

Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Church

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In our series of articles on the rapture, we outlined the biblical basis for posttribulationism. Jesus' teaching to His Apostles-in-training, with its posttribulation rapture, formed the foundation for the eschatology of the Apostolic Church.

The eschatology of the post-Apostolic Church was the direct result of the labor of the Apostles. One big advantage the Early Christians had over us was their familiarity with Apostolic oral tradition. The Apostles not only wrote the New Testament books under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but they spent their lives teaching the Word of God to the next generation of Christians. A good illustration of the importance of oral tradition is found in 2 Thess. 2. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers about the "Restrainer" who was holding back the revelation of Antichrist. *"Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining."* (2 Thess. 2:5-6). Unfortunately, Paul did not reveal the identity of the Restrainer in this passage, and we are left to guess just what he actually told the Thessalonians when he was with them.

The oral teaching of the Apostles, as well as the written Word of God, molded the thinking and theology of the earliest believers. And some of this personal instruction is reflected in the writings of the earliest of the Church fathers, who either knew the Apostles personally, or were taught by those who were linked to the Apostles. Below we have quoted Irenaeus and Hippolytus. Both of these men dealt with eschatology extensively, and both had a chain of linkage to the Apostle John who wrote Revelation. John personally disciplined several men, including Papius, Ignatius, and Polycarp, the famous martyr. Polycarp was Bishop of the Church of Smyrna under John's leadership, and was most likely the one to whom the letter to Smyrna was addressed in Revelation. Polycarp in turn disciplined Irenaeus, who later became Bishop of the Church at Lyons, Gaul (France). Irenaeus conveyed some very intriguing oral tradition that John passed down through Polycarp, and his other disciples, regarding the nature of the Millennium (including some sayings of Jesus). Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies, Book V*, was the earliest writer (whose works have survived) to deal with end-time prophecy in any great depth. So, in Irenaeus we have both extensive treatment of eschatology, and a high degree of credibility due to his direct linkage to the Apostle John's oral teaching.

Hippolytus, bishop of Portus, was a disciple of Irenaeus, and carried on his work of refuting heresies after Irenaeus' martyrdom. Hippolytus' eschatological work is in some ways more extensive than Irenaeus'. So, we see that there is an unbroken chain of men,

who were directly influenced by the oral teaching of John, who had much to say about the end-times.

What better way to confirm our understanding of the Apostles than to examine their students! If our theory is correct, that a uniform rapture view can be traced from Jesus through the Epistles and Revelation, we would expect to find the same continuity in the writings of the post-Apostolic Church. On the other hand, if the pretribulation theory is correct, that Paul was given new prophetic insight of a “secret rapture,” we would expect the post-Apostolic Church (especially Gentiles to whom Paul was sent) to embrace this new prophetic scheme, and to distinguish their eschatology from what Jesus taught in the Olivet Discourse. If the post-Apostolic Christians display the kind of posttribulation expectancy consistent with Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse, then pretribulationists would be forced to the awkward conclusion that the Apostles failed miserably in transmitting sound Christian teaching to the very next generation!

We do not want to give the impression that the eschatology of the Early Church was uniform throughout. There was some controversy, mainly concerning whether the Millennium should be understood literally. The earliest writers seem to be consistent, understanding the Millennium as the literal reign of Christ and the saints on earth after the second coming. However, a few North African writers, with links to the heretical Alexandrian school, tended toward allegorical interpretation. A few of them thought the 70th week (but not the tribulation) was already fulfilled. These were Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Julius Africanus.

However, despite the apparent disagreement over the nature of the Millennium, and how to interpret Daniel 9:27, there was absolutely no controversy regarding the timing of the rapture. All saw a future tribulation, a literal Antichrist who would persecute the Church, and all were posttribulationists, seeing only one future coming of Christ after the tribulation.

Some of the writers we will cite carry greater weight than others, depending on their level of orthodoxy, and their closeness to Apostolic teaching. We present the following evidence only for its historical value, to illustrate how the next generations of Christians understood the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. Due to the natural tendency for error to creep in and compound over time, we have limited our evidence to the Ante-Nicene period (from the Apostles until A.D.325). Also, we have tried our best to be thorough. We have NOT selected only quotations that support our posttribulation rapture and ignored those that present something else. The writings of the early Christians universally support posttribulationism, and give absolutely no hint of pretribulationism.

IMMINENCE or EXPECTANCY?

One of the key elements of pretribulation thinking is the idea that Jesus could come at any moment, and no intervening prophetic events need occur prior to Jesus' coming. Some pretribulationist authors have claimed the early Christians believed Jesus' coming was imminent. **THIS IS ABSOLUTELY NOT TRUE.** While there are passages in the Church fathers that show they expected a soon return of Christ, we should not mistake this for belief in "imminence." The one thing that precludes an "any-moment" coming is their clear belief that intervening events must occur prior to the coming of the Lord for His Church. Yet, most were convinced the end-time scenario would unfold soon. Therefore, they had a healthy **EXPECTANCY** of the Lord's soon return, while **NOT** believing in "imminence."

