

# Imminency versus Prophecy

Jesus was a Prophet  
Peter had to Die

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## Purpose of the article

This essay attempts to address what I see as a serious difficulty in the Pre-tribulation rapture scheme. The difficulty arises from conflicts between the nature of true prophecy and the doctrine of imminency. This doctrine of imminency can be fairly stated thus: *No prophesied event MUST take place before the rapture of the Church.* In the Pre-tribulation scheme, prophesied events MAY take place, but none are required to be fulfilled before the return of Christ for the Church at the rapture, which could have taken place at any moment since the ascension of Jesus Christ from the Mount of Olives. The question is: In the light of the doctrine of imminency, how then should we view New Testament prophecy concerning the Church and the apostles?

There are several prophecies that are mentioned in the New Testament that involve either the Church or the apostles. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on these few listed below:

- The Church to be built
- Paul to be delivered unto the Gentiles in Jerusalem
- Paul to have a ministry to the Gentiles far away
- Paul to be brought before Caesar
- Peter to grow old and die

The concept of an any-moment rapture of the Church is contradictory to a literal view of prophecy. Had the rapture occurred it would have prevented these prophecies from seeing fulfillment in the early days of the Church. This is the difficulty. The more disturbing situation is the seemingly total disconnect, among Pre-tribulationists, on this issue. They seem to dismiss this problem out of hand based on their devotion to the doctrine of imminency. For those of us that have not come to the conclusion that *imminency is in fact truth*, the problem of a violation of the principles of Bible prophecy looms large. It has become a significant obstacle for some, preventing us from adopting a Pre-tribulational position. I can testify that this problem was instrumental in my abandonment of Pre-tribulationism several years ago. And, search though I may, no sufficient explanation has been put forth by the Pre-trib camp to change my mind. Some of these explanations will be given below.

It is my position that *if the scriptures that are now used to try to support the so-called doctrine of imminency did not teach imminency at the time they were written then they cannot be used to prove the doctrine of imminency now.*

## Prophecy is instrumental in God's revelation to man

The doctrine of imminency, as stated above, and as is understood by most Pre-tribulationists, devalues the very concept of Bible prophecy in that it allows for the possibility that some prophecies would not have been fulfilled had the rapture taken place at an early date. Have ye not read that God claims to be the One True God on the basis of prophecy? No one else can determine the course of future events. The prophet Isaiah wrote much on the matter of God decreeing the future. In chapter 46 Isaiah relates the words of God.

“Remember the former things of old: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else; I *am* God, and *there is* none like me, **Declaring the end from the beginning**, and from ancient times *the things* that are not *yet* done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:” (Isa 46:9-10 AV) [Emphasis added]

So here we learn God’s perspective on prophecy: *prophecy is that which sets Him apart from the pretenders*. What God says will happen, will surely happen for, “I have spoken *it*, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed *it*, **I will also do it.**” (Isa 46:11 AV). Note carefully, that God is not only claiming to know the future, He decreed (purposed) it and He is claiming to be the very One acting to bring said future into existence. “I will do it.” You can take that to the bank.

## Pre-trib tensions between imminency and prophecy

The problem arises when prophecies concerning the Church and its apostles are considered in the light of a supposedly imminent rapture. The occurrence of the rapture of the Church before any of these prophecies was fulfilled would cast doubt on the *legitimacy of the prophet* and would have undermined the very concept of prophecy itself. The startling thing about this situation is that many pre-tribulationists do not even acknowledge that this presents any kind of difficulty to their position.

The Pre-tribulationists, who do try to defend their position against the problems presented by apostolic prophecy, have come up with a variety of apologetic approaches. Some of which have been published. For this writer, these defenses are all inadequate. All of them distort the meaning of prophecy. Only Pre-tribulationists think that any of these explanations are adequate refutations of the difficulties presented by these prophecies. The explanations that I have been able to discover are categorized below.

## Pre-tribulationist's Views on the Problem

### *Imminency trumps prophecy?*

#### **Dwight Pentecost's view**

Pre-tribulationists do not see a paradox between (a) the inevitability of Peter's death and (b) the imminency of the rapture. They see the doctrine of imminency to be so strong that it could have even taken precedence over a specific prophecy by Jesus Christ foretelling the death of Peter. Dwight Pentecost comments on the topic of these New

Testament prophecies in his book Things to Come in his refutation of the Post-tribulation view:

*The argument against imminency.* A second major argument of the posttribulation rapturist is the argument against imminency. It is evident that if belief in the imminent return of Christ is the Scriptural doctrine then the Church must be raptured before the signs of the tribulation period unfold. **The adherent of that position discounts all Scriptural admonitions to the Church to watch for Christ and bids us watch for signs.** His position rests on the argument that the announcements of events such as the destruction of Jerusalem, **the death of Peter**, the imprisonment of Paul, and the announced program for the age as set forth in Matthew 28:19-20, together with the outlined course of the age, with its development of apostasy, all make an imminent return impossible; therefore the Lord could not come until these events had taken place. **Such argument fails to see that the very men who received such announcements themselves believed that what would be the natural course of history could be interrupted by the translation of the believers out of the sphere in which history unfolds and held to the imminent return.** [emphasis added] [J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, Zondervan, 1958, p. 168]

From Pentecost, in the above quote, we get two explanations as to why it was not mandatory that the fulfillment of prophecies concerning the apostles occur. (1) It is impossible to watch for two things at the same time. Scriptures tell the Church to watch for the return of Christ. (2) "*The natural course of history*," (God's plan as revealed through prophecy), "*could be interrupted by the translation of believers out of the sphere in which history unfolds*," (the rapture). In other words: Prophecy did not have to be fulfilled if the rapture happened first.

Pentecost (p. 180) quotes at length from Midtribulation rapturist Norman B. Harrison, where Harrison ably states the case for the necessary fulfillment of New Testament prophecies. Harrison cites Peter's attitude toward an imminent rapture saying, "*For Peter* there was no possibility of such an experience, our Lord having told him that he would live to old age and die a martyr's death ... John 21:18, 19." Pentecost also cites Harrison on the topic of Paul's vision of Jesus while in a trance, "*For Paul* his Lord's commission ... Acts 22:21 left him facing a long preaching career that precluded, for much of his lifetime, any momentary return of Christ." Dwight Pentecost has this response concerning Harrison's denial of imminence (p181):

While Harrison is seeking to disprove the doctrine of imminence by the Scripture quotations he cites, **it is evident that the New Testament writers themselves believed in an imminent return.** There is a distinction between the *soon* coming of Christ and the *imminent* coming. Scripture nowhere taught that the coming would be soon, but it consistently taught that the coming could be expected at any time. **The prophecy concerning the natural course of history, which would come to pass unless interrupted by the termination of history by the coming of Christ, did not rob the writers, as Harrison's very quotations show, of an imminent hope.** Since the belief that the Church must look for all the signs of the first half of the tribulation period would destroy the doctrine of imminency, the midtribulation view must be rejected. [emphasis added]

[J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, Zondervan, 1958, p. 181]

These statements by Dwight Pentecost demonstrate the contradictory view of scripture he holds within his mind on the fulfillment of prophecy versus imminency: "Both are true." He thinks that Jesus' prophecy of Peter's death, when he had reached old age, would certainly be fulfilled, and Jesus' return for the Church could have happened at

any time, even before Peter's prophesied death. What he doesn't realize is that these are two conflicting views. Despite what even Pre-tribulationists see as the clear teachings of scripture on the necessity of the fulfillment of prophecy, based on adherence to a literal hermeneutic, Pre-tribulationists still think the many scriptures that call us to watch for Christ's return to be unquestionable affirmations of imminency. And, on top of that, they do not see that these two positions are in contradiction with each other.

Because of their unshakable devotion to the doctrine of imminency, Pre-tribulationists are loath to entertain a competing eschatology that might better explain the rapture without causing any paradox with these New Testament prophecies. Belief in imminency, *as an any-moment event*, is far from a universal Christian truth. Other systems of eschatology, that do not rely on imminency as a fundamental tenet, are able to incorporate all the so-called *imminency proof texts* into their schemes, without abandoning sound principles of consistent biblical interpretation. One such principle is that contradictions in the bible are understood to be shortcomings in the interpretation, and demonstrate an error on the part of the interpreter. These *imminency proof texts* can also be interpreted as *expectancy proof texts* without doing violence to the scriptures, or to the concept of prophecy.

## The View of Renald Showers and his Definition of Imminency

Dr. Renald Showers has written much on the subject of the rapture. His two books Maranatha, Our Lord Come!: A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church and The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique, have become standards amongst Pre-tribulationists. As a preeminent proponent of imminency his definition shall be used as the Pre-tribulational standard.

1) An imminent event is one which is always "hanging overhead, is constantly ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence." ("imminent," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1901, V, 66.) Thus, imminence carries the sense that it could happen **at any moment**. **Other things may happen before the imminent event, but nothing else must take place before it happens.** If something else must take place before an event can happen, then that event is not imminent. In other words, the necessity of something else taking place first destroys the concept of imminency.

2) Since a person never knows exactly when an imminent event will take place, then he cannot count on a certain amount of time transpiring before the imminent event happens. In light of this, he should always be prepared for it to happen at any moment.

3) A person cannot legitimately set or imply a date for its happening. As soon as a person sets a date for an imminent event he destroys the concept of imminency, because he thereby is saying that a certain amount of time must transpire before that event can happen. A specific date for an event is contrary to the concept that the event could happen at any moment.

4) A person cannot legitimately say that an imminent event will happen soon. The term "soon" implies that an event *must* take place "within a short time (after a particular point of time specified or implied)." By contrast, an imminent event *may* take place within a short time, but it does not *have* to do so in order to be imminent. As I hope you can see by now, **"imminent" is not equal to "soon."**

[Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come!: A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995), pp. 127-28. As quoted by

Thomas Ice in his web-article (<http://www.according2prophecy.org/perhaps.html>, viewed 05/31/2012) "Perhaps Today: The Imminent Coming of Christ." Emphasis added. Italics in the original.]

