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MYTHS OF THE ORIGIN OF PRETRIBULATIONISM

Part I

Thomas Ice

A history of the rapture is of necessity a history of pretribulationism, since most other views do not distinguish between the two phases of Christ's return—the rapture and second advent. The partial rapture and midtribulationism have been developed only within the past 100 years.

THE POST APOSTOLIC CHURCH

That the earliest documents (in addition to the New Testament canon) of the ancient church reflect a clear premillennialism is generally conceded, but great controversy surrounds their understanding of the rapture in relation to the tribulation. Pretribulationists point to the early church's clear belief in imminency and a few passages from a couple of documents as evidence that pretribulationism was held by at least a few from the earliest times.

As was typical of every area of the early church's theology, their views of prophecy were undeveloped and sometimes contradictory, containing a seedbed out of which could develop various and diverse theological viewpoints. While it is hard to find clear pretribulationism spelled out in the fathers, there are also found clear pre-trib elements which if systematized with their other prophetic views contradict posttribulationism but support pretribulationism.

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.[2] 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.'"[3]

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.[4] 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,

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

[2]Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 87-93. Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 112. J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 12-19.

[3]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.

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

> 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.[5]

Evidence of pretribulationism surfaces during the early medieval period in a sermon some attribute to Ephraem the Syrian entitled *Sermon on The Last Times, The Antichrist, and The End of the World*.[6] 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. 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 there was always some forms of premillennialism throughout the Middle Ages, but it existed primarily underground. Dorothy deF. Abrahamse notes:

> By medieval times the belief in an imminent apocalypse had officially been relegated to the role of symbolic theory by the Church; as early as the fourth century, Augustine had declared that the Revelation of John was to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally, and for most of the Middle Ages Church councils and theologians considered only abstract eschatology to be acceptable speculation. Since the nineteenth century, however, historians have recognized that *literal apocalypses did continue to circulate in the medieval world* and that they played a fundamental role in the creation of important strains of thought and legend [emphasis added].[7]

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[5] *The Shepherd of Hermas* 1.4.2.

[6] 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.

[7] Dorothy deF. Abrahamse, introduction to *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition,* by Paul J. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 1-2.

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.

It must be noted at this point that it is extremely unlikely for the Middle Ages to produce advocates of a pretrib rapture when the more foundational belief of premillennialism is all but absent. Thus, the rapture question is likewise absent. This continued until the time of the Reformation, when many things within Christendom began to be revolutionized.

THE REFORMATION CHURCH

Premillennialism began to be revived as a result of at least three factors. First, the Reformers went back to the sources, which for them was the Bible and Apostolic Fathers. This exposed them to an orthodox premillennialism. Specifically significant was the reappearance of the full text of Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, which included the last five chapters that espouse a consistent futurism and cast the 70th week of Daniel into the future.

Second, they repudiated much, not all, of the allegorization that dominated mediaeval hermeneutics by adopting a more literal approach, especially in the area of the historical exegesis.

Third, many of the Protestants came into contact with Jews and learned Hebrew. This raised concerns over whether passages that speak of national Israel were to be taken historically or continued to be allegorized within the tradition of the Middle Ages. The more the Reformers took them as historical, the more they were awakened to premillennial interpretations, in spite of the fact that they were often labeled "Judaizers."

By the late 1500's and the early 1600's, premillennialism began to return as a factor within the mainstream church after more than a 1,000 year reign of amillennialism. 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.

It has been claimed that some separated the rapture from the second coming as early as Joseph Mede in his seminal work *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), who is considered the father of English premillennialism. Paul Boyer says that Increase Mather proved "that the saints would 'be *caught up into the Air*' beforehand, thereby escaping the final conflagration–an early formulation of the Rapture doctrine more fully elaborated in the nineteenth century."[8] Whatever these men were saying, it is clear that the application of a more literal hermeneutic was leading to a distinction between the rapture and the second coming as separate events.

Others 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

[8]Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), p. 75.

