

## The Imminent Return of the Lord

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**Dr. Earl D. Radmacher, Th.D. \***

*Chafer Theological Seminary*

[\*Editor's note: Earl Radmacher earned his Th.D. degree at Dallas Theological Seminary and presently serves as chancellor of Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. Besides being in demand as a conference speaker, Dr. Radmacher is the general editor of the *Nelson Study Bible*, and author of *The Nature of the Church*.]

“Our great-great-great grandchildren will not starve; they will be squeezed to death,” said Professor Heinz von Foerster of the University of Illinois when he set the date for the end of the world—“Doomsday”—for Friday, November 13, 2026. He based this conclusion on the exploding world population, which the professor says is to reach infinity and overrun the earth by that time, plus or minus some five years.<sup>1</sup>

Von Foerster is only one of many, however, who have attempted to set dates for the consummation of the earth's history. In spite of the fact that Jesus said, *But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father* (Mark 13:32), there have been those throughout history who seemingly could not resist the temptation to set dates. Using the septa-millennial theory as a basis, Augustine calculated that the end of human history would be about A.D. 650.<sup>2</sup> When this did not materialize, others attempted to salvage the idea by resetting the clock for A.D. 1000, again for the year 1044, and then again for 1065.<sup>3</sup>

Another well-known date was 1843, the year set by William Miller, forerunner of the Millerites, or Adventists, in his work entitled *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843*. Again, a well-respected and effective Bible teacher of the last generation attempted to find the fulfillment of the trumpet judgments of Revelation in the events of World War II. With reference to the second trumpet he said, “The ‘great

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<sup>1</sup> “Window on the World,” *Eternity* (January 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 3.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959), 19–20.

mountain burning with fire' seems a clear reference to Germany, suddenly 'cast into the sea' of nations."<sup>4</sup>

One of the leading missionary statesmen of that same generation proclaimed that according to his calculations "the Great Tribulation, the revival of the Roman Empire, the reign of the Antichrist and the Battle of Armageddon, must take place before the year 1933."<sup>5</sup> How many others are there who have identified with dogmatism that the Antichrist was Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, or Khrushchev, only to be embarrassed by the lack of fulfillment?

Embarrassment, however, is the mildest of the results. Much more seriously, God's people are hurt and the integrity of God's Word is questioned. Think of the thousands of South Koreans from the Tami Mission Church who

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waited eagerly for the Rapture on October 28, 1992, because of the date setting of their leaders.<sup>6</sup> An estimated five thousand sold their homes and deserted their jobs and families to await Jesus' return. Reportedly, several expectant mothers had abortions to be more easily raptured. Even more recently (1993), think of the magnitude of harm to the Branch Davidians and hundreds of others because of the doomsday prophecies from David Koresh's misuse of Scripture.

Equally as unjustified as date setting for Christ's return are the numerous sermons attempting to find fulfillment of prophecy in this age. Typical of them is a popular author, conference speaker, and television personality who has stated his belief that the "paramount prophetic sign" is that Israel had to be a nation again in the land of its forefathers. This condition was fulfilled, he claims, on May 14, 1948. This pronouncement is simply representative of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others who, although eager in their anticipation of Christ's coming, distort the Scripture and cause terrible confusion for God's people.

This situation is further confused by the fact that many of the very ones who preach such messages today also proclaim with equal force (justifiably, I believe) that there are no biblical prophecies that need to be fulfilled before the Lord Jesus Christ returns for His church. This conflicting emphasis begets the rather embarrassing plight of talking about signs of a signless event. One amillennial writer was quick to notice this inconsistency: "In no respect is the inconsistency of Dispensationalists more glaringly apparent than in their persistent efforts to discover signs of the nearness of an event which they emphatically declare to be signless."<sup>7</sup> (One must hasten to add that, while this seeming inconsistency may be

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<sup>4</sup> Norman B. Harrison, *The End: Re-Thinking the Revelation* (Minneapolis: Harrison, 1941), 218.

<sup>5</sup> Oswald J. Smith, *Is the Antichrist At Hand?* (Toronto: Tabernacle, 1926), 19.

<sup>6</sup> "Miscalculated Rapture: October 28, 1992," *WEF-Theological News* 23, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1992), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Allis, *Prophecy*, 174.

charged to the presentation of some Dispensationalists, it is by no means necessary to or inherent in Dispensational theology.)

This whole situation becomes even more serious when one realizes that the embarrassment and chagrin (to say nothing of the harm) that this date-setting has occasioned could have been avoided by simply recognizing the doctrine of the imminency of the Lord's return as it is taught in God's Holy Word, the Bible. Our final court of appeal on any matter of faith is the Word of God; thus, we turn to it to gain a clearer understanding of our Lord's imminent return.

