

The ‘Rapture’—The Futurist’s Escape Plan: Studies In Eschatology

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What exactly *is* the “Rapture” and what are the different arguments for it? Do they hold up under scrutiny and, if not, is there a critical flaw?

While the scope of this study does not allow a full analysis of them, we will show two foundational presuppositions behind the “Rapture” teaching: 1) The Dispensational and Premillennial view of eschatology; and 2) A literal and futuristic interpretation of prophecy.

While our main priority is to outline the Rapture teaching, we will also argue that these underlying principles of interpretation provide the critical flaw, resulting in not only unresolvable anomalies for the Rapture theory (and its parent, Dispensational Premillennialism) but also – and more importantly – significant aberrations for the church, robbing it of its kingdom mandate to transform the world here and now.

The Rapture teaching, unfortunately, provides an ‘escape route’ from this world and the rigors of its spiritual conflict. It paints the scenario of a defeated church, cowering under the tyranny of an end-time Antichrist, desperately awaiting rescue from this world.

THE RAPTURE

The ‘Rapture’ is a word used by Premillennialists (including Dispensationalists) to describe the uniting of the church with Christ just prior to the second coming. In the words of Ludwigson, “it has been applied to the doctrine of the ‘catching away’ or transporting of believers from the earth to heaven by the Lord at His second coming.”^[1]

The basis of the ‘Rapture’ teaching, and its complement, the ‘Tribulation’, is a literal and futuristic interpretation of two prophetic passages: Daniel’s 70 weeks prophecy (Dan 9:20-27) and the Olivet discourse (Matt 24). Various other scriptures used include Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1; Mk 13:19; 1 Cor 15:51-53; 1 Thes 4:13-17 and Rev 3:10. From these, it is taught that through the Rapture the dead are raised and those that are living and remain are changed in the ‘twinkling of an eye’ and, therefore, escape death. Both groups are then caught up to meet the Lord in the air. In contrast to Historic Premillennialism, which holds to one ‘second coming’, “Dispensationalism splits the second coming of Christ into two parts: the Rapture, which is His coming for the saints, and the Revelation, which is His coming with the saints. This latter being also His coming for Israel and the world.”^[2] The coming for the saints in the Rapture occurs secretly and without warning before the Tribulation (according to the more predominant pre-tribulation Premillennialists) rescuing it from the potential ravages of the Antichrist. The raptured saints are preserved in heaven until after the Tribulation when they return with Christ at his second coming to destroy Antichrist and his armies in the battle of Armageddon (Rev 19:11-21).

Three words are used to distinguish between the Rapture and the Second Advent: ‘parousia’ (coming), ‘epiphany’ (appearing), ‘apocalypse’ (revelation); ‘parousia’ referring to the coming for His saints in the Rapture; ‘epiphany’ and ‘apocalypse’ to the return of Christ with His saints after the Great Tribulation. However, more recently, it has been recognized by this school that these terms cannot be used as technical designations of the two phases of the Premillennial second coming.^[3]

PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

Modern dispensational pre-tribulation Premillennialism finds its origins in the teachings of J. N. Darby, Edward Irving and the visions of a Scottish girl, Margaret McDonald. MacPherson argues, from his research, that Margaret McDonald’s prophetic visions of 1830 were the original source for the two stage second coming, from which Darby and Irving then developed their doctrine.^[4] Darby, one of the early founders of the Brethren Movement, visited North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century promulgating the new teaching^[5], which was gradually adopted by the mainstream of the evangelical church. The Scofield Reference Bible and many of the interdenominational evangelists disseminated the Pre-tribulation Rapture teaching. Also, many of the leading Bible institutes embraced it, and numerous evangelical theological seminaries,

including Dallas Theological Seminary.^[6]

