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May 2009

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Recommended Citation
Ice, Thomas D., "The Three-Quarters Rapture Theory" (2009). *Article Archives.* Paper 43.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/43

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THE THREE-QUARTERS RAPTURE THEORY

by Thomas Ice

Robert Van Kampen was the inventor of the three-quarters rapture theory in the late 1970s. According to one who was there, he first eliminated pretribulationism and then excluded posttribulationism. Thus, he had to come up with another view. That view is what he called the "pre-wrath" rapture theory. That title is a misnomer, since pretribulationism is 100% pre-wrath. If we follow consistency in labeling, Van Kampen's view should be called the three-quarters rapture position, since he teaches that the church will be raptured somewhere in the middle of the last three and a half years of the 70th week of Daniel.

Van Kampen spent a number of years searching for an advocate of his newly developed viewpoint until he was finally able to persuade Marvin Rosenthal to adopt and champion his new theory. I have a friend who was interviewed extensively by Van Kampen (in the 80s) for the pastorate of the church he attended in the Chicago area. My friend spent hours on the phone with Van Kampen, as he tried to convince him of his strange rapture view. In the end, my friend could not agree with Van Kampen. It was clear that Van Kampen was searching for someone to champion his rapture position. Rosenthal wrote a book called *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, which was published by Thomas Nelson in 1990. Later Van Kampen came out with his own book called *The Sign* (three editions, 1992, 1999, 2000) from Crossway Books. He then had published *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple* (1997) with Revell.

WHAT IS THE THREE-QUARTERS RAPTURE THEORY?

Van Kampen's three-quarters rapture view is a blend of midtribulational and posttribulational rationale. Instead of seeing the 24 terms describing the 70th week of Daniel as denoting various characteristics of a single period, Van Kampen chops them into compartmental segments that contain either the wrath of man and Satan or the wrath of God. Through redefinition, Van Kampen limits the wrath of God to the final year and three-quarters of the seven-year period and deduces that the rapture occurs right before that time period. Van Kampen distinguishes the rapture and the second coming with a gap of one and three-quarters years between them. He has the church continuing through the first three-quarters of the tribulation until the three-quarters point rapture occurs.

Van Kampen's theory requires several unique features concerning the church and the tribulation. First, he chops the seventieth week of Daniel into three parts: 1) the beginning of birth pangs (first three and a half years), 2) the great tribulation (first half of the second half of the seven years), 3) the day of the Lord (last half of the second half of the seven years, plus a thirty day period after the second coming). By arbitrarily compartmentalizing the 70th week of Daniel in this way, Van Kampen prepares the way for his view by saying that the first two period (first three-quarters of the seven-year period) is the wrath of man and Satan but not God's wrath. By speculating that God's wrath only occurs during the last quarter of the 70th week of Daniel, he concludes that the rapture occurs at that point and keeps the church out of the wrath of God.

Some Reasons Why Van Kampen's Theory Is Wrong

This view of the rapture is not only built upon faulty interpretation of the Bible, but also upon flawed data and logic. In 1990 Marvin Rosenthal released the first published expression of the Van Kampen rapture view in all of history. I read and detected many problems with the book. Rosenthal made the following statement: "The Greek word *thlipsis*, translated *tribulation* or *affliction* in many English Bibles, occurs twenty times in the New Testament" (Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath,* p. 103). My concordance showed that it actually occurs 45 times. Why had he not even considered over half of the New Testament references?

The point that Rosenthal was attempting to make when he committed such a glaring factual error was that the word "tribulation" is never used to refer to the first half of Daniel's 70th week (Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath,* pp. 103-08). This is not the case since Matthew 24:9 is an instance where "tribulation" (KJV = "afflicted") refers to the first half of Daniel's 70th week. Dr. John McLean explains:

> Rosenthal has not only overstated his case but has stated as true fact that which is clearly false. A cursory reading of a Greek concordance reveals that the word "tribulation" *(thlipsis) is* used in prophetic contexts to refer to both the first and second halves of the seventieth week of Daniel. Matthew 24:9, which chronologically relates to the first half of the seventieth week as evidenced by its preceding the midpoint of the abomination of desolation (Matt. 24:15-21) states: "Then they will deliver you to *tribulation (thlipsis),* and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name" (NASB). Clearly the biblical text describes the first half of the seventieth week as a time of *tribulation.*
>
> The second half of the seventieth week is also described as a time of tribulation. Second Thessalonians 1:6 uses the Greek word *thlipsin* while referring to the second coming of Christ which occurs during the second half of the seventieth week of Daniel: "For after all it is only just for God to repay with *affliction (thlipsin)* those who afflicted you" (NASB). Therefore, it is proper and even biblical to refer to, and even describe, the seventieth week of Daniel as "The Tribulation," or "A Time of Tribulation."[1]

Interestingly, Rosenthal restricts *thlipsin* "tribulation" to simply trials to be experienced (Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath,* p. 237), while at the same time locating such tribulation in the first half of Daniel's 70th week (Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath,* p. 152). Like Dr. McLean and pretribulationists, Rosenthal equates Matthew 24:9 with the fifth seal judgment as stated in Revelation 6:9–11. Yet if Rosenthal admits the obvious logical conclusion—that the tribulation in Matthew 24:9 is the tribulation—then it would provide another reason that contradicts his new view and would support pretribulationism.

God's Wrath

Van Kampen defines only the final quarter of Daniel's 70th week as the only time of God's wrath. He sees the first three quarters as the wrath of man and Satan. But does

the Bible make such distinctions? It does not!