Below is a quote from Irenaeus, Bishop of the Church at Lyons. In this excerpt, Irenaeus was speaking unapprovingly about a group of fellow believers who were enthusiastically trying to figure out the name of the Antichrist based on the value the Greek letters. (There were a few manuscripts of Revelation circulating that had an error in the number of the name of the Beast, 616 rather than 666). Their expectation was quite real, thinking that the end-time scenario — tribulation, Antichrist, second coming — would play out in the near future. But they were in error by using a corrupt manuscript with the erroneous number. In this section, Irenaeus was concerned both with this erroneous number, as well as their unhealthy eagerness to find a candidate who's name added up to the number of the Beast. Irenaeus' advice was to await the fulfillment of certain prophecies in Revelation, including the fall of the Roman Empire and rise of the ten kings, before they begin to speculate on who the Antichrist might be. Hence, it is obvious they did **NOT** believe the coming of the Lord was "imminent."

Irenaeus: (AD. 120-202)

"Moreover, another danger, by no means trifling, shall overtake those who falsely presume that they know the name of Antichrist. For if these men assume one [number], when this [Antichrist] shall come having another, they will be easily led away by him, as supposing him not to be the expected one, who must be guarded against. These men, therefore, ought to learn [what really is the state of the case], and go back to the true number of the name, that they be not reckoned among false prophets. But, knowing the sure number declared by Scripture, that is, six hundred sixty and six, let them await, in the first place, the division of the kingdom into ten; then, in the next place, when these kings are reigning, and beginning to set their affairs in order, and advance their kingdom, [let them learn] to acknowledge that he who shall come claiming the kingdom for himself, and shall terrify those men of whom we have been speaking, having a name containing the aforesaid number, is truly the abomination of desolation. ... It is therefore

more certain, and less hazardous, to await the fulfillment of the prophecy, than to be making surmises, and casting about for any names that may present themselves, inasmuch as many names can be found possessing the number mentioned; and the same question will, after all, remain unsolved. ... But he indicates the number of the name now, that when this man comes we may avoid him, being aware who he is: ... But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."¹

Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) Anonymous, 1st Century

"Watch for your life's sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ye ready, for ye know not the hour in which our Lord cometh. But often shall ye come together, seeking the things which are befitting to your souls: for the whole time of your faith will not profit you, if ye be not made perfect in the last time. For in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate; for when lawlessness increaseth, they shall hate and persecute and betray one another, and then shall appear the world-deceiver as Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands, and he shall do iniquitous things which have never yet come to pass since the beginning. Then shall the creation of men come into the fire of trial, and many shall be made to stumble and shall perish; but they that endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself. And then shall appear the signs of the truth; first, the sign of an out-spreading in heaven; then the sign of the sound of the trumpet; and the third, the resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but as it is said: The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him. Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven."²

The Shepherd of Hermas: (Early 2nd Century)

"You will tell, therefore, those who preside over the Church, to direct their ways in righteousness, that they may receive in full the promises with great glory. Stand steadfast, therefore, ye who work righteousness, and doubt not, that your passage may be with the holy angels. Happy ye who endure the great tribulation that is coming on, and happy they who shall not deny their own life. For the Lord hath sworn by His Son, that those who denied their Lord have abandoned their life in despair, for even now these are to deny Him in the days that are coming."³

Hippolytus: (AD. 170-236)

"When the times are fulfilled, and the ten horns spring from the beast in the last (times), then Antichrist will appear among them. When he makes war against the saints, and persecutes them, then may we expect the manifestation of the Lord from heaven." ⁴

"With respect to his name, it is not in our power to explain it exactly, as the blessed John understood it and was instructed about it, but only to give a conjectural account of it; for when he appears, the blessed one will show us what we seek to know. ... Wherefore we ought neither to give it out as if this were certainly his name, nor again ignore the fact that he may not otherwise be designated. But having the mystery of God in our heart, we ought in fear to keep faithfully what has been told us by blessed prophets, in order that when those things come to pass, we may be prepared for them, and not be deceived. For when the times advance, he too, of whom these things are said, will be manifest." ⁵

Cyprian: (AD. 200-258)

"For you ought to know and to believe, and hold it for certain, that the day of affliction has begun to hang over our heads, and the end of the world and the time of Antichrist to draw near, so that we must all stand prepared for the battle; nor consider anything but the glory of life eternal, and the crown of the confession of the Lord; and not regard those things which are coming as being such as were those which have passed away. A severer and a fiercer fight is now threatening, for which the soldiers of Christ ought to prepare themselves with uncorrupted faith and robust courage, considering that they drink the cup of Christ's blood daily, for the reason that they themselves also may be able to shed their blood for Christ. ... For there comes the time, beloved brethren, which our Lord long ago foretold and taught us was approaching, saying, "The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things they will do unto you, because they have not known the Father nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them." Nor let any one wonder that we are harassed with increasing afflictions, when the Lord before predicted that these things would happen in the last times, and has instructed us for the warfare by the teaching and exhortation of His words. Peter also, His apostle, has taught that persecutions occur for the sake of our being proved, and that we also should, by the example of righteous men who have gone before us, be joined to the love of God by death and sufferings. For he wrote in his epistle, and said, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, nor do ye fall away, as if some new thing happened unto you; but as often as ye partake in Christ's sufferings, rejoice in all things, that when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." ⁶

The "Six Day" Theory Precludes "Imminence"

One important reason the Church Fathers could not have believed in an "any moment" coming of Christ, is the "six-day theory." Many of the early Church Fathers believed in the theory that the earth would continue for six thousand years under the curse. The Millennium would be the Sabbath of rest. Consequently, they tried to calculate the time since creation, by using the genealogies from the Old Testament, to calculate the approximate time of the Lord's coming. It is noteworthy that even some of the Church Fathers, who are alleged by pretribulationists to have believed in "imminence," taught this theory. This theory is totally incompatible with the idea of imminence.

