

The Imminent Coming of Christ  
by Renald E. Showers

I. THE CONCEPT OF IMMINENCY

A. The Meaning Of Imminency

1. "Hanging over one's head"<sup>1</sup>
2. "Ready to befall or overtake one",<sup>2</sup>
3. "Close at hand in its incidence",<sup>3</sup> In other words, close at hand in the sense that it could happen at any moment.
4. Other things *may* happen before the event, but nothing else *must* take place before it occurs. If something else must take place before an event can happen, then that event is not imminent. The necessity of something else occurring first destroys the concept of imminency.
5. When an event is truly imminent, a person never knows exactly when it will occur. A. T. Pierson stated, "Imminence is the *combination of two conditions* viz., *certainty* and *uncertainty*. By an imminent event we mean one which is certain to occur at some time, uncertain at what time.",<sup>4</sup>

B. Truths Associated With Imminency

Since a person never knows exactly when an imminent event will occur, three things are true.

1. A person cannot count on a certain amount of time transpiring before the imminent event occurs. Thus, he should always be prepared for it to occur at any moment.
2. A person cannot legitimately set a date for the occurrence of an imminent event. As soon as a person sets a date for an imminent event he destroys the concept of imminency. By setting a date he says that a certain amount of time must transpire before that event can occur. A set date is contrary to the concept that the event could occur at any moment.
3. A person cannot legitimately say that an imminent event is soon. The term "soon" implies that an event *must* occur "within a short time (after a particular point of time specified or implied)." By contrast, an imminent event *may* occur within a short time, but it does not *have* to in order to be imminent. Thus, "imminent" is not equal to "soon." Evidence Christ's coming to rapture the Church was as imminent when the New Testament was written as it is today; however, today, over 1900 years later, it hasn't happened yet. Thus, from today's historical perspective it is obvious that, although Christ's coming to rapture the Church was imminent in New Testament times, it was not soon then.

II. THE CONCEPT OF THE IMMINENT COMING OF CHRIST

A. The Meaning Of The Imminent Coming Of Christ

1. Christ's coming to rapture the Church is always hanging over the believer's head.
2. Christ's coming to rapture the Church is constantly ready to befall or overtake believers.

3. Christ's coming to rapture the Church is always close at hand in the sense that it could happen at any moment.

4. Other things *may* happen before Christ comes to rapture the Church, but nothing *must* take place before He comes. If something else must take place before Christ can come, then His coming is not imminent. The necessity of something else taking place first destroys the concept of the imminent coming of Christ.

5. Since Christ's coming to rapture the Church is truly imminent, a believer never knows exactly when He will come.

B. Truths Associated With The Imminent Coming Of Christ Since a believer never knows exactly when Christ will come, three things are true.

1. A believer cannot count on a certain amount of time transpiring before Christ comes to rapture the Church. Thus, believers should always be prepared for Christ to come at any moment.

2. A believer cannot legitimately set a date for Christ's coming. As soon as a believer sets a date for Christ's coming he destroys the concept of the imminency of that coming. By setting a date he says that a certain amount of time must transpire before Christ can come. A set date is contrary to the concept that Christ could come at any moment.

3. A believer cannot legitimately say that Christ's coming to rapture the Church is soon just because it is imminent. The term "soon" implies that Christ's coming must occur within a short time. His coming *may* occur within a short time, but it does not *have* to in order to be imminent.

III. SELECTED NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES RELATED TO THE IMMINENT COMING OF CHRIST

Does the New Testament teach the imminent coming of Christ? J. G. Davies, the Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham, stated that the expectation of Christ's "imminent coming" is "so vivid in the New Testament. ,<sup>6</sup> J. Barton Payne declared, "In fact, no natural reading of Scripture would produce any other conclusion. ,<sup>7</sup>

A. *1 Corinthians 16:22 - "Maranatha"*

1. Its meaning. The term "Maranatha" consisted of three Aramaic words: "Mar" - Lord; "ana" - our; "tha" - come. Thus, the entire term meant "our Lord, come."<sup>8</sup>

2. Its form. The term "Maranatha" had the form of a petition.<sup>9</sup>

3. Its origin and significance. The term "Maranatha" was an Aramaic expression begun by Jewish Christians in the land of Israel. Why, then, did Paul use it in a letter to a Greek church? Barclay explained the significance of this as follows:

It is strange to meet with an Aramaic phrase in a Greek letter to a Greek Church. The explanation is that that phrase had become a watchword and a password. It summed up the vital hope of the early Church, and Christians whispered it to each other, identified each other by it, in a language which the heathen could not understand.<sup>10</sup>

Morris asserted that the term "Maranatha"

must have expressed a sentiment that the early Church regarded as supremely important, else it would never have been taken over in this way by the Greek-speaking Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Kuhn concluded, "Thus maranatha is an important and authentic witness to the faith of the primitive Palestinian community. ,<sup>12</sup> Concerning the term "Maranatha" in 1 Corinthians 16:22, Robertson and Plummer stated, "It warns them that at any moment they may have to answer for their shortcomings. ,<sup>13</sup>

It would appear, then, that the fixed usage of the term "Maranatha" by the early Christians was a witness to their strong belief in the imminent return of Christ. If they knew that He could not return at any moment because of other events or a time period which had to transpire first, then why did they petition Him in a way that implied that He could come at any moment?

