

Dispensationalism — Imminency

“Thus delay of the parousia is not a theological concern for Paul. It is not an embarrassment for him; it does not compel him to shift the center of his attention from apocalyptic imminence to a form of “realized eschatology,” that is, to a conviction of the full presence of the kingdom of God in our present history. It is of the essence of his faith in Christ that adjustments in his expectations can occur without a surrender of these expectations (1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15:15–51; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 2:21–24). Indeed, the hope in God’s imminent rule through Christ remains the constant in his letters from beginning to end....”

—— J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 49.

The Doctrine of Imminency: Is It Biblical?

Dr. Gerald Stanton

The primary thought expressed by imminency is that something important is likely to happen, and could do so without delay. While it may not be immediate nor necessarily soon, it is next on the program and may take place at any time. If the event is evil or potentially dangerous we would call it impending for it is threatening to occur. But if it is an event full of hope and joyful expectation we express it by the noun imminence or the adjective imminent. Among believers, these words normally relate to the possible soon coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to catch up His Church in that happy and monumental event called the Rapture.

The word imminent should not be confused with immanent which means in theological language that God is not only transcendent, far above us, but that He is always with us and active on our behalf. Nor should it be confused with eminent a title of honor usually reserved for a king or other person of outstanding distinction. Imminence is used to describe the coming of Jesus Christ for His Church, the Rapture experience, and to declare that it is next on the prophetic program of God.

Actually, the term imminency normally implies three important truths concerning our Lord's coming:

(1) While no one knows the time of Christ's return, He may come at any moment and it is possible that He might come today. It is this hope which keeps the Church singing:

"Jesus may come today. Glad day! Glad day!

And I would see my friend!

Dangers and troubles would end,

If Jesus should come today."

Similarly we sing with expectation:

"Jesus is coming to earth again.

What if it were today?"

In the midst of all the trials and sorrows of life, it is the hope of Christ's imminent return which never fails to encourage the troubled heart.

(2) The Rapture is signless, and will be unannounced and largely unexpected. It is next on the revealed program of God, and is so presented in the Scripture that every generation may enjoy the hope, challenge and other blessings of His appearing. We are all exhorted to watch but no one can know the day nor the hour when the Bridegroom will come (Matt. 25:13).

(3) No clearly prophesied event must transpire prior to the Rapture, for this might date the time of His coming. If the return of Christ for His Church is imminent, then obviously it will be before the coming period of Tribulation with its clearly predicted signs and judgments. In theological language, the Rapture of the Church must be Pretribulational. We do not first look for an invasion of the Holy Land by Russia or some other northern confederation, nor the revelation of Antichrist and his godless ambitions, nor the predicted Battle of Armageddon with its vast devastation. We look next for

the coming of Christ from heaven to take His own to the Father's house (John 14:1-3), and the Bible calls this our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).

It is this which gives such great importance to our speaking of the "imminent return of Christ." We believe that the Bible teaches clearly that the Rapture of the Church will take place before the coming Great Tribulation, the time of the outpoured wrath of God. This has become the cherished hope of a vast number of Christian people, especially those of conservative theology and Premillennial expectation. Which is why those of Posttribulational persuasion oppose it so vigorously.

WHY DO WE BELIEVE IN THE IMMINENT RETURN OF CHRIST?

There are a number of reasons. (1) First, we see clearly that the Rapture is not identical with the Revelation, commonly called the Second Coming of Christ. There are some obvious differences. The Rapture relates to the Church, when the dead in Christ shall rise and the living will be translated to meet the Lord in the air (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16-17). It expresses hope and a warm spirit of expectancy (1 Thess. 1:10), all of which should result in a victorious and purified life (1 John 3:2-3).

On the other hand, the Second Coming of Christ does not deal primarily with the saint but with the sinner. When Christ returns to earth, Armageddon must be terminated (Rev. 19:17-18), the Beast and the False Prophet will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 19:19-20), Satan shall be bound in the abyss (Rev. 20:1-3), the nations of earth will be gathered and judged (Matt. 25:31-46), and Israel, which has gone through deep trial, will now behold and put their trust in Christ, their true Messiah (Zech. 12:10; Rom. 11:26-27).

(2) There is a vast difference in the language used for these two events. While both relate to the endtime and both describe actions on the part of Christ, early believers were taught to look for the Savior (Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:13). "Unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28). Likewise, they were to wait for God's Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:10). They were to watch and be sober (1 Thess. 5:6), and to comfort one another with the hope of Christ's coming (1 Thess. 4:18). These frequent exhortations caused them to believe that the return of Christ was imminent.

