

AN ARMY OF ONE

Intellectual Honesty and the Imminent Return of Christ

by Brian L. Martin

Imagine for a moment two armies. While they each have their own strengths and weaknesses, they are pretty evenly matched. One may be better equipped, the other better trained, and one may have more soldiers, the other more experienced soldiers. The only way to really determine the dominant army is by a head-to-head battle. The problem, however, is the unconventional way in which these armies battle. One army will either capture or pick just one soldier from the other army. Occasionally there will be more than one soldier, but only a handful at the most. This army then “wars” against this soldier, or small group of soldiers—their entire army against a handful. It’s easy to predict the outcome. The other army does the same thing in battling the first army. Thus each army gets to report back to the lands that they represent how they overwhelm the enemy. By either picking their battles, or capturing a few of the enemy at a time, and then using all of their resources against them, they are always victorious and the people back home never realize the size or strength of the other army.

Granted, it is a poor analogy, but this is exactly how many theological and doctrinal “battles” are fought. A preacher will either pick a Scripture, or come across a particular passage in the course of his regular preaching, that stands opposed to his (or his denomination’s) viewpoint. He then proceeds to bring to bear upon it all of his resources to defend his viewpoint. He uses all of the verses that defend his point, multiple commentaries and years of study to strengthen his viewpoint and weaken the other. The other viewpoint, like the other army above, does not have its full resources brought into play. The congregation (or reader, or listener) sees the other viewpoint overwhelmed, never realizing that there may be many more verses that support it, as well as other commentaries and studied theologians who can aptly defend it. Thus there are many on both sides that naively believe the “battlefield” reports given to them, and think that most views other than their own are held only by the spiritually ignorant, immature, deceived, etc.

A case in point: if you were asked what the four major viewpoints for interpreting the book of Revelation are, what would you reply? *Pre-trib*, *Post-trib*, *Mid-trib* and something else, *Amillennialism* perhaps? How many would correctly answer *Historicist*, *Preterist*, *Futurist* and *Spiritual (Allegorical)*? The truth is that *Pre-*, *Post-*, and *Mid-trib* are all subsets of the Futurist viewpoint, while Amillennialism is not a view of Revelation per se, but of the Millennium, and may be held by individuals adhering to each of four Revelation viewpoints. The reports from the Futurist “battlefield” are so pervasive that many in the Church don’t even know that there are other “armies” out there. Thus, for most, the “battle” is not with other “armies” (such as Preterism vs. Futurism), but over which branch of their army (such as Pre-trib vs. Post-trib) is the strongest.

This holds true for virtually any difference in doctrinal belief—Free-will vs. Predestination, Continuation vs. Cessation of the spiritual gifts, etc. When is the last time you heard a debate on these or other points in which both sides were equally represented? We all receive biased representations, and interpretations, of the Word of God depending upon which church we attend. This does not mean that after much personal study we shouldn’t choose the “army” we side with. We just need to realize that our surroundings dictate the “battlefield” reports that we receive. If our choice is a good one, and our search for truth sincere, then we should be willing, even seek, to be challenged by other viewpoints. At the worst it can only give us greater understanding of the Word, and strengthen our viewpoint—at the best it could show us where we have been ignorant, immature, deceived, etc.

That being said, what follows is a quick look at a portion of the Preterist “army”—the imminency passages. Generally speaking, these passages, like the armies in our analogy above, are not gathered en masse, but are dealt with either individually or in small groups. Thus many are unaware of the size of this “army”. It must be stated here that our analogy must be abandoned, for this is not a battle. There is no desire to war with others, or other views, merely to present material for thought and meditation. If you currently hold to a different view, and it is correct, then you should be able to defend it, and point out the errors in this one. If you find that there are points (note that this booklet deals with only one aspect of Preterism, the imminency passages) that are not easily dismissed—questions raised that are not as decisively answered by your view as you had thought, then it is time to study. Just be sure to bring together the full resources of all sides of the issue(s). Remember also that fallible man prepares all resources except Scripture, and we do well to heed the following admonitions:

Let God be true but every man a liar. Romans 3:4 NKJV

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. Isaiah 8:20 NKJV

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4:12 NKJV

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. John 17:17 NKJV

The Imminency Factor

To say that there are several Scriptures that imply that Christ and the apostles believed in and taught an imminent Second Coming would be an understatement. Most are familiar with the well-known ones, like Matt. 16:28, where Christ states, “there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom”, and we have all read phrases like “the hour is near” and “the time is at hand” scattered throughout the epistles. But have you ever sat down and attempted to list just how many passages there are which address the topic? We think that you would be amazed. Following this brief introduction is a list of such passages. This list is not exhaustive, perhaps you can add to it.

