

FIVE

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The early Church fathers were not experts on prophecy and the major doctrines of Scripture. Most of them did not have access to all the books in the Bible. It took them a few hundred years to come to a consensus on the major doctrines. The doctrine of the Trinity was not confirmed until the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD). Athanasius (293-373) properly formulated it and in 381, at the First Council of Constantinople, the doctrine was finalized. It is folly to base any doctrine, or to derive support for a doctrine on the teachings of the early Church fathers. All doctrines must be based solely on Scripture.

The early Church fathers did not believe in the doctrine of *imminence*, which teaches that Jesus Christ can return at *any moment* to rapture the Church. Some of them expected Him to return in their lifetime, but those who looked for His return knew the Antichrist would come first. The consensus among the early Church fathers was that the Antichrist would rise to power before the rapture of the Church.

Larry V. Crutchfield, writing in the *Conservative Theological Journal*, admitted that the early Church fathers looked for the coming of the Antichrist before the Rapture:

Even most of those who **looked for Antichrist's appearance** prior to the second advent, saw that event as occurring suddenly and just as suddenly **being followed by the rescue and rapture of the saints** by Christ. (*Conservative Theological Journal*, August 1999, p. 195, emphasis added, R.K.)

And Irenaeus still spoke of Antichrist's "sudden coming," **and** the church "suddenly" being caught up. (Ag. Her. V, XXX, 2 and V, XXIX, *Conservative Theological Journal*, August 1999, p. 195, emphasis added, R.K.)

Crutchfield understood that the early Church fathers looked for the appearing of the Antichrist, and taught that the Church would be raptured after he rose to power, just as the Bible says (2 Thessalonians 2.3).

Dr. John Walvoord admitted that the view of the early Church fathers concerning eschatology does not "correspond to what is advanced by pretribulationists today except for the one important point that both subscribe to the imminency of the rapture" ("The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation," p. 25, *Conservative Theological Journal*, August 1999, p. 196).

Walvoord also stated in his book, *The Rapture Question*, that the early Church fathers believed in the *imminence* of the return of Jesus:

The early church believed in the imminency of the Lord's return, which is an essential doctrine of pretribulationism. (p. 192, 11th printing, 1973)

Roland Rasmussen refuted that claim by Dr. Walvoord, which is clearly not true. This is what he wrote in his 1996 book, *The Post-Trib, Pre-Wrath Rapture*:

In our chapter, “Posttribulationism Is the Historical Position,” we will show that Walvoord, Stanton, and Pentecost all try to convince their readers that the early church fathers taught imminency. They did not teach imminency; they taught expectancy. It is one thing to eagerly expect Christ’s coming, but it is an entirely different thing to believe that Christ may come at any moment. (pp. 275-276)

The view of the early Church fathers does not agree with today’s doctrine of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, because they did not believe the Rapture was an *imminent* event. They taught that the Antichrist had to rise to power before the Rapture.

If the early Church fathers were correct, and the Antichrist comes before the Rapture, then his appearing is a *sign*. We should then be looking for the rise of the Antichrist, along with the formation of a ten-nation confederacy, because that confederacy is formed before the Antichrist comes to power.

According to the book of Daniel, a world government will be established. Then the leaders of the ten most prominent nations will form a confederacy and take control of it:

Thus he said, “The fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom upon earth, which will be diverse from all the kingdoms, and will devour the whole earth, and will tread it down, and break it in pieces. And as for the ten horns, out of this kingdom will ten kings arise: and another will arise after them; and he will be diverse from the former, and he will put down three kings.” (Daniel 7.23-24)

Shortly after the ten rulers form this coalition, another national leader will rise up. This eleventh prominent ruler is the Antichrist, who will then become a member of this ruling coalition. The early Church fathers understood and they taught that the Antichrist would come first, then the Rapture.

Writings of the early Church fathers

The Didache (110 AD)

The *Didache* was a Church manual written around 110 AD. It clearly taught that the Antichrist would rise to power before the Rapture:

Be you watchful for your life; let your lamps not be quenched and your loins not ungirded, but be ready; for you know not the hour when our Lord comes. And will gather yourselves together frequently, seeking what is fitting for your souls; for the whole time of your faith will not profit you, if you be not perfected at the last season. For in the last days the false prophets and corrupters will be multiplied, and the sheep will be turned into wolves, and love will be turned into hate. For as lawlessness increases, they will hate one another and will persecute and betray. And then the **world-deceiver will appear as a son of God**; and will work signs and wonders, and the earth will be delivered into his hands; and he will do unholy things, which have never been since the world began. Then all created mankind will come to the fire of testing, and many will be offended and perish; but **they that endure in their faith will be saved** by the Curse Himself. And then will the signs of the truth appear; first a sign of a rift in the heaven, then a sign of a voice

of a trumpet, and thirdly, a resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but as it was said: The Lord shall come and all his saints with Him. Then will the world see the Lord coming on the clouds of heaven. (Lightfoot, J.B., *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 129, emphasis added, R.K.)

