

Imminence: An Apostolic Perspective

By David Ervin

The second coming of Christ is the blessed hope of every believer. The literal and bodily return of Christ has been the confession of the church since the day he was taken up in clouds of glory. Although the faithful are united in the truth that he is coming back, there is much division concerning the manner and timing of his return. Some believe there remain events that must take place prior to the second coming. Others hold that Christ could return at any moment, and they would define imminence in such terms. This "any moment" definition of imminence is so pervasive in the church today that it has become a standard of orthodoxy to many.

The New Testament writers certainly conveyed a sense that the coming of Christ was near and could happen within their own lifetime. James tells us, "The Lord's coming is near" (James 5:8).¹ The writer of Hebrews bids his readers to hold fast to the faith with the knowledge that, "In just a very little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay" (Hebrews 10:37). The apostolic use of personal pronouns reveals their belief that they could personally witness the return of Christ within their own generation. "Continue in him, so that when he appears *we* may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (emphasis added, 1 John 2:28).

It seems clear that the Apostles believed the return of Christ was potentially near. However, alongside of teachings that convey a sense of near expectation with respect to

¹All Scripture is from the New International Version (Zondervan Publishing Company, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984).

the second coming are also prophetic statements that predict certain events that must take place prior to Christ's return. Paul taught the Thessalonians that Christ will not come until a "rebellion" occurred and "the man of lawlessness" appears (1 Thessalonians 2:1-3). Timothy was warned about a time of trouble and apostasy that would precede the return of Christ (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Many who hold to an "any moment" definition of imminence cannot reconcile the teaching of near expectancy with the simultaneous apostolic teaching of prerequisite events. As John MacArthur states, "If 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 actually means Christ's coming for the church cannot occur until after seven years of Tribulation, it nullifies everything the New Testament teaches about the imminence of Christ's return."² Any event that remains to take place before the second coming destroys an "any moment" definition of imminence. John F. Woolvoord echoes this sentiment when he says, "If the church is destined to endure the persecutions of the Tribulation, it is futile to proclaim the coming of the Lord as imminent."³

Consequently, to maintain the premise that Christ could bodily return at any second requires either explaining away the preliminary events (through spiritualization or some form of preterism) or dividing the second coming into two stages. It is not the text of Scripture that demands a pretribulational rapture, but it is the belief that a two-stage *parousia* is necessary in order to reconcile all the Scriptural data with the modern

²John MacArthur, *The Second Coming: Signs of Christ's Return and the End of the Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 55.

³John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), p. 15.

definition of imminence. An *a priori* assumption that Jesus could return at any moment is driving the interpretation of the relevant passages.

Rapture advocate Tim LaHaye makes this approach clear:

It's impossible for the rapture and glorious appearing to happen at the same time. If one were to take all of the Biblical accounts of the second coming into consideration, it becomes clear that the second coming has two distinct phases: first the rapture, when Christ comes in the air to take His church to His Father's house; then the glorious appearing, when Christ returns visibly to earth . . . The rapture could take place at any moment, for it is imminent. Not so for the glorious appearing. It cannot occur till after Israel and the Antichrist sign their covenant.⁴

Such a view of imminence is a modern invention for the simple reason that the very Apostles who taught the concept could not have *personally* held that definition.

However one defines imminence, it cannot be a definition that the Apostles themselves could not have held.

Peter certainly taught that the coming of Christ is an imminent reality that could happen within the lifetime of his readers. "When the Chief Shepherd appears, *you* will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (emphasis added, 1Peter 5:4). He warned, "The end of all things is near" (1Peter 4:7). He preached that the coming of Christ will take place unexpectedly, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief" (2 Peter 3:10). Nevertheless, Peter could not have believed that Christ could return at any moment because he had not yet been crucified. The resurrected Jesus had told him that he would grow old and stretch out his hands on a cross (John 21:18-19). For Peter, this necessary prerequisite event to the second coming would preclude the notion that Christ could come at any moment. Whatever Peter meant when he taught the concept of

⁴Tim LaHaye, "The Second Coming: A Two-phased Event," in *The Popular Handbook on the Rapture*, eds. Thomas Ice, and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), p. 53-58.

imminence, he could not have meant that Jesus could appear at any time. It is interesting to note that Peter does not use first-person pronouns in reference to the second coming.

The Apostle Paul wrote at length concerning the nearness of Christ's return. He eagerly awaited a Savior from heaven (Philippians 3:20). He had a personal expectation of the "blessed hope" (Titus 3:11-13). Yet, like Peter, Paul could not have believed that Christ could return at any moment because he had not yet testified in Rome. At Paul's conversion God revealed his sweeping missionary plan for the Apostle's life. Paul's mission would be a decades-long journey that would take him before gentiles and kings (Acts 9:15). Christ foretold later that Paul would testify in Rome (Acts 23:11). In light of these predictions, Paul could not have held the modern definition of imminence. As Samuel Waldron states in reference to Paul's prophecy of the man of lawlessness:

The doctrine that imminence means any moment-ness is clearly refuted by Paul's words. Paul did not believe either that no prophesied event remained before the parousia or that it could be at any moment. In fact he exposes such teaching as in seed form the Thessalonians error.⁵

It is inconsistent for Paul to have believed that Christ could return prior to the completion of his mission and the events that he himself predicted would take place.

Imminence from an apostolic perspective is that Christ could appear rapidly within *any generation* of Christians. It is not an "any moment" expectation, but it is an "any lifetime" expectation. Understanding imminence from the Apostle's point of view reconciles all the themes of Scripture concerning the second coming. Expectancy, watchfulness, nearness, and the knowledge that certain prophetic events remain to be fulfilled come together in harmony when imminence is viewed through their eyes.

⁵Samuel Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple: How Could Everyone be so Wrong About Biblical Prophecy?* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2003), p. 194.

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