

Rapture of the Church.¹ A phrase used by premillennialists to refer to the church being united with Christ at his second coming (from Lat. *rapio*, “caught up”). The main scriptural passage upon which the teaching is based is 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17: “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

The major divisions of interpretation of Paul’s words center on the relationship of the time of the rapture to the tribulation period that marks the end of the age. Pretribulationists teach that the church will be removed before this seven-year period and the revelation of the Antichrist. A second group, the midtribulationists, contend that the church will be raptured during the tribulation after the Antichrist’s rise to power but before the severe judgments that prepare the way for Christ’s return to establish his rule on earth. Another approach to the problem is that of the posttribulationists, who believe that the church will continue to exist in the world throughout the entire tribulation and be removed at the end of the period when Christ returns in power.

Pretribulationism and the Origin of the Rapture Debate. Despite the attempt by dispensationalists to identify all premillennialists with peculiar aspects of their thought such as the pretribulation rapture, it is obvious that throughout most of the history of the church those who taught premillennialism did not have such a detailed interpretation of the endtimes. Until the early nineteenth century those believers who discussed the rapture believed it would occur in conjunction with the return of Christ at the end of the tribulation period. It was the contribution of John Nelson Darby to eschatology that led many Christians to teach that the return of Christ would be in two stages: one for his saints at the rapture and the other with his saints to control the world at the close of the great tribulation. According to this interpretation of Bible prophecy, between these two events the seventieth week predicted by Daniel (9:24–27) would be fulfilled and the Antichrist would come to power. With the church removed from the scene, God would resume his dealings with Israel at that time.

Darby’s ideas had a wide influence in Britain and the United States. Many evangelicals became pretribulationists through the preaching of the interdenominational evangelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) and the leading Bible institutes and graduate schools of theology such as Dallas Theological Seminary, Talbot Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary also contributed to the popularity of this view. During the troubled times of the 1960s there was a revival of the pretribulationist view on a popular level through the books of Hal Lindsey and the ministries of preachers and Bible teachers who use the electronic media.

If the influence of Darby is obvious in the work of his successors, it is a more difficult task to determine how he arrived at an understanding of the secret pretribulation rapture. Samuel P. Tregelles, like Darby a member of the Plymouth Brethren movement, charged

¹Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 983.

that the view originated during a charismatic service conducted by Edward Irving in 1832. Other scholars maintain that the new understanding of the rapture was the product of a prophetic vision given to a young Scottish girl, Margaret MacDonald, in 1830. She claimed special insight into the second coming and began to share her views with others. Her ecstatic conduct and apocalyptic teaching led to a charismatic renewal in Scotland. Impressed by the accounts of a new Pentecost, Darby visited the scene of the revival. According to his own testimony, in later years he met Margaret MacDonald but rejected her claims of a new outpouring of the Spirit. Despite his opposition to MacDonald's general approach, some writers believe that he accepted her view of the rapture and worked it into his own system.

Other scholars feel that one must accept Darby's own explanation of how he arrived at his eschatological view. He based it upon an understanding that the church and Israel are distinct entities in Scripture. 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. The Jews will be betrayed by their new benefactor, however, 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 pretribulation premillennialists, all the prophecies that 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. The view that was taken of the church and its place in prophecy is crucial to the acceptance of the pretribulation rapture and the system it supports.

Another argument given in favor of the pretribulation rapture is that the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit must be removed before the Antichrist can be revealed (2 Thess. 2:6–8). Because the Spirit is particularly associated with the church, it follows that the church must be absent from the scene when the Spirit is gone. Among the other factors that seem to support pretribulationism is the imminence of the rapture. If it can occur at any time, then no tribulation signs such as the revelation of the Antichrist, the battle of Armageddon, or the abomination in the temple precede the "blessed event."

The Midtribulation View. One of the leaders in presenting a different view of the rapture was Harold John Ockenga, a leader in the evangelical movement that developed in the United States after World War II. In a brief personal testimony in *Christian Life* (February 1955), he cited many difficulties associated with pretribulationism. These included the secret aspect of the rapture, the revival to be experienced during the tribulation despite the removal of the Holy Spirit, and the reduction in the importance of the church involved in dispensational eschatology. Other evangelical leaders joined in the criticism of the pretribulation position. The modifications they advocated were slight, involving the limitations of the wrath of God upon the world (Rev. 16–18) to the first three and a half years prior to the battle of Armageddon. Influenced by the repeated mention of three and a half years (forty-two months) in Daniel 7, 9, and 12 and in

Revelation 11 and 12, they argued for a shortened tribulation period. To support this argument, they cited Daniel 7:25, which indicated that the church will be under the tyrannical rule of the Antichrist for three and a half years. Daniel 9:27 also indicates that the world ruler of the endtimes will make an agreement with Christians and Jews guaranteeing religious freedom, but then he will carry out the second stage of his plan and suppress religious observances. Various NT passages were also believed to support midtribulationism, including Revelation 12:14, which predicts a flight into the wilderness by the church during the first three and a half years of the tribulation period. Also, midtribulationists believed that their view fit into the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13; and Luke 12) better than the pretribulation interpretation.

