

The Return of Christ

by

Ernest W. Durbin II

Constructive Theology II

THST 6101

Gilbert W. Stafford, Th.D.

April 14, 2005

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

The Christian belief that Jesus Christ will return someday in a final consummation of the work inaugurated by his first coming is commonly called the “Second Coming” or “Second Advent.” These terms, present in today’s vernacular, appear to have originated in the very earliest days of the church, indicating the continuing importance of this doctrine, beginning with early patristic fathers.¹ Theologians use the Greek word *parousía* as a technical term to denote Christ’s return at the end of the age. The fundamental meaning of *parousía* is “presence,” deriving the concept “coming to be present.” In addition to these, *parousía* in the New Testament also reflects “arrival,” or “coming.” Inside Hellenistic culture, the word indicated the visitation of a ruler, marked with activities of celebration and preparation, denoting overtones of greatness.² Scripture records many other words and phrases indicating Christ’s return such as: “manifestation,” or “appearance,” as well as combinations using the word “day,” including “the day of the Lord,” “the last day,” “the day of judgment” or simply “that day.” The New Testament is replete with passages affirming the Return of Christ.

¹ Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Apostle John And Asia Minor As A Source Of Premillennialism In The Early Church Fathers," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 (December 1988): 427.

² Kittel, Gerhard, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 791.

Scripture is very clear that Christ will return, and indicates some arguably unambiguous details regarding the event. We are told the Parousia will be the personal return of Christ (Acts 1:11), a public, universal and grand event, visible to all creation (Mt. 24:27, Lk. 21:27). Christ will come unexpectedly and suddenly (Mk. 13:35–37, 1 Thess. 5:2, 2 Pet. 3:10) at a time impossible to predict, as not even the incarnate Son and the angels are privy to the Father's timetable (Mk. 13:32). Yet we are informed of certain signs that will herald Christ's return: worldwide proclamation of the Gospel (Mk. 13:10), extensive apostasy (Mt. 24:10; 2 Tim. 3:1–9; 2 Pet. 3:3), increasing wickedness (Mt. 24:12), wars and natural calamities (Mk. 13:7-8), and the appearance of the antichrist or false Christs and false prophets (2 Thess. 2:3, 1 Jn. 2:18, Mk. 13:22). Christians are encouraged to remain watchful, expectant, and eager for His return (2 Pet. 3:12, 2 Tim. 4:8, Tit. 2:13). In addition to these particulars, the New Testament record reflects a certain historical imminence of Christ's coming.

Imminent eschatological content within the New Testament is evident both in the sayings and teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul. When Jesus stated some of his contemporaries would not die before they saw the Kingdom of God come (Mk. 9:1, Mt. 10:23), some the scholars imply Jesus taught that He would return within the lifetime of His hearers. Likewise they refer to Paul's words describing those who are currently alive ("we") being caught up in the air with Christ on his return (1 Thess. 4:17). This imminent content coupled with the apparent delay of the Parousia has generated significant response from the scholarly community.

A. Schweitzer initiated much of the recent debate with his premise that both Jesus and Paul expected the world to end within a few years or generations.³ The delay of the return of the Son of Man presented a problem for early Christians to wrestle with. Schweitzer contends Jesus died confidently expecting the consequence of his death to be the immediate dawning of the Kingdom of God and His own “coming” as Messiah. Jesus’ expectation proved wrong, nonetheless Paul subsequently regarded Jesus’ death as the inauguration of the Messianic era.⁴ C. H. Dodd challenged the imminence- delay issue by purporting it was not Jesus who erred in expecting a Parousia, but rather the early church that erred in its hope.⁵ Jesus predicted the survival of his own death as the work of God and a gateway to a new epoch. It was not the future that concerned Jesus, but a “realized eschatology in His present ministry.”⁶ The church mistakenly believed that Jesus would return and created an eschatology which was not authentic to His teaching.

Others have dealt with imminence in the New Testament and the delay of the Parousia differently. Ben Witherington rejects the notion that Jesus and Paul were wrong about their predictions of the imminent return. Witherington asserts neither Jesus or Paul affirmed the end of the world had to come within their lifetimes; rather they held the

³ Ben Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove, ILL.: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 20.

