

Understanding the Validity of the Pretribulational Rapture Doctrine

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Introduction

One of the primary goals of Christian apologetics is to be able to convey reasons for believing in the Christian faith. In sharing the evidence for their faith, as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ should, they can lead others to saving faith in Him. The classic biblical example of this is Paul who “was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing {Gentiles,} and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present” (Acts 17:17).¹ It is clear from this passage that Paul, in his day to day evangelism, gave reasons for his faith.

In a similar fashion, Christians today should be able to give reasons for why they believe what they believe regarding key eschatological (End Times) topics such as the timing of the millennial kingdom and the Lord’s coming for His people, the church. In recent years, various media figures such as Harold Camp have made attempts to predict the timing of the rapture of the church. So, more than ever, it is important to be able to speak correctly and concisely on the validity of the belief in Christ’s coming. In doing so, believers can encourage others in the faith and give them confidence in the “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

For background purposes of discerning the validity of the various eschatological doctrines, it is important to know that there are four primary eschatological views held by Christians today: Historic Premillennialism, Dispensational Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism. Historic premillennialists believe that the rapture and second coming of

¹All Scripture references from this paper are from NASB version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

Christ are simultaneous events, with Christ reigning on earth, but not necessarily for one thousand years. Dispensational premillennialists (referred to as pretribulationists going forward) believe that Christ will rapture the church prior to the seven year Tribulation, then return in glory to reign on earth in a literal one thousand year kingdom. Unlike the other views, pretribulationism does not view the church as a spiritual Israel, but holds to the belief that God has separate, distinct plans for both the church and Israel. Postmillennialists believe Christ's millennial reign to be spiritual, not literal, and is a reality in the hearts of believers who will usher in Christ's return through the Christianizing of the world followed by the eternal state of Heaven and Earth. Amillennialists believe in a spiritual reign of Christ for an unknown number of years that began with His first coming and will end at His second coming.²

It is not in the scope of this paper to go in depth in examining each eschatological viewpoint. Instead, this paper will discuss the following points: 1) Dating of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine; 2) Extra-biblical References for the Belief in the Imminent Return of Christ; 3) Biblical References for the Belief in the Imminent Return of Christ; 4) Narrative Typology in the Old Testament for the Pretribulation Rapture; 5) Pretribulation Rapture Passages in the New Testament; 6) Conclusion/Life Application.

Dating of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine

It is a popular misconception today that the belief in the pretribulation rapture is a teaching that has emerged only recently. This misconception is fueled by a perception that John Nelson Darby, leader of the Plymouth Brethren, first taught the doctrine in 1830.³ Another

²Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 93, 141 – 143.

³Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1975), 19.

theory is that a Scottish teenager named Margaret MacDonald originated the pretribulational rapture teaching around 1830 after being inspired by a vision.⁴ Proponents of the view that the pretribulationalist rapture position is a recent one include posttribulationalist scholar, Robert Gundry,⁵ as well as Hank Hanegraaf, a non-scholar radio host who has spoken against the pretribulational rapture position on his show as well as in print.⁶ These proponents have adopted a tone of anti-pretribulationalism.

In suggesting that the pretribulationalist doctrine is a recent one, the anti-pretribulationalists intimate that the foundation for pretribulationalism is somehow weakened. However, eschatological scholar and author John Walvoord argues that the doctrine of postmillennialism is in fact more recent than the doctrine of pretribulationalism.⁷ Walvoord also points out that since Christian doctrines such as the Trinity (4th century) and human depravity (5th century) were not ingrained until well after the birth of the faith, it makes sense that eschatological doctrines like pretribulationalism did not emerge until much later.⁸ While it cannot be established that pretribulationalism as a formal doctrine was taught before Darby, the belief in the imminent return of Christ is a tenet that has been held since Christianity began.

⁴Benware, 243 and Thomas D. Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulational Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald.," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147, no. 586 (April – June 1990), 155.

⁵Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 172 – 184.

⁶Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007), 40-41.

⁷John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 50.

⁸*Ibid.*, 50 – 51.