In the book Maranatha I could not find any treatment of Peter's death, or the other prophecies under consideration, in relation to the imminent return. In The Pre-Wrath Rapture View, however, Showers does, in an offhand way, give his abbreviated treatment of this problem, in response to his Pre-Wrath critics. The Pre-Wrath critics had brought up the Pre-tribulationists' use of the teaching of *imminency in the New Testament* by Post-tribulationist J. Barton Payne, and Showers felt the need to clarify Payne's position. In doing so Showers brings up the subject at hand.

Dr. Payne made comments to the effect that during the first half century of the church's existence it could not hold to an any-moment coming of Christ because of **foretold events that had to transpire first**. But after those foretold events of that first half century had been fulfilled, the church did hold to an imminent coming... Dr. Payne asserted that in John 21:22-23, the apostle John indicated that the church in the latter part of the apostolic age believed that Christ would come before he (John) would die.

In response to the argument that the New Testament passages that were written during the first half century, when Christ's coming could not be imminent, cannot now be regarded as teaching imminency, Dr. Payne declared that this argument does not "square with the Biblical evidence..." In addition, he wrote, "The interpreter's primary task is therefore to discover, not what he feels the apostolic writers *could* have said about imminency, but what the text indicates that they did say..." Then he asserted that as the interpreter seeks "a solution for the **tension** that may have existed between the apostles' statements on the imminence of the Lord's coming and their individual awareness of **the events which for them lay antecedent to it**," he does not have the liberty to deny the statements themselves.

[Renald Showers, The Pre-Wrath Rapture View, Kregel Academic & Professional, 2001, p204 – 205] [Italics in the original, bold added]

This quote prompts several thoughts. (1) Post-tribulationist Payne has disqualified himself from being a credible witness. Declaring imminency to be the teaching of the New Testament while not holding to the imminent return himself, places him in the position of disagreeing with scripture. Why should we give credence to someone having such a double-minded opinion as he? (2) Showers does not dispute that the early church thought that these foretold events had to transpire before the rapture. This is clear from the quote he chose to use from J. Barton Payne. (3) Showers believes that despite the required fulfillment of these foretold events, the New Testament apostles clearly taught imminency. He holds these two conflicting concepts are held in tension against one another, as do J. Barton Payne and Dwight Pentecost. He even selected the quote from Payne that introduces the term *tension* into the debate. (4) Showers does not consider the prophecy of Peter's death, in John 21:18-19, to be any factor in the veracity of the doctrine of imminency. Payne refers to the possibility of John's persistence in life until the return of Christ in John 21:22-23, as if that was the relevant concept of the passage, when it is Peter's death just a few verses earlier that causes much more difficulty. Showers does not mention Peter's death in either of his books on the rapture.

The common theme among Pre-tribulationists is that *even if there are prophecies that had to be fulfilled before the return of Christ, the unavoidable language of scripture is such that the rapture could happen before these prophecies could be fulfilled*. If this

makes sense to you then you have what it takes to become a Pre-tribulationist, and maybe you can explain it to me.

### **Paradoxes Held in Tension**

The Pre-tribulationists' treatment of this problem is of the same type as the treatment of many Arminians when they speak on the problem of predestination. The cavalier dismissal of the problem with their system, (that of prophecy being negated by imminency), Pre-tribbers are, in effect, giving credence to the view *that it is acceptable to hold simultaneously to paradoxical, and even contradictory, beliefs on the teachings of scripture*. We, rightly, criticize those who hold to contradictory doctrines. Some Arminians believe both in man's absolute free-will and God's predestination; believing that these two concepts are held *in tension* against one another, both being true in their estimation. Some Amyraldians (four-point Calvinists) believe that God the father predestines only some people for eternal life, yet the Son is trying to save the whole human race. Likewise, Pre-tribbers believe both in the literal fulfillment of prophecy, including Jesus' prophecy of Peter's death, and in the certainty of the imminent return of Christ counting from the time of the ascension, even possibly before Peter's death, and can conceive of no paradox in this; for them both are equally true. They can teach both the necessity of the literal fulfillment of prophecy and insist on the veracity of the imminent return of Christ with equal fervor.

### **Conditional Prophecy**

So, what I will refer to as the *high view* of prophecy is this: *events that are prophesied must happen*. Once God reveals the future through prophecy, it is tantamount to a promise from God that He will not deviate from this revealed plan. Some prophecies in the Bible are conditional, but these always deal with the possibility of punishment for unrepentance, or blessing for repentance. Also, the conditional prophecies are always accompanied with an *if-then* statement: *If you do this then I will do that*. Both the blessings for fulfilling God's conditions and the curses for not fulfilling God's stated conditions are always present in conditional prophecies. None of the prophecies in question, in the New Testament, are such. God uses these repentance-based conditional prophecies to prompt a response from men, or to teach a lesson. Was Peter told he was to grow old and die in order to provoke him to repentance? No, Peter was already a saved man at the time Jesus told him he was to die. Did Peter fail to "feed my sheep?" Was Paul told he was to stand before Caesar so that he would change his evil ways? Hardly, Paul was anointed as the apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus had already changed his evil ways on the Damascus road. What were the conditions declared in conjunction with Peter's death or with Paul's journey to Rome? There were none, because these were not conditional prophecies.

### **Dwight Pentecost on Conditional Prophecy**

This possible exception of *conditional prophecies* must be dealt with. J. Dwight Pentecost, himself quoting from Girdlestone and Peters, puts forth an excellent understanding of conditional prophecy in his book Things to Come. Sadly, Pentecost

does not hold strictly to this definition himself. While he never labels these apostolic prophecies as "conditional," he does not see their fulfillment to have been necessary. For him their fulfillment could have been prevented by the rapture.

Even though Girdlestone recognizes that **prophecies of judgment may be conditioned on repentance** and, according to God's universal dealing with sin and the sinner, judgment might be averted if the sinner turns to God, **he does not mean that one can imply conditions where none are stated in other areas of prophecy**. He safeguards against this false conclusion by adding:

**Shall it be said that all prophetic utterances are conditional? By no means.** There are some things concerning which "the Lord hath sworn and will not repent" (Ps. 110:4)... These irreversible promises do not depend on man's goodness, but on God's. They are absolute in their fulfillment, even though they may be conditional as to the time and place of their fulfillment. . . . Times and seasons may be modified, days may be shortened, events may be accelerated or delayed, individuals and nations may come within the scope of the promises or may stand outside; but **the events themselves are ordered and sure**, sealed with God's oath, and guaranteed by His very life.

The relationship between the conditional and unconditional aspects of prophecy has been observed by Peters, who comments:

The prophecies relating to the establishment of the Kingdom of God are both conditioned and unconditioned.

By this paradox is simply meant that they are conditioned in their fulfillment by the antecedent gathering of the elect, and hence susceptible of postponement . . . and that they are **unconditioned so far as their ultimate fulfillment is concerned**, which the conduct or action of man cannot turn aside. . . . The kingdom itself pertains to the Divine Purpose, is the subject of sacred covenants, is confirmed by solemn oath, is to be the result or end designed in the redemptive process, and therefore cannot, will not, fail. The inheritors of the kingdom, however, are conditioned—a certain number known only to God—and the kingdom itself, although predetermined . . . is dependent... as to its manifestation upon their being obtained.

It may then be concluded that although **a prophecy which depends on human agency may be conditional yet that which depends on God can not be conditional unless conditions are clearly stated**. Prophecies based on unchanging covenants can-not admit the addition of any condition. Thus there is no warrant for assuming any conditions to the fulfillment of prophecy. [emphasis added]

[J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, Zondervan, 1958. pages 48-49]

## The High View of Prophecy

A high view of prophecy then is one which understands predictions of the future to be events that must occur, unless those events are warnings of judgment, which can be averted by repentance, or pledges of blessing which can be nullified by disobedience. Other events, not related to judgment or blessing, are not to be considered conditional unless conditions are clearly stated. No conditions are stated for the prophecies in question, and they do not involve judgment. Therefore, they are not conditional prophecies.

## National Repentance

The argument that these New Testament prophecies are conditional must be rejected because these prophecies do not meet the criteria, stated above, for conditional prophecies. The conditional prophecies in the Bible concern God's pending judgment in matters of national repentance. Scripture contains a blanket caveat, in Jeremiah 18, for all such judgment prophecies against nations that allows for God to repent of the predicted

judgment in the circumstance that the nation given prophetic warning repents of their wickedness.

“*At what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy *it*; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, **I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them**. And *at what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant *it*; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.” (Jer 18:7-10 AV)  
[emphasis added]

One prime example is Nineveh. Jonah was reluctant to deliver his prophecy of judgment to Nineveh because he knew that if they repented God would have mercy on them, and Jonah wanted only judgment. To make a long story short Nineveh did repent and God forgave them. Note that in this case of National repentance, God does not deliver to Jonah any mention of conditions in case they should repent.

Jonah 1:2 (NASB) Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

Later Jonah reveals his knowledge of the principle of God showing mercy on those who repent.

Jonah 3:10 (NASB) When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Jonah 4:1 (NASB) He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

The prophecies in question, Peter’s death etc., allow for no conditions. If these prophecies can be considered conditional then by the same lack of scriptural evidence so can the unconditional covenants of the Old Testament be considered conditional, but such interpretation violates the literal hermeneutic.

Other than an irrational, emotional requirement to force a meaning into the text to defend imminency, there is no reason to consider these prophecies to be conditional. The propositional language in each is unequivocal. The burden of proof lies with the Pre-tribulationist to demonstrate imminency to a certainty. The level of proof required goes far beyond a “strong inference” indicating that perhaps, if all previous assumptions are valid, that imminence is correct. No, if Christ was at risk of being deemed a false prophet based on the occurrence of the rapture prior to Peter's death, then the evidence must be unassailable and incontrovertible for an imminent rapture. The laying on of hands technique is no such proof. Many false doctrines have a multitude of adherents supporting them.

Calling upon the Early Church Fathers is no better because they had wavering ideas on eschatology, and contrary to the teaching of some did not hold fervently to an any-moment return. They certainly did not hold to imminency in the same manner that

contemporary Pre-tribulationists do today. (That is Christ may return at any moment, and no prophesied event must be fulfilled beforehand.) They may have thought that the rapture could occur in their lifetimes but most of the Early Church Fathers, who wrote on the subject of the end-times, also believed that they would live to witness suffering at the hands of Antichrist; hardly the same concept of imminency that Pre-tribulationists hold to today.