These early Church fathers understood the Antichrist would come to power before the Rapture takes place. Notice the statements they make about “*false prophets*” being multiplied (Matthew 24.5, 11, 24) and that “*lawlessness increases*” (Matthew 24.12). They also say that believers will “*hate and persecute and betray one another*” (Matthew 24.10), and then the “*world-deceiver will appear*” (Matthew 24.15). The context shows that the early Church fathers who wrote the Didache believed that the Church would go through the entire Tribulation.

Some eschatologists argue that the phrase – “*for you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming*” – means that Jesus could return at *any moment* since Pentecost. The context shows that they used it to tell believers that they must be “*alert*” and living holy lives or they would not see the events taking place before the Rapture. These things are: the rise of false prophets, the increase of lawlessness, believers betraying each other, and the rise of the Antichrist. Christians who are living backslidden lives, and not studying their Bibles will not see the clear *signs* that will precede the Rapture. The most notable *sign* will be the rise of the Antichrist.

Clement of Rome (??-99 AD)

Clement was the bishop of Rome from 88 until his death in 99 AD. Tradition says he is the Clement that Paul mentions in Philippians 4.3 as a fellow laborer in Christ. In a letter to the church at Corinth in 95 AD, Chapter 23, “Be humble and believe that Christ will come again,” he briefly discusses the return of Christ:

Ye perceive how in a little time the fruit of a tree comes to maturity. Of a truth, soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, “Speedily will He come, and He will not tarry;” and, “The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple, even the Holy One, for whom ye look.” (Roberts, Alexander, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 11)

The so-called *Second Epistle of St. Clement to the Corinthians* was written by an unknown author around 120-140 AD. It is titled, *An Ancient Homily*, of which a small section deals with the return of Christ:

If therefore we will do what is just in the sight of God, we will enter His kingdom, and will receive the promises, which neither eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man. Let us therefore await the kingdom of God betimes in love and righteousness, since we know not the day of the God’s appearing. (*The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 48)

The context of the paragraph from which the first quote above is taken, and those following, are about the resurrection. A careful study of the surrounding passages makes it clear that the author did not believe in the *imminent* return of Christ. Instead, he believed in the certainty of His return.

The second quotation does not support the doctrine of *imminence*. The context is about living a holy life. The statement “Let us therefore await the kingdom of God betimes in love and righteousness, since we know not the day of the God’s appearing” is similar to a statement by James:

Be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it, until it receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; establish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (James 5.7-8)

Both statements were given to inspire Christians to live holy lives. They are not doctrinal statements, nor are they clear enough to build a doctrine on.

Why are we commanded to “wait” for the return of the Lord? No believer in the Church Age can know the exact day of His return (Matthew 24.36), but we can know the approximate time by “waiting” and “watching.” The way we “wait” and “watch” for His return is by “looking” for the *warning signs* of the Rapture. The commands to “wait” and “watch” cannot be construed to mean that the Rapture has been an *imminent* event since Pentecost.

Justin Martyr (100-165 AD)

Justin Martyr was born at the end of the 1st century. He knew people who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He was the first Christian apologist whose works survive. He believed that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ was still to come. This is important because it refutes the belief that Christ returned in 70 AD, as Full-Preterism teaches. He also agreed with the other early Church fathers that the Antichrist would rise to power prior to the Rapture. This is what he wrote in *Dialogue with Trypho* (chapter 110):

...that two advents of Christ have been announced: the one, in which He is set forth as suffering, inglorious, dishonored, and crucified; but the other, in which He will come from heaven with glory, when the **man of apostasy**, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do **unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians**, who, having learned the true worship of God from the law, and the word which went forth from Jerusalem by means of the apostles of Jesus, have fled for safety to the God of Jacob and God of Israel... (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 253-254, emphasis added, R.K.)

Justin Martyr believed the Antichrist would rise to power and persecute Christians before the return of Jesus Christ. The key is the phrase “us the Christians.” The use of the word “us” means that he believed Christians of the Church Age would be persecuted by the Antichrist.

