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THE WALVOORD LEGACY

by Thomas Ice

The comprehensive sweep of the Bible, as it looks at history from God's point of view and then presents the glorious future that is awaiting the child of God, gives the Christian a life of meaningful activity, a system of values that transcends the materialism of our day, and a glorious hope in a world where there is much happiness.¹

—John F. Walvoord

On December 20, 2002 one of the giants of the church went home to be with the Lord. John F. Walvoord, theologian, writer, and teacher, seminary president, and defender of dispensational pretribulational premillennialism passed from our midst. He was 92 years old. It would not be an overstatement to say that Dr. Walvoord was the foremost proponent of pretribulationism and one of the world's leading interpreters of Bible prophecy. We will miss him! However, as giants are prone to do, he has left behind a great legacy.

Dr. Walvoord came to Dallas Seminary in 1931 as a student and remained there until his death in 2002. Over 70 years at a single institution must be some kind of a record! Virtually every one who has ever gone through Dallas Seminary has brushed shoulders with John Walvoord. I was privileged to have learned eschatology in the late 1970s under his tutelage while a student at the Seminary.

ESCHATOLOGICAL THEOLOGIAN

In the eschatology (study of last things) class that I took from Dr. Walvoord, he gave us a handout the first day of about 278 questions on the subject. (I made the mistake of lending my copy out and never saw it again.) He told us that if we could answer all of those questions, then we would know something about eschatology. The class consisted of him lecturing through all of those questions, without using any notes other than his Bible. Dr. Walvoord was such a clear and straightforward professor. He knew what all the views on any issue were and presented them fairly before he would turn his attention toward providing a biblically accurate and incisive critique. He handled the most pressing questions with ease and biblical clarity, which produced convincing results. Students in my class often competed with one another in an effort to ask a question that Dr. Walvoord was unfamiliar with or would make him look bad. They never succeeded.

I always sat on the front row of his class, right in front of his lectern, because I liked being close to Dr. Walvoord, and, more importantly, because I tape recorded his classes. I have listened to his lectures many times over the years and am always amazed at his grasp of the theology of God's Word. As a theologian he could correlate all the facts, synthesize them into theology, and show anyone the implications of his own views and where others went astray. As a student, I never dreamed that later I would have the privilege of speaking at about a dozen conferences with Dr. Walvoord. Usually there would be a time of questions and answers from the audience at these

conferences. I would often defer to my former teacher in these situations because I would be just as interested in his answer as the questioner.

WHY THE RAPTURE MATTERS

I once heard Dr. Walvoord say that earlier in his career he focused upon broader prophetic concerns, like premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism. However, over time and after much thought and discussion he realized that the same hermeneutical, exegetical and theological issues were involved in the rapture question. He came to believe that when one made a consistent application of interpretative methods, exegesis of Scripture and theological thought, there were only two consistent positions: amillennialism and pretribulationism. This is why, by the 1950s, Dr. Walvoord started focusing his attention upon the rapture question.

Of course, he believed the New Testament taught pretribulationism, but he also saw that the pre-trib rapture doctrine formed the first line of defense for premillennialism as well. He believed that when one abandoned pretribulationism, that individual was on a slippery slope toward the eschatological valley of allegoricalism known as amillennialism. He believed that consistent literal interpretation led to pretribulationism. Any departure from pretribulationism (for example mid-trib or post-trib) must involve some degree of allegorical interpretation. I heard him say that if you are going to allegorize at all then you might as well allegorize everything and become a consistent allegorizer by adopting amillennialism and be done with it. Dr. Walvoord's keen theological mind saw where things led.

Dr. Walvoord was asked a few years ago "what do you predict will be the most significant theological issues over the next ten years?" His answer included the following: "the hermeneutical problem of not interpreting the Bible literally, especially the prophetic areas. The church today is engulfed in the idea that one cannot interpret prophecy literally."² Such is the trend almost ten years later. Today too many evangelicals want to blend literal and non-literal hermeneutics. According to Dr. Walvoord, it cannot be legitimately done, without producing a confused and contradictory mix of eschatology.

A SINGLE TYPE OF PRETRIBULATIONISM

Another of Dr. Walvoord's insights includes the observation that there is a single kind of approach to developing and defending pretribulationism. What does he mean? When it comes to pre-trib rationale, there are not multiple systems that have reached the same conclusion—pretribulationism. In other words, all pretribulationists use the same hermeneutic, generally the same exegesis and theologically the same thought process in arriving at pretribulationism. Dr. Walvoord believed that this detail hints at the fact that pretribulationism is likely what the Bible teaches.

On the other hand, posttribulationism has four distinct ways in which they argue for their belief. Dr. Walvoord used to say that if any single one of these four approaches were true, then it would mean that the other three systems were wrong and would contradict the form of posttribulationism that was posited as true. In other words, there could be incorrect views of posttribulationism, even if the view was posited as being

correct. While there is only a single form of pretribulationism, which if true, would make sense since the Bible teaches a single view on any issue.

