

Is the Doctrine of Imminency Capable of Proving Pretribulationism?

—Sam A. Smith

[Sam A. Smith is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary. Having advocated pretribulationism for over thirty-five years, he believes that the case for pretribulationism is seriously flawed and has actually undermined the case for the imminency of the rapture, and may even jeopardize the future of dispensationalism itself. This is the first in a series of four papers on the problems of pretribulationism. The second paper is titled: *Does Pretribulationism's Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?*, the third is titled: *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*, and the fourth is titled: *Some Final Thoughts on Rapture Theories*. The author has also written two books on this subject: *What the Bible Says About the Future*, and *The Imminent Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church*. All of these materials are available from Biblical Reader Communications (BiblicalReader.com).]

Pretribulationists maintain that the rapture of the church must occur before the tribulation period begins. This view, which in modern times has become the dominant view among dispensational premillennialists, rests upon two central tenets: that Christ's return is imminent, and that the church is not to be the object of divine wrath during the coming day of the Lord. While other minor arguments are employed to bolster the case for pretribulationism, these are the two "heavy" arguments; and pretribulationism as a theory stands or falls on the validity of these two arguments. ["Pretribulationism" and "pretribulational," as used here, do not refer to the same thing. "Pretribulationism" is the belief system that states that the rapture of the church can only occur before the tribulation period begins. "Pretribulational" is simply a relative time designation meaning, "before the tribulation." Below, I will be referring to the "possibility" (rather than the necessity) of a pretribulational rapture; such a view is quite distinct from pretribulationism.]

Of the two arguments (imminency and the wrath argument), the primary case for pretribulationism has always been the argument from imminency (see, John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, pp. 53 and 55), and for that there is a reason. The wrath argument has only come to the forefront since the case for imminency was weakened by pretribulationists beginning with Lewis Sperry Chafer (see my paper, *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*). The wrath argument is insufficient as a primary proof for pretribulationism, since it is built on the presumption that the entire tribulation period is divine wrath—a presumption for which there is no conclusive evidence, even though several ineffectual lines of argumentation have been attempted (for examples see, *Things to Come*, by J. Dwight Pentecost, pp. 168-169 and 202-204). In fact, early pretribulationists seldom made the claim that the entire tribulation is to be divine wrath; that concept has come to the forefront only since the mid-1900s, after pretribulationists weakened the case for imminency by denying that Matthew 24:36-25:30 describes the rapture. For the sake of argument let us assume here that the imminency of the rapture is an established fact; and from there let us focus on this question: Is the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture capable of proving pretribulationism?

It has long been assumed, both by pretribulationists, and by opponents of pretribulationism, that proof for the imminency of the rapture is tantamount to proof of pretribulationism. Consequently, pretribulationists have insisted that both the scriptures and the beliefs of the early church support imminency, and opponents of pretribulationism have taken precisely the opposite position. Remember, we are assuming imminency to be true; we only want to know if an imminent rapture logically necessitates (and thus proves) that the rapture must be pretribulational.

In exploring this question, it would be helpful if we knew how imminency came to be so tightly associated with pretribulationism in the first place. Prior to the emergence of the various alternate dispensational views in the nineteen hundreds (partial rapturism, midtribulationism, and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view), there were just two major views of the rapture among premillennialists—pretribulationism and posttribulationism. Of these two views only pretribulationism is compatible with the doctrine of the imminency of the rapture, and it was assumed that if imminency were true, then pretribulationism must be true.

In time other theories emerged: midtribulationism (1941) and Rosenthal's pre-wrath view (1990). Since each of these views are incompatible with imminency, the same line of argumentation has been applied to them—pretribulationism must be the correct theory since it is the only view compatible with imminency. Of course, this is a reductive error, since it has not been established that pretribulationism is the only possible imminent theory. [Let me illustrate this logic. It's like telling someone that Christmas occurs in a month ending in "r," and having them conclude that it must be in November, since January, February, March, April, May, June, July, and August do not end in "r." What went wrong? Obviously they did not exhaust all the possibilities—September, October, and December end in "r" too. If all we knew about the timing of Christmas was that it occurs in a month ending in "r," we would have to conclude that it could occur in one of the following months: September, October, November, or December.] Now, what if pretribulationism isn't the only imminent option? What if the rapture could be imminent, but not pretribulational? If so, imminency could not be used as evidence of pretribulationism (any more than the criteria of ending in "r" could be used to prove that Christmas occurs in November). So, it is critically important to know whether or not an imminent, non-pretribulational rapture is possible, for pretribulationism's prime argument hangs on the answer.