Midtribulationists claim that the rapture is to take place after the fulfillment of certain predicted signs and the preliminary phase of the tribulation as described in Matthew 24:10–27. The event will not be secret but will be accompanied by an impressive display including a great shout, a trumpet blast, or a great thunder (1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 11:15; 14:2). This dramatic sign will attract the attention of unsaved people, and when they realize that the Christians have disappeared, they will come to Christ in such large numbers that a major revival will take place (Rev. 7:9, 14).

The Posttribulation View. Many other interpreters were uncomfortable with the sharp distinction that the pretribulationists drew between the church and Israel. Christ, they believed, would return to rapture his saints and establish his millennial rule at the same time. They cited numerous passages (e.g., Matt. 24:27, 29) that indicate that Christ's second coming must be visible, public, and following the tribulation. Their belief was based upon the fact that much of the advice given to the church in Scripture relative to the last days is meaningless if it does not go through the tribulation. For example, the church is told to flee to the mountains when certain events occur, such as the setting up of the abomination of desolation in the holy place (Matt. 24:15–20).

Many of the arguments suggested by those who advocate the posttribulation view are stated in opposition to the pretribulation position, which has been the most widely held interpretation among twentieth-century American premillennialists. Included in these criticisms are suggestions that the imminent return of Christ does not require a pretribulation rapture. Posttribulationists also point to the difficulty of deciding which passages of Scripture apply to Israel and which are relevant to the church. They also contend that there is a notable lack of explicit teaching about the rapture in the NT.

Advocates of the posttribulation position differ among themselves on the application of the prophetic Scriptures and the details about the return of Christ. John Walvoord has detected four schools of interpretation among their number. The first of these, classic posttribulationism, is represented by the work of J. Barton Payne, who taught that the church has always been in tribulation and therefore the great tribulation has largely been fulfilled. The second main division of posttribulationists are those who hold the semiclassical position found in the work of Alexander Reese. Among the variety of views held by these individuals, the most common is that the entire course of church history is an era of tribulation, but in addition there is to be a future period of great tribulation. A third category of posttribulationist interpretation is called futurist and is ably presented in the books of George E. Ladd. He accepts a future period of three and a half or seven years of tribulation between the present era and the second coming of Christ. He was led

to this conclusion by a literal interpretation of Revelation 8–18. A staunch premillennialist, he believes that the pretribulation rapture was an addition to Scripture and as such obscured the truly important event, the actual appearance of Christ to inaugurate his reign. A fourth view is that of Robert H. Gundry, which Walvoord calls the dispensational posttribulational interpretation. Gundry combines in a novel manner the pretribulational arguments and an acceptance of the posttribulation rapture.

The Partial Rapture Interpretation. In addition to those who hold to pretribulation, midtribulation, or posttribulation views of the rapture, others contend for a partial rapture theory. This small group of pretribulationists teaches that only those who are faithful in the church will be caught up at the beginning of the tribulation. The rest will be raptured some time during or at the end of the seven-year period. According to these interpreters, those who are most loyal to Christ will be taken first and the more worldly will be raptured later. Although it is condemned by most premillennialists, the respected G. H. Lang advocated this view.

Conclusion. The interpretation of the rapture has led to some differences of opinion among evangelicals. Those who hold to a pretribulation rapture have been accused of having a severely circumscribed attitude toward the church and its mission, culture and education, and current events. While some dispensationalists involuntarily lend currency to this by regarding their position as almost a cardinal doctrine of the faith, most would reject the above criticism as a baseless generalization. They would insist that their stance excludes neither a highly developed social ethic nor a policy of world rejection rightly understood.

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See also DARBY, JOHN NELSON; DISPENSATION, DISPENSATIONALISM; ESCHATOLOGY; MILLENNIUM, VIEWS OF THE; SCOFIELD, CYRUS INGERSON; SECOND COMING OF CHRIST; TRIBULATION.

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