



The Imminent Return of Christ: Do We Really Believe It?

By: W. E. Nunnally

Introduction

One distinctive tenet of conservative evangelical faith is the belief that Jesus can come at any moment. The founding fathers of the Assemblies of God included this doctrine in our Statement of Fundamental Truths as nonnegotiable. Not only is this belief in our foundational statement of faith — along with salvation, baptism in the Holy Spirit, and divine healing — it is grouped among the set of beliefs often referred to as cardinal doctrines. Our leaders identify these four beliefs this way because they “are essential to the church’s core mission of reaching the world for Christ.”¹

As important as the doctrine of the Second Coming is to the life of the Assemblies of God, it is often not prominent in current preaching and teaching. Contemporary Christian literature seldom discusses this topic. Generally seminars, conferences, and prayer meetings do not focus on this topic. This sociological phenomenon will likely self-correct, however, when political, economic, and security issues sufficiently undermine current confidence. As in times past, the church will again embrace and proclaim this doctrine when the next major crisis reminds us that our hope is not in the stock market, retirement funds, or home equity, but rather in the triumphal return of Christ.

The purpose of this article is to address this question: Do we believe Jesus can come at any moment? In fact, when we can answer this question with an unequivocal affirmative, that reality alone will go a long way toward solving the problem of infrequent preaching on the subject.

Why Another Discussion of Imminent Return?

Many pastors, missionaries, educators, evangelists, and administrators confess that they believe in the imminent return of Christ, but often teach beliefs that contradict this doctrine. What are some of the commonly held beliefs that contradict or undermine the doctrine of the imminent return of Jesus?

Popular prerequisites

Some believe Jesus cannot return until some lost aspect of the church has been restored — such as Davidic worship or the fivefold ministry. Others believe all Jews must first return to the land of Israel or come to faith in Jesus. Other groups believe that Christians must first take dominion of the earth back from Satan and his followers. Still others believe some eschatological event such as the appearance of the Antichrist, the battle of Gog and Magog, Armageddon, rebuilding Solomon’s Temple, or the reinstatement of the sacrificial system must precede the return of Christ.

Many believe, preach, and teach there must be a final, sweeping revival that will usher millions into the Kingdom before Jesus can return. This would be wonderful, and we have every right to pray for and work toward that end. Scripture, however, makes no promise that such a revival will immediately precede the coming of the Lord. In fact, many passages reflect the opposite: a great falling away will mark the time just prior to Jesus’ appearance (Matthew 24:10–12, 22, 36–41; 25:1–13; Luke 18:8; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1–9; 2 Peter 3:3, 4; Jude 18, 19).

Some maintain the gospel must reach every person, nation, or language group before Jesus returns. This position derives

almost exclusively from a particular interpretation of Matthew 24:14, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come” (NASB),³ and Mark 13:10, “And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations” (NASB).

Because this teaching is so prevalent within the Assemblies of God, two observations are in order. First, according to our own literature, there are an “estimated 4.4 billion people in the world who still have not had an adequate witness of the gospel ... more than two-thirds of the world’s population”⁴ According to another AG author, there are 6,775 unreached people groups who have never been reached with the gospel.⁵ If Jesus cannot return until each individual, people group, or language group receives an adequate witness of the gospel, He cannot come today. Nor can He come tomorrow, next month, next year, and probably not in our lifetime.

This view does not mirror the fervent expectation of the imminent return of Christ held by the Early Church. The disciples believed “the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:9, NASB). At this point, a word of caution is in order: the Early Church (not the 21st century church) is our paradigm. If it was in error in accepting Jesus at His word and believing He could return at any moment, we must also view the remainder of its theology and proclamation as questionable.

A second and far more important issue is the teaching of Scripture. When we carefully examine passages relevant to the interpretation of Matthew 24:14 and Mark 13:10, we find an astounding reality: Before the martyrdom of Paul in A.D. 64, the Early Church had already reached the world to which Jesus referred. According to Acts 2:5, there were Jews in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost from “every nation under heaven” (NASB). After 3,000 of these accepted Christ as their Savior, the vast majority of these new believers eventually returned to their country taking the gospel to “every nation under heaven.”