### **The Linguistic Argument**

It seems that a logical question to ask right at the beginning is, What does the word *imminent* mean? The need for clarification at this point becomes apparent when one recognizes that theologians with contradictory

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eschatological opinions both claim to believe in imminency. According to Oswald Allis, "Amillennialists, who believe in a spiritual millennium which is past or nearly past, and ... Amillennialists who do not believe in any earthly millennium at all, may approximate very closely to that of Premillennialists regarding the imminence of the coming."<sup>8</sup>

Further confusion reigns when one reads contradictory statements made by a writer within the confines of the same book. For example, in opposition to George Ladd's statement that "a real 'any-moment' expectation is neither Biblically nor historically sound,"<sup>9</sup> the amillennial writer, Ray Summers, insists that the imminent, any-moment hope is emphatically stressed in the New Testament<sup>10</sup> and seems to take the view that "the Lord may come at any moment, and when he does come, he will raise the dead, exercise final judgment, terminate the present world order, and introduce the eternal order."<sup>11</sup> Several pages later, however, when expounding passages from 2 Thessalonians, he explains that certain predicted events must first take place. He states that "the Lord's return would be preceded by other events - the falling away, the revealing of the man of sin, and the removal of the restraining one."<sup>12</sup> This would appear to contradict his initial emphasis of an any-moment return.

The question arises, then, "Does the language of the Bible teach that the Lord may return for His church at any moment, or does it teach that the Lord's return for His church will be preceded by the fulfillment of certain predicted events, such as the revelation of the man of sin, the Great Tribulation, and so on?"

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-68.

<sup>9</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 154.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Summers, *The Life Beyond* (Nashville: Broadman, 1959), 124-29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

## Theological Terminology

Webster defines the word *imminent* as follows: “1. Threatening to occur immediately, impending; - said especially of misfortune or peril. 2. Projecting over; overhanging.” He lists the word *impending* as a synonym, and under that word he gives the following definition: “Syn. Impending, imminent, threatening to occur very soon. But impending implies signs that keep one in suspense; imminent more strongly suggests the shortness of time before happening.” In light of this, one must say that Ladd is more consistent with his eschatology when he uses the word *impending* than Summers is when he uses *imminent*, because both of these men believed that the Lord’s return for His church would be preceded by the fulfillment of certain clearly predicted events. Neither of these words is altogether satisfactory, however, because one could conclude that “soonness” rather than “next prophesied event” is the

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thrust. Rather than “soon,” the theological emphasis is the “next prophesied event” on God’s prophetic timetable. Thus, we need to turn to the specific words of Scripture.

## Biblical Terminology

We do not find the words *imminent* and *impending* in Scripture. This is not unusual, however, for neither are some other commonly used theological terms [e.g., Trinity, depravity]. The Greek word on which the theological term is built is *engus*, which simply means “near” but is most generally translated “at hand” in the Authorized Version. Unfortunately, Scofield attempted to make the word a statement of the doctrine. He defined it: “‘At hand’ is never a positive affirmation that the person or thing said to be ‘at hand’ will immediately appear, but only that no known or predicted event must intervene.”<sup>13</sup> In this statement, Scofield has used a *possible* lexical meaning of a word as its only meaning. In other words, he has not properly differentiated between a word and a term.

In his *Methodical Bible Study*, Robert Traina presents this important distinction:

A term is a given word as it is used in a given context. It therefore has only one meaning, whereas the same word may have several. For instance, the word ‘trunk’ may mean the main stem of a tree, the main body of anything, the proboscis of an elephant, or a box or chest. Though in all of these cases the same word is used, “trunk” is one term when it signifies the main stem of a tree and another when it denotes the proboscis of an elephant.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1967), 998.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (New York: Ganis and Harris, 1952), 34.

This exegetical error, which is very common among those who seek to prove their point from word studies alone, is explained by James Barr: “The error that arises when the meaning of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there, may be called ‘illegitimate totality transfer.’”<sup>15</sup>

One must be careful, therefore, how much one reads into a word. With respect to the word *engus* [near, or at hand], when it is used in Matthew 26:45–46, for example, the thing spoken of as being “at hand” took place while the speaker was yet speaking: *Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going.*

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*See, he who betrays Me is at hand. And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve ... came.* When the same word is used in 1 Peter 4:7, however, we see quite a different situation in which “the end of all things” is declared to be at hand. In this case, we know that almost two thousand years have already intervened, and there will be many predicted events fulfilled before we witness the end of all things in this world scene. The common usage, however, seems to have the idea of nearness in some sense of the word.

James states: *Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord ... for the coming of the Lord is at hand [engiken] ... Behold, the Judge is standing at the door* (James 5:7, 9)! The perfect tense is brought out by the rendering of the NASB (“the judge is standing right at the door”) and the Berkeley Version (“See, the judge has stationed Himself at the doors”). The idea seems to be that He has taken a position nearby and could enter at any moment (cf. Philippians 2:30; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9, 11). It is only necessary for Him to open the door and make His appearance. It may happen in a few minutes (Matthew 26:45–47) or in a few thousand years (1 Peter 4:7). The latter case definitely included predicted intervening events; thus, the argument for no intervening events cannot be made strictly by word study alone, apart from the specific contexts.

What conclusions can be drawn, then, based on the usage of the word *engus* in the New Testament? First, it does not necessarily mean “soon.” Failure to recognize that imminency does not demand that we understand it to mean “soon” has caused much confusion. For example, Louis Berkhof attempted to show the fallacy of the belief in imminency: “To teach that Jesus regarded the Second Coming as immediately at hand, would be to represent Him as in error, since almost two thousand years have already elapsed since that time.”<sup>16</sup> It should be noted, however, that while *engus* does not necessarily mean “soon,” neither does it necessarily mean a long way off, as Berkhof seems to imply. His conclusion is faulty because he has made an “illegitimate totality transfer.”

