

Classic Posttribulation Interpretation

by John F. Walvoord

Classic posttribulationism is a view that holds to the imminency of the second coming, a nonliteral tribulation preceding the second coming, and a literal millennium following the second coming, but it is plagued by inherent inconsistency and logical fallacies.

Scripture: Luke 21:28

Topics: "Eschatology", "Second Coming"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the various schools of thought within posttribulationism, highlighting classic posttribulationism, semiclastic posttribulationism, futuristic posttribulationism, and dispensational posttribulationism. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the roots of classic posttribulationism in the early church's eschatology. Walvoord discusses J. Barton Payne's significant contributions to contemporary prophetic interpretation, particularly focusing on the imminency of Christ's return and the posttribulation second coming, rooted in a nonliteral tribulation preceding the second coming and a literal millennium following it.

Transcript

Contemporary Varieties of Posttribulationism

Although posttribulationism unites in refutation of pretribulationism, midtribulationism, and the partial rapture view, within posttribulationism itself at least four distinct schools of thought have emerged in the twentieth century. Although it is difficult to name them accurately they can be denominated: (1) classic posttribulationism; (2) semiclastic posttribulationism; (3) futuristic posttribulationism; (4) dispensational posttribulationism. Because classic posttribulationism is rooted most deeply in the history of the church and depends in large degree on the validity of the eschatology of the early church, it is the natural starting point in considering the varied and somewhat contradictory approaches to posttribulationism that are being advanced today.

Probably the most vocal, scholarly, and effective exponent of classic posttribulationism is J. Barton Payne. His recent major work, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*,^[1] J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). has been considered by some a major contribution to contemporary prophetic interpretation. His earlier work, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*,^[2] J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962). delineates in specific form his concept of classic posttribulationism. Payne reacts specifically against

George Ladd's concept of a future tribulation presented in Ladd's *The Blessed Hope*[3] George Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). and this author's *The Rapture Question*[4] John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1957). which defends pretribulationism. Although in the main a refutation of pretribulationism, his conclusions in large measure depend on his definition, support, and defense of classic posttribulationism. His point of view may be summarized under four propositions which will form the basis of this discussion: (1) the imminency of the second coming; (2) the posttribulational second coming; (3) a nonliteral tribulation preceding the second coming; (4) a literal millennium following the second coming.

The Second Coming as an Imminent Event

As indicated in the title of Payne's volume, the imminency of Christ's return is his major contribution to posttribulationism. By "imminency" he means that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ to the earth could occur any day at any moment. He summarizes his view in these words:

Finally, the "blessed hope," as it has been interpreted by the classical view of the church, is one the full accomplishment of which is imminent. Each morning, as the Christian casts his glance into the blueness of the sky, he may thrill with the prayerful thought, "Perhaps today!" Or, if his particular skies be shrouded in gloom, still the blackest moment comes just before the dawn. His very prayer of petition may be cut short by "a great earthquake" (Rev 6:12). Then, "Look up, and lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28).[5] Payne, *The Imminent Appearing*, p. 161.

Having defined imminency as the possibility of Christ's return any day, Payne offers further explanation of his concept of imminency in the third chapter of his work. Here he states, "The term 'imminent' applies to an event 'almost always of danger,' which is 'impending threateningly; hanging over one's head; ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence; coming on shortly.'"[6] Ibid., p. 85. After citing Matthew 24:38-39, 42; 25:13; Revelation 22:7, 12; as compared to Revelation 3:11; 22:20, he states, "It should therefore be clear at the outset that imminency does not mean that Christ's coming must be soon.... The day of Christ's appearing rests in the hands of God, 'which in its own times he shall show' (1 Tim 6:15)."[7] Ibid., p. 86. Payne goes on to say, "Does this mean then that it could be so soon as to happen right away, at any time? This is the thought that is associated with imminency, 'ready to befall or overtake one'; and the question of biblical eschatology is whether such a possibility does actually characterize Christ's second advent." [8] Ibid.