The “essential basis” of the pre-tribulation Rapture theory, according to J. Dwight Pentecost, is “the literal method of interpretation of the scriptures.”^[7] He also stipulates that, “as a necessary adjunct to this, the pre-tribulationist believes in a dispensational interpretation of the Word of God”, in which, “the Church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan.”^[8] On this basis, Clouse describes the pre-tribulation scenario: “When the church is withdrawn from the world, then the prophetic events involving Israel can be fulfilled. Antichrist will rise to power by promising peace on earth and will make an agreement to protect the restored state of Israel. However, the Jews will be betrayed by their new benefactor, who will suddenly suspend all traditional religious ceremonies and demand that they worship him. Those who do not cooperate will be persecuted. This final holocaust against God’s chosen people will lead them to accept Christ as their savior. Plagues will ravage the earth during this time of tribulation, and finally, the battle of Armageddon will result in the visible, personal, victorious return to earth of Christ and his saints. The Lord will then bind Satan for a thousand years and rule the world with his followers for a millennium. According to pre-tribulation Premillennialists, all the prophecies which were supposed to be fulfilled when Christ came the first time will come to pass at his second coming. The Jewish rejection of Christ in the first century forced the postponement of the kingdom until the second coming.”^[9]

Feinberg, a pre-tribulationist, agrees with Pentecost in the basic issues when he says, “The Rapture touches the extremely important issues of biblical interpretation,” and, “the relationship between the Church and Israel ...”^[10] The former determines the view of the latter. The pre-tribulationist insists on a so-called ‘literal’ interpretation of scripture and, therefore, as Allis points out, “Israel means Israel: it does not mean or typify the Church.”^[11] The distinction between the two – the Church and Israel – is thus established. Allis again comments, that “the question of literal versus figurative interpretation is ... one which has to be faced at the very outset. And it is to be observed ... that the issue cannot be stated as a simple alternative. ... Both principles have their proper place and their necessary limitations.”^[12] So, what are the limitations? First, ‘literal’ interpretation must be governed by the normal laws of language and, hence, take into account literary genre. The Bible’s use of figurative language, which according to the common use of language, cannot be, and isn’t meant to be, understood literally. This is especially true of poetry and prophecy. Second, ‘literal’ interpretation must be governed by “the fact that the OT is both preliminary and preparatory to the NT ...”^[13] First the natural and then the spiritual. The OT economy of Israel prefigures the spiritual reality of the NT Church. This is the essential message of the Epistle to the Hebrews. However, the pre-tribulationist Premillennialist seems to defy this principle and interprets Israel in prophecy literally. Therefore, the prophets had no knowledge of the ‘Church Age’, which then becomes a parenthesis in God’s prophetic programme, being fulfilled only through Israel. Allis points this out: “The parenthesis view of the Church is the inevitable result of the doctrine that OT prophecy must be fulfilled literally to Israel and that the Church is a mystery first revealed to the apostle Paul.”^[14] Once the church has been removed through the Rapture all the kingdom prophecies, unfulfilled due to Israel’s rejection of the Messiah, will finally be fulfilled in the restoration of Israel’s statehood, temple and sacrifices. At the second coming the kingdom is established through the nation of Israel and Christ will then reign for a thousand years from the city of Jerusalem. Thus, the principle of literal interpretation of prophecy leads inevitably to the establishment of a literal kingdom.

Another impact of the ‘literal’ interpretation of prophecy is found in Futurism.^[15] The kingdom prophecies describing the future glories of Israel are taken literally and, therefore, await fulfillment. This bears on the interpretation of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy (in which the church ‘parenthesis’ is discovered between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week) and the Book of Revelation (chs 4-22 being interpreted futuristically, the Rapture having occurred in ch 4).

Viewing Daniel’s seventieth week futuristically, Dwight Pentecost uses it to support a pre-tribulation Rapture when he indicates that the scope of God’s wrath covers the whole earth and more particularly Israel. He points out that because the church did not exist before the day of Pentecost “the church could not have been in the first sixty-nine weeks, which are related only to God’s program for Israel, it can have no part in the seventieth week, which is again related to God’s program for Israel after the mystery program for the church has been concluded.”^[16] The obvious implication being that the church is raptured between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week. In the words of Pentecost: “It must be concluded, ... since every passage dealing with the tribulation relates it to God’s program for Israel, that the scope of the tribulation prevents the church from participating in it.”^[17] Feinberg also uses the futuristic interpretation of this prophecy, as well as Revelation, as one of his two presuppositions for the pre-tribulation argument.^[18]