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<sup>15</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Glasgow: Oxford Univ., 1961), 218.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 697.

Second, the word *impending* is not satisfactory because it may imply that certain signs will precede the looked-for event, and this is not necessary to the word.

Third, the word *proximate* seems to fit in most of the cases that refer to eschatological subjects (i.e., the next following event). We must caution the reader, however, against formulating a doctrine simply based on the meaning of a word. Therefore, we would say that the linguistic argument is inconclusive, but it certainly does not militate against the any-moment idea, which understands the return of Christ to be the next predicted event.

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## The Doctrinal Argument

When one begins to systematize the varied eschatological usages of the words related to the doctrine of the Lord's return, a problem appears, for there are those places where signs specifically precede the Lord's return and there are other places where signs are just as definitely not involved. Thus, at times it appears to be imminent and at other times it appears to be impending. The distinction may be reconciled by differentiating between the Rapture and the Second Coming.

### The Second Coming Is Not Imminent

This assertion simply means that the Second Coming will be preceded by signs that are the specific fulfillment of events predicted in the Scriptures. In this respect, therefore, premillennialists can agree with the statement made by Berkhof, an amillennialist, that "several important events must occur before the return of the Lord, and therefore it cannot be called imminent."<sup>17</sup> Among the things that must occur, he lists the calling of the Gentiles, the national conversion of Israel, the Apostasy and Great Tribulation, the coming revelation of the Antichrist, and various predicted signs and wonders.

At this point, however, a very important clarification must be made with respect to the meaning of the phrase "the return of the Lord," often referred to simply as the Second Coming. This latter term is theological, rather than scriptural, phraseology; but it certainly has its justification from such verses as Acts 1:11 and Hebrews 9:28. However, in the Greek New Testament three nouns are used of the Second Coming: *parousia*, *apocalupsis*, and *epiphaneia*. These words have been worked overtime by some premillennialists (both pretribulational and posttribulational) and amillennialists trying to prove their respective viewpoints.<sup>18</sup> We must remind ourselves again, however, that words

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 696.

<sup>18</sup> See J. F. Strombeck, *First the Rapture* (Moline, Ill.: Strombeck Foundation, 1950); Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*; Allis, *Prophecy*; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990).

apart from their contexts must not be used to establish doctrine. A word out of a context may have several meanings, but in a given context it only has one meaning.

Let us, therefore, look at the meanings of these words. The word *parousia* may mean “coming,” “arrival,” or “presence.” *Apocalupsis* means “unveiling” or “revelation.” *Epiphania* means “manifestation” or “appearance.” It is important to note that the New Testament uses each of these words in both a technical and a nontechnical sense. The nontechnical sense does not have any eschatological implications whatsoever (cf. Luke 2:32 for *apocalupsis*; 2 Timothy 1:10 for *epiphaneia*; and 1 Corinthians 16:17 for *parousia*). Furthermore, within the eschatological references, there is not a clear-cut distinction (based on the words used) as to whether they refer to the Rapture

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or to the Second Coming, because all three words are used for both events. Whereas most of the usages of *parousia* refer to the Rapture (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 4:15; 5:23), it appears quite evident that such verses as 2 Thessalonians 2:8 refer to the Second Coming. The eschatological usages of *apocalupsis* appear to be rather evenly divided. Romans 8:19; 1 Corinthians 1:7; and 1 Peter 1:17, 13 seem to refer to the Rapture, whereas 2 Thessalonians 1:7; 1 Peter 4:13; and Revelation 1:1 appear to refer to the Second Coming to the earth. Finally, we note that *epiphaneia* is used of the Second Coming in 2 Thessalonians 2:8.

The study of these usages suggests that a distinction between the Rapture (the return of Christ *for* His saints) and the Second Coming (the return of Christ *with* His saints) cannot be made on the basis of the Greek words themselves. As a matter of fact, it is possible that one may conclude that this is sufficient evidence to prove that there is no distinction between these two events; in fact, that they are not two events at all but simply two aspects of the Second Coming. This is the thinking of such men as Louis Berkhof,<sup>19</sup> an amillennialist, and George Ladd,<sup>20</sup> a posttribulational premillennialist. However, before one hastens to the conclusion that all of the references are to a single event, which seems so obvious on the surface, one should probe deeper into Scripture.

First, there is no reason to conclude that the Rapture and the Second Coming must be one single event because the word *parousia* is used of both of them. This is a major flaw in the reasoning of Marvin Rosenthal, who asserts that the use of *parousia* demonstrates the fact of the Rapture’s inclusion in the Second Coming. Noting that *parousia* can mean “arrival” and “presence” (which is certainly clear in Scripture), he concludes that because it is used of both the Rapture and the

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<sup>19</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 695–96.

<sup>20</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 69.