Epistle of Barnabas (Late 1st Century)

"And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it." Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, "He finished in six days." This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying, "Behold, to-day will be as a thousand years." Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished. "And He rested on the seventh day." This meaneth: when His Son, coming [again], shall destroy the time of the wicked man, and judge the ungodly, and change the-sun, and the moon, and the stars, then shall He truly rest on the seventh day." ⁷

Commodianus: (AD. 240)

"This has pleased Christ, that the dead should rise again, yea, with their bodies; and those, too, whom in this world the fire has burned [martyrs], when six thousand years are completed,..." ⁸

Irenaeus: (AD. 120-202)

"For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. And for this reason the Scripture says: "Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their adornment. And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made; and God rested upon the seventh day from all His works." This is an account of the things formerly created, as also it is a prophecy of what is to come. For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year." ⁹

Cyprian: (AD. 200-258)

*"You have desired, beloved Fortunatus that, since the burden of persecutions and afflictions is lying heavy upon us, and in the ending and completion of the world the hateful time of Antichrist is already beginning to draw near, I would collect from the sacred Scriptures some exhortations for preparing and strengthening the minds of the brethren, whereby I might animate the soldiers of Christ for the heavenly and spiritual contest.... For he cannot be a soldier fitted for the war who has not first been exercised in the field; nor will he who seeks to gain the crown of contest be rewarded on the racecourse, unless he first considers the use and skillfulness of his powers. It is an ancient adversary and an old enemy with whom we wage our battle: six thousand years are now nearly completed since the devil first attacked man. All kinds of temptation, and arts, and snares for his overthrow, he has learned by the very practice of long years. If he finds Christ's soldier unprepared, if unskilled, if not careful and watching with his whole heart; he circumvents him if ignorant, he deceives him incautious, he cheats him inexperienced. But if a man, keeping the Lord's precepts, and bravely adhering to Christ, stands against him, he must needs be conquered, because Christ, whom that man confesses, is unconquered."*¹⁰

Methodius: (AD. 260-312)

*"For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is past as a watch in the night." For when a thousand years are reckoned as one day in the sight of God, and from the creation of the world to His rest is six days, so also to our time, six days are defined, as those say who are clever arithmeticians. Therefore, they say that an age of six thousand years extends from Adam to our time. For they say that the judgment will come on the seventh day, that is in the seventh thousand years."*¹¹

Lactantius: (AD. 260-330)

"But we, whom the Holy Scriptures instruct to the knowledge of the truth, know the beginning and the end of the world, respecting which we will now speak in the end of our work, since we have explained respecting the beginning in the second book. Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six thousandth year is not yet completed, and that when this number is completed the consummation must take place, and the condition of human affairs be remodeled for the better, the proof of which must first be related, that the matter itself may be plain. God completed the world and this admirable work of nature in the space of six days, as is contained in the secrets of Holy Scripture, and consecrated the seventh day, on which He had rested from His works. But this is the Sabbath-day, which in the

language of the Hebrews received its name from the number, whence the seventh is the legitimate and complete number. For there are seven days, by the revolutions of which in order the circles of years are made up; and there are seven stars which do not set, and seven luminaries which are called planets, whose differing and unequal movements are believed to cause the varieties of circumstances and times.

Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says "In Thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day." And as God labored during those six days in creating such great works, so His religion and truth must labor during these six thousand years, while wickedness prevails and bears rule. And again, since God, having finished His works, rested the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteousness reign for a thousand years; and there must be tranquillity and rest from the labors which the world now has long endured.... Perhaps some one may now ask when these things of which we have spoken are about to come to pass? I have already shown above, that when six thousand years shall be completed this change must take place, and that the last day of the extreme conclusion is now drawing near. It is permitted us to know respecting the signs, which are spoken by the prophets, for they foretold signs by which the consummation of the times is to be expected by us from day to day, and to be feared. When, however, this amount will be completed, those teach, who have written respecting the times, collecting them from the sacred writings and from various histories, how great is the number of years from the beginning of the world. And although they vary, and the amount of the number as reckoned by them differs considerably, yet all expectation does not exceed the limit of two hundred years. The subject itself declares that the fall and ruin of the world will shortly take place; except that while the city of Rome remains it appears that nothing of this kind is to be feared. But when that capital of the world shall have fallen, and shall have begun to be a street, which the Sibyls say shall come to pass, who can doubt that the end has now arrived to the affairs of men and the whole world? It is that city, that only, which still sustains all things; and the God of heaven is to be entreated by us and implored - if, indeed, His arrangements and decrees can be delayed - lest, sooner than we think for, that detestable tyrant should come who will trader-take so great a deed, and dig out that eye, by the destruction of which the world itself is about to fall. Now let us return, to set forth the other things which are then about to follow." ¹²

"For six thousand years have not yet been completed, and when this number shall be made up, then at length all evil will be taken away, that justice alone may reign." ¹³

As is apparent from the preceding quotations, some believed they were only a hundred or so years from the second coming and the Millennium. Others believed the time was very near. Their was a serious problem with their calculations, however. They were all based on the Old Testament they were familiar with, the Greek Septuagint [LXX]. This version differs dramatically from the Hebrew text regarding the ages of the Patriarchs when they begat children, the LXX giving much longer life spans. For example, if you add up the life spans of the patriarchs in Genesis eleven, from the flood to the birth of Abraham, there was 292 years according to the Hebrew Masoretic text. But, according to the Septuagint, there was over 1,000 years. Consequently, the early Christians, using the Septuagint version, were off by about 1,500 years. Since they did not use the Hebrew Scriptures which give the correct years, they did not know the completion of the six thousand years was more than 1,500 years away. So they looked for the appearing of Antichrist and the signs that would signal Christ's return in their generation.

