

On the Seven Point Statement Against Hyper-preterism

A controversy has arisen about a view of eschatology variously known as full preterism, hyper-preterism, or consistent preterism. (We are not here concerned with distinctions some may make between the varieties.) The term ‘eschatology’ is often glossed as ‘end times’, but the implications of some types of preterism go much further, as they concern not only a view about the cosmic future, but about what is the status of Christians now, both those dead and still living, the reality of the resurrection, as well as the sweep of history. The effect of hyper-preterism, like that of the other ‘hyper’, hyper-dispensationalism, is to remove the applicability of much of the Bible, including much of the New Testament from Christians today. Also, the practice of hyper-preterism, as reported in various small church groups that hold to it, is strangely similar to the antinomian Thieme cult that Hal Lindsey was part of, with the irony that the extreme of hyper-preterism meets the extreme of dispensationalism.

What has increased concern about this lately has been the teaching of Gary DeMar, who more than anyone has been carrying on the legacy of Tyler Reconstruction, and who seems to be going along with hyper-preterist doctrine, and who in response to questioning, has preferred to say the that issue is “not so simple” and to reply by stressing the complexities of exegeting various texts, rather than stating his view on the broad, clearer points of systematic theology.

There is now (March 2023) a website, <https://hyperpreterism.com/>, dedicated to opposition to hyper-preterism, with a doctrinal statement in seven points opposing hyper-preterism as being opposed to historic creeds and confessions. It also invites readers to sign the statement, and numerous people, including leaders of some prominence have done so.

This essay offers some thoughts on the seven points of the statement. To sum it up quickly, I agree with the seven points. I also want to say that in some ways “it is not so simple”, but its not being so simple does not diminish the truthfulness of the seven points, and the ability to agree with them in some sense in which they appear to be meant.

We hereby adopt the following position concerning the unorthodox eschatological doctrine of Full Preterism, Hyper-preterism, or any other Eschatological System promoting any one or all of the following errors which are contrary to the Holy Scriptures, historic creeds and confessions.

1. That original sin plunged Adam into spiritual death only, and not into physical death [Genesis 2 & 3; Romans 5:12-19; Ephesians 2:13].

The story of the Fall told in Genesis, has as a major feature that death was threatened as the punishment for disobedience, mankind disobeyed, and death resulted, including also a widespread curse. Within Christianity this has always been taken to include physical death, and within the context of Genesis there follow the genealogies with each generation (except Enoch) ending “and he died”. This has traditionally been taken as a way to

hammer home the point about the reign of physical death coming in with the sin of Adam and Eve.

Now for the not so simple part. The threat given to Adam was actually that “in the day that you eat of it [the tree of knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die.” Did Adam die physically that day? No, he lived nine hundred and thirty years. So what happened in “that day” was not physical death. To explain how this can be, theologies are brought in which (based on many other places in Scripture) explain the idea of spiritual death, and explain how the penalties of spiritual death and of physical death are related, and how spiritual death ultimately leads to physical death. With the Fall a redemptive program is introduced, which also has a requirement that life in the physical world must continue and the launching of history has to take place, so physical death, while certain, is delayed for a time.

Thus there is a whole theology involved, right from the beginning of Genesis, and the denial of point (1) stands against that whole system of theology.

The second thing to observe about point (1) is that it is denied by far more than the hyper-preterists. The introduction of physical death as a punishment for sin has been a big problem for theistic evolutionists. The reconciliation of Genesis with theistic evolution that is most in vogue involves the idea of an ancestor tens or hundreds of thousands of years ago being selected as a covenant representative, and thus the Adam of Genesis. The death this ancestor experienced was some sort of spiritual death, corresponding to some sort of spiritual life granted in the role of covenant representative, because every generation prior to that representative had died. Most notably ideas along this line have been advocated by Biologos, the organization founded by associates of Tim Keller in the Presbyterian Church in America, and endorsed by him. Also it is the position of William Lane Craig, a prominent Evangelical philosopher.

It is possible to deny point (1) and still be a leader in Evangelicalism, and in avowedly confessional denominations. Are the signers of the seven point statement applying the same standard within their own church associations? In some cases it would seem not.

2. That Christ does not have (or retain) a physical body consequent upon His resurrection from death [1 Corinthians 15:3-8; John 20:25-28; Romans 8:34];

That Christ did have a physical body after the resurrection is given great emphasis especially in the Gospels and in Acts. First, a resurrection takes place, second, the body is gone from the tomb afterwards, third Jesus appears to various people at various times and places and his body still has the wounds that killed him, fourth, this body while in the midst of a conversation with the disciples ascends to heaven. Also the body could be touched and Jesus ate food.

The resurrected body of Christ is important, as believers are promised a resurrection and a resurrected body like Christ has. The resurrection is a model for believers and their status and destiny in the New Covenant.

The parts that are not so simple include these: Christ's body is not like the other physical bodies we know of. It can live with deadly wounds, it can appear and disappear in various places. Second, were you die because you get smashed up in an auto accident, you do not expect to be resurrected in a smashed up body, but in a perfect body. In this important way, Christ's resurrection is not the model for the believers' resurrection.