In his historical introduction to the subject of the appearing of Christ, Payne quotes the ante-Nicene fathers in support of his concept that the early church held to the doctrine of imminency. He states, "Prior to the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, the ancient church was characterized in general by two convictions respecting the sequence of events of Christ's second coming." [9] Ibid., p. 12. Payne summarizes these two convictions as follows: "The ante-Nicene fathers thus held two basic convictions relative to the second coming of Christ: that it was imminent, and that it was post-tribulational." [10] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

In support of the concept of imminency he states, "In the first place, it expected that the Lord could appear in the clouds in immediate connection with any day of contemporary life. The ante-Nicene fathers, in other words, were committed to the concept of the imminence of their Lord's return." [11] Ibid., pp. 12-13. Payne qualifies this, however, with the statement, "It must be observed at the outset, however, that imminency as herein defined does not mean that it had to be close at hand, only that it could be, that the establishment of Christ's eschatological kingdom was conceived of as capable of overtaking them at any time." [12] Ibid.,

p. 13.

In support of this he cites the First Epistle of Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians and Ignatius in Epistle to Polycarp in addition to other early fathers.[13] Ibid. In general, Payne establishes the fact that at least some of the early fathers expected the return of Christ momentarily even though how soon it might occur is not always clear. Whether or not all actually believed Christ could come at any day, the extent of the evidence, however, is that they commonly did expect Christ's coming soon, and a recurring note is the thought that they were in the very last days.

Payne goes on to point out that, with the advent of the Alexandrian School of Theology about A.D. 200 with its attack on the literalness of prophecy in general, the hope of imminency receded. Payne states, "Although the entire body of the early fathers, insofar as they expressed themselves, held to the above-outlined position of imminent post-tribulationism, there did appear, beginning at the close of the second century among the apologists who succeeded the apostolic fathers, a few exceptions." [14] Ibid., p. 17. As the church drifted into amillennialism, especially following Augustine, the doctrine of imminency became obscure. Payne concludes, "By medieval times there was thus exhibited a considerable deviation from the original expectancy of the imminent appearance of Christ." [15] Ibid., p. 21.

The Classical View That the Second Coming Is Posttribulational

As already indicated, the classical view of posttribulationism claims that the early church not only held to the imminency of the second coming of Christ but also that it was posttribulational. The preponderance of evidence seems to support the concept that the early church did not clearly hold to a rapture as preceding the endtime tribulation period. Most of the early church fathers who speak on the subject at all considered themselves already in the great tribulation. Accordingly, Payne, as well as most other posttribulationists, takes the position that it is self-evident that pretribulationism as it is taught today was unheard of in the early centuries of the church. Accordingly, the viewpoint of the early church fathers is considered by practically all posttribulationists, whether adherents of the classical view or not, as a major argument in favor of posttribulationism. However, the fact that most posttribulationists today do not accept the doctrine of imminency as the early church held it qualifies the force of their argument against pretribulationism.

Most posttribulationists today actually reject the posttribulationism of the early church fathers. The fact is that Payne almost stands alone in his strict adherence to the viewpoint of the early church on prophecy. Not only have all amillenarians rejected the prophetic outlook of the early church, but most premillenarians also believe that the early church was mistaken when they considered themselves already in the great tribulation.

Generally speaking, however, Payne has correctly analyzed the writings of the early church fathers in assuming that they should be classified as posttribulational. While the force and cogency of this point of view may be debated, the historical fact is that the early church fathers' view on prophecy did not correspond to what is advanced by pretribulationists today except for the one important point that both subscribe to the imminency of the rapture. Most posttribulationists, while rejecting the concept of imminency prominent in the early church, accept the idea that the second coming of Christ is posttribulational.

The Classical View of a Nonliteral Tribulation Preceding the Second Coming

The most important problem facing classical posttribulationism is the necessity of explaining all prophetic events leading up to the second advent as either past or contemporaneous. The problems involved in such a point of view have led most contemporary posttribulationists away from the doctrine of imminency. By making the tribulation still future, posttribulationists allow a time period in which events predicted which have not yet been fulfilled can be fulfilled. The major problem of classic posttribulationism is to solve this problem of fulfillment of endtime prophecy.

In support of his position, Payne cites numerous Scriptures which support imminency and the concept of immediate expectation of the Lord's return. The Scriptures mentioned include many that relate to the second coming of Christ as well as those which speak specifically of the rapture. The presentation is confusing because verses are often included with little attention to their context or subject matter. Most expositors recognize that Scriptures relating to the rapture can be construed as presenting the event as imminent. It is also true that many passages relating to Christ's coming to set up His kingdom and to close the tribulation are presented as imminent for those living in the great tribulation. To put all these passages together, however, as proving that the second coming of Christ is imminent has not gained favor with most posttribulationists as well as those of other points of view.