Theophilus: (AD. 115-181)

"And from the foundation of the world the whole time is thus traced, so far as its main epochs are concerned. From the creation of the world to the deluge were 2242 years. And from the deluge to the time when Abraham our forefather begat a son, 1036 years. And from Isaac, Abraham's son, to the time when the people dwelt with Moses in the desert, 660 years. And from the death of Moses and the rule of Joshua the son of Nun, to the death of the patriarch David, 498 years. And from the death of David and the reign of Solomon to the sojourning of the people in the land of Babylon, 518 years 6 months 10 days. And from the government of Cyrus to the death of the Emperor Aurelius Verus, 744 years. All the years from the creation of the world amount to a total of 5698 years, and the odd months and days." ¹⁴

This author, calculating from the LXX, believed the second coming was still about 302 years away. This is hardly belief in "imminence." While some of the Church Fathers may have been a bit over enthusiastic about dates, or trying to figure out if any of their would-be rulers' names added up to 666, who can blame them? They were suffering terribly for the Faith. Many are making similar calculations today, but expect that the tribulation is still entirely future. We will reserve judgment on the "six thousand year theory," which seems possible based on the true Hebrew text genealogies, placing the end of the sixth millennium shortly after the year 2,000. However, we must not ignore the fact that the early Church Fathers could not have believed in "imminence" and still believe the six thousand year theory. Obviously, in their thinking, Christ would not return until the end of this predetermined period. They placed the tribulation in the future, and, as posttribulationists, they could not be looking for a pretribulation rapture

before this time. The preceding quotations clearly indicate that they expected intervening events would occur before the Lord's coming. Therefore, they did not believe in "imminence," as defined by pretribulationists.

PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH BY ANTICHRIST

The early Christians unanimously believed the Antichrist would persecute the Church, and that the resurrection and gathering to Christ would occur at a single coming, after the tribulation.

Justin Martyr: (AD. 110-165)

*"[T]wo advents of Christ have been announced: the one, in which He is set forth as suffering, inglorious, dishonored, and crucified; but the other, in which He shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians, ... Now it is evident that no one can terrify or subdue us who have believed in Jesus over all the world. For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus."*¹⁵

Epistle of Barnabas: (AD. 100)

*"The final stumbling-block (or source of danger) approaches, concerning which it is written, as Enoch says, "For for this end the Lord has cut short the times and the days, that His Beloved may hasten; and He will come to the inheritance." And the prophet also speaks thus: "Ten kingdoms shall reign upon the earth, and a little king shall rise up after them, who shall subdue under one three of the kings." In the like manner Daniel says concerning the same, "And I beheld the fourth beast, wicked and powerful, and the more savage than all the beasts of the earth and how from it sprang up ten horns, and out of them a little budding horn, and how it subdued under one three of the ten horns. ... We take earnest heed in these last days; for the whole (past) time of your faith will profit you nothing, unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as becometh sons of God. That the Black One may find no means of entrance, let us flee from every vanity, let us utterly hate the works of the way of wickedness."*¹⁶

Irenaeus: (AD. 120-202)

"In a still clearer light has John, in the Apocalypse, indicated to the Lord's disciples what shall happen in the last times, and concerning the ten kings who shall then arise, ... These

have one mind, and give their strength and power to the beast. These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them, because He is the Lord of lords, and King of kings. ... And they shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and put the church to flight. After that they shall be destroyed by the coming of our Lord." ¹⁷

"But he indicates the number of the name now, that when this man comes we may avoid him, being aware of who he is:... But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple in Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that "many coming from the east and from the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." ¹⁸

"For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign on the earth, waxing stronger by the sight of the Lord: and through Him they shall become accustomed to partake in the glory of God the Father, and shall enjoy in the kingdom intercourse and communion with the holy angels, and union with spiritual beings; and those whom the Lord shall find in the flesh, awaiting Him from heaven, and who have suffered tribulation, as well as escaped the hands of the Wicked one." ¹⁹

The Shepherd of Hermas: (2nd Century)

"You will tell, therefore, those who preside over the Church, to direct their ways in righteousness, that they may receive in full the promises with great glory. Stand steadfast, therefore, ye who work righteousness, and doubt not, that your passage may be with the holy angels. Happy ye who endure the great tribulation that is coming on, and happy they who shall not deny their own life. For the Lord hath sworn by His Son, that those who denied their Lord have abandoned their life in despair, for even now these are to deny Him in the days that are coming." ²⁰