The General Epistle of Barnabas (130 AD)

The General Epistle of Barnabas was written around 130 AD, allegedly by Barnabas, the disciple who traveled with the apostle Paul (Acts 13.1-5). It was quoted

by Clemens of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, and other Church fathers. Although Origen and Jerome considered it to be part of the canon of Scripture, most Church historians disagree and they do not believe it was written by Barnabas. The author did not believe the Rapture was an *imminent* event. Rather he believed it would not take place for another 2000 years. He writes in Chapter XV (“The False and the True Sabbath”):

Further, also, it is written concerning the Sabbath in the Decalogue which [the Lord] spoke, face to face, to Moses on Mount Sinai, “And sanctify ye the Sabbath of the Lord with clean hands and a pure heart.” And He says in another place, “If my sons keep the Sabbath, then will I cause my mercy to rest upon them.” The Sabbath is mentioned at the beginning of the creation [thus]: “And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it.” Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, “He finished in six days.” This implieth the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying, “Behold, to-day will be as a thousand years.” Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, **in six thousand years, all things will be finished.** “And He rested the seventh day.” This meaneth: When His Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day. (Ibid., vol. 1, p. 146, emphasis added, R.K.)

The author believed the Rapture would take place about 1900 years after the time of his writing. There had been about 4000 years of human history from Adam to the birth of Jesus Christ, and there must be about 2000 more years until the return of Jesus. The final thousand years will be the Millennial Kingdom. The writer of this letter agreed with the early Church fathers that the Rapture was not an *imminent* event.

The author of this epistle also wrote in Chapter IV, “Antichrist is at Hand: Let Us Therefore Avoid Jewish Errors,” the following warning to Christians:

It therefore behooves us, who inquire much concerning events at hand, to search diligently into those things which are able to save us. Let us then utterly flee from all the works of iniquity, lest these should take hold of us; and let us hate the error of the present time, that we may set our love on the world to come: let us not give loose reins to our soul, that it should have power to run with sinners and the wicked, lest we become like them. **The final stumbling-block** (or source of danger) **approaches**, concerning which it is written, as Enoch says, “For this end the Lord has cut short the times and the days, that His Beloved may hasten; and He will come to the inheritance.” And the prophet also speaks thus: “**Ten kingdoms shall reign upon the earth, and a little king shall rise up after them, who shall subdue under one three of the kings.**” In like manner Daniel says concerning the same, “And I beheld the fourth beast, wicked and powerful, and more savage than all the beasts of the earth, and how **from it sprang up ten horns, and out of them a little budding horn, and how it subdued under one three of the great horns.**” Ye ought therefore to understand. And this also I further beg of you, as being one of you, and loving you both individually and collectively more than my own soul, to take heed now to yourselves, and not to be

like some, adding largely to your sins, and saying, “The covenant is both theirs and ours.” (Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 138-139, emphasis added, R.K.)

This warning was given to Christians of the 2nd century. They were warned to live holy lives so they would recognize the Antichrist (little horn). The writer believed Christians would recognize the Antichrist, and be persecuted by him. He understood that “ten kingdoms” would rise up, and that the Antichrist would subdue three of them. He was wrong in thinking the Antichrist would rise to power in his lifetime.

The Shepherd of Hermas (150 AD)

The Shepherd of Hermas contains claims of visions, mandates and similitudes from the Lord to Hermas. It was written around 150 AD. From “Book One, Vision Fourth, Chapter II”:

You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then you prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and you spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly. Cast your cares upon the Lord, and He will direct them. Trust the Lord, ye who doubt, for He is all-powerful, and can turn His anger away from you, and send scourges on the doubters. Woe to those who hear these words, and despise them: better were it for them not to have been born. (Ibid., Vol. II, p. 18)

This statement by the Shepherd of Hermas teaches that Christians who live holy lives will be preserved through the Tribulation, and backslidden Christians will not be preserved. Note that he writes to Christians who had already been preserved “through” (escaped) persecution. It can mean nothing else. The beast that they faced is a type of the beast to come. This writing also refutes Full-Preterism as all of the writings of the early Church fathers do.

Irenaeus (140-202 AD)

Irenaeus was Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul, which is now Lyons, France. He was an early Church father and apologist. His writings were formative in the development of Christian theology. He was said to be, but most likely not, a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. He briefly touched on the subject of the Antichrist, the Tribulation and the Church in his treatise, *Against Heresies*:

It is manifest, therefore, that of these [potentates], he who is to come shall slay three, and subject the remainder to his power, and that he shall be himself the eighth among them. And they shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and **put the Church to flight**. After that

they shall be destroyed by the coming of our Lord. (Ibid., vol. 1, vol. v, chap. 26, emphasis added, R.K.)