Second Advent the two are a single event.<sup>21</sup> With respect to Rosenthal's reasoning, Paul Karleen states,

The author has committed the linguistic error of illegitimate totality transfer, in which meanings of a word in various occurrences and contexts are all poured into one particular occurrence. An example of this would be saying that horn means "a projection from an animal's head," "the end of a crescent," "a brass or other wind instrument," "a noise-making device on a vehicle," "one of the alternatives in a dilemma" and "a telephone" all at the same time and in all occurrences.<sup>22</sup>

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It is interesting to note in Scripture that the Jews did confuse the First and Second Comings by failing to see an interval between them. This simply was not a matter of revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures. Christ's accurate use of Isaiah 61:1–2 in Luke 4:16–22 shows how one should understand two comings in the Old Testament prophecies. This is precisely why Christ gave the revelation of Matthew 13 to explain the character of the time between the First and Second Comings. Even after these explanations, the disciples still did not completely understand (see Luke 19:11 and Acts 1:6). This problem of the early disciples may be similar to the contemporary problem of failing to distinguish events that God has distinguished.

In the second place, when the contexts of the Greek words are studied, a number of distinctions between the Rapture and the Second Coming become very apparent. John F. Walvoord has listed several of these distinctions in his book, *The Rapture Question*,<sup>23</sup> but one of the most obvious distinctions is that which is the theme of this paper. Passages demanding imminency would refer to the Rapture, whereas passages demanding signs would refer to Christ's Second Coming. Failure to recognize this distinction and trying to see the Rapture and the Second Coming as a single event has forced certain writers into the dilemma of having a Second Coming that is imminent in some passages and not imminent in other passages.<sup>24</sup> Surely, the Spirit of God cannot be accused of contradicting Himself.

Oswald Allis, an amillennialist, finds a way out of the predicament when he says, "Whether this coming to earth will follow the coming into the air immediately or *after an interval of time* may be regarded as uncertain" (italics

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture*, 215–30.

<sup>22</sup> Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is it Biblical?* (Langhorne, Pa.: B F Press, 1991), 83.

<sup>23</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1957), 198–99.

<sup>24</sup> Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb; An Interpretation of the Revelation* (Nashville: Broadman, 1951), 123–30.



mine).<sup>25</sup> By injecting this interval of time, he seems to admit that the events are not synonymous. Recognizing the problems, he continues: “If these events are all practically contemporaneous, or if the intervals between them, whether short or long, are of relatively minor importance, the language used in the New Testament to describe them, the confusing use of such words as coming and appearing, is sufficiently accounted for.” Now, if the interval between these events is of relatively minor importance as to its length, why should it pose a problem to these men to see at least a seven-year interval, namely, Daniel’s seventieth week, beginning with the covenant between the world-ruler, the Antichrist, and the nation of Israel guaranteeing them peace? Also, if Allis is right, then Ladd is wrong when he states, “The distinction between the Rapture of the Church and the Revelation of Christ is an inference which is nowhere asserted by the Word of God ... Any division of Christ’s coming into two parts is an unproved inference.”<sup>26</sup>

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Finally, it should be noted with respect to the Greek words used that it is not necessary to understand them as *categorizing* words but rather as *characterizing* words. It will only lead to confusion to try to make a distinction between the Rapture and the Second Advent on the basis of the words alone; rather, they should be seen in their respective contexts as words that characterize both of the events. Thus, we would agree with Ladd’s statement that “the vocabulary used of the Lord’s return lends no support for the idea of two comings of Christ or of two aspects of His coming,” but we take exception to his subsequent statement that the vocabulary “substantiates the view that the return of Christ will be a single, indivisible glorious event.”<sup>27</sup> The vocabulary is not categorizing (cf. *parousia* used of both comings), but it is characterizing. When one investigates all of the contexts of these words in the New Testament, however, it appears that two specific events are in view, namely, the coming of Christ in the air *for* His saints and the coming of Christ *with* His saints to the earth. In the latter case there will be specific signs such as are outlined in Matthew 24 and 2 Thessalonians 2.

### **The Rapture Is Imminent**

It is essential that one understand the distinction between the Rapture and the Second Advent before it is possible to understand imminence. All of the arguments for a pretribulational Rapture of the Church could be injected at this point to sustain this distinction; however, it is not the purpose of this paper to defend the pretribulational viewpoint but simply to show that it is essential to a proper understanding of imminency.

When one investigates the passages of Scripture dealing with the Rapture, there are no signs given that must be fulfilled. At this point, a word should be said

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<sup>25</sup> Allis, *Prophecy*, 187.

<sup>26</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

concerning the inconsistency of those who believe in the imminency of the Rapture and yet insist on preaching on the “signs of the times.” Certainly Spirit-controlled believers ought to be able to discern the spiritual climate of the last days as they come upon us, but let us beware of the dangerous, though sometimes fascinating, art of finding specific fulfillments of prophecy in these days. Spectacular attempts at date setting may bring vast crowds to the services, but they can lead only to confusion. We should not be looking for prophetic signs of the times when we are not in the time of prophetic signs.