The view that these apostolic prophecies were conditional does not satisfy this writer. Those who hold to such teaching must assess the violence they are doing to the literal hermeneutic and to the integrity of the propositional view of scripture language. When words can no longer mean what they say all doctrine must be held suspect.

## ***Prophecy of Peter's death was not widely known?***

### **The View of Clarence B. Mason and Trinity Bible Institute**

A quite interesting attempt to explain the contradiction between imminency and these apostolic prophecies is made in the notes on Eschatology written by Clarence B. Mason and presented by Trinity Bible Institute (TBI):

#### The argument against imminency

Postribulationists assert there is Scriptural evidence that predicted events must transpire before the return of Christ. These events include such things as the **prediction of Peter's death**, the destruction of Jerusalem, the fulfillment of the great commission, **the apostasy**, and the signs preceding the second advent.

Refutation: By the time that the truth of imminent return became known among Christians generally, most of these difficulties were resolved. **The prediction about Peter's death was not recorded by John until about twenty years after Peter's death.**

The possible reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse certainly was not clear to Christians before the event occurred in A.D. 70; and in contrast to this fact is the certainty that they were told to wait for God's Son from heaven (1 Thes. 1:10).

The great commission (Mt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8) throws no light on the subject of the expectation of the Lord's return; it does not support postribulationism any more than pretribulationism. The passages involved merely point to the destination of the gospel. **The gospel was preached in Paul's day throughout the known world (Col. 1:6, 23) before all his epistles which testify to the imminent return became generally known**. God's purpose in this dispensation is not to convert the world, but rather to call out a people for His name from among the Jews and Gentiles. Incidentally, Mt 24:14 refers to the tribulation period and does not concern the Church.

In reference to the signs which precede the Lord's return (Lk. 21:25ff.), it is sufficient to say that they relate to the tribulation period before which time the Church will be raptured.

In contrast to these rather nebulous arguments against the any-moment rapture, there is the positive fact that **Scripture abounds with exhortations for the believer to be looking for the return of the Lord**. (cp. Jn. 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:4; 1 Thes. 1:9-10; 1 Tim. 6:14; Heb. 10:37; James 5:8; 2 Pet. 3:4-5; Rev. 22:20). The clarity of these exhortations is evident from the effect it had upon the Church, especially in the first three centuries (cp. A. Harnack, "Millennium," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., XVI, 314). This fact indicates the weakness of the argument of postribulationism regarding predicted events; apparently they did not dim the hope of His imminent return. [Clarence B. Mason, *Eschatology III*, date unknown, page 150] [underlining in the original] [bold emphasis added]

## Gerald Stanton's View

Gerald Stanton comes up with a similar argument, in response to Marvin Rosenthal's article in *Zion's Fire* magazine in the Aug.-Sept. 1990 issue in which he asks the question, "Is the Return of Christ Imminent?," gives us his take on the matter. This is Stanton's response to one of Rosenthal's five objections to imminency:

**"Peter was to live to be an old man (Jn. 21:18-19). For the early Church, that precluded an any-moment Rapture."** This argument, borrowed from Cameron, is readily answered. Peter himself encouraged believers to look for the coming of the Lord, calling those who did not do so "willingly ignorant" (2 Pet. 4:3-5). He knew that he might die suddenly (2 Pet. 1:14), and Herod had just killed James and seized Peter with the same intention (Acts 12:1-3). Certainly believers expected Peter's early death, for when Rhoda bore the news of his release, they said "Thou art mad," and when he appeared to them "they were astonished" (Acts 12:15-16).

**They had no concept that his would be a long life,** and as they looked for the Savior they certainly did not run around asking, "I wonder if Peter is dead yet?" **Actually, the passage in question which recorded Christ's conversation with Peter, John 21:18, could not have been a factor in their thinking, for it was not written and sent to the Churches until twenty or more years after the death of Peter.**

[Dr. Gerald Stanton, 1992, The Pre-Trib Research Center, <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/doctrine-of-imminency-is-it-biblical>, viewed 05/25/2012] [emphasis added]

Dr. Stanton comments that, "They had no concept that his would be a long life." This may have been so, but Stanton is assuming that these Jerusalem believers, who were in close Christian fellowship, and therefore discipleship, under the apostle Peter, had never been taught by Peter this life-shaking prophecy given to Peter by Christ personally. I think that assumption of the omission of such a teaching by Peter to his disciples is not a reasonable one to make. One would only need to make such an assumption if one had an ulterior motive. In Stanton's case, he must come up with a solution that meets the requirements of *plausible deniability*. This is the pattern of Pre-tribulationists when it comes to their defense of imminency: they offer a defense for every doubt and then act on like it were unanswerable, when it is anything but.

## Redefines the requirements for prophecy; must be widely known?

Stanton goes on to say, "Actually, the passage in question which recorded Christ's conversation with Peter, John 21:18, could not have been a factor in their thinking, for it was not written and sent to the Churches until twenty or more years *after* the death of Peter." As I have tried to explain elsewhere, this is completely irrelevant. (1) The prophecy was uttered by Christ. (2) Some people, including Peter, were aware of it. (3) Therefore, it had to be fulfilled. It seems that Stanton, Mason, and TBI are adopting the argument that a prophecy is not a prophecy unless it is widely known. Stanton is more concerned with the effect this prophecy would have had on believers if they had known it. By his reasoning, the ignorance of the Jerusalem believers of the prophecy of Peter's long life and inevitable death justifies their belief in an imminent rapture, despite the fact that prophecy had to be fulfilled before the rapture could happen. This line of reasoning is a complete *non-sequitur*. If the Jerusalem believers had a faulty view of the timing of the rapture because of ignorance, this does not somehow magically elevate their faulty view to true doctrine. And notice that Stanton thinks that, "This argument, borrowed from

Cameron, is readily answered." If he thinks that he readily answered the question, then Stanton's thinking is delusional.

Note that a consistent argument, in the Mason notes and by Stanton, is that these prophecies were not widely known to the early Church until after the predicted events had already taken place. Are they trying to say that a prerequisite for a prophecy is that it be widely known? If so, this is preposterous! Prophecy need not be known by the effected parties to be considered valid. The fact that God revealed the future to even one person means that the fulfillment of that prophecy is necessary and inevitable. And it is completely irrelevant that John did not record the prophecy of Peter's death until after the fact. John and Peter certainly knew of it, thereby making the fulfillment certain. These refutations are not satisfactory. The fact that they are even entertained by Pre-tribulationists indicates the weakness of their position. Again their main explanation is that the scriptures are so clear on the "fact" of the imminency of Christ's return that all other potential problems with their position can be brushed aside under the rug.

### The View of Thomas Ice

Dr. Thomas Ice has taken up the gauntlet on the issue of these apostolic prophecies and addresses the issue of Peter's death as it relates to Imminence and the rapture. His views are essentially the same as those of Mason and Stanton. Dr. Ice is one of the leading popularists of the Pre-tribulation position. He and Dr. Tim Lahaye maintain The Pre-Trib Research Center. The following quotes are from his web-site.

#### Jesus' Promise to Peter

How would one who believes that the New Testament teaches imminence deal with Cameron's charge that Jesus promised Peter that he would live to an old age, so that Christ could not return before Peter became old? The passage from which this charge is derived is John 21:18-19, which says, "'Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.' Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me!'"

First, **John's Gospel was not written until decades after Peter's death** when it would no longer be an issue one way or the other. "As far as the Church at large was concerned," notes John Walvoord, "the information given to . . . Peter **did not deter their belief in imminency** because on a given day **few would know whether . . . Peter was still alive, and most of them were not informed about the predictions.**"

Second, the first book in the New Testament canon is James, which appeared around a.d. 50. "By this time, **Peter was in old age and his own death was conceivably imminent.**" Marshall Hawkins provides an **excellent explanation** as follows:

Time for this gap between Peter's middle age and his old age is allowed for by the progress of revelation. **It was not until the book of James (written just about A.D. 50), and then later in Paul's writings that the imminence of the rapture is revealed.** Twenty years would have elapsed between **the prophecy** and the writing of James-enough time for Peter to have aged sufficiently. . . . By this time **imminence was a viable doctrine for most of the Church since they would have no idea whether Peter was alive at any one moment or not.** . . . For those accompanying Peter **at this time**, the rapture was also imminent because **Peter may have been seized and martyred at any time, making the rapture possible immediately afterward.**

Hawkins concludes as follows:

It must be kept in mind that any attack on imminence due to the prophecy of Peter's death must also take into account the passage in James chapter 5. **Imminence must be disproved first before a persuasive argument against imminence can be maintained here.** There are enough doubts about Peter's age, about the time of the revelation of the doctrine of imminence, about

how old Peter had to be before **his death became imminent**, and about **when the prophecy of his death became known**, to make the posttribulational case insecure. As long as the passage in James stands, imminence can be correlated with the prophecy in John chapter 21.

We will find as we diffuse the many landmines set against pretribulationism that **nothing in the New Testament stands in the way of Christ's any-moment return**. It is truly a blessed hope to realize that the rapture is indeed imminent. Maranatha!

[Dr. Thomas Ice, (Part 1) Imminence and The Rapture, [http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-\(Part1\)ImminenceandT.pdf](http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-(Part1)ImminenceandT.pdf), viewed 05/25/2012] [emphasis added]

This explanation, offered by Dr. Ice, gives us more insight into the Pre-tribulational mindset. Sadly, he creates more problems for his position than he solves.

His first argument, above, is that *John's gospel was not written until long after the fact*. Why would the date a prophecy was written down for others to read make one whit of difference as to whether it had to be fulfilled before the rapture? Neither the writing date of scripture, nor the publication date, mark the time from which a pronouncement becomes prophecy. No, the *prophecy must be counted from the time it was uttered from the lips of the prophet*. In this case, it went into effect before Christ's death. The *argument* that the book of John was not written until long after the prophecy was fulfilled does not negate the *fact* that this utterance by Jesus was a true prophecy from the moment it was spoken.