Paul seemed to include himself among those who looked for Christ's return (1 Thess. 4:15, 17; 2 Thess. 2:1). Timothy was exhorted to "keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 6:14). Jewish converts were reminded that "yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (Heb. 10:37). Many have concluded that the expectation of some was so strong they had ceased their work and had to be exhorted to return to their labors (2 Thess. 3:10-12), and all were exhorted to have patience (James 5:8). Finally, John concluded the book of Revelation and closed the canon of Scripture with the glad cry: "He which testifies these things says, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). Such Scriptures form the very foundation for the widely acclaimed hope of Christ's imminent return.

How very different is the language of the Second Advent when Christ returns to deal with the unbelief and rebellion of the wicked. In that day, He will "in flaming fire take vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:8). Failure to distinguish Rapture from Revelation has become a major source of confusion among the various schools of eschatology.

(3) Imminency has been the consistent belief of evangelical Christians down through the centuries. While theological terms such as trinity, theophany, imminency, inerrancy and premillennial developed gradually over the centuries, it is clear that although they did not use the term, imminency was indeed the expectation of the Apostolic Church.

John F. Walvoord, a prime authority in the field of Bible eschatology, forcefully states and illustrates this truth:

"The central feature of pretribulationism, the doctrine of imminency, is, however, a prominent feature of the doctrine of the early church ... [which] lived in constant expectation of the coming of the Lord for His church." [1]

He then quotes the Didache dated about 100-120 A.D., which contains the exhortation:

"Watch for your life's sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ye ready, for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh." [2]

Adolph Harnack, although a member of the liberal theological school, out of sheer honesty as an historian, has written:

"In the history of Christianity three main forces are found to have acted as auxiliaries to the gospel. They have elicited the ardent enthusiasm of men whom the bare preaching of the gospel would never have made decided converts. These [include] a belief in the speedy return of Christ and in His glorious reign on earth First in point of time came the faith in

the nearness of Christ's second advent and the establishing of His reign of glory on the earth. Indeed it appears so early that it might be questioned whether it ought not to be regarded as an essential part of the Christian religion." [3]

Jesse Forest Silver, in his excellent book *The Lord's Return* has written of the Apostolic Fathers:

„They expected the return of the Lord in their day They believed the time was imminent because their Lord had taught them to live in a watchful attitude." And concerning the Ante- Nicene Fathers, he says: "By tradition they knew the faith of the Apostles. They taught the doctrine of the imminent and premillennial return of the Lord." [4]

It is generally agreed that the Christian Church of the first three centuries was Premillennial, although the common term used was Chiliasm, from the Greek chiliad meaning "thousand." It is less clear when the concept of Christ's soon return was first explicitly stated as imminent which is a theological word rather than a Biblical. Richard Reiter has traced it to the Niagara Bible Conference of 1878, and more specifically to the five resolutions of the first general American Bible and prophetic conference held in New York City the same year. Article 3 stated: "This second coming of the Lord is everywhere in the Scriptures represented as imminent, and may occur at any moment." [5] However, among the Niagara delegates arose three different definitions of imminent (1) Christ may appear at any moment, but this will be understood only by the final generation of the Church (A. J. Gordon). (2) Christ could return within the lifetime of any individual generation of believers (Samuel H. Kellogg). (3) "Imminent" requires "the coming of Christ for his saints as possible any hour" (Arthur T. Pierson).

While this third "any moment" view was evidently dominant at Niagara, the years that followed brought some harsh disputes, especially by Canadian pastor, Robert Cameron and Presbyterian theologian Nathaniel West, both of whom defended the Posttribulational view. Their position was opposed by men like Lutheran minister, George N. H. Peters; Congregational pastor, C. I. Scofield; Presbyterian missionary spokesman, Arthur T. Pierson; and Arno C. Gaebelein, editor of *Our Hope* all of whom became strong champions of the Pretribulational position. Ultimately, most Posttribs gave up the concept of imminency, and "Pretribulationism emerged as the dominant view of the Rapture within American premillennialism." [6]

While most Posttribulationists now vigorously repudiate imminency, it is significant that one of their number, J. Barton Payne, just as vigorously asserts that it was a major belief of the early Christian Church. He even names his book on the subject *The Imminent Appearing of Christ!* [7]

When one studies the New Testament Rapture passages and the exhortations to look watch and wait for Christ's coming, it is easy to see why so many of the Lord's people believe in and proclaim the doctrine of imminency. The expression has been incorporated into the doctrinal statement of many evangelical churches and missionary agencies. Indeed, it forms part of the basic doctrine of many excellent Christian colleges and theological seminaries throughout the world. The great expectation of the Church is to look for Christ and not Antichrist!

