

Chapter 4 - Evaluation

In evaluating chapter 2, Bell himself agrees (as do most posttribulationists) that the primary Rapture passages of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-53 are indeed explaining the Rapture of the Church. However, he believes that Paul is just expounding on what Jesus had previously taught in the Apocalyptic Discourse (Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) about His own Second Coming and that the Rapture would take place in conjunction with the Second Coming. Upon further exegetical exploration into these primary passages, with their associated passages, the following was determined.

The Rapture of the Church, as described in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, is a completely separate and distinct event from the Second Coming of Christ, as described by Jesus in the Apocalyptic Discourse and in Revelation 19. The order of 1 Thessalonians 4 (addressing the Rapture) preceding 1 Thessalonians 5 (the Day of the Lord/Tribulation), is not just numerical in nature, but it also indicates the order of these two events chronologically. This is confirmed by Paul in the language of 5:3-8, where he indicates that the Christians will not be present for the Day of the Lord coming in “darkness” and “like a thief in the night.” This is further confirmed by verse 9, where he states that Christians are not destined for the wrath of God, but will experience His salvation instead. And by verse 10, where he reinforces the Rapture with the words, “whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.” Paul continues this line of thought in 2 Thessalonians 1:7. He clarifies that the unbelievers alone will receive “retribution” and “eternal destruction” at the Second Coming of the Lord in verses 7-10. Then in chapter 2, he begins with the “gathering together” of believers at the Rapture (completely separate from the Second Coming reference for judgment just related in chapter 1). He then

proceeds to chronologically outline the order of events in verse 3: the apostasy/departure first (per the previous study of the word in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis and Paul's placement of the term here in chapter 2, it probably refers to the departure of the Church at the Rapture, mentioned in verse 1 of the same chapter); then the revealing of the Antichrist; and then the Day of the Lord. Then, the mention of the "restrainer" in verses 6 and 7, who is restraining the appearance of the antichrist. Referring back to the discussion in chapter 2 of this thesis and based on all the commentary reviewed, and again Paul's placement in the text, leads one to believe the "restrainer" is the Church (relating back to verse 3, which in turn relates back to verse 1—the Rapture of the Church). Then, verse 8 talks about the destruction of the Antichrist at the Second Coming of Christ. This is the second time the order is confirmed: restrainer Raptured; Antichrist appears; and Antichrist destroyed at the Second Coming.

Whereas 1 Thessalonians 4 addresses the Rapture of both the resurrected dead in Christ and those Christians living at that time, 1 Corinthians 15 focuses on the resurrection aspect of the Rapture. Paul describes the change that takes place in the bodies of those who are asleep (or dead) in Christ at the time of the Rapture. As Rea states it in his thesis, "The resurrection of the just (Luke 14:14) or the first resurrection (Rev. 20:5, 6), seems to have two or more phases. The New Testament passage which most clearly delineates this order is 1 Corinthians 15:20-26."¹ This can be further explained in the following manner, which is closely associated to the chart of differences between the Rapture and the Second Coming at the end of chapter 2. The resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is different than the resurrection in Revelation 20 for at least three reasons: (1) That there are different sets of people at each resurrection—the Church at the Rapture in 1

¹Rea, 24.

Corinthians 15 and Tribulation Martyrs in Revelation 20 + the Old Testament Saints who will be resurrected per Daniel 12:1-3, 11-13;² (2) That the Rapture, and thus the resurrection of the saints by association, can not take place in conjunction with the Second Coming (per posttribulational theory) because the first resurrection in Revelation 20 takes place after the Second Coming; and (3) That the resurrected dead in Christ meet the Lord in the air at the Rapture and the first resurrection of the Tribulation and Old Testament saints takes place on earth, just prior to the Matthew 25 judgment and entrance in the millennial kingdom of Christ for one thousand years.