The doctrine of imminency has not only been confused by the misinterpretations of some who hold to it, but also by the misunderstandings of those in opposition to it. As a case in point, Ladd reasons erroneously when he analyzes the pretribulationist viewpoint:

According to this system, the Rapture occurs at the beginning of the seventieth week predicted in Daniel 9:27 ... If this is a correct interpretation of the prophetic future, the Rapture of the Church is not the next event

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upon the prophetic calendar; it is rather the return of Israel to her land. The Rapture of the Church is then preceded by a sign, the ‘Sign of the fig tree,’ the sign of Israel.<sup>28</sup>

Now, if Ladd’s premise is correct, we must accept the conclusion. However, does the Rapture occur at the beginning of the seventieth week of Daniel? When reading Daniel 9:27, one finds that the week begins when the Antichrist establishes a covenant of peace with Israel. Even Ladd evidences this understanding of the position: “The last seven years begin when Antichrist—who is not yet recognized as such—makes a covenant with Israel, now restored in Palestine as a nation.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Rapture of the Church has no part in the seventieth week. The Rapture takes place before the revelation of the Antichrist.

The posttribulationists have suggested other hindrances, however, to the coming of the Lord at any moment: (1) the predicted experience of the Church (persecution [John 15:20; 16:1–3], greater works [14:12]); (2) the witness to all nations (Acts 1:4–8); (3) the predictions concerning the persecution of Paul (9:16, 23) and the death of Peter (John 21:18–19); (4) the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem preceding the Second Coming (Luke 21:20–24); and (5) the implication of an extended period of time before the King’s return (19:11–26).

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-54.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

We may note several avenues of refutation of these objections. These have been handled in brief by Leon J. Wood in *Is The Rapture Next?*<sup>30</sup> By way of general response, we see upon investigation that most of these objections would apply only to imminency in the first century. If the hindrance no longer existed after the first century, one could say that they are not hindrances to the acceptance of the doctrine of imminency in this day. To be more specific, however, we must ask the question, Were these present-day objections hindrances to belief in imminency on the part of the early church? Under the historical argument (to be discussed later) we will find that the answer is no. But why? Several factors may serve as an answer to this.

In the first place, it seems apparent that there could be no doctrine on imminent Rapture until the Church was brought into existence at Pentecost. Christ could not come for His Church before He had founded it. Second, there would be very little understanding of the doctrine of imminency until the “waiting” and “hoping” passages of Scripture had been written. By the time of the writing of the New Testament, the aforementioned hindrances no longer existed. Third, under the pretribulation interpretation, time exists for events to be fulfilled after the translation of the Church, such as the specific signs

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given in the Olivet Discourse. Thus, we maintain that there are no intervening events that militate against the imminent return of the Lord to rapture the Church.

### **The Historical Argument**

One question that needs to be asked is, What did the early disciples expect? Did they believe that the Lord may return for His Church at any moment? C. K. Barrett comments on John 21:22: “The possibility is contemplated, though (as John hastens to point out) not definitely affirmed, that the beloved disciple might live until the return of Christ ... Undoubtedly the earliest Christian belief was that the ‘*parousia*’ would take place before the first generation of Christians had disappeared.”<sup>31</sup>

A study of the early church Fathers reveals a strong belief in the imminency of the Lord’s return. According to Pentecost, “Eschatology of the early church may not be altogether clear on all points for that subject was not the subject of serious consideration, yet the evidence is clear that they believed in the imminent return of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Payne says, “The ante-Nicene fathers ... were committed to the concept of the imminence of the Lord’s return.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Leon J. Wood, *Is the Rapture Next?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 35–40.

<sup>31</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960), 488.

<sup>32</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 201.

<sup>33</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 13.

Yet, we are not so interested in general evaluations as we are in the specific beliefs and teachings of the apostles who wrote, under inspiration, the infallible Word of God. For example, it is clear that Paul believed that the Lord might come in his own lifetime: *Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed* (1 Corinthians 15:51–52). Here the apostle is distinguishing between the two groups to be found at the Lord’s return, the dead and the living. Significantly, he expects to be among the living who shall be changed. Paul, then, had an any-moment hope. There may be delay, but there would be no necessary prophesied event before the coming of Christ for His Church. Lenski comments:

The simple fact is that Paul did not know when Christ would return. He was in the exact position in which we are. All that he knew, and all that we know, is that Christ may come at any time. So Paul spoke in his time ex-

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actly as we speak in ours, namely in two ways: Christ may come immediately; or he may delay a long while.<sup>34</sup>

Commenting on the same passage, Robertson and Plummer confirm that “the first person plural does not necessarily imply that St. Paul felt confident of living till the Second Advent; but it does imply expectation of doing so in company with most of those whom he is addressing. Those who die before the advent are regarded as exceptions.”<sup>35</sup>

This expectation is even more strongly expressed in 1 Thessalonians 4:15: *For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.* The Greek construction makes very clear and emphatic here that Paul is not talking simply about those who are alive at the parousia but about those who survive until the parousia. He thus betrays the expectation that he and his contemporary Christians will remain alive until Christ comes.

In fact, this expectancy of the Lord’s imminent return characterized the apostle Paul to the very last days of his life. H. A. A. Kennedy has listed evidence of this in his work, *The Theology of the Epistles*.<sup>36</sup> Another splendid summary of

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<sup>34</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg, 1937), 737.

<sup>35</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1914), 376.

