THE IMMINENT RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST

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The subject of the return of Jesus Christ has been a highly controversial one in conservative Protestant circles. Basically, the divergence of opinion can be traced to different hermeneutical principles which have led to the premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial views. But there are more than these three views on the return of Christ. The premillennial camp, itself, is divided into at least four contrasting positions based upon different answers given to one fundamental question: when will the rapture of the church take place? Thus, we have pretribulationism, midtribulationism, posttribulationism, and the partial rapture view.

Why are there so many views advocated by God's people and by competent Bible scholars? What causes these differences? Both Walvoord, a pretribulationist, and Ladd, a posttribulationist, admit that their respective positions are not explicitly taught in Scripture.[1] Both tenaciously affirm that the Scriptures teach the personal, visible return of Jesus Christ, but at the same time, they both agree that the exact time is nowhere explicitly stated. They have arrived at their respective positions through honest attempts at the harmonization of the Scriptural passages dealing with the subject. This fact, no doubt, accounts for some of the differences. Ignorance or misunderstanding of an opposing position is another reason. Ladd misrepresents the pretribulationist position on the removal of the restrainer, the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:6-7) when he argues that it is absurd to think that the Jewish remnant without the indwelling Spirit could do a better job of evangelism in the Great Tribulation than the church is doing in the present age.[2] The omnipresent Spirit will be in the world during that period, convicting, regenerating, and indwelling men. Generalizations, or equating the views of an individual with an entire system, are another reason. Advocates of the same position may disagree on the interpretation of certain passages. Wood sees two comings in the Olivet Discourse (the rapture in Matt. 24:32-25:30, and the revelation in Matt. 24:4-31; 25:31-46),[3] whereas many other pretribulationists would recognize only one.

All of these various views have a direct bearing on the present subject: Is the return of Jesus Christ imminent? Could He come at any moment? Could He come today? The purposes of this study will be to relate these various views to the problem of imminency, to present the arguments against imminency, to evaluate these arguments, and to set forth support for imminency.

The various views on the imminent return of Jesus Christ can be divided into two general classifications. There are those who deny imminency and those who advocate imminency.

VIEWS AGAINST IMMINENCY

There are at least five views that deny imminency, and these are distributed among the three millennial positions.

Liberal, neo-orthodox view.--There has been a resurgence of thinking on the part of both liberal and neo-orthodox theologians on the subject of the return of Christ. This is evident by the several books produced on the subject: Emil Brunner, Eternal Hope; H. H. Rowley, The Relevance of the Apocalyptic; and Paul Minear, Christian Hope and the Second Coming. However, because of their tendency to spiritualize a literal second coming, Walvoord says that liberal and neo-orthodox theologians "contribute nothing to the rapture question,"[4] and consequently nothing to the question of imminency.

Amillennialism.--As a general rule, amillennialists believe in the personal, visible return of Jesus Christ, but deny the imminency of that event. Berkhof, in denying imminency, believes that these events will precede the coming of Christ: calling of Gentiles or world-wide evangelization, conversion of Israel (elect remnant, not the nation), the great apostasy and the great tribulation, the revelation of the Antichrist, and the appearance of signs and wonders.[5] Allis is not as explicit as Berkhof. Although he expresses a distaste for the phrase, "any moment" return, Allis appears to be ambiguous on the doctrine. He asserts that Christ may come today, tomorrow or not within the lifetime of this generation or of many future generations; but he confidently affirms that the task of world evangelism must take place before Christ can come.[6] Allis further recognizes the similarity between the amillennial position and belief in imminency in this statement:

> And it is important to keep in mind that the view of those Amillennialists, who believe in a spiritual millennium which is past or nearly past, and of those Amillennialists who do not believe in any earthly millennium at all, may appropriate very closely to that of Premillennialists regarding the imminence of the coming.[7]

Although there may be an approximation on the part of some amillennialists toward imminency, this does not constitute belief in imminency, as premillennialists define it. This system, as a whole, must be characterized as denying imminency.

Postmillennialism.--In the nineteenth century, postmillennialism was the favored system. However, two world wars and a universal depression obliterated the system. In spite of this, there remain some Biblical scholars who embrace this position with its attendant denial of imminency. Boettner, after admitting the possibility that Christ might return in the comparatively near future, says, "In view of present conditions, however, there seems to be little or nothing in the Scriptures to warrant the notion that Jesus will return within the lifetime of the present generation."[8] This is the only conclusion that a postmillennialist could make in the light of the present, terrible, world conditions.