B. *1 Thessalonians 1:10*

1. The literal meaning of *anamenein* translated "to wait," is "to wait up for." It is used of persons who "wait for someone who is arriving. ,<sup>14</sup> Thus, the word refers literally to the activity of persons who "wait up for" someone who is arriving.

Those persons do not go to bed at their normal time because they are expecting someone to arrive at any moment. Their understanding is that there is no time period which *must* elapse before that person can come; thus, they do not go to bed for a period of time.

2. *anamenein* carries "the suggestion of waiting with patience and confident expectancy. ,<sup>15</sup> Thus, it refers to the activity of persons who wait patiently for someone to arrive because they are confident that he could come at any moment.

3. Paul used the present tense form of the infinitive. A. T. Robertson indicated that the present tense of this specific infinitive gives it the sense of "to keep on waiting for."<sup>16</sup> In other words, it refers to the continuous action of waiting for someone. It can be concluded, then, that the Thessalonians were continuously and patiently expecting or waiting up for Christ to return from heaven because they were confident that He could come at any moment.

4. From whom or what did the Thessalonians derive this concept of the imminent return of Christ? Since Paul had been their teacher when he was with them prior to writing 1 Thessalonians (Acts 17; 1 Th. 1:6; 2:13; 2 Th. 2:5), it seems apparent that he was the one who taught them to expect the Lord to return at any moment.

5. It should be noted that Paul did not tell the Thessalonians that they were wrong to have this expectancy. Instead, he referred to their waiting up for the Lord in an approving manner (vv. 7-10).

C. *James 5:7-9*

1. The Greek verbs translated "draweth nigh" (v. 8) and "standeth" (v. 9) are in the perfect tense and indicative mood. Thus, each of these verbs refers to an action which was completed before James wrote his epistle and which continues on in that completed state.<sup>17</sup>

2. The implications of James' statements.

- a. Christ's coming drew near before James wrote his epistle, and His coming continues to be near.
- b. Christ as judge began to stand before the door of heaven before James wrote his epistle, and Christ as judge continues to stand before that door. James wanted to impress his readers with the fact that Christ could come through the door of heaven at any moment and cause them as Christians to stand before Him at the judgment seat of Christ. He could do so today.

In light of James' statements C. Leslie Mitton wrote, "James clearly believed, as others of his time did, that the coming of Christ was imminent."<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of James' statements we can conclude that Christ's coming was imminent in New Testament times and continues to be so today, and that this fact should make a difference in the way Christians live.

#### IV. AN IMPLICATION OF IMMINENCY

The concept of the imminent coming of Christ has a strong implication relative to the time of the Rapture of the Church. Earlier it was demonstrated that, in light of the meaning of the term "imminent," the concept of the imminent coming of Christ involves several principles: Christ could come at any moment. Other things *may* happen before His coming, but nothing else must precede it. If something else *must* occur before Christ comes, then His coming is not imminent. The necessity of something else taking place first destroys the concept of the imminent coming of Christ. A person cannot count on a certain amount of time transpiring before the Lord's coming.

In light of the concept of the imminent coming of Christ and the fact that the New Testament teaches His imminent coming, it can be concluded that the pre-tribulation rapture view is the only view of the Rapture of the Church which comfortably fits this New Testament teaching. It is the only view that can honestly say that Christ could return at any moment, because it alone teaches that He will come to rapture the Church before the 70th week of Daniel 9 or Tribulation Period begins and that nothing else *must* happen before His return.

All other views teach that at least part of the 70th week *must* transpire before Christ can come to rapture the Church. The mid-tribulation view claims that one-half (the first three and one-half years) of the 70th week must elapse before He can return. The pre-wrath view asserts that approximately three-fourths of the 70th week must run its course before Christ can come. The post tribulation view declares that the entire 70<sup>th</sup> week (all seven years) must pass before the Lord can come. Thus, none of these views can honestly say that Christ could come at any moment. In reality, all three of these views are saying that a person can count on a certain amount of time transpiring before Christ's coming, and, therefore, are destructive of the New Testament teaching of the imminent coming of Christ.

It can be concluded, then, that the concept of the imminent coming of Christ strongly infers a pre-tribulation Rapture of the Church.

<sup>1</sup> "imminent," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1901, V, 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Arthur T. Pierson, *Our Lord's Second Coming as a Motive to World-Wide Evangelism* (published by John Wanamaker, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> "soon," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989, XV,1011.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle Of Paul To The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> Johannes Schneider, "erchomai," *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament* Vol. II, p. 674.

<sup>10</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to The Corinthians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle Of Paul To The Corinthians* p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> K. G. Kuhn, "maranatha," *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament* Vol. IV, P. 470.

<sup>13</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical And Exegetical Commentary On The First Epistle Of St Paul To The Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), p. 401.

<sup>14</sup> William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.505.

<sup>15</sup> W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphants Ltd., 1940), Vol. IV, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament* Vol. IV (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1931), p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 200.

<sup>18</sup> C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle Of James* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966), p.186.