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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

One of the most often cited objections to pretribulationism is that it is a new teaching in church history having only come on the scene in the 1830s. It is often argued that if the pre-trib rapture were biblical then it would have been taught earlier and throughout church history. In the last decade, individuals have found a number of pre-1830 references to a pre-trib rapture. Here is a summary of that evidence.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Since imminency is considered to be a crucial feature of pretribulationism by scholars such as John Walvoord,[1] it is significant that the Apostolic Fathers, though posttribulational, at the same time just as clearly taught the pretribulational feature of imminence. Since it was common in the early church to hold contradictory positions without even an awareness of inconsistency, it would not be surprising to learn that their era supports both views. Larry Crutchfield notes, "This belief in the imminent return of Christ within the context of ongoing persecution has prompted us to broadly label the views of the earliest fathers, 'imminent intratribulationism.'"[2]

Expressions of imminency abound in the Apostolic Fathers. Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, *The Didache*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas* all speak of imminency.[3] Furthermore, *The Shepherd of Hermas* speaks of the pretribulational concept of escaping the tribulation.

> You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast. Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly.[4]

Evidence of pretribulationism surfaces during the early medieval period in a sermon some attribute to Ephraem the Syrian, but more likely the product of one scholars call Pseudo-Ephraem, entitled *Sermon on The Last Times, The Antichrist, and The End of the World*.[5] The sermon was written some time between the fourth and sixth century. The rapture statement reads as follows:

> Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms all the world? . . . For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.

This statement evidences a clear belief that all Christians will escape the tribulation through a gathering to the Lord and is stated early in the sermon. How else can this be understood other than as pretribulational? The later second coming of Christ to the earth with the saints is mentioned at the end of the sermon.

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

By the fifth century A.D., the amillennialism of Origen and Augustine had won the day in the established Church–East and West. It is probable that some form of premillennialism persisted throughout the Middle Ages, but it existed primarily underground.

It is believed that sects like the Albigenses, Lombards, and the Waldenses were attracted to premillennialism, but little is know of the details of their beliefs since the Catholics destroyed their works when they were found. But there was at least one who held to some form of pretribulationism, namely one named Brother Dolcino in 1304.

Francis Gumerlock is the individual who advocates the Brother Dolcino rapture find and said in his book: "The Dolicinites held to a pre-tribulation rapture theory similar to that in modern dispensationalism."[6] The reason Gumerlock believes that Brother Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren taught pretribulationism is found the following statement:

> "Again, [Dolcino believed and preached and taught] that within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come, then *he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise*, in which are Enoch and Elijah. And in this way they will be *preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist*. And that then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed by him or by his servants, and thus *Antichrist would reign for a long time*. But when the Antichrist is dead, Dolcino himself, who then would be the holy pope, and his preserved followers, will descend on the earth, and will preach the right faith of Christ to all, and will convert those who will be living then to the true faith of Jesus Christ."[7]

THE REFORMATION CHURCH

After over a thousand years of suppression, premillennialism began to be revived as a result of at least four factors. By the late 1500's and the early 1600's, premillennialism began to return as a factor within mainstream Protestantism. With the flowering of biblical interpretation during the late Reformation Period, premillennial interpreters began to abound throughout Protestantism and so did the development of sub-issues like the rapture.

Some began to speak of the rapture. Paul Benware notes:

> Peter Jurieu in his book *Approaching Deliverance of the Church* (1687) taught that Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to heaven before the battle of Armageddon. He spoke of a secret Rapture prior to His coming in glory and judgment at Armageddon. Philip Doddridge's commentary on the New Testament (1738) and John Gill's commentary on the New Testament (1748) both use the term *rapture* and speak of it as imminent. It is clear that these men believed that this coming will precede Christ's descent to the earth and the time of judgment. The purpose was to preserve believers from the time of judgment. James Macknight (1763) and

> Thomas Scott (1792) taught that the righteous will be carried to heaven, where they will be secure until the time of judgment is over.[8]

Frank Marotta, a brethren researcher, believes that Thomas Collier in 1674 makes reference to a pretribulational rapture, but rejects the view,[9] thus showing his awareness that such a view was being taught in the late seventeenth century. There is the interesting case of John Asgill, who wrote a book in 1700 about the possibility of translation (i.e. rapture) without seeing death.[10]

Perhaps the clearest reference to a pretrib rapture, if not the most developed system, before Darby comes from Baptist Morgan Edwards (founder of the Ivey League school, Brown University) who saw a distinct rapture three and a half years before the start of the millennium.[11] The discovery of Edwards, who wrote about his pretrib beliefs in 1744 and later published them in 1788, is hard to dismiss.[12] He taught the following:

> II. *The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years.*
>
> I say, *somewhat more—*, because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's "appearing in the air" (I Thes. iv. 17); and **this will be about three years and a half before the *millennium*,** as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many "mansions in the father's house" (John xiv. 2), and **disappear during the foresaid period of time.** The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for "now the time is come that judgment must begin," and that will be "at the house of God" (I Pet. iv. 17) . . . (p. 7; The spelling of all Edwards quotes have been modernized.)

CONCLUSION

I have heard from another scholar who is reading through many Latin manuscripts of previously unpublished documents that he has found a number of previously unknown pre-trib rapture statements from pre-nineteenth century Christendom. He is planning on publishing his material in a few years. What these pre-Darby rapture statements prove, if nothing else, is that indeed others did see the rapture taught in Scripture similar to the way that pretribulationists in our own day teach. Thus, the argument that no one ever taught pretribulationism until J. N. Darby in 1830 is just not historically true and it is becoming increasingly clear with each passing year. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

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[1] John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), pp. 24-25.

[2] Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers" in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, editors, *When The Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 103.

[3] Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers", pp. 88-101.

[4] *The Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.2.

[5] For more information on this matter see Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 152, No. 607; July-Sept. 1995), pp. 306-17.

[6] Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Day and the Hour: A Chronicle of Christianity's Perennial Fascination with Predicting the End of the World* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2000), p. 80.

[7] Gumerlock's translation of the Latin text in Gumerlock, "A Rapture Citation," pp. 354-55.

[8] Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 197-98.

[9] Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Morganville, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1995), pp. 10-12.

[10] The entire title of Asgill's work is as follows: *An argument proving, that according to the covenant of Eternal Life revealed in the Scriptures, Man may be translated from hence into that Eternal Life, without passing through Death, although the Human Nature of Christ himself could not be thus translated till he had passed through Death.*

[11] Marotta, *Morgan Edwards*.

[12] Morgan Edwards, *Two Academical Exercised on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* (Philadelphia: self-published, 1788).