Irenaeus believed that the Church would be here when the Antichrist rises to power in the future, and that the Antichrist would persecute the Church.

Tertullian (160-220 AD)

Tertullian was the first to write Christian literature in Latin. He was a notable early Christian apologist who helped develop the theology of the early Church. The most famous term he coined was “Trinitas” (Trinity), setting out the formula “three Persons, one Substance.” He also coined the terms “Vetus Testamentum” (Old Testament) and “Novum Testamentum” (New Testament). He taught that the Church would go through the entire Tribulation period in Chapter 25 of his work, *Anti-Marcion, On the Resurrection of the Flesh*:

In the Revelation of John, again, the order of these times is spread out to view, which “the souls of the martyrs” are taught to wait for beneath the altar, whilst they earnestly pray to be avenged and judged: (taught, I say, to wait), in order that the world may first drink to the dregs the plagues that await it out of the vials of the angels, and that the city of fornication may receive from the ten kings its deserved doom, and that the beast **Antichrist with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God**; and that, after the casting of the devil into the bottomless pit for a while... (Ibid., vol. 3, emphasis added, R.K.)

Tertullian taught that the “Antichrist with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God” after the angels pour out their vials of plagues on the world. The seven vials are poured out in Chapter 16 of Revelation at the end of the seven-year Tribulation.

Hippolytus (170-236 AD)

Photius, an Eastern Orthodox Church patriarch of Constantinople from 858 to 867 AD, and from 877 to 886 AD, described Hippolytus in his *Bibliotheca* (cod. 121) as a disciple of Irenaeus, who was said to be a disciple of Polycarp. It is highly unlikely that Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp. Hippolytus became an enemy of the Church leaders and for some time led a separate group. Finally reconciled to the Church leaders, he eventually died as a martyr of the faith. Concerning the Antichrist, the Tribulation and the Church, he has this to say in his work, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*:

It is proper that we take the Holy Scriptures themselves in hand, and find out from them what, and of **what manner, the coming of Antichrist is**; on **what occasion and at what time the impious pious one shall be revealed**; and whence and from **what tribe (he shall come)**; and **what his name is**, which indicated by the number in the Scripture; and how he shall work terror among the people,

gathering them from the ends of the earth; and (how) **he shall stir up tribulation and persecution against the saints**; and how he shall glorify himself as God; and what his end shall be; and how the sudden appearing of the Lord shall be revealed from heaven; and what the conflagration of the whole world shall be; and what the glorious and heavenly kingdom of the saints is to be, when they reign together with Christ; and what the punishment of the wicked by fire. (Ibid., vol. 5, p. 205, emphasis added, R.K.)

“And the dragon,” he says, “saw and persecuted the woman which brought forth the man-child. And to the woman were given two wings of the great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.” That refers to the one thousand two hundred and threescore days (the half of the week) **during which the tyrant is to reign and persecute the Church**, which flees from city to city, and seeks concealment in the wilderness among the mountains, possessed of no other defense than the two wings of the great eagle, that is to say, the faith of Jesus Christ, who, in stretching forth His holy hands on the holy tree, unfolded two wings, the right and the left, and called to Him all who believed upon Him, and covered them as a hen her chickens. For by the mouth of Malachi also He speaks thus: “And unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings.” (Ibid., p. 217, emphasis added, R.K.)

Hippolytus believed the Church was to look for the appearing of the Antichrist. He said that Christians will be able to identify him: by his tribe, by his name, by his gathering the people together from around the world, by his persecution of the saints, and by claiming to be God. The above quote by him leads one to believe that he was certain that the Church would go through the entire Tribulation.

Cyprian (200-258 AD)

Cyprian was bishop of Carthage and an important early Christian writer. He was born around the beginning of the third century in North Africa, received a classical education for that time, became a bishop after converting to Christianity around 249 AD, and died a martyr at Carthage. Cyprian wrote many volumes on Christian doctrine, and he stated emphatically that the Antichrist would persecute Christians and then they would be rescued by Christ. This is what he wrote in *Treatise XI. Exhortation to Martyrdom, Addressed to Fortunatus*:

You have desired, beloved Fortunatus that, since the burden of persecutions and afflictions is lying heavy upon us, and in the ending and completion of the world **the hateful time of Antichrist is already beginning to draw near**, I would collect from the sacred Scriptures some exhortations for **preparing and strengthening the minds of the brethren**, whereby I might animate the soldiers of Christ for the heavenly and **spiritual contest**. I have been constrained to obey your so needful wish, so that as much as my limited powers, instructed by the aid of divine inspiration, are sufficient, some arms, as it were, and defenses might be brought forth from the Lord’s precepts for **the brethren who are about to fight**. For it is little to arouse God’s people by the trumpet call of our voice, unless we

confirm the faith of believers, and their valor dedicated and devoted to God, by the divine readings. (Ibid., Vol. V, p. 496, emphasis added, R.K.)