However, at this point there is still considerable disagreement among students of prophecy. Among those of Premillennial persuasion, actually five different views have been proposed, frequently spoken of as Pretrib, Midtrib, Posttrib, Partial Rapture, and Pre-wrath Rapture. While all of these may be evangelical and some are held by prophetic scholars, the five views are mutually exclusive and all but one must be considered in error. Except possibly for some of the Partial Rapturists, only the Pretribulationist believes in the imminent return of Christ. It is here proposed that this is the true and thoroughly defensible view of the Christian Church.

THE ATTACK AGAINST THE DOCTRINE OF IMMINENCY

Since imminency is one way of stating that the Church of Jesus Christ will be caught up in the Rapture before the coming Tribulation, most of the opposition to this doctrine stems from the Posttribulational camp. Probably the most extended attack against imminency came in 1922 from the pen of Robert Cameron. In his book, *Scripture Truth About The Lord's Return* he fills at least one- third of its volume with this very argument. [8]

It is not our purpose here to review all of his arguments and give a considered rebuttal. This has already been accomplished in our defence of the Pretribulational Rapture, *Kept From The Hour*, in the chapter entitled "The Imminency of the Coming of Christ for the Church." [9] In considerable detail, we have presented all of Cameron's arguments against imminency and answered these objections. We have examined the hope of the early Church as set forth in the New Testament and the imminent return as an incentive to holiness. To the present time, none have attacked imminency more vigorously than Cameron, and we believe that his objections have been answered fairly and convincingly.

However, in recent months the attack against imminency has been renewed from a new and unexpected quarter. Mary Rosenthal, an evangelical and Premillennial brother in the field of Jewish evangelism, has recently rejected the Pretribulational position which he previously taught and defended during most of his ministry. Said he:

"I was a convinced, sincere, unbending, and, in retrospect, to my shame, intolerant pretribulation rapturist for thirty-five years. My pretribulation position was widely known. I had preached it with conviction and sincerity around the world." [10]

But under the prodding of a "persistent friend" (former publisher, Robert Van Kampen), who phoned him "long-distance... almost daily for three months," and after much personal study, he renounced the Pretrib Rapture position and wrote and published a new and surprisingly novel view, called The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church. [11]

Typical of all those who argue that the Church must go through the Great Tribulation, he strongly renounced imminency and with frequent abrasiveness and much repetition, he argued for a Rapture placed between the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord. This, to Rosenthal, will be three-fourths of the way through Daniel's seventieth week, and identified with the "innumerable multitude" of Revelation 7:9-17.

Concerning imminency he declares that it is "invalid," an "insolvable problem" which "crumbles" and "is once again destroyed." This doctrine is a "false hope" which cannot "in the early Church be sustained." "The student of the Word will search in vain for exegetical evidence." "Pretribulation rapturism is once again mortally wounded," etc., etc., a most annoying repetition. [12]

He continues to defend his new prophetic views in a well published bi-monthly magazine called Zion's Fire and it is there in the Aug.-Sept. 1990 issue that he asks the question, "Is the Return of Christ Imminent?" and launches his major attack. He endeavors to trace Pretribulationism back to John Darby in the year 1830, and ultimately to "a charismatic, visionary woman, named Margaret MacDonald." Such claims have been frequently answered. He discusses his view of the Day of the Lord, and repeatedly attacks the "unproven concept of imminence." In place of "imminency" he prefers the word "expectancy," arguing that "Christ can come during any generation of history." But first the Church must go through the Great Tribulation, which he waters down by calling it merely "a period of great difficulty."

Surprisingly, however, in a major article which includes fourteen full columns of type, he can name only five objections to the doctrine of imminency, four of these contained in one short para- graph. These should now be stated and evaluated.