While it is impossible to do justice to the discussion of Payne on this point, his extensive quotation of Scripture should be mentioned. In his discussion of "the time of the church's hope" he cites Isaiah 25:6-11; Matthew 24:29-31; Luke 17:24; Romans 8:18-21; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8; 2:1-2 ; Titus 2:12-13; Revelation 7:3-4; 14:3-4 ; 20:4-5 .[16] Ibid., pp. 53-65. He also discusses what he calls "contributory passages" and includes Isaiah 26:19-21; Daniel 12:1-2; Acts 1:11; Romans 11:15; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 5:2-6 ; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Peter 1:6-7, 13; 5:4 ; and Revelation 2:25-26; 14:14-16 .

In support of imminency Payne mentions the following as "valid passages": Matthew 24:42-25:13 ; Luke 12:36-40; Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 3:20; 4:5 ; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; Titus 2:12-13; James 5:7-8; Jude 21; and Revelation 16:15.[17] Ibid., pp. 95-102.

The problem of how to solve predicted events which have not taken place and which are scheduled to occur before the second coming does not go away easily simply by quotation of these many Scriptures. The problems surface immediately when certain questions are asked. A number of prophecies occur in Scripture such as Peter's predicted execution, the implication that a long time occurs before the first and second coming of Christ, and the prediction that Paul was to die. Prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem also are presented as preceding the second advent. In an extended discussion of this type of problem, Payne takes the position that while these were hindrances to imminency in the first century, they no longer existed as far as the early church fathers are concerned and certainly are no problem to us today. He also noted that it was not a practical problem for most of the early Christians as they were not aware of these predictions.[18] Ibid., pp. 90-91.

The more serious problems concern the prophetic program. One of these is the prophetic fulfillment of Daniel 9:27 predicting a final seven-year period and Daniel 12:9-12 in reference to the desecration of the temple. Payne solves this by applying it to the second century B.C. and holds that it is already fulfilled much in the style of many amillenarians.[19] Ibid., pp. 116-20. However, because Christ predicted the abomination of desolation as a future event, making a second century B.C. fulfillment impossible, Payne refers this to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In a word, Payne spiritualizes these prophecies and does not expect literal fulfillment. His short dismissal of the possibility of future fulfillment is not convincing.

is posttribulational, that is, coming after events that describe the time of trouble preceding the second advent. (3) In order to preserve the imminency of the second coming of Christ, it adopts a nonliteral interpretation of the tribulation, finding the events either fulfilled in the past or in the contemporary situation. (4) In spite of almost a complete commitment to nonliteral interpretation of prophecies relating to the tribulation, the classic view holds with the early church fathers to a literal millennium following the second coming of Christ.

The probable reason why most conservative expositors, regardless of their eschatological position, have rejected classic posttribulationism is the inherent inconsistency of combining in one system a very literal interpretation of the last four chapters of Revelation while at the same time holding to an almost completely nonliteral interpretation of the preceding chapters. The problems inherent in this position also explain why most adherents of a completely nonliteral interpretation of the earlier chapters of Revelation are amillennial rather than premillennial and apply the nonliteral interpretation both to the tribulation and to the millenium which follows. Although many posttribulationists would undoubtedly agree with some of the arguments advanced by Payne against pretribulationism, contemporary posttribulationism has largely abandoned premillennialism on the one hand in favor of amillennialism and has abandoned the doctrine of imminency in favor of a deferred second coming of Christ.

Probably the most evident fault of classic posttribulationism is its logical inconsistency. The early church fathers were obviously wrong in believing they were already in the great tribulation and other events of the last days. It was partly for this reason that they held to imminency. Payne wants to ignore this error in judgment of the early church fathers and accept their conclusions anyway. A conclusion is no stronger than its premises, and if the early fathers were wrong in their premises, they were also wrong in their conclusions. Most posttribulationists, accordingly, have abandoned the precise interpretation of the early fathers and the classic view of posttribulationism.

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