Midtribulationism.--This view identifies the great tribulation with the last half of Daniel's

70th week (Dan. 9:24-27). The church will experience the first 3 1/2 years of that seven year period, a time of relative peace and safety, but it will not go through the wrath of the second half. It will be raptured in the middle of the seven year period. This view retains the two phases of the coming of Christ, but it necessarily denies the imminency of the rapture. Its most popular advocate, Norman B. Harrison, writes,

> We see from the Scriptures that Christ could not have returned in the lifetime of Peter; nor yet in the days of the Apostles; nor yet before the Reformation; nor yet before the missionary program is completed; nor yet before the apostasy has overtaken us; nor yet before the last days in which we seem to be living.[9]

Posttribulationism.--The most ardent foe of dispensationalism, of premillennial pretribulationism, and of imminency among contemporary evangelicals is posttribulationism. This seems to be the position embraced by the new evangelicalism. This view teaches that the church will go through the Great Tribulation and that it will be raptured as the Lord Jesus returns to the earth after the tribulation. All of the events of the Great Tribulation must take place before the Lord returns. This negates imminency. George Ladd, the key spokesman for this group feels that only one passage (Rev. 20) explicitly states that the church will go through the Great Tribulation.[10] Yet he rejects pretribulationism as an inference and a prophetic innovation of the nineteenth century.[11] Walvoord says that posttribulationists "labor either to deny imminency or to invest the word with a different meaning which does not require immediacy. Their denial of imminence is a major aspect of their argument against pretribulationism."[12]

VIEWS FOR IMMINENCY

Pretribulationism.--The major proponents of the imminent return of Jesus Christ are those who believe in the pretribulation rapture of the church. This view is based upon the premillennial, dispensational approach to Scripture. Walvoord cites fifty arguments for pretribulationism.[13] Included among these are the nature of the church, the nature of the Great Tribulation, the present ministry of the Holy Spirit, historical precedents, hermeneutical principles, the necessity of intervening events between the rapture and the return of Christ to the earth, and imminency. This view teaches that Christ can come at any moment to rapture His church. Some feel that this event would usher in the day of the Lord and the Great Tribulation, but others feel that there may be a lapse of time between the rapture and the beginning of the Great Tribulation.

Partial rapture view.--This view is a modification of the strict pretribulation position. Those Christians who are watching, looking, and loving His appearing (Luke 21:36; Heb. 9:27-28; 2 Tim. 4:8) will be taken by the Lord when He returns for His own. This can take place at any time. However, if a Christian is indifferent toward the Lord's return, he will not be taken, but will be left on earth to go through the Great Tribulation. The Rapture, then, is a reward to the faithful. One key advocate is G. H. Lang of England.

Posttribulationism.--At first glance, the appearance of posttribulationism in this category

may seem to be a mistake, but actually posttribulationism provides us with a paradox. Pentecost is partially wrong when he says, "The posttribulationist must deny the doctrine of imminence . . ."[14] He is right if all posttribulationists consistently hold to the futurist interpretation, but not all do. Payne embodies "the strong points of all three methods of prophetic interpretation: historical, futurist, and past (or preterist), and in so doing to maintain the doctrine of the imminence of Christ's appearing."[15] He commends pretribulationism for maintaining imminency, but criticizes it for its innovation of a secret rapture, thus dividing the single coming of Christ into two phases. He commends posttribulationism for maintaining the singleness of the event, but he criticizes it for its loss of imminency. Payne's position, then, is both posttribulational and imminent. He says that this was the position of the early church and of the reformers. Other key advocates of this position are A. J. Gordon, Leon Morris, and Harold John Ockenga.[16] Payne identifies the posttribulational objections to imminence, such as long range prophecies and the Great Tribulation, as antecedents to the Lord's return which are potentially and presently being fulfilled. He writes,

> If Christ should come back today (pray God), we would have the final proof that they have been historically fulfilled; but if He should not, His delay might well be because of a need for their more complete fulfillment in days that are still future.[17]

The tribulation, then, is not a literal seven year period. If Christ should come today, the Antichrist would probably be identified as the Russian or Chinese premier. As the early church identified the Antichrist with the Roman emperor and the Great Tribulation with the imperial persecutions, and as the Reformers identified the Antichrist with the Pope and the Great Tribulation with the Catholic persecutions, so we may do the same today. They believed that Christ could come at any time to deliver them from their persecutions; so should we today, says Payne.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST IMMINENCY

The following list of arguments against imminency has been compiled from several sources. It should not be supposed that every one who denies imminency would necessarily embrace each argument. These are simply arguments which, at one time or another, have been put forth against imminency.