"Twenty days after the former vision I saw another vision, brethren a representation of the tribulation that is to come. I was going to a country house along the Campanian road. Now the house lay about ten furlongs from the public road. The district is one rarely traversed. And as I walked alone, I prayed the Lord to complete the revelations which He

had made to me through His holy Church, that He might strengthen me, and give repentance to all His servants who were going astray, that His great and glorious name might be glorified because He vouchsafed to show me His marvels. And while I was glorifying Him and giving Him thanks, a voice, as it were, answered me, Doubt not, Hermas; and I began to think with myself, and to say, What reason have I to doubt I who have been established by the Lord, and who have seen such glorious sights? I advanced a little, brethren, and, lo! I see dust rising even to the heavens. I began to say to myself, Are cattle approaching and raising the dust? It was about a furlong's distance from me. And, lo! I see the dust rising more and more, so that I imagined that it was something sent from God. But the sun now shone out a little, and, lo! I see a mighty beast like a whale, and out of its mouth fiery locusts proceeded. But the size of that beast was about a hundred feet, and it had a head like an urn. I began to weep, and to call on the Lord to rescue me from it. Then I remembered the word which I had heard, Doubt not, O Hermas. Clothed, therefore, my brethren, with faith in the Lord, and remembering the great things which He had taught me, I boldly faced the beast. Now that beast came on with such noise and force, that it could itself have destroyed a city. I came near it, and the monstrous beast stretched itself out on the ground, and showed nothing but its tongue, and did not stir at all until I had passed by it. Now the beast had four colors on its head-black, then fiery and bloody, then golden, and lastly white. Now after I had passed by the wild beast, and had moved forward about thirty feet, lo! a virgin meets me, adorned as if she were proceeding from the bridal chamber, clothed entirely in white, and with white sandals, and veiled up to her forehead, and her head was covered by a hood. And she had white hair. I knew from my former visions that this was the Church, and I became more joyful. She saluted me, and said, Hail, O man! And I returned her salutation, and said, Lady, hail! And she answered, and said to me, Has nothing crossed your path? I say, I was met by a beast of such a size that it could destroy peoples, but through the power of the Lord and His great mercy I escaped from it. Well did you escape from it, says she, because you cast your care on God, and opened your heart to the Lord, believing that you can be saved by no other than by His great and glorious name. On this account the Lord has sent His angel, who has rule over the beasts, and whose name is Thegri, and has shut up its mouth, so that it cannot tear you. You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly. Cast your cares upon the Lord, and He will direct them. Trust the Lord, ye who doubt, for He is all-powerful, and can turn His anger away from you, and send scourges on the doubters. Woe to those who hear these words, and despise them: better were it for them not to have been born. I asked her about the four colors which the beast

had on his head. And she answered, and said to me, Again you are inquisitive in regard to such matters. Yea, Lady, said I, make known to me what they are. Listen, said she: the black is the world in which we dwell: but the fiery and bloody points out that the world must perish through blood and fire: but the golden part are you who have escaped from this world. For as gold is tested by fire, and thus becomes useful, so are you tested who dwell in it. Those, therefore, who continue steadfast, and are put through the fire, will be purified by means of it. For as gold casts away its dross, so also will ye cast away all sadness and straitness, and will be made pure so as to fit into the building of the tower. But the white part is the age that is to come, in which the elect of God will dwell, since those elected by God to eternal life will be spotless and pure. Wherefore cease not speaking these things into the ears of the saints. This then is the type of the great tribulation that is to come. If ye wish it, it will be nothing. Remember those things which were written down before. And saying this, she departed. But I saw not into what place she retired. There was a noise, however, and I turned round in alarm, thinking that that beast was coming.²¹

Tertullian: (AD. 145-220)

*"In the Revelation of John, again, the order of these times is spread out to view, which "the souls of the martyrs" are taught to wait for beneath the altar, whilst they earnestly pray to be avenged and judged: (taught, I say, to wait), in order that the world may first drink to the dregs the plagues that await it out of the vials of the angels, and that the city of fornication may receive from the ten kings its deserved doom, and that the beast Antichrist, with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God; and that, after the casting of the devil into the bottomless pit for a while, the blessed prerogative of the first resurrection may be obtained from the thrones; and then again, after the consignment of him to the fire, that the judgment of the final and universal resurrection may be determined out of the books. Since, then, the Scriptures both indicate the stages of the last times, and concentrate the harvest of the Christian hope in the very end of the world."*²²

*"Now the privilege of this favor [the resurrection] awaits those who shall at the coming of the Lord be found in the flesh, and who shall, owing to the oppressions of the time of Antichrist, deserve by an instantaneous death, which is accomplished by a sudden change, to become qualified to join the rising saints; as he writes to the Thessalonians: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we too shall ourselves be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."*²³

Hippolytus: (AD. 170-236)

"It is proper that we take the Holy Scriptures themselves in hand, and find out from them what, and of what manner, the coming of Antichrist is; on what occasion and at what time that impious one shall be revealed; and whence and from what tribe (he shall come); and what his name is, which is indicated by the number in Scripture; and how he shall work error among the people, gathering them from the ends of the earth; and (how) he shall stir up tribulation and persecution against the saints; and how he shall glorify himself as God; and what his end shall be; and how the sudden appearing of the Lord shall be revealed from heaven; and what the conflagration of the whole world shall be; and what the glorious and heavenly kingdom of the saints is to be, when they reign together with Christ; and what the punishment of the wicked by fire." ²⁴

"With respect to his name, it is not in our power to explain it exactly, as the blessed John understood it and was instructed about it, but only to give a conjectural account of it; for when he appears, the blessed one will show us what we seek to know. ... Wherefore we ought neither to give it out as if this were certainly his name, nor again ignore the fact that he may not otherwise be designated. But having the mystery of God in our heart, we ought in fear to keep faithfully what has been told us by blessed prophets, in order that when those things come to pass, we may be prepared for them, and not be deceived. For when the times advance, he too, of whom these things are said, will be manifest." ²⁵

