

WHEN WILL THE BELIEVING BE LEAVING?

A CASE FOR THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

There remains to this day serious and honest disagreement among Christian scholars and laypeople alike as to the timing of the “snatching away” or “Rapture” of church-age saints prior to the millennium. Some argue from Scriptures that the Rapture event occurs at the end of the seven-year Tribulation period described by John in Revelation 6 through 18, stressing a unified Second Coming of Christ with the saints. Others find in Scripture evidence that living church-age saints are to be spared from God’s wrath, which is meted out in the second three and one-half years of the Tribulation period; thus, the church-age saints are said to be raptured “pre-wrath” within the Tribulation period. Finally, and likely greatest in number are those who hold to a Rapture of all church-age saints prior to the Tribulation period.

Now this disagreement as to the timing of the Rapture is not merely an academic exercise. There are serious implications at stake depending upon which Rapture view actually represents biblical truth. What if the Rapture were to occur in this lifetime? Will believers witness the rise of the Antichrist? Will they be forced to choose whether to take the mark of the beast in order to buy or sell goods? Will they be witness and even party to the terrifying worldwide destruction as God metes out his wrath upon the earth? Certainly these are sobering if not terrifying questions. So there is merit to seeking out objective biblical truth on this matter, for in the end there can be only one truth.

Why then do such divergent views exist if believers have been seeking this truth for ages? As with all questions of doctrine and theology, the hermeneutical principles employed in

interpreting Scriptures can often return varying results, especially when presuppositions or pre-understandings are allowed to serve as a guide for interpretation. Biblical prophecies concerning events of the last days are particularly susceptible to obfuscation under such circumstances. As a result, in the pages that follow, it will be demonstrated that a consistent, literal, grammatical, historical, and contextual interpretation of Scripture reveals the Rapture of the church precedes the Tribulation period.

THE RAPTURE: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The single most significant truth in all of biblical prophecy is the absolute certainty of the return of Jesus Christ – his Second Coming. This fact is laid bare by the myriad of references to this return in twenty-three of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and all nine authors of the New Testament mentioned it.¹ Based on this internal evidence alone, belief in the Bible seems to necessitate a belief in the physical return of Christ. But the biblical record portrays this return in two ways: Christ will come in the air (1 Thess. 4:17), but he will also come to the earth (Zech. 14:4). Further, he will come both as a thief in the night (2 Pet. 3:10), and elsewhere it is said every eye will see his return (Rev. 1:7). John hints that believers in Christ will be “changed” while still alive and will be suddenly taken home (John 14:1-3). Paul describes this event as a mystery (1 Cor. 15:51) before providing explicit details regarding the sequence of the “snatching away” (ἁρπάζω) of all church-age believers, both living and dead.

From these descriptions it becomes apparent that Christ’s Second Coming is accomplished in two stages. The first stage comprises the rapture, or the removal of all church-age saints to be with Jesus Christ. The second stage occurs when Christ physically returns to the

¹ Philemon and 2 and 3 John are single chapter letters that do not discuss the Second Coming, and Galatians only mentions the Second Coming by implication in 1:4.

earth where every eye will see him. The only question that remains is the timing of the Rapture relative to Christ's physical Second Coming. A brief survey of some perspectives on this issue from church history will add value to this discussion.

Early Church Fathers

The idea of the timing of the Rapture was not as systematized in the early church fathers as was the idea of imminency, which Charles Ryrie describes as an event that is "impending, hanging over one's head, ready to take place. An imminent event is one that is always ready to take place."² Larry Crutchfield finds ample expressions of imminency in Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, *The Didache*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In fact, Crutchfield sees in *The Shepard of Hermas* (ca. A.D. 140) a possible pretribulational concept of escaping the Tribulation, an idea also found in the writings of Hippolytus and Lactantius.³ Crutchfield concludes the early church fathers "believed that they were living in the last times. Thus they looked daily for the Lord's return," an event "occurring suddenly and just as suddenly being followed by the rescue and rapture of the saints by Christ."⁴

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus : What You Need to Know About the Rapture*, Rev. ed. (Eugene, Or.: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 21-22.

³ Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 88-101. Also Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism: Part VI - the Conclusion: Evaluating the Content of Early Dispensational Concepts," *Conservative Theological Journal* 3, no. 9 (1999): 194.

⁴ Crutchfield, "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism: Part VI - the Conclusion: Evaluating the Content of Early Dispensational Concepts," 195.