Historically, students of the rapture have assumed that belief in the imminency of the rapture is compatible only with pretribulationism. However, that is a logical error that has resulted from thinking of the rapture as a "sequent" event. To think of an event sequently is to view it as part of a sequence of events. Naturally, since sequenced events occur sequentially, a sequent event cannot be imminent unless it is the first event in the sequence. To illustrate the difference between sequent and non-sequent views of the rapture, let's say we have fifty cards; and for each card we write the name of some future tribulation event, and we sort the cards in order. Let's also make a card for the rapture. Now, if we put the rapture in the middle of the stack and begin to turn the cards over one by one (simulating the passage of each event), the rapture wouldn't be imminent since we couldn't turn it over until we had turned over all the cards that precede it in the stack. The only way the rapture could be imminent would be if it were the first card in the stack. Applying this analogy: according to pretribulationism the rapture is the first card and it is therefore imminent, but mid-tribulationism, Rosenthal pre-wrath rapturism, and posttribulationism do not place the rapture card first; thus, these theories do not view the rapture as imminent. That's the sequent conception of the rapture. Now let's look at an alternative conception (one we could call a "non-sequent" view of the rapture). We will use the same stack of cards, but instead of putting the rapture card with the stack, we will put it off to the side, with the provision that it can be turned over at any time. Before we even turn the first card the rapture is imminent, because it could be turned over first. But if it isn't turned over first, it's still imminent because it could be turned over next. (Remember, the rapture card isn't subject to the sequence of the stack.) Again, if it isn't turned over next it remains imminent until it is finally turned over.

Because sequent thinking has dominated rapture theology from its beginning, most students of prophecy mistakenly assume that if the rapture is imminent, it must be the first event on the prophetic calendar (hence, pretribulational); and conversely, if they do not view the rapture

as the first future prophetic event, they seek to deny the doctrine of imminency. Clearly, all of these theories share a common perspective: they are all sequent theories. However, the scriptures do not specify the place in the stream of prophetic events where the rapture occurs, other than that it must be pre-wrath (which only establishes the terminal point of the event window, not a stream of events within which the rapture occurs). Here is where we need to make a critical observation: If the timing of the rapture is not specified in scripture, it is imminent. It is not imminent because it is the first event; it is imminent because the timing is unspecified (and thus no one knows when it will occur, leaving open the possibility that it could occur at any moment). This is a crucial distinction, since it allows for the *possibility* of a pretribulationist rapture without the necessity of such. (The rapture is imminent before the tribulation period begins, and if it doesn't happen before the period begins, it continues to be imminent until it does happen. [Pretribulationists might argue that all of this is a moot point since the rapture is the only event prior to the terminal point of the rapture window (*i.e.*, the rapture is the only event prior to the manifestation of divine wrath at the day of the Lord). However, that assumes the day of the Lord begins immediately at the inception of the tribulation period—an assumption for which there is no proof; indeed the weight of evidence argues strongly to the contrary—that the day of the Lord begins sometime in the second half of the tribulation period (see the next paper in this series: *Does Pretribulationism's Wrath Argument Prove Pretribulationism?*).]

Thus, when we break free of the limitations of the sequent frame of reference, we see that it is possible for the rapture to be imminent without the necessity of pretribulationism. Therefore, since we have shown that such a view is possible, imminency cannot be used as proof of pretribulationism, since it is also compatible with a non-pretribulationist rapture. We have now illustrated the reductive fallacy that was referred to earlier. Imminency, while compatible with pretribulationism, is not proof of pretribulationism. All imminency proves is that the rapture is not contingent to any other future event. Whether the imminency of the rapture is a sustainable doctrine is another question that will be addressed separately. It is my belief that a sound biblical case can be made for the imminency of the rapture, even though, as strange as it might seem, pretribulationists have seriously eroded the biblical case for the doctrine (again see, *How Pretribulationism Has Almost Destroyed the Doctrine of Imminency*, by the author). The conclusion then is this: Even if imminency is true, it doesn't prove pretribulationism.

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