"Now concerning the tribulation of the persecution which is to fall upon the Church from the adversary, John also speaks thus, "And I saw a great and wondrous sign in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, ... And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent." That refers to the one thousand two hundred and threescore days (the half of the week) during which the tyrant is to reign and persecute the Church.... These things then, being come to pass, beloved, and the one week being divided into two parts, and the abomination of desolation being manifested then, and the two prophets and forerunners of the Lord having finished their course, and the whole world finally approaching the consummation, what remains but the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ from heaven, for whom we have looked in hope." ²⁶

Cyprian: (AD. 200-258)

"[T]he Lord hath foretold that these things would come. With the exhortation of His foreseeing word, instructing, and teaching, and preparing, and strengthening the people of His Church for all endurance of things to come. He predicted and said that wars, and famines, and earthquakes, and pestilences would arise in each place; and lest an

unexpected and new dread of mischiefs should shake us, He previously warned us that the adversary would increase more and more in the last times.” ²⁷

“For you ought to know and to believe, and hold it for certain, that the day of affliction has begun to hang over our heads, and the end of the world and the time of Antichrist to draw near, so that we must all stand prepared for the battle; nor consider anything but the glory of life eternal, and the crown of the confession of the Lord; and not regard those things which are coming as being such as were those which have passed away. A severer and a fiercer fight is now threatening, for which the soldiers of Christ ought to prepare themselves with uncorrupted faith and robust courage, considering that they drink the cup of Christ’s blood daily, for the reason that they themselves also may be able to shed their blood for Christ. For this is to wish to be found with Christ, to imitate that which Christ both taught and did, according to the Apostle John, who said, “He that saith he abideth in Christ, ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.” Moreover, the blessed Apostle Paul exhorts and teaches, saying, “We are God’s children; but if children, then heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.” ... For there comes the time, beloved brethren, which our Lord long ago foretold and taught us was approaching, saying, “The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things they will do unto you, because they have not known the Father nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them.” Nor let any one wonder that we are harassed with increasing afflictions, when the Lord before predicted that these things would happen in the last times, and has instructed us for the warfare by the teaching and exhortation of His words. Peter also, His apostle, has taught that persecutions occur for the sake of our being proved, and that we also should, by the example of righteous men who have gone before us, be joined to the love of God by death and sufferings. For he wrote in his epistle, and said, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, nor do ye fall away, as if some new thing happened unto you; but as often as ye partake in Christ’s sufferings, rejoice in all things, that when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.” ²⁸

“Nor let any one of you, beloved brethren, be so terrified by the fear of future persecution, or the coming of the threatening Antichrist, as not to be found armed for all things by the evangelical exhortations and precepts, and by the heavenly warnings. Antichrist is coming, but above him comes Christ also. The enemy goeth about and rageth, but immediately the Lord follows to avenge our sufferings and our wounds. The adversary is enraged and threatens, but there is One who can deliver us from his hands. He is to be feared whose anger no one can escape, as He Himself forewarns, and says: “Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.” And again: “He that loveth his life, shall lose it; and

he that hateth his life in this world, shall keep it unto life eternal." And in the Apocalypse He instructs and forewarns, saying, "If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead or in his hand, the same also shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, mixed in the cup of His indignation, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and the smoke of their torments shall ascend up for ever and ever; and they shall have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image."

"For the secular contest men are trained and prepared, and reckon it a great glory of their honor if it should happen to them to be crowned in the sight of the people, and in the presence of the emperor. Behold a lofty and great contest, glorious also with the reward of a heavenly crown, inasmuch as God looks upon us as we struggle, and, extending His view over those whom He has condescended to make His sons, He enjoys the spectacle of our contest. God looks upon us in the warfare, and fighting in the encounter of faith; His angels look on us, and Christ looks on us. How great is the dignity, and how great the happiness of the glory, to engage in the presence of God, and to be crowned, with Christ for a judge! Let us be armed, beloved brethren, with our whole strength, and let us be prepared for the struggle with an uncorrupted mind, with a sound faith, with a devoted courage. Let the camp of God go forth to the battle-field which is appointed to us. Let the sound ones be armed, lest he that is sound should lose the advantage of having lately stood; let the lapsed also be armed, that even the lapsed may regain what he has lost: let honor provoke the whole; let sorrow provoke the lapsed to the battle. The Apostle Paul teaches us to be armed and prepared, saying, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against powers, and the princes of this world and of this darkness, against spirits of wickedness in high places. Wherefore put on the whole armor, that ye may be able to withstand in the most evil day, that when ye have done all ye may stand; having your loins girt about with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace; taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one; and the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." ²⁹

Victorinus: (AD. ?-304)

"He speaks of Elias the prophet, who is the precursor of the times of Antichrist, for the restoration and establishment of the churches from the great and intolerable persecution."

