

Futurism and Dispensationalism Interpretative Beliefs

Introduction: The Battle Over Biblical Prophecy Introduction

Throughout church history, the interpretation of biblical prophecy has been a central and contentious issue, shaping theology, church practice, and even global politics. At the heart of this debate lie three dominant frameworks for understanding prophecy: **Historicism**, **Preterism**, and **Futurism**. Each approach offers a distinct view of how God's redemptive plan unfolds in scripture and history.

The **Protestant Reformation** of the 16th century brought Historicism to prominence, as Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin used this framework to identify the Roman Catholic Church as the fulfillment of key prophetic warnings, including the **Antichrist** and the **Beast of Revelation**. This interpretation undermined the authority of the Catholic Church and fueled the growth of Protestantism.

In response, the **Catholic Counter-Reformation** sought to discredit Historicism and protect the church's reputation. Jesuit scholars such as **Luis de Alcázar** and **Francisco Ribera** introduced **Preterism** and **Futurism**, respectively, to deflect Protestant critiques. Preterism confined prophecy to past events, particularly the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., while Futurism projected prophecy into a distant future, centered on a single Antichrist and a seven-year tribulation. Both strategies effectively shifted attention away from the papacy, fragmenting Protestant thought on eschatology.

Meanwhile, the theological framework of **Covenantalism** emerged alongside Historicism during the Reformation, emphasizing the unity of God's redemptive plan through Christ and His fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Covenantalism rejects the sharp division between Israel and the Church promoted by Futurism, instead teaching that all believers—Jew and Gentile—are united in Christ as heirs of God's promises.

This paper will explore the historical development of these eschatological frameworks, analyze their theological implications, and present responses rooted in scripture. By examining how Futurism and Preterism were introduced to counter Protestant critiques, we will uncover how these interpretations have influenced modern Christianity and examine the enduring relevance of Historicism and Covenantalism in understanding God's work in history.

Scotfield Futurist

8 Points of Interpretative Beliefs & Covenantal Response

The following are eight key points of the Scotfield Futurist interpretation, accompanied by responses using scripture from the KJV to present an alternative, often covenantal perspective that challenges the mainstream narrative. While the Futurist interpretation has gained significant popularity within the church, particularly since its rise in the early 20th century, its historical and theological accuracy comes into question when the biblical narrative is carefully examined through sound hermeneutical principles and the proper application of exegesis. For an understanding of **exegesis** click [HERE](#).

1. God's Separate Plans for Israel and the Church

Futurist Belief: Israel and the church are distinct; Old Testament promises to Israel will be fulfilled separately from the church.

Response:

- **Galatians 3:28-29:** "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."
 - *All believers, Jew and Gentile, are united as Abraham's spiritual seed.*
- **Ephesians 2:14-16:** "For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us."
 - *Christ has united Jews and Gentiles into one people, negating a separation in God's plan.*

2. Literal Fulfillment of Prophecy

Futurist Belief: Prophecies should be taken literally whenever possible.

Response:

- **John 18:36:** "Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight."
 - *Jesus emphasizes that His kingdom is spiritual, not a physical, earthly kingdom.*

- **Luke 17:20-21:** “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation... for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.”
 - *The kingdom of God is spiritual, present within believers, not a future earthly kingdom.*

3. A Future 7-Year Tribulation

Futurist Belief: The tribulation is a future 7-year period of God’s wrath based on Daniel 9:24-27.

Response:

- **Matthew 24:34:** “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.”
 - *Jesus places the fulfillment of the events in Matthew 24 within the generation of His listeners, not in a distant future.*
- **Daniel 9:27:** The “he” in this verse refers to Christ confirming the covenant, not an Antichrist breaking a covenant.
 - *Christ’s sacrificial death fulfilled the prophecy, ending the sacrificial system (Hebrews 10:10-14).*

4. The Pre-Tribulation Rapture

Futurist Belief: Christians will be raptured before the tribulation, based on 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

Response:

- **John 17:15:** “I pray not that thou shouldest take them

out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.”

- *Jesus prays for believers to remain in the world and be protected, not removed.*

- **Matthew 24:29-31:** “Immediately after the tribulation... shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

- *The gathering of believers occurs after the tribulation, not before.*

5. The Rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem

Futurist Belief: A physical temple will be rebuilt, and sacrifices resumed.

Response:

- **John 2:19-21:** “Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up... But he spake of the temple of his body.”

- *Jesus is the true temple; no physical temple is necessary.*

- **Hebrews 10:10-14:** Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice ended the need for animal sacrifices.

6. The Rise of the Antichrist

Futurist Belief: A single, future world leader (Antichrist) will rise.

Response:

- **1 John 2:18:** “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists.”
 - *The Antichrist is not a single future figure but refers to anyone opposing Christ, present even in John’s time.*
- **2 Thessalonians 2:3-4:** The “man of sin” is interpreted as a symbol of corrupt religious power, historically fulfilled.

7. The Battle of Armageddon and Christ’s Second Coming

Futurist Belief: A literal, global battle will occur at Armageddon before Christ’s return.

Response:

- **Revelation 1:1:** “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass.”
 - *Revelation’s events were imminent for John’s audience, suggesting symbolic, not literal, fulfillment.*
- **Revelation 19:11-16:** Christ’s return is described symbolically, representing His spiritual victory over sin and evil.

8. The Millennial Kingdom

Futurist Belief: Christ will reign on earth for a literal 1,000 years.