<sup>36</sup> H. A. A. Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1919), 108–11, 245–48.

this theme is given by Hogg and Vine.<sup>37</sup> However, at the same time as he expressed this expectancy, the apostle was able to keep a balanced perspective and realization that he might meet the Lord any time by way of death. “Longing for the Parousia of Christ, which is certain to come, yet not afraid of death, which may possibly come first, is, then, the characteristic attitude of each generation of Christians.”<sup>38</sup>

This understanding of Paul’s eager anticipation of the imminent return of the Lord seems to throw light on two rather difficult passages. One of these is Philippians 3:11: *if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*. Literally translated, the last words read, “the out-resurrection out of the dead.” There are a number of possible suggestions for the meaning of the resurrection here: the general resurrection, the first resurrection, the spiritual resurrection, the attainment of rewards at the judgment seat, a partial Rapture, and the Rapture of the Church. Several factors strongly support a combination of Rapture and consequent reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

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First, the context is strongly in its favor. We have already seen that in their broad context, the Pauline epistles place a recurring emphasis on the Rapture. An even stronger Pauline emphasis is the consequent reward for believers who have endured faithfully (Romans 8:17; 14:10–12; 1 Corinthians 3:8–15; 9:24–27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:23–25; 2 Timothy 2:11–13; 4:7–8). In the narrower context of Philippians, we see the same emphasis. Several verses (1:6, 10; 3:20–21; 4:5) all lay stress on the eschatological day of Christ and the imminent appearing of Christ, whom we are to be eagerly and momentarily expecting. In the immediate context of Philippians 3:11, Paul has discussed justification (v. 9) and sanctification (v. 10). We agree, therefore, with the conclusion of S. Lewis Johnson: “It is certainly fitting that his thought move into the future, because glorification is the natural consummation of the life of grace.”<sup>39</sup> This is further confirmed by the future look in verses 20 and 21. Thus, Paul is speaking of something to attain while still living, namely, his translation and consequent reward at the Rapture.

A second factor in favor of the Rapture here is the doubt and uncertainty expressed in the verse. The particles *ei pos* (“if by any means”) are used in only three other places (Romans 1:10; 11:14; Acts 27:12), and in each occurrence doubt is expressed. This uncertainty is further confirmed by the use of the subjunctive mode of the verb *katantao* (“I may attain”). The indicative mode is the mode of certainty, whereas the subjunctive expresses contingency and uncertainty. A. T. Robertson says, “It is the mood of doubt, of hesitation, of

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<sup>37</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Fincastle, Va.: Bible Study Classics, 1914), 138–40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, “The Out-Resurrection from the Dead,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110 (April 1953), 140.

proposal, of prohibition, of anticipation, of expectation, of brooding hope, of imperious will.”<sup>40</sup>

This evident uncertainty makes it inconceivable, then, that Paul is speaking of the first resurrection, for his previous words in 1 Corinthians 15:1–34 evidence anything but doubt. Nor can it refer to the spiritual resurrection, for Paul states in many other passages that all believers do partake of the resurrection life of Christ (Romans 6:3–11; Ephesians 2:5, 6; Colossians 3:1). Again, the partial Rapture view is untenable because of its “works” foundation and the fact that the Body of Christ will not be split up at the Rapture. Rather, “we [not some] shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52). The only solution that fits the doubt and uncertainty of the passage is that of the Rapture. Simply stated, Paul is uncertain, though full of expectancy, as to whether or not he will remain alive (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15) until the Rapture. Johnson cogently summarizes: “Paul’s doubt is not concerning the fact of his resurrection but concerning the circumstances of it.”<sup>41</sup>

A final argument in favor of the Rapture view is the unusual word *exanastasis* (“out-resurrection”). This is its only occurrence in the New

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Testament, although the similar word *anastasis* (“resurrection”) occurs forty-one times. Forty of these times it refers to the physical resurrection. Now, the fact that verse 10 uses *anastasis* and verse 11 uses *exanastasis* evidently singles out the latter as having some special significance. Interestingly enough Hippocrates and Polybius use the word in the sense of a rising up into the air.<sup>42</sup> This certainly fits the idea of the Rapture, and it does account for the change of words.

It is our conclusion, then, that the eschatology of the context, the uncertainty with expectancy of the text, and the *hapax legomenon* (i.e., the only occurrence in the New Testament) *exanastasis* all together give strong support to the idea that it was Paul’s eager anticipation that the Rapture might take place at any moment and that he might, therefore, remain alive until the Rapture and thus be translated.

A final Pauline passage that takes on new meaning when one understands the apostle’s belief in the imminency of Christ’s return is 2 Corinthians 5:1–10:

For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed

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<sup>40</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 928.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, 144.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1889), 221.

with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. Therefore, we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

A close examination here reveals that the chapter division is not well made. The “for” of verse one gives the reason for Paul’s hope in the chapter four. Paul reminds the believers that they need not be unduly concerned about the dissolution of this body of humiliation because there is a new body awaiting them that is eternal in the heavens. He then goes on to express his

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strong desire and anticipation that he shall receive this new body before death. Notice the figure in his statement, “earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven.” The eternal garment is to be drawn over the temporal one, as one garment is drawn over another, and is to take its place. The dead receive their spiritual bodies through resurrection, but the living through transfiguration (1 Corinthians 15:38, 51), and it is the living who are described here. This is further substantiated by verse three, which views death before the Rapture as an unclothed or “naked” state.