Wrath in Zephaniah

Zephaniah 1:14–18 heaps together a cluster of terms that characterize the future Day of the Lord. Verse 14 labels this time as "the great day of the Lord" and "the day of the Lord." Then verse 15–18 describe this time with the following descriptions: "that day is a day of wrath," "a day of trouble and distress," "a day of wasteness and desolation," "a day of darkness and gloominess," "a day of clouds and thick darkness," "a day of the trumpet and alarm," "I will bring distress upon men," and "the day of the Lord's wrath." The context supports the notion that all these descriptives apply to the Day of the Lord. Such biblical usage does not allow an interpreter to chop the Day of the Lord into compartmental segments as Van Kampen insists. The text plainly says that the Day of the Lord is a time of both tribulation and God's wrath. All of the many descriptives in this passage provide a characterization of the Day of the Lord that applies to the entire seven-year period. The Zephaniah passage clearly contradicts the basis upon which Van Kampen attempts to build his recently developed theory. Zephaniah is not alone in providing an obstacle to the Van Kampen speculation.

Wrath in Revelation

Revelation 6:1–17 records the six seal judgments, which are the first reported judgments of the tribulation. Revelation 6 and the seal judgments also contradict the Van Kampen formulation since the Bible describes all six judgments as ". . . the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come . . ." (Rev. 6:16c–17a). Even though Van Kampen cannot recognize God's wrath, the unbelievers at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation will be able to. Revelation 5 reveals that only the Lamb (Christ) was qualified to open the seals that would begin the first judgments of the tribulation. As we connect the dots of Revelation 5 and 6, there is no basis for saying that the events of the seal judgments are somehow disconnected from Scripture's characterization as God's wrath. The following observations about the seal judgments support such a connection:

- The Lamb is the Individual Who breaks, and thus initiates, all six of the seals (Revelation 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12) clearly indicating that He (God) is the source of the events or wrath. These are explicit references to the wrath of God, not the wrath of man or Satan as taught by Van Kampen.

- One quarter of the earth's population is killed (Rev. 6:8).

- The fifth seal reveals that multitudes of Christian martyrs are slain as a result of seal activity, which has to be considered the wrath of the Lamb. God allows this to occur when the Lamb breaks the seal in this part of the seal judgments.

• At the end of the six seal judgments an assessment is given as follows: "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (Rev. 6:16–17). "Him that sitteth on the throne" is God the Father as indicated in chapter 4, thus it is clearly God's wrath. It is also the Lamb's wrath (Christ). The passage clearly says "the great day of his wrath is come," meaning that all six of the seal judgments are classified as God's wrath.

Van Kampen attempts to say that the events of the seal judgments are not really "God's" wrath, but the wrath of man. Rosenthal declares, "The word wrath occurs eight times in the book of Revelation. All eight occurrences follow the opening of the sixth seal. The word wrath is never used in connection with the first five seals" (Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath,* p. 176). Rosenthal neglects to tell his readers that Revelation 6:16–17 is a summary statement of all the previous seal judgments. In spite of the Van Kampen claim to follow the plain interpretation of the text (Van Kampen, *Rapture Question*, p. 23–24.), I believe that Revelation 6:16–17 relates to all six seal judgments for the following reasons: First, Revelation 6:15–17 is an overall report of the human response to God's judgment as administered through all six seal judgments. A similar evaluation is recorded after the trumpet judgments in Revelation 9:20–21. This argues in favor of associating this report with the preceding seal judgments.

Second, the controlling verb in verse 17, "is come" *(êlthen),* "is aorist indicative, referring to a previous arrival of the wrath, not something that is about to take place"[2] Rosenthal's attempt to say that this verb is a future aorist (Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath,* pp. 166-67), cannot be supported by the context. Such contextual support is necessary to adopt his unusual use of the aorist indicative. Further, if a future look were intended by the verb then John most likely would have used the future tense. Such stress and strain in biblical interpretation demonstrates the forced notion that Van Kampen's new invention is not the product of sound biblical exegesis.

Third, Revelation 5 narrates a heavenly scene of Christ pictured as a slain, but victorious Lamb. The Lamb is pictured as worthy to open the seals on a scroll, which result in judgment—the judgment described in the succeeding chapter as the seal judgments. In chapter 6, each one of the seal judgments commences as a result of the Lamb's breaking of each seal (Revelation 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12). Since all six seal judgments begin the same way, with the breaking of the seal by the Lamb, one should not be at all surprised that Revelation 6:16–17 summarizes all six judgments as "the wrath of the Lamb," and "the great day of his wrath." This cannot be the wrath of man or Satan.

The above information provides ample biblical proof that all six seal judgments are the wrath of God (Lamb). Since all six seal judgments are designated in Scripture as God's wrath it means that the entire 70th week of Daniel is called the wrath of God in Revelation 6. Therefore, this passage does not support the Van Kampen interpretation. Since the church is promised deliverance from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9, 1 Thess. 1:10, 5:9, and Rev. 3:10), it is clear in light of Revelation 6 that the church will be

raptured before the seventieth week of Daniel.

CONCLUSION[3]

The above points are just a few of the errors that can be noted about Van Kampen's theory. As he demonstrates in his writings, if one errs at this crucial point then it paves the way for faulty conclusions. It should be clear that Van Kampen must resort to strained characterizations of things like the day of the Lord, the tribulation, and the scope of God's wrath in order to first avoid pretribulationism and then to support his new rapture view. Bible believing Christians should continue to draw strength and hope from the fact that our Lord could rapture His church at any moment. We will not be left standing when our Lord moves history to the point of the commencement of the seven-year tribulation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

[1] John McLean, "Chronology and Sequential Structure of John's Revelation" in Thomas Ice & Timothy Demy, eds., *When The Trumpet Sounds* (Harvest House Publishers, 1995), p. 341.
[2] Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Moody, 1992), p. 457.
[3] For an excellent, in-depth critique of the three-quarters rapture perspective, I highly recommend Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique* (Kregel, 2001).