Necessity of Intervening Events

These are events which have to take place before the Lord could possibly return. Some of these were fulfilled during the apostolic era; others took centuries to be fulfilled; and a few still are future.

Death of Peter.--During His post-resurrection ministry, Christ declared to Peter, "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. Now this he spake, signifying by what manner of death he should glorify

God" (John 21:18-19). Peter, late in his life, made reference to this prediction (2 Peter 1:14-15). The argument is that Christ could not have come until Peter had become old and had died. This would delay Christ's coming until at least A.D. 65-68, the traditional date of Peter's martyrdom.

Pentecost replies,

> Such argument fails to see that the very men who received such announcements themselves believed that what would be the natural course of history could be interrupted by the translation of the believers out of the sphere in which history unfolds and held to the imminent return.[18]

Walvoord believes that the prophecy of John 21 was not generally known until after the Gospel was written. If it had been known, the dangers of martyrdom and the lack of communication would leave the believers wondering whether Peter was still alive; thus their hope could still have been imminent.[19] Wood argues,

> Hence, it is true that so long as Peter lived, Jesus could not come. But it should be noted that this only provided a definite end-time in connection with Peter, not one of duration as to how long he would still live. And it is the latter which is necessary for the point of the post-tribulationists. For who knew how long it would be before Peter would die? The death of Peter was imminent, just as is the death of any person. It could occur at any time. Hence, Christ's coming was just as imminent.[20]

Peter, apparently, was middle-aged at this time because he was neither young nor old (John 21:18). Since the life span was relatively short in New Testament times, he would have been old in just a few years. After Pentecost, Peter faced immediate persecution and possible loss of life (Acts 4, 5, 8, 12). His death <u>was</u> imminent; therefore Christ's coming was just as imminent.

<u>Evangelization of the world.</u>--Christ commissioned the disciples and the church to "make disciples of all the nations, "to go "into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation," and to be witnesses of Him from Jerusalem to the uttermost part of the earth (Matt. 28: 19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). This extensive program of evangelization would involve a great deal of time and effort; therefore, Christ could not come until the church had fulfilled her commission. Ladd writes,

> Christ is tarrying until the Church has completed its task. When Matthew 24:14 has been fulfilled, then Christ will come. . . . The world is nearly evangelized; <u>any generation which is really dedicated to the task can complete the mission</u>. The Lord can come in our own generation, in our life-time--if we stir ourselves and finish our task.[21]

Walvoord feels that the extensive preaching of the apostolic era may have satisfied the

great commission.[22] It is true that on the day of Pentecost devout Jews "from every nation under heaven" heard Peter preach and apparently received Christ (Acts 2:5). If they went back to their respective countries and proclaimed the gospel message, would this not fulfill Christ's commission? Did the commission involve geographical areas or specific individuals? Must every person in the world hear the gospel at least once before Christ can come? If this be so, there have been millions in the past who died without having heard of Jesus Christ. Could the commission ever be fulfilled if this were the case? At Thessalonica, during Paul's first trip to Europe, the opponents cried, "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also" (Acts 17:6). Paul had not yet visited Berea, Athens, or Corinth. Paul told the Colossians that the gospel "was preached in all creation under heaven" (Col. 1:23 cf. 1:6). So then, there is good Scriptural support for believing that the commission was fulfilled in the apostolic era, possibly very early. Even Ladd admits that a dedicated generation could complete the task. Was there a more dedicated generation than the apostolic era?

Plan and content of Paul's ministry.--Christ commissioned Paul to be a witness unto Gentiles, kings, and Israel and to suffer great things (Acts 9:15-16). Paul had long distance plans for his missionary journeys (Rom. 15:24). He knew that he would reach Rome (Acts 23:11). Late in life, he even predicted his own death (2 Tim. 4:6). Does this not negate a belief in imminency on the part of Paul?

Walvoord makes this mild concession:

> That Paul should receive specific revelation immediately before his death that he would die rather than be translated may have removed the imminency of the Lord's return for him in his last days but no more.[23]

Wood feels that this type of argument is "intangible" because there is no indication as to how much he would experience and how long it would last.[24] Paul wanted to go to Bithynia too, but the Spirit stopped him (Acts 16:7). Just because he planned a trip to Spain does not prove that the Lord had to delay His coming until then. In Paul's mind, the Spirit could stop him again, the Lord's return could interrupt his plans, or imprisonment and/or death could prevent it.

