

Background

Those who hold to the early nineteenth century theory maintain that since there are no primary source references to the Rapture of the Church in any of the Patristic Writings, or throughout the entire Middle Ages for that matter, then the Rapture of the Church is only a recent development from the outer edge of orthodoxy of the Church; which came into prominence during the rise of Dispensationalism (see “Definition of Terms”) around the year 1830. Those who promoted this belief in the Rapture at that time were Edward Irving, a Scottish minister who translated the Jesuit Manuel de Lacunza’s, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (under the pseudonym Juan Josafat Ben Ezra) from Spanish into English in 1826; Margaret MacDonald, a young Scottish girl who saw a vision of the Rapture in Scotland in 1830; and John Nelson Darby, an Anglican priest from Ireland, who espoused it as a doctrine and with the help of Benjamin Wills Newton formed a new denomination called the Plymouth Brethren in the 1830’s.¹ The modern theologians, who hold to this theory, acknowledge the fact that throughout Church History the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus was taught as an orthodox doctrine of the Church. Even most of them admit that the Church Fathers were premillennialists (believing in a literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation,² with its view of a Tribulation, an Antichrist, and Jesus establishing an earthly kingdom for a thousand years, Millennium, from the Latin words *milus*, meaning thousand and *annum*, meaning years, after His Second Coming).³ Other names

¹Dave MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1975), 27-32, 37-8, 46-60.

²Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in the paper are to the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

³Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 46.

for premillennialists are millenarians and chiliasts (taken from the Greek word for thousand).⁴

However, these theologians do not believe that a distinctly separate appearing of the Lord Jesus to take the Church to heaven with himself (the Rapture) was ever taught by the Church prior to the 1830 timeframe.

The other side of this theological debate bases their theory upon the early church's premillennial view of eschatology and the teaching of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus. Although, until recently they have only found a very few isolated specific inferences to the Rapture in the Patristic Writings that may satisfy any of Bell's four criteria mentioned above. The discussion of Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, or Amillennialism, as the orthodox view of the early church, also applies to the question at hand. If one takes either the postmillennial (Christ will return to earth after the Millennium, not necessarily a literal thousand years, and after the Church has brought in the Kingdom of God by the fulfillment of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20) or amillennial (the belief that between Jesus' two Comings or Advents, He rules in the hearts of His Believers in a Spiritual Kingdom, which is definitely not a literal thousand year period) stance, the Rapture of the Church does not fit into their eschatology. That is because there will be no literal Tribulation and the Church will ultimately be triumphant on earth and usher in the Second Coming of Christ. However, if the premillennial stance is taken, then the Rapture of the Church becomes an issue. Premillennialism can be further subdivided into two groups: Historicism, belief that the prophecies concerning the End Times provide a symbolic history of the Church Period leading up to the Second Coming, which examines past and present Church History to seek fulfillment of specific prophecies; and Futurism, belief that

none of the End Time prophecies will be fulfilled until a future short period of time, just before the Second Coming. Additionally, one must address the Rapture of the Church in terms of when it occurs: pre-Tribulation, mid-Tribulation, or post-Tribulation (in conjunction with the Second Coming).⁵ The majority of those who teach the Rapture of the Church place it before the revealing of the Antichrist and the start of the Tribulation (pretribulational). However, there are others who teach a midtribulational (halfway through the Tribulation and before the Great Tribulation), pre-Wrath (after the mid-point of the Tribulation and before God pours out His wrath on the Earth, The Day of the Lord; which takes place after the Sixth and before the Seventh Seal in Rev 6 and 7), or posttribulational (after the Tribulation and in conjunction with the Second Coming) Rapture also.⁶

The author of this paper has maintained an avid interest in eschatology and spent countless hours of personal bible study and research endeavoring to uncover the truth of this mystery of the Rapture ever since coming to know the Lord Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit in the mid 1970's. In preparing the research for this thesis, a search was conducted to see if any other masters or doctoral work had been previously done on this topic. In addition to Bell's dissertation, mentioned above, three related works were found. Bell concludes his dissertation by saying, ". . . on the basis of the foregoing study, that the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture is not supported by the exegesis of scripture or the testimony of church history. It has been demonstrated that the doctrine was entirely unknown in the early church, the standard belief

⁴R. A. Torrey, *The Return of the Lord Jesus* (Los Angeles: Grant's Publishing House, 1913), 145.

⁵Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming, American Premillennialism 1875-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9-11.

⁶Rosenthal, 60-61.

being that Christ's coming would be posttribulational.”⁷ The other three works are cited and summarized below.

John Rea's masters thesis concludes with the following:

In the rapture only the true Church will be translated to heaven . . . can truly be said to be in Christ . . . The resurrection of the dead in Christ will take place at a different time from the resurrection of the Old Testament saints and of the martyred tribulation saints . . . The need for the deliverance or rescue of the Church from the hour of trial which shall come upon all the world . . . only the pre-tribulation system of interpretation seems to allow for sufficient time to conduct . . . the judgement of the believers' works at the bema-seat of Christ and the marriage and wedding supper of the Lamb . . . For all these reasons it is logical to conclude that the rapture of the Church—the return of our blessed Saviour for His own—will precede the tribulation.⁸

P. Allan Carlsson's masters' thesis broke down the historical witness into periods:

Apostolic Fathers, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and post-Reformation period, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To this, he added two appendices: Imminency and Pretribulationism and Jewish Tradition and Pretribulationism. Under the summary of the Apostolic Fathers he states, “In the sources consulted no mention was found of the Rapture as a distinct event. However, all of the writers were looking forward to the soon return of the Lord.”⁹ In addressing the Ante-Nicene Fathers, he makes the following statement, “The most interesting quotation from Irenaeus is the following which contains the earliest mention of the Rapture as a distinct event found in the course of this study. The Church seems to be pictured as caught up during tribulation.”¹⁰ In summary of the

⁷Bell, 353.

