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

Review of Writings from the Post-Nicene Church up to 1750

First, the orthodox Creeds of the Church (Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian) will be reviewed. Some form of the Apostles’ Creed is the oldest. But, the first record of it in its entirety was recorded in Greek by Marcellus between 336-341, and in Latin by Rufinius in 390. The form Christendom currently uses was received from the late seventh and early eighth century. The Nicene Creed has three different forms: (1) The original from the Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325; (2) The enlarged Creed from the Council at Constantinople in 381; and (3) The Latin version with various dates—589, 809, 858. When both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are compared side by side, they both contain the exact same language in lines 7, 11 and 12, “7. And he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end” . . . “11. And we look for the resurrection of the dead; 12. And the life of the world to come.”¹ These Creeds clearly mention two separate statements: one referring the Second Coming of Christ to “judge the quick and the dead;” and the other speaking of the “resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” Since they contain two separate statements, a case can be made that these two events happen at different times (the same as the Rapture and the Second Coming).

However, the Athanasian Creed, which probably was not written by Athanasius and did not appear in its full form until the end of the eighth/beginning of the ninth century, consolidates the separate thoughts of the previous creeds into one universal resurrection and judgment event occurring at the Second Coming in its lines 40-44: “40. From whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. 41. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; 42. And shall

give account for their own works. 43. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. 44. This is the Catholic Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he can not be saved.”

This makes sense, since the Athanasian Creed dates well after the previous two Creeds, came out of the N. African School of Augustine and dates after Amillennialism became the eschatological doctrine of the newly consolidated Catholic Church. Next, the other references/inferences to the Rapture in Church History.

The next citation was discovered by Grant R. Jeffrey during the summer of 1994 in manuscripts apparently written by Ephraem the Syrian (306-373) and entitled, *Sermon On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World.* However, since its recent discovery it has been determined that several prominent ancient Byzantine scholars (Ernest Sakur, 1862-1901, Wilhelm Bousset, 1865-1920, C. P. Caspari, in his 1890 book, and the late Paul J. Alexander) had already reviewed the manuscript and determined it to be written by a Pseudo-Ephraem, dating anywhere from 373 to somewhere between 565 and 627. In either case, the quotation from the text speaks for itself [emphasis added]:

1. Most dearly beloved brothers, believe the Holy Spirit who speaks in us. Now we have spoken before, because the end of the world is very near, and the consummation remains.

2. We ought to understand thoroughly therefore, my brothers, *what is imminent or overhanging...* Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare

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ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that He may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms the world? Believe you me, dearest brothers, because the coming of the Lord is nigh, believe you me, because the end of the world is at hand, believe me, because it is the very last time... See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: ‘Woe to those who desire to see the Day of the Lord!’ Because all saints and the Elect of the Lord are gathered together before the tribulation which is about to come and are taken to the Lord, in order that they may not see at any time the confusion which overwhelms the world because of our sins. And so brothers, most dear to me, it is the eleventh hour, and the end of this world comes to the harvest.5

It is clear that this citation describes a pretribulation Rapture of the Church. If one uses the later dating of this manuscript (AD 565-627), then this would be the first reference to support the Rapture in the medieval church (post AD 500). This would also show a connection to the teaching of the early church Fathers.

The *Codex Amiatinus* (ca. 690-716) is a Latin manuscript from England which was written under the auspices of Abbot Ceolfrid from the monasteries at Jarrow and Wearmouth. This manuscript was written during the same time period as the commentaries of Venerable Bede (who was also a monk at Jarrow monastery). In the *Codex Amiatinus*, in the title to Psalm 22 a note was written: “Psalm of David, the voice of the Church after being raptured [emphasis added].”6 While this is just an isolated statement in an isolated manuscript amid the sea of Augustine’s amillennial eschatology, it still shows the continuity of the belief in the Rapture of the Church during the Medieval Church Period.