Destruction of Jerusalem.--Jerusalem was to be destroyed before the second advent of Christ to the earth (Luke 21:20-24). Since Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, Christ could not have come before then. However, this argument is only relevant if it is assumed that Christ's coming has but one phase. This is logically unacceptable. The destruction of Jerusalem could have been delayed until after the Rapture. In fact, no one knew when Jerusalem would be destroyed. The Romans who destroyed the city in A.D. 70 were in absolute control of the city when Christ announced His return. The destruction of Jerusalem was just as imminent as His return.

Course of church history.--Harrison accepts the view that the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 prophetically reveal the course of church history.[25] This development required an extended period of time; therefore Christ could not have come during the past 1900 years. Scofield somewhat lends support to the non-imminent position by his prophetic outline of these

chapters.[26] This argument has some validity only if this interpretation is assumed to be true. It can not be absolutely demonstrated.

Apostasy and the man of sin.--In the posttribulational interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2, Payne writes that "the parousia of Christ and the accompanying rapture, or gathering together to Him, are to occur at the day of the Lord, but that the Antichrist and the other aspects of the tribulation will have to come first."[27] Both Ladd and Charles Erdman concur.[28] Ladd relates this passage to Matthew 24:31 because of the common usage of "gather together." He then compares this latter passage to 1 Thessalonians 4:16 because of the common usage of "coming," "trumpet," and "angels."[29] They argue that if the rapture occurs before the Tribulation, why did not Paul simply point out that the rapture had not yet occurred? But Paul did tell the Thessalonians that they could not be in the Day of the Lord because the man of sin had not yet been manifested. They had not missed the rapture; they had not misunderstood Paul's teaching of the imminent coming of Christ and the attendant deliverance from wrath.

Return of Israel.--Looking back over world history, Ladd concludes that Christ could not have possibly come until 1948. He states,

> . . . the Rapture of the Church is not the next event upon the prophetic calendar; it is rather the return of Israel to her land. . . . the Rapture could not take place until Israel was restored to Palestine as a nation and until there arose another emperor or king who would rule over all Europe.[30]

Parables Implying Delay

Advocates of non-imminency argue that various parables teach a long interval between the time the Lord leaves and the time He returns (e.g. Matt. 25:14-30). But what constitutes a long interval? Both Peter and Jude faced mockers who were wondering about the delay (2 Peter 3:3-4; Jude 18). If you were expecting a person at any time, any length of time would constitute a delay. The parable of wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30) involves time for growth and fulfillment, they say. But this passage deals with conditions at the end of the age, not with developing conditions throughout the period. To use their type of argument, the parable of leaven would involve practically no time at all. The character of the period, not the duration, is being emphasized.

Denial of Two Phases

This argument is directly related to the question of imminency. Pretribulationists divide the translation of the church from the return of Christ to the earth by at least seven years. Posttribulationists argue for the singleness of the event by asserting that both the translation and the return take place at the same time. They argue that the Bible knows nothing of two second comings. Payne argues that the Greek terms parousia, epiphaneia, and apokalupsis are technical terms referring to a single event. They are not non-technical terms that can be used for both the rapture and the revelation. The technical features of these terms can be seen by their usage with the definite article.[31] Ladd writes that the "Scripture nowhere asserts that

there is a Rapture which will take place before the Revelation."[32] Their argument proceeds in this way. Since there is but one second coming and it takes place after the tribulation (Matt. 24:29-31), then the rapture must take place at that time. The rapture-revelation can not be imminent because the events of the Tribulation will necessarily announce it.

Usage of "Watch"

Advocates of non-imminency argue that the command to watch does not mean to watch for something that can happen at any moment. After citing admissions of pretribulation writers that the command to watch is given to Jews in the Tribulation (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:37-39; 21:36). Ladd argues,

> . . . if pretribulationists can apply the command to watch to anyone in the midst of the Tribulation whose end can be approximately known, then they cannot object to the application of these same exhortations to the church on the ground that it is impossible for believers to watch for an event whose time can be approximately known.[33]

Ladd adds, "It is because of the uncertainty of the time, not its imminence, that we are to watch . . ."[34] In relating 1 Thessalonians 5:7-8 to Revelation 16:15, he writes, "If Christ's coming "as a thief" means a coming which is entirely unexpected, without any preceding signs, this verse should never have been written."[35] This is largely a negative argument. It is not so much a proof of non-imminency as it is a warning to pretribulationists not to push the meaning of "watch" too far.

