

# The Rapture

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By *Reginald Pope*

Dear Brethren,

In many a corner of the visible church these days a spirited (if you will permit the term) debate is in progress. It is true enough that the substance thereof is a matter for which the bells of Christendom have oft rung their, "nine taylor's" Yet the debate over the millenium, and the closely united doctrine of the Raptures simply does not decrease. On the contrary the old *corpus doctrinae* of the Rapture is perennially rejuvenated, fitted in a smart fashion, and presented to the world as a trusted, old friend. Yes, just like Gods s own Truth!

What is most distressing is that all of the clamor over the Rapture is raised in theological circles, not by the dreary existentialists and moral empiricists, but by individuals that avow their faith in the infallibility of Scripture, For example, Dr. John Walvoord, President of the Dallas Seminary and Editor of *Bibliotheca Sacra* (America's oldest theological quarterly?) has written an in-depth study of the translation of the Christian Church. Walvoord comments, "For constructive Scriptural exegesis of unfulfilled prophecy, the student of Scripture is forced to rely on those who accept the inspiration of Scripture and who use the principle of its literal interpretation as the norm. Liberal and neo-orthodox theologians, for example, contribute nothing to the rapture question." Shall we hear then what these students of unfulfilled prophecy contribute to the question. At the outset we must also advise ourselves that the Rapture Question is irretrievably laced in their thinking to their doctrines of the Millenium and the Great Tribulation. Just how and when is the substance of the ubiquitous, seemingly, debate? For a study of the Rapture, we are obliged to re-state the various positions. Dr. Walvoord presents as complete a study as our mini-paper will permit.

## I. The Rapturists' Peregrination Through Unfulfilled Prophecy

The Rapture Question, the Dallas professor asserts, is not really a 20<sup>th</sup> century consideration. "The blessed hope of Christ's coming for His won," says Dr. Walvoord, "has been the expectation of the church since the time of the apostles. In the early centuries there was no attempt to achieve the full theological discussion of prophecy which has characterized recent Biblical studies. It is clear however, that from the beginning the church believed that the coming of the Lord was imminent. Through the centuries since the apostles, this truth has continued to be the star hope to saints weary of this world and it abides as the hope of the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century."

Were these the sentiments of all the rapturists, there would be little cause for debate anywhere. Dr. Walvoord from thence conducts a grand investigation of what "experts of unfulfilled prophecy" have learned since the first century. Dr. Walvoord, though not neutral himself, frankly declares that the experts are by no means agreed, his booklet is intended as a final word upon the subject, or question. To this end, he champions the third position and seeks to show why the others are wrong. Rapturists fall into three categories (generally):

A) Postmillennial attitude toward the tribulation: this view (and until recently was the view held by the majority of the rapturists) considers the tribulation a final state of trouble just proceeding the grand climax of the triumph of the Gospel. This is the view of Hodge, George Allis, Alexander Reese., and it is defended by Norman MacPherson (though he is a premillennialist).

B) Amillennial attitude toward the tribulation: the present age is regarded as the predicted millenium, and inasmuch as the tribulation is said to proceed the millenium by so much, it must be past already. Often identified with the troubles of Israel in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Amillenarians spiritualize the sequence of events prophesied, particularly the interpretation of the tribulation section of Revelation. Dr. Walvoord attributes this position to Louis Berkhof in his Systematic Theology, and others.

C) Premillennial attitude toward the tribulation:

aa) In general the premillenarians interpret the coming tribulation with more literalness than either the postmillenarians or amillenarians. Although some premillenarians believe the church will remain on earth throughout the tribulation period.

bb) Mid-tribulationists view declares that the church will be translated at the coming of the Lord for His Church just before the great tribulation prophesied by the Lord, but in the middle of the seven year period predicted by Daniel as proceeding the coming Christ.

cc) The third view, which is popular with premillenarians, who have specialized in unfulfilled prophecy, is the position which holds that Christ will come for His Church before the entire seven-year period predicted by Daniel. The Church in this view point does not at all enter into the final tribulation period. (Scofield Reference Bible, Dr. Walvoord, Salem Kirban, Hal Linsey, T. Epp, of Back to the Bible Publications)