Cyprian believed the Antichrist would rise to power in his time. He wanted to prepare Christians for the coming conflict. Agreeing with the teaching of the *Didache*, he believed the Antichrist would persecute Christians before they are delivered by Jesus Christ.

Victorinus (???-304)

Victorinus of Poetovio was a Church writer who was martyred during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian. He wrote commentaries on several books of the Bible, with only portions of Revelation surviving. This is a short passage, written around 270 AD, concerning the last days, from his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 15.1:

“And I saw another great and wonderful sign, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is completed the indignation of God.” For the wrath of God always strikes the obstinate people with seven plagues, that is, perfectly, as it is said in Leviticus; and these shall be in the *last time, when the church shall have gone out of the midst.* (Ibid., vol. 7, p. 357)

The passage, from the commentary on the book of Revelation, does not prove that Victorinus or any of the early Church fathers knew or believed in the doctrine of *imminence*. Instead, the passage confirms that the early Church fathers believed the Antichrist would come to power before the Rapture.

According to the above statement, Victorinus believed Christians would escape the judgment on the unsaved that begins at the mid-point of the Tribulation. We know this because the passage that he was commenting on takes place at this time of the Tribulation. Chapters 6-9 cover the events of the first 3½ years of the Tribulation, and Chapter 10 describes what is taking place in Heaven at the mid-point. Chapter 15 announces the final judgment of God upon the unsaved that also starts at the mid-point of the Tribulation.

In another writing on the book of Revelation, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 20.1-3, he said that the Church would suffer persecution at the hands of the Antichrist during his last 3½ years of rule:

And he shut him up, says he, and put a seal upon him, that he should not deceive the nations until the thousand years should be finished. “He shut the door upon him,” it is said, that is, he forbade and restrained his seducing those who belong to Christ. Moreover, he put a seal upon him, because it is hidden who belong to the side of the devil, and who to that of Christ. For we know not of those who seem to stand whether they shall not fall, and of those who are down it is uncertain whether they may rise. Moreover, that he says that he is bound and shut up, that he may not seduce the nations, **the nations signify the Church**, seeing that of them it itself is formed, and which being seduced, he previously held until, he says, the thousand years should be completed, that is, what is left of the sixth day, to wit, of the sixth age, which subsists for a thousand years; after this he must be loosed for a little season. The little season signifies three years and six months, in

which with all his power the **devil will avenge himself under Antichrist against the Church**. Finally, he says, after that the devil shall be loosed, and will seduce the nations in the whole world, and will **entice war against the Church**, the number of whose foes shall be as the sand of the sea. (Ibid., vol. 7, p. 358, emphasis added, R.K.)

Victorinus believed the Antichrist will persecute the Church. His timing of this persecution is a bit different than what the men who quote him say it is. He was certain the devil will be released from the abyss after the thousand years are completed, and then “avenge himself under Antichrist against the Church.”

In his commentary on Revelation (12.7-9), he says the Antichrist will rise to power after the two witnesses of Chapter 11 have completed their 3½ years of ministry:

“There was a battle in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon warred, and his angels, and they prevailed not; nor was their place found any more in heaven. And that great dragon was cast forth, that old serpent: he was cast forth into the earth.” This is the beginning of Antichrist; **yet previously Elias must prophesy**, and there must be **times of peace**. And afterwards, when the **three years and six months are completed** in the preaching of Elias, he also must be cast down from heaven, where up till that time he had had the power of ascending; and all the apostate angels, as well as Antichrist, must be roused up from hell. Paul the apostle says: *“Except there come a falling away first, and the man of sin shall appear, the son of perdition; and the adversary who exalted himself above all which is called God, or which is worshipped.”* (Ibid., vol. 7, p. 356, emphasis added, R.K.)

When this passage is compared with the previous one, we see that Victorinus believed the Antichrist would reign for 3½ years prior to the Second Coming of Christ. During that short period he will persecute the Church.

No Pre-Tribulationist should quote Victorinus, and claim he taught the doctrine of *imminence* and the Pre-Tribulation Rapture; he did not. His eschatology is unusual, to say the least.