ROSENTHAL'S FIVE OBJECTIONS TO IMMINENCY

(1) Says he: "There is no historical evidence to demonstrate that the early church believed in an any-moment Rapture." But the evidence is right within the New Testament. They were instructed to look, watch, and wait for His coming, and to comfort one another with this happy expectation (1 Thess. 4:18). It would have been small comfort to believe they must first go through raging Tribulation and probably die at the hands of the Beast (Rev. 13:7). Such exhortations would have lost all significance if many years of unparalleled death and destruction must first intervene.

It is important to note that the writings of a great many early Church leaders demonstrate they did believe that Christ's return might be very soon. In addition to the hope so clearly expressed in the Didache we read in the First Epistle of Clement written about 96 A.D., "Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, 'Speedily will He come, and will not tarry.'" Also, "The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One for whom ye look."

In the Second Epistle of Clement we read "Let us every hour expect the kingdom of God in love and righteousness, because we know not the day of the Lord's appearing." And in the Epistle of Barnabas "The Lord has cut short the times and the days that His Beloved may hasten"; also "The Lord is near, and His reward." Similarly, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, refers to "the last times" and exhorts in those times to "expect Him." Clement of Rome (c. 40-100 A.D.) preached the coming of Christ, and according to George N. H. Peters expressed the hope "that He shall come quickly and not tarry." [13] Crippen, in his History of Doctrine declares in summary: "The early Fathers lived in expectation of our Lord's speedy return."

The coming of Christ has long been the hope and expectation of great spiritual leaders such as John Wesley (1703-91), the father of Methodism, who fixed no dates but was always watchful for the Lord's return. He was hardly expecting to pass through seven years of raging Tribulation when he wrote:

"Perhaps He will appear as the dayspring from on high, before the morning light. Oh, do not set a time -- expect Him every hour. Now He is nigh, even at the doors. [14]

In his day, even Luther declared:

"I believe that all the signs which are to precede the last days have already appeared. Let us not think that the Coming of Christ is far off; let us look up with heads lifted up; let us expect our Redeemer's coming with longing and cheerful mind."

And Calvin wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion

"Scripture uniformly enjoins us to look with expectation for the advent of Christ."

To which hope Latimer (c.1485-1555) responded:

"All those excellent and learned men, whom, without doubt, God has sent into the world in these latter days to give the world warning, do gather out of the Scriptures that the last days cannot be far off. Peradventure it may come in my day, old as I am, or in my children's days." [15]

Furthermore, in the Shepherd of Hermas dated about 100-120 A.D., in a vision Hermas was told, "You have escaped from the great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of the beast..." [16] These quotations demonstrate clearly that the early Church not only looked for Christ and His Kingdom, but also expected His coming to be soon and even before the Tribulation. While we are not saying that the early Church fathers, or even the Reformers, knew the details of eschatology or were always consistent, it is a monumental error to declare that the concept of imminency was not found in the apostolic Church, but first appeared in the nineteenth century.

(2) Next, Rosenthal declares that the early Church could not believe in imminence because "the gospel had to be preached throughout the world before Christ could return (Acts 1:8)." But we must remember the tremendous missionary impetus of the early Church.

"When the vitality and zeal of Paul and other early converts, with their world-shaking testimony (Acts 17:6), is remembered, together with the size of the then-inhabited world (grown yet smaller by the unifying influence of Roman rule and Roman roads), it must be confessed that world evangelism was a greater possibility in Paul's day than in ours." [17]

(3) "Peter was to live to be an old man (Jn. 21:18-19). For the early church, that precluded an any-moment Rapture." This argument, borrowed from Cameron, is readily answered. Peter himself encouraged believers to look for the coming of the Lord, calling those who did not do so "willingly ignorant" (2 Pet. 4:3-5). He knew that he might die suddenly (2 Pet. 1:14), and Herod had just killed James and seized Peter with the same intention (Acts 12:1-3). Certainly believers expected Peter's early death, for when Rhoda bore the news of his release, they said "Thou art mad," and when he appeared to them "they were astonished" (Acts 12:15-16).

They had no concept that his would be a long life, and as they looked for the Savior they certainly did not run around asking, "I wonder if Peter is dead yet?" Actually, the passage in question which recorded Christ's conversation with Peter, John 21:18, could not have been a factor in their thinking, for it was not written and sent to the churches until twenty or more years after the death of Peter.