As we read these definitions by the Dallas Seminary President, we would not fail to note that there is also another point to the whole discussion. The Rapture is debated, not only from time question, but also from the point of “who” will be raptured! Though Alexander Reese (Approaching Advent of Christ) calls it “supreme rubbish” and a “cowardly doctrine,” Dr. Walvoord questions whether the “elect” as used in Matthew 24:31, is equivalent to the term “church” (*ecclesia*). In numbers 7 and 8 of his “50 Arguments For Pretribulationism,” he notes (point 7) “None of the Old Testament passages on the tribulation mention the church (Deuteronomy 4:29-30; Jeremiah 30:4-11; Daniel 9:24-27; 12:1-2).” He continues (point 8) “None of the New Testament passages of the tribulation mention the Church (Matthew 24:15-31; I Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:4-9; Revelations 4-19). Dr. Walvoord, who assert that *church*, *elect*, and *Israel*—as terms—are not synonymous, goes on to state in point 23 of his 50, “The pretribulationist view as opposed to post-tribulationism does not confuse general terms like *elect* and *saints* which apply to the saved of all ages with specific terms like *church* and those which refer to believers of this age only.”

Since the word “*ecclesia*” does not occur in any of their *sedes doctrinae*, the pretribulationists inform the world that this is significant. The word does not occur because the holy writers mean to indicate that the church does not exist on earth during the great tribulation. This discovery causes them to set up an elegant time table of fulfillment for the “unfulfilled prophecy.” Salem Kirban in his prefatory remarks to his best seller novel, *666*, sums up the time table in this manner, “In the New Testament it (Christ’s Second Coming) is referred to 300 times. His first coming was over 1900 years ago when He came on earth to save man from sin. The Second Coming is an event starting at the Rapture and comprehending four phases: First, at the Rapture Christ takes the believers out of this world to be with Him. (I Thess. 4) Second, Christ pours out His judgement on the world during the 7 year Tribulation Period. Third, Christ, at the end of the 7 year period destroys the antichrist and his wicked followers. (Revelations 19) Fourth, Christ sets up His millennial Kingdom prophesied so often in the Old Testament.” At the Rapture the church (*ecclesia*) will be taken... only saints and elect will be left to undergo the great tribulation.

## II. In the Twinkling of an Eye

“The Rapture refers to the time, prior to the 7 year period, when believing Christians (both dead and alive) will in ‘the twinkling of an eye’ rise up to meet Christ in the air... before the Great Tribulation!” Cowardly ? Rubbish? Nevertheless, the Pretribulationists sincerely believe this is God’s way, and God’s truth. Their oft quoted passage is I Thessalonians 4:14-17. It is from the Latin translation that the word “*Rapture*” is derived. “...if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the Word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not precede them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout... and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up (*Raptured*) together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”

What happens in that moment? In all of their graphic accounts, perhaps, no pretribulationist is more colorful than Kirban. In his novel *666* he blends unfulfilled prophecy, with modern history and future speculation into an astonishing, plausible fabric. Hear, if you will, the moment of the Rapture as it occurs in the life of George Omega, the leading character of *666*. George is a news correspondent and prior to the “Great

Tribulation Period” was a great disappointment to his Christian wife. One day George and another member of the fourth estate were returning home by plane from a news assignment... author Kirban writes...

“George, look out that window... I tell you that’s not just a cloud. I’ve never seen the sky so funny looking. It’s as though it was opening up... George, *it is opening... peeling back like a scroll..* George, what’s happening?” And then it happened... Almost like a twinkling of an eye. It seemed like the plane got much lighter... turned abruptly and went into a dive from 80,000 feet. I lost consciousness, I don’t remember exactly what happened. There had been two stewardesses standing next to me; but when I awoke one was there. I picked her off the floor and she rushed into the pilot’s cabin. When she came out, she was ashen white... and put her hand to her mouth to hold a scream. What should make the stewardess shout with fear... I wondered... and then I looked around me and she pointed with trembling hands... “Look,” she screamed, “*half of the passengers are missing!*” I’ll never forget the chills that ran up and down my spine... It wasn’t half, but it looked as though 100 or so just disappeared. And I turned to Bill... but Bill *wasn’t there*.

“When we landed, I rushed to my car... I just had to get home. Tears poured down my cheeks and a cold sweat engulfed me. I drove up the drive. Thank God. Helen’s (his wife) car was there. She was home. I rushed to the door and shouted and my own voice came echoing back through the empty halls.