Then in verse four, Paul expresses his strong desire that his earthly body may be clothed upon with his heavenly body before the earthly one is taken away so that there may be no interval of separation between soul and body. The following context points up, however, that Paul is perfectly willing to rest his confidence in the Lord’s timing, looking forward to his acceptance by the Lord and the receiving of the Lord’s evaluation of his ministry and life at the *Bema* (Judgment Seat) of Christ. Every indication is that he expects that this may occur at any time, and there certainly is no indicator that he expects the revelation of the Man of Sin or the Great Tribulation to occur before that time.

The uncertainty of the time of the Lord’s appearing is also taught by the apostle John by the use of the subjunctive mode in 1 John 2:28. The “when” in this verse is from *ean* (“if”) used with the subjunctive mode, which is the mode of uncertainty or probability. Thus, it is better translated, “*And now, little born ones, be abiding in him, in order that whenever he may be made manifest, we may have*

*instant freedom of speech and not be made to shrink away from him in shame at his personal presence.*"<sup>43</sup> The uncertainty does not concern the fact of the Lord's coming (cf. 2:28), but the time of that coming. Robertson sees this as "a clear reference to the Second Coming of Christ which may be at any time."<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps these words of imminency, "Whenever he may be made manifest," echo the "If I will that he remain till I come" of the Lord's enigmatical saying about the apostle (John 21:22). Referring to these words of Jesus, Findlay concludes,

The possibility of His coming within the Apostolic era and while St. John remained in the flesh, was bound to be entertained: and the prolongation of the Apostle's life to the verge of human age might well encourage the hope of an early advent - delayed indeed but to be ex-

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pected before the veteran Apostle's departure, and now therefore, possibly quite imminent.<sup>45</sup>

Again, the apostle James certainly entertained the eager expectancy of the imminent return of the Lord as he sought to encourage those who were suffering persecution:

Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door (James 5:7-9)!

There are two words in this context that stress the imminency of the Lord's return. The first is *engiken*, which the Authorized Version translates "draweth nigh." This translation makes it seem to be a present tense. In actuality, however, it is a perfect tense that emphasizes not continuing action but completed action. Instead of "draweth nigh" or even "at hand" (NKJV), it is better translated "has drawn near." The process is completed. At any moment we may be caught up into the presence of our Lord.

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<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Wuest, *An Expanded Translation of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 3:139.

<sup>44</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), 6:219.

<sup>45</sup> George G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 232.



This teaching is further demonstrated by the figure of speech, “the Judge is standing at the door.” Once again, this is a perfect tense of the verb *histemi* and is better translated “has taken a stand.” The Lord is at the door. At any moment He may open the door and receive us. One could hardly think of a more fitting illustration of the imminent return of the Lord. There seems to be ample evidence, then, that the earliest followers of our Lord eagerly anticipated the any-moment return of the Lord, and the inspired exhortations they have left for us give us every reason to have the same hope. It is of particular significance that the late J. Barton Payne, a confirmed posttribulationist, could not avoid the conclusion that “belief in the imminency of the return of Jesus was the uniform hope of the early church.”<sup>46</sup>

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## The Practical Argument

A final question, then, we need to answer: What are the exhortations given to the Church, the Body of Christ? While this is one of the strongest arguments for imminency, it is also an area of great confusion both in the defense and in the opposition. The subject of imminency demands careful thinking here.

### The Church Is Not to Watch for Signs

Some writers have attempted to make a case against imminency based on the exhortations to watch. After examining the passages that include an exhortation to watch, Ladd concludes that “all of these exhortations have reference to the glorious appearing of the Son of Man at the end of the Tribulation.”<sup>47</sup> The obvious conclusion, then, is that the exhortations would be pointless unless the Church were present on the earth at the end of the Tribulation.

The conclusion comes, however, from a failure to observe that in every case, except one, where “watch” is used in an eschatological passage, *the addressee is Israel*. (The exception is 1 Thessalonians 5:6, and it will be dealt with presently.) Those living in the Tribulation are first exhorted to watch for certain signs and then, after the signs, to watch for the return of Christ to establish His kingdom.

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<sup>46</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, 102. Payne further states, “It must therefore be concluded that the denial of the imminency of the Lord’s coming on the part of post-tribulationists who have reacted against dispensationalism is not legitimate. There have been, it is true, extremists throughout the course of church history who have interpreted imminency to mean that the Lord’s advent must be soon, or even at some set date; but no such impropriety rests upon imminency when it is understood in its basic definition of ‘ready to befall or overtake one,’ that is, that Christ’s coming could be at any time. There are, indeed, a number of verses that have been, and are, used uncritically to substantiate this doctrine and that do not constitute valid proof. But, at the same time, the preceding section has validated a considerable group of passages that do demonstrate its legitimacy. In fact, no natural reading of Scripture would produce any other conclusion.”

<sup>47</sup> Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 112. See also Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 29–43.

The pattern of exhortation seems to be, “When ye shall see these things, then look for the Son of Man” (cf. Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:29; Luke 21:31).

