

A SURVEY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE RETURN OF CHRIST IN THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS

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What did the early Church teach about Christ's return? The answer to this question can give us perspective for a proper interpretation of this doctrine in Scripture. Many leaders of the early Church were struggling to understand the teaching of Scripture concerning Christ's return. Their struggles and varied answers can assist our own efforts to answer the question. The views of the ante-Nicene fathers, for example, can function as a commentary to aid our formulating a theology concerning the return of Christ.

There are many varieties of interpretation among the ante-Nicene fathers concerning the significance and nature of Christ's return. Irenaeus and Origen, for example, are as different in their understanding of Christ's return as summer is from winter. However, there are also many similar eschatological emphases that appear in the ante-Nicene fathers. There is a general agreement that Christ's return is near. The fathers believe that the return of Christ will result in judgment on evil and the rescue of God's people from persecution and hardship. This return is generally seen as premillennial. There is mention of only one stage in the return of Christ.

We of course do not regard the views that we will encounter in our survey with the same authority that we bestow on Scripture. We will, however, increase our own understanding of Scripture by observing the efforts the early Church made to understand the question of Christ's return.

Since a vast quantity of material is being surveyed, no claim for completeness is intended. This survey, however, will provide enough information to recognize the establishment of general tendencies and features of the doctrine of the early Church concerning the return of Christ. We will emphasize chiefly those areas of agreement concerning the doctrine.

I. THE CONDITIONS SURROUNDING CHRIST'S RETURN

The earliest writers on the subject of Christ's return are the apostolic fathers. The church manual known as the *Didache* (c. A.D. 120) placed the return of Christ at the end of a time of persecution carried out by the antichrist:

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

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the curse itself. And then . . . the Lord shall come and all His saints with Him.¹

The epistle of Barnabas (c. A.D. 120–150) referred to ten kingdoms and the little horn of Dan 7:24 in connection with events then at hand. This seems to suggest that the writer felt that the carving of ten kingdoms out of Rome was a development in the prophetic events that would occur in connection with the rising of the antichrist:

It therefore behoves us, who inquire much concerning events at hand, to search diligently into those things which are able to save us. . . . 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."²

At a later time Tertullian also emphasized that a political breakup of Rome would occur at the time of Christ's return. He urged that Christians pray in behalf of the emperors, the stability of the empire, and Roman interests in general:

For we know that a mighty shock impending over the whole earth—in fact, the very end of all things threatening dreadful woes—is only retarded by the continued existence of the Roman empire. We have no desire, then, to be overtaken by these dire events; and in praying that their coming may be delayed, we are lending our aid to Rome's duration.³

Tertullian also anticipated that the return of Christ would occur with signs of a cosmic shakeup throughout the universe. He quoted with approval the Scripture that there would be "signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars, distress of nations with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring, men's hearts failing them for fear."⁴

Irenaeus emphasized the significance of Christ's return as an incentive to godly living. Like Tertullian and Barnabas he emphasized the breakup of the Roman empire before the return of Christ: "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, among whom the empire which now rules [the earth] shall be partitioned."⁵

Like many other of his contemporaries Irenaeus suggested that the return of Christ would occur after a three-and-a-half-year period in which the antichrist would reign:

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.⁶

¹*Did.* 16.4–7.

²*Barn.* 4.

³Tertullian *Apology* 32.

⁴Tertullian *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 22.

⁵Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.26.1.

⁶*Ibid.*, 5.30.4.