Finally, an exploration of the use of the Greek words *harpazo* (for the Rapture) and *parousia* (for the coming of the Lord for the Rapture) by Paul and other New Testament writers was made. After a complete study of all the New Testament uses of both words, it was determined that Paul used them specifically to describe the Rapture and used other words to describe the Second Coming (*apokalupsis*, *epiphaneia*, *erchomai*). The remaining uses of *parousia* by James, Peter, and John seem to relate to the Rapture, but not with the same conclusiveness and specificity as Paul. The use of *parousia* by Matthew in chapter 24 of his Gospel is first of all made in the prophetic time setting versus the apocalyptic time setting of its other uses by Paul, James, Peter, and John. And in this context, it is used interchangeably with *erchomai* in relation to the Second Coming. In the original language that Matthew probably wrote his Gospel first (Hebrew), only one word was used for coming—*bow* (see chapter 2 for more details).

²Rea, 38-42.

When all this exegetical evidence is compared to Bell's conclusions and criteria, the consensus seems to be: (1) The Lord is coming in more than one phase separated by a number of years; (2) The Church will be removed before the Tribulation; (3) The "resurrection of the just" occurs in more than one phase; and (7) That upon proper exegesis of the pertinent New Testament passages, (8) They speak of two separate and distinct Comings of the Lord during the Second Advent.

To endeavor to start from a common frame of reference, chapter 3 begins with the agreement of all concerned that the early Church Fathers were avid premillennialists. Then, paths diverge somewhat when the pretribulation theologians show that the same Fathers also believed in the "imminency" of the Lord's return. Next, all the research material available on the writings of the Fathers was investigated, looking for anything that referred, inferred, or otherwise mentioned in any way, shape or form, the word rapture. The results of this exploration were presented in the following phases. First, the Fathers use of *harpazo* and related terms was addressed. That search showed that the Fathers maintained a clear understanding of rapture as a concept, made many referrals to Enoch, Elijah and Jesus as examples, and specifically made eight references to the Rapture of Christians (four of which were of the Church universal). Next, the eschatological use of *parousia* was compared to *erchomai* (and related terms) in their writings. Although *parousia* was used much more than *erchomai* (and related terms), it was used more as a universal word to describe all events related to the Second Coming and not as Paul used it, exclusively with the Rapture (although, some of the *parousia* citations did only refer to the Rapture). Next, the direct references to the Rapture were explored. Of those citations (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Didache*, Irenaeus, and Victorinus), taken primarily from the first two

centuries of the early Church, it became clear that the Rapture of the Church would take place before the Tribulation and at a time separate and distinct from the Second Coming of the Lord; thus fulfilling criteria (1) and (2) from Bell's list. And, in one of the citations of Irenaeus, the resurrection of the just is addressed as being in two separate stages; thereby fulfilling Bell's criterion number (3) also. Next, the inferences to the Rapture were explored (Clement of Rome, Polycarp, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Chrysostom). Those inferences seemed to confirm that even more of the Fathers understood Paul's teaching on the Rapture of the Church. Most inferred, if not directly stated, that it would occur before the Tribulation or the appearance of the antichrist. A couple gave clear testimony to the Rapture of the Church, but did not place it within the eschatological chronology of events. Two other references were cited that specifically spoke of a posttribulation Rapture, coincidental with the Second Coming. However, as described in chapter 3, the author believes that they were affected by the neoplatonic, allegorical, amillennial thought and writings of Origen (who himself made reference to a posttribulation Rapture, according to the Hauser citation above).

In the final analysis, it was determined that the preponderance of evidence supports the fact that the early Church Fathers believed in and taught the pretribulation Rapture position. There is not a voluminous amount of evidence from a wide spectrum of the Fathers, yet there are more than two or three credible and authoritative historical witnesses (including several noted Bishops of the Church and the "father of early church eschatology"—Irenaeus) to that fact. This "orthodox" teaching is confirmed by its continued teaching into and through the Medieval Church Period, despite the eschatological position of the newly formed Roman Catholic Church being changed to Amillennialism after Augustine. Additionally, prior to the time-frame

suggested by the posttribulationists for the beginning of the “secret rapture theory” in the early nineteenth century, there were again more than two or three credible, authoritative historical witnesses to the fact that the pretribulation Rapture of the Church was believed and taught as an orthodox belief of the Church.