³⁰

"The woman clothed with the sun, and having the moon under her feet, and wearing the crown of twelve stars upon her head, and travailing in her pains, is the ancient Church of fathers, and prophets, and saints, and apostles,..." ³¹

"He shall cause also that a golden image of Antichrist shall be placed in the temple at Jerusalem, and that the apostate angel should enter, and thence utter voices and oracles. ... [T]he Lord, admonishing His churches concerning the last times and their dangers, says: "But when ye shall see the contempt which is spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place, let him who readeth understand." ³²

"[T]he thousand years should be completed, that is, what is left of the sixth day, to wit, of the sixth age, which subsists of a thousand years; after this he must be loosed for a little season. The little season signifies three years and six months, in which with all his power the devil will avenge himself under Antichrist against the Church." ³³

Constitutions of the Holy Apostles: (2nd or 3rd Century) Anonymous

"Be watchful for your life. "Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye like unto men who wait for their Lord, and when He will come, at even, or in the morning, or at cock-crowing, or at midnight. For at what hour they think not, the Lord will come; and if they open to Him, blessed are those servants, because they were found watching. For He will gird Himself, and will make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them." Watch therefore, and pray, that ye do not sleep unto death. For your former good deeds will not profit you, if at the last part of your life you go astray from the true faith. For in the last days false prophets shall be multiplied, and such as corrupt the Word; and the sheep shall be changed into wolves, and love into hatred: for through the abounding of iniquity the love of many shall wax cold. For men shall hate, and persecute, and betray one another. And then shall appear the deceiver of the world, the enemy of the truth, the prince of lies, whom the Lord Jesus "shall destroy with the Spirit of His mouth, who takes away the wicked with His lips; and many shall be offended at Him. But they that endure to the end, the same shall be saved. And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven; and afterwards shall be the voice of a trumpet by the archangel; and in that interval shall be the revival of those that were asleep. And then shall the Lord come, and all the saints with Him, with a great concussion above the clouds, with the angels of His power, in the throne of His kingdom, to condemn the devil, the deceiver of the world, and to render to every one according to his deeds. "Then shall the wicked go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous shall go into life eternal," to inherit those things "which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, such things as God hath prepared for them that love Him." ³⁴

FUTURIST or HISTORICIST?

Some Pretribulationist writers attempt to discount the views of the early Church by claiming they believed they were already in the tribulation. Yet, all of the writers considered the revelation of Antichrist to be entirely future, as well as the appearance of

the two witnesses. They believed the Antichrist would defile and rule from the Temple in Jerusalem. And remember, the Jews had been driven from Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed in AD. 70, and Roman law at the time forbid them from returning. These Church fathers expected that Rome would fall and be replaced by the ten kings. Then Antichrist would arise and take over the kingdom, the Jews would be restored back to Jerusalem, and Antichrist would rebuild the Temple. Only afterward would the Antichrist commit the "abomination of desolation," and then persecute the Church. They could not believe they were in the tribulation if they expected a series of events to occur before the Antichrist was revealed. They held a literal "futurist" view of Revelation, just as pretribulationists do today, minus the pretribulation rapture.

Hippolytus: (AD. 170-236)

"As these things, then, are in the future, and as the ten toes of the image are equivalent to (so many) democracies, and the ten horns of the fourth beast are distributed over ten kingdoms, let us look at the subject a little more closely, and consider these matters as in the clear light of a personal survey. The golden head of the image and the lioness denoted the Babylonians; the shoulders and arms of silver, and the bear, represented the Persians and Medes; the belly and thighs of brass, and the leopard, meant the Greeks, who held the sovereignty from Alexander's time; the legs of iron, and the beast dreadful and terrible, expressed the Romans, who hold the sovereignty at present; the toes of the feet which were part clay and part iron, and the ten horns, were emblems of the kingdoms that are yet to rise; the other little horn that grows up among them meant the Antichrist in their midst; the stone that smites the earth and brings judgment upon the world was Christ." ³⁵

Some pretribulationist authors have implied that the reason the early Christians did not teach pretribulationism is because they were not as theologically sophisticated as modern scholars. They had not developed their doctrinal positions enough to realize a pretribulation rapture. They excuse this absurdity by claiming the early Christians were not really focused on prophecy. They allege the Church did not concern itself with eschatology until after the Reformation, when pretribulationism was allegedly "rediscovered."

This line of reasoning implies that correct theology comes from an evolutionary process. And, the Church is progressing and becoming more theologically sophisticated as time goes by. But, isn't the transmission of doctrinal truth from one generation to the next supposed to be fixed? Weren't the early Christians taught personally by the Apostles? Were the Apostles not as sophisticated theologically as today's scholars? Perhaps we flatter ourselves too much if we think we have arrived at truths unseen by the early Church. Did the Apostles transmit a crude system of theology that needed to be refined

by later theologians? The whole concept of evolving theology is absolutely anti biblical. Acts records that new converts continued steadfastly in the Apostle's doctrine, [Acts 2:42]. Paul told Timothy to faithfully transmit what he had been taught to other faithful men who could then be trusted to pass on pure doctrine to succeeding generations, [2 Tim. 2:1,2]. Paul also warned the Ephesian elders to guard what they had been taught because after the Apostles died, error was bound to dilute the pure doctrine of Christ and the Apostles, [Acts 20:28,29]. And Jude exhorted the brethren to "*earnestly contend for the Faith which was once delivered to the saints*" [Jude 3]. There was no eschatological vacuum in the early Church! And the extensive treatment of end-time prophecy by Irenaeus and Hippolytus demonstrate an extremely well developed understanding right from the beginning. If there is any need to advance in theology today, it is to get back to what Christ and the Apostles taught. Aside from the Scriptures themselves, the best evidence is to examine what the disciples of the Apostles believed and taught. Obviously, just as Paul warned, as time went on, and new generations of Christians were taught by the preceding generation, a degrading of pure doctrine occurred. Men brought in their own ideas, intentionally and unintentionally, diluting the true teaching of the Apostles. This degrading process is clearly demonstrated in the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, where tradition upon tradition has been heaped up, with the modern teaching hardly resembling the Apostle's doctrine. Of course, those of us who hold only the Bible as our final authority are better anchored than Catholics. But, it cannot be denied that theology has evolved even among non-Catholics. People still bring their preconceived philosophical ideas to their interpretation of Scripture.