It should be noted that, while the words of the Bible are timeless, Christ and the apostles were speaking/writing to a specific audience. If we read the New Testament with this in mind, we begin to see passages that formerly we didn't equate with imminence as being exactly that, for example:

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. 1 Cor. 4:5

What we might have considered as a general directive to the church throughout the ages, we now see as a directive to a particular church in a particular age. This particular church was also instructed to wait until the Lord comes, which Paul seems to imply they would see (why wait for something you'll never see in your lifetime?). Also, when we read the pronouns “we”, “you”, etc. we should take them as meaning specific people, not an ethereal collection of saints. Thus, when you include all passages with phrases such as “at hand . . . , near . . . , passing away . . . , soon . . . , wait until . . . , look for . . . ,” etc., the list of an imminent Second Coming (imminent to the 1st Century saints) becomes quite substantial. However, the audience relevance factor of these passages is often overlooked, or worse, ignored. For instance, consider the following passages:

Then we went ahead to the ship and sailed to Assos, there intending to take Paul on board; for so he had given orders, intending himself to go on foot. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. We sailed from there, and the next day came opposite Chios. The following day we arrived at Samos and stayed at Trogyllium. The next day we came to Miletus. Acts 20:13-15 NKJV

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. 1 Thess. 4:15-17 NKJV

Both passages refer to a group of people (the “we”) meeting up with someone who had gone on ahead of them. In the first passage the “we” is Luke and his fellow shipmates. Now have you ever heard a sermon, or a teaching, that present-day saints are included in that group of shipmates, and that *we* are waiting to meet up with Paul? As absurd as it may sound, isn't that exactly what is done with the second passage? Somehow the “we” of 1 Thessalonians 4 is not the 1st century saints to whom Paul was writing, but us! If that doesn't sound as absurd as the first example, ask yourself, why not? Could it be that we've been brought up with that teaching, and have learned to gloss over the face-value meaning? Likewise, it has become “absurd” to take Jesus and the New Testament writers at face value. When Jesus said, “this generation”, could He have possibly meant *this generation*—the one whom He was addressing? When Paul says “we” in 1 Thess. 4:17, could he possibly have meant himself and his contemporaries?

We challenge you to take off the glasses of preconception and popular interpretation, and read the following list at face value. Look them up and read them in context, and then ask yourself, “when did Jesus and the New Testament writers teach that the Second Coming would occur”?

Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. Matt. 16:28 NASB

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”. . . “He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Matt. 24:3, 33b-34 NASB

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. John 14:3

Peter therefore seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” John 21:21-22

But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets; having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be (Greek implies about to be) a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. Acts 24:14-15

And this do, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Rom. 13:11-12

. . . so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor. 1:7

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away. 1 Cor. 2:6

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God. 1 Cor. 4:5

But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. 1 Cor. 7:29-31

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 1 Cor. 10:11

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 1 Cor. 15:51-52

If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha. (Come Lord) 1 Cor. 16:22

Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Phil. 4:5

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. 1 Thess. 1:9-10

For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? 1 Thess. 2:19

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and

remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. 1 Thess. 4:14-18

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thess. 5:23

This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. 2 Thess. 1:5-10

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 2 Thess. 2:1-2 The implication here is that there was such an expectation of the day of the Lord, that some thought that it had already come. This also supports the argument that they understood it to be a spiritual coming, not a physical one.

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Tim. 6:13-14

. . . and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and thus they upset the faith of some. 2 Tim. 2:17-18 see the note on 2 Thess. 2:1-2 above.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. Titus 2:11-13

. . . and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near. Heb. 10:24-25

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. Heb. 10:36-37

You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. James 5:8

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." 2 Pet. 3:3-4

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour. 1 John 2:18

And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. 1 John 2:28

I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. Rev. 3:11

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Rev. 22:20

As mentioned earlier, when one starts reading the New Testament from the perspective of the 1st Century church and an imminent Second Coming, the list grows even longer. These are just the verses that

are the most apparent. Notice also, that there is *not one verse in the whole New Testament* that even hints at a far-distant, future, Second Coming. Perhaps the closest would be Peter, when he defends the Lord's delay, quoting Moses from Psalm 90, saying that, "one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" 2 Pet. 3:8. But that's how God sees time. With us, a day is a day. Sure, there are verses exhorting the readers to wait, to be patient, endure, etc. But they are encouraged to do so because the time is short! Hang in there just a while longer "For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry" (Heb. 10:37). How encouraging, or ethical, would it be to "tease" the New Testament believers with something that was really 2,000 years (or more) away?