> 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.[9]

Frank Marotta, a brethren researcher, believes that Thomas Collier in 1674 makes reference to a pretribulational rapture, but rejects the view,[10] thus showing his awareness that such a view was being taught. Perhaps the clearest reference to a pretrib rapture before Darby comes from Baptist Morgan Edwards (founder of Brown University) in 1742-44 who saw a distinct rapture three and a half years before the start of the millennium.[11]

THE MODERN CHURCH

As futurism began to replace historicism within premillennial circles in the 1820's, the modern proponent of dispensational pretribulationism arrives on the scene. J.N. Darby claims to have first understood his view of the rapture as the result of Bible study during a convalescence from December 1826 until January 1827.[12] He is the fountainhead for the modern version of the doctrine.

The doctrine of the rapture spread around the world through the Brethren movement with which Darby and other like-minded Christians were associated. It appears that either through their writings or personal visits to North America, this version of pretribulationism was spread throughout American Evangelicalism. Two early proponents of the view include Presbyterian James H. Brookes and Baptist J. R. Graves.

The rapture was further spread through annual Bible conferences such as the Niagara Bible Conference (1878-1909); turn of the century publications like *The Truth* and *Our Hope*; popular books like Brookes' *Maranatha*, William Blackstone's *Jesus Is Coming*, and *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). Many of the greatest Bible teachers of the first-half of the twentieth century help spread the doctrine such as Arno Gaebelein, C.I Scofield, A.J. Gordon, James M. Gray, R.A. Torrey, Harry Ironside, and Lewis S. Chafer.

In virtually every major metropolitan area in North America a Bible Institute, Bible College, or Seminary was founded that expounded dispensational pretribulationism. Schools like Moody Bible Institute, The Philadelphia Bible College, Bible Institute of Los

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[9]Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 197-98.
[10]Frank Marotta, *Morgan Edwards: An Eighteenth Century Pretribulationist* (Morganville, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1995), pp. 10-12.
[11]Marotta, *Morgan Edwards*.
[12]Roy A. Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J.N. Darby*, Vol. 1 (Morganville, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1991), pp. 63-77.

Angeles (BIOLA), and Dallas Theological Seminary taught and defended these views. These teachings were found primarily in independent churches, Bible churches, Baptists, and a significant number of Presbyterian churches. Around 1925, pretribulationism was adopted by many Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and The Four-Square Gospel denomination. Pretribulationism was dominate among Charismatics in the 1960s and '70s. Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) furthered the spread of the pretrib rapture as it exerted great influence throughout popular American culture and then around the world. Many radio and T. V. programs taught pretribulationism as well.

CURRENT STATUS

Although still widely popular among Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, dominance of pretribulationism began to wane first in some academic circles in the 1950s and '60s. A decline among Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Evangelicals began in the 1980s as the result of a shift toward greater social concern emerged. Pretribulationism is still the most widely held view of the day, but it cannot be taken for granted in many Evangelical, Charismatic, and Fundamentalist circles as it was a generation ago.

The doctrine of the rapture has not been the most visible teaching in the history of the church. However, it has had significant advocates throughout the last 2,000 years. It has surfaced wherever premillennialism is taught, especially when literal interpretation, futurism, dispensationalism, and a distinction between Israel and the church. Regardless of its history, belief in the rapture has been supported primarily by those who attempt a faithful exposition of the biblical text.

RECENT CHALLENGES TO PRE-TRIB ORIGINS

A few years ago, pre-wrath advocate Marvin Rosenthal wrote that the pre-trib rapture was of Satanic origin and unheard of before 1830. "To thwart the Lord's warning to His children, in 1830," proclaims Rosenthal, "Satan, the 'father of lies,' gave to a fifteen-year-old girl named Margaret McDonald a lengthy vision."[13] Rosenthal gives no documentation, he merely asserts that this is true. However, he is wrong. He is undoubtedly relying upon the questionable work of Dave MacPherson.

Another thing amazing about Rosenthal's declaration is that a few paragraphs later in the article he characterizes his opposition as those who "did not deal with the issues, misrepresented the facts, or attempted character assassination."[14] This description is exactly what he has done in his characterization of pre-trib rapture origins. Why would Rosenthal make such outlandish and unsubstantiated charges about the pre-trib rapture?

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

[13] Marvin J. Rosenthal, "Is the Church in Matthew Chapter 24?" *Zion's Fire* (Nov-Dec 1994), p. 10.
[14] Rosenthal, "Is the Church in Matthew Chapter 24?" p. 10.