Lactantius (260–330) became a Christian through his involvement in writing about some of the attacks made on Christianity by heathen philosophers. He was an eminent teacher and is said to have become the tutor of Crispus, the oldest son of Constantine. He also felt that wickedness, the breakup of the Roman empire, and celestial phenomena would occur as harbingers of the return of Christ. He described the growth of wickedness:

For righteousness will so decrease, and impiety, avarice, desire, and lust will so greatly increase, that if there shall then happen to be any good men, they will be a prey to the wicked, and will be harassed on all sides by the unrighteous; while the wicked alone will be in opulence, but the good will be afflicted in all calamities and in want.⁷

He pictured the decimation of the Roman Empire with these words:

The Roman name, by which the world is now ruled, will be taken away from the earth, and the government return to Asia; and the East will again bear rule, and the West be reduced to servitude. Nor ought it to appear wonderful to any one, if a kingdom founded with such vastness, and so long increased by so many and such men, and in short strengthened by such great resources, shall nevertheless at some time fall.⁸

He anticipated the appearance of celestial signs:

Wonderful prodigies also in heaven shall confound the minds of men with the greatest terrors, and the trains of comets, and the darkness of the sun, and the colour of the moon, and the gliding of the falling stars. Nor, however, will these things take place in the accustomed manner; but there will suddenly appear stars unknown and unseen by the eyes; the sun will be perpetually darkened, so that there will be scarcely any distinction between the night and the day.⁹

Through the years preceding the Nicene Council those writers who commented on the conditions accompanying the return of Christ emphasized the appearance of evil led by the antichrist in an unparalleled outburst. They also emphasized the political division and fall of the Roman empire and the appearance of cosmic signs and portents.

II. THE TIMING OF CHRIST'S RETURN

A recurring emphasis in an attempt to suggest a precise timing for Christ's return is that it will occur at the beginning of the seventh millennium of life on earth. Barnabas emphasized that the creation accounts in Genesis provided a clue to the timing of the *parousia*. After referring to the fact that God made all aspects of creation in six days, the writer said:

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. . . . Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in

⁷Lactantius *The Divine Institutes* 7.15.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 7.16.

six thousand years, all things will be finished.¹⁰

This emphasis that the return of Christ will occur after six thousand years was also given by Irenaeus,¹¹ Cyprian¹² and Lactantius.¹³ These early writers expected Christ to appear at the beginning of the seventh millennium in order to overthrow the antichrist, judge the wicked and restore the universe. However, there was little evidence of date setting among these writers. The precise date of Christ's return remained veiled. A typical emphasis was that of the writer of the *Didache*, who said, "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."¹⁴

Hippolytus (170–236) was a learned theologian who spent his ministry in Rome and its vicinity. He used the idea of the six thousand years of the world's duration to set a date for the return of Christ. He felt that the first appearance of Jesus in the flesh took place in the year 5500, and he suggested that five hundred years remained to be accomplished before the year 6000. Hippolytus raised the question of how one arrived at the idea that Christ was born in the year 5500. He provided this absurd answer:

Learn that easily, O man; for the things that took place of old in the wilderness, under Moses, in the case of the tabernacle, were constituted types and emblems of spiritual mysteries, in order that, when the truth came in Christ in these last days, you might be able to perceive that these things were fulfilled. For He says to him, "And thou shalt make the ark of imperishable wood, and shalt overlay it with pure gold within and without; and thou shalt make the length of it two cubits and a half, and the breadth thereof one cubit and a half, and a cubit and a half the height"; which measures, when summed up together, make five cubits and a half, so that the 5500 years might be signified thereby.¹⁵

Froom notes that Hippolytus was apparently the first to set a specific date for the second advent by the use of the above methods.¹⁶ He also notes that Hippolytus used the prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel as a prophecy of the end of the world. He separated the seventieth week from the sixty-ninth, and he placed the seventieth week just before the end of the world.¹⁷ He also divided the seventieth week between the two witnesses of Revelation 11 and the antichrist. Froom notes:

¹⁰Barn. 15.

¹¹Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.28.3.

¹²Cyprian *The Treatises of Cyprian* 11.2 (preface).

¹³Lactantius *The Divine Institutes* 7.14.

¹⁴*Did.* 16.1.

¹⁵Hippolytus *Fragments from Commentaries*, "On Daniel," 2.5.