ARGUMENTS FOR IMMINENCY

Imminency seems to be a corollary to the pretribulation rapture position; therefore every argument for this position is indirectly an argument for imminency. However, because of the limited scope of this study, only those arguments and passages that have a direct bearing on imminency will be discussed.

Explicit Teaching of Scripture

John 14:3.--During the Upper Room Discourse given by Christ to His disciples the night before He was crucified, He said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." The verb for "I come" is erchomai, present, active, indicative. This is a futuristic usage of the present tense. It "denotes an event which has not yet occurred, but which is regarded as so certain that in thought it may be contemplated as already coming to pass."[36] The choice of the present tense rather than the future in a prophetic context probably implies an ever-present possibility of fulfillment, or imminency. Payne however, relates this verse to the death of the believer on the basis of the context (13:36-37; 14:3, 6, 18).[37] His interpretation is the exception, rather than the norm.

John 21:21-23.--

> Peter therefore seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. This saying therefore went forth among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, that he should not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?

Most critics of imminency point out that Peter had to die before Christ could come. However, they fail to reveal that the early church believed Christ would come before the death of John. The Christians were not mistaken in their belief in the imminent return of Christ; they were mistaken in their dogmatism that John would not die. The translation of John before death was a possibility, but not an absolute certainty, according to Christ's own words. This is all that imminency teaches--that it could have taken place, not that it would. The fact that Peter was still alive did not detract from their belief in the imminent return of Christ; the fact that John was still alive (especially since he outlived Peter by at least 25 years) intensified that belief. Imagine the excitement of the church over the death of Peter and John's escape from that particular persecution. Imagine their increased excitement over the destruction of Jerusalem. Can the lack of written church history during this time (70-90) be attributed to the fact of their intent belief in the imminent return of Christ, especially since John was still living? It is a definite possibility.

Romans 13:11.--Paul wrote the Romans, ". . . for now is salvation nearer to us than when we first believed." To what aspect of salvation did he refer? It could not refer to the initial deliverance from the penalty of sin because this was past. It could not refer to progressive sanctification because this was now taking place in Paul's life. Although physical death in a certain sense delivers a believer from the presence of sin, yet Paul was not anticipating death at this time. It must refer to that final act of salvation, the redemption of the body, which Paul discussed earlier in the letter (8:23). Since the redemption of the body will take place at the return of Christ, Paul viewed this event as near or imminent (note usage of egguteron; cf. Matt. 3:2). He certainly did not project this event into the distant future.

James 5:7-9.--James told the believers that the coming of the Lord was "at hand" (ēggiken cf. Matt. 3:2) and that the judge "standeth before the doors" (hestēken, perfect, active, indicative--"He has taken his stand before the doors and could enter at any moment"). Certainly these phrases do not imply a delay in the coming of the Lord or that He is some distance away. This earliest of the New Testament books (A.D. 45-50) teaches a belief in imminency within twenty years of Christ's ascension. Paul later wrote the same truth, "The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5). Payne contributes this observation: "The doors may not open until tomorrow, or the next week, or the next millennium; but they might open at any time."[38]

1 John 2:28.--John wrote his little children to abide in Christ "that, if he shall be manifested, we may have boldness, and not be ashamed before him at his coming." The underlined words form a subjunctive clause in the Greek. Wuest writes, "The subjunctive teaches the uncertainty of the time of the rapture, therefore, its character of imminency."[39]

Revelation 22:20.--The closing prophecy and prayer of the canon reads: "He who testifieth these things saith, Yea: I come quickly. Amen: come, Lord Jesus." Both of these teach the possibility of imminent fulfillment (cf. usage of erchomai with John 14:3).

Attitude of Believers

Wait.--Believers should be "waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7). They should "wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation" (Phil. 3:20-21).

Look.--Believers should be "looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). Payne cautions us concerning the nature of the church's hope. He says that it is not that it might live unharmed through the Tribulation, nor that it might be removed from the earth before the Tribulation, nor its rapture, nor its resurrection; but its hope is the appearing of Christ and the subsequent union with Him.[40] There is an element of truth in his warning, although it must be said that part of the character of His appearing is its imminent nature.

