

PROBING THE CRITICAL NEXUS OF THE TWO-STAGE PAROUSIA

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Luke 12:35-48

My objective this afternoon is to advance the evidence and argue the case for a two-stage Parousia (this being one of the key words in the New Testament for the second advent of our Blessed Lord). But where in the New Testament does it say the Second Advent will be in two stages? Should we not using Occam's Razor (the familiar philosophic tool) incline to believe that the simplest and easiest interpretation is the best and preferable? But an analogous precedent may be seen in the Old Testament promise of the coming of the Messiah first given in Genesis 3:15 and gradually enlarged and expanded particularly in the Psalms and the Prophets. It is nowhere overtly stated that the Messiah's coming would be in two stages, the first to redeem us through His suffering and death and the second to reign and to rule. Both lines of truth are in the Old Testament and indeed the Qumran people posited the coming of two Messiahs (*Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*). Israel in Jesus' time desperately wanted a powerful ruler who would deliver them from the Romans and thus rejected Jesus the Messiah and his bonafide offer of the theocratic Kingdom promised in the Old Testament. One might infer that there would be two advents from a close exegesis of Daniel 9:24-27 (from the six point agenda of the Messiah) but how many of the Godly remnant waiting "for the consolation of Israel" saw this clearly?

I. The progressive development of theological systems

Jesus Himself, the most skilled and wise pedagogue, said: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear" (John 16:12). No one has dealt more satisfyingly with this than T.D. Bernard in his Bampton Lectures, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*. It is demonstrably clear in the New Testament that Jesus will translate the bridal Church to heaven before the revelation of the Man of Sin and the onset of the seven years of Tribulation. He has

promised deliverance from divine wrath to be poured out in “the day of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 5:9, Revelation 3:10). It is also clear that Christ will return in power and great Glory “with thousands upon thousands of His holy ones” (Jude 14). He will judge the living Nations and set up the theocratic kingdom and rule for 1000 years. I am arguing that these are two stages in His second coming. They are different and distinct. Some have held that the Rapture is technically not the Second Advent because the meeting is in the air and Christ takes His own back to the Father’s House without touching earth, but Christ speaks of this as His coming back (John 14:1-4, 1 Thessalonians 4:15ff, two great Rapture passages).

The wonder of many great doctrines is given incrementally and only in due time does the magnificence of the mosaic strike us fully and persuasively. This is certainly true of the doctrine of the triune nature of God, that there are three eternal personal distinctions in the one, unified divine essence. The Apostles as Jews worshipped the one true God. Then they met Jesus who is God. Then they experienced the Holy Spirit who is God (Acts 5:2-4). By the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) the Church was ready to refute on the basis of what was everywhere written but nowhere definitively stated either tritheism on the one hand or Sabellianism (modal monarchianism) on the other.. Arianism was out and all other Christological heresies. The relationship of divine and human natures in Christ came into clarity in 451 A.D. at Chalcedon. The doctrine of justification by faith alone received the sharp focus of Reformation in the sixteenth century leaving no room for Pelagianism of any stripe as Augustine earlier argued but the Reformers systematized it with an Anselmic doctrine of the substitutionary atonement at its core. Ecclesiology was a later entrant (and think how matters of church government, pneumatology and the spiritual gifts and ecumenical issues have come into view in the last century). Eschatology came later as well and no one saw the nature and necessity of a two-stage parousia more clearly than John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century. Was Darby

the first to properly infer that Christ's coming for His saints is different from His coming with His saints? Recent research has opened the fascinating vistas of earlier students of Scripture who came to the same conclusion, such as Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century), Joachim of Fiore (twelfth century), Fra Dolcino (fourteenth century), Increase Mather (seventeenth century), Thomas Shepard (seventeenth century), Morgan Edwards (eighteenth century). These and others and we ourselves can make a valid inference that the Rapture is different from the Coming in Power and Glory seven years later when God rings down the curtain on time-space history as we have known it. It is generally conceded that in the New Testament and during the first four centuries of church history, the church was to look for an imminent, signless Rapture and to anticipate the defeat of all of God's enemies and the establishment of His glorious Kingdom when Christ returns in glory (cf J. Barton Payne in his *Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy*, 257).