FOUR KINDS OF POSTTRIBULATIONISM

Dr. Walvoord has classified the four kinds of posttribulationism as classical, semi-classical, futuristic and dispensational.³ “In the last century a number of varieties of posttribulationism have emerged, some of them quite recent in their major tenets,” declares Dr. Walvoord. “In general, they cover the gamut of the possibilities.”⁴ Note the following breakout by Dr. Walvoord:

1) CLASSIC POSTTRIBULATIONISM—“J. Barton Payne, in his *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*,⁵ advocates a return to what he says was the position of the early church, that is, a premillennial and posttribulational point of view which spiritualizes the tribulation and identifies it with the contemporary problems of Christianity. Comparatively few have followed Payne, however, though a tendency to spiritualize the period of tribulation is a general characteristic of posttribulationism.”⁶

2) SEMI-CLASSIC POSTTRIBULATIONISM—“Alexander Reese, in his *The Approaching Advent of Christ*,⁷ presents the most comprehensive defense of posttribulationism.”⁸ “He offers evidence that the resurrection of the church occurs at the same time as the resurrection of Revelation 20. Major emphasis is placed on terms like ‘appearing,’ ‘the day,’ ‘the end,’ and ‘revelation’ as technical terms that relate the rapture to the second coming as the terminus of the present age. Reese's arguments have not been surpassed by other posttribulationists, but later writers offer other approaches.”⁹

“All the views previously mentioned consider the church already in the tribulation and identify the trials of the church through the centuries as the fulfillment of prophecies of a time of trouble preceding the second advent of Christ.”¹⁰

3) FUTURISTIC POSTTRIBULATIONISM—“George Ladd whose work, *The Blessed Hope*,¹¹ promotes the view that the great tribulation is still future. While other views of posttribulationism could conceivably be harmonized with the idea that Christ could return any moment, Ladd considers it inevitable that at least a seven-year period (described in Dan. 9:27) separates the church today from the rapture and the second advent of Christ which are aspects of the same event. Although Ladd's argument builds largely on the fact of the history of the doctrine and extols posttribulationism as the norm for orthodoxy through the centuries, he introduces a new realism into the picture in adopting a literal future tribulation. His views have somewhat been qualified by his later writings, but in general he seems to retain a futuristic view of the great tribulation with its corresponding doctrine that Christ's return could not be any day, but that it can only follow the years required to fulfill prophecies relating to the tribulation.”¹²

4) DISPENSATIONAL POSTTRIBULATIONISM—“Robert Gundry in his work, *The Church and the Tribulation*.¹³ Gundry, following the lead of many premillenarians, distinguishes Israel and the church as separate entities and attempts a literal interpretation of many of the prophecies that deal with the endtimes. In advancing his theory he refutes most of the posttribulationists who have preceded him. Working with these premises, he endeavors to establish a new doctrine of posttribulationism which he tries to harmonize with a literal interpretation of prophecy.”¹⁴

“Gundry's work poses a number of theological problems both for other posttribulationists and for contemporary pretribulationists. Because his arguments, in the main, are new and establish a new form of posttribulationism never advanced before, his work is a milestone in the variety of interpretations which have characterized posttribulationism through the centuries and creates further need for study of posttribulationism in the history of the church.”¹⁵

It is interesting to take note of Dr. Walvoord's classification of differing types of posttribulationism in light of the often made claims that pretribulationism is of recent vintage (around 1830). With the death of Payne in the 1970s, no one of significance even holds his classical view of posttribulationism. The semi-classical view of Reese is rarely held as well. Both of the views require the historicist view of prophecy, which almost no one holds to apart from Seventh-Day Adventist and Mormon influence. This means that the last two forms of posttribulationism, which are views that almost all premillennial posttribulationists advocate today, were developed after pretribulationist futurism came on the scene. This means that the systematic approach of virtually all premillennial posttribulationism is newer than pretribulationism. This is a fact little understood in premillennial posttribulationist circles. This should be a cause for pause and reflection on their part before suggesting that there is a problem with the history of pretribulationism.

CONCLUSION

The Walvoord legacy is one of hope—Blessed Hope!¹⁶ He used his considerable skills and long life to help believers better understand God's plan for history and for the individual Christian. Over the years as I have spoken at Bible prophecy conferences across America, I have had a number of people come up to me and tell me that Dr. Walvoord had been their pastor at Rosen Heights Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, Texas. They have all said that Dr. Walvoord used to tell them (this was in the 1930s and 40s) that he would live to see the rapture. Obviously he did not make it. But John F. Walvoord will certainly be a recipient of the crown of righteousness that will be handed out at the judgment seat of Christ. “In the future there is laid up for me the *crown of righteousness*, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (2 Tim. 4:8) I can't wait to see him at that awards ceremony. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Statement taken from the back panel of the bulletin obtained at the memorial service for John F. Walvoord, “The Bible: Cornerstone of John F. Walvoord's Life,” final paragraph.

² “An Interview: Dr. John F. Walvoord Looks at Dallas Seminary,” *Dallas Connection* (Winter 1994, Vol. 1, No. 3), p. 4.

³ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976), pp. 16–19.

⁴ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, p. 17.

⁵ J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

⁶ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, p. 17.

⁷ Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1937).

⁸ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, p. 17.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, “Posttribulationism Today, Part I: The Rise of Posttribulational Interpretation, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January–March 1975; Vol. 132, No. 525), p. 22.

¹⁰ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, p. 18.

¹¹ George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

¹² Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, pp. 18–19.

¹³ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

¹⁴ Walvoord, *Blessed Hope*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Walvoord, “Posttribulationism Today,” p. 24.

¹⁶ For anyone interested in reading about the life of Dr. Walvoord, his auto biography came out about a year before his death. John F. Walvoord with Mal Couch, *Blessed Hope: The Autobiography of John F. Walvoord* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2001).