¹⁶L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington: Review Herald, 1950), 1. 278.

¹⁷Hippolytus *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 43.

Hippolytus is believed to be the first to have projected such a theory, making the sixty-nine weeks reach from the first year of Darius the Mede to Christ's *first* coming, and the seventieth to begin separately after a gap, just before Christ's *second* coming. Most early expositors explain Daniel's hebdomads as having their full accomplishment in Christ's death, or the consequent destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies, and having no reference to the future Antichrist.¹⁸

III. THE RESULTS OF CHRIST'S RETURN

What occurs after the return of Christ? There was general agreement among the ante-Nicene fathers that God's judgment on the wicked occurred after Christ's return. However, they did not venture to suggest a firm chronology.

Irenaeus explained the result of Christ's return:

If then the advent of the Son comes indeed alike to all, but is for the purpose of judging, and separating the believing from the unbelieving, since, as those who believe do His will agreeably to their own choice, and as, [also] agreeably to their own choice, the disobedient do not consent to His doctrine; it is manifest that His Father has made all in a like condition, each person having a choice of his own, and a free understanding.¹⁹

This view that judgment resulted from the return of Christ reappeared as an emphasis in many of the ante-Nicene fathers. Commodianus, a North African bishop (c. A.D. 240), was an enthusiastic millennialist. After using imagery that we associate with the return of Christ, he said:

In the flame of fire the Lord will judge the wicked. But the fire shall not touch the just, but shall by all means lick them up. . . . Such will be the heat, that the stones themselves shall melt. The winds assemble into lightnings, the heavenly wrath rages; and wherever the wicked man fleeth, he is seized upon by this fire.²⁰

Although Commodianus did not outline an exact chronology, he did give evidence of an awareness of time relationships when he said that after a thousand years the wicked "are delivered over to Gehenna; and he whose work they were, with them are burnt up."²¹

Victorinus, author of the oldest preserved commentary on Revelation, served as bishop of Petau and died in persecutions around A.D. 304. In commenting on Rev 19:11 he said that after the coming of the Lord Jesus "all the souls of the nations will be assembled to judgment."²²

Lactantius preserved a semblance of a chronological scheme when he suggested that there were two events of judgment at the return of Christ with a

¹⁸Froom, *Prophetic*, 1. 278. As an example of a messianic interpretation of Daniel's seventy weeks see Tertullian *An Answer to the Jews* 8.

¹⁹Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.27.1.

²⁰Commodianus *The Instructions of Commodianus* 43.

²¹Ibid.

²²Victorinus *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 19.11.

thousand-year period of time separating them. He described Christ's second advent in the following words:

Then the heaven shall be opened in a tempest, and Christ shall descend with great power, and there shall go before Him a fiery brightness and a countless host of angels, and all that multitude of the wicked shall be destroyed, and torrents of blood shall flow.²³

After describing the preliminary judgments occurring at Christ's second advent, he suggested a reign of Christ for a thousand years with Satan bound, God's people at rest, and the earth bringing forth its fruit with great fecundity. He then described a concluding judgment with the added words:

But when the thousand years shall be fulfilled, and the prince of the demons loosed, the nations will rebel against the righteous, and an innumerable multitude will come to storm the city of the saints. Then the last judgment of God will come to pass against the nations . . . He shall rain upon the wicked fire with brimstone and hail, and they shall be on fire, and slay each other.²⁴

The ultimate destination of these wicked is to be condemned to eternal torment and delivered to eternal fire where they may suffer the punishments they deserve.

There was general agreement that the second advent of Christ would result in judgment for the wicked. In a few instances there were the bare outlines of a chronology worked out. Lactantius, for example, felt that there was an initial judgment at the second advent, a millennium of peace and fecundity, and a final judgment.

