

How did the Church restart?

by Edward E. Stevens

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ONE OF OUR READERS asked the following excellent questions: “[In view of] the rapture and the long silent gap [afterward] ... *what was God’s plan* to build and perpetuate the church into the new age? There didn’t seem to be any *apostolic succession* (so no one-on-one, face-to-face passing on of the torch). And the later church fathers couldn’t correctly interpret the eschatology of the New Testament even though it was pretty evident to first century Christians. Where was the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit in all of this?”

The Rapture removal of all saints at the Parousia definitely forced the Church to restart. However, even though there were no true Christians left behind to guide the next generation, they did have the writings of the apostles. And since those documents were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they were fully capable of instilling faith in those who read them. Thus, God provided everything that was needed to convert the lost and rebuild His Church.

Gospel Had Been Preached

Jesus had commissioned His twelve apostles to “make disciples of *all the nations*” (Matt 28:19), and to preach the gospel throughout “*the whole world*” before the end came (Matt 24:14). And according to Paul, that mission was accomplished (Rom 10:18, 16:26; Col 1:6, 23).

This means the gospel had been proclaimed wherever the twelve tribes had been scattered in the Diaspora. And since many of them rejected the gospel, it was preached to the Gentiles also, so that many Jews and Gentiles all over the Roman world had heard the message. And since not many of them believed the gospel before the Parousia, it is no surprise to see some of them beginning to believe afterward.

Philip Schaff, explains how this most likely happened:

After the intense commotion of the apostolic age there was a [silent or dormant period] ... But the soil of heathenism had been broken up, and the new seed planted by the hands of the apostles gradually took root. ... The foundation was laid strong and deep by the apostles themselves. The

seed scattered by them from Jerusalem to Rome, and fertilized by their blood, sprung up as a bountiful harvest [*History of The Christian Church* (Ante-Nicene, vol. 2)].

New Testament Manuscripts Were Available

The apostles wrote, copied, and distributed hundreds (if not thousands) of manuscripts all over the Roman world and Diaspora. There were so many manuscripts in existence after the Parousia that they could not all be gathered up and destroyed. I am sure the Jews tried to eliminate them, but there were too many in circulation. Many of them survived in libraries, scriptoriums, and other public records.

The rabbis had copies, and so did the Gnostics, Judaizers, heretics, and apostates. And there is evidence that some of them tried to corrupt the text, or rewrite them according to their own heretical beliefs. But since there were so many copies still available, they were not able to alter those texts without being noticed.

And because there were so many copies still in existence, it is easy to see how the next generation after the Parousia was able to learn the gospel. It seems certain that many, like *Justin Martyr* (early second century), came to faith by reading some of those manuscripts. And those New Testament documents not only contained the gospel, but everything else that was needed to rebuild and maintain the Church.

The gospel, which is the *seed of the kingdom* (Matt 13:18), was sown all over the Roman Empire before the end. Not all of that seed sprouted before the Parousia. Some of it sprouted afterward. And others who had not heard the gospel before AD 70 learned about it through the New Testament writings which were still available. So, it was not a complete “restart” *from nothing*, but rather the sprouting of the seed that had *already been planted* beforehand. It was only a matter of time before a new “crop” of Christians arose, and they now had the inspired written Word (Sword of the Spirit) to guide them.

The Seed is where the *continuity* is, both in the gospel that was orally preached beforehand and in the written Word that remained afterward. So, there was never any danger of the Gates of Hades prevailing against the Church, as long as the Seed remained. Neither the Great Tribulation, nor the Rapture, could prevent the regrowth of the Church. That seed began to sprout and grow immediately after the Parousia and Rapture.

Were There Any Other Documents?

In order to downplay the significance of the silence after AD 70, and to avoid lending any support to the first century Rapture, some preterist leaders suppose that there must have been some other documents after AD 70 which mentioned or taught full preterism. And they suppose that the reason why no one has found any of those full preterist writings is because of one or more of the following situations:

- Early church leaders *destroyed* those documents
- The Vatican has them *hidden* away somewhere
- They exist but have *never been translated* into English

However, Dr. Charles Hill (New Testament professor at *Reformed Theological Seminary* in Florida) explains the improbability of those theories:

Even if some had wanted to cover up such central events and Christian teachings – supposing for the moment that they occurred in something like a [full-preterist] fashion, and were preached and taught and written about – it taxes the imagination to conceive of how such a campaign could have been successfully conducted throughout the entire church, which for centuries had no central authority capable of such crushing censorship. Clarence A. Forbes argues that the early Christians were remarkably disinclined to call for the destruction of heretical books [“Books for the Burning,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67 (1936): 114-25]. And even if no primary document survived, we would surely have reports of the events or the controversies surrounding them, as we do for so many other controversies in the church. Some descriptions and critiques of Christianity from pagans have also survived, and evidently these wells are as dry as the Church’s with regard to [full-preterist] sources. Those who have been involved in the discovery, collection, translation, and publishing of new documentary finds for the past several decades have hardly been answerable to any ecclesiastical authority, and so their failure to unearth [full-preterist] documents could hardly be due to any churchly conspiracy [“Eschatology in the Wake of Jerusalem’s Fall,” *When Shall These Things Be?* Keith Mathison, editor. pp. 109-110].

Furthermore, there is no justifiable reason to think that the Roman Church has any preterist documents hidden in their vaults, since Jesuit preterists like Alcázar (1618) would have used them as ammunition against the Reformers.

And the suggestion that some full preterist documents exist, but have not yet been translated, reveals a very shallow understanding of the field of *textual studies*. Over the past 200 years, thousands of textual

scholars have read those documents in their original languages (Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, and Coptic), and they know exactly what those documents contain.

All of the earliest manuscripts have been translated into multiple languages. If there were any full preterist statements found in those manuscripts, they would have known about them and reported them. So, just because some of those documents have not yet been translated into English, it doesn't really matter.

In the last 150 years since J. P. Migne (1800-1875) compiled his *Complete Patrology*, many more manuscripts have been found, identified, translated and published, but there still have been no full preterist writings found.

Moreover, even though it may be true that some of the later Latin, Coptic, and Syriac writings have not been translated into English, we still know what they contain. And if textual scholars who read those manuscripts had found any full preterist statements, we would know about them.

This lack of full preterist documentation in the first five centuries becomes even more clear when we hear textual scholars like Dr. Charles Hill say, "An early Christian writer who is even aware of a [full-preterist] eschatology in the church has yet to be found" [*WSTTB*, p. 107].

So, while all of us full preterists continue to cherish the hope that an early church manuscript might one day be discovered 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 realistic 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. And since that silence and absence is the very scenario that we find after AD 70, it points unmistakably to a rapture. †

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Expectations Demand a First Century Rapture by Edward E. Stevens

Final Decade Before the End by Edward E. Stevens

Outbreak of the Zealot Rebellion (free article by email request: preterist1@preterist.org)