The Middle Ages

Thomas Ice finds evidence of pretribulationism (i.e., a pre-tribulation Rapture) surfacing between the fourth and sixth centuries in a sermon often attributed to Ephraem the Syrian entitled *Sermon on The Last Times, The Antichrist, and The End of the World* (ca. 373). Here believers are said to escape tribulation through an initial gathering to the Lord, with Christ's Second Coming being mentioned at the end of the sermon.⁵ In *Codex Amiatinus* (ca. 690–716), commissioned by Abbot Ceolfrid of the monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth in Northumberland, Ceolfrid writes of Christ's sudden future return and the resurrection of believers.⁶ Brother Dolcino (d. 1307) is said to have led the Apostolic Brethren in northern Italy through a time of extreme papal persecution. In *The History of Brother Dolcino*, Dolcino and his followers believed they would be translated (i.e., raptured) to paradise before the appearance of the Antichrist – a pre-tribulation Rapture concept.⁷

The Reformation Period

The Reformers who identified with an imminent rapture were most strongly exemplified by Anabaptists such as Balthasar Hubmaier who exclaimed, “[A]lthough Christ gave us many signs whereby we can tell how near at hand the day of his coming is, nevertheless, no one but God knows the exact day. . . Take heed, watch and pray; for you know neither the day nor the

⁵ Thomas Ice, "The Rapture, John 14, and Myths," *Conservative Theological Journal* 5, no. 14 (2001): 37.

⁶ James F. Stitzinger, "The Rapture in Twenty Centuries of Biblical Interpretation," *Master's Seminary Journal* 13, no. 2 (2002): 159.

⁷ Francis Gumerlock, "A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 635 (2002): 352.

hour . . . [The] Judge is already standing at the door. . .”⁸ Those such as Martin Luther and John Calvin make similar statements regarding the imminency of the Lord’s return, but such writings are scant. Nevertheless, James Stitzinger notes the rebirth of premillennialism during this period for three reasons: the Reformers investigated original written sources by church fathers (e.g., Irenaeus, a premillennial adherent) and Scriptures; much of the allegorical hermeneutic of the Middle Ages was repudiated (Calvin reintroduced exegetical exposition); and, many Reformers learned Hebrew and contacted Jewish sources thereby moving them to take passages regarding Israel more historically than allegorically.⁹ Thus, futurist interpretations of biblical prophecies became much more prominent in the church.

John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) is most often deemed the father of dispensationalism, representing a shift from historicism to futurism. Paul Wilkinson describes him as “the man who formulated the pretribulation Rapture in its modern form, who originated the Rapture as a stock part of Evangelical theology, and who did more than any other man to organize and popularize this doctrine in the United States and Great Britain.”¹⁰ For Darby, the Second Coming applied “not only to the day of the Lord, but also to what precedes that day, that is, to the Rapture of the

⁸ Balthasar Hubmaier, "Apologia," in *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1989), 541-43. Cited in Stitzinger, "The Rapture in Twenty Centuries of Biblical Interpretation," 159-160.

⁹ Stitzinger, "The Rapture in Twenty Centuries of Biblical Interpretation," 160.

¹⁰ Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake : Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Milton Keynes, [England] ; Colorado Springs, Colo.: Paternoster, 2007), 121.

church.”¹¹ Through his association with the Brethren movement, the doctrine of the Rapture spread around the world through annual Bible conferences (e.g., the Niagara Bible Conferences [1878-1909]), and through popular books such as the *Scofield Study Bible* (1909).¹² The fundamental basis for such widespread recognition was a consistent literal interpretation of Scriptures regarding the church and Israel in the last days, and more specifically the removal of the church prior to the Tribulation. But what of opposing Rapture views that do not adhere to a literal hermeneutic? This will be entertained in the discussions that follow.

WHEN WILL THE BELIEVING BE LEAVING?

As previously argued, the hermeneutical principles employed in interpreting Scriptures can often return varying results, especially when presuppositions or pre-understandings are allowed to serve as a guide for interpretation; therefore, that differing views on the timing of the Rapture remain should come as no surprise. A careful evaluation of the most prevalent Rapture views quickly betrays the hermeneutical principles employed by proponents of each to achieve either a post-tribulation, pre-wrath, or pre-tribulation view of the Rapture of the church.