⁸John Rea, “The Rapture of the Church and Its Chronological Relation to The Great Tribulation” (M.Th. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1954), 128-130.

⁹Allan Carlsson, “A Historical Approach to the Doctrine of the Rapture” (M.Th. thesis, Wheaton College, 1956), 13.

¹⁰Carlsson, 15.

Ante-Nicene Fathers, he goes on to say that there was little reference to the Rapture, the prevailing understanding was the Church would go through the tribulation and the premillennial tide turned to amillennialism with the teachings of Origen, Eusebius and Augustine.¹¹ In the summary of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers he amplifies:

With the conversion of Constantine and the resultant change of attitude of the Roman empire toward the church, the church increasingly came to believe that her present temporal position was the actual fulfillment of the promised kingdom of God. The City of God advocated the idea that this kingdom was established at the first advent of Christ . . . In this period the first instance of an individual statement on the time of the Rapture in relationship to other eschatological events occurs in Chrysostom. Christ's coming with his saints and the Rapture of the saints on earth to meet Christ happen at the same time. The other representatives chosen for this period see a time in the future when the Antichrist will be persecuting the Church. This does not seem to allow for a Rapture of the saints prior to the tribulation period.¹²

In the summary of the Middle Ages, he states, "The long period of time from 500-1500 has been treated as one period of time since there was little development of thought in regard to the Rapture."¹³ Then, in his overall summary he concludes, "This study indicates that up to the nineteenth century, the consensus of opinion expressed in the various historical divisions made in this study . . . is that which is today known as the post-tribulation Rapture theory or historical premillennialism. Throughout these periods little direct mention is made to the Rapture, but tribulation and Antichrist are seen before the coming of Christ, which of course necessitates a post-tribulation Rapture."¹⁴ In appendix A, he adds, "The pre-tribulation Rapture cannot be

¹¹Carlsson, 21-22.

¹²Carlsson, 30-1.

¹³Carlsson, 43.

¹⁴Carlsson, 93b.

defended from the early fathers by a defense of the doctrine of imminency of the Lord's return.”¹⁵ However, appendix B ends on this note, “This material gives evidence that there is some connection between a Jewish tradition and the pre-tribulation Rapture position.”¹⁶ In total, there were several references to the Rapture, but very little evidence for a pretribulation Rapture.

Charles August Hauser, Jr.’s doctoral dissertation, treats the Patristic Fathers in three separate periods (96-150, 150-200, and 200-250), each addressing five different eschatological issues: the Great Tribulation, the Antichrist, the Second Advent, the Resurrection, and the Kingdom (notice, there is no separate category for the Rapture). Hauser reviewed the following writers for evidence of their eschatological views on the five issues by period. Period 1 includes: Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, Papias, Aristides, *Epistle to Diognetus*, *The Didache*, *An Ancient Homily*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, and *Shepherd of Hermas*. Period 2 includes: Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. Period 3 includes: Hippolytus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen. Even though it was not a primary focus of his research, the assessment of the collective view of a pretribulation Rapture was the following:

The Church Fathers believed that the Church would be on earth during the tribulation period. This is seen in the earliest writers and there is nothing in the other writers to contradict this. They speak of the persecution of the Church by the Antichrist and of the Church being on earth at the second advent of Christ. Two writers mention the translation of the Church but one, Irenaeus, does not tell when it will take place and the other, Origen, places it at the second advent of Christ. They did not seem to realize that part of the blessed hope of the Church was the escape from the wrath to come. The passages where the Apostles Paul and John teach this truth are neglected by these writers. Perhaps the extreme persecution which the Christians received during the first three centuries conditioned them to believe that they would go through the tribulation.¹⁷

¹⁵Carlsson, 99.

¹⁶Carlsson, 101.

¹⁷Charles August Hauser, Jr., “The Eschatology of the Early Church Fathers” (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1961), 234.

Again, there are two isolated references to the Rapture, but just as passing comments that relate to the other eschatological findings. Despite Hauser's general pretribulational disposition, the Rapture was just not a primary focus of his research.

Although the three works above, which dealt with the Fathers' view on the Rapture, contain several isolated references to the Rapture, in total, they contain very little evidence to support the idea that the Fathers taught or believed in a Pretribulation Rapture of the Church. If anything, they could only be generally characterized as posttribulational premillennialists and if they believed in the Rapture at all, it was in conjunction with the Second Coming of Jesus and not a separate event. Therefore, it remains the primary purpose of this thesis to thoroughly research the early Church writings to see if there is more evidence to support the theory that they did possibly believe in and teach a pretribulation Rapture of the Church. Then, to continue with that same type of research into the Medieval Church Period; to see if there remains at least a strain of teaching on the Rapture of the Church through that period also.