The next citation is from the early fourteenth century, after Joachim of Fiore (1130-1202), a monk from Italy, had revived interest in the premillennial belief by his new prophetic interpretation of eschatology—Three ages or dispensations: (1) The Father (or Law), from creation to the Incarnation; (2) The Son (or Grace), from Jesus’ First Advent to His Second

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5Jeffrey, 109-111.
Advent at the year AD 1260; and (3) The Holy Spirit (or the Spiritual Church/Millennium). The citation is taken from *The History of Brother Dolcino*, written in 1316 by an anonymous notary in the diocese of Vercelli, Italy. It speaks of the beliefs of Brother Dolcino of Novara (d. 1307), who was a member of and ultimately became the leader of a group called the Apostolic Brethren (founded by Gerard Sagarello in 1260 after the Franciscans rejected him for membership). The citation is as follows [emphasis added]:

Again [Dolcino believed and preached and taught] that within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come, then he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise, in which are Enoch and Elijah. And in this way they will be preserved unharmed from the persecution of the Antichrist. And that then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed . . .

Both Joachim of Fiore and Brother Dolcino turned the Medieval Church in a direction back toward the premillennial eschatology of the Fathers. And from that time on, there followed more interest and study on these eschatological issues.

Even though the tide of eschatology had begun to turn back toward premillennialism, it took awhile before Protestants began to more readily address the pretribulation Rapture. Although John Calvin (1509-1564) did address the imminence of the Rapture, and then in general terms only, he did not address the timing of it. Joseph Mede (the father of English premillennialism), helped the process immensely by writing his strongly premillennial book,
Clavis Apocalyptica (“Key of the Revelation”) in 1627. After that, Increase Mather (1639-1723) wrote, “the saints would be caught up into the air beforehand, thereby escaping the final conflagration.” Peter Jurieu (1637-1713), prominent theologian and apologist in the French Reformed Church, in his work, Approaching Deliverance of the Church (1687), taught, “Christ would come in the air to rapture the saints and return to heaven before the battle of Armageddon.” John Gill (1697-1771), profound scholar and Calvinist theologian, published his work, An Exposition of the New Testament in three volumes from 1746 to 1748. His commentary on 1 Thessalonians 4:15 says, “The Apostle having something new and extraordinary to deliver, concerning the coming of Christ, the first resurrection, of the resurrection of the saints, the change of the living saints, and the rapture both of the raised, and living in the clouds to meet Christ in the air, expresses itself in this manner.” Regarding 1 Thessalonians 4:17 he says:

Suddenly, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and with force and power; by the power of Christ, and by the ministry and means of the holy angels; and to which rapture will contribute the agility, which the bodies both of the raised and changed saints will have; and the rapture of the living saints will be together with them; with the dead in Christ, that will then be raised; so that the one will not prevent the other, or the one be sooner with Christ than the other; but one being raised and the other changed, they’ll be joined in one company and general assembly, and be rapt up together: in the clouds; the same clouds perhaps in which Christ will come, will be let down to take them up.

Similar pretribulational views are also found in commentaries by Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), James MacKnight (1721-1800), and Thomas Scott (1747-1821). Finally, Morgan Edwards (1722-1795), Baptist preacher and founder of Brown University (then called Rhode Island

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10Stitzinger, 161.

11Stitzinger, 162.

12Stitzinger, 162-3.
College), wrote an essay on Bible Prophecy entitled, “Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties,” during his student days at Bristol Baptist Seminary (1742-44). In this essay, Edwards makes the statement, “The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years.” After researching the context of the text, Thomas Ice, in his “Morgan Edwards: Another Pre-Darby Rapturist,” from The Thomas Ice Collection, concludes that Edwards believes that: (1) 1,003.5 years will transpire between resurrections; (2) He associates the first resurrection with the Rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, at least 3.5 years before the Millennium; (3) He associates the meeting of believers with Christ in the air with John 14:2; and (4) He sees believers disappearing during the tribulation.\(^\text{13}\)

From these citations throughout Church History it may ascertained that at least a trickle of the Fathers flood of premillennial pretribulational Rapture teaching was maintained up to the time of Irving, MacDonald and Darby. In the next and final chapter, the evidence presented by this thesis will be weighed against the claims of those theologians who say that the doctrine of the Rapture was a novel and non-orthodox idea that burst onto the eschatological scene around the year 1830.

\(^\text{13}\)Stitzinger, 163.