The precise inter-relationship between the two events (if indeed they are different and I believe they are) is like the triune nature of God and the hypostatic union, inferential. The idea of the Rapture being inferential makes some nervous although most of our knowledge is inferential. George Ladd and John Walvoord both acknowledged that their positions on the Rapture were an inference, i.e. not stated in so many words in Scripture (John Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 148). A contemporary postmillennialist has roundly assaulted Walvoord for his use of inference (Keith Mathison, *Postmillennialism: A Theology of Hope*, 116) but of course interpretation and application are impossible without inference. When I say "If it rains tomorrow we shall postpone the picnic," the unavoidable inference is important – i.e. "if it does not rain tomorrow we shall have the picnic." Gordon Haddon Clark in his *Logic* explores how conclusions are derived inferentially from data by either deduction or induction and we now propose to examine the evidence from Scripture which requires the sound inference or conclusion that the Parousia has two stages, the Rapture and the Coming in Glory. We must

not resist reasoning from revealed premises to legitimate and imperatival conclusions. What is at stake here is the incredibly critical doctrine of the imminency or “any-moment” coming of Jesus. We can still sing and ought to, “Jesus is coming to earth some day, what if it were today?”

II. The persistent data of the New Testament documents

Diarmaid MacCulloch, the Oxford historian in his massive new *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Viking, 2010) repeatedly refers to the belief of Christ’s contemporaries in “His imminent return to earth.” How else could they or we understand Luke 12:35ff and parallel passages? The premise here is that no one knows the time of Christ’s return (Mt 24:36) and that day will not “overtake us as a thief” because we are not asleep but watching (1 Thess. 5:4ff). “The times and seasons” have not been made known (Acts 1:7). Date-setting is disobedience. Why wait for an event which could not take place? Why watch (six times in the Gospels) if His coming for the Church now were not possible? We are to “be ready for the Son of Man comes at an hour when you think not” (Luke 12:40, even if His coming were in the second or third watches of the night). So our Lord spoke in the Olivet Discourse: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 25:13).

C.S. Lewis in one of his sermons captures the thrust of our Savior’s words: 1) Christ is coming back; 2) No one knows when He is coming back; 3) We all need to be ready for His coming.

Even Wayne Grudem defines imminency as “Christ *could* come and *might* come at any time” (*Systematic Theology*, 1096, n.7). That is, the misguided servant says “My Lord delays His Coming” (12:45). It is signless. His coming in glory has many signs of the Day of the Lord and the Antichrist, setting the stage for Israel in its unique role in the seven years, etc. It would be a mistake, in my judgment, to deny imminency by insisting that:

1) the Ezekiel 38-39 war must take place before the Rapture. This denies imminency.

- 2)the rebuilding of the Third Temple must take place before the Rapture. Denies imminency.
- 3)there must be a world-wide revival before Christ returns. Possibly but not necessarily. The precedent would be the awakening under King Josiah just prior to judgment on Judah. Every generation since the first has properly looked for the Lord's return in their time. So our Lord in an often over-looked passage clearly intimates, He could have returned within the life span of the Apostles (cf John 21:22, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to you?")
- 4)the return of Christ must be on the Feast of Trumpets – possible, but don't deny imminency.
n.b. indeterminacy of the interval. Also no designation of time in Christian year for Parousia.

Virtually every writer in the NT makes clear his belief in the imminent return of Christ.

- 1)The Apostle Paul was convinced Christ would return in his life-time, cf 1 Thess 4:17. "We are waiting up for His Son from heaven who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess.1:10). The Corinthians were "waiting for the Lord's coming" (1 Cor. 1:7) since indeed "The time is short" (7:29). Those "who love Christ's appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8) realize "The Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5). Believers are to be "looking for the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).
- 2)The writer to the Hebrews speaks of "the day is approaching" (10:25) and that "He that is coming will come and will not tarry" (10:37). Note also 9:28, "To those who look for Him...."
- 3)James urges that "the coming of the Lord draws near" (5:8).
- 4)Peter argues "that the end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter 4:7). "Daystar" vs "day dawns" in 2 Peter 1:19. Is this setting forth the two stage parousia?
- 5)John in his epistles writes that "It is the last time" (1 John 2:18) and sees the purifying hope of the bridal church to be the Lord's appearing (3:1-3). In the last chapter of the Bible, he shares the promise of the living Christ three times: "I am coming soon!" (22:7, 12, 20). Obviously the Church is raptured and in heaven (24 Elders: 12 from OT Israel and 12 the Church in heaven and not mentioned in seven years, 6:1-19:6 until the Marriage Supper (19:6ff) , cf Merrill

Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, 190).

