

The Pretribulation Rapture Theory Revisited

Pastor Bradford Winship

A Critique of the Article

**“Why a Pretribulation Rapture” by Richard L. Mayhue
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The Lord Jesus Christ will literally return for His church to rescue His people and establish His everlasting Kingdom. As taught throughout the New Testament, the day will come when Christians will be raptured from the earth to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Matthew 24:40; 1 Corinthians 15:52).

There is debate concerning the timing of the rapture of the church in reference to the coming apocalypse. The view that has dominated American Evangelicalism over the last hundred years is that the church will be taken off the earth before God reestablishes his covenant with Israel for seven years as prophesied by Daniel (Daniel 9:27).

The “pretribulation rapture” of the church is a theory. It is a theory because the Bible never directly states that believers will be taken off the earth before the prophesied seven-year tribulation. Evangelical theologians have formulated the theory of the pretribulation rapture by inference. Seasoned students of the Bible understand this fact, but there are many in the American evangelical church who assume there are Biblical texts that state explicitly a pretribulation timing of the rapture. These untaught believers are often frustrated when challenged to find the texts that support a pretribulation rapture. If, after being challenged, they continue to hold to the pretribulation rapture, they do so by learning the pretribulation system of inferences.

DEFINITIONS

Throughout this article I will be referring to the two alternatives to pretribulationism – the midtribulation and the posttribulation views. Since the arguments for these two positions are almost identical, these will be referred to together as mid/posttribulationism.

Both midtribulationists and posttribulationists believe that Christians will be saved from the wrath of God that will be poured out upon the world during the great tribulation. Both views allow for a time gap between the rapture of the saints and Christ’s return to set up His Millennial Kingdom. It is during this time that divine wrath will be poured out on the antichrist and his kingdom. For the posttribulationist, the forty-five days of Daniel 12:11-13 may be an allusion to this time gap. Marv Rosenthal’s “Pre-Wrath Rapture” theory has believers taken from the earth in the sixth year. The rapture is followed by a quick outpouring of the trumpet and bowl

judgments. Midtribulationists have a similar belief, but they see three-and-a-half years of judgment for those left behind.

The time between the rapture and the second coming may be hours, days, months, or even years; but mid/posttribulationists are assured that the Church will be present on earth during some part of the **seven-year** period prophesied by Daniel because:

- (1) Jesus teaches in Matthew 24:29-31 that “after” the Great Tribulation the elect will be gathered;
- (2) Revelation 6 describes believers on earth martyred during the opening of the seal judgments; and
- (3) Paul, the apostle, was silent concerning the timing of the rapture in regard to the seven-year period.

The purpose of this article is not to refute the pretribulation rapture but to help believers understand that the pretribulation position is a theory. Of the three theories, pretribulationism may be the weakest since both the midtribulation position and the posttribulation position are supported by direct statements from Scripture, while the pretribulation position is based only on inferences.

THE CORE ISSUE: EPISTEMOLOGY

Arguments for and against pre, mid, and posttribulationism have been exhausted, and there is no need to rehash the arguments here. New students of the Bible can get an overview of the various arguments in any systematic theological textbook. The objective of this article is to address the core issue behind the debate – the Doctrine of Epistemology. This is a concept that is rarely discussed in writings devoted to this subject.

Every student of the Bible has experienced debating Eschatology with other Christians only to end up with neither side being swayed. This seems odd given what we believe about the perspicuity of Scripture. After years of unsuccessfully persuading other believers with exegesis, I was compelled to dig deeper into the psyche underlying my opponents’ views. The obvious dawned on me; at the root, each of us was operating on a different understanding of how truth is to be derived from Scripture. The problem was not one of exegesis but epistemology – how knowledge is acquired. Having come to this realization, I never again debated eschatology in the same way.

Pretribulationists are comfortable with deriving their position from inferences; and theological systems. It is of little consequence to them that there is not a single text directly stating that the church will be raptured before the seven-year Tribulation. Contextual clues are considered a sufficient basis for establishing the timing of the rapture in reference to the final week of Daniel (Daniel 9). Biblical statements such as, “*not ordained unto wrath,*” and “*like a thief in the night,*” or “*upon this people;*” are considered indications of a pretribulation

rapture. The role of the Pretribulationist is to be a detective – connecting the dots to arrive at an otherwise veiled timing of the rapture.

