

## **The Third Foundation: Futurism**

by Thomas Ice

The third biblical foundation for a systematic understanding of the pretribulation rapture is futurism. An important, but seemingly little-recognized aspect of proper interpretation of Bible prophecy is the role of timing. When will a prophecy be fulfilled in history? There are four possibilities. The four views are simple in the sense that they reflect the only four possibilities in relation to time—past, present, future, and timeless.

The preterist (past) believes that most, if not all prophecy has already been fulfilled, usually in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The historicist (present) sees much of the current church age as equal to the tribulation period. Thus, prophecy has been and will be fulfilled during the current church age. Futurists (future) believe that virtually all prophetic events will not occur in the current church age, but will take place in the future tribulation, Second Coming, or Millennium. The idealist (timeless) does not believe either that the Bible indicates the timing of events or that we can determine their timing in advance. Therefore, idealists think that prophetic passages mainly teach great ideas or truths about God to be applied regardless of timing.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FUTURISM**

Of the four views noted above, the only one that logically and historically has supported the pre-trib position is futurism. Why? Because, the timing of the rapture relates to when the tribulation will occur in history. Preterism declares that the tribulation has already taken place. Historicism says that the tribulation started in the fourth century with events surrounding Constantine's Christianization of the Roman Empire and continues until the second coming. Idealism denies that there is a timing of events. Thus, only futurism, which sees the tribulation as a yet future event could even allow for a rapture before the beginning of that seven-year period. This does not mean, however, that all futurists are pre-trib; they are not. But to be a pretribulationist, one must be a futurist.

### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FUTURISM**

While not as consistently developed as modern futurism, the early church would have to be classified as inconsistent futurists, more than any of the other three possibilities. With a few exceptions, the early church believed that events of the tribulation, millennium, and second coming were to take place in the future. As anti-millennial views began to arise in the third century, and the Christianization of the Roman Empire through Constantine spread in the fourth century, futurism began to be displaced. As the fourth century turned into the fifth, Jerome and Augustine's influence against futurism drove it underground during the thousand-year era of medievalism. But there remained during this time pockets of futurist interpretation scattered throughout a number of the groups who refused to come under Roman Catholic authority. Further, there have been discoveries of medieval apocalypticism during this time which wrote from varying degrees of futurism.

The Reformation brought a return to a study of the sources. In Northern Europe those sources included the early church writers and aided in a renewal of the study of prophecy from a futurist perspective within the Roman Catholic and then the Protestant churches. The Jesuit, Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) was one of the first to revive an undeveloped form of futurism around 1580. Because of the dominance of historicism, futurism made virtually no headway in Protestantism until the 1820's through Church of England scholar S. R. Maitland in 1826. In the late 1820s, futurism began to gain converts and grow in the British Isles, often motivated by a revived interest in God's plan for Israel, during which time it gained one of its most influential converts in John Nelson Darby. Through Darby and other Brethren expositors, futurism spread to America and throughout the evangelical world. The last one hundred years have seen, for the first time, the full development of consistent futurism. This has led in turn to

the formulation of dispensationalism and a clearer understanding of the pretribulational rapture of the church.

### **SUPPORT FOR FUTURISM**

A defense of futurism can be developed from the Bible by comparing and contrasting futurism with the other three approaches. For example, futurism instead of preterism can be shown by demonstrating from specific texts of Scripture that "coming" in the debated passages refers to a bodily return of Christ to planet earth, not a mystical coming mediated through the Roman Army. One area that supports futurism over historicism is demonstrated by the fact that numbers relating to days and years are to be taken literally. There is no biblical basis for days really meaning years. A major argument for futurism over idealism is the fact that numbers do count. In other words, why would God give hundreds of chronological and temporal statements in the Bible if He did not intend to indicate such?

Let's look at some general support for the futurist approach. First and foremost, only the futurist can interpret the whole Bible literally and having done so harmonize those conclusions into a consistent theological system. Just as the people, places, and times were meant to be understood literally in Genesis 1-11, so are the texts that relate to the end-times are to be taken literally. Days mean days; years mean years; months mean months. Thus, the only way that the book of Revelation and other prophetic portions of the Bible make any sense is if they are taken literally, which means that they have not yet happened, and thus, they are future.

Another proof for futurism is found in the Bible's understanding of who Israel is and God's plan for His people. If, whenever we see the Bible using the term "Israel", we remember that it always refers to the same people throughout the whole of the Bible, then it follows that many passages referring to Israel have never been fulfilled and for them to be fulfilled they will have to occur in the future. The fact of the matter is that an outline of Israel's history was written in advance, before they ever set one foot into their land. One passage that illustrates this is Deuteronomy 4:25-31.

"When you become the father of children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God so as to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but shall be utterly destroyed. "And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the Lord shall drive you. "And there you will serve gods, the work of man's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. "But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. "When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and listen to His voice. "For the Lord your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.

I have put in bold-faced type those major events that even a schoolchild would know as key elements in the history of Israel. If the first three events have happened to Israel, and no one would deny that they have, then it is clear from the text that the final two highlighted events will also happen to the same people. This is most clear from the context. The Bible does not "change horses in midstream" so that suddenly Israel who has received the curses is dropped out of the picture and the church takes over and receives the blessings. Any literal reading of this text will have to admit that the same identity is referred to throughout the whole text. If it is true that the same Israel is meant throughout the text, then the last two highlighted events have yet to be fulfilled for Israel in the same historically literal way in which the first three events have clearly taken place. Thus, a fulfillment of the final two events in the

life of Israel will have to happen in the future. This is an argument for a futurist view of prophecy, since this kind of argument can be applied throughout the rest of the Bible. (See also Deut. 27-32 for an expansion of 4:25-31).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Bible is one third prophecy and the majority of that is future prophecy. Since a consistently literal approach to the whole Bible, including prophecy, is the proper way of understanding God's revelation to man, then the futurist approach is the correct way of looking at the timing of biblical prophecy. Only the futurist understanding of biblical prophecy can support the pre-trib rapture position.