Extra-biblical References for the Belief in the Imminent Return of Christ

One key trait that all pretribulationists possess is the belief in the imminent return of Christ. The doctrine of imminency consists of the belief that Christ could come at any time to rapture His bride, the church. Since He could come at any moment, no specific event must occur before the Lord comes in the clouds. The first century believers must have been familiar with the concept of imminency, since other than the event of the Apostle Peter's execution when he was advanced in age (foretold by Christ in John 21:18), there were no other events that were necessary to have occurred before the rapture took place.

There are several extra-biblical (outside the Bible) references to support an early date in the belief in the imminent coming of Christ. Clement, an early church bishop in Rome in his *First Epistle of Clement*, writes around AD 96, "Of a truth, yet a little while, and his will shall suddenly be accomplished: the Scripture also bearing witness, 'That He shall quickly come and shall not tarry.'"⁹ Also, Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch, and a disciple of the Apostle John, writes in *The Epistle to Polycarp*, in AD 107, "Consider the times and expect Him, who is above all time."¹⁰ In addition, *The Didache*, chapter 16, section 1, an early Christian book written by an unknown author around AD 120 or before, exhorts believers to "watch over your life; let not your lamps be quenched and let not your loins be unloosed, but be ye ready; for ye know not the hour in which our Lord comes."¹¹

Additional extra-biblical evidence that points to an early belief in imminency includes

⁹Clement, *The Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* in *A Translation of the Epistles of Clement of Rome, Polycarp and Ignatius*, ed. W. R. Whittingham, trans. Temple Chevallier (New York: Henry M. Onderdonk & Co., 1846), 23.

¹⁰Ignatius, *The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp* in *A Translation of the Epistles of Clement of Rome, Polycarp and Ignatius*, ed. W. R. Whittingham, trans. Temple Chevallier (New York: Henry M. Onderdonk & Co., 1846), 3.

¹¹*The Didache*, rev. ed., trans. Philip Schaff (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, Publishers, 1886), 16.1

The Epistle of Barnabas, 20 (written around AD 130 by an unknown author), *The Shepherd of Hermas*, chapter 3, sections 9, 7 (written between AD 90 to AD 150 by Hermas, brother of the Roman bishop, Prius), and *Dialogue with Trypho*, 52 (written around AD 150 by Justyn Martyr, an early Christian apologist).¹² These references do not explicitly state the belief in an imminent rapture of believers into the clouds. However, since the writers' views do reflect an expectation for an imminent return of Christ, this evidence points to the early belief that the church would be spared the Great Tribulation prophesied of in the books of Daniel and Revelation.

Biblical References for the Belief in the Imminent Return of Christ

There are several Scripture passages that express the early followers' belief in the imminent return of Christ. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:22), he uses the word "maranatha", which is a combination of three Aramaic words that mean: "Our Lord, come". The use of this expression is unique in that the word appears in a letter that was composed in Greek and was addressed to the people of Corinth, a Greek speaking community.¹³ Paul employs this Aramaic word in order to encourage other believers to remember that the Lord's coming could take place at any given time. Maranatha also appears in *The Didache* (10.6), in petitions used for a communion service.¹⁴ This earnest expectation for Christ's coming is consistent with Paul's writing in 1 Cor. 11:26 which also speaks of the communion service. Paul reminds believers that in partaking in the Lord's supper "you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes".

¹²Renald Showers, 143 – 144.

¹³Ibid., 130 – 131.

¹⁴*The Didache*, 10.6.

Pretribulational Rapture scholar and author, Renald Showers, writes:

It would appear then, that the fixed usage of the term “Maranatha” by the early Christians was a witness to their strong belief in the imminent return of Christ. If they knew that Christ could not return at any moment because of other events or a time period that had to transpire first, why did they petition Him in a way that implied that He could come at any moment?¹⁵

It is apparent from other writings by Paul such as Phil. 3:20, and Titus 2:13, that the early believers were expecting Christ’s return continuously. The words used in these passages, “look” and “looking for” convey the impression that Paul and others were actively watching for and eagerly anticipating Christ’s appearance, similar to someone who might wait up at night in anticipation of the return of a dear friend or family member. This expectation of Christ’s return, then, was not just a casual one, but was one filled with certain hope and knowledge that believers could potentially see Jesus in His glory that very day.¹⁶ Similar passages by Paul that refer to the imminent return of the Lord include: 1 Cor. 1:7, 4:5; Phil. 4:5; 1 Thess. 1:10.