Ephrem of Syria (306-373 AD)

Ephrem was a hymnographer, theologian, and prolific writer (said to have written one million lines), of the 4th century. The following section includes key passages from a text written near the end of his life entitled, *On the Last Times, the Antichrist and the End of the World*:

We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is imminent or overhanging. Already there have been hunger and plagues, violent movements of nations and signs, which have been predicted by the Lord, they have already been fulfilled (consummated), and **there is not another which remains, except the advent of the wicked one in the completion of the Roman kingdom**. Why therefore are we occupied with worldly business, and why is our mind held fixed

on the lusts of the world or the anxieties of the ages? Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that He may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms the world? Believe you me, dearest brothers, because the coming (advent) of the Lord is nigh, believe you me, because it is the very last time. Or do you not believe unless you see with your eyes? See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: *“Woe to those who desire to see the day of the Lord!”* **For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.** And so, brothers most dear to me, it is the eleventh hour, and the end of the world comes to the harvest, and angels, armed and prepared, hold sickles in their hands, awaiting the empire of the Lord. And we think that the earth exists with blind infidelity, arriving at its downfall early. Commotions are brought forth, wars of diverse peoples and battles and incursions of the barbarians threaten, and our regions will be desolated, and we neither become very much afraid of the report nor of the appearance, in order that we may at least do penance; because they hurl fear at us, and we do not wish to be changed, although we at least stand in need of penance for our actions! (*Vanished Into Thin Air*, p. 115-116, emphasis added, R.K.)

Some eschatologists have used the writings of Ephrem to support their doctrine of *imminence*. They have also claimed that he believed in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. The statement below, taken from the quote above, shows that he expected the Antichrist would rise to power before the Lord raptures the Church:

Already there have been hunger and plagues, violent movements of nations and signs, which have been predicted by the Lord, they have already been fulfilled, **and there is not another which remains, except the advent of the wicked one in the completion of the Roman kingdom.**

Ephrem and the early Church fathers awaited the rise of the Antichrist before the Rapture. The key is the word “except.” Ephrem had seen what he thought were the fulfillment of prophecies (*signs*) of the “last days.” He was looking for the rise of the Antichrist. Clearly he did not believe in an *imminent* Rapture that has no *signs* preceding it. According to Ephrem, the Church will be here to watch the rise of the Antichrist, followed by the Rapture.

Another work by Ephrem, *The Book of the Cave Treasures*, was written around 373 AD:

“At the end of the world and at the final consummation... suddenly the gates of the north shall be opened... They will destroy the earth, and there will be none able to stand before them. After one week of that sore affliction [Tribulation], they will all be destroyed in the plain of Joppa... Then will the son of perdition appear, of the seed and of the tribe of Dan... He will go into Jerusalem and will sit upon the throne in the Temple saying, “I am the Christ,” and he will be borne aloft by legions of devils like a king and a lawgiver, naming himself God... The time of the error of the AntiChrist will last two years and a half, but others say three years and six months.” (Jeffrey, Grant, *Final Warning*, p. 311, italics added, G.J.)

Ephrem believed that the 70th week of Daniel would be fulfilled in the last days prior to the appearing of the Antichrist. At the conclusion of the 70th week, the Antichrist would declare himself to be God, and rule for either 2½ or 3½ years, followed by the return of Christ. When he said, “the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come,” he was referring to the time of the Antichrist’s reign after the seven-year Tribulation. We know this because he wrote to Christians warning them to look for the rise of the Antichrist: “There is not another which remains, except the advent of the wicked one in the completion of the Roman kingdom.”

Ephrem did not expect the Rapture to take place at *any moment*. He knew that the Rapture was not an *imminent* event. He understood that certain prophecies had to be fulfilled first, and final one would be the rise of the Antichrist after the 70th week of Daniel had been fulfilled. What was *imminent* in his mind was the rise of the Antichrist. He was also a bit confused in his understanding of the sequence of the “last days.”

Commentary on the early Church fathers

Hal Lindsey’s commentary on Ephrem’s writing

Hal Lindsey, a noted televangelist, Christian author and graduate of Dallas Seminary, became a religious celebrity in 1970 with his first book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. He believes that the writing of Ephrem supports a Pre-Tribulation Rapture:

No matter what else the writer of this sermon believed, the fact Pseudo-Ephraem taught a pre-tribulational Rapture is undeniable. (*Vanished Into Thin Air*, p. 123)

Lindsey believes that the Antichrist will not be identified as such until after the Rapture:

Antichrist’s Unveiling Closely Connected to Beginning of the Day of the Lord

It begins shortly after the Antichrist is revealed, which is immediately after the removal of the Holy Spirit’s restraining ministry (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). (*Ibid.*, p. 244)

On page 387 of his book, *Vanished Into Thin Air*, Lindsey has a chart that says the Antichrist is revealed immediately after the Rapture, and several weeks before the start of the Tribulation.

