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## Imminent And Any-Moment

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Belief in the imminence of the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ from glory is a sacred conviction among many Bible believers. In recent decades there has been a strong emphasis upon this Scriptural truth by evangelists and pastors resulting in conversions and holy lives. This doctrine of the Word believers have accepted as clearly taught by God, as greatly used by God, and as frequently blessed to their own hearts.

Recent years, however, have seen growing opposition to this doctrine. In the face of such opposition, it behooves Christians to re-examine the Scriptures and re-examine their understanding of that which Scripture teaches as set forth in their doctrinal statements. Re-examination as such is never dangerous, but is always wise for every Christian and every generation. In a seminary classroom, for instance, every theology class constitutes a re-examination and re-evaluation of the teaching of the Word.

One of the dangers concerning which we must be exceedingly cautious, the Modernists of former generations have taught us, is that so-called re-examination may sometimes amount to a re-definition or re-statement rather than a re-evaluation. Further study of the teaching of the Bible should normally lead us to stronger convictions, more clearly expressed and more surely believed. That type of so-called re-examination which actually amounts to a re-definition of historic theological terms accomplishes the end of whisking away the reality of the doctrine without actually and clearly opposing the doctrine itself. Fundamentalists are aware that Modernists, instead of openly opposing the doctrine of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ cleverly re-defined

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*"Imminent And Any-Moment" is a reprint from Central Bible Quarterly (Summer 1959) at which time Dr. Vanhetloo served as Dean of Central Baptist Seminary.*

"deity" such that the deity of Christ in their speech was the same as the "deity" of any human being. The reality of the doctrine was removed by a re-definition of the term used, such that the average Christian was often not aware of the radical difference between Fundamentalist and Modernistic teachings.

There is reason to suspect that in our day once again such a process is possible, and perhaps even actual. There are those who are concerned that much of the so-called re-investigation of the doctrine of inspiration in our day amounts to little more than a re-statement of the doctrine which in effect waters down the actual and historic teaching. There are also those who are concerned that a similar process concerning the historic Scriptural concept of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ is also possible in this day. The purpose of this study is to call attention to what seem to be important distinctions to keep in mind in this regard, as well as to consider certain indications which might justify such an evaluation.

### Definitions of the Doctrine

Many books on eschatology have entire chapters dealing with the imminence of the Lord's return. A perusal of these, as we shall see, reveals that there exists a common understanding and definition of the word imminent. In fact the unanimity is so obvious that most Christians will not conceive of the possibility of re-interpretation of the doctrine in our day.

Let it be understood at this point as well that many who oppose the doctrine of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ call themselves post-tribulationists, as against the label pre-tribulationist which they give to those who still maintain the imminency of the return. These are not the only two groups interested in the doctrine, but are the most vocal groups in this day.

To understand a doctrine, a glance at a dictionary is frequently helpful. For the word imminent in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, the definition reads "threatening to occur immediately; impending." In identifying the doctrine, Stanton says (*Kept from the Hour*, 108):

Many Christians affirm that the coming of Christ is imminent, which does not mean that this glad event must be immediate, but rather that it is over-hanging, that it may occur at any moment. The word imminent, if used of an evil event, might be rendered impending, for it is always threatening to come to pass. An imminent event is one that hangs suspended, possibly for an indefinite period of time, but

the final occurrence is certain. As applied to the coming of the Lord, imminency consists of three things: the certainty that He may come at any moment, the uncertainty of the time of that arrival, and the fact that no prophesied event stands between the believer and that hour."

That this is the concept of imminence held by other theologians can be demonstrated by a few quotations. Feinberg (*Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* 89) uses the word in this fashion: "Nowhere in Scripture is the time of this event made known. It is imminent at all times; certain at one time hidden in the counsels of God." Walvoord says (*The Rapture Question*, 79): "Most post-tribulationists today oppose the doctrine of imminency and regard the coming of Christ as approaching, but not immediate." Thiessen (*Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?* 15) wrote that the early church regarded the second coming "as imminent. The Lord had taught them to expect His return at any moment, and so they looked for Him to come in their day." Leon Wood (*Is the Rapture Next?* 30) writes that the teaching of Scripture is obvious: "Men should be prepared for the coming of Christ at any time, for no one knows when it will occur."

This is the doctrine which has been opposed by post-tribulationists as one of their major arguments (see Pentecost, 68, and Stanton, 109). Stanton says, "The denial of imminency as applied to the coming of Christ is one of their main contentions, as illustrated by Robert Cameron, who fills approximately one-third of his book with this very argument."

One of the most recent and most influential books supporting the post-tribulation position is *The Blessed Hope* by Ladd. He too considers that one of the major arguments against pre-tribulation is opposition to the doctrine of imminence. On page 8 he identifies the position: "the coming of Christ is 'imminent'; ie, it can take place at any moment. 'Imminence' means that no prophesied event must take place before Christ's return to rapture the church." On page 9 he says that those who believe the tribulation precedes Christ's return find the doctrine of an any-moment coming impossible. On page 105 he says, "Imminence means that no prophesied event stands in the way and must be fulfilled before the return of Christ . . . it can occur at any moment; it must therefore precede a tribulation." He says on page 118, "Nowhere are we told to watch for a secret, any-moment coming of Christ to rapture the church." On page 154 he says, "A real 'any-moment' expectation is neither Biblically nor historically sound."

These and many other references which could be given in this volume lead us to conclude that Ladd is employing a proper definition of the word imminent; however, these directly lead us to the purpose for this consideration.