At times, the evolution of theology has been checked by a revolution. This was clearly demonstrated in the Reformation. Over a millennia of Roman Catholic tradition was thrown off and Christians again began to search the Scriptures. As the masses became familiar with the written Word of God, they began to shed the false and cumbersome doctrines they had been fed. Most of the "new" doctrines the Protestants embraced were explicitly taught in the Scriptures, and in the writings of the early Church, so were not actually "new," just rediscovered.

It is obvious, that the closer we can trace a doctrine back to the time of the Apostles, the more likely it is to actually be doctrine taught by the Apostles. This is especially true if a doctrine can be shown to be contiguous to the time of the Apostles. For example, widely accepted doctrines taught by Church leaders from the later decades of the first century, while the Apostle John was still alive and overseeing the local churches of Asia Minor, are more likely to have met with John's approval. If such doctrines can be shown to have been widely or universally accepted by faithful early Christian leaders who had ties to the Apostles, the likelihood is much greater that they are orthodox. Conversely, if a particular doctrine has no support in the early Church, and is even opposite the universally held view, then such doctrine is highly suspect! While we do not consider

linkage to the early Church to be proof of a doctrine's correctness, it does provide weighty supporting evidence. The essence of the posttribulation argument against pretribulationism on historical grounds is that any new doctrine is false doctrine. If it cannot be traced back to the inspired biblical writers, it is not "*the faith once delivered to the saints,*" and we should not be "*contending*" for it!

Of course, some false doctrines were developed even in the first century, and were then passed to succeeding generations, so that they can be traced very far back in Christian history. However, in the early Church, this could not, and did not, occur without a strong reaction from orthodox believers. When serious false doctrines were developed, the large number of orthodox believers trained by the Apostles were a natural deterrent to the spread of these false doctrines, and sounded the alarm against them. The writings of the early Christians display ferocious attacks on new and false doctrines, and valiant defenses of the orthodox Faith. The five books of Irenaeus *Against Heresies* are a catalogue of the false teachings of the day and Irenaeus' refutation of them, based on the teaching of Scripture, and oral tradition passed down by the Apostles. In fact, much of the writings of the early Ante-Nicene Fathers are refutations of heresies. One of Irenaeus' arguments against these early heresies was that they had no traceable linkage to the Apostles. Irenaeus argued that the orthodox Faith could be traced back through the succession of ordained local Bishops in the local churches founded by the Apostles. These local churches were entrusted with both the original New Testament manuscripts as well as the oral teaching of the Apostles who founded and originally pastored them.

Since the early Christians who knew both the Scriptures and the Apostolic oral tradition were unanimously posttribulationist, it seems difficult to believe that they all had departed from the teaching of the Apostles without a single writer challenging them! Furthermore, it seems almost impossible to imagine that if pretribulationism was indeed taught by the Apostles, there should be no trace of it left in the very next generation of believers! The claim, that these early Christians were not theologically sophisticated, is utter nonsense, as anyone who has read their discourses can easily see. They quoted Scripture extensively, and brought together a well developed eschatology that depended on a literal interpretation of prophecy, and was premillennial, futurist, and posttribulationist.

Notes:

1. Irenaeus: *Against Heresies*, Book V, XXX
2. Didache: Chapter XVI
3. Shepherd of Hermas: 3rd Vision
4. Hippolytus, *Fragments from Commentaries*, II, 7
5. Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 50
6. Cyprian: *Epistles of Cyprian*, LV, 1,2
7. Epistle of Barnabas, XV

8. Instructions of Commodianus, LXXIX
9. Irenaeus: Against Heresies V. XXVIII, 3
10. Cyprian: Treatise XI, 2
11. Methodius: Extracts From The Work on Things Created. IX
12. Lactantius: The Divine Institutes, Book 7, Chapter XIV, XXV
13. Lactantius: The Epitome of the Divine Institutes, Chapter 70
14. Theophilus to Autolycus, Book III, XXVIII
15. Justin Martyr: Dialog with Trypho, CX
16. Epistle of Barnabas, IV
17. Irenaeus: Against Heresies V, XXXVI, 1
18. Irenaeus: Against Heresies V, XXX, 2, 4
19. Irenaeus: Against Heresies V, XXXV, 1
20. Shepherd of Hermas: 3rd Vision
21. Shepherd of Hermas: 4th Vision
22. Tertullian: On the Resurrection of the Flesh, XXV
23. Tertullian: On the Resurrection of the Flesh, XLI
24. Hippolytus: Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, 5
25. Hippolytus: Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, 50
26. Hippolytus: Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, 60, 61, 64
27. Cyprian: Treatise VII, 2
28. Cyprian: Epistles of Cyprian, LV, 1,2
29. Cyprian: Epistles of Cyprian, LV, 7,8
30. Victorinus: Commentary on the Apocalypse, 7:2
31. Victorinus: Commentary on the Apocalypse, 12:1
32. Victorinus: Commentary on the Apocalypse, 13:13
33. Victorinus: Commentary on the Apocalypse, 20:1-3
34. Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Book VII, XXXI, XXXII
35. Hippolytus: Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, 27,28