Dr. Ice quotes Dr. Walvoord's opinion on the effect of the prophecy of Peter's death on the early Church's belief in imminency: "the information given to . . . Peter **did not deter their belief in imminency** because on a given day **few would know whether . . . Peter was still alive**, and **most of them were not informed about the predictions.**" So Ice is advancing the position that the weight of this prophecy is predicated upon the believer's response to it and how well the believers were informed on the particulars of its fulfillment.

### Thomas Ice concedes that Peter had to Die before the Rapture

Ice's next series of statements concede that Peter's death was a prerequisite of the rapture. "The first book in the New Testament canon is James, which appeared around a.d. 50. "By this time, **Peter was in old age and his own death was conceivably imminent.**" And: "**Peter may have been seized and martyred at any time, making the rapture possible immediately afterward.**" Note that he is, in effect, stating that the rapture was not possible until the death of Peter. Dr. Ice rightly realizes that the prophecy of Peter's death is indeed problematic to his position, and lamely offers the ignorance of believers to legitimize his ailing Pre-tribulation scheme.

Ice quotes Hawkins' "excellent explanation" where Hawkins states, "The rapture was also imminent because Peter may have been seized and martyred at any time, making the rapture possible immediately afterward." It is surprising that Ice would adopt this explanation since it redefines the doctrine of imminency to be contingent upon Peter's death. All through his argument Ice gives credence to the validity of Jesus' utterance being a necessary prophecy. It is maddening, however, that this acknowledgment of this necessary prophecy does not sway his faith in imminency. He does not see that he is holding to a position that is self-contradictory. Ice is not letting foolish consistency interfere with his mind.

How does Ice possibly think that layering one imminent event upon another aids his case? An essential tenet of the doctrine of imminency is that no prophesied event must take place before that imminent event. How could both Peter's death and the rapture be imminent if Peter had to die? For the doctrine of imminency to be true no prophesied event must be fulfilled prior to the rapture. If one considers Peter's death to be necessary before the rapture, as the statement by Dr. Ice validates, then the rapture was not imminent. And if it was not imminent when the proof texts for imminency were written, then how can those same proof texts validate imminency now?

By the best estimates, Peter did not die until 67 AD, years after the book of James was written in 50 AD, according to Hawkins. So any passage in the book of James would have been written while the prophecy of Peter's death was still pending and, therefore, could not have been teaching an imminent return. Surely, any sane man believing in the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture can see that the Holy Spirit supervised the writing of the infallible book of James in 50 AD, and would have known that Peter was still alive, and therefore the Holy Spirit would not have included any mention in the text that was in contradiction to Christ's prophecy of Peter's death.

If one considers the prophecy of Peter's death to be the last prophecy requiring fulfillment before the rapture of the Church became imminent, (and I do not), then one could conceivably teach that the rapture is imminent now. But this is not the doctrine of imminency. The doctrine of imminency, as promoted by Pre-tribulationists, insists that the rapture has been imminent since the ascension of Jesus Christ, not since Peter's death.

And what are we to make of Hawkins' next circular argument? Quote: **“Imminence must be disproved *first* before a persuasive argument against imminence can be maintained here.”** If this is the way he wants to play, then indeed he has come up with an argument that is truly unanswerable. I'd like to employ that same argument to support my case: "You can't prove imminence until you first prove imminence." Do you think that would satisfy someone who believes in imminence? No. Well, likewise, the converse, put forth by Hawkins and Ice, does not satisfy me. The use of such a ridiculous argument casts doubt on the soundness of all his other arguments.

## ***Qualified Imminency?***

### **The view of Pre-tribulationist John A. Sproule**

A few Pre-tribulationists recognize the problems these apostolic prophecies present to their view. John A. Sproule in his review of Posttribulationist Robert H. Gundry's book [The Church and the Tribulation](#) (Zondervan, 1973), discusses the concept of imminency. In his "paper," as he prefers to call it, Sproule honestly concedes that Pre-Tribulationism has some work to do to answer Gundry's points. He especially calls for an exegetically sound foundation for Pre-Tribulationism that does not rest upon the necessarily derivative doctrine of imminency. Below is Sproule in his own words.

One answer to the problem posed (and Gundry admits this as a weak possibility) is that every expectation carried the **qualification of "only if Christ does not return beforehand."** Frankly, this answer does not satisfy this reviewer either. A completely satisfactory answer may not be determinable.

A preferable solution for this reviewer would be to regard **the concept of imminency as a theological truth, arrived at deductively, which describes a characteristic of Christ's return that developed with time.** As such, it was not a developed element in the eschatology of the apostolic Church for **Christ's Return would not have been imminent until a period of time had elapsed,** for the very reasons cited by Gundry. As time passed (after the deaths of Paul and Peter and after the spread of the Gospel throughout the ancient world), **imminency became an essential characteristic of Christ's Return.**

Later Sproule summarizes his point:

Gundry argues for a necessary delay between the Ascension of Christ and His Return and such a delay destroys any doctrine of imminency. He justifies such a delay on the basis of time needed to: **(1) fulfill the Great Commission, (2) fulfill the promise to Peter that he would reach old age, and (3) fulfill Paul's full-orbed ministry extending to Rome (or even beyond, into Spain).** Frankly, **this reviewer believes that the doctrine of imminency does face a problem here.** It is the reviewer's belief that the concept of imminency ought to grow out of an exegetically proven pretribulationism rather than vice versa. **The preferred solution to the problem posed by Gundry is to view imminency as a characteristic of Christ's Return that developed with time and that it was not a developed element in the eschatology of the Apostolic Church** (cf.pp. 16-18 of this review). This does not diminish the importance of imminency nor deny its correlation with pretribulationism.

[John A. Sproule, *In Defense of Pretribulationism*, BMH Books, 1980.]

Any Pre-tribulationist taking Sproule's position would logically have to abandon the proof texts for imminency. Recognizing that some prophecy had to be fulfilled precludes an interpretation of these texts to mean an any-moment rapture. This begs the question: "Have all the prophecies with a necessary fulfillment before the rapture been fulfilled?" Sproule seems to think so. The day will certainly come when the rapture will be the next event prophesied to happen, and on that day-and-hour the rapture will then become imminent. Have we reached that point today? Sproule believes that since the destruction of Jerusalem we have been in a state where the rapture can occur at any moment. If he is correct, then the rapture is indeed now imminent. However, Sproule's definition of "qualified imminency" is very different from the view of normative dispensationalists, who require the rapture to have been in an *any-moment state of fulfillment ever since the ascension*. It seems to me that Sproule's view rests on a weak foundation, not being able to call upon scripture for support, but instead depending on the philosophical importance of imminency as it relates to Pre-tribulationism.

### The View of Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum

In his broad-scope eschatology book, *The Footsteps of the Messiah (FOM)*, that outlines the sequence of prophetic events, Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum presents his view of imminency. Like John A. Sproule above, Fruchtenbaum holds to a *qualified imminency*. He teaches that there were several prophecies that had to be fulfilled before the rapture of the church became imminent. He first touches on the subject in his explanation of the Olivet Discourse. Here are his comments introducing Luke 21:20-24:

Only after having spelled out clearly that **the Apostles would have to undergo a period of suffering as well as have a successful ministry** did Jesus go on to answer their first question concerning the sign of **the coming destruction of Jerusalem** and the Temple. [bold added]

[Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah, Ariel Ministries, 2003, p. 629]

Later in his exposition of the Olivet Discourse, a more explicit statement of Fruchtenbaum's concept of imminency is recounted. He sees the destruction of Jerusalem as the last prophecy that had to be fulfilled before the rapture.

The exhortation is that when believers *see these things begin to come to pass*, then they are to look up – raise their heads – because it will mark the imminent redemption of the believers from this world. In Luke's context, the expression *these things* refers back to Luke 21:20-24, which was the sign of the destruction of Jerusalem. Once Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, that fulfilled every and any prophecy that had to be fulfilled before the Rapture. **Once the city and the Temple were destroyed, it fulfilled the judgment for the unpardonable sin. Once that happened, it rendered the Rapture of the Church imminent.** "Imminency" does not mean "soon." It only means that **it can now happen at any moment** of time. It should be noted what Jesus did *not* say. He did not say, "Only when *all* these things have come to pass, then look up, for your redemption draweth nigh." He did not say we must wait until the end of the Tribulation before looking up. What He did say was, "When you see these things *begin* to come to pass, then look up, for your redemption draweth nigh." The beginning part was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. **Once the beginning had occurred, the Rapture became imminent.** [italics in the original, bold added]

[Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah, Ariel Ministries, 2003, p. 637]

Note that Fruchtenbaum does not appeal to the so-called imminency proof-text scriptures. His view of imminency is based strictly upon the complete fulfillment of prophecy as he sees it. The difference between Fruchtenbaum's view and that of other Pre-tribulationists is that the rapture, for him, became imminent only after certain prophecies had been fulfilled. Most other Pre-tribulationists hold to a view of imminency from the very moment of Christ's Ascension.

While Fruchtenbaum has a more defensible position on the New Testament prophecies of interest in this article than do other Pre-tribulationists, he falters in his utilization of the literal hermeneutic elsewhere. Although he does not mention Peter's death, which occurred in A.D. 67, his understanding of the prophesied fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 indicates that he would consider Peter's death a prophecy requiring *fulfillment* as well. His understanding of the requirement for the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem is the reason for his postponement of the imminency of the rapture until A.D. 70. So, he seems to understand the value of prophecy *fulfillment* in determining the possible time of the rapture in this one instance.

