

The Early Church Fathers up to A.D. 250 on the Relationship between the Church and Antichrist

by Alan Kurschner

I have heard the objection to the prewrath position that it is a new interpretation. I gladly accept this charge that the prewrath position is new, but only in the sense that the label “prewrath” is new and that it is a refinement of our understanding of the day of the Lord and the rapture issue. I do not believe that the Holy Spirit has ceased teaching the church the riches of the Word for better understandings and refinements of biblical truths. Moreover, even though the prewrath position is a refinement and development of the day of the Lord and the rapture question, the essence of prewrath teaching reaches back, not just to the early church period, but finds testimony within the first century in what many believe to be the very first Christian document outside of the New Testament. This document is called the *Didache*, “The Teaching” (a.k.a. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), pronounced DID-ah-kay. By the essence of the prewrath position, I mean specifically that the church will encounter the persecution of the Antichrist, followed by the coming of Christ to rescue his people and resurrect the dead in Christ.

The *Didache* is an extremely important early Christian document because it is a window allowing us to see the faith and practice of a segment of the primitive church. The date of the *Didache* has been dated roughly AD 50–120. It is agreed that it is a compositional document made up of several sources, of which the earliest of the sources likely written before AD 70. The most probable place of origin is Syria, perhaps in the city of Antioch, which was the main Christian center at that time. The *Didache* is made up of three parts. The first is a code of Christian morals, the “Two Ways,” expounding on the way of life and the way of death. The second is a church order manual, a rules of conduct, prescribing correct practice of baptism, church polity, the Lord’s supper, etc. The final part of the *Didache* concludes with an eschatological section of an outline commentary to the Olivet Discourse; hence, since this is the first interpretation in church history on Jesus’ teaching about his second coming, we will benefit from what it says.

The early church viewed this document as containing orthodox teaching, including its interpretation of eschatology. So important was this document that some early church fathers (albeit wrongly) accepted it as Scripture. But in the main it was used for instruction for church leaders, believers, and baptismal candidates. The eschatological section of the *Didache* is found in chapter 16. It states:

(1) “Watch” over your life: “let your lamps” be not quenched “and your loins” be not ungirded, but be “ready,” for ye know not “the hour in which our Lord cometh.” (2) But be frequently gathered together seeking the things which are profitable for your souls, for the whole time of your faith shall not profit you except ye be found

perfect at the last time; (3) for in the last days the false prophets and the corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall change to hate; (4) for as lawlessness increaseth they shall hate one another and persecute and betray, and then shall appear the deceiver of the world as a Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders and the earth shall be given over into his hands and he shall commit iniquities which have never been since the world began. (5) Then shall the creation of mankind come to the fiery trial and "many shall be offended" and be lost, but "they who endure" in their faith "shall be saved" by the curse itself. (6) And "then shall appear the signs" of the truth. First the sign spread out in Heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet, and thirdly the resurrection of the dead: (7) but not of all the dead, but as it was said, "The Lord shall come and all his saints with him." (8) Then shall the world "see the Lord coming on the clouds of Heaven."

The main gospel source that the *Didache* 16 uses is Matthew, particularly chapters 24–25, alluding frequently from it. The first verse begins with exhortations to be ready spiritually (e.g., "'Watch' over your life"). In verse 2, there is given a cause and effect warning that a lack of consistent gathering with other believers will hinder faith-readiness. Next, verses 3–8 provide us with the chronology of key events:

vv. 3–4a—false prophets, corrupters, love shall change to hate, lawlessness increaseth.

vv. 4b–5—then shall appear the deceiver of the world [Antichrist] as a Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders and the earth shall be given over into his hands and he shall commit iniquities which have never been since the world began [great tribulation]. Then shall the creation of mankind come to the fiery trial and "many shall be offended" and be lost but "they who endure" in their faith [during the great tribulation] "shall be saved" [delivered from the day of the Lord] by the curse itself.

v. 6—And "then shall appear the signs" of the truth. First the sign spread out in Heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet, and thirdly the resurrection of the dead [i.e., resurrection of the righteous].

v. 8—Then shall the world "see the Lord coming on the clouds of Heaven" [shekinah glory].

As is clearly indicated in the sequence above, the *Didache* understands that Antichrist will appear first before the coming of Christ to resurrect the righteous and deliver his faithful people who are alive.

Incidentally, it should be noted that in two earlier chapters of the *Didache*, it interprets the elect who are gathered in Matthew 24:31 as the “Church”: “so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth” *Didache* 9:4; and, “Remember, Lord, thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in thy love, and gather it together in its holiness from the four winds to thy kingdom which thou hast prepared for it” *Didache* 10:5.

It is fundamental to the prewrath position that the resurrection of the dead-righteous and the deliverance of the alive-righteous follow the Antichrist’s great tribulation. Our final authority is the Word of God and that is where we must find our inspired teaching for faith and practice. Even though it is not authoritatively binding, it is however wise to learn what others who have gone before us have said about the Bible. Church history can teach us a lot. Since this is the case, how much more weight carries for writings during the apostolic age such as the *Didache*!