### The Word and the Doctrine

One begins to wonder after noticing several references to "any-moment" instead of "imminent" why another term is introduced. Then further one begins to wonder if Ladd does not actually believe that which he tries to oppose.

What is Ladd saying, the reader asks himself, when on page 119 he reads, "We find no assertion of an any-moment coming for which we are to watch. We are indeed to be ready for the coming, for we do not know when the Lord will come. Therefore we must always be awake. Even though His coming is delayed, we must be awake so that His coming will be no surprise." It looks as though Ladd is saying there is no actual coming of the Lord for which we are to watch; however, we are to be watchful for such a coming.

The confusion is heightened at the end of his presentation. On page 154 he says, "A real 'any-moment' expectation is neither Biblically nor historically sound. This is not to say that we are not to be possessed with a spirit of expectancy. The Word is full of such an attitude. No man can possess a Biblical outlook without looking for the personal coming of the Lord."

The reader wonders if Ladd has completely forsaken his position when he writes on page 156:

There is in our Lord's teachings a two-fold emphasis: expectancy and perspective. He wished to leave every generation of His people in the position where they might feel that their generation might be last and yet be unable to set dates. The reaction which this should create is seen in the Apostle Paul. Paul lived his entire life with an attitude of expectancy toward the return of Christ. He talks as though his generation would witness the end; yet he nowhere explicitly affirms that the end will come in his lifetime. . . . Paul lived as though Christ were coming back in his own generation; but he worked and planned as though the world would go on for a long time.

The reader is surprised to discover that Ladd feels that "this is the attitude God would find in every generation. . . . The Lord may well return within our lifetime. But we do not know that this is to be the case."

The answer to the apparent confusion may lie in a recognition that Ladd has broken down some of the concepts included in the doctrine of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Returning to the three-fold designation of the doctrine set forth by Stanton, it would appear that Ladd would like to recognize the expectancy taught in Scripture, and that he wants to emphasize strongly the uncertainty of knowing the specific time when the Lord will return. But Ladd has difficulty with the third aspect, namely that no prophesied event stands between the believer and the return of Jesus Christ. It cannot be an "any-moment" event for it is at least seven years off unless we are, without knowing it, in the Great Tribulation. Most Christians will immediately react, "If the tribulation must come before the return of the Lord, how can Ladd hold to expectancy of that return?" The only possible answer this writer can suggest is that Ladd redefines the concepts of the Lord's return in order to bring in the entire complex of end-time events. These may transpire "within our lifetime" but not "at any moment."

Within our life-time we may see the tribulation and then at the end of that period the Lord will come to rapture His saints and immediately return with them to establish His earthly kingdom; but this will not occur without the warning of the tribulation and so cannot be an any-moment expectancy. All of these events are included by Ladd in the return of the Lord, and so it may be possible to speak of the tribulation being imminent without speaking of the actual presence of the Lord as possible at any moment.

By this time, it will be apparent to many that Ladd comes deceptively close to the doctrine of imminence after consistently denying the validity of that doctrine. Next, let the reader ask himself how difficult it would be for such a writer to claim that he believes in the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ even though he denies the any-moment return of the Lord. When that happens (and we are not claiming that it has happened as yet), post-tribulationists will end up claiming to believe the very doctrine which they denied at the beginning. They will, in the eyes of many Christians, actually rob the imminent return of our Lord of its reality. Let us report the possible course which this process might take. The word imminent is conveniently dropped by the wayside and the term any-moment is utilized while attacking the doctrine. Later to identify aspects of expectancy recognized by post-tribulationists the word imminent is once more utilized, this time not in its historic sense but with a new definition which the uninitiated may not recognize.

## Possible Related Distinctions

In his last paragraph (p 167), Ladd proposes a larger thesis: "Neither pre-tribulationism nor post-tribulationism should be made a ground of fellowship, a test of orthodoxy, or a necessary element in Christian doctrine. There should be liberty and charity toward both views." In connection with this, the author would like to quote part of an editorial he wrote for the February, 1958, *North Star Baptist* (22):

While reading some background materials recently, I came across what I might label a confusion of 'leadership' and 'liberty.' . . . Permitting a brother in the Lord to hold a divergent view, however, is far different from paying that brother to instill his view in the hearts and minds of coming generations. In a local church I may accept as a member one who has strange beliefs, but I will certainly hesitate to appoint him as a Sunday school teacher or consider him as a deacon. Leadership changes a situation completely.

## Conclusion

Probably the best conclusion to this type of study would be a listing of those passages of infallible revelation which set forth the doctrine of the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Leon Wood (*Is the Rapture Next?* 29ff) recognized two groups of Scriptural passages, those having to do with watching and those with hoping. The "watching" passages include Matthew 24:42-44; Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-40; Romans 13:11-12; I Thessalonians 5:6-8; and I Peter 4:7. The "hoping" passages include Titus 2:13; James 5:7-8; and several others. Pentecost (*Things to Come*, 168) says "The doctrine of imminency is taught in Scripture in such passages as John 14:2-3; I Corinthians 1:17; Philippians 3:20-21; I Thessalonians 1:9-10; 4:16-17; 5:5-9; Titus 2:13; James 5:8-9; Revelation 3:10; 22:17-22." Stanton (*Kept from the Hour*, pp 124-5) cites as testimony from Scripture John 14:2, 3; Acts 1:11; I Corinthians 15:51, 52; Philippians 3:20; Colossians 3:4; I Thessalonians 1:9, 10; I Timothy 6:14; Hebrews 10:37; II Peter 3:4, 5; and Revelation 22:20. Examination of these various passages should convince all of the true imminence of the Lord's return.