IV. PERSONAL PREPARATION FOR CHRIST'S RETURN

The apostolic fathers reflected broad agreement that the return of Christ would not bring wrath upon the people of God. Lactantius, for example, said that while judgment would be poured out on the wicked, the people of God "shall be concealed under caves of the earth, until the anger of God against the nations and the last judgment shall be ended."²⁵

Despite this realization that God's people experience protection from his wrath, there was an emphasis that Christians must make personal preparation for the time of judgment and wrath.

The *Didache* paraphrased Luke 12:35; Matt 24:42 in reminding its readers that they must be watchful, for they do not know the time of the Lord's return.²⁶ The writer added that "the whole time of your faith will not profit you, if ye be

²³Lactantius *The Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 72.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Lactantius *The Divine Institutes* 7.26.

²⁶*Did.* 16.1.

not made perfect in the last time."²⁷ Only those who endured in their faith were counted among the saved.²⁸

The author of *The Shepherd of Hermas* reminded his readers that they would escape the coming tribulation only if they repented with all their heart and turned to the Lord:

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.²⁹

The same appeal for obedience and endurance was sounded by Irenaeus, who said that the Church must endure and persist in its obedience to God in order to be crowned with incorruption.³⁰ Cyprian similarly sounded a lengthy warning when he said:

Let us always with solicitude and caution wait for the sudden coming of the Lord, that when He shall knock, our faith may be on the watch, and receive from the Lord the reward of our vigilance. If these commands be observed, if these warnings and precepts be kept, we cannot be overtaken in slumber by the deceit of the devil; but we shall reign with Christ in His kingdom as servants that watch.³¹

The fathers believed that moral obedience among Christians would prevent their sharing in the judgment and punishment that would come on the rest of the world.

V. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FATHERS' VIEW OF CHRIST'S RETURN

Modern interpreters of varying millennial theories have used the views of the ante-Nicene fathers as a basis for supporting their ideas. The fact that varying interpreters can find support for their views in the fathers indicates clearly the presence of inherent contradictions in the statements by the fathers. It also suggests that selective quotations and inadequate research can prevail in even the most erudite interpreter of the fathers. This writer, who must not claim erudition in the fathers, can recognize his own propensity for the previously mentioned errors.

In a brief reference to the views of the early Church John Walvoord says, "The early church fathers understood the Scriptures to teach that the coming of the Lord could occur any hour."³² He is aware of the fact that in many of the fathers there is reference to a return of Christ only after a period of tribulation. He is also aware that the specific mention of a pretribulational return of Christ

²⁷Ibid., 16.2.

²⁸Ibid., 16.5.

²⁹*The Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.2.

³⁰Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.29.1.

³¹Cyprian *The Treatises of Cyprian* 1.27.

³²J. F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 80.

is not clearly taught in the fathers. He attempts to explain this apparent contradiction: "It should be clear to any impartial observer that the early church believed in the imminent coming of the Lord, but without solving many problems related to it."³³ He explains the failure of the Church to solve the problems surrounding the return of Christ by referring to the Church's involvement in theological problems other than eschatology. He feels that only in the last hundred years has concentrated effort been directed toward the study and harmonization of prophetic interpretation of Scripture.³⁴

George Ladd is aware that the early Church showed an expectation of the nearness of Christ's return, but he warns against deducing from this attitude of expectancy a belief in a pretribulationist rapture and an any-moment return of Christ. Ladd says, "The expectation of the coming of Christ *included the events which would attend and precede His coming.*"³⁵ After surveying the teachings of several ante-Nicene writers concerning the return of Christ, Ladd says, "The prevailing view is a posttribulationist premillennialism. We can find no trace in the early church; and no modern pretribulationist has successfully proved that this particular doctrine was held by any of the church fathers or students of the Word before the nineteenth century."³⁶

Robert Gundry engages in a brief survey of the ante-Nicene writings and concludes that "the early Church was as explicitly posttribulationist as it was premillennial."³⁷ Gundry's survey does not disclose any evidence in the ante-Nicene fathers of a rapture of the Church preceding a period of tribulation. He finds that the return of Christ is always linked with the prior occurrence of such events as a tribulation, persecution, or time of intense hardship for the people of God.