Elsewhere, however, Fruchtenbaum mentions that he considers the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 to be representative of the seven eras of church history. This he terms the "historical-prophetic interpretation" of the letters to the seven churches. He even goes so far as to give the approximate dates for each era; the last, that of Laodicea, does not commence until A.D. 1900 (FOM, p. 65; and the chart on p. 46). He explains the controversial nature of this interpretation:

While there is general consensus on the first two points among premillennial writers, this is not true with the third issue, known as the historical-prophetic interpretation, which states that while all seven types of churches always exist, one type dominates a particular era of church history. Throughout church history all seven types of churches will be present, but one type will tend to dominate a particular period of church history. **Thus these letters present a prophetic picture of the seven historical periods in which the visible church will develop.** [Emphasis added]

[Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah, Ariel Ministries, 2003, p. 49]

Despite these misgivings Fruchtenbaum does believe this historical-prophetic interpretation of the seven churches; his, so called, third point:

Hence the historical-prophetic interpretation does have strong merit, though it is not without its problems. **While this author is not totally comfortable with this third point, he still more so with it than without it.** Furthermore, it is the literal interpretation of such promises that has moved this author to that position. [bold added]

[Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah, Ariel Ministries, 2003, p. 49]

One would think that if these seven eras were prophetic that the rapture could not possibly be considered imminent until all seven eras had at least run their course. Prophecy must be fulfilled. By Fruchtenbaum's chronology this would mean that the rapture could not be considered imminent until A. D. 1900. Paradoxically, Fruchtenbaum believes the rapture to be imminent from A.D. 70. Here are two representative samples of his assessment of the start date for the end-times Laodicea age of apostasy:

If the present Age of the Apostasy had a definite beginning (and this is impossible to determine), for the United States, it might well have been January 20, 1891.

[Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah, Ariel Ministries, 2003, p. 72]

So throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, apostasy took over the schools and trained ministers for the denominational churches.

[Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, The Footsteps of the Messiah, Ariel Ministries, 2003, p. 73]

So, in the end, Fruchtenbaum succumbs to the same faulty reasoning as do the others. To his credit, at least he does not resort to teaching that every reference to "watch and wait," and "look for," and "be sober," is an imminency reference. His error is in believing that the destruction of Jerusalem was the last prophecy requiring fulfillment, but even this belief is inconsistent with his view of the seven prophesied eras of church history. He holds to belief in two mutually-exclusive systems of belief: Imminency and Seven churches. Since the Seven periods of church history were prophesied, in Fruchtenbaum's view, then his belief in Imminency is hypothetical.

### ***If not Imminency, then what? Expectancy.***

From the sections above it is clear that Pre-tribulationists consider the teachings concerning the return of Christ to be pronouncements of an any-moment rapture. If we consider the prophecy of Peter's death, and the other apostolic predictions, to be a true prophecy, what then can be said of these so-called imminency texts? The high-view of prophecy demands that these prophecies are to be taken in the literal sense, and that they be fulfilled. Not even the rapture can intervene to prevent their fulfillment. Therefore these texts must be teaching something other than imminency.

One argument against this is that Paul was not aware of these prophecies, and so from his point of view his exhortations to "watch," "wait," and "look for" the return of Christ can be seen as anticipatory of an imminent return even though some prophecy must necessarily be fulfilled before the rapture; prophecy of which Paul was not aware. So, in this way, Paul could be seen as writing clear teachings on the imminent return even while

unfulfilled prophecy remained that had to happen first, because by the time Paul's letters were distributed, all of these unfulfilled prophecies would have been fulfilled and then the rapture would actually be imminent.

## **Jesus was a prophet, Peter had to die.**

Luke 14:33 “Nonetheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day for it cannot be that a prophet cannot die outside Jerusalem.”

By these words Jesus is claiming title as a prophet, in case there was any doubt. God is, by definition, the ultimate true prophet. His utterances are the very stuff of prophecy.

## ***A Literal Hermeneutic requires a literal fulfillment of prophecy***

As stated elsewhere in this article, the high view of prophecy demands a fulfillment of prophecy. What God says will happen, will certainly happen. Other than for very limited circumstances of conditional prophecy, this is the rule for interpretation of prophecy. God says it. Expect a fulfillment.

## ***The Proper View of Prophets***

Now we know God's perspective on prophecy. Before considering the problem in particular we also need to know God's view of the prophets who deliver that prophecy, for this figures prominently in the matter. This can be found in Deuteronomy 18. Here God states the requirements for a true prophet: *he will never be wrong*. The prophet who prophesies a thing that does not come to pass is to be considered a false prophet, and shall be put to death. Here is the text from Deuteronomy:

“I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, *that* whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require *it* of him. But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even **that prophet shall die**. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, **if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken**, *but* the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.” (De 18:18-22 AV) [Emphasis added]

For the adherents of Pre-tribulationism, this is where the difficulty arises: There are several events in the New Testament that were prophesied to occur in the lives of the apostles, some prophesied by angels, some by named prophets, and some by Jesus Himself. Let's look at a few of them.

## The Prophecies that pose the problem:

The apostolic prophecies have been referred to many times. I will now elaborate on some of them so that the reader may understand the full extent of the problem.

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock **I will build my Church**; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Mt 16:18 AV) [Emphasis added]

If Christ was to build His Church, then the rapture could not have happened before Acts chapter 2, else Christ would have been a false prophet. **His return for His Saints would have negated His own prophecy about His own future actions.** Surely this makes God out to be double-minded, and contradictory. True doctrine cannot abide such a contradiction. Any doctrine requiring it must be abandoned. And what Saints would have been raptured anyway, certainly not Church Saints.

This example of the possibility of the rapture before the very foundation of the Church is in the realm of the indefinable, for the scope of debate on the timing of the rapture ever and always concerns only Church Saints. None include “Old Testament Saints” or “Tribulation Saints” in the discussion on the timing of the Blessed Hope of the Church. It is hard to speak of this even hypothetically. These reasons demonstrate that the rapture could have not taken place before Pentecost and was therefore not imminent from the moment of the Ascension, but had to occur sometime after the inauguration of the Church.

There are many other such prophecies concerning the Church. I will list one more: **the Great Commission**, “*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:*” (Mt 28:19 AV). This text has always been thought of as a directive to the Church. Had the rapture taken place before the Church had even begun, this command would have no meaning; they would have been baptizing people into the baptism of John the Baptist; the baptism of repentance, for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that is baptism into the body of Christ, had not yet been inaugurated, and would not be inaugurated until Pentecost.

Oftentimes, New Testament prophecy foretold events in the lives of the apostles. Now any prophecy concerning an apostle relates directly to the issue, for the **apostles are the very foundations of the Church**, and would surely be taken to be with Jesus in the rapture. The apostles must be included in any list of Church membership. Any event prophesied to effect an apostle means that the event **MUST** take place before the rapture. After the rapture the apostle would not be on the earth to fulfill the prophecy but would be ever with the Lord along with the rest of the Church saints.

In the book of Acts Agabus prophecies, in quite dramatic fashion, about Paul going down to Jerusalem and there being bound.

“And as we tarried *there* many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named **Agabus**. And when he was come unto us, he took **Paul’s girdle**, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, **Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver *him* into the hands of the Gentiles.** And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine

heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, **The will of the Lord be done.**” (Ac 21:10-14 AV) [Emphasis added]

Here the apostle Paul recognized the will of God as delivered through the prophet Agabus. Note that Paul immediately steeled himself for whatever destiny awaited him at Jerusalem. He prepared himself for the worst, not doubting the inevitability of this prophesied event. Paul would not have been caught teaching an imminent rapture in the interim between Agabus’ prophecy and its fulfillment, for to do so would be to declare the Holy Spirit a false prophet. The rapture was not imminent prior to this *binding in Jerusalem* had been inflicted upon Paul. In Acts 22:17-21 Paul recounts a vision he had of speaking with Jesus while in a trance. In this vision he recalls the Lord telling him that He would send him far away to preach to the gentiles.

"It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.' "And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You.' And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.' "And He said to me, 'Go! **For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.**'" Acts 22:17-21 (NASB)[emphasis added]

Later in the same book of Acts, an angel prophesies that Paul would not only survive a shipwreck but would be brought before Caesar.

“And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of *any man’s* life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night **the angel of God**, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, Fear not, **Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar:** and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for **I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.**” (Ac 27:22-25 AV) [Emphasis added]

Paul spoke well when he said, “I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.” Paul used this trust in the prophecy, given by the *angel of God*, to reassure his shipmates that their lives would be spared. The truth of this prophecy is attested to in scripture, for we read that Paul, and all on board, survived the shipwreck, and that Paul did indeed stand before Caesar. Paul would not have been caught teaching an imminent rapture before he was brought before Caesar, for to do so would have been to declare the *angel of God* to be a false prophet.

This prophecy concerning Paul begs the question, “How can it be that at the end of Paul’s life the rapture could not be imminent because of unfulfilled prophecy (namely, that he would be brought before Caesar), yet many Pre-tribulationists think Paul taught imminency during his letter writing ministry?” Surely, if the rapture was not imminent later, it could not be imminent earlier. Any such interpretation of the letters of Paul purporting that they teach imminency is therefore suspect.

The most devastating New Testament prophecy, for the doctrine of imminency, is that of Jesus foretelling Peter’s death. (1) Jesus Christ is the one delivering the prophecy. (2) The apostle Peter’s manner and time of death are revealed, and Peter did not die until after ALL of Paul’s epistles were written. (3) Therefore, NONE of Paul’s epistles could

have taught imminency because Peter's death was pending all through Paul's writing career. This prophecy is recorded in the gospel of John:

“He saith unto him the third time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me? **Peter** was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. **Jesus saith unto him**, Feed my sheep. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but **when thou shalt be old**, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry *thee* whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, **signifying by what death he should glorify God**. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.” (John 21:17-19 AV) [emphasis added]

### ***Peter and Paul both died in 67 AD***

Church history has it that in 67 AD, Peter was crucified upside down, at Peter's request, supposedly because he did not deserve to die in the same manner as his Lord. It could also be that he wanted to be sure he fulfilled the Lord's prophecy concerning the manner of his death. If one considers that the death of Peter to be the last necessary prophecy, and I do not, then this mid-60s AD date for Peter's death marks the earliest time that imminency could legitimately be taught. If one considers the prophecy of Peter's death to be legitimate, and I do, this means that no scripture written before Peter's death could have possibly taught that the rapture was imminent.

Our conclusion is that June 29, A.D. 67, is to be the accepted date of the deaths of Peter and Paul. [Jack Finegan; The Handbook of Biblical Chronology, Revised Edition 1998, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. p.388, entry 671.]