The controversy is not because of a lack of scholarship on the part of one position. Many defenders of the pretribulation position are serious Bible scholars. The controversy arises because of different core beliefs regarding the role of human reason in hermeneutics. In fact, those with great scholarship might be more prone to misuse human reason. Some of the greatest scholars have been Roman Catholic apologists. Their logic may be flawless, but their error is in believing it is permissible to deduce doctrine by inferences. Without a single direct statement of Scripture, the Romanist infers purgatory, the immaculate conception of Mary, celibacy of the clergy, etc.

I personally became alarmed over the dogmatism of pretribulationism after in-depth studies into the hermeneutical methods used by Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Romanists. The false doctrines of cults are rooted in the belief that doctrines can be deduced by contextual clues, even in the absence of clear Biblical statements. When I discovered that the pretribulation rapture position was derived by the same technique of determining doctrine by supposed inferences and contextual clues, I was troubled. The Evangelical/Fundamentalists of our generation are not immune from the same fleshly tendency of restoring to human speculation and “*to go beyond*” the Scriptures (2 John 9). Because the Scriptures are silent, or at least unclear, concerning the timing of the rapture of the church in regard to the apocalypse, one may call into question the Biblical integrity of any ministry that holds dogmatically to a pretribulationist interpretation.

In his first edition of “*The Rapture Question*,” Dr. John Walvoord of Dallas Theological Seminary, a prominent defender of the pretribulation rapture, admitted that “*neither Posttribulationism nor Pretribulationism is an explicit teaching of Scripture.*”¹ Nevertheless Dr. Walvoord, saw no problem in developing eschatological doctrine by way of inference. Many students of the Bible are uncomfortable with such questionable methods. Serious Bible students look for direct textual support rather than theological lines of reasoning. It is their commitment to “*sola scriptura*” that prevents them from accepting any position that lacks direct Biblical pronouncements. For this reason, after a run of 150 years, the pretribulation rapture theory is in decline. Many Evangelicals are returning to the historic premillennial position of the early church fathers.

Here the pretribulationist’s retort should be addressed. Pretribulationist will argue that deducing doctrine through Biblical inferences is a proper hermeneutic because this is the means by which the church has arrived at many fundamentals of the faith. For example, the word “pretribulation rapture” may not be found in the Bible, but neither is the word “Trinity.” Pretribulationists might have a valid point if the doctrine of the Trinity were merely deduced by finding the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the same sentence. But the Trinity is based on direct statements in Scripture that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.

¹ Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1957), p. 148.

The same clarity is found in all the major fundamentals of the faith. The hermeneutics behind the pretribulation rapture position is in a completely different category. Apply the same type of reasoning supporting the pretribulation rapture to any other doctrine and one will arrive at heresy.

THE CRITIQUE

A stand alone article could have been written about the pretribulation rapture, but to facilitate understanding, I have chosen to critique “Why a Pretribulation Rapture” by Richard L. Mayhue, posted in the *Master’s Seminary* (Fall 2002). There are advantages in addressing the written arguments by a leading seminary in support of the pretribulation rapture, rather than supplying those arguments second hand. No offense is intended; this is simply an edifying discussion in a matter where godly Christians disagree.

As I remarked earlier, there is little need to rehash the arguments for and against the pretribulation rapture. Nevertheless, I still encounter pretribulationist pastors and seminarians who have never wrestled with the biblical texts challenging their position. To provoke their thinking, I offer this critique of Richard Mayhue’s article.

DR. MAYHUE’S OPENING THESIS

The opening statement to Dr. Mayhue’s article is a telling admission. He states that “seven major lines of reasoning produce the conclusion that a pretribulation rapture best fits the biblical evidence and raises the fewest difficulties.” Immediately we hear that the pretribulation rapture position is not based on any didactic statement from Paul, but is based upon “*lines of reasoning*.” This is problematic from a Biblical exegesis point of view. In addition, the author states that “*it will not be the weight of any one reason that makes pretribulationism so compelling, but rather the combined force of all the lines of reasoning.*” This statement opens the door to a typical fallacy used in argumentation, that is, using multiple bad arguments to muddy the waters and, then, hoping the quantity of arguments alone will appear as one good argument.

BURDEN OF PROOF

The first consideration is to recognize that the burden of proof falls on the pretribulationist to show that the Apostle Paul introduced a new event for believers, that is, a secret rapture of the church before the seven-year Tribulation. Given direct statements of Scripture, the default position is the mid/posttribulation position. Christ clearly stated that “...*immediately after the tribulation... He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other* (Matthew 24:29-31).” It is unlikely that any new teaching from Paul concerning a pretribulation rapture would be disclosed to the church through mere hints or allusions in the apostle’s letters. We would expect that any new event, that is

one in addition to that which Jesus Christ prophesied, must be disclosed with such clarity that believers in the church would surely know the words of Jesus about His second coming do not apply to them. I believe pretribulationists fail to meet this threshold, and therefore, they should regard their teaching as theory and, at the very least, change their public teaching from the church “will be” raptured before the tribulation, to the church “may be” raptured before the tribulation.