This is not what Ephrem taught. He clearly taught that the Antichrist would rise to power before the Rapture, ruling for just a few years. According to Ephrem, the reign of the Antichrist will start after the 70th week of Daniel is completed. He believed Christians would go through the seven-year Tribulation, and then be raptured before the Antichrist’s reign of 2½ or 3½ years.

Grant Jeffrey's commentary on Ephrem's writing

Grant Jeffrey, a leading Pre-Tribulationist, chairman of Frontier Research Publications, host of the "Bible Prophecy Revealed" television program and author of numerous books on Bible prophecy, believes Ephrem taught the Rapture was an *imminent* event with no fulfilled prophecies beforehand:

To summarize the key points in Ephraem's text on the last days:

Ephraem's manuscript lays out the events of the last days in chronological sequence. Significantly he began with the Rapture using the word *imminent*, then, he described the Great Tribulation of three and a half years duration under the Antichrist's tyranny, followed by the second coming of Christ to earth with his saints to defeat the Antichrist. (*Final Warning*, p. 309)

The context of the use of the word *imminent* in the first passage of Ephrem's writing, a portion of which we quote below, is that the *signs* of the approaching Tribulation made him think it would start in his lifetime. The only thing that Ephrem thought had to take place next, before the start of the Tribulation, was the "advent of the wicked one" (the rise to power of the Antichrist). We quote Ephrem again from Lindsey's book:

We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, what is **imminent** or overhanging. Already there have been hunger and plagues, violent movements of nations and signs, which have been predicted by the Lord, they have already been fulfilled (consummated), and **there is not other which remains, except the advent of the wicked one in the completion of the Roman kingdom.** (*Vanished Into Thin Air*, pp. 115, emphasis added, R.K.)

According to Ephrem's sermon, believers are commanded to look for the "advent of the wicked one" (Antichrist). We must also point out that Ephrem understood the importance of looking for *signs*. He said, "Already there have been hunger and plagues, violent movements of nations and signs, which have been predicted by the Lord, they have already been fulfilled (consummated)." He knew the **What** (*signs*) was very important. He simply did not understand that there were many more prophecies that had to be fulfilled before the **When** (Rapture) could take place.

Henry C. Theissen's commentary on the early Church fathers

Dr. Henry Theissen, a dispensational Pre-Tribulationist writer of the 20th century, is certain that the early Church fathers believed in the doctrine of *imminence*. His *Lectures in Systematic Theology* states:

It is clear that the Fathers regarded the Lord's coming as imminent. (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 372)

Theissen was mistaken in his understanding of what the early Church fathers believed. Some thought the Rapture was *imminent* because they believed that most, or all of the *signs* of the Rapture had been fulfilled except the rise of the Antichrist.

Thomas Ice's commentary on the early Church fathers

Dr. Thomas Ice, of the Pre-Trib Research Center and author of several books on Bible prophecy, has this to say about the beliefs of the early Church fathers:

Expressions of imminency abound in the Apostolic Fathers. Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, and The Shepherd of Hermas all speak of imminency. (*Myths of the Origin of Pretribulationism*, Part 1)

He does not explain why he thinks the early Church fathers believed in the doctrine of *imminence*. There is no statement by any of them that supports that doctrine. Instead, they clearly taught that Christians were to “watch” for specific *signs*, with the rise of the Antichrist being the primary *sign*. He admitted that the early Church fathers had views of prophecy that were *contradictory*:

As was typical of every area of the early church's theology, their views of prophecy were undeveloped and sometimes contradictory, containing a seedbed out of which could develop various and diverse theological viewpoints. While it is hard to find clear pretribulationism spelled out in the fathers, there are also found clear pre-trib elements which if systematized with their other prophetic views contradict posttribulationism but support pretribulationism. (Ibid.)