Church history also has it that both Peter and Paul were martyred at the same time, under the persecution of Nero in Rome. This informs us that none of the writings of Paul could have been written after the death of Peter, for Paul did not outlive Peter. Therefore none of the writings of Paul could have possibly taught imminency, if he was being led by the Holy Spirit.

In accordance with evidence discussed above [concerning the death of Peter], we accept June 29, A.D. 67, as the date of death of both apostles [Peter and Paul]. [Jack Finegan; The Handbook of Biblical Chronology, Revised Edition 1998, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. p.401, entry 697.] [text in brackets added]

Among the New Testament authors most active before the death of Peter was Paul. Paul is also credited with penning most of the imminency proof texts. Christian scholars place the following dates on the writings of Paul: 1 Thessalonians: 51 AD, 2 Thessalonians: 51-52 AD, Galatians: 53 AD, 1 Corinthians: 55 AD, 2 Corinthians: 55 AD, Romans: 57 AD, Ephesians: 60 AD, Colossians: 60 AD, Philemon: 60 AD, Philippians: 61 AD, 1 Timothy: 63-65 AD, Titus: 65 AD, 2 Timothy: 67 AD. Given the dates cited above, what can be said of a surety is that *all* of the imminency proof text attributed to Paul had to have been written before Peter's death.

### ***Paul's writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit***

The Holy Spirit inspired all scripture, and was certainly aware of the prophecy of Peter's death, and certainly whether or not Peter was still alive. If, before Peter's death, a writer of scripture (such as Paul), had wanted to teach that Christ's return for the Church would become imminent after Peter's certain death, he would have to mention the necessary prerequisite of Peter's death in his teaching, to maintain the truthfulness of his writing, lest his students misunderstand him to mean that the rapture could occur at any-moment. If the rapture was not considered imminent by the writer, we would expect no such mention, and, indeed, scripture does not contain such a mention. The fact that no such mention of Peter's death is documented along with the so-called imminency proof texts, either means that, (1) Peter's death was not a prerequisite for the imminent rapture, or (2) that the rapture was not considered imminent by Paul. Pre-tribulationists, of course, are going to hold to the former, while those of us who hold to a consistent literal hermeneutic, and therefore insist on the literal fulfillment of prophecy, will hold to the latter.

If the rapture occurred before any of these prophesied events had come to pass, the one delivering that prophecy would have been a false prophet. It is dangerous to consider an angel or a prophet of God to be wrong. It is blasphemy to consider Jesus a false prophet. But that would have been a necessity had the rapture occurred before Peter died. This very necessity disqualifies the "doctrine" of imminency from serious consideration. And all subsequent teachings that are built upon the faulty foundation of imminency must be reevaluated. That is: as long as Pre-tribulationism incorporates imminency, as defined above, into its end-times scheme, Pre-tribulationism is disqualified from serious consideration as a possible interpretation of end-times events.

### **Even these so-called conditional prophecies were fulfilled literally**

An interesting feature of all these apostolic prophecies mentioned in this discussion is that they have all been fulfilled literally, indicating that this was indeed the intent of God's decree all along. Surely God would not have allowed teachings to be inserted into His scripture that would contradict His own decree. All the prophecies of Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally. An essential tenet of dispensationalism is that all the prophecies of Christ's second coming will be fulfilled literally. All the New Testament prophecies concerning the Church or the apostles were to be fulfilled literally, without exception. This is the inevitable result of prophecy: *prophecy in scripture is fulfilled literally within the sphere of human history*. Pre-tribulationism disagrees, however. Pre-tribulationism considers these prophecies in question to have been conditional, not requiring literal fulfillment. This is a major contradiction between Pre-tribulationists and their own supposed literal hermeneutic.

### **Pre-tribulationist Dual Hermeneutic**

Argument: The Pre-tribulationist notion that *Christ's return for His Church was imminent and that any events prophesied to occur are conditional pending that return* is exactly parallel to the Amillennial notion that *God's promises to the nation of Israel*

*concerning the land of Palestine, and the earthly throne of David, need never be fulfilled even by the Church.*

### **Equivalent of the Amillennial view of the Second Coming**

Amillennialists, as a rule, for which there are isolated exceptions, deny that the *prophecies of God to the nation of Israel concerning the land of Palestine*, or the *millennial prophecies of a time of earthly restoration*, have to be fulfilled in a literal fashion here on earth.

When looking at Old Testament prophecy, the Amillennialist sees the many prophecies concerning Christ's first coming and, employing a literal hermeneutic, looks for, and finds, a literal fulfillment. But when considering Christ's second coming the Amillennialist does not look for a literal fulfillment. The Amillennialist has already decided that the Church has replaced Israel and therefore these promises of God will not be kept. They find ways to disqualify Israel from inheriting the promises. For the prophecies concerning Christ's Second Coming they then must resort to an allegorical hermeneutic.

For the Amillennialist there is no need to expect a literal fulfillment of the promises of God to His chosen people, Israel. They see the nation of Israel as have been forsaken by God, despite the many assurances that God would never forsake them. For them there will be no earthly kingdom of one-thousand years. For them Jesus Christ will never rule with a rod of iron from Jerusalem sitting upon the throne of David. For them Israel will not enjoy a time of restoration as God's chosen people. To be an Amillennialist requires the reader of scripture to allegorize the Palestinian and Davidic covenants. The scriptural support for the restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land and for an earthly Millennial Kingdom ruled by Jesus Christ is copious but beyond the scope of this article. I mention this for the sake of comparison only, not to discuss the merits of the Amillennial position.

Amillennialists believe that Christ will return before any such *literal earthly fulfillment* of these prophecies will take place, in fact, they see such a literal fulfillment of these earthly related Israelite prophecies to be completely unnecessary. Many Amillennialists, those following the teaching of Augustine, believe that these prophecies are being fulfilled even now *spiritually, not literally*, by the Church, which has replaced Israel in the heart of God. Others in the Amillennial camp, following after Warfield, see a heavenly fulfillment of the Kingdom of God where Jesus Christ is, even now, ruling and reigning from His throne in heaven over a heavenly kingdom. Amillennialists are criticized for their position on prophecy for employing a dual hermeneutic, and rightly so.

In like fashion, Pre-tribulationists deny that many *New Testament prophecies had to be fulfilled*. If Christ had returned for His Church before these events had come to pass, then they would have never seen fulfillment during the time of human history. This is no different than the dual hermeneutic of the Amillennialists.

### **Dispensationalists chide Covenant theologian's dual Hermeneutic**

Dispensationalists rightly chide the Amillennialists for their inconsistent view on prophecy. Amillennialists hold that all of the prophecies concerning the Messiah's first coming were fulfilled literally, but that all the prophecies concerning Christ's Second Coming will be fulfilled allegorically. Pre-tribblers *usually* hold that all prophecy, both

fulfilled and unfulfilled, is to be taken literally, *except* in the case of the aforementioned apostolic prophecies that Christ could have circumvented by returning before their actual earthly fulfillment. This demonstrates their employment of a dual hermeneutic. This dual hermeneutic weakens the Pre-tribulationist's position in that it makes a mockery of the Biblical concept of prophecy on which they claim to rely. If prophecy doesn't have to be fulfilled then it cannot be termed prophecy.

### ***The Block Universe and the nature of Prophecy***

God is eternal, that is, He resides outside the constraints of chronological time. For Him the future is no less visible and determined than the past. If the timeline of history were plotted it might resemble a meandering path through a block of glass. The past present and future would be visible to an eternal observer. The Block Universe represents God's eternal decree; the future being no less set in stone, no less certain, than the past.

God can *foretell* the future with no less certainty than He can *remember* the past, because He has decreed all things. Some of this foreseen future He chooses to reveal in the form of revelation to men; we call such revelation prophecy. God's canon, the Bible, is His perfect revelation to man, and was not complete until all 66 books were written. God knew that He would one day, after the time of the apostles, cease to deliver such inspired teaching, and He also knew that His Church would have to persevere for two long millennia (to date), after the passing of the apostles, with only the instruction in the Bible to guide them. It would be against His very nature to conceive of the 66 books, in their perfection, and then preempt the revelation to men by causing the Second Coming to occur. No, God had decreed to wait until the canon was complete before the Second Coming could have happened.

In the same manner, *the unknown future* is something that can only be contemplated from a human perspective. From the point of view of the eternal God, nothing is ever uncertain. So, from God's position of omniscience, He chooses to reveal some future events to His human subjects. It does not make sense that, after having revealed that portion of the future, God would alter that future by causing the rapture to happen. For instance: It does not make sense that after having revealed Peter's death God would translate Peter to heaven without dying.

This same line of reasoning can be used for any prophecy that must be fulfilled before the rapture. There are several other New Testament prophecies that should be considered in this discussion of Imminency versus Prophecy: namely, the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD), the rebirth of the state of Israel, the course of Church history as laid out in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, the great apostasy and the rise of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. These raise separate issues that will have to be dealt with elsewhere. The point is that the rapture cannot occur prior to any of these prophesied events. All prophecy must come to pass else the one giving the prophecy must be considered a false prophet.

### **Future events destined to happen preclude Imminency**

You can also rest assured that God never taught Paul that Christ could come at any moment if God still had many revelations about what would have to happen first, such as the future promised suffering of the Church at Smyrna (Rev 2:10), or God's promised

protection of the Church at Philadelphia (Rev 3:10). It would have been contradictory for God to teach Paul that the Second Coming could come for him at any moment, when God knew that he would, as late as 95 AD, inspire John to prophecy about events future even to John's time. The fact that there were prophecies after the time of Paul proves that Paul's prophecies did not teach an any-moment rapture.