The imminent return of Christ is also emphasized in the writings of James, brother of Jesus, and the Apostle John. In James 5:7 – 9, and 1 John 2:28, the writers encourage believers to lead godly lives in earnest expectation of Christ’s return. In a cautionary note stressing the need to avoid discord with other brethren, James warns the believers that “the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:9). Similarly, John instructs the reader to “abide” in Christ continuously so that the believer will not be shamed upon “His coming” which could be at any time.

¹⁵Showers, 131.

¹⁶Ibid., 131 – 132, 134 – 135.

Narrative Typology in the Old Testament for the Pretribulational Rapture

There are a couple of specific examples of the rapture taking place in the Old Testament that serve as a type of rapture that could come for the Church in the future. Gen. 5:24 describes the rapture of Enoch who “walked with God; and he was not, for God took him”. Also, 2 Kings 2:11 recounts the rapture experience of Elijah, who “went up by a whirlwind to heaven”. These two rapture events are examples of two godly men who enjoyed a unique relationship with their Creator and were taken up directly into Heaven without enduring death or the suffering associated with it.

In addition to specific references to types of rapture events that took place in the Old Testament narrative, there are also instances which serve as a model of how God spares those He calls His own from calamity or divine judgment. In the Flood account found in Gen. 6:5 – 8:18, Noah and his family find favor with God and are told, “Enter the ark, you and all your household, for you {alone} I have seen {to be} righteous before Me in this time” (Gen. 7:1). Noah is spared the wrath of God because he was faithful. It makes sense to believe that just as God spared Noah and his family from divine wrath by protecting them during the flood, so shall He protect the righteous church from His wrath that will be poured out upon the earth during the Great Tribulation.

Another example of God sparing the righteous from His wrath can be found in Gen. 18 where Abraham repeatedly asks the Lord if He will hold back from destroying the city of Sodom if righteous people are found to be living there. Abraham pleadingly asks, “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are *treated* alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”(Gen. 18:25). God, of course, responds to each question from Abraham and tells Abraham that He will spare

the city if only ten righteous people are found in Sodom. This passage serves as a good example of how God deals with His own righteous people. If the Lord had been willing to spare the city because only ten righteous people lived there, it makes sense to believe that God will rapture His righteous people in the church before He pours out His wrath upon the Earth during the Tribulation.

Pretribulation Rapture Passages in the New Testament

There are several verses in the New Testament that specifically point to a pretribulation rapture of the Church. One reference that may not be fully understood by today's Gentile believers in its unique application is John 14:2 – 3. There is a rich cultural background regarding the meaning of this passage. In examining the historical Jewish wedding betrothal and marriage rituals, a deeper insight is gained into the meaning of these verses and how they apply to the relationship that believers have with the Lord.

In first century Hebrew culture, when prospective brides and grooms met to discuss marriage, the father of the bride would decide on an acceptable dowry or “mohar” that he would accept to give his daughter in marriage.¹⁷ Once the mohar was agreed upon, and it was acceptable to all parties, the prospective groom would pour a cup of wine and give it to the prospective bride. After a blessing was said, the bride would drink from the cup, in effect agreeing to marry the groom.¹⁸ The couple was then considered betrothed to be married. From that moment on, the bride was consecrated or set apart for the groom.¹⁹ During this betrothal

¹⁷Bill Risk, “The Ultimate Wedding”, under “The Ultimate Wedding”, <http://ldolphin.org/risk/ult.shtml> (accessed November 20, 2011).