Other arguments used to support this position include the necessity of an interval between the Rapture and the second coming, and the promises in Scripture of exemption from divine wrath. Pentecost holds to the necessity of a gap between the Rapture and Second Advent for events such as the judgement seat of Christ, the presentation of the church to Christ and marriage of the

Lamb.^[19] However, he admits that it can be argued that the Rapture and return with Christ in the Second Advent can be instantaneous and Feinberg seems to concede that it could be two “distinct aspects of a single complex event.”^[20] Nonetheless, Feinberg holds to a necessary interval “so that some saints can be saved to go into the millennium in non-glorified bodies.”^[21] According to Feinberg, the Premillennialist must explain the presence in the millennium of Gentiles (Is 19:18-25; Zech 14:16-21; Is 60:1-3), sin, and the final rebellion (Rev 20:7-10). He asks how, if the wicked are destroyed at Christ’s coming, will this be. The explanation, according to Feinberg, is found in the saints who refuse to take the mark of the beast in the tribulation and are not martyred. They enter the millennium with non-glorified bodies and procreate normally, “therefore, the wicked or the rebellious in the kingdom, as that period progresses, are the unbelieving children of believing parents. This alone can harmonize all that the scripture says on the matter.”^[22] He does concede, however, that “this argument does not establish a pretribulation rapture”, but “it does show that there must be a separation of the rapture from the Second Advent so that people with natural, physical bodies can be saved and populate the millennial kingdom.”^[23] This is clearly a significant weakness in the Dispensational-Premillennial scheme. It is easily solved if the so-called millennial age is, in fact, fulfilled in the inaugurated kingdom of Christ in the new covenant era. This then easily accounts for sin, death, and procreation in the kingdom age. Both Amillennialism and Postmillennialism provide this plausibility. Furthermore, they view the consummation as one simultaneous event: the return of Christ, the resurrection, and the translation of those who remain to meet the Lord as he comes.

Perhaps the most predominant scripture used to show the promise of the church’s exemption from divine wrath, and therefore, absence during the tribulation is Rev 3:10: “I will keep thee from the hour of tribulation.” Pentecost maintains this promises “a removal from the sphere of testing, not a preservation through it.”^[24] Other texts used to express this promise include: 1Thes 1:10; 5:9; Rom 5:9; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6. ^[25] There are, however, insurmountable difficulties in applying Rev 3:10 to the tribulation which Allis discusses at length.^[26] Ludwigson, though, feels that the evidence for pre-tribulationism is “cumulative rather than ... dependent on a single point.”^[27] He maintains that all the evidence can be subsumed under three heads: 1) The great tribulation is the punishment of Israel’s rejection of Christ (not of the church); 2) The nature of the Christian church disallows its presence in the tribulation; and 3) An interval of time is necessary between the rapture and the Second Advent. He provides substantiation for his first two points but not the last.^[28] This is significant, as the Postmillennialist and Amillennialist would not argue the first two points but disagree with the last; the only issue being as to when the tribulation occurs, AD 70 or in the future.

Evaluating this view, the church is robbed of the kingdom promises. As we have seen, its flawed hermeneutic, the literal interpretation of prophecy, teaches that the kingdom promises are literal and, hence, exclusively for Israel. This relegates the church to a stop-gap measure, a parenthesis between the First Advent, when Jesus came to Israel and was not received, and the Second Advent, when he will be received. It is claimed that the “prophetic clock stopped” when Jesus “...came to his own, and his own did not receive him” (Jn 1:11). The kingdom was then put on hold until the church is raptured and taken out of the way. Then Israel will finally respond to the preaching of Jewish evangelists. Christ returns, ushering in the kingdom and rules for a thousand years from Jerusalem. This scheme is a patent denial of the Gospels and the Pauline revelation, grounded in the prophets, that shows the church as the new Israel of God, consisting of Jews and Gentiles. With the church denied its kingdom mandate and promises, is it any wonder she is found crushed under Satan’s heel, needing to escape through the Rapture! This teaching belies Jesus’ promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church (Mt 16:18). Rather, this promise is the truth and the Rapture theory the lie. Satan is the one in the defensive position, hunkered down behind hell’s teetering gates! The church will fulfil her destiny of harvesting the nations and bringing in the kingdom before Christ returns. Contra to the Rapture theory, Christ and his church will not go out of history defeated!