We are not in fact looking for the signs of the Rapture but for the Savior, and I think Earl Radmacher is correct in affirming that “the hope is realistic and motivational in proportion to its Imminence” (*Chafer Seminary Journal*, 4, 20). I believe Archbishop Trench was correct in saying that “there is no year in which Christ could not return; there is no month in which Christ could not return; there is no week in which Christ could not return; there is no day on which Christ could not return; there is no minute in which Christ could not return; there is no second in which Christ could not return.” Lenski had it right: from the beginning, the Church saw that Christ could return immediately or in the distant future. No one knows when Christ is returning. Dr. Walvoord was on target when he insisted: “The teaching of the coming of the Lord for the church, is always presented as an imminent event which should occupy the Christian’s thought and life to a large extent.” This hope is not a distraction from the task at hand; this is not “pie in the sky by and by;” this is not being so heavenly minded we are of no earthly good – on the contrary, as C.S. Lewis held: those who have been the most sure of the heavenly hope have been the ones who most generally have been the most involved and gripped by the task given to the church on this planet and through this church age. I conclude by demonstrating this.

III. The practical dynamics of expecting Christ’s imminent return

Moltmann has maintained that “theology is eschatology.” George Ladd was correct in seeing “the eschatological orientation of Biblical theology.” Believers in Christ are those upon whom “the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). We are those “who are partakers of the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5) The eschatological verdict on our souls has already been pronounced (Romans 8:1). Christians as the people of the future live in the now/not yet tension (1 John 2:2). The collapse of the tension through the denial of

imminence is calamitous and catastrophic. The misguided servant suffered an ethical and behavioral collapse when he ceased looking for his master's return "and began to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and be drunk" (Luke 12:45). I was raised by the old-fashioned maxims: "Don't go any place you wouldn't want to be if Jesus came back; don't be doing anything you wouldn't want to be doing if Jesus returned."

Could it be that some of our present conservative drift, our financial and moral scandals, our lethargy and worldliness are due to the recession of confidence in imminency? Have we jettisoned any thought about "being ashamed before Him at His coming?" (1 John 2:28). And what trepidation do we have about the account we give at the Bema? Some among us have mistakenly gone for a solution to Lordship Salvation and in so doing have weakened sola gratia and virtually denied the existence of the carnal Christian. Others with "an overcomers theology" have gone to a partial rapture which fractures the Body of Christ and holds that some believers will miss the millennium and still others that some at the Judgment Seat of Christ will be sent into outer darkness for a period of punishment. One has even urged a resuscitation of the unbiblical doctrine of purgatory to frighten us into obedience. I would rather urge a genuine return to Romans 6 on our union with Christ in His death and resurrection and a renewal of our proclamation of the imminent return of Christ for the church.

Eugene Peterson is right when he says "Everything in the NT is written under the pressure of the end. Christ is coming back!" Richard B. Hayes of Duke insists that "the imminence of Christ's coming heightens the ethical imperative" (*The Moral Vision of the NT*, 26). Very clearly throughout the NT there is close linkage between imminency and a life-style:

- 1)urgency in service and evangelism. We don't have unlimited time – no one knows how much.
- 2)purity through sanctification and the Spirit. Cf 2 Peter 3:11-14, 17-18. Prophecy is practical!

3) fidelity to the Word and sound doctrine because we are those who must give an account. Sometimes we grow weary in waiting. It is hard to stand on tiptoes for 2000 years! Yet this is not long if a day is with the Lord as a thousand years – it has been two days since Christ was here! And further, heirs must wait. They can afford to wait. Fascinatingly, in China today the registered churches are forbidden to preach on the Second Coming of Christ. The hope of Christ's imminent return is "clearly a powerful source of hope and endurance and an incentive to evangelism in the underground church" which is overwhelmingly pretribulational and premillennial (Robert Aikmann in *Books and Culture*). The bumper sticker "Christ is coming, look busy" has it half right.

Listen to words spoken by dear R.A. Torrey at the great Moody Conference in Chicago In 1914 in an address entitled: "The Lord's Second Coming a Motive for Personal Holiness": "The fourth great epoch in my life was when I got hold of the truth, and the truth got hold of me, of a personal, visible, glorious imminent return of our Lord. It lifted me above the world and its ambitions. What did I care if I were rich or poor? What did I care whether I had honor or contempt? What did I care if I were well-fed or hungry? I had been very ambitious, but when the truth got hold of me I had one ambition, and that was to please my Lord, who might come back at any time, and to please Him at any cost."

If the Lord tarries, we must do a better job of transmitting this truth to the new generations.

Why aren't we living more like we really believed it?

When are we going to wake up out of slumber and sleep?

Time for sipping tea on the veranda is over! (Richard Swenson, *Hurting Toward Oblivion*, NavPress, 1999). Swenson's conclusion is: "Live ready!"

MARANATHA!!!! "Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus."