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Renald Showers. “Jewish Marriage Customs”, under “Jewish Marriage Customs”, http://www.biblestudymanuals.net/jewish_marriage_customs.htm, (accessed November 20, 2011).

period, the groom would be busy with the task of preparing the bridal chamber. These preparations could entail a major construction project that would often consist of adding onto the family compound to accommodate the bride and groom. The work would be overseen by the father of the groom, who would give the go ahead once the project was deemed complete.²⁰ Once the bridal chamber was finished, the father would confirm that the wedding could then take place.

In this passage from John, Jesus is in effect letting the disciples know that once all of His (the groom's) preparations for the church (the bride) are complete, then the Father will give permission for the Son to come rapture (catch away) the church into Heaven. It is reasonable to understand that this extended stay in Heaven is for a period of seven years (the length of the Tribulation period) because in a similar fashion, the Jewish wedding ritual consisted of a seven day period in which bride and groom resided together inside the bridal chamber.

In addition to the passage in John, 1 Thess. 4:13 – 18 also paints a clear picture of the rapture. This passage addresses specifically the fate of believers who have died before the coming of the Lord. Paul writes that followers who are alive “will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17). Also, in this passage, it is revealed that “we shall always be with the Lord”. These words are similar to John 14:3 where Jesus says, “Where I am, there you may be also”. Together, these passages give assurance that the rapture is a reality and that the Lord and His church will be together forever.

In 1 Thess. 1:10 and 5:9, there are clear statements that believers are not to endure the wrath that is to come during the Great Tribulation. In 1:10, Paul writes to the believers declaring that it is “Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come”. Paul also gives comfort to the

²⁰Ibid.

Thessalonians in 5:9 by boldly stating, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” From these passages, it is clear that Paul was expecting the coming of the Lord and knew that His coming would precede the Tribulation of the last days.

One more passage that speaks to believers not enduring the wrath poured out during the Tribulation is Revelation 3:10, in which Christ states, “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that {hour} which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” This text was addressed to the church of Philadelphia which represents the true church that is removed from earth before the Tribulation begins. This basic meaning of the passage is that the church will be spared the “hour of trial” also known as the Great Tribulation which will come upon all who “dwell on the earth”. Eschatology scholar and author, J. Dwight Pentecost, believes that the correct interpretation of the nature of “keep you from” hinges on the use of the Greek word “ek” which is used here and means “out of, from, by, away from”. The usage of this word indicates the church will be pulled out from/kept from the “hour of trial” or Tribulation period before it begins.²¹

Conclusion/Life Application

In examining the extra-biblical and Scriptural evidence for the belief in both the imminent return of Christ and a pretribulational return of the Lord, it can be concluded that the early believers were eagerly expecting Jesus’ return. The Apostle Paul was a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5), a student of the Law, and a man who had been educated as a Pharisee. With such an extensive educational background, Paul would have been very familiar with the

²¹J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Dunham Publishing, 1964), 244.

prophecies concerning “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7, NKJ), and the “time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time” (Dan. 12:1). Paul would have known all about the Tribulation to come. That he and other believers were enthusiastically looking for the Lord’s return so eagerly in their day leads one to believe that Paul expected that Christ would come for him and other believers prior to the Tribulation period. If this were not so, Paul would have written more about the Anti-Christ’s coming as an event that necessarily had to occur prior to Christ’s rapture of the church.

Paul, James, and John all used the knowledge of Christ’s imminent coming to encourage other believers to live godly lives. This knowledge of an imminent return of the Lord leads others to live godly today, also. Christian counselor and author, Edward T. Welch believes that the knowledge that the Lord could graciously catch up the church at any time encourages believers to be persistent in the battle against sin. The temptation to give up is always there he writes, “but when we know that the deadline is approaching, we become much more vigilant. Like virgins waiting for the bridegroom or a student who must complete an assignment by a certain date, deadlines make us willing to forego sleep to do what has been asked of us.”²² Indeed, with the knowledge of Christ’s imminent coming, whether it is today or tomorrow, believers everywhere can fight against sin in their personal lives as they pray, “Our Lord, come”.

²²Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 218 – 219.