3. That the sacraments (ordinances) of the church no longer exist for this generation, that the institutional visible Church does not exist, refusing to recognize her officers, authority, and membership [Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:25-26];

Here things get much more difficult. All churches, except some oddball sects, have held to sacraments or ordinances. Almost as broad a group has held to church offices, authority and membership. As exceptions of the latter type we can think of Darby and his early Brethren group who considered most of these to be the signs of the fallen churches that would go through the Tribulation, but even they believed in membership. The difficulty is in the way the language is stretched to the point and perhaps beyond the point where it no longer means the same thing to all the signers. First what is a sacrament and what are the particular sacraments? The signer is offered two terms, sacrament and ordinance, so that everyone from the most high church to the most simple baptist congregationalist can hold his nose and sign it. But there are two different terms because people do not mean the same thing by these terms, and want to make that difference clear. So is the statement saying that all Christians must believe in one or another of these different things? That is, "It is fine to believe that sacraments no longer exist, if instead you believe that ordinances do." Nor are they listed. The list of what is considered a sacrament has varied considerably over church history. For example, until the eleventh century the anointing of kings was considered a sacrament and kingship an ecclesiastical office. We might suppose that what is meant are the two that since the Reformation are accepted as the two Biblical ones, the Lord's Supper, and baptism. Here again, even the names might suppose a theology that not everyone would agree on.

Again, what is the institutional visible church, what is its authority, and what is membership in the this church? From late antiquity the idea has come down that the identity of the church is in its bishops, and much of the Reformed world has not completely escaped that thinking. Much of the ecclesiastical world has an elaborate organization and church order for which being in the institutional church comes down to not getting the people with the power mad at you and throw you out. But we read in 3 John 8 that the real Christians were the ones thrown out of the institutional church.

Then, does the reference to the visible institutional church mean that a signer of the statement must believe in the distinction between the visible and invisible church? The Federal Vision people deny the distinction. Does the statement even mean that they as well as the hyper-preterists are holding a heresy?

The concept of church and qualifications for church membership vary so widely that many of the signers could not be in each others churches. Can they all really mean the same thing when they sign the statement?

4. That the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is already past and fulfilled (AD70) therefore denying a physical visible return of Christ at the end of history [Acts 1:8-11; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17];

Here we get into some plain things, and also into some terminological issues. As for plain things, there is the coming promised in the first chapter of Acts. “This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” As the text says “this Jesus” and “in like manner” it does not mean some spiritual coming, or some coming in the form of a judgment, or any such other coming that is not personal and physical in the way Acts describes.

Also, the usage among Christians has been that “Second Coming” is a reference to this coming promised in Acts. The terminology, however, leaves an opening for evasive maneuvers. Some might say that there is another coming or even several promised in scripture, and by strict count the one promised in Acts is not the second. For the hyper-preterists, however, this might not help if their particular view eliminates all except for a 70 AD coming, which for them in that case would be the one and only Second Coming.

5. That there is no physical Resurrection of the bodies of believers and non-believers at the consummation of history [John 5:21, 28-29; Romans 8:22-23; Philippians 3:21];

There are certain things that need to be affirmed. At death the body dies, but the believer goes to be with Christ, so as Paul says it is a gain. Yet the body remains behind. Resurrection, though, is spoken of in Scripture as rising from the grave. It is the body that died that is resurrected, and this is a hope for the believer. Something is gained also by this physical resurrection.

The simple language hides a multitude of complications. The simple language accommodates that fact that even the eschatological views that multiply the resurrections like rabbits get in a resurrection right at the end to account for the people who have died in between other eschatological events. But various varieties of eschatology, particularly premillennial ones, put the Big One at least a thousand years before the consummation of history. So does the language here mean a physical Resurrection of the believers, or a physical Resurrection of the left-over believers? Is it intending to leave out premillennialists as a strict reading might suggest?

There are also some unanswered questions. The Bible writers knew as well as we do that in many cases the body is destroyed and that the materials that make up the body get recycled into other life. So how is it that the resurrection is spoken of as that of the body that died? The Bible writers did not see a need to explain this.

6. That there is no future Final Judgment of all men [Matthew 13:36-43; John 5:28-29; Acts 17:31; 2 Peter 2:4-9];

The idea of Final Judgment is also agreed on by all orthodox Christians. But of course some of the premillennialists make problems again, as they multiply the judgments, with the White Throne judgment, etc. So is this language intended to include those hold that there is no final judgment for all men, but there is some judgment or other for all men?

7. That there is no end to history in which Christ completes His victory over sin and death. [1 Corinthians 15:22-26; John 6:40, 44, 54; 11:24; 2 Peter 3:12-13];

Here, again, is a point that all orthodox eschatologies agree on, regardless of how they line up their millenniums, tribulations and rebellions prior to the end. I can think of only a small problem with the language. One of Augustine's ways of dividing up history was his scheme of seven eras, with the seventh being the Final Day of the last judgment. This scheme in the Middle Ages was often the six era scheme. Why? Because the seventh, the Last Judgment was thought of as beyond history. Thus there is an historic ambiguity in Christian thought over whether Christ's victory comes in history or after history. Either way, history ends, and with the end comes Christ's victory, and that is the point here.