Walvoord responds to the type of criticism offered by those such as Gundry by suggesting that the doctrine of imminence held by the early Church is a form of incipient pretribulationism.³⁸ He also suggests that "the early Fathers were neither pretribulationist nor posttribulationist in the modern meaning of the term."³⁹ Obviously Ladd and Gundry would disagree with the latter statement.

VI. THE QUESTION OF IMMINENCE

To probe the dilemma posed by the conflicts between the views of Ladd and Gundry and those of Walvoord and others, we shall examine the emphasis on

³³Ibid., p. 81.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 20.

³⁶Ibid., p. 31.

³⁷R. H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 178.

³⁸J. F. Walvoord, "A Review of the Blessed Hope by George E. Ladd," *BSac* 113 (July 1956) 291-292. The term "incipient pretribulationism" is used by Gundry, *Church* 179.

³⁹J. F. Walvoord, "Premillennialism and the Tribulation," *BSac* 112 (October 1955) 296.

the imminence of Christ's return proposed by the ante-Nicene fathers.

First Clement, dated near the close of the first century A.D., represents one of the earliest contributions to an interpretation of the views of the apostles. Clement expressed his view of the nearness of Christ's return with the emphasis that "soon and suddenly shall His will be accomplished, as the Scripture also bears witness, saying, 'Speedily will He come, and will not tarry'."⁴⁰ On the surface this appears to be a clear statement of the twentieth-century idea of imminence, but it should be noted that the expression by Clement appeared just after another passage that described the process by which the tree puts forth leaves, then flowers, then produces the sour grapes, and finally the ripened fruit. In other words, there are clear evidences that the fruit is coming. Clement seems to be suggesting that there are clear precursors to the return of Christ although he does not specifically call attention to them.

Ignatius described his anticipation of the close of the age by saying, "The last times are come upon us. Let us therefore be of a reverent spirit, and fear the long-suffering of God, that it tend not to our condemnation."⁴¹ His use of the phrase "last times" is no clear indication of belief in a rapture. The term may refer simply to the era of finality ushered in by Christ or to the complex of events to be culminated by Christ's return. There is obvious expectancy of the nearness of the end-time events, but there is not imminence in the sense of an any-moment rapture.

Ignatius displayed further evidence of an expectancy when he said, "Weigh carefully the times. Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes."⁴² Here again Ignatius was not stressing belief in an any-moment rapture. He was showing eager expectancy for Jesus to return, but he did not suggest that nothing stood between his time and the coming of Christ to rapture the Church. All that Ignatius has suggested can be understood with the aid of Ladd's earlier comment that the expectation of Christ's return included the events that surrounded his coming. It was not a hope for an any-moment rapture.

Cyprian is not excessive in his eschatological visions, but he does express a fond hope of the nearness of Christ's return:

The kingdom of God, beloved brethren, is beginning to be at hand; the reward of life, and the rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession lately lost of paradise, are now coming, with the passing away of the world; already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away.⁴³

Henry C. Theissen make reference to this quotation in order to prove that Cyprian held to imminence in the sense of an any-moment return of Christ for

⁴⁰1 Clem. 23.

⁴¹Ign. Eph. (shorter version) 11.

⁴²Ign. Pol. (shorter version) 3.

⁴³Cyprian *The Treatises of Cyprian* 7.2.

the Church.⁴⁴ Cyprian mentioned the above passage in the context of warning his readers that such events as wars, famines, earthquakes, and pestilences were arising in many places just as the Lord had foretold. In light of the occurrence of these and other events Cyprian wanted his readers to know that the kingdom of God was near. This was not a reference to an any-moment return of Christ. It was a description of the expectancy that the second advent of Christ was near because of the predicted events that were occurring. It was an allusion to a posttribulational return of Christ.