When Acts speaks of more organized missionary activity, even unbelievers admitted the first Christian generation had succeeded in “turn[ing]the whole world upside down” (17:6, literal translations, emphasis added). Admittedly, this statement is partially overstatement. These unbelievers were agitated at Paul because of the powerful progress the gospel was having on the then known world. They wanted to present Christianity in the worst possible light. But there was some fact for this charge to have gained immediate importance with the local population and its leaders (verses 8,9). We base another reference to the gospel’s widespread impact in Paul’s lifetime on a reaction the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome had against Paul and Christianity. They declared that Christianity “is spoken against everywhere” (28:22, NASB, emphasis added). Again, it is likely this statement is somewhat hyperbolic, but it nevertheless attests to the degree to which the gospel had impacted the Mediterranean world by A.D. 62.

The Book of Acts is not the only place where we have reports of world evangelism within the lifetimes of the apostles. About A.D. 57, Paul told Christians in Rome that the faith they had embraced “is being proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Romans 1:8, NASB). In contrast to the statements made in Acts by unbelievers, it is not likely that Paul is exaggerating. Certainly no one would attempt to make this charge against his earlier statements in this passage about Jesus’ Davidic ancestry (verse 3), resurrection (verse 4), or grace (verse 5).

In another passage in Romans, Paul describes the spiritual status of the Jewish people in his day. He readily notes that not all Jews have accepted the message of the lordship of Jesus (10:16). Two verses later, however, he explains that this is not because they have not heard; “Indeed they have [heard because]: ‘Their voice has gone into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world’ ” (10:18, NASB, emphasis added).

Further evidence of the impact the gospel had in Paul’s lifetime appears in his letter to the Christians at Colossae. He notes that “the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also ... is constantly bearing fruit and increasing” (Colossians 1:6, NASB, emphasis added). Paul affirmed that the gospel he had been preaching already had a worldwide impact and was still bringing forth fruit.

As in Romans, Paul underscored the progress of the gospel at the end of the first half of the first century. In Colossians 1:23, he wrote of “the hope of the gospel ... which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven.” We must note the similarity of this language with that of Acts 2:5 — “every nation under heaven.”

It is easy for us to dismiss the use of such language by the authors of Scripture and assert the impossibility the Early Church could have evangelized places such as the Far East, North, Central, and South America, and Scandinavia by the end of Paul's ministry. Stanley Horton, however, has noted that the synonymous phrase "every nation under heaven" was a common idiom used to speak primarily of those in the known world or even in the Roman Empire."⁶ The first-century Jewish historian Josephus describes the Feast of Pentecost using similar language. He states that at Pentecost, Jerusalem was crowded with tens of thousands of people.⁷ Paraphrasing Deuteronomy 16:16, he says that all these pilgrims come "from the ends of the earth" (Antiquities 4:203). This same phrase appears in the writings of Luke (Acts 1:8) as synonymous with "every nation under heaven" (2:5) and referred to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire.

We should note that the second generation of Christians were equally aware of the extent of the exploits of Christians in the apostolic era. In A.D. 95, Clement states that Paul had already "taught righteousness unto the whole world ... having reached the farthest bounds of the West."⁸ Similarly, "John [the apostle] ... when he was a very old man ... dictated the Gospel to his own disciple, the virtuous Papias of Heirapolis [A.D. 60–120], to fill up what was lacking in those who before him had proclaimed the word to the nations throughout all the earth."⁹

What is true of Paul and Luke must also be true of Jesus. All shared a first-century Mediterranean worldview, mindset, and vocabulary with which they described realities around them. Therefore, when Jesus used the word world (Matthew 24:14) to refer to the extent of the spread of His message, His frame of reference was the same as that of Paul, Josephus, Luke, and countless other contemporaries. Like them, He used these words and phrases to describe the known or civilized or Romanized context in which He lived and taught.

Having briefly surveyed the relevant biblical material, it is easy to see how the Early Church could embrace, preach, and teach the imminent return of Christ. They saw absolutely no impediment to Jesus' return, including revival or world evangelization. They knew these things had already taken place and that Jesus could come at any moment.

