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Morgan Edwards: Another Pre-Darby Rapturist

by Thomas Ice

Opponents of pretribulationism have often tried to “poison the well” by contending that a pre-trib understanding of the Bible is novel and/or has sprung from a polluted source. However, the last few years have witnessed the discovery of voices from the past testifying to a two-stage return of Christ. The latest pre-Darby voice to join the chorus is that of an early American Baptist pastor and educator, Morgan Edwards (1722-95).

WHO IS MORGAN EDWARDS?

Morgan Edwards was born May 9, 1722 in Trevethin parish, Wales, and after education at Bristol College, began preaching in 1738. He served several small Baptist congregations in England for seven years, before moving to Cork, Ireland, where he pastored for nine years. Edwards emigrated to America, and in May 1761, became pastor of the Baptist Church in Philadelphia.¹ After the Revolutionary War (he was the only known Baptist clergy of Tory persuasion), Edwards became an educator and the premier Baptist historian of his day. His major work *Materials Toward A History of the Baptists* is an important seminal work outlining American Baptist history of the era. Edwards founded the first Baptist college in the Colonies, Rhode Island College, which we know today as Brown University of the Ivy League.

As was typical of early American Colonists, Edwards experienced significant tragedy in his life. He outlived two wives and most of his children. During a “dark period” in his life, he ceased attending church, took to drink and was excommunicated from his church. “After making repeated efforts to be restored, he was received into the church on October 6, 1788, and thereafter lived an exemplary life.”² Baptist historian Robert Torbet described Edwards as

a man of versatility, being both a capable leader for many years and a historian of some importance. In temperament he was eccentric and choleric. . . . With all of his varied gifts, he was always evangelistic in spirit.³

Another historian similarly says of Edwards:

Scholarly, laborious, warm-hearted, eccentric, choleric Morgan Edwards, one of the most interesting of the early Baptist ministers of our country and one of those most deserving of honor. His very faults had a leaning toward virtues side, and in good works he was exceeded by none of his day, if indeed by any of any day. . . . He was an able preacher and a good man, but not always an easy man to get on with.⁴

EDWARDS AND THE RAPTURE

During his student days at Bristol Baptist Seminary in England (1742-44), Morgan Edwards wrote an essay for eschatology class on his views of Bible prophecy. This essay was later published in Philadelphia (1788) under the

following title: *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties*. (This is actually one of the shorter titles for a book published in his day.) The term in the title “Last-Novelties” refers to what we would call today the eternal state; “novelties” refers to the new conditions of the future new heavens and new earth. Upon reading the 56 page work, it is clear that Edwards published it unchanged from his student days. Thus, it represents a view developed by the early 1740s.

Morgan Edwards taught some form of pretribulationism as can be gleaned from the following statement in his book:

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 **so 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)

What has Edwards said? Note the following:

- He believes that at least 1,003.5 years will transpire between resurrections.
- He associates the first resurrection with the rapture in 1 Thess. 4:17, occurring at least 3.5 years before the start of the millennium (i.e., at least 3.5 years before the second coming of Christ at the start of the millennium.
- He associates the meeting of believers with Christ in the air and returning to the Father’s house with John 14:2, as do modern pretribulationists.
- He sees believers disappearing during the time of the tribulation, which he goes on to talk about in the rest of the section from which the rapture statement is taken.
- He, like modern pretribulationists, links the time in heaven, during the tribulation, with the “bema” judgment of believers.

The only difference, at least as far as the above statements go, between current pretribulationism and Edwards is the time interval of 3.5 years instead of 7. In fact, anti-pretribulationist John Bray wonders,

It would be interesting to know what, in those early years at the Academy, led Edwards to his concept of a pre-tribulation rapture. One could almost think he had been studying at one of our modern dispensational-entrenched schools, the teaching is so similar to that which is being taught today.⁵

It would be interesting to know what he studied at Bristol, but Edwards makes it clear in the introduction that his views are not those normally held in his day and that he was approaching eschatology with a literal hermeneutic. Such an approach is said by modern pretribulationists to be the primary determinative factor leading to pretribulationism. This is what J.N. Darby claimed⁶ and so does Edwards before Darby.