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast *some* of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” (Re 2:10 AV)

“Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” (Re 3:10 AV)

God would not have led the faithful to believe, through Paul or any other New Testament writer, that the Second Coming could occur at any moment when He knew full well that such an occurrence was not even a possibility; that He had thousands of years of human history already decreed, queued up and waiting to happen; that He was not even finished delivering the revelation of the canon of scripture to His Church, a Church that would persevere two-thousand years beyond the time of Paul. This same Church was to suffer much throughout the intervening generations. Their spiritual life need not be cluttered with the faulty notion that they would escape these earthly trials in the rapture. No, God gave His Church instruction on how to persevere, and cautions to expect tribulation in this life, and not a false hope of being delivered without any prerequisite signs indicating that blessed hope. When the time comes for the rapture, God will first activate the yearning for it in the generation alive at the time with prophesied signs, namely the regathering of Israel into the Promised Land, the Apostasy of the Church (2 Thes), the Son of Perdition committing the Abomination of Desolation in the Holy Place (2 Thes) and the visible sign in the sun, moon and stars, at which the Church will look up, for their redemption draweth nigh (LK 21).

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and **our gathering together to Him**, that you 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. Let no one in any way deceive you, **for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed**, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (2 Thes 2:1-4, NASB) [emphasis added]

“And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.” (Lu 21:28 AV)

Knowing that the Church would have to persevere for generations, why then would God inspire the writers of the New Testament to write things that would have scripture readers believe that their earthly sojourn could come to an end at any moment by means of the rapture? The fact is that He did not, but Pre-tribulationists claim that the New Testament does indeed teach imminency. History, decreed beforehand by God, records the birth of the Church in the first century, and the Church's continued existence through nearly two thousand years of struggle. This realization of God's eternal decree to require

the Church to persevere for two thousand years, while all along *falsely* believing that Christ could return for them at any moment, should force them to realize the awkward position in which they are putting God. Pre-tribulationists would have God *falsely* declaring to His Church that the rapture could happen at any moment even though God, in His omniscience, knew full well that for generations of Christians there was *absolutely no possibility* that the rapture of the Church would catch them away. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). The fact of God's eternal decree for the Church to persist for two thousand years precludes any possibility that God would teach those saints who would live and die, in the intervening years between the Apostolic age and the time of the rapture, that even they might possibly participate in the rapture. The very existence of God's decree contradicts Pre-tribulation Imminency.

There will come a day when the rapture is indeed imminent. And any true believer who has read the pertinent biblical texts will know when that time has come. That day has not yet come. No Christian before that time should let himself be deceived in thinking that the New Testament teaches him that the rapture can happen at any moment. God would not have permitted the New Testament writers to teach that which His decree does not allow.

### **God cannot lie.**

Knowing, from the observation of elapsed history that many events have taken place following the plan of God's perfect decree since the ascension, we can know, of a surety, that there was zero possibility that the Second Coming could have occurred at any time prior to now. The fact that events have unfolded in the exact manner we see them in history, means that this is God's decree for them to unfold in this fashion and in this time frame. To think that God would have taught His Apostles that the Second Coming could have happened at any time, when God knew that it would not happen for long ages, is tantamount to saying that God caused the Church to be ill-prepared for the reality of the challenges in store for them in their earthly life. Nineteen hundred years of Church saints would not have any possibility of being taken in the rapture; and God knew this. Why would God then instruct His disciples that Christ could return at *any moment* when God the Father knew full well that Christ would not return for at least 1900 years after the ascension? Aside from violating many prophecies, this violates our view of God's very nature. God cannot lie (Tit 1:2).

“In hope of eternal life, which **God, that cannot lie**, promised before the world began;” (Tit 1:2 AV)

### **No certainty for the future with a capricious God**

Such a situation relegates the devout follower of such a capricious God to being a blind believer with no hope or certainty for the future. He believes that his God is, (1) on the one hand, either *capable of changing his mind about what he has already revealed will happen in the future*, (2) on the other hand, *unsure about the course of the future*, and such uncertainly manifests itself in unfulfilled prophecy, or (3) on the gripping hand, *being deceitful about his revelation of future events*. This is not the God of the Bible. It is not the God I worship. My God does what He says He will do, and not even He is

capable of betraying His own nature; the one who tells the end from the beginning. When He says that Peter will die, you can bet Peter never thereafter expected to be taken alive in the rapture.

## The proper view of these imminency verses

### *Rosenthal's list of Imminency proof texts*

There are several scripture texts that Pre-tribulationists try to use to support their view of imminency. The trouble is that none of these texts explicitly teach an “any-moment” return of Christ, and in fact they all easily fit into an “expectancy” framework.

Marvin Rosenthal, author of The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church, writes:

Above all other issues, the fact remains that there is not one verse of scripture that teaches imminence, if by imminence it is meant that Christ’s return is signless, any-moment, and without the possibility of fulfilled prophecies preceding it. The student of the Word will search in vain for exegetical evidence to support imminency. The fact that men are to “wait for,” “expect,” “look for,” “keep awake,” “be free from excess,” “be alert,” (and similar phrases) does not substantiate the claim that no prophesied event can occur before the Rapture. A chart listing verses that demonstrate that fact follows:

TEXT	BASIC MEANING (Greek)
Luke 12:36	Wait for, expect
Titus 2:13	
Romans 8:23	Await eagerly
Galatians 5:5	
Hebrews 9:28	
James 5:7	Expect, wait for
Matthew 24:50	Wait for, look for, expect
2 Peter 3:12-14	
1 Thessalonians 5:6, 8	Be sober, self-controlled
1 Peter 1:13; 4:7	Free from excess
Matthew 24:42-43	To be awake, to keep awake
Revelation 16:15	
Mark 13:33	To see, look at
Hebrews 10:25	
1 Thessalonians 1:10	To wait for, expect, near
Philippians 1:19	To wait for, expect, near, At hand
James 5:8-9	

...There are simply no verses in the Bible which teach that Christ’s return can occur at any moment, is signless, and that no prophesied event will precede it – an absolute necessity to sustain pretribulationism. [Marvin Rosenthal, Zion’s Fire magazine; Aug. /Sept. 1990. Vol. 1, No. 7]

### **H.L. Nigro: Imminency texts do not teach Imminency**

Another author, H. L. Nigro (Quoting Douglas Moo), writes on the same subject that these words, used in other contexts, do not mean imminency.

“Wait for,” applied to the parousia in Luke 12:36 and Tit 2:13 and Jude 21. Is used of Paul’s expectation to the resurrection of the just and the unjust (Acts 24:15), - yet the latter does not occur until **after the millennium**. “Await eagerly” used of the parousia in 1 Cor 1:7 can refer to the creation’s longing for deliverance (Romans 8:19), which deliverance comes only **after the tribulation**. “Expect” is used by James of the parousia in 5:7, but the analogy of the context is with a farmer who **waits for his crops** - certainly not “any moment!” “Look for” (cf. Matt 24:50, Luke 12:46 with reference to the Second Coming) is the word used by Peter to exhort believers to “look for” the **new heavens the earth** (2 Peter 3:12-14). “be near” and the adjectival form applied to the parousia in numerous texts are used of **Jewish feasts and the seasons of the year** (e.g. John 2:13, Matt. 21:34) – and these, obviously, are not “any moment” events. A number of other terms, “watch”; “be awake”; “be sober”; “look at” are used to exhort believers to an attitude of spiritual alertness and moral uprightness in the light of the second return, **but imply nothing as to its time**. [emphasis added] [H. L. Nigro, Before God’s Wrath, Strong Tower Publishing, p82]

Imminency is far from the slam-dunk that Pre-tribulationists need it to be to justify their position of the conditional nature of these apostolic prophecies. The usage of these words in other contexts, that do not imply imminency, should give pause to those who insist that they do imply imminency in the context of the return of Christ.

## ***Bodily Return***

There is another aspect of the texts Pre-tribulationists want to use to shore up imminency: Many of them speak to the anticipation of Christ's second coming, which according to Acts will be bodily, in the same manner in which they saw Him ascend.

They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11 NASB)

Pre-tribulationists do not teach that Christ touches down on the earth at the rapture, but meets the Church in the air, and goes right back up to heaven. For them the second, bodily, coming does not occur until Armageddon (seven years later), and is not an imminent event. In effect, they hold to a two-stage second coming (some even say they hold to a second coming and a third coming). The first stage is at the rapture when Christ meets the Church in the air on their ascent to heaven, and the second is the *second coming proper* when He touches down on the earth to confront the forces of the Antichrist. The difficulty arises because the verses encouraging believers to watch and wait make no distinction between any second or third coming, and only speak of a singular second coming. One must approach these verses with the pre-conceived notion that the rapture takes place prior to “the tribulation” to be able to arbitrarily assign to them the meaning that they are referring to an imminent rapture and not to the bodily return of Christ. The plain meaning of the text calls for an interpretation that we are to watch for His glorious second coming.

There is an even more important reason that the doctrine of imminence cannot be used to support an any moment and therefore two-stage rapture. The very verses that pretrib scholars use to support the imminent return of Christ also tell us that the rapture must occur at his bodily return. Take for example the two verses cited earlier” “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13), and “be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord” (James 5:7). And also “Now brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

and our gathering together to Him..." (2 Thes. 2:1). [Nigro, Before God's Wrath, Strong Tower Publishing, p. 292.2]

### ***Dwight Pentecost's Imminency Proof Texts:***

A list of so-called imminency proof texts is given by Dwight Pentecost on page 180 of Things to Come:

The doctrine on imminency is taught in Scriptures in such passages as John 14:2-3; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 4:16-17; 5:5-9; Titus 2:13; James 5:8-9; Revelation 3:10; 22:17-22. [Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, Zondervan, 1958, p 180]

It will be beneficial to look at the verses in this list to determine if they really do teach an imminent rapture, or if Pentecost is reading meaning into the text because of his belief in imminency.

John 14:2-3 does not mention anything about the timing of Christ's return, only that He will return. Note that, as cited by H.L. Nigro below, John Walvoord uses this same passage to support Christ's bodily return at Armageddon, and not for the rapture. This indicates that the usage of this passage as an imminency proof text is not unanimous, even among the Pre-tribulationist camp. To believe that this text teaches an any moment rapture is stretching the very boundaries of the meaning of words.

