In our series of articles titled, *The Rapture is After the Tribulation*, we outlined the biblical basis for post-tribulationism. **Our basic thesis was that Jesus' teaching to His Apostles-in-training, with its post-trib rapture, formed the foundation for the eschatology of the early Church.** In contrast to this, the pre-trib theory claims that Paul taught a new eschatology featuring a pre-trib rapture which was quite different from Jesus' (Jewish) teaching.

**The eschatology of the Early Church (after the deaths of the Apostles) was the direct result of the labor of the Apostles.** One big advantage the Early Christians had over us is 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, where Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers about the "Restrainer," who was holding back the revelation of Antichrist. Paul wrote, "remember ye not, that when I was with you I told you these things. And now ye know what withholdeth..." [v. 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. For example, below we have quoted Ireneaus and Hippolytus rather extensively. Both of these men dealt with eschatology extensively, and both had a chain of linkage to the Apostle John who wrote Revelation. John personally discipled 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 discipled 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 (who's works have survived) to deal with end-time prophecy in any 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 even 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 teachers than to test their students! If our theory is correct, that a uniform rapture view can be traced from Jesus through the Epistles and Revelation, then we would expect to find the same continuity in the writings of the post-apostolic Church. On the other hand, if pre-tribbers are correct in their theory, that Paul was given a new prophetic scenario for the Church, we would expect the post-apostolic Church (especially Gentiles to whom Paul was sent) to embrace this alleged pre-trib scheme, and to distinguish their eschatology from what Jesus taught in the Olivet Discourse. If the post-apostolic Christians display the kind of post-trib expectancy consistent with Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse, then pre-tribbers 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. Most of the writers understood the Millennium as the literal reign of Christ and the saints on earth for 1,000 years after the second coming. But, those who favored allegorical interpretation (spiritualizing the Millennium) thought the 70th week (but not the tribulation) was already fulfilled. These were exclusively North African writers, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Julius Africanus (all of which were connected with the heretical Alexandrian school). Tertullian, also of North Africa (Carthage), thought the 70th week was past. Yet, like the orthodox writers, he still believed in a future tribulation and Antichrist, and a literal Millennium.

However, despite the 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 post-tribulationists, seeing only one future coming of Christ after the tribulation.

We do NOT claim independent authority for any Christian literature outside the Bible. Some of the writers we refer to carry greater weight than others, depending on their level of orthodoxy, and their linkage 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 post-trib thesis, and ignored those that oppose us. The writings of the early Christians consistently support post-tribulationism, and give absolutely no hint of pre-tribulationism.

**IMMINENCE or EXPECTANCY?**

One of the key elements of pre-trib thinking is the idea that Jesus could come at any moment, and no intervening prophetic events need occur prior to Jesus' coming. Some pre-trib authors have claimed the early Christians believed in the imminency of Jesus' coming. **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 "imminency."

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." [Irenaeus: Against Heresies, Book V, XXX]

[Click for more quotes showing non-imminency (Non-Java Window).]

**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.” [Dialog with Trypho, CX]

FUTURIST or HISTORICIST?
The early Christians did not believe they were in the tribulation, as is claimed by some. They 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 had been 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 held a literal "futurist" view of Revelation, just as pre-tribbers do today, minus the pre-trib 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." [Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, 27,28]

Some pre-trib authors have implied that the reason the early Christians did not teach pre-tribulationism is because they were not as theologically sophisticated as modern scholars. They had not developed their doctrinal positions enough to realize a pre-trib 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 pre-tribulationism was "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? Were 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 generations? The whole concept of evolving theology is absolutely antibiblical. 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 a 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 post-trib argument against pre-tribulationism 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 post-trib, 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 pre-tribulationism 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 pre-millennial, futurist, and post-tribulational.