Post-Tribulation Rapture View

Post-tribulationism is the view which expects the church will endure the Tribulation period and be raptured at its conclusion – the Rapture and Christ’s Second Coming being one and the same event. To arrive at such a conclusion, post-tribulationists such as Robert Gundry typically argue the early church did not believe in the doctrine of imminency, nor do Scriptures

¹¹ John Nelson Darby, "Notes on the Apocalypse," in *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly (Kingston-on-Thames: Stow Hill Bible & Tract Depot, n.d.), 5:23. Cited in Wilkinson, 121.

¹² Ice, "The Rapture, John 14, and Myths," 41.

teach it.¹³ Gundry writes, “A number of exhortations to watch, including the fullest, appears in the immediate context of the post tribulational advent and include the observation of precursive signs during the Tribulation.”¹⁴ Dave McPherson expands on this idea and proposes a dozen signs that had to be accomplished before Christ could return. Among these signs he argues are Paul’s expectation of death and not rapture in 1 Timothy 4:6-8, Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s martyrdom in John 21:18-19, and that the signs of Matthew 24 must come first.¹⁵ But a scrutiny of the relevancy of these signs to a post-tribulation rapture reveals a failure to interpret these verses within their biblical context.

In response to the idea that Paul expected death instead of rapture, Elmer Towns writes, “It was Paul who most fully developed the doctrine of an imminent Rapture of the church (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4). If toward the end of his life, he spoke of death as a very real possibility, it does not necessarily mean he was denying the doctrine of imminency.”¹⁶ On Peter’s martyrdom, Towns argues most conservative scholars agree the prophecy of Peter’s martyrdom was recorded by John over three decades after Peter was killed.¹⁷ Thus, how would this discourage any in the early church from expecting Christ’s imminent return? Finally, on the signs of Matthew 24, post-

¹³ As previously shown the concept of the Rapture was not fully developed in the early church. In this light Dwight Pentecost cautions, “It should be observed that each era of church history has been occupied with a particular doctrinal controversy, which has become the object of discussion, revision, and formulation, until there was a general acceptance of what Scripture taught. The entire field of theology was thus formulated through the age. It was not until the last century that the field of Eschatology became a matter to which the mind of the church was turned.” J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come : A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1964), 166.

¹⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1973), 43.

¹⁵ Dave MacPherson, *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City, Missouri: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974), 23.

¹⁶ Elmer L. Towns, "Answering the Arguments of Post-Tribulation Rapture Position," *Conservative Theological Journal* 6, no. 19 (2002): 298.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

tribulationists simply ignore any distinction between the Rapture and Second Coming, reading later revelation through Paul unjustifiably back into the Olivet Discourse. John Walvoord notes the reason the Rapture is not discussed in Matthew 24 is that it was not Christ's subject; rather, "the disciples wanted to know the signs leading up to the establishment of the millennial kingdom."¹⁸ The future kingdom was the subject of Christ's discussion.

Though not an exhaustive examination of the post-tribulation Rapture view, as with Towns, it can be concluded that the post-tribulation view is not the product of a consistent theological system. In other words, the presupposition that imminency is not a product of Scripture clouds their hermeneutics and loosely shapes a post-tribulation Rapture position.

Pre-Wrath Rapture View

The pre-wrath Rapture view argues the true and faithful church will be rescued from the Tribulation period when the persecution of God's elect by the Antichrist is cut short by Christ's Second Coming. Thus the Day of the Lord is said to begin sometime between the middle and end of the seventieth week of Daniel 9 (i.e., the Tribulation period), and the Rapture occurs just before or on the same day as the beginning of the Day of the Lord. Alan Hultberg, a pre-wrath proponent and self-described progressive dispensationalist, suggests support for this view is found in the Olivet Discourse, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation. Hultberg summarizes:

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus seems to indicate that his disciples would see both the Danielic abomination of desolation and the subsequent tribulation (Matt. 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20) immediately prior to his *parousia*. Paul appears to expect the former in 2 Thessalonians 2, and John appears to expect at least the latter in Revelation 2, 7, 13, and 17.¹⁹

¹⁸ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation : A Biblical and Historical Study of Posttribulationism*, Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976), 87.