MID-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

Archer prefers to call this school “mid-seventieth week pre-tribulationism”, holding to the view that the tribulation proper doesn’t begin until after the first three and half years.^[29] According to Ludwigson, “Those who affirm this view of the time of the rapture hold essentially the same position as the pre-tribulationist with the exception that the interval of time between the Lord’s coming ‘for’ His saints and His coming ‘with’ them is shortened.”^[30]

This period is shortened from seven years to three and a half based on references to this period in Dan 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11; and Rev 11:2; 12:6. Dan 7:25; 9:27 are also cited to show that the church is, for three and a half years, under the tyrannical control of antichrist.^[31] It is only the last half of the tribulation, after the Rapture, that is a manifestation of divine wrath upon the world. The Rapture actually occurs at “the sounding of the seventh trumpet and the catching up of the two witnesses in Rev 11.”^[32] The seven seals and trumpets are fulfilled in the church age before the Rapture, the seals indicating only ‘the

beginning of sorrows' which precede the great tribulation.[\[33\]](#)

Some of the difficulties with the pre-tribulation view that prompted the development of mid-tribulationism include the secret nature of the Rapture, evangelism and revival during the tribulation despite the absence of the Holy Spirit, and dispensationalism's reduction of the church.[\[34\]](#)

Nonetheless, the essential problem remains, as explained for the pre-tribulation Rapture. The church – in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek – is not the climax of God's redemptive purpose, despite the NT teaching it, with Paul declaring that "Now by the church the manifold wisdom of God is displayed to principalities and powers" (Eph 3:10). The church will not be taken out through a Rapture either pre or mid-tribulation. It will rather remain, succeeding in its mandate to disciple the nations, teaching them to obey the commandments of God. And in that mandate Jesus promised, contra to the Rapture theory, that he would be with his disciples "to the *end* of the age" (Mt 28:20).

POST-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

This view holds that the second coming of Christ and the Rapture are parts of the same event. According to Pentecost, "This theory holds that the church will continue on the earth until the Second Advent ... at which time the church will be caught up unto the clouds to meet the Lord who has come into the air on his way from heaven to earth for the Second Advent, to return immediately with him"[\[35\]](#). During the tribulation the church "will not be subject to the outpouring of the wrath of God, being sealed in protection", however, "they may be exposed to the persecution of the antichrist ..."[\[36\]](#)

Post-tribulationism alleviates the sharp distinction between Israel and the church. Moo comments, "What is important ... is to distinguish carefully between prophecies directed to Israel as a nation) and which must be fulfilled in a national Israel) and prophecies directed to Israel as the people of God (which can be fulfilled in the people of God – a people that includes the church!). ... It is our contention, then that the Great Tribulation predicted for Israel by eg Daniel, is directed to Israel as the people of God. It can therefore be fulfilled in the people of God, which includes the church as well as Israel."[\[37\]](#) This, then, allows the church into the tribulation and blurs the dispensational distinction between herself and Israel. Moo feels that this "paves the way for more objective exegesis of the relevant texts: "... a particular view of the relationship of Israel and the church can too easily lead to circular reasoning. One argues that such and such a text cannot refer to the church because it describes the Great Tribulation, which is only for Israel – but one can know that it is exclusively for Israel only on the basis of an exegetical treatment of every relevant passage ..."[\[38\]](#)

At the public, visible coming of Christ, the church, including the believing dead of both Old and New Testaments, will be raptured to meet Christ in his return. This involves the first resurrection at which time antichrist is destroyed, Satan is bound and the millennium inaugurated (Rev 20:4-6). According to Ludwigson this resurrection occurs "at the last trump, ... the day of the Lord, at the conversion of Israel, after the great tribulation, and at the establishment of the Messianic kingdom."[\[39\]](#)

This view turns to the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt 13) to show that both grow together until the harvest which is the consummation of the age at the second coming (Matt 24:3). Therefore, there is no separation for the church from the tares through the Rapture as the pre and post-tribulation would suggest.