Furthermore, the mid/posttribulation Rapture of the church is the default position of the early church fathers. Pretribulationism is a position developed in the mid-nineteenth century. For example, the 2nd century *Didache*, which is the earliest known church manual, describes nothing of a pretribulation rapture and assumes the church will be tested through the tribulation.

And then the world-deceiver shall appear as a son of God; and shall work signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hand; and he shall do unholy things, which have never been since the world began. Then all created mankind shall come to the fire of testing, and many shall be offended and perish; but they that endure in their faith shall be saved by the Curse Himself. And then shall the sign of the truth appear; first a sign of a rift in the heaven, then a sign of a voice of a trumpet, and thirdly a resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but as it was said; the Lord shall come and all His saints with Him. Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven. (The Didache, Section 15)

THE TRUTH ABOUT KEY PRETRIBULATIONISM TEXTS

The *Master’s Seminary* article begins by stating that 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 are the texts in which Paul introduces a new rapture of the church before the tribulation. Pretribulationist claim that the rapture is an event which Jesus did not address in the Gospel record. Dr. Mayhue admits that neither of Paul’s texts “*contain and explicit time indicator.*”

A careful reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 or 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 shows conclusively that:

- (1) Paul does not state he is speaking about a different “gathering” of believers than that which Jesus taught in Matthew 24;
- (2) Paul does not state that he is introducing a coming of Jesus before the tribulation. No chronology is given by Paul. If anything, the reader would assume that Paul is referring to the same event Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24:31, that is, a gathering of believers “*after*” the tribulation.

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31)

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:15-1)

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

For the following reasons, Paul must be referring to the same mid/posttribulation coming that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24:

1. Paul never states that the coming he is referring to has a pretribulation chronology.
2. Paul uses the same descriptive words as Jesus: “*coming of the Lord*,” “*angels*,” “*trumpets*,” and “*clouds*.”
3. The point of 1 Thessalonians 4 is not to teach a new coming, but to assure believers that those Christians who have died will still partake in the glorious procession of our Lord.
4. Paul teaches in 2 Thessalonians that believers will be given relief “*when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire (2 Thessalonians 1:7)*.” This language describes the glorious second coming, not a secret rapture.
5. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, the believers are concerned that the “*Day of the Lord has come*.” It is evident that the early church understood the meaning of the “Day of the Lord” as described in Isaiah’s apocalypse (Isaiah 24-26). At this juncture, if Paul were teaching a pretribulation rapture, he would mostly likely have replied, “*Of course you are not in the Day of the Lord; don’t you remember that I taught you that the church would be raptured before the Day of the Lord?*”

Instead Paul replies that the Thessalonians cannot be experiencing the Day of the Lord because the apostasy has not taken place and the anti-christ has not yet been revealed. Paul is following Matthew 24:15 where Jesus teaches that believers will see the Abomination of Desolation and this will be the sign that the day of the Lord is upon them. It is at this point that believers need to recognize that Jesus' coming is upon them (Matthew 24:8).

5. In 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, Paul further tells the believers that the anti-christ will be defeated at Christ's coming (2:8). The believers would not have considered the "*coming of Christ*" as an event separate from the rapture of the saints. Since Paul states earlier in 2:1 that "*our gathering*" and "*the coming*" are one event:

*Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the **coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together** to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).*

At this point pretribulationists claim that Paul's failure to mention the rapture of the church in 2 Thessalonians 2 is an argument from silence. Yes, it certainly is an argument from silence, but not in the manner pretribulationists argue, and that is the issue at hand. In no verse does Paul state a pretribulation rapture. Paul's failure to mention the timing of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15, and 2 Thessalonians 2 is proof that he is following the chronology of Jesus; and Jesus does not teach a pretribulation rapture of the church in Matthew 24. Paul had the opportunity to explicitly state a pretribulation rapture of the church, but he did not so do. That silence speaks volumes.

Given the natural reading of Paul's teaching, the whole pretribulation rapture position should be relegated to speculative theology. But Dr. Mayhue claims that Paul must be introducing a new event in 1 Thessalonians 4 because Paul uses the word "*harpazo*" – "caught up" and Christ did not use this word in Matthew 24:31. Even though Christ spoke of His people being "*gathered*" by the angels, and Christ spoke of those "*taken*" and those "*left behind*" (Matthew 24:40), pretribulationists believe Paul's use of a different word establishes a new and different gathering of the saints. Is this how Christians are to deduce Biblical doctrine? Is it not cults that deduce new doctrine by dissecting minor variations in words?