Ice is correct that none of the early Church fathers taught a clear doctrine of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture. Most taught a Mid-Tribulation Rapture, and some taught the Post-Tribulation doctrine. If, as Ice admits, it is “hard to find clear pretribulationism spelled out in the fathers” how could they possibly believe in the doctrine of *imminence*? They could not and they did not! They were mistaken in thinking that all of the *warning signs* of the Rapture had been fulfilled except the rise of the Antichrist. Some thought the Rapture was *imminent* because of the fulfilled *warning signs*, not because Scripture says Christ can return at *any moment*. (You can read his full article at his website - www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=50)

Gerald Stanton's commentary on the early Church fathers

Gerald Stanton, president of Ambassadors International, is a graduate of Dallas Seminary, a former professor of systematic theology at Talbot Theological Seminary and an author of several religious books. He believes the early Church fathers “held the coming of Christ to be an *imminent* event”:

There is abundant literature to prove that they were almost without exception premillennial, down to the end of the third century. There is also sufficient evidence to prove that many of them held the coming of Christ to be an imminent event, as seen in the following quotations. (*Kept From the Hour*, p. 220)

Most early Church fathers were premillennial, but none believed in *imminence*. As noted previously, they thought most of the *signs* of the Rapture had been fulfilled, except the rise of the Antichrist. They were “looking” for him, not for the *any moment* return of Christ.

Timothy LaHaye's commentary on Victorinus

Dr. Timothy LaHaye, former pastor, founder of Christian Heritage College (now called San Diego Christian College), co-founder of the Council for National Policy and co-author of the best-selling *Left Behind* fiction series, cited the work of Victorinus and then commented on it to argue that the early Church fathers knew of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture:

And I saw another great and wonderful sign, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is completed the indignation of God. For the wrath of God always strikes the obstinate people with seven plagues, that is, perfectly, as it is said in Leviticus; and these shall be in the *last time, when the church shall have gone out of the midst.*

So it is clear that the teaching of the church being taken out “in the last time,” meaning the coming of Christ, was known as early as the third century. (*No Fear of the Storm*, p. 173, emphasis added, T.L.)

The passage, from the commentary on the book of Revelation, does not prove that Victorinus, or any early Church father believed in the Pre-Tribulation Rapture or the doctrine of *imminence*. Instead, the passage confirms that the early Church fathers believed the Antichrist would come to power before the Rapture.

He failed to mention that the passage from which Victorinus commented, was Revelation 15:1, which occurs at the mid-point of the Tribulation. It announces the final judgment of God upon the unsaved.

Victorinus believed that Christians would escape the judgment on the unsaved that begins at the mid-point of the Tribulation. At best he was a Mid-Tribulationist.

We can understand why LaHaye thinks the early Church fathers believed in the *imminent*, Pre-Tribulation Rapture:

Frankly, one of my principal objections to the mid- and post-Trib theories is their destruction of imminency. For if Christ cannot come at any moment, these views cannot instruct us to look for His return. Instead they advise us to look for the inaugurating of the Tribulation period, when Antichrist signs a covenant with Israel for seven years for the rebuilding of the temple, the mark of the beast, the advent of Antichrist himself, and the thirty-one events listed in chapter four of this book. Only the pre-Tribulation view retains the promise of imminency! (*Ibid.*, p. 66)

Conclusion

The early Church fathers believed that all of the *warning signs* of the return of Christ had been fulfilled, except the rise of the Antichrist. The consensus among them was that the Antichrist would rise to power before the Rapture and persecute Christians. They did not teach the doctrine of *imminence*, and none taught a clear Pre-Tribulation Rapture doctrine. They admonished Christians to “watch” for the rise of the Antichrist before the return of Jesus Christ.

The claim by eschatologists that the early Church fathers believed in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture, and in the modern doctrine of *imminence* is not based on the historical record. All were Mid-Tribulationists and Post-Tribulationists. Not even Ephrem taught a Pre-Tribulation Rapture doctrine. He clearly said the Antichrist would rise to power after the conclusion of the 70th week of Daniel, and the Rapture would take place before his 2½ or 3½ year reign. He taught the Post-Tribulation Rapture doctrine, and that the reign of the Antichrist will start at the conclusion of the seven-year Tribulation. It is a bit confusing, but Ephrem did not teach the modern doctrine of *imminence*, and he believed Christians of the Church Age would go through the entire 70th week of Daniel.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter Five

1. Why did some of the early Church fathers mistakenly think they were living in the “last days,” and that the Tribulation was just over the event horizon?
2. Who did most of the early Church fathers say would rise to a position of power before the Rapture?
3. What did they say this person would do to Christians of the Church Age?
4. Why did the early Church fathers believe Christ could not return at *any moment*?

5. Did the early Church fathers “watch” for the return of Christ by “watching” for the rise of the Antichrist?

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