(4) "The Temple was to be destroyed before Christ returned (Mt. 24:1-3). For the early church, that precluded an any-moment Rapture." But in this passage, Christ was not discussing the Rapture or the Church age, for the Spirit had not yet come nor had the Church been established. He was teaching about the Inter-advent Age, that period between the first and the second coming of the King, and the affairs that concerned Israel. He predicted the destruction of the Temple, a fact accomplished in 70 A.D. under the Roman, Titus. But there is nothing in this prophecy which relates the destruction of the Temple to the timing of the Rapture, nor vaguely suggests that it must happen first.

(5) "Antichrist will make a covenant with Israel to protect her for seven years" (Dan. 9:27). From 70 A.D. to May 14, 1948 "no Jewish nation or representative government existed An any-moment Rapture, therefore, was not possible before the modern state of Israel was resurrected out of the ashes of the Second World War."

Now this may sound plausible until it is more fully considered. The prophecy does not say that the covenant will be made with the nation, Israel, but simply with "many." Nor can we assume that Daniel's prophecy, "shut up and sealed. .. to the time of the end" (Dan. 12:4) was known and sufficiently understood by early Christians to cause them to look for the reestablishment of Israel prior to the coming of the Lord. It is obvious that they did not. In addition, Daniel was writing concerning the coming Antichrist and a covenant to be made during the last of the "seventy weeks." Since the catching up of the Church occurs before the seventieth week, an event which takes place during the Tribulation has absolutely no bearing on the timing of the Rapture.

It is not a question whether we now understand this ancient prophecy, especially in the light of the book of Revelation. The question is whether that prophecy was so clearly understood that it destroyed the hope and expectation of the Church throughout the centuries. It is obvious that it did not, just as so many of us looked for the Lord from heaven many years before Israel became a nation in 1948. If Daniel's prophecy did not destroy our daily looking for Christ's coming during our own lifetime, why should it have destroyed hope and expectation in any lifetime? Can it be that Rosenthal's argument is simply a straw man set up in an attempt to protect an erroneous eschatology?

We must conclude that imminency and Pretribulationism are intimately related, for the first is part of the evidence for the second. The difference is primarily a matter of focus. The word Pretribulationism focuses on the fact that the true Church of

Jesus Christ will be caught up to the Father's House before the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7), before the "great day of God's wrath" (Rev. 6:16-17). The focus of the word imminency is upon Christ and His possible soon coming. We are not looking for signs or the fulfillment of other prophetic events. We are looking for Christ Himself.

His coming is next on the revealed program of God, and it may be near at hand. Hence we look and watch and wait for our Lord from heaven. This is our bright and blessed hope, far higher and more in keeping with Scripture than looking for Antichrist and the tragic years of the coming Tribulation. Praise God, we have been delivered from the wrath to come (2 Thess. 1:10; 5:9), and the next voice we shall hear from heaven will call us home!

[1] John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question Revised and Enlarged Edition*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1979, 51.

[2] Ante-Nicene Fathers VII: 382.

[3] Adolph Harnack, "Millennium," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (ninth edition), XVI, 314.

[4] Jesse Forest Silver, *The Lord's Return*, Fleming H. Revell Co., New York, 1914, 62-63.

[5] Cited by Richard R. Reiter, "A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions," *The Rapture Pre- Mid- or Post-Tribulation?* Archer, Feinberg, Moo and Reiter, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1984, 12.

[6] Reiter, *op.cit.* 22.

[7] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1962.

[8] Robert Cameron, *Scripture Truth About The Lord's Return*. Fleming H. Revell Co., New York, 1922, pp. 21-69.

[9] Gerald B. Stanton, "The Imminency of the Coming of Christ for the Church," *Kept From The Hour* (revised and enlarged edition), 1991, pp. 108-37, Schoettle Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1246, Haysville, N. C., 28904.

[10] Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1990, 317 pages, 18.

[11] Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1990, 317 pages, 18.

[12] Rosenthal, *op.cit.* 54, 150, 158-9, 174, 197, 282.

[13] George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (3 vol.), reprint by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1952. This massive work on the known beliefs of the early Fathers is quoted extensively by Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, IV, 270-75, as he surveys the history of Chiliasm.

[14] John Wesley, cited by Jesse Forest Silver, *The Lord's Return* Fleming H. Revell Co., 1914, 162.

[15] The above quotations of Crippen, Luther, Calvin and Latimer come from I. M. Haldeman, *The History of the Doctrine of Our Lord's Return*, and are cited by Chafer, *op.cit.* IV, 275-79.

[16] For additional discussion of this early and important quotation, see *Kept From The Hour*, 221-22.

[17] *Ibid.*, 119.

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