⁴ A. L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 35-36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51

perspective that it was imminently *possible*.⁷ Jesus and Paul used imminent language to “warn their respective audiences to be prepared, stay awake, and keep watch.”⁸ A. L. Moore believes that Jesus and the early church based their future expectation on the conviction that “the End was in Jesus Christ.”⁹ As such, the End could not be far off in a “manifest, unambiguous, universal form.”¹⁰ In Jesus’ understanding of the future were the twin themes of eschatology and grace. Eschatologically the End was the revelation of His person and work, guaranteeing nearness. Yet grace precluded the idea that the End would definitely come in a certain number of years; the provision of God’s mercy could not be measured or forecast.¹¹ For Witherington and Moore, the imminent language of the New Testament does not necessitate the writings be interpreted as erroneous.

The eschatological interpretation known as Preterism also defends the New Testament writings. The term Preterism is based on the Latin word *preter* which means “past.” The Preterist understanding of certain eschatological passages holds that they have already come to fulfillment.¹² Emphasizing the word “soon” in Revelation 1:1 in conjunction with Jesus’ words in the Olivet Discourse “This generation will not pass away,” (Matt. 24:34) Preterism holds that most of Jesus’ predictions about His future

⁷ Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World*, 233.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48

⁹ Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament*, 207.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 208

¹² Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1997), 163-164.

coming refer to the destruction of Jerusalem A. D. 70.¹³ The Preterist viewpoint takes the historical interpretation of Revelation seriously, relating it to the original author and audience. They view the purpose of Revelation as to prepare the first century Church for persecution by imperial Rome and also support the reorientation of the Church after the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁴ Preterism, like many eschatological interpretations, has internal variants.¹⁵ Moderate Preterists (also described as orthodox or partial Preterists) interpret the majority of eschatological prophecy as recurring before 70 A. D. but allow for the Second Advent, resurrection the dead, and judgment to occur in the future.¹⁶ Hyper-Preterism (also known as consistent, full or plenary Preterists) declares that all prophecy was fulfilled prior to the destruction of the Temple; disavowing the future return of Christ.¹⁷ Preterist eschatology, as well as Dodd's realized eschatology, and Schweitzer's consistent eschatology, all contend with the issue of imminence and the delay of the Parousia in the first century; other eschatological models are also concerned with imminence, but in the sense of the expectation of the future return of Christ.

¹³ Robert L. Thomas, "The Doctrine of Imminence in Two Recent Eschatological Systems," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (October 2000): 454.

¹⁴ Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 15-16; quoted in Kenneth L. Gentry, Sam Hamstra Jr, C. Marvin Pate, and Robert L. Thomas, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Stanley N. Gundy and C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 19.

¹⁵ Preterism, presented here as an eschatological model of its own, is also regarded as an interpretive method within other models. For example, postmillennial scholars such as Kenneth L. Gentry adopt preterist interpretations of scriptural passages within their own eschatological framework.

¹⁶ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 555.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Those who look to a future Second Advent of Jesus Christ share the common ground of expectation, but are frequently divided over the interpretation of the millennium as spoken of in Revelation chapter 20. The word Millennium is derived from the Latin combination of *mille* meaning “thousand,” and *annus*, for a “year,” and signifies the thousand-year period envisioned by the seer in Revelation 20:1-8.¹⁸ Conclusions vary regarding the nature of this millennium, and the sequence of events leading up to, during, and immediately following it; ultimately these opinions influence perspectives on the Parousia. The major views regarding the Millennium are commonly called Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism.

The term Premillennialism means that Christ will return before the millennium to establish an earthly reign for 1000 years. Premillennialism has two distinct and primary forms, dispensational and “historic.” The primary difference between the two understandings relates to the distinctions made between Israel and the Church and the timing of the rapture of the Church in relation to the tribulation.¹⁹

Dispensational Premillennialists hold to a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, believing the promises made to Abraham and David are unconditional and have had or will have literal fulfillment. Promises made to Israel have not been eliminated or fulfilled by the Church, which is now regarded as a distinct body in this age having promises and a destiny of its own. Dispensationalists assert that Christ will return for His Church at the close of this age, meeting her in the air (not to be regarded as the Second Coming of

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, ILL.: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 16-17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129-130

Christ) in an event known as the rapture. The rapture, sometimes known as the translation, will initiate a seven-year period of tribulation on earth. This pre-tribulation rapture precludes the Church from having to endure the tribulation. After this period, Christ will return to earth (the Second Coming) and establish His Kingdom on earth for 1000 years. During this time Dispensational Premillennialism contends the promises to Israel will be fulfilled.²⁰