Having established that there is an impressive amount of text indicating the imminent return of Christ, there are a limited number of possible explanations for the apparent discrepancy that comes with them:

1. Christ and the New Testament authors were mistaken in their understanding of the timing of the Second Coming.

2. Christ and the New Testament authors understood the timing, but deliberately misled their generation, for any number of reasons.

3. In light of our understanding of (the nature of) *how* Christ will return (based upon Scripture), we must be misunderstanding these verses concerning *when* He will return. In other words, our understanding of the *nature* of His return dictates that we must reinterpret the verses concerning the *timing* of His return (this is the *Futurist* position, also the dominant position of the church today).

4. In light of our understanding of *when* Christ will return (based upon the above Scriptures, et. al.), we must be misunderstanding the verses that describe *how* He will return. In other words, our understanding of the *timing* of His return dictates that we must reinterpret the verses concerning the *nature* of His return (this is the *Preterist* position).

Those who believe that Christ was the Son of God incarnate, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that the authors wrote as they were "inspired by the Holy Spirit" can immediately dismiss the first two possibilities. What we are left with is that either the timing of Christ's return has been misunderstood, or the nature of Christ's return has been misunderstood. We can not say that we believe the Bible taught an imminent Second Coming in the 1st Century, and still be waiting for it 2,000 years later. (Note that while it's not possible that both the timing *and* the nature have been properly understood, it is possible that both have been misunderstood.)

Because the majority of prophecy teachers and pundits adhere to a yet future Second Coming, the bulk of Christianity has been raised upon the premise that it is the timing issue that has been misunderstood. To deal with the apparent imminent Second Coming, several devices have been employed. Christ's discourse in Matthew 24 has been divided into sections—some verses relating to what the disciples would see, some verses relating to what a future, unnamed generation will see. Or, the various New Testament authors, as they looked forward in time in the Spirit, saw distant events as we see mountain ranges in the distance, not realizing the spacious valleys (of time) that separate the ranges. Then there is the fact that "a day with the Lord is as a thousand years", so that while 2,000 years have passed for us, only two days have passed for God, so that from His perspective the Second Coming is still "soon". And the list goes on. Some explanations fit well; others require a stretch of more than the imagination.

But what about the other possibility? What if the imminent return passages are understood at face value, and we must reinterpret our understanding of the nature of Christ's return? You're probably asking yourself, "Does that mean what I think it means?" Are we saying that Christ and the New Testament authors correctly taught that He would return within their generation, therefore He did return and we didn't know it? As foreign as it sounds, yes! But before you choke on sacrilegious teaching, before you cry heretic, before you raise your dogmatic hackles, ask yourself, "Don't I owe it to myself and the veracity of the Word of God to at least explore the possibility, if for no other reason than to disprove it?" If we are willing to accept that the apparent timing of Christ's return has been misunderstood (if He didn't return in the 1st Century), and try to reinterpret timing verses so that they comply with our interpretation of the nature of His return, why can't we accept that we may have misunderstood the nature of His return, and try to reinterpret nature verses so that they comply with the timing of His return? What gives one precedent over the other, except our own prejudices? (It should be noted that Preterists do not just take hold of the timing [imminency] verses, and then try to make the nature verses fit their *a priori* dogma. Rather, they claim

scriptural precedent for their interpretation of the nature verses, and thus would say that they are not interpreting Scripture, but allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.)

Interestingly enough, this concept is not as foreign as we may think. It is widely accepted in the church that the reason the Jews of Christ's day did not accept Him as their messiah is because they were looking for a reigning king, not a suffering servant. They wanted the lion of the tribe of Judah, not the Lamb of God. They wanted deliverance from Rome, not from the Law. They misunderstood the nature of His coming, and so missed their Messiah. Ironically, their understanding of the nature of His coming came from the same Old Testament passages that we use today in teaching that Christ will return and rule (physically) from Jerusalem, and that Israel will be the focal point of the world and the center of worship. How is it that we can so deftly point out where the Jews misunderstood the nature of Christ's (the Messiah's) coming, and yet be so willing to cry "heresy" if it is suggested that the church is doing the same today? The Jews were looking for a physical king, a reigning messiah with Israel as the head of the nations. But Christ plainly said that "His kingdom was not of this world" (John 18:36) and "The kingdom of God is *not coming with signs to be observed;*" (Luke 17:20, emphasis added) When did that change?

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