I will do my possible: and in the attempt will work by a rule you have often recommended, viz. “to take the scriptures in a literal sense, except when that leads to contradiction or

absurdity.” . . . Very able men have already handled the subject in a mystical, or allegorical, or spiritual way. (pp. 5-6)

Historian John Moore, quoting from Rev. William Rogers' sermon at Edwards' funeral: "There was nothing uncommon in Mr. Edwards' person; but he possessed an original genius."⁷ Thus, as an original thinker, Edwards, like Darby, apparently saw his views flowing from a literal reading of the Bible. Also, like Darby, Edwards developed these views early in life. Edwards was between the age of 20-22, while Darby was about 26 years old.

Edwards adds to his earlier rapture statement later when he says,

Another event previous to the *millennium* will be the appearing of the son of man in the clouds, coming to raise the dead saints and change the living, and to catch them up to himself, and then withdraw with them, as observed before. [i.e., p. 7] This event will come to pass when Antichrist be arrived at Jerusalem in his conquest of the world; and about three years and a half before his killing the witnesses and assumption of godhead. . . . (p. 21)

It is clear that Edwards separates the rapture and the second coming from the following statements:

8. The last event, and the event that will usher in the *millennium*, will be, the coming of Christ from paradise to earth, with all the saints he had taken up thither (about three years and a half before) . . . (p. 24)

millions and millions of saints will have been on earth from the days of the first Adam, to the coming of the second Adam. All these will Christ bring with him. The place where they will alight is the "mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east." Zech. xiv, 4. (p. 25)

Of interest is the fact that Edwards wrote 42 volumes of sermons, about 12 sermons per volume, that were never published. Other than his historical writings and ecclesiastical helps, his essay on Bible prophecy was his only other published work. It is significant that this essay, from his youth, was published and not something else. This evidences that there was some interest in his views on this subject. Such an interest would have surely risen out of his bringing it to the attention of those to whom he ministered. Yet, on the other hand, the book only went through one printing, showing that all books on the rapture do not automatically become a number one best seller. It could also reflect the fact that Baptists were not a large denomination at this time in America. Nevertheless, Edwards' work on Bible prophecy did have some circulation and exposed early Americans to many of the ideas that would come to dominate Evangelicalism a century later.

CONCLUSION

Detractors of pretribulationism often want to say or imply that our view cannot be found in the pages of the Bible and must have come from a deviant source. Of course, we strongly object to such a notion and have taken great pains over the years to show that the New Testament not only teaches pretribulationism, but holds it forth as our "Blessed Hope"—a central focus of faith. The bringing to light of Morgan Edwards' views of the rapture do demonstrate (again) that a consistently literal approach to Bible interpretation leads many to distinguish between Christ's coming in the air *for* His bride

and His return to earth *with* His saints. Edwards, along with Pseudo-Ephraem's fourth century sermon⁸ (and perhaps others) make it clear that, while Darby may have restored the pretrib rapture, he did not originate it. Pretribulationism is found first in the New Testament and at times throughout the history of the church. Maranatha! Ω

ENDNOTES

¹ "Edwards, Morgan" in John McClintock & James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981 [1867-87]), XII vols, III:69.

² John S. Moore, "Morgan Edwards: Baptist Statesman," *Baptist History and Heritage* (VI:1; January 1971), p. 31.

³ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950), pp. 243-44.

⁴ Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publishing Society, 1907), p. 232.

⁵ John Bray, *Morgan Edwards & the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching (1788)* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, 1995): 8

⁶ See Floyd Elmore, "J. N. Darby's Early Years," in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When The Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), pp. 127-50.

⁷ John Moore, "Morgan Edwards," p. 33.

⁸ For information about the Pseudo-Ephraem material see Grant R. Jeffrey, "A Pretrib Rapture Statement in the Early Medieval Church," in Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When The Trumpet Sounds* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), pp. 105-25. Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice, "The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July-September 1995), pp. 306-17.