"In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you." "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. (Jn 14:2-3 NASB)

H. L. Nigro writes:

Another proof text that is very important to Walvoord is John 14:3, "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." Ironically Walvoord uses this as a proof, not for the rapture (see Renald Showers' use of the same verse to support the opposite position in Appendix B), but for the **literalness of Christ's physical and bodily return** at Armageddon: "It is rather strange that the literal interpretation of this passage should be even questioned." He writes. "It is perfectly obvious that Christ's departure from earth to heaven represented in the expression 'I go' was a literal departure. He went bodily from earth to heaven. By the same token, 'I will come back' should be taken as a literal and bodily return." (p70 John Walvoord, The Rapture Question Revised and Enlarged Edition.) [H. L. Nigro, Before God's Wrath, Strong Tower Publishing, p313.2]

1 Corinthians 1:7 and Philippians 3:20-21, encourage us to *await eagerly*. It requires a leap of faith to interpret these verses to mean that this revelation of Jesus Christ can happen at any moment, yet these are included in the list of imminency proof texts by Pentecost. It is as if Pre-tribulationists cannot conceive of *awaiting something eagerly* unless that event can happen at any moment. Surely a person will *await eagerly* a long-planned-for vacation even though that vacation be months away. So to take *awaiting eagerly* to mean *only anticipation of imminent events* is extracting far too much from the text than is actually present in the words on the page. This is eisegesis, and is in conflict with the literal hermeneutic that Pre-tribulationists hold so dear.

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

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we **eagerly wait for** a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. (Phil 3:20-21 NASB)

As an example of the attitude of someone who is *awaiting eagerly* consider a child in mid-July who is making his Christmas list. This posture of *awaiting eagerly* has nothing to do with a belief that Christmas could happen at any moment. It is descriptive of the level of anticipation of the event, not the timing of the event. All of these verses that Pre-tribulationists try to use to support the doctrine of imminency speak to the proper attitude of the believer, and not to the timing of the event of the blessed hope.

The general use of the term *wait for* means that the one being told to wait should have patience for what he is anticipating, not that the thing awaited can happen at any moment.

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 rescues us from the wrath to come. (1 Thes 1:9-10 NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 does not have anything to say concerning the timing of the rapture. How Pentecost thinks this supports imminency is beyond me.

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 will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thes 4:16-17 NASB)

How does the phrase *be alert and sober* get misapplied to mean that the rapture can happen at any time?

for you are all sons of light and sons of day We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let **us be alert and sober**. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us **be sober**, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, (1 Thes 5:5-9 NASB)

Pre-tribulationists think that one cannot look for an event unless it is the next event on the prophetic timetable. Yet elsewhere we are told to look for the new heavens and the new earth (2 Peter 3:12-14), which is certainly not imminent by any one's definition.

**Looking for** and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, (2 Peter 3:12-14, NASB)

**Looking for** the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, (Titus 2:13 NASB)

Pentecost's use of *be patient*, in James 5, in no way instructs us that the return of Christ could happen at any moment. Even the phrase, "For the coming of the Lord is

near," is no help for him because Pre-tribulationists do not believe that it can be said that the rapture will happen *soon*. Again, this language speaks to the proper attitude of the believer not to the timing of the rapture. We are to be patient, no matter how long the rapture is delayed, because the Lord wants us to be ready, not to waste our lives in dissipation.

You too **be patient**; strengthen your hearts, **for the coming of the Lord is near**. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. (James 5:8-9 NASB)

Being *kept from the hour of testing* can only be taken to mean an imminent rapture if one approaches the text with the bias of Pre-tribulationism, for the Pre-tribulationist sees the rapture as the means of being kept from this testing. And they think the hour of testing to be the Broad Day of the Lord, which they equate with The Seven Year Tribulation (their terms, not mine)

'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will **keep you from the hour of testing**, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. (Rev 3:10 NASB)

The last citation (Rev. 22:17-22) by Pentecost in support of imminency only implies that the bride is saying "come," not that she is saying "come at any moment and nothing has to happen first." And, again, the phrase, "I am coming quickly," cannot mean Christ is coming soon. Even Pre-tribulationists reject this view. This can only mean that when he does come it will be quick. Obviously the term "quickly" had to incorporate a 2000 year delay, and therefore had to assume something other than the typical meaning of the word.

The Spirit and the bride say, "**Come**" And let the one who hears say, "Come" And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost. I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, **I am coming quickly**" Amen Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. (Rev 22:17-22 NASB)

The reader has to approach these verses cited by Pentecost with a pre-conceived bias toward imminence to think that they teach an any-moment rapture. In their zeal to find support for imminence in the scriptures Pre-tribulationists are guilty of reading more into the text than is actually meant by the words on the page.

One can see that even a cursory examination of these imminency proof texts demonstrates that these words simply do not carry the weight that Pre-tribulationists require of them. Indeed it is impossible for them to do this type of heavy lifting. These same words, used elsewhere, carry meanings very different from "imminency." Definitions of "wait for," and "expect" are much more in concert with the general application of these words throughout scripture. Therefore, insisting that these words mean "imminency" in rapture contexts is an inconsistent application of the principles of Bible interpretation.

## **In my lifetime - not any moment**

Pre-tribulationists have redefined the term "imminency" to fit their particular brand of eschatology. A definition meaning "in my lifetime" is more in keeping with the spirit the Church has used the word.

The apostles knew they were destined to die. They did not leave the Church uninformed as to the trials ahead that they would have to face after they had died.

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as **men condemned to death**, because we have become a spectacle to the world. (1 Cor 4:9 NASB) [emphasis added]

So that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that **we were going to suffer affliction**, and so it came to pass, as you know, (1 Th 3:3-4 NASB 1995) [emphasis added]

## ***Imminency in Scripture***

### **Peter taught that his own death was imminent.**

From the moment Christ prophesied the time (when he was old) and the manner (to be lifted up, as in crucifixion) of his death, Peter could not possibly have believed in imminency. He knew he was going to die. By the same token, the Holy Spirit would not have inspired Paul to teach imminency in his letters as long as Peter lived, because this prophecy had been given and had to be fulfilled first. The argument that Paul was ignorant of this prophecy does not alter the scriptural fact that the prophecy had been given, and as prophecy it had to be fulfilled. That is the inevitable outcome of true prophecy. Also the one who inspires the writing of scripture, the Holy Spirit, was surely not ignorant of this prophecy. The rapture could not happen prior to this because, in the rapture, Peter would have been taken and given a resurrected body and this was impossible for the apostle Peter, once Jesus had prophesied his death. If Christ had come for His Church before Peter had died, His own actions would have branded Him as a false prophet. True doctrine cannot abide such a paradox. There was, therefore, no possibility that the rapture could have happened before Peter's death. **Jesus was a prophet, Peter had to die.** Peter's concept of imminency certainly did not fit the concept of Pre-tribulationism, that of an any-moment rapture. Peter never taught that the rapture could have happened before his own death, in fact, he even reminded his followers of his impending death encouraging them to hold fast to the things they had been taught while he was alive. Peter confirms this conclusion in his teaching on imminency; the imminency of his own death:

I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that **the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent**, as also our **Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me**. And I will also be diligent that at any time **after my departure** you will be able to call these things to mind. (2 Pet 2:13-15 NASB 95) [emphasis added]

## Day of the Lord Imminent

Oddly the word “imminent” is used in the Bible, in the context of the end-times, but in context it cannot be made to support an any-moment rapture view. Above we saw Peter’s use of the word imminent in the context of this own death, (2 Peter 2:13-15). Below we see Paul’s use of the word imminent. In this case it is associated with the Day of the Lord. If we assign to this word the concept that the event referred to *could happen at any moment, and that no prophesied event must take place before this “imminent” event*, then we would be forced to come to an interpretation that the Day of the Lord is not imminent, in other words, that there are prophesied events which *must take place* before the Day of the Lord comes. H. L. Nigro, Quoting Gary Vaterlaus on the use of the word imminent in the context of the rapture:

“Interestingly enough, in the Latin Vulgate by Jerome, we do find the word “imminent.” Here is the verse: “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 Thes 2:1-2). The Latin says, “to the effect that the **day of the Lord is imminent.**” In other words, the only time the word “imminent is used in relation to the return of Christ, it is telling us that His return is not imminent.” [emphasis added] [H. L. Nigro, Before God’s Wrath, Strong Tower Publishing, p. 80]

## Conclusion: Imminency is not well enough supported to trump prophecy

At the very least, the above discussion of the use of the word *imminent* in scripture should cause Pre-tribulationists to consider the possibility that they are not using the word correctly in their discussion of the timing of the rapture. Also their *interpretation* of other phrases in scripture, such as "watch for," "wait," "eagerly await," "look for," "near," "at hand," etc. may be incorrect. These phrases might very well be teaching some concept other than imminency. In fact they do teach what is best termed “expectancy.”

Those of us who find ourselves in opposition to the doctrine of imminency sincerely believe we are taking the view required by our literal hermeneutic when we consider these apostolic prophecies to require fulfillment and to avoid the blasphemous possibility that Jesus was a false prophet. Apparently, for Pre-tribulationists, none of the prophets mentioned above, including Agabus and Jesus, would have been guilty of being false prophets despite the failure of their prophecy to come true had the rapture taken place before Paul stood before Caesar in Rome or before Peter's death when he had grown old.

Pre-tribulationists, like Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, and Thomas Ice are cognizant of these New Testament prophecies; however, they do not acknowledge them as problems. Their posture is that the concept of imminency is so strong so as to be absolutely unshakable. So, in their reasoning, for the doctrine of imminency to remain inviolate, other doctrines must bend, or be completely ignored. In their hierarchy of doctrinal importance imminence takes precedence over the fulfillment of prophecy.

In this article I have tried to demonstrate that Pre-tribulationists have not been able to establish the doctrine of imminency to the degree that is required to prove their case; that the prophecies mentioned above, Peter’s death, Paul being sent to Rome, etc., need not find literal, earthly, fulfillment due to the overriding possibility that the rapture of the

Church could have occurred first thus preempting these prophesied events from every actually taking place. From this, it follows that if Peter had to die, and Paul had to go to Rome, then the rapture could not have taken place before these things came to pass. It also follows that no scripture written prior to the fulfillment of these prophecies, especially Peter's death, could have possibly been teaching an imminent rapture. Therefore none of the writings of Paul, James, and Peter teach an imminent rapture. If the prophecies of the rapture were not teaching imminency at the time they were written they could not now be teaching an imminent rapture.