Undoubtedly, no believer in the church of Thessalonica would have concluded that Paul was introducing something different from Jesus' teaching simply because Paul used the word "*harpazo*." To change Jesus' posttribulation teaching would take a direct statement from Paul.

DR. MAYHUE'S REASONS FOR THE PRETIBULATION RAPTURE

Dr. Mayhue provides the following seven reasons why he believes the pretribulation rapture position is the most biblical position. As noted earlier, absent from his arguments are any statements in the Bible explaining the occurrence of the rapture before the seventieth week of Daniel. All arguments are based on conjecture.

1. The Church Is Not Mentioned in Revelation Chapter 6-18 as Being on Earth

The word “*church*” appears predominately in the introductions of all New Testament letters. This is especially true in the book of Revelation where the first three chapters are addressed to the seven churches of Asia. The word “*church*” is not mentioned in Paul’s 1 Corinthians 15 prophecy of the resurrection, nor in the prophetic teachings of 1 Thessalonians 4 or 2 Thessalonians 2. Yet, as in the book of the Revelation, believers are referred to by other titles.

The book of Revelation strives to make the point that believers are on earth during the tribulation (Revelation 6:9-11, 7:14). Only those who impose a pretribulation system on Scripture can claim that these believers are new believers who are saved after the rapture of the church. It is sheer pretribulationist speculation that multitudes will be saved after seeing the rapture of the church and reading the literature we have left behind.

The fact that Revelation is addressed to the churches also belies the pretribulation position. Later in the article, Dr. Mayhue has to address the valid question “*Why is Revelation written to the churches, if the church will not experience the tribulation of Revelation 6-19?*”

2. The Rapture is Rendered Inconsequential if it is Posttribulation

The error here is the fallacy of logic called the “law of the excluded middle.” Dr. Mayhue only allows for one possible outcome. He surmises that a posttribulation rapture would not leave any mortal believers on earth to populate the Millennium.

The truth is that we know very little about how glorified believers and mortals will interact in the Millennium. What we do know is believers will come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4, Ezekiel 37:12); and we also read there will be mortals on earth – believers and unbelievers (Isaiah 65:20, Revelation 20:7-8). There are many unseen ways these prophecies can be fulfilled. We should never determine our eschatology by speculation about how the dead are raised, and we should limit ourselves to direct Biblical prophecies about the timing of the rapture.

In any case, this pretribulation argument is eliminated by the midtribulation position or even posttribulation views that allow for a substantial time gap between the rapture and the descent. If one wishes to speculate on

mortals entering the Millennium, it may include those Jews who repent when the Lord descends to the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 12:10).

Dr. Mayhue also argues that a posttribulation rapture leaves no time for the Judgment Seat of Christ for believers and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. This reason for postulating a pretribulation rapture is an embarrassment to Christian theology. We cannot determine eschatology by speculating about the time necessary for heavenly events (John 6:21; Joshua 10:13; Matthew 22:29; 2 Peter 3:8).

The New Testament is generally silent about the timing of the rapture in regard to the seventieth week of Daniel. However, the strongest language describing the timing of the rapture of the church in the book of the Revelation is after the Sixth Seal. It is then that John sees a multitude in heaven from every nation standing before the throne. John asks, "*Where have these come from?*" The angel answers, "*These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation* (Revelation 7:14-15)." This group appears to be separate from those martyrs who arrived earlier in heaven and who ask the Lord, "*How long?*" (Revelation 6:9)." After "*the ones who come out of the great tribulation*" are in heaven we read "*woe to those who dwell on the earth* (Revelation 8:13)." After the saints are in heaven, the direct judgments of God come upon the earth under the heading of the trumpet and bowl judgments.

3. The Epistles Contain No Preparatory Warnings of an Impending Tribulation for Church-Age Believers

Only those who have superimposed on the New Testament the pretribulation rapture of the church would make the claim that the Epistles contain no "preparatory warnings." Jesus Christ warned of the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation. Paul confirms the same warnings in 2 Thessalonians 2 when he tells the church to look for the apostasy and the man of lawlessness whom the Lord will slay at "*His coming*." The entire book of the Revelation is written to prepare believers for the end times. The call to martyrdom and suffering is found throughout the New Testament (Philippians 1:29).

4. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Demands a Pretribulation Rapture

Dr. Mayhue writes, "*The Thessalonians are actually grieving because they fear their loved ones have missed the rapture. Only a pretribulation rapture accounts for this grief.*" Mid/posttribulationists fail to see how only a pretribulation rapture accounts for the Thessalonian's grief. Is it not possible that the Thessalonians were merely wondering if deceased Christians would partake in the glories of Christ's return? Pretribulationist are not being careful in their exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 4. The text does not tell us why the Thessalonians were grieving, nor even that they were grieving at all. Paul writes to give them more assurance about the future of Christians who have died. He writes "*so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.*"

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)

It is at this point that the author introduces the “joyous expectation argument.” The argument is that if the church has to endure any of the tribulation, then the church would not be joyously anticipating the coming of Christ. The mid/posttribulationists’ response is to point out that even though Jesus Christ taught a posttribulation coming in Matthew 24, it did not prevent Jesus from teaching the disciples to joyfully expect the Lord’s return. Joy in the Lord’s return is not diminished by coming tribulation. The joy of the Lord’s return is even greater when troublesome signs of the time appear.

But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:28)

The joy of the return of Christ is not affected by the prophecies of hardship, whether they be present hardships in the church age that foreshadow the apocalypse, or the very apocalypse itself. As a pastor, I extend great liberty to believers who hold to the pretribulation rapture theory. My only concern is when believers hold to the pretribulation position because they believe God would never allow church-age believers to suffer the war, hunger, and martyrdom described in the seven seal judgments (Revelation 6). One may hold to pretribulationism for any other reason, but to believe the church is not called to suffer is a spiritual malady. We have been called to suffer tribulation in this world, and the “joyous expectation argument” is an offense to all those Christians in the church age who have suffered terribly as they have waited upon the return of Christ.

For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake. (Philippians 1:29)

Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction. (2 Corinthians 7:4)

5. John 14:1-3 Parallels 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The argument here is that Jesus promised the church a home in heaven, not a return to earth to live in the Millennium. Dr. Mayhue’s article reads, “*a posttribulation rapture demands that the saints meet Christ in the air and immediately descend to earth without experiencing what the Lord promised in John 14.*” The mid/posttribulationist retort is that there is really no inconsistency between mid/posttribulationism and Jesus’ promise that “*where I am, there you may be also (John 14:3)*” or “*so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:18).*”

The saints will reign with Christ in the Millennium (Revelation 20:4). The Millennium is a transitional period before the new Heaven and new Earth (Revelation 21). Some pretribulationists believe the church will reign with Christ on earth in the Millennium; others pretribulationist believe the church will be in heaven during the Millennium. Yet how can we “*always be with the Lord*” if we are not with Him on earth during His millennial reign? The pretribulationists are unable to be consistent in this matter. The timing of the rapture should not be deduced from these speculations about our proximity to Jesus after the resurrection.

An additional problem pretribulationist have is the claim that Jesus’ words to His disciples in the upper room apply to the rapture of the church (John 14:1-3). The pretribulationist argument is that Jesus’ words to the disciples about the details of His coming do not apply to the church but to the Jewish disciples who represent national Israel. Pretribulationist insist that Jesus’ words to His disciples two days earlier on the Mount of Olives is for the Jews and not the gentile church.

According to Pretribulationist theology, Jesus’ words in John 14:1-3 must refer to a posttribulation coming for national Israel. They argue that “*I will come again and receive you to Myself (v. 3)*” is a word to national Israel, not a reference to the rapture of the church. However, mid/posttribulationists understand that this text provides no basis for the reader to make such distinctions.

6. The Nature of Events at Christ’s Posttribulation Coming Differs from that of the Rapture

It is here that the pretribulationists look for distinctions between the words of Christ and the words of Paul in order to claim that Paul is introducing a gathering of the saints different from the one Christ spoke of in Matthew 24. Again the method of deducing doctrine through clues discredits the whole Pretribulation rapture position. It is unlikely that an event as new and different as the pretribulation rapture would have been revealed cryptically. It is hard to imagine that Paul expected the Thessalonian believers to assume he was introducing something different from Jesus’ teaching simply because his words varied slightly from the Lord’s.

As mentioned earlier, the language used by Jesus and Paul is actually more similar than different. Both Jesus and Paul speak of the “*the coming of the Lord,*” “*a great trumpet,*” “*angels of God,*” “*clouds of the sky,*” etc. (Matthew 24:29-31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). It is perfectly reasonable to assume that if Paul used slightly different words, he did so not to define a new event, but to reveal additional aspects of the coming of Christ described in Matthew 24:31.