Response:

- **Revelation 20:4-6:** The “1,000 years” is symbolic, representing the current spiritual reign of Christ with His saints.
- **Colossians 1:13:** “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.”
 - *Believers are already part of Christ’s kingdom; His reign is spiritual, not a future physical event.*

These alternative interpretations align with a **covenantal view** of scripture, emphasizing fulfillment in Christ and rejecting a future, physical separation of Israel and the church.

Covenantalism and Its Relationship to Historicism

To address where **Covenantalism** fits into this historical picture, it is important to understand its theological framework and how it relates to **Historicism** and the broader eschatological debate during and after the Reformation. Below, I’ll weave **Covenantalism** into the historical narrative where appropriate.

Reformation and Historicism: The Foundation for Covenantalism

1. The Rise of the Protestant Reformation

- Reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others challenged the Catholic Church's authority by returning to **scripture alone (sola scriptura)** as the basis of faith and doctrine.
- They adopted **Historicism** as their eschatological framework, interpreting prophecy as unfolding progressively through history. This included identifying the **papacy** as the **Antichrist** and the **Roman Catholic Church** as the **Beast** in Revelation.

2. Covenantal Theology Emerges

- **Covenantalism** grew alongside the Reformation as a framework for understanding the Bible's overarching story.
- **Key Idea:** The Bible is structured around two primary covenants:
 - The **Covenant of Works:** God's agreement with Adam before the fall, requiring perfect obedience.
 - The **Covenant of Grace:** God's promise of salvation through Christ, given after the fall and fulfilled in the New Testament.
- Reformers like **John Calvin** emphasized that all scripture points to **Christ** and the unity of God's redemptive plan for humanity, contrasting with Catholic views that emphasized a continuing role for the institutional church in salvation.

3. Connection to Historicism

- Covenantalism and Historicism complement each other because both interpret scripture in light of God's progressive revelation throughout history.
- Reformers viewed God's covenantal dealings with His people as unfolding through historical events, such as the rise and fall of empires, the

corruption of the papacy, and the ultimate triumph of Christ's kingdom.

- **Historicism** provided the eschatological framework, while **Covenantalism** provided the theological foundation for understanding God's purpose throughout redemptive history.
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The Counter-Reformation and the Jesuit Attack on Historicism

1. The Challenge to Historicism and Covenantalism

- The Catholic Church, through the Counter-Reformation, aimed to discredit Protestant theology, including both **Historicism** and **Covenantalism**.
- Jesuits like **Luis de Alcázar** (Preterism) and **Francisco Ribera** (Futurism) sought to reinterpret prophecy in ways that:
 - Removed the papacy from the narrative of prophetic fulfillment.
 - Undermined the Protestant emphasis on covenantal continuity between the Old and New Testaments, which highlighted Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises.

2. Futurism's Attack on Covenantalism

- Futurism, with its sharp division between **Israel** and the **Church**, directly opposed Covenantalism's teaching that the church is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

- Covenantalism teaches that all believers (Jew and Gentile) are united in Christ, fulfilling the promises made to Abraham (Galatians 3:28-29). Futurism instead posits that Israel and the church have separate, parallel roles in God's plan—a concept foreign to the Reformers.
 - This shift weakened the Protestant focus on God's single redemptive plan and led to the rise of **dispensationalism**, which became closely tied to Futurism in later centuries.
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The Protestant Decline of Historicism and Covenantalism

1. The Rise of Dispensationalism in Protestantism

- By the 19th century, **John Nelson Darby** and the **Plymouth Brethren** introduced dispensational theology, popularized through the **Scofield Reference Bible** (1909).
- Dispensationalism, rooted in Futurism, fragmented the unity of God's covenantal plan by:
 - Teaching a **pre-tribulation rapture** for the church.
 - Viewing Israel and the church as distinct entities with separate roles in prophecy.

2. Historicism and Covenantalism Decline

- As dispensationalism spread, both Historicism and Covenantalism fell out of favor in many Protestant circles, particularly in evangelicalism.

- This shift obscured the Reformation's core message of covenantal continuity and its critique of the Catholic Church as the fulfillment of prophetic warnings in scripture.
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Where Covenantalism Stands Today

1. Revival in Reformed Theology

- Covenantal theology remains central in **Reformed** and **Presbyterian** traditions, which continue to emphasize the unity of God's redemptive plan and Christ's fulfillment of Old Testament promises.
- These traditions often align with **amillennialism**, rejecting the literalist eschatology of Futurism and the dispensationalist focus on a future, separate role for Israel.

2. Covenantalism and Historicism's Shared Legacy

- Both frameworks highlight the progressive fulfillment of God's purposes in history.
 - While Historicism provides a lens for interpreting prophecy, Covenantalism provides the theological backbone, emphasizing Christ as the center of all scripture.
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Conclusion: Covenantalism's Role in the

Picture

Covenantalism fits seamlessly into the broader **Reformation narrative**, as it formed the theological foundation for the Reformers' belief in God's unified redemptive plan through Christ. It complements **Historicism**, which interprets prophecy as unfolding throughout history, by showing how those historical events align with God's covenantal promises.

The Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation attacks on Historicism and Covenantalism—through the invention of **Preterism** and **Futurism**—were strategic attempts to undermine the Protestant critique of Rome and shift eschatological focus. Despite these efforts, Covenantalism continues to offer a robust, biblically rooted framework that unites scripture under the central theme of Christ's fulfillment of God's covenantal promises.