was a more significant number.

For instance, dozens of expectations (see the list below) were given to a broad range of churches scattered all over the Roman empire, including Judea, Galilee, Syria, Turkey, Macedonia, Achaia, Italy, Colossae, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Cyprus, Crete, Egypt, Italy, and the seven churches of Asia. Even if there were only a handful of faithful saints left alive in each of those churches, it would amount to a very significant number — far more than CBV allows, and too many to believe that every single one of them forgot their expectations (mass amnesia), missed the end-time events, and failed to claim the fulfillments afterward.

Plus, we can see from their expectations below that those saints were NOT expecting to live through the end-time events without knowing afterward that they had occurred (as the CBV wants us to believe). Instead, they were fully expecting to cognitively experience those events.

And Jesus explicitly promised that not all of the saints would be killed in the great tribulation or fall away in the apostasy (Matt 24:21-24), but rather that the persecution would be “cut short” so that some would remain alive until the Parousia to be gathered by the angels (Matt 24:29-31). So, how many “elect” saints did the angels gather? It seems to imply a significant number, not just a small handful or none.

Don Preston uses Luke 18:8 to question whether Christ would find anyone faithful at His coming. But this verse cannot overturn the many other verses where Jesus and the Apostles clearly teach that there would still be “some” faithful saints left alive at His coming (see their expectations below). Thus, it wasn’t just a handful (or none) as Preston seems to think. If no faithful saints were left alive at the time of the Parousia, then there would not have been any “elect” saints for the angels to gather!

Furthermore, if there were no faithful saints remaining alive at the Parousia, that would mean that the collective body which was supposedly raised or changed at the Parousia *included no living saints*. However, those “living and remaining saints” were obviously not expecting to *all be dead* at the Parousia, since Paul had told them that “*we are not all going to die*” (1 Cor 15:51). Was Paul wrong?

Thus, it does not solve the silence dilemma for the CBV advocates to claim that the majority of the pre-70 saints were killed in the Neronian persecution, or fell away in the great apostasy, or were confused by the Hellenists, so that very few (or none) of them were still around at the time of the Parousia. The majority is not the totality. It means that some of them did remain alive to experience the Parousia and would have still been around afterward to claim the fulfillment if there was no rapture.

Nor can the CBV explain why the few faithful saints, who supposedly remained alive on earth after the Parousia, did not speak up to set the record straight when their post-70 brethren started teaching that the big three eschatological events were still future. So, since they were silent and absent afterward, it implies that they were taken to heaven. And that was exactly what they were expecting to experience at the Parousia. Here are their expectations:

What Were They Expecting?

- Relief from the persecution (2 Thess 1:7)
- SEE Christ at His coming (Matt 16:27-28; 1 John 3:2)
- Christ would come “in like manner” as He left (Acts 1:9-11)
- The dead would be raised out of Hades (Rev 20:13-15; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16)
- The living would be changed to be like Him (Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:51-52; 2 Cor 5:2-4; 1 John 3:2)
- The living would not experience physical death (1 Cor 15:51; cf. John 21:23)
- “clothed upon with our [immortal] dwelling from heaven” (2 Cor 5:2-4)
- “give life [immortality] to your mortal bodies” (Rom 8:11)
- Both living and dead would be caught up to be with Christ (1 Thess 4:17; Luke 21:28)
- Elect saints would be gathered by real angels (Matt 24:31; 2 Thess 2:1)
- Jesus would receive them to Himself in heaven (John 14:3)
- “not destined for wrath but for obtaining salvation” (1 Thess 5:9)
- Rescued before the wrath was poured out (1 Thess 1:9-10; Luke 21:36)
- Be like the angels who cannot die (Luke 20:36)
- Dwell with Him in prepared dwelling places (John 14:3)
- Eat and drink with Him at His table (Luke 22:30)
- Sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes (Matt 19:28)
- Judge the angels (1 Cor 6:3)
- Stand in the presence of Christ (Luke 21:36; Jude 24; 1 Thess 2:19)

- *Marvel* at Christ along with all believers (2 Thess 1:10)
- Rewarded in the presence of Christ (2 John 8; Col 3:24; Rev 11:8; 22:12)
- Fullness of knowledge and face to face clarity of understanding (1 Cor 13:12)
- Obtain salvation and eternal glory in heaven (2 Tim 2:10-11)
- “I will give you the crown of life” (immortality) (Rev 2:10)
- “crown of righteousness to all who loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8)
- Rewarded with “unfading crown of glory” at the Parousia (1 Pet 5:4)
- “revealed with Him in glory” (Col 3:4)
- Remain with Him forever afterward (1 Thess 4:17)

Note the intensity of their expectations:

- “looking for and *hastening* the coming (2 Pet 3:11-14)
- “Oh, our Lord come!” (1 Cor 16:22)
- “*How long*, O Lord?” (Rev 6:10)
- “Come [quickly], Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20)
- “we *eagerly wait* for a Savior” (Phil 3:20; Rom 8:25; Jude 21; 1 Cor 1:7-8; Heb 9:28)
- “anxious longing . . . groan within . . . longing to be clothed upon” (Rom 8:19, 23; 2 Cor 5:2-4)
- “cry to Him day and night” (Luke 18:7-8)
- “Fix your hope completely on it” (1 Pet 1:13)
- “loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8)
- “be alert, stay awake, be ready, looking for it” (Matt 24:42-44; Rev 16:15; 2 Pet 3:12-14)

In view of these very explicit and intense expectations, how can anyone believe that those remaining saints (the elect) could have missed the end-time events when they occurred, or shrugged them off as unimportant, or walked away never to mention them again? This silence about the fulfillments becomes even more strange and inexplicable when we see other Christians in the late first and early second century claiming that the Parousia was still future! Why didn’t those saints who experienced those events, and who were supposedly still on earth, speak up and set the record straight? Their *silence* points unmistakably to their *absence* — gone, taken to heaven, no longer on earth!

From the above list of expectations, it is apparent that the saints living before the Parousia were anxiously awaiting His return, groaning within themselves, and longing to be clothed with their immortal bodies. They were looking for and hastening the day, and fixed their hope completely upon it. It was not something that those saints could miss. It was like lightning flashing across the whole sky (Matt 24:27; Luke 17:24).

They were told that they would not only be consciously aware of Christ's return, but that they would SEE the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven and sending His angels to gather them. He told the 12 apostles that all of them (both dead and alive) would be received to Himself, sit on 12 thrones, and dwell in the places He had prepared for them in heaven.

Before the saints could be caught up to be with Christ, their lowly (mortal) bodies had to be changed (transformed) into immortal to be like Christ's glorious, immortal body. The dead were raised first, then the living were changed, and together as one group they were caught up to be with Christ in heaven forever afterward.

They would not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming (1 John 2:28), but rather draw near and glorify Him on that day and marvel at Him in the presence of all believers (2 Thess 1:10). They would rejoice with exultation when they stood before the Son of Man in His glorious presence at the Parousia, and from that time forward they would always be with the Lord in heaven above (1 Thess 4:17).

These were their great expectations, and if they were not cognitively experienced in the manner these Scriptures indicate, then they would not only have been disappointed, but disillusioned, outraged, and complaining about it. So, they must have experienced those things, or else Jesus and the apostles were false prophets.

What Are the Odds?

If anyone wishes to claim that there were a *few faithful saints* left alive at the Parousia who still retained the CBV view, or somehow recovered their understanding of it afterward, we would still have to wonder why they didn't correct the error of the Hellenists and resume their teaching of the CBV after AD 70. And if that had happened, we would know about the existence of CBV and see the controversy about it recorded in church history. But, as we all know, there is no record of either the *controversy*, or the *correction* of the Hellenistic error, or the *continued teaching* of the CBV.

What are the chances that every single saint left alive after the Neronian persecution fell away into Hellenistic apostasy and completely lost not only their understanding of CBV, but also their memory of ever having believed it (simultaneous mass amnesia), and their awareness that there ever was such a view as the CBV? The possibility of that happening has to be close to zero. Yet, that appears to be what Don Preston believes. But, as Charles Hill suggests, there is an astounding irony here:

The dreaded and nearly fatal "Hellenization" of the gospel is supposed to have struck the church, according to [the CBV view], concurrently with the church's attainment of its ultimate state of perfection. It does not seem to me that one can have it both ways. If one wants to argue for a radical nosedive of the church [into Hellenistic apostasy] as soon as the apostles left the scene somewhere around A.D. 70, then I do not see how one can argue that it was precisely then that the church also attained the consummation of

its hope, its full measure of knowledge and sanctification, [and] its final state of conformity to the image of Christ (*When Shall These Things Be?* p. 109).

Many, I trust, will find that conclusions like these place too high a demand on their credulity, especially when to read the New Testament in a way that preserves a more or less traditional [interpretation] makes infinitely better sense (*When Shall These Things Be?* p. 107).

Indeed! I could not agree more with Hill's analysis of the CBV Hellenistic apostasy theory. The traditional view of a rapture makes "infinitely better sense" in view of their expectations beforehand and their silence afterward.

And, since they experienced what they were expecting to experience, then they knew that the Parousia had occurred, and would have *claimed the fulfillment* if they were still alive on earth. But, since there were no such claims afterward, it necessarily implies that they were *taken to heaven* at the Parousia, just as Jesus promised, and just as they had expected. ✝