The pretribulation system is built upon making a distinction between Jesus’ “*gather together the elect*” (Matthew 24:31) and Paul’s “*caught up*”(1 Thessalonians 4:17). The pretribulation system imposes on the Matthew text the idea that the “[gathering of] *the elect*” does not include a transformation and translation of the

saints to heaven, but a mortal gathering of Jews to meet Jesus in Jerusalem. John Darby and his pretribulationist followers believed they found in this distinction an eschatological clue, that is, a clue that had been left for the church to deduce a secret rapture before the tribulation. Mid/posttribulationists are grieved by the use of such subjective methods to arrive at doctrine.

The distinctions made by Dr. Mayhue between Jesus' and Paul's teaching are alarming. In his explanation, he adds words to the text. In regard to the first distinction he writes, "*At the rapture, Christ comes in the air and returns to heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:17) but at the final event of the second coming, Christ comes to the earth to dwell and reign (Matthew 25:31-32).*" However, the 1 Thessalonians 4 text does not include the words "return to heaven;" Paul merely states that we will meet the Lord in the air and be with the Lord. Furthermore, the Matthew 25:31-32 text does not mention anything about Christ coming "*to the earth to dwell and reign.*" Pretribulationists make so many assumptions that they begin to read those assumptions into the text.

In regard to the second distinction Dr. Mayhue makes between the pretribulation rapture and the posttribulation second coming, He claims, "*At the rapture, Christ gathers His own (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), but at the final event of the second coming, angels gather the elect (Matthew 24:31).*" A careful examination of 1 Thessalonians 4 reveals that there is no reference in the text to "*Christ gathering His own;*" the text merely says "*the Lord will descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise...*"

The remaining five distinctions listed by Dr. Mayhue are also filled with pretribulationist suppositions imposed on the text. The proponents of pretribulationism are so influenced by their system that they add words to the Scriptures. With all good intentions, they assume these additional words render the proper meaning of the passage; yet this is clearly additions to texts to fit the pretribulationist system.

7. Revelation 3:10 Promises the Church Will Be Removed Prior to Daniel's Seventieth Week

In this argument, the Revelation 3:10 promise to the church of Philadelphia ("*I will keep you from the hour of testing...*") means that the church will be raptured from the earth before the seven-year tribulation. But this text does not explicitly provide such a time table; those with a predisposition for the pretribulation rapture look for its support under every rock.

Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. (Revelation 3:10)

The first problem with this interpretation is that only the church of Philadelphia is given this promise. Does this mean that the six other churches are left on earth? A popular interpretation of Dispensationalism is that the seven churches represent seven periods in church history. Many Dispensationalists believe the church of

Philadelphia represents the church during the great missions movement of the 17th and 19th centuries, and that we are now living in the age of wealth and lukewarmness – the church of Laodicea. Under this interpretation the great mission-minded saints in the age of Philadelphia have actually escaped the great tribulation because they have died and are now in heaven. Refinement by fire is the promise to the church of Laodicea (Revelation 3:18-19). The fact that the final church, the church of Laodicea, is not promised deliverance from the hour of testing supports a mid-posttribulationist view.

Many Pretribulationists who hold to the “church of Philadelphia rapture theory” respond by claiming that the age of Laodicea begins after the rapture of the church, but this contradicts their position that the church age ends when the church is raptured.

The main refutation to Dr. Mayhue’s Revelation 3:10 argument is that the promise to the church of Philadelphia does not in any way require a pretribulation time table. Even if one believed the church of Philadelphia represented the church today, and that the promise to Philadelphia was a veiled reference to the rapture, a mid-tribulation position satisfies the promise to the church of Philadelphia. Jesus taught in Matthew 24:15-21 that the great tribulation will not take place until after the abomination of desolation which, according to Daniel 9, occurs in the middle of the tribulation (Daniel 9:27). Therefore, the church would be saved from the hour of testing which will occur in the latter half of the seven-year tribulation.

In his article, Professor Mayhue writes extensively on the meaning of the word *ek* (“out of”) in Revelation 3:10 – “*I will keep you out of the hour of testing.*” This argument is meaningless because it operates on the unproven assumption that the church of Philadelphia represents the age of the church that will be raptured. The weakness of Dr. Mayhue’s argument is further revealed by the very fact that, in the absence of a clear text in Revelation describing the rapture, he must resort to Revelation 3:10 as his pretribulation rapture text.