Cyprian also said that "the end of the world comes suddenly."⁴⁵ The statement appeared in a list of 120 precepts that are devoid of any theological context. The term "suddenly" is the Latin *subito*. In the statement it is not possible to discern all that Cyprian includes under the term "end of the world." He might indeed refer it to a single event such as the return of Christ, or he might refer it to a sequence of events culminating in God's destruction of and judgment of the world. The term "suddenly" in Cyprian's statement reminds one of the term "shortly" in Rev 1:1 where John speaks of the revelation of events "which must shortly come to pass." The Vulgate uses the adverb *cito* for "shortly," and this term is best translated as "quickly" or "speedily." Cyprian's use of the term may be another example of expressing a sense of expectancy that affects the moral behavior of the Christian today.

None of the previously mentioned passages need be seen as teaching an any-moment return of Christ. They do show expectancy. Their context often indicates that the longed-for return occurs at the end of a series of events, and this could not be seen as capable of occurring immediately. Again it is wise to consider the relevance of Ladd's statement that the expectation of the coming of Christ included the coming of those events that would precede and surround Christ's actual advent.

VII. RELATIONSHIP TO THE TRIBULATION

Most futurists view the tribulation as that great outpouring of evil that will occur at the end of the this age. There is tribulation throughout this age, but the general belief of a futurist is that tribulation and persecution will intensify for the Christian at the conclusion of this age.

One of the obviously attractive features of asserting the pretribulational return of Christ is that the Church can be removed from the tribulation before its effects are devastating. The Scriptures do promise that believers will be saved from wrath through Christ (Rom 5:9). How can it be that Christians will be present on the earth during this tribulation without being subjected to the wrath and affliction of the time?

George Ladd solves this dilemma by distinguishing between wrath and tribulation. The wrath of God is seen as his judgment against a sinful and rebellious civilization. Ladd defines tribulation as the persecution and affliction that Christians have always suffered for their faith. He feels that Christians

⁴⁴H. C. Theissen, "Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?", *BSac* 92 (April 1935) 192-193.

⁴⁵Cyprian *The Treatises of Cyprian* 12.3.89.

will be sheltered from wrath but not from the persecution:

God will protect His people from the outpourings of wrath in the Great Tribulation, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Whoever they are, we are assured that the people of God, even though they are living on the earth during these last terrible days, will be sealed by God that they may be protected and sheltered from the experience of the outpouring of wrath which will be directed against those who are worshipping and following the beast.⁴⁶

Ladd leaves open the question of how the people of God will be protected from the wrath of God. How did the early Christian writers handle this question?

There was general agreement that the return of Christ would not occur until after a time of tribulation and persecution by the antichrist. This has previously been mentioned, but here again it will be amplified.

Justin Martyr described the second advent of Christ as that time "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."⁴⁷ The writer of *The Shepherd of Hermas* also spoke of the great tribulation to come upon Christians. He did not mention specifically the work of the antichrist, but he said:

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. . . . This then is the type of the great tribulation that is to come.⁴⁸

Tertullian suggested that the reign of terror and affliction inaugurated by the antichrist would result in the martyrdom of some of God's people. It was only after this martyrdom that Christ would actually return:

When, then, we read, "Go, my people, enter into your closets for a little season, until my anger pass away," we have in the closets graves, in which they will have to rest for a little while, who shall have at the end of the world departed this life in the last furious onset of the power of Antichrist.⁴⁹

Cyprian said that the antichrist "goeth about and rageth, but immediately the Lord follows to avenge our sufferings and our wounds."⁵⁰ Hippolytus felt that the antichrist would bring upon the Church intense persecution. He pictured the Church as driven from city to city possessed only with the defense of its faith in Christ. After this outpouring of persecution the coming of Christ would occur.⁵¹ Lactantius pictured the persecution inaugurated by the anti-

⁴⁶Ladd, *Blessed* 126.

