

## CHAPTER 4

### SUMMARY, EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

#### Summary

This thesis began by outlining the problem of trying to establish when the doctrine of the pretribulation Rapture of the Church began: in the early Church as a logical follow-on to the teachings of Paul and the Apostles or around 1830, with the rise of Dispensationalism. There are many modern day theologians on both sides of the issue. Interestingly enough, both sides agree that Paul taught about the Rapture of the Church in the Scriptures; however, the disagreement comes as to when the Rapture will occur (the primary arguments are pretribulational or posttribulational, with midtribulational being a distant third). Yet, the answer comes down to finding the necessary historical evidence to support either position. Either the early Church Fathers were taught this doctrine by the Apostles and subsequently passed it down in their writings or they had no idea of this teaching and thus were silent because the Rapture was not a separate event from the Second Coming.

This question led to the methodology used by the author. After researching both sides of the issue, including the research of four previous authors, this thesis was designed to describe the overall problem, background (including the summarized results of the four previous authors), presuppositions of the author and definition of key terms (chapter 1). Then, an exegetical study of the “Rapture Passages” was conducted to ascertain their validity (chapter 2). This led to a review of the Ante-Nicene, Post-Nicene, and Medieval writings to explore the possibility of this belief being passed down by the Fathers, using the evaluative criteria established by Bell

(chapter 3). The results of this research will now be summarized and evaluated. The research of the previous authors will be addressed first to lay the foundation for evaluating the findings of chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis. Then, the findings of chapters 2 and 3 will be compared to the previous authors' findings on the subject, and a conclusion will be drawn.

Rea's thesis was on the chronological relation of the Rapture of the Church to the Great Tribulation. And, although it contained a wealth of information that contributed to the definition of terms in chapter 1 and the exegetical study in chapter 2, it contained very little historical information for use in chapter 3.<sup>1</sup> However, Carlsson's thesis, Hauser's dissertation and Bell's dissertation all address the subject from a historical perspective. Therefore, each of these will now be summarized on its own merits in the order written.

Carlsson's "A Historical Approach to the Doctrine of the Rapture" 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 overall summary of the thesis 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."<sup>2</sup> In appendix A, he adds, "The

---

<sup>1</sup>Rea, vi-viii.

<sup>2</sup>Carlsson, 93b.

pre-tribulation Rapture cannot be defended from the early fathers by a defense of the doctrine of imminency of the Lord's return."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> In total, there were several references to the Rapture, but very little evidence for a pretribulation Rapture.

Hauser, in his "The Eschatology of the Early Church Fathers," 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). In his dissertation, Hauser reviewed the following writers, or writings, for evidence of their eschatological views on the five issues: Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, Papias, Aristides, *Epistle to Diognetus*, *The Didache*, *An Ancient Homily*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen. Even though it was not a primary focus of his research, his overall assessment of their collective view of a pretribulation Rapture was:

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

---

<sup>3</sup>Carlsson, 99.

<sup>4</sup>Carlsson, 101.

the extreme persecution which the Christians received during the first three centuries conditioned them to believe that they would go through the tribulation.<sup>5</sup>

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 pretribulationist disposition, the Rapture was just not a primary focus of his research.

Bell, in his "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology," does the most extensive historical and exegetical review of the pretribulation Rapture doctrine of all three authors, yet does not cover nearly as many early writings as Hauser did. He published the findings of his extensive research in the preface to his dissertation, which is summarized below:

No trace of the pretribulation rapture doctrine was found in the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers.

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.

The historical origin of pretribulationism was traced to John Nelson Darby . . . The doctrine apparently arose about 1830.

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

It was concluded, then, that the pretribulationist rapture position is not to be viewed as part of historic Christian orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup>

Since these findings are the most explicit, extensive, and germane, and quite aptly represent the views of the opponents of the pretribulation Rapture, they will be used as the standards upon

---

<sup>5</sup>Hauser, 234.

<sup>6</sup>Bell, ii-iii.

which chapters 2 and 3 are evaluated (in addition to his four criteria previously stated and given again below for continuity's sake):

- (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>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Bell, 26-7.