A truth that should not be overlooked is that throughout the book of the Revelation there is not one verse that states the exact point of time when the saints are gathered in the air as described by Jesus in Matthew 24:31 and by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Even in Revelation 19, where we read that the marriage of the Lamb has arrived, there is no definite description of the gathering of believers. This silence. Or ambiguity, should be a lesson to students of the Bible. It could be that Jesus’ words “*no man knows the day or the hour*” extends not only to a date, but to the timing of the Lord’s coming in reference to the seven-year Tribulation. Could this be the reason why theologians cannot come to any agreement on the timing of the rapture in reference to the Tribulation? Notice also that not even the martyred tribulation saints in heaven know when Jesus will return to save His people, for they cry out, “*How long, O Lord (Revelation 6:10-11)?*”

It is my personal conviction that the Christian cannot definitely determine the moment the church will be raptured from the earth in reference to the seven-year Tribulation – the seventieth week of Daniel. The

Scriptural texts are not definitive in this matter, and, therefore, we do not have Biblical authority to be dogmatic. Where the Scriptures do not stipulate, do not speculate. Of course, this position may not appeal to popular Christianity. People want a date; they want a system; they want to know if they will see the anti-christ. But as ministers of the Gospel we must give the sheep what they need, not what they want; and what they need is to be prepared for the end-times.

Because of the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:29-31, Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, and John in Revelation 6:9-11, I lean toward the position that believers will most likely go through some part of the tribulation and yet be raptured before the heavenly judgments. Nevertheless, I refuse to be dogmatic about this position and potentially fall into the same error as the diehard pre, mid, or posttribulationists. These are theories, and as theories they should never have become a basis for membership, pulpit supply, ministerial qualification, or ecclesiastical unity. I have some thoughts as to why God allowed the church in America to operate under, and be divided by the influence of the pretribulation rapture position, but that is a topic for another article.

There is a growing movement away from the pretribulation position among Evangelical/Fundamental churches in America. I suspect this has grown out of a re-examination of Scripture in light of current troublesome times. The church is being prepared for the last days, and this is of God. But there is resistance to this movement from the older generation of preachers raised in Pretribulationist Dispensationalism. I have seen first hand how changes in eschatology can upset members and even collapse the donor base. The safe thing to do is to stay with the status quo, but Christian leaders must choose to please God over men. Can you imagine what would happen if the prominent pretribulationist preachers announced they were favorable toward a Mid-Posttribulationist position – John MacArthur, Chuck Swindol, Charles Stanley, David Jeremiah, the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary? I suspect the first one to make the change would take the heat, but others would soon follow, and I expect the change will come. The Scriptural passages allowing for a mid/posttribulation rapture are too powerful to ignore.

ADDITIONAL ARGUMENTS

There are a few additional arguments put forth by pretribulationists which Dr. Mayhue did not include in his article. Given the popularity of some these, I am surprised they were not included; but Dr. Mayhue may have believed these particular arguments have little Scriptural integrity. Pretribulationists do not agree on all elements of the system.

1. Imminence

I have found that imminence is the most popular argument for the pretribulation rapture. Pretribulationists assert that the rapture of the church is imminent – meaning it can take place at any time. If the rapture takes place after the beginning of apocalyptic signs, then the rapture cannot be imminent. Pretribulationists argue that Jesus

taught imminence, “*no man knows the day or the hour,*” and “*the coming of the Son of man will be like the days of Noah* (Matthew 24:36-38).” Therefore, there must be an imminent, secret rapture of the church before the apocalyptic signs and the glorious coming of Christ.

The problem with this argument is that all of the language of imminence is used by Christ in reference to the Post-tribulation coming of Christ.

*But immediately **after the tribulation** of those days . . . He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. **But of that day and hour no one knows**, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. (Matthew 24:29,31-37)*

Apparently the pretribulationists have wrongly defined imminence. In Matthew 24 Jesus taught that the signs of the Abomination of Desolation and Cosmic events will precede His coming even though “*no one can know the day or the hour.*” Jesus also goes on to describe His coming after the Tribulation as a “*thief in the night*” even after teaching that signs precede this coming (Matthew 24:40-44).

Paul, in using the phrase “*you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night,*” is referring back to the imminence Jesus described in Matthew 24. This imminence is preceded by signs. Paul’s point is not that believers will be unaware or surprised at the coming of Christ, but that unbelievers will see Christ as coming like a thief in the night

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, “Peace and safety!” then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3)

When I first studied prophecy as a new Christian, the paradox in Matthew 24 confused me, even as it confuses many others. How can Matthew 24:33, “*Recognize that He is near*” be true in view of Matthew 24:39 or 24:44 (“*He will come in an hour when you do not think He will*”)? Are there signs to look for, or are there not signs to look for? If there are signs, then how can Jesus come as a thief in the night? This paradox is a source of endless false teaching on the second coming of Christ. End-time preachers will often focus on one aspect while

neglecting the other. They fail to see how Jesus taught signs and imminence and that both fit together. Believers are to look for signs of the Lord's return, while unbelievers will be taken unaware.