Historic Premillennialism believes the Church will be present during the tribulation period, which may or may not be seven years. At the close of the tribulation, the Church will be taken up in rapture, hence a post-tribulation experience. In relation to Israel, Historic Premillennialists interpret the church as the spiritual Israel; covenantal relations with God are passed from Israel to the Church. The reign of Christ during the millennium will be over a spiritually orientated kingdom rather than a theocratic Jewish oriented one. The Grace of God is regarded as a principle for all humankind, in all periods of time.²¹

Much the same as Premillennialism, Postmillennialism anticipates a future kingdom era on this earth. Although they share a basic millenarian outlook, Postmillennialism, as its name implies, contends that Christ will return at the end of the millennium. Unlike the catastrophic initiation of the millennium espoused by Premillennialism, Postmillennial thinkers look for a period of peace on earth ushered in

²⁰ Condensed from Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), 12; Quoted in Steve Lewis, "Theological Presuppositions and the Interpretation of Revelation." *Conservative Theological Journal*, vol. 7 (August 2003): 215.

²¹ Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, 129-130.

by the Church. As the Gospel is continually preached, heightened acceptance and influence of Christian principles will affect a worldwide change, diminishing the influence of evil in human affairs. Christianity will be a transforming influence not only over individual lives but also over nations. As the millennium arrives, Satan is “bound,” and evil temporarily restrained. After 1000 years Satan is loosed for a brief and futile rebellion, ended by the triumphal return of Jesus. The Second Coming is followed by the general resurrection, judgment and the close of time into eternity.²² Many Postmillennialists interpret the tribulation as the constant conflict of good and evil throughout history.

In contrast to both Premillennial and Postmillennial thought, Amillennialism is an eschatological orientation that awaits no future earthly millennium. Amillennial etymologically means “no millennium,” yet proponents of this theory do not deny the truth or validity of the thousand-year vision of Revelation 20. This thousand-year period is understood symbolically rather than literally. The millennium is to be interpreted as a reference to the spiritual reign by the saints in heaven during an intermediate state or a symbolic description of the conversion and victorious life now enjoyed by believers. Thus the symbolic era transpires during the church age, indicative of the time between the two Advents of Christ. This time will be characterized by a mixture of both good and evil until Christ finally returns at the close of the age. As the end of time approaches, the conflict between the Church and evil will intensify with the appearance of the antichrist

²² Ibid., 70-72

and heavy persecution of the saints. When Christ returns there will be a general resurrection, judgment, and transformation of creation into the eternal state.²³

Irrespective which millennial view is embraced, the New Testament account of the return of Christ proclaims themes filled with victory and assurance. On His own schedule, God will obliterate evil, bringing this fallen world to its end, and establish “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15). We can be assured that nothing will stand in the way of His purpose for those who are called redeemed. It is evident that the Parousia has been and will continue to be of interest to both theologians and lay people. Yet we should not be lost in thought, working out the precise details of how these prophecies will be fulfilled; the mission of the first advent is yet to be accomplished, there are those who do not yet know of Christ’s first coming. While we labor to see this accomplished we remember the closing words of Scripture, “Yes I am coming soon.” May we all reply, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”²⁴

²³ Ibid., 150-152

²⁴ Revelation 20:20

WORKS CITED

- Crutchfield, Larry V. "The Apostle John And Asia Minor As A Source Of Premillennialism In The Early Church Fathers." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 (December 1988): 411-427.
- Gentry, Kenneth L. *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*. Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989, 15-16. Quoted in Kenneth L. Gentry, Sam Hamstra Jr, C. Marvin Pate, and Robert L. Thomas, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Stanley N. Gundy and C. Marvin Pate, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.
- ., Sam Hamstra Jr, C. Marvin Pate, and Robert L. Thomas, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Stanley N. Gundy and C. Marvin Pate, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.
- . *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*. 2nd ed. Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1997.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*. Downers Grove, ILL.: Intervarsity Press, 1992.
- Kittel, Gerhard, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translation of: Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985.
- Lewis, Steve "Theological Presuppositions and the Interpretation of Revelation." *Conservative Theological Journal*, vol. 7 (August 2003): 205-219.
- Moore, A. L. *The Parousia in the New Testament*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *The Basis of Premillennial Faith*. Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953, 12. Quoted in Steve Lewis, "Theological Presuppositions and the Interpretation of Revelation." *Conservative Theological Journal*, vol. 7 (August 2003): 205-219.
- Thomas, Robert L. "The Doctrine of Imminence in Two Recent Eschatological Systems." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (October 2000): 452-467.
- Witherington, Ben. *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology*. Downers Grove, ILL.: Intervarsity Press, 1992.