The great commission is also referred to in support, showing that the church is in the world until the end of the age (Matt 28:19,20). As Ludwigson comments, "This commission is the church and not a Jewish remnant ..."[\[40\]](#)

It is also held that the technical terminology that refers to the end (epiphany, apocalypse, parousia) all relate to one and the same event, the second coming of Christ, not two different stages as taught by the other schools. However, Premillennial scholars have recently conceded that these terms cannot be used to substantiate the two-stage coming.[\[41\]](#)

Christ's coming is also held to be contingent on the fulfillment of predicted events. The gospel must be preached in all the world before the end comes (Matt 28:19,20; 24:14); the rise of apostasy (2Thess 2:8); and the revelation of the man of sin, must all first occur. Heaven must retain Christ until the restitution of all things spoken by the prophets (Acts 3:21). The Rapture, therefore cannot be imminent but can in actual fact be foreseen by the fulfillment of predicted events and signs.

While compared to the pre and mid-tribulation views this view is more orthodox, its Premillennial schemata still views the tribulation and the Antichrist as future, immediately prior to the second coming. It defers the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24,

the prophecy of apocalyptic judgement, to the end-time and, hence, falls foul of the Futurist school's hermeneutical flaws: 1) Violating the principle of context (Mt 24:34 states unambiguously that "*this* generation [referring to those alive at the time] will not pass away until all these things take place", hence, the tribulation Jesus predicted was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70); and 2) Literal interpretation of symbolic language, violating laws of language, especially literary genre.

CONCLUSION

It must be remembered, as stated in our introduction, that these three schools are based on two common presuppositions:

1. A Dispensational and Premillennial view of eschatology; and
2. A literal and therefore futuristic interpretation of prophecy.

It must be asked, "If the presuppositions are correct, why is there such disagreement and complexity evidenced in the three different schools here considered?" This insoluble complexity appears to be more than adequately illustrated in a text referred to above, "The Rapture: Pre, Mid or Post-Tribulation?" – panel of three professors from the Free Evangelical Church seminary (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) – Archer, Feinberg and Moo, propound and respond to each view displaying subtleties and nuances of argument that in the end provide no resolve.

We hold, therefore, that the foundations are faulty, flawing the whole construction. All the problems of the Futurist interpretation – and thus of the Rapture and the Tribulation – are resolved when the key texts, the Olivet Discourse and the Revelation, are interpreted preteristically, as primarily fulfilled in the first generation of believers, viewing them as preparation for the epochal events that were imminent: the judgement of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem; the end of the old covenant economy; and the ascension of Christ and outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church as the agency of God's kingdom in the world.

As stated at the outset, the Rapture teaching, and its accompanying Dispensational Premillennial scheme, among other things, postures the church as a defeated remnant tyrannised by the Antichrist. It is neither Christ glorifying, in that his First Advent was clearly not sufficient to subdue all his enemies, nor is it faith engendering, in that the church ultimately fails, requiring rescue. The false hope of the imminent "Rapture" provides an escape route for the faint-hearted, robbing the church of her kingdom mandate to change the world.

As the incomparable Spurgeon once declared, commenting on Psalm 86:9,

David was not a believer in the theory that the world will grow worse and worse, and that the dispensation will wind up with general darkness, and idolatry. Earth's sun is to go down amid tenfold night if some of our prophetic brethren are to be believed. Not so do we expect, but we look for the day when dwellers in all lands shall learn righteousness, shall trust in the Saviour, shall worship thee alone O God, and shall glorify thy name. The modern notion has greatly damped the zeal of the church for missions, and the sooner it is shown to be unscriptural the better for the cause of God. It neither consorts with prophecy, honours God, nor inspires the church with ardour. Far hence be it driven!

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[20]Feinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 72

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[22]*ibid*, p. 77

[23]Feinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 79 (for the whole argument, read pp 72-79)

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[27]Ludwigson, *op. cit.*, p. 136

[28]*ibid*, pp. 136-146

[29]G. L. Archer, “The Rapture: Pre, Mid, or Post-Tribulation?”, (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1984), p. 122

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