

Letter to Ligonier Ministries

By Andrew Sandlin (February 10, 1999)

Dear Friends:

First, let me mention how gratified I am in hearing of R. C. Sproul's adoption of postmillennialism as expressed in a recent book. Though I haven't had a chance to obtain and read a copy, I do look forward to seeing it when I get the opportunity.

To the point of this letter: I received earlier this week a newsletter from a Hymenaen ministry announcing their Orlando conference Saturday, February 20, designed to piggyback on your own conference that weekend addressing various eschatological issues, though they did not claim theirs was in any way affiliated with or sponsored by yours. By "Hymenaen" I refer to the so-called "consistent (or full) preterists" who hold that all--or virtually all--Biblical prophecies were fulfilled before or at the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. This includes the final resurrection of the just and unjust; the final judgment; and, of course, the Second Advent. Their occasional claims to the contrary notwithstanding, this view patently deviates from historic Christian (not to mention Protestant) orthodoxy; and many of the Hymenaens are content to acknowledge their clear divergence from historic Christian orthodoxy while arguing that they are only adhering to the Reformers' dictum of sola scriptura in their theological formulations, and suggesting that we orthodox are inconsistent in our commitment to creedal Christianity. While there is some variation among the Hymenaens, they tend to define the Second Advent as a non-physical event, and are forced to depict the final resurrection in patently non-corporeal terms--or else they argue that at death we saints receive the only "resurrection" body we'll ever have. This obviously is not a resurrection, but a replacement. Much of the entire Biblical picture of the resurrection, judgment and the Second Advent they de-corporealize ("spiritualize"), in a somewhat docetic fashion. They steal the believer's hope in the resurrection and glorification of his present body, and recognizing the latter's continuity with Christ's resurrection body (1 Cor. 15), often revise the orthodox definition of Christ's resurrection.

Especially disturbing was the newsletter's comment: " The [Ligonier] conference and seminar combined will produce thousands of new Partial Preterists, many of whom will eventually go all the way into the [full] Preterist view, and start new study groups and preterist churches.

Some of them will attend our [Hymenaen] seminar as well. The impact is going to be far-reaching. This is the BIGGEST opportunity for the advancement of the Preterist cause yet" (emphasis in original). Even discounting the propagandistic tone of this statement, it reflects a conscious attempt to proselytize believers to the cause of a demonstrably heretical viewpoint. The Hymenaens contend that there is an irresistible logic to their exegetico-theological paradigm, according to which the assignment of **any** passages expressing Christ's coming or appearance to A. D. 70 presses to the conclusion that **all** of them must be so interpreted.

While I may dispute this notion (partial preterist orthodox eschatologists like Kenneth Gentry certainly do), it does have some appeal to the sincere but unwary and untrained believers, and it is these who concern me. Hymenaenism seems to have gained a recent hearing chiefly by means of the reprint of Russell's heretical **The Parousia** and the promotion by Great Christian Books (founded by Walt Hibbard - TDD) of various smaller works taking the Hymenaen line. A clear primitivist impulse is detectable in this heresy, and a number of its adherents, I hear, were schooled in the "creedless" Church of Christ denomination. This, I believe, accounts for their aversion to either any grasp of or commitment to historical theological continuity; their pronounced naiveté in charging that we orthodox eschatologists do not operate in the *sola scriptura* spirit of the Reformers (few could be other than willingly ignorant of the Reformers' unquestioned dedication to the cardinal outline of inherited medieval orthodoxy); and their obliviousness to anything other than an historically unconditioned reading of the text--i.e., reinventing orthodoxy on the anvil of one's own speculation in every generation. How cogently this approach has been refuted by such great Protestants as Philip Schaff, Charles Hodge, and James Orr! Moreover, the Hymenaens seem blissfully unaware that the same exegetico-theological paradigm that can on the grounds of a misguided and historically uninformed appeal to *sola scriptura* jettison orthodox eschatology can on identical grounds jettison orthodox Trinitarianism and Christology. The Hymenaen accusation that we orthodox Protestants are incrementally making our way to Rome by maintaining fidelity to the historic Christian view is less slanderous than it is silly--revealing a tragic ignorance of what the basic Reformation approach to Scripture, orthodoxy, and history really is.

Not only are the Hymenaens poor exegetes--they are poor historians.

We glory in texts like Acts 1:11, Phil. 3:20-21, Col. 3:4-5, the concluding section of each chapter of 1 Thes., Heb. 9:28, Jas. 5:7-9, 2 Pet. 3:10-13, 1 Jn. 3:2-3, and others that refer to Christ's future physical Second Advent, though I don't have space for exegesis here. We could appeal to the exegesis by orthodox eschatologists over nearly 2000 years of church history, and set it over against the recent heretical speculations of the Hymenaens.

The reason for this letter is to urge you and your speakers to denounce this heresy in the clearest possible terms, calling the church to fidelity to broad Biblical eschatology (which the Hymenaens deny) and to the Christian orthodoxy in which it is expressed (at least two of your scheduled speakers--Gentry and Mathison--have already publicly repudiated this heresy). There can be valid disagreement within the church over certain eschatological specifics--millennialism, for example. The Hymenaens contend that their disagreement with the orthodox is merely over the **timing** of eschatological events. This at best is erroneous, and at worst disingenuous. They disagree with the orthodox fundamentally over the **nature** of those events. There can be no valid disagreement among Christians over the very character of Christian eschatology--including the bodily resurrection of the just and unjust, the final judgment, and the Second Advent of our Lord.

To my knowledge, only two prominent Christian institutions have publicly, vocally

repudiated the Hymenaen heresy: Chalcedon, and the Reformed Church in the United States, which anathematized the heresy.

We urge Ligonier to join us by a public denunciation of Hymenaenism at your conference next week. We at Chalcedon, in fact, have been discussing the possibility of a West Coast conference later this year exploring the theme of Biblical authority, historic Christianity, confessionalism, and heresy; and we would, of course, address this heresy at some point at the conference.

And why is Chalcedon especially interested in publicly refuting *this* heresy? After all, in our day multitudinous heresies and heterodoxies (sadly) plague the church, and Chalcedon couldn't track down and refute them all even if we wanted to. The fact is, Hymenaenism seduced several individuals (one is speaking at the Orlando Hymenaen conference) broadly identified with Chalcedon's theological distinctives; we want to make clear our opposition to this frightful heresy. It seems especially attractive to those who recognize the folly of dispensational date-setting--an obviously simple (and simplistic) solution to the dispensational error by just wiping away any future Second Advent whatever. In the process they must affirm (and most Hymenaens do) that human history never ends, that God never decisively vanquishes sin, and that the resurrection of the body is not a real resurrection. This is a heavy price to pay for an apparently cheap solution to the errors of dispensationalism.

Chalcedon is unabashedly postmillennial. Thus, we--like all other orthodox institutions--affirm the future bodily resurrection of the just and unjust, the final judgment, and the Second Advent of Christ. One need not adopt Hymenaenism in order to be a consistent anti-dispensationalist and postmillennialist--and, indeed, can be neither if he is a Hymenaen.

I'm having my administrative assistant send you a copy of the July, 1997 CHALCEDON REPORT which deals somewhat in depth with the Hymenaen heresy. In addition, I'm scheduled to lecture in Tampa and Naples the weekend of Feb. 26, and may be addressing some of these issues.

May God grant success in your conference as you articulate Biblical eschatology and defend the Faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Yours for Christ's Kingdom,

Andrew Sandlin
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