¹⁹ Alan Hultberg, "A Case for the Prewrath Rapture," in *Three Views on the Rapture : Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, ed. Alan Hultberg, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 110. Of

In more specific terms, the seventieth week of Daniel 9 is divided into three stages: the first consists of the beginning of birth pangs (Matt. 24:4-8), or first four seal judgments of Revelation 6, and covers the first three and one-half years of the seventieth week; the second stage begins in the middle of the seventieth week at the breaking of the sixth seal, and will end sometime between the middle and the end of the seventieth week with Christ's Second Coming and the simultaneous rapture of the church; the third stage comprises the breaking of the seventh seal and commences the Day of the Lord where God pours out his wrath upon the earth.

As in the hermeneutics of the post-tribulational view, the pre-wrath view spiritualizes the idea of Jesus' disciples in Matthew 24, substituting for them the church. In this way, the church is seen to experience the birth pangs and is therefore present in the Tribulation period.

Furthermore, from an eschatological perspective the Bible associates both the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1-2) and the Tribulation period (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21) with a future unparalleled time of trouble. Renald Showers rightly concludes, "Since there can be only one unparalleled time of trouble, this common association prompts the conclusion that the Great Tribulation cannot be totally separate from the Day of the Lord."²⁰ Moreover, Paul is explicit in his description of the suddenness of the Day of the Lord, coming at a time when people of the world are saying, "Peace and safety" (1 Thess. 5:2-3). Paul Benware explains:

According to the pre-wrath view, the sixth seal will just have been broken, which will result in earthquakes and great cosmic disturbances that will cause incredible terror to the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 6:12-17). In fact, more than one-fourth of the world's population will have been recently destroyed by famines, disease, and widespread

interest, in this same book Craig Blaising, also a progressive dispensationalist, takes the pre-tribulation Rapture position. Even more intriguing, John Brumett comments that "if one pushes the theology of [progressive dispensationalism] to its logical extreme, based on the blurring and breaking down of the clear distinctions that distinguish the Church, it is more, much more logical to be post-tribulational." John Brumett, "Does Progressive Dispensationalism Teach a Posttribulational Rapture? - Part II," *Conservative Theological Journal* 2, no. 6 (1998): 331.

²⁰ Renald E. Showers, "The Prewrath Rapture," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), 356.

warfare on the earth. It does not seem likely that the people of the world will be saying “Peace and safety” when more than a billion people have recently perished and incredible cosmic disturbances are taking place.²¹

Clearly, placing the Rapture and the Day of the Lord at this point in the Tribulation does not make logical sense and violates an important hermeneutical principle, the perspicuity or intelligibility of Scripture.

Pre-Tribulation Rapture View

The pre-tribulation Rapture view teaches that all church-age believers, the dead first, then the living, will be suddenly removed from the earth and caught up into heaven to be with Christ. The Tribulation period will commence sometime after the Rapture when the Antichrist and Israel sign a seven-year peace treaty. As with the other Rapture views, there is no expressed declaration of a pre-tribulation Rapture in Scripture. Therefore, to properly understand the timing requires a “weight of evidence” investigation through careful analysis of those passages of Scripture which suggest the relationship of the church with the Tribulation period. At the outset, arrival at a pre-tribulation Rapture view requires the application of a consistent, literal, grammatical, historical, and contextual interpretation of Scriptures.

Six major lines of evidence for a pre-tribulation Rapture of the church will be explored, beginning with the use of the Greek word for “church” (*ekklesia*) in Revelation. The word is used twenty times in Revelation, and nineteen of these references are found in the first three chapters in the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. Then comes silence – the church is not mentioned again until chapter 19 where she is pictured as a beautifully adorned Bride who returns with the Bridegroom, Christ, at his Second Coming. The simple statement that the Bride

²¹ Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 235.

“made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7) is a clear indication the church has been in heaven for some time. Thus the place of the church in Revelation is compelling evidence for a pre-tribulation Rapture.

The second line of evidence for a pre-tribulation Rapture arises from a literal understanding of the two-stage return of Christ. In the first stage, John proclaims Christ will come *for* his church to bring her to his father’s house (John 14:3). Scriptures portray the second stage as Christ returning *with* his saints as he descends from heaven to judge his enemies and establish his millennial kingdom (Zech. 14:5; Rev. 19:14). In the first stage Christ comes in the air for his saints and all believers depart the earth (1 Thess. 4:16-17). In the second stage Christ comes to the earth (Zech. 14:4) with his saints (1 Thess. 3:13; Jude 4) and only unbelievers are taken away (Matt. 24:37-41). Walvoord concludes these and a number of other “contrasts should make it evident that the translation of the church is an event quite different in character and time from the return of the Lord to establish His kingdom, and confirms the conclusion that the translation takes place before the tribulation.”²²