Pretribulationist preachers will fight tooth and nail to hold on to the popular slogan that Jesus could come at any moment. They fear that if apocalyptic signs precede the Lord's coming, believers will not properly anticipate the Lord's coming. I have heard more than one pretribulation prophetic speaker say, "I am not looking for the undertaker (the anti-christ); I am looking for the 'uppertaker' (Jesus Christ)." The concern is that if believers are to look for the Abomination of Desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, as Jesus taught in Matthew 24:15, then believers will be looking for the coming of the antichrist and not Christ. In twenty-five years of ministry, I have never seen believers that incapable of balancing truth. The possibility of witnessing the rise of the anti-christ does not in anyway diminish the believer's anticipation of Christ's appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). Despite any signs that may precede Christ's return, the nearness of Christ's return is just as motivating. Jesus said, "*When you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door* (Matthew 24:33)." When the prophetic clock of Daniel starts ticking, events will unfold in quick succession. In this sense the coming of Christ is still imminent. Despite the fact that Jesus said signs will precede His coming, He still said, "*The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will*" (Matthew 24:44)."

Dr. Mayhue may have left off the pretribulationist imminence argument because the New Testament teaches that what pretribulationists call the rapture and the second coming are both described as imminent. This supports the mid/posttribulation interpretation.

2. The Restrainer is Removed

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (2 Thessalonians 2:7)

Here is a perfect example of reading a system into the text. The pretribulationist argument is that 2 Thessalonians 2:7 is teaching that the Holy Spirit is taken from the earth, and when the Holy Spirit leaves, so does the church. However, the text merely states that the one who restrains (most likely the Holy Spirit) will be "*taken out of the way*" so that the antichrist can rise to power. The text is teaching that the Spirit of God is actively restraining the lawless one and lawlessness in the earth. The only reason the antichrist can arise is because God permits him. Imposing the rapture of the church on this text is dishonest and exposes the weak foundation of the pretribulation position.

Furthermore, many in the Dispensational system teach that the removal of the Holy Spirit signals the end of the Church Age, and the promise of the Holy Spirit's indwelling. Therefore, those saved in the Tribulation are not

part of the church. These tribulation saints will receive the Spirit only sporadically, as did the prophets in the Old Testament. This does great violence to the New Testament doctrines of salvation.

3. The End of the Church Age and a Return to God's Covenant with Israel

Pretribulationism is linked to Dispensationalism. In Dispensationalism, the church is considered parenthetical in God's plan. After God finishes the program of the church, He will return to His covenant with Israel. In Dispensationalism, it follows logically that the church will be taken from the earth once God resumes His program with Israel. Many Pretribulationist Dispensationalists teach that the church will have no part in the earthly reign of Christ in the Millennium. They claim that the church's hope is a "heavenly hope" while Israel's hope is an "earthly hope."

First, even if one holds to a Dispensational system, it does not follow that the church has to be off the earth when God returns to work with national Israel. Such a conclusion is not taught in Scripture. In the first century, the Gentile church existed on earth while elements of the Old Covenant were disappearing (Hebrews 8:13).

Second, it is doubtful that the church age will ever end. Paul teaches in Ephesians that the church is the body of Christ and that God has made the *"two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross"* (Ephesians 2:15-16). This text, among many others, teaches that for the Jews to be saved, even the 144,000 of Revelation chapter 7, they must become part of the church, the body of Christ. They must be grafted into God's tree (Romans 11:17). It is doubtful that the church will ever cease to be the destination of the elect. The completion of the 490 years God has decreed for national Israel (Daniel 9:24-27) does not imply a return to the Old Covenant, but a final appeal to the Jews to become part of the New Covenant, the Bride of Christ, the Church.

One does not need to be a full-fledged Covenant theologian, or an Amillennialist to object to unscriptural elements in Dispensationalism. There is the historical premillennial position that takes the best Scriptural elements from both Covenant and Dispensational theology.

May God give you the grace to examine the Scriptures to see if these things are so (Acts 17:11).

Pastor Brad Winship

Harbor Bible Church

Laurence Harbor, NJ 08879