Of the five words translated “watch” in the Authorized Version, only two (*gregoreo, agrupeno*) have reference to the Second Coming and neither is ever used in connection with the Rapture. At this point a word of explanation is needed with reference to 1 Thessalonians 5:6. The previous context (4:13–18) dealt with the Rapture. The immediate context (5:1–11) deals with the things preceding the Second Coming. The first relates to the Day of Christ and the second to the Day of the Lord.

Whereas many have had a difficult time explaining the relationship between these two passages, the pretribulationist has an adequate explanation. If the terrible judgment of the Day of the Lord is to begin shortly, or immediately, after the Rapture, then it is possible to explain 5:1–11 logically as pertaining to our conduct in light of the future program. This is a very acceptable motivation. The fact that Christians are to be delivered from the prophesied day of wrath ought to be a compelling motive to live lives charac-

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terized by vigilance and sobriety. Peter uses this same motivational principle in 1 Peter 4:7 and 2 Peter 3:10–12.

The immediate occasion of the exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 was undoubtedly a question from the Thessalonians regarding the *time* of the coming of the Day of the Lord (cf. vv. 1–3). They were anxious that the Lord might come soon, while they were yet living, because they thought that only the living would enjoy the full blessedness of Christ’s *parousia*. Paul does not give them any further instructions regarding the time, except to remind them of what they already knew - the uncertainty of the time of its arrival. The day is to come suddenly, as the birth pang to the woman with child, and unexpectedly, as the thief in the night, so that none of the inhabitants of the earth in that day shall by any means escape it. In contrast to the time of terrific warfare before the Second Coming (cf. Matthew 24:15–28), there will be an atmosphere of peace and security just before the coming of the Day of the Lord.

The other teaching of this passage is the certainty that the believers will not be here when it comes (1 Thessalonians 5:4–11). Paul establishes this with an array of reasons, stating it both negatively and positively, so that there should be no doubt left in their minds. In the first place, the Day of the Lord is a day of judgment and darkness, and the believers do not belong to the realm of darkness (v. 4a). In the second place, positively stated, the Day of the Lord shall not “overtake” them (v. 4b). Third, not only are they in the realm of the light, but they are characterized by the nature of the light, by the very nature of Christ Himself (v. 5). Furthermore, in the sovereign purpose of God they have not been appointed to wrath but to full and complete deliverance (v. 9). Finally, the ground of

assurance for all this rests in the instrument of their deliverance, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for them so that, regardless of their degree of spiritual attainment when He comes, they shall live together with Him forever (v. 10).

Because of these marvelous manifestations of God's grace, surely those who have nothing to do with the darkness will exercise continual watchfulness (*gregoreo*, "to be mentally alert") and self-control (vv. 6–8). At the same time they are to be comforting one another with these words, and each one is to be building others up in this temple of the Body of Christ (v. 11). Thus, in 4:13–18, Paul assured them that both the living and the dead will be gone before the Day of the Lord arrives.

### **The Church is to look for the Savior**

Passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:7; Titus 2:13; and Philippians 3:20 are applicable at this point; they picture the believer as eagerly waiting and earnestly expecting the Savior. Watching for signs is foreign to these passages. It never occurs. Not even once. Furthermore, not only is the believer to look for the any-moment return of the Lord, but he is to direct his life in the light of it (cf. Romans 13:11–14; James 5:7–8; 1 John 3:1–3). If, on the other hand, there are specific prophesied signs, in reality we would not be looking

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for the Savior at any moment but instead should be watching for the revelation of the Man of Sin, the Great Tribulation, etc. There would be at least a seven-year preparation period.

Oswald Allis takes issue with this so-called "psychological argument" that assumes, he says, "that men cannot expect and watch for the coming of Christ and be stimulated and safeguarded by the thought of it unless they can believe that it may take place 'at any moment.'" He claims that "intensity of affection disregards time and distance."<sup>48</sup> Whatever else may be said by way of answer, one thing is certain: the Bible does use the imminent return of the Lord as a motivation for holy living (cf. Romans 13:11–14; 1 John 3:1–3; James 5:7–9). If this is improper, then we would have to bring the writers of Scripture in question.

Furthermore, Allis' argument is contrary to human experience, for hope is realistic in proportion to its imminency; otherwise, why does Paul appeal to the "nearer" argument (Romans 13:11–12)?

Apparently, our Savior receives greater glory because of the any-moment expectancy on the part of His children. Facing this problem realistically, if there were not the tendency toward carelessness or unconcern when an event is far removed, there would be little purpose for the exhortations. But whatever the differences of opinion may be, is it not a very beautiful, practical fact that for

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<sup>48</sup> Allis, *Prophecy*, 169.

almost two thousand years believers from every generation have lived in the constant expectation that the Lord Jesus Christ may come at any moment, and yet His failure to come did not discourage succeeding generations from having the same hope? Instead, the intensity of the hope seems to grow as the years pass for they know that His assured coming is closer than before.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, based on the linguistic, doctrinal, historical, and practical arguments, the Scriptures give abundant support for the any-moment return of the Lord to Rapture the Church. The Lord never gives the Church a prophesied sign for which it is to watch, but it is to wait expectantly with eager anticipation for the return of Christ at any moment.