Does This Raise More Questions Than It Solves?

Some will claim that if we remove these prerequisites there will be less impetus for missions and personal evangelism. Against this assertion, the following arguments need to be considered:

- 1) The Early Church that turned the whole world upside down with their preaching did so while at the same time believing Jesus could come at any moment. They believed in imminent return, and this belief did not diminish the fervency of their personal witness or their emphasis on the mission of the Church. Quite the contrary; their belief in imminent return seems to have encouraged faithfulness in personal witness and missionary activity.
- 2) Neither Luke nor John records Jesus' prediction about world evangelism recorded by Matthew 24:14 and Mark 13:10. Nevertheless, the communities in which they were a part (traditionally, Rome and Asia Minor) — that (at least originally) did not have access to the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark — were as active as any other in the prosecution of the Great Commission.
- 3) We do not become involved in missions and personal evangelism so Jesus can return; we do them because He is going to return. This is not a case of semantics: the former is Kingdom Now and Dominion Theology, both of which are officially disapproved doctrines.⁹
- 4) We do not become involved in missions and personal evangelism to fulfill prophecy. He does that. We are involved in missions because we love Him and want to keep His commandments (Matthew 28:19,20; Mark 16:15; cf. Luke 24:47), and because we love people and want to see them in right relationship with God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20).
- 5) The Father has already set the time of Jesus' return and the setting up of His earthly kingdom (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7). Jesus taught this to the Early Church himself. Nevertheless, they took His message throughout their world within three decades after His ascension.

The point is this: It makes absolutely no difference which impediment we place in the way of Jesus' return or what

motivates us to do so — all equally nullify belief in the doctrine of imminent return.¹¹ Either He can return at any moment or He cannot return until certain prerequisites are met. If the latter is the case, we cannot truly believe in imminent return.

A Related Concern: Date Setting

Having established that believers can truly embrace the return of Jesus as imminent, it is crucial to the health of the Church and the integrity of its message that the Church avoids a related error. The desire to know the exact date of the Lord's return is as old as the New Testament (Acts 1:6,7), and the impetus toward date setting has continued unabated into the information age. To date, however, every attempt to specify the time of Jesus' return has met with failure.

The fact Jesus did not appear at the end of the first millennium A.D. dashed the hopes of many. When 1914 came and went, the Jehovah's Witnesses needed to reinterpret their prediction by claiming there had been an "invisible [rather than literal] return." More recently, considerable spiritual fallout came in the wake of the book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988*. Despite the millions of copies sold, at least three retries and worldwide exposure on Christian television, the author died in 2001 without seeing his predictions realized.

In 1994, a charismatic pastor prophesied that God was going to "rip the evil out of this world" on Thursday, June 9, of that year. Such a cleansing is indeed predicted by Scripture as a prominent aspect of the end of human history (Isaiah 2:2-4; 66:15-24; Zechariah 14:9-21; Romans 14:11; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 11:15; 18:18; 21:1-5). However, when that day came and went and evil remained a very real part of this world, that pastor resorted to a spiritual interpretation of his prophecy reminiscent of the Jehovah's Witnesses. As at the end of the first millennium A.D., the approach of Y2K signaled yet another outpouring of dire predictions, none of which came to pass. Undaunted, new Web sites regularly predict the year or time of year that Jesus will return. One relatively new Web site claims to have accurately calculated the return of Christ to take place in 2013 (www.danielstimeline.com).

Unintended Bad Fruit

Irrespective of the date, once people set one, this automatically precludes Jesus — at least in the minds of some — from being able to return at any moment before that magic moment. This in turn undermines the doctrine of imminent return. And as with all other impediments, this inadvertently places man in control of end-time events rather than God. In addition, each of the examples cited above only serves to hurt the health of the body of Christ and minimize the effectiveness of its witness.

The teaching of Scripture is clear: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36 and parallels). Although some claim it is possible to know the general time period or season, the Scriptures are equally clear: "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). If we are able to accurately calculate the time of His return, we will be true and the Scriptures will be in error. He will not really be able to come "like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2, NASB).