The third line of evidence for a pre-tribulation Rapture revolves around God’s exemption of his people from his coming wrath in the Tribulation period (1 Thess. 1:9-10; 5:9; Rev. 3:10). Since church-age saints have already been judged and declared not guilty on the basis of their belief in Christ and his finished work on the cross, the focus of God’s wrath during the Tribulation will be upon unbelievers. Now pre-wrath rapture proponents would agree with this assessment but would suggest that God’s wrath is meted out in the second half of the Tribulation period, arguing the first six seal judgments are not God-caused but man-caused. Yet this

²² John F. Walvoord, *The Return of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1955), 87-88. Walvoord provides the following additional contrasts regarding the Rapture and Second Coming: Christ claims his bride first, then comes with his bride second; Christ gathers his own (1 Thess. 4:16-17), angels gather the elect (Matt. 24:31); Christ comes to reward (1 Thess. 4:17), Christ comes to judge (Matt. 25:31-46).

interpretation betrays a faulty hermeneutic by ignoring the fact that the seal judgments are brought forth by Christ himself – they are the messianic judgments that begin the Tribulation period. Furthermore, by maintaining the important hermeneutical principle of biblical perspicuity, it would be an inconsistent interpretation for Christ to have suffered, died, and risen from the dead to satisfy God’s wrath on behalf of all believers, and then have these same believers pass through the Tribulation period where God’s wrath is poured out on those who rejected the Messiah. Therefore, the church is not present during the tribulation period, at least allowing for a pre-tribulation Rapture.

A fourth line of evidence for a pre-tribulation Rapture is the removal of the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:6-7) and the resulting unleashing of evil upon the earth. In this present age, the onslaught of Satan and his ilk is held back, or restrained by the Holy Spirit through the church. Donald Grey Barnhouse aptly writes,

Well, what is keeping the Antichrist from putting in his appearance on the world stage? *You* are! You and every other member of the body of Christ on earth. The presence of the church of Jesus Christ is the restraining force that refuses to allow the man of lawlessness to be revealed. True, it is the Holy Spirit who is the real restrainer. But as both 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19 teach, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer. The believer’s body is the temple of the Spirit of God. Put all believers together then, with the Holy Spirit indwelling each of us, and you have a formidable restraining force.²³

Satan cannot put his plan of bringing the Antichrist into power over the world fully into action until the Spirit-indwelt church and its restraining influence are removed. Again, a strong case for a pre-tribulation Rapture.

The fifth line of evidence for a pre-tribulation rapture is the imminence of Christ’s return (in two stages). The idea of his imminent return was laid down by Jesus himself via a thief

²³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Thessalonians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 99.

analogy in a parable (Luke 12:35-48), through analogies of the coming flood in Noah's day and the destruction of Sodom in Lot's day (Luke 17:22-37), and by stressing that no one, not angels in heaven or the Son of God himself knew the "day and hour" of his Second Coming. Robert Thomas notes that Jesus "changes the subject from signs that indicate the nearness of His coming to establish the kingdom in [Matthew] 24:32-35 to speak of events which will have no signals to indicate that the advent is 'at the door.'"²⁴

The Apostle Paul taught the imminence of Christ's Second Coming to the Thessalonians. Thomas suggests Paul's use of the first person plural in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17: "we who live and who remain until the coming of the Lord" are the people who will be raptured. Thomas continues, "Paul uses the first person plural, because he was personally looking for the Lord's return during his lifetime . . . but he did not know when it would come. He was setting an example of expectancy for the church of all ages."²⁵ Coupled with Christ's teaching on his imminent return, Paul's expectancy reveals the Rapture of the church is the next event on the program of God and, therefore, must precede the Tribulation period.

The final line of evidence for a pre-tribulation Rapture is the blessed hope of Christ's return. Under the pre-wrath and post-tribulation views, the anticipation of Christ's Second Coming is preceded by woe for the coming wrath of God upon the earth, which they argue church-age saints will experience. Who would long for such experiences? Conversely, Gerald Stanton reminds that a pre-tribulation Rapture "focuses on the fact that the true church of Jesus Christ will be caught up to the Father's house before the 'time of Jacob's trouble' (Jer. 30:7),

²⁴ Robert L. Thomas, "Imminence in the NT, Especially Paul's Thessalonian Epistles," *Master's Seminary Journal* 13, no. 13 (2002): 194.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

before the ‘great day of God’s wrath’ (Rev. 6:16-17).”²⁶ Hence, believers today are not looking for signs or fulfillment of other prophecies. They are looking for Jesus Christ himself – the blessed hope of his coming.

