

## CHAPTER 1

### THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

#### The Problem

Since the early nineteenth century, there has arisen a greatly renewed interest in eschatology (from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning, “the extreme, most remote spoken of place and time, the last,”<sup>1</sup> the study of Last Things, End Times, or final events surrounding the Second Coming or Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ) in general and the Rapture of the Church (as a separate and distinct event from the Second Coming and before the Tribulation) specifically. The Rapture has been popularized in recent years by the *Left Behind* series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

Many modern day theologians posit that the beginning of the teaching of the Rapture, as a belief within the traditional orthodox Church, did not occur until around the year 1830, coincidental with the rise of Dispensationalism (see “Definition of Terms” below.) Some strong proponents of this position are George Eldon Ladd (in his book, *The Blessed Hope*, 1956), William Everett Bell, Jr. (in his doctoral thesis, “A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology,” 1967), and Dave MacPherson (in his books, *The Incredible Cover-up*, 1975, *The Great Rapture Hoax*, 1983, *The Rapture Plot*, 1994, *The Three R’s: Rapture, Revisionism, Robbery: Pretribulation Rapturism from 1830 to Hal Lindsey*, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup>Spiros Zodhiates, ed., “eschatos,” *The Complete Word Study Dictionary, New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 661-2.

Other theologians maintain that the Rapture was part of the early church's premillennial eschatological teaching of the imminent return of Christ (over-hanging, any moment, nothing holding it back, no signs or prerequisite required).<sup>2</sup> Some strong proponents of this position are: Jesse Forest Silver (in his book, *The Lord's Return: Seen in History and in Scripture as Premillennial and Imminent*, 1914), John F. Walvoord (in his book, *The Rapture Question*, 1957), Tim LaHaye (in his paper, "The Case for the Imminent Rapture of the Church," 2000), and Norman Geisler (in his book, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4, *The Church and Last Things*, 2005).

Until recently there has been very little primary source evidence from the early church Fathers to support the claim that they believed in and/or taught about the Rapture. Bell did the most extensive historical and exegetical review of the pretribulation Rapture doctrine to date. He published the findings of his extensive research in the preface to his dissertation and applicable portions are quoted below:

1. No trace of the pretribulation rapture doctrine was found in the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers.
2. No trace of dispensationalism was found in the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers, which traces, had they been found, would have indicated at least an embryonic pretribulationism.
3. The Ante-Nicene fathers when they mentioned the subject at all, were specifically posttribulation and non-dispensational.
4. The historical origin of pretribulationism was traced to John Nelson Darby . . . The doctrine apparently arose about 1830. . . .
7. It was found that the primary support for the doctrine stemmed from the distinctive hermeneutical methodology of dispensationalism. A study of key passages of scripture disclosed that the system is not supported by an exegesis of the text. Its basic hermeneutical deficiency was found to lie in its disposition to arrive at premature literal interpretations of Old Testament passages with insufficient attention being given to the applicable New Testament passages . . .
8. A study of the specific New Testament data concerning the second coming of Christ confirmed the hypothesis that the doctrine was a product of theological deduction rather

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<sup>2</sup>Tim LaHaye, "The Case for the Imminent Rapture of the Church," December 2000, <http://www.tyndale.edu/dirn/articles/rapture.html/> (18 October 2005).

than inductive exegesis. It was found that the New Testament knows nothing of any future coming of Christ apart from His glorious, posttribulational coming which is so prominent in its pages.

9. It was concluded, then, that the pretribulational rapture position is not to be viewed as part of historic Christian orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

Bell also outlines the criteria for accepting any primary source evidence on the Rapture by the Church Fathers below:

Any of the following items would be of crucial importance, if found, whether by direct statement or clear inference:

- (1) Any mention that Christ's second coming was to consist of more than one phase, separated by an interval of years.
- (2) Any mention that Christ was to remove the church from the earth before the tribulation period.
- (3) Any reference to the resurrection of the just as being in two stages.
- (4) Any indication that Israel and the church were to be clearly distinguished, thus providing some rationale for a removal of Christians before God "again deals with Israel."<sup>4</sup>

This then is the problem to be addressed by this thesis: Is there enough primary source historical evidence to support whether the Rapture was an orthodox doctrine of the early church, passed down from the Apostles?

the Book of Revelation and by Daniel 12; Matthew 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21. This seven year period is also commonly broken into two 3 ½ year periods (Dan 9:27, "but in the middle of the week"), with the latter 3 ½ year period being known as the Great Tribulation. As previously alluded to in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9, God will *deliver (sozo)* believers from this wrath to come and "did not appoint" believers unto this wrath, but *salvation (soteria)* through Jesus Christ. Therefore, believers will not be on earth during the Day of the Lord/Tribulation;

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<sup>3</sup>William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, School of Education, 1967), ii-iii.

<sup>4</sup>Bell, 26-27.

when God pours out his wrath upon the world, but in Heaven with Jesus<sup>5</sup> (another reference to the Rapture of the Church).

The theological terms related to the Rapture are: eschatology, imminency, dispensationalism, premillennialism, historic premillennialism (historicism), futuristic premillennialism (futurism), pretribulationism, midtribulationism, posttribulationism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. Both eschatology and imminency were defined in the “Problem” section. Premillennialism, historicism, futurism, pretribulationism, midtribulationism, posttribulationism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism, were all defined in the “Background” section.

Dispensationalism is a theological belief attributed to John Nelson Darby that teaches that God deals with humanity throughout Biblical History in a number of (usually seven) periods of time, economies, administrations, or dispensations (for example, Innocence, Conscience, Government, Patriarchal Rule, Mosaic Law, Grace or the Church Age, and the Millennial Kingdom). Dispensationalists hold to the following four major doctrines: (1) A distinct separation between an earthly Israel and the heavenly Church; (2) A clear separation between Law and Grace; (3) The New Testament Church is a “parenthesis” in God’s plan and was not foretold in the Old Testament; and (4) A clear distinction between the Rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Christ, separated by the seven year Tribulation. All of their beliefs are based on a literal, plenary interpretation of the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>J. Randall Price, “Old Testament Tribulation Terms,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 82-3.

<sup>6</sup>Walter A. Elwell, ed., “dispensation, dispensationalism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 343-5.

The Rapture of the Church: A Doctrine of the Early Church or a Recent Development of the Dispensational Movement?

Based on the problem addressed above and the terms which have just been defined, an exegetical study will be done in the next chapter of the primary and related passages normally attributed to the Rapture of the Church.