⁴⁷Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 110.

⁴⁸*The Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.3.

⁴⁹Tertullian *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 27.

⁵⁰Cyprian *The Epistles of Cyprian* 55.7.

⁵¹Hippolytus *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 60-64.

christ as so severe that only divine help could terminate it and assist believers amidst it. He felt that Christ would succeed in overthrowing the power of the antichrist after many fierce battles.⁵²

Irenaeus similarly placed the return of Christ after the time of the anti-christ's testing and persecution:

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.⁵³

Admittedly additional passages could be selected to suggest the relation of the Christians to the period of the great tribulation. However, the above obviously indicate that the return of Christ is placed following a period of much persecution for Christians, who are seen as being involved in this time of tribulation. They are not removed from it or taken out of it.

How are Christians preserved from the wrath of God during this time of persecution? It is not possible to find any clear answer in the writers who discuss the subject. However, the fathers who commented on it indicated that tribulation was a reality to be dealt with, not something to be avoided or removed from.

The Shepherd of Hermas contained a famous passage in which the author pictured the period of tribulation as a great beast who approached Hermas, obviously intent on inflicting harm. Hermas summoned forth the faith to march boldly forward to confront the beast with the following insults:

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.⁵⁴

Irenaeus explained that tribulation was necessary for the saved in that "having been after a manner broken up, and rendered fine, and sprinkled over by the patience of the Word of God, and set on fire [for purification], they may be fitted for the royal banquet."⁵⁵

Although there is no speculation as to the exact manner in which Christians are preserved or kept from the wrath of God, there is general agreement that Christians will suffer tribulation. It will purify and refine them. There is no effort in the fathers to remove believers completely from the time and experience of the great tribulation.

VIII. RELATIONSHIP TO THE FIRST RESURRECTION

There was general agreement among the ante-Nicene fathers that the return of Christ was the event that led to the experience of the first resurrection

⁵²Lactantius *The Divine Institutes* 7.19.

⁵³Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.30.4.

⁵⁴*The Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.1.

⁵⁵Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.28.4.

mentioned in Rev 20:6. In some of the fathers there is an ambiguity about the time of this resurrection. Justin, for example, has some statements that suggest that the resurrection of believers is an event occurring immediately after Christ's return without the necessity of a millennial interval:

For the prophets have proclaimed two advents of His: the one, that which is already past, when He came as a dishonoured and suffering Man; but the second, when, according to prophecy, He shall come from heaven with glory, accompanied by His angelic host, when also He shall raise the bodies of all men who have lived, and shall clothe those of the worthy with immortality, and shall send those of the wicked, endued with eternal sensibility, into everlasting fire with the wicked devils.⁵⁶

Here it is possible to conclude that there will be a general resurrection and judgment and perhaps the establishment of an eternal kingdom without any intervening millennium. Justin, however, is definitely a chiliast,⁵⁷ and he also has passages that seem to indicate that this resurrection will occur after a millennial period:

And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place.⁵⁸

It is not possible to harmonize the conceptions of Justin at this point. Perhaps we must simply say that Justin did not give a great deal of thought to systematizing his eschatology. Also, he likely did not express all of his views about the millennium in every context in which he broached the subject of eschatology.⁵⁹

Many of the fathers were not clear about the relationship between the resurrection, the return of Christ, and the millennium. There was, however, general agreement that the resurrection for believers occurred at the time of Christ's advent. Typical among those who made this emphasis was Hippolytus, who quoted with little commentary the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:

Concerning the resurrection of the righteous, Paul also speaks thus in writing to the Thessalonians: "We would not have you to be ignorant concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."⁶⁰

⁵⁶Justin Martyr *The First Apology* 52.