It would be helpful to document subsequent patristic writings to the *Didache* that also agree that the church will suffer Antichrist’s persecution. It will suffice to list those important statements by the early church fathers up to A.D. 250, even though we could list more beyond that time period. The following will be their statements followed by the references.

Epistle of Barnabas (c.80–c.100)

The final stumbling-block (or source of danger) approaches . . . We take earnest heed in these last days; for the whole [past] time of your faith will profit you nothing, unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as becometh the sons of God. That the Black One [Antichrist] may find no means of entrance, let us flee from every vanity, let us utterly hate the works of the way of wickedness. Do not, by retiring apart, live a solitary life, as if you were already [fully] justified . . . Take heed, lest resting at our ease, as those who are the called [of God], we should fall asleep in our sins, and the wicked prince, acquiring power over us, should thrust us away from the kingdom of the Lord (*Epistle of Barnabas*, 4).

The Shepherd of Hermas (c.95–c.150)

[Blessed are] you who endure the great tribulation that is coming on, and [blessed are] they who shall not deny their own life. (Vision 2:2)

Those, therefore, who continue steadfast, and are put through the fire, will be purified by means of it. . . . But the white part is the age that is to come, in which the elect of God will dwell, since those elected by God to eternal life will be spotless and pure...This then is the type of the great tribulation that is to come. (Vision 4:3)

Justin Martyr (c.110–c.165)

He [Jesus Christ] shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy [Antichrist], who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, CX)

Irenaeus (c.120–c.202)

And they [the ten kings who shall arise] shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and put the Church to flight. (*Against Heresies*, V, 26, 1)

And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, "There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be." For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption. (*Against Heresies*, V, 29, 1)

It is therefore more certain, and less hazardous, to await the fulfillment of the prophecy [Antichrist], than to be making surmises, and casting about for any names that may present themselves, inasmuch as many names can be found possessing the number mentioned; and the same question will, after all, remain unsolved. . . . But he indicates the number of the name now, that when this man [Antichrist] comes we may avoid him, being aware who he is. (*Against Heresies*, V, 30, 3, 4)

For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist [A]nd [with respect to] those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one. (*Against Heresies*, V, 35, 1)

Tertullian (c.145–c.220)

Heresies, at the present time, will no less rend the church by their perversion of doctrine, than will Antichrist persecute her at that day by the cruelty of his attacks, except that persecution make seven martyrs, (but) heresy only apostates. (*The Prescription Against Heretics*, IV)

[A]nd that the beast Antichrist with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God. (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 25)

Now the privilege of this favour [be alive when Christ comes back] awaits those who shall at the coming of the Lord be found in the flesh, and who shall, owing to the oppressions of the time of

Antichrist, deserve by an instantaneous death [i.e., raptured/translation], which is accomplished by a sudden change, to become qualified to join the rising saints; as he writes to the Thessalonians [1 Thess 4:15–17]. (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 41)

Hippolytus (c.185–c.235)

When the times are fulfilled, and the ten horns spring from the beast in the last (times), then Antichrist will appear among them. When he makes war against the saints, and persecutes them, then may we expect the manifestation of the Lord from heaven. (*On Daniel*, II, 7)

[I]n order that when those things [Antichrist's mark of the beast] come to pass, we may be prepared for them, and not deceived. For when the times advance, he too, of whom these things are said, will be manifested. (*Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 50)

Now, concerning the tribulation of the persecution which is to fall upon the Church from the adversary 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. (*Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 60, 61; cf. 60–67)

Cyprian (c.200–c.258)

For you ought to know and to believe, and hold it for certain, that the day of affliction has begun to hang over our heads, and the end of the world and the time of Antichrist to draw near, so that we must all stand prepared for the battle; nor consider anything but the glory of life eternal, and the crown of the confession of the Lord; and not regard those things which are coming as being such as were those which have passed away. A severer and a fiercer fight is now threatening, for which the soldiers of Christ ought to prepare themselves with uncorrupted faith and robust courage, considering that they drink the cup of Christ's blood daily, for the reason that they themselves also may be able to shed their blood for Christ. (Epistle 55, 1)

Nor let any one of you, beloved brethren, be so terrified by the fear of future persecution, or the coming of the threatening Antichrist, as not to be found armed for all things by the evangelical exhortations and precepts, and by the heavenly warnings. Antichrist is coming, but above him comes Christ also. The enemy goeth about and rageth, but immediately the Lord follows to avenge our sufferings and our wounds. The adversary is enraged and threatens, but there is One who can deliver us from his hands. (Epistle 55, 7)

These statements show the consistent testimony of the early church's thought concerning the relationship between Antichrist and the church. In fact, every early church writer in the first couple of centuries who actually wrote on this relationship agreed in a singular voice that the church would encounter the Antichrist. By contrast, pretribulationism must wait over 1,500 years to produce a document that teaches their peculiar theology of an imminent raptured church before Antichrist' persecution. Prewrath possesses affinity and agreement with the early church on this central issue, while at the same time refining the biblical teaching on the day of the Lord and the rapture.