Comfort.--Concerning the problem at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:13-18), Pentecost writes,

> If the Thessalonians had believed that the church would be going through the seventieth week they would have rejoiced that some of their brethren had missed this period of suffering and were with the Lord without experiencing the outpouring of wrath. . . . These Christians evidently believed that the church would not go through the seventieth week and in their anticipation of the return of Christ mourned for their brethren, whom they thought had missed the blessing of this event.[41]

The attitude of believers toward the return of Christ has some merit in the argument for imminency. However, a word of caution must be given here. These words expressing attitude should not be pressed too far. The believer should also look for and desire the day of the Lord which will involve the fiery destruction of this world and the introduction of the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:8-14). These events are non-imminent, and yet, they should stimulate the believer to a holy and godly life (2 Peter 3:11, 14).

Believer's Relationship to Wrath

Paul commended the Thessalonian Christians for waiting for Jesus, "who delivereth us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10). The Greek construction of this latter phrase provides an argument for imminency: Iēsoun ton hruomenon hēmas ek tēs orgēs tēs erchomenēs. A literal translation would be: "Jesus, the one who is delivering us out of the wrath, the coming one." Payne simply interprets this as a present deliverance from hell.[42] English admits that this posttribulational interpretation may be correct.[43] But why did Paul clarify this wrath as "the coming one?" The wrath of God presently abides upon the unbeliever (John 3:36). This is the wrath from which the Christian has already been delivered (John 5:24). Paul, here, is

speaking of the wrath of the Great Tribulation (note the usage of the definite articles with orgēs and erchomenēs). This coming wrath is just as imminent as the delivering return of Jesus Christ. God has not appointed us to wrath (either the wrath of hell or of the Great Tribulation), but to obtain salvation from both (1 Thess. 5:9). Ladd believes that the church will endure the wrath of men and of the Antichrist, but not the wrath of God. As Israel was preserved on earth when the plagues of God fell upon Egypt, so the church will not be removed from the presence of the Tribulation, but it will be preserved and delivered in and through it.[44] In referring to parallel passages (John 17:15; Rev. 3:10), Wood answers Ladd:

> It is, of course, possible to be kept from evil by non-participation but the same is not true regarding an hour of temptation. For the latter is a portion of time, and one is either in it or else out of it; there is no other possibility. One could be preserved from the Tribulation itself, but not from the hour of tribulation.[45]

Historical Argument

Scripture must remain the sole authority for the doctrine of imminency, but yet, corroborative evidence can be gleaned from the interpretations of the church fathers and of the reformers. Both posttribulationists[46] and pretribulationists[47] agree that the church fathers and the reformers believed in imminency. Walvoord even admits that some of the fathers and the reformers were posttribulational.[48] What was the cause of the paradox? Both the fathers and the reformers interpreted everything in the light of their circumstances. The fathers thought that they were in the Tribulation because they were being persecuted by the Roman emperor, the supposed Antichrist. The reformers thought that they were in the Tribulation because they were being persecuted by the Pope, the supposed Antichrist. Posttribulationists would affirm that the fathers and the reformers were wrong in their belief in imminency, but right in the posttribulation return of Christ. Pretribulationists state that they were right in their belief in imminency, but wrong in identifying their persecutions with the Great Tribulation.

Progress of Revelation

The two advents of Christ, undistinguished to Old Testament prophets (1 Peter 1:10-12), did not become apparent until after Christ's first coming. Wood believes that a similar situation prevailed in the revelation and understanding of Christ's second coming. At first, the disciples did not distinguish the translation from the revelation. He says, "Although Jesus realized this He avoided further explanation knowing that He then was revealing even more than they could comprehend."[49] Their understanding would become clearer as the truth of two phases was progressively revealed to them. When did they distinguish the two phases? When did they understand the truth of imminency? Wood concludes:

> It is certain that it did begin and that it was existent by the time of the writings of Paul, Peter, James and others. It was not existent until after the church had become a reality and a few beginning years had passed. But just when between these two extremes it first began appears quite impossible to

> say. But it is hardly necessary either. It did begin, and that is all that is needed to refute the post-tribulational rendition.[50]

From Eden to Patmos, God progressively revealed His program to men. The same, no doubt, is true of the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ, with its distinguishing features of the imminent translation of the church and the subsequent return to earth.

Jesus Christ is coming. It may be today. "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

DOCUMENTATION

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10. Ladd, op. cit., p. 165.
11. Ibid., pp. 13, 19.
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