Scriptural Prescription for Christian Living in Light of the Imminent Return of Christ

If accurately predicting the return of Jesus is not the task of His disciples, what is our responsibility in light of the imminent return of Christ?

- 1) We are to be constantly engaged in witness (John 4:35; 9:4; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Galatians 6:9; Ephesians 5:16) that emphasizes the time of His return is near (Matthew 4:17; 2 Corinthians 6:2).
- 2) We are to be on guard against the increasing number of deceivers and deceptions characteristic of the end-time (Matthew 24:4,5,11,24; 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Peter 3:17).
- 3) We are to be awake, sober, and alert (Matthew 24:42,43; 25:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:6; 1 Peter 4:7; Revelation 16:15).
- 4) We are to be ready, prepared (Matthew 24:44; 25:10; Luke 12:35-37; Revelation 19:7).

5) We are to be wise (Matthew 25:2; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:18).

6) We are to be holy in conduct and thought (Luke 21:34; 2 Peter 3:11; Revelation 16:15).

7) We are to be living servant lives filled with the fruit of good deeds (Hebrews 10:24,25; 1 Peter 4:8–10).

8) We are to be earnestly and expectantly desiring His appearing (Luke 12:36; 2 Timothy 4:8; 2 Peter 3:12; Revelation 22:17,20).

Conclusion

Scripture emphasizes that Jesus can come at any moment. At no time does this suggest we can embrace the doctrine of imminent return and at the same time maintain that there are certain unmet prerequisites that prohibit it. Regarding human responsibility, the consistent emphasis of the New Testament is on living in obedient service and effective witness in light of His imminent return. Date setting not only impedes the testimony of the Church, it also undermines the doctrine of imminent return. The timetable of Jesus' return is within the purview of God alone. Until that day, let the Bride of the 21st century say the same thing the Bride of the first century said, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20, NASB).

Notes

1. http://www.ag.org/top/Beliefs/Statement_of_Fundamental_Truths/sft_full.cfm.

2. Neither the Bible nor the doctrinal statements of the Assemblies of God is so nuanced that we are able to argue that the Rapture is imminent but the revelation of Jesus Christ is not. Nor on the basis of these same documents are we able to argue the reverse. In fact, whether the term in use is second coming, return, rapture, or coming, the Scriptures and our own literature suggest that these events are imminent (cf., e.g., Hardy W. Steinberg, "The Rapture and the Revelation," http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/top/sermon_data/200732.pdf; http://www.ag.org/top/Beliefs/gendoct_17_endtime_events.cfm; George D. Cope, "Living in light of the Lord's return," pentecostalevangel.ag.org/Coverpages2002/4583_cvr_pg.cfm; George Wood, "Five major priorities," tpe.ag.org/2007PDFs/4879_Wood.pdf; Jim Railey, "What does the future hold?" http://www.pentecostalevangel.ag.org/Articles2002/foundational_eight.cfm; Statement of Fundamental Truths, www.ag.org/top/Beliefs/Statement_of_Fundamental_Truths/sft.pdf, etc.

3. Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission (<http://www.Lockman.org>).

4. Hurst, Randy, "Unreached," Today's Pentecostal Evangel, 2 March 2008, 12.

5. Alan Johnson, "The Call to Extreme Missions," Rapport 22.1 (Winter 2006):13,14.

6. Stanley M. Horton. Acts (Springfield, Mo.: Logion, 2001), 60, note 34, emphasis added.

7. War 1:253; 2:42; Antiquities 14:337; 17:254.

8. Clement 5:7; translation is taken from J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, The Apostolic Fathers (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 59.

9. Fragments of Papias 20 in Lightfoot and Harmer, 535.

10. "Endtime Revival — Spirit-Led and Spirit-Controlled: A Response To Resolution 16." Prepared by the Commission on Doctrinal Purity and Ratified by the General Presbytery, August 2000. http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200102/088_endtime_revival.cfm; the latter is largely what motivated the evangelistic efforts of the Early Church.

11. Nunnally, Wave, "Looking Back at Y2K," *Pentecostal Evangel*, 25 March 2001, 15.

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