DOES THE TIMING REALLY MATTER?

Given the preceding discussion, one might still be asking whether the timing of the Rapture is a relevant doctrinal issue to the church today. To begin with, from a broader perspective, a pre-tribulation Rapture acknowledges the purposes of God for the church and Israel. Michael Vlach contributes to this discussion,

God is a God of truth and order. Not only can we be assured that all He reveals is true, we can also know that the many facets of His revelation fit in perfect harmony with each other. No revealed truth in one area ever contradicts a revealed truth in another. Nor will His purposes in one area contradict His purposes in another. We find this to be true when we come to the matter of how Israel and the church relate to the rapture. These categories, while distinct, fit together.²⁷

The pre-tribulation Rapture closes God’s program for the church on earth and marks the resumption of God’s program with Israel, a program that was interrupted after sixty-nine weeks of years described in Daniel 9 due to the nation’s rejection of the Messiah. The seventieth week of Daniel 9 comprises the Tribulation period where God will pour out his judgment on an unbelieving world. But the Bible is clear that the Tribulation period is also a time for God to save and restore Israel through intense turmoil and persecution until she looks upon the One whom they have pierced, and mourns for Him with tears of repentance (Zech. 12:10).

²⁶ Gerald B. Stanton, "The Doctrine of Imminency: Is It Biblical?," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Timothy J. Demy and Thomas D. Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 232-233.

²⁷ Michael J. Vlach, "Israel and the Church and Why They Matter to the Rapture," in *The Popular Handbook on the Rapture*, ed. Tim F. LaHaye, Thomas Ice, and Edward E. Hindson (Eugene, Or.: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 223.

So upon this basis alone, the pre-tribulation Rapture is a relevant doctrinal issue for the church today. But a pre-tribulation Rapture also necessitates a dispensational understanding of Scripture, since dispensationalism provides biblical distinctions (e.g., between Israel and the church), and employs a consistently normal principle of interpreting Scripture.²⁸ The latter of these could not be more important to churches today in studying and teaching all of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, especially eschatology. Unfortunately, in-depth teaching on biblical eschatology is generally only a characteristic of evangelical churches. As a result, most of the churches in the world spend little time or effort teaching or even attempting to understand eschatology. By teaching the biblical truth of a pre-tribulation Rapture of the church, pastors and teachers are forced to participate in honest Bible study that includes consistent, literal, grammatical, historical, and contextual interpretation of Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

Throughout church history, believers have embraced three essential truths regarding the end times: Jesus will return to earth in bodily form at some point in the future, he will judge all humanity, and God will physically resurrect all humanity at some point in the future.²⁹ Beyond these essential truths lie detailed facets of eschatology to which little consensus has manifested. The doctrine of the timing of the Rapture of the church is certainly no exception, as has been previously shown. Those holding to pre-wrath and post-tribulational views of the Rapture see the church enduring through some or all of the Tribulation period and raptured at Christ's Second Coming. The challenge one faces with these two views is the abandonment of sound

²⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, Rev. and expand ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 20.

²⁹ Timothy P. Jones, David Gundersen, and Benjamin Galan, *Rose Guide to End-Times Prophecy* (Torrance, Calif.: Rose Pub., 2011), 40.

hermeneutical principles required to achieve the end result. But application of these erroneous hermeneutics also results in a loss of the distinction, or at best a blurred distinction, between Israel and the church. Thus the pre-wrath and post-tribulational Rapture views are simply manifestations of poor hermeneutical systems. Conversely, when a consistent, literal, grammatical, historical, and contextual interpretation of Scriptures is employed, the weight of evidence from Scriptures necessarily supports a pre-tribulation Rapture.

The New Testament clearly teaches that believers in Jesus Christ have a blessed hope (cf. Titus 2:13). This hope is portrayed in Scriptures under the motif of a wedding, where the bride anxiously awaits the coming of the bridegroom. While she waits, her loyalty to the bridegroom is tested. In this same way, the church is waiting and watching with expectation and anticipation. The pre-tribulation Rapture of the church is an expectation that provides all believers daily motivation for pure and godly living until Jesus returns for his Bride. So when will the believing be leaving? At any moment. Maranatha!

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