⁵⁷Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 80.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁹An interpreter of Justin's eschatology has blamed some of the apparent inconsistency on historical circumstances; L. W. Barnard, "Justin Martyr's Eschatology," *VC* 19 (March 1965) 94.

⁶⁰Hippolytus *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 66.

IX. SPIRITUALIZATION OF THE SECOND ADVENT

Our survey of the teaching of the ante-Nicene fathers concerning the second coming of Christ has dealt with those who accept a personal, historical coming of Christ. It should be noted that Origen is an exception to this view. Before the time of Origen it was reasonably common to find the fathers expressing their belief in a personal second coming of Christ together with a millennial reign of the saints with Christ after their resurrection from the dead. Origen denounced millennialism perhaps because of his view that it overemphasized the sensual and the material:

Certain persons, then, refusing the labour of thinking, and adopting a superficial view of the letter of the law, and yielding rather in some measure to the indulgence of their own desires and lusts, being disciples of the letter alone, are of opinion that the fulfillment of the promises of the future are to be looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury; and therefore they especially desire to have again after the resurrection, such bodily structures as may never be without the power of eating, and drinking, and performing all the functions of flesh and blood, not following the opinion of the Apostle Paul regarding the resurrection of a spiritual body.⁶¹

Froom points out that the emphasis of Origen was so significant that millennialism began to wane.⁶² Origen also views the event of the Lord's return as demanding an interpretation in the spiritual sense. He felt that those who held to a literal or bodily interpretation of this passage needed enlightenment:

With much power, however, there comes daily, to the soul of every believer, the second advent of the Word in the prophetic clouds, that is, in the writings of the prophets and apostles, which reveal Him and in all their words disclose the light of truth, and declare Him as coming forth in their significations [which are] divine and above human nature. Thus, moreover, to those who recognize the revealer of doctrines in the prophets and apostles, we say that much glory also appears, which is seen in the second advent of the Word.⁶³

It is obvious from Origen's statements that he has allegorized or spiritualized the occurrence of the second advent into an experience that is mystical and personal but not historical. Origen further expressed himself: "For if the world is crucified to the righteous, it has become the end of the age for those to whom the world is crucified."⁶⁴ Again Origen has taken the chief event from God's prophetic timetable and has reduced it to an experience of personal commitment and rededication in which a closer walk with Christ is experienced. There is a denial of the historical content of a second advent of Christ. The meaning of the event becomes wholly personal and subjective.

⁶¹Origen *De Principiis* 2.11.2.

⁶²Froom, *Prophetic*, 1. 319.

⁶³Translated in *ibid.*, 1. 318, from *Series Commentariorum Origenis in Mattheum*, chap. 50, in PG, vol. 13, col. 1678.

⁶⁴Translated in Froom, *Prophetic*, 1. 318, from PG, vol. 13, col. 1642.

X. CONCLUSION

The return of Christ as taught by the ante-Nicene fathers was an event that occurred after tribulation and persecution for God's people. Christians were urged to expect to pass through a period of great tribulation and persecution for their faith. They were urged to be faithful. They were encouraged to feel that they must endure in their faithfulness in order to reap blessing from the Lord.

Since this return occurred only after a period of tribulation, it is impossible to see how the ante-Nicene fathers can be described as giving teaching that supports the view of a pretribulation return of Christ. Every reference that betrays any idea of a relationship between the tribulation and the return of Christ suggests that the return follows the tribulation. We as Christians must have a sense of expectancy that the return of Christ is an event that can occur quickly in the plan of God. Our awareness of this is an incentive to holiness, evangelism, and wholesome spiritual commitment. However, we cannot use the teaching of the fathers to support the contention that Christ is coming at any moment. Their view was clearly the idea that he would come after a period of tribulation and difficulty for the people of God. That tribulation and difficulty could begin to occur quickly. The plan of God could rapidly move to its completion. The fathers, however, urged Christians to prepare to endure that tribulation and gave no encouragement that Christians would be exempt from it.