“And then a voice of the past seemed to echo in my mind... ‘All right, George, I’ll leave you alone. There’s a Bible by your bed and the bookmark’s at I Corinthians 15. Please read it and I’ll see you at the Rapture.’ *The Rapture*. That’s it. This is the Rapture. Quickly I ran into the bedroom and there it was—the Bible still on the bedstand. I hurriedly opened it at the place of the bookmark. Finally my eyes focused through the tears and I read First Corinthians 15:52-53, ‘Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed...’”

While it is admittedly written in a novel form Mr. Kirban wants it said, “It (666) may seem too fantastic to be true. While it is written in novel form the facts of the rapture (when believing Christians meet in the air)... the Tribulation period and its judgments... these facts are true.” Why has Salem Kirban chosen novel form? “It is my hope that 666 may be used as a witness. Where many will not accept a tract... or perhaps they will accept a Bible and never read it... they gladly accept a novel... one that tells about *tomorrow*. And it is my prayer that in so accepting the novel 666, they will become convicted of their sin, realize their need of our Savior, and accept Him as their Lord and soon coming King.”

In what is no doubt an epilogue to the novel, Mr. Kirban touches upon some very searching questions for him, and surely for us all, concerning the Rapture and the Great Tribulation—as he understands them to be. How do they come upon all of this special interpretation? And basically, what in their estimation is now all important for the saved, or unsaved, in the precious moments of a lifetime? Being very sincere, and writing with a remarkable understanding of how a person is saved by Christ alone through faith, Kirban addresses himself to the unchurched saying,

1) Now is the time of salvation. No one should wait. The Bible does not encourage anyone to wait. Nevertheless, some disobediently do wait, and by God’s grace get on to the next day, or week—or year. This in no way, says Kirban, detracts from God’s command that all should turn to Him today. “Now is the time of salvation,” and he notes, that 2 Cor. 6:2 should remind everyone that our life is like a vapor that vanishes away and for many tomorrow may never come (James 4:13-15).

2. A second chance? We deny, says author Kirban, that there is any “Second Chance” after death. Death and then the judgment of Matthew 25:31- 46 when all the surviving people of the world (alive after the Tribulation) are gathered, there is no second chance.

At the Judgment of the Great White Throne, after the Millenium (Rev. 20) he says there is still no second chance. However, after the Rapture (I Thess. 4:13-14) those who are not taken up with Jesus and are still alive on earth, they live on into the awful Tribulation Years (which his novel at great length describes) and many who live into this period will indeed turn to Christ (Rev. 7:13-14). But, he believes, many—the vast majority—of those who live past the Rapture will follow AntiChrist and remain lost. Those, however, who do

turn to Christ at this time will be saved. No “Second Chance... as long as you live now, you’re still on the first chance... thus he concludes his work.

### **III. Items of the Scriptures and the Confessions which the Rapturists have Raptured...?**

There is a sadness that creeps across one’s heart the more one is exposed to the writings of those who have made it their specialty to interpret and explain “unfulfilled prophecy.” It has been our endeavor thus far to give the rapturists a full hearing in order that they may state “their case.” Upon hearing them, upon reading their works one cannot escape the zeal they have for their position. But what causes the sadness is the fact that they can present with great clarity man’s need of salvation through Christ alone... but in a sentence, or even with a word, wander far from truth in so many areas.

No doubt you too, as you heard them, checked various items that never seemed to enter their discussion. These items are found, not in unfulfilled prophecy, but are to be found in the clear declarations of Almighty God unto Whom all prophecy is unalterably accomplished and perfect. How is it that these items are not used to throw light upon the more difficult passage? This paper would list but a few items—for I would not presume to engulf the whole spectrum of items which by now will have occurred to you...

Item... if it is God’s way and will to spare “the church” from the great tribulation, how is it that the Lord in His high-priestly prayer in John 17:15, said, “I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.” This is quite literal. This is clear. Moreover, it cannot be maintained that the Lord spoke (or prayed) only in behalf of the original disciples. The context thereof shows remarkable love of the Savior for God’s children, His believers until the end of time.

Item... Would any care to doubt that when the Lord Jesus spoke to the disciples (His Church) on the Mount of Ascension He gave a Great Commission to every one of His believers through the eons until the end of time. Is it not strange that Jesus did not comfort them saying, for example, “Do not worry. Your task will be completed when I rapture you before the great Tribulation”? Jesus rather said, “Lo, I am with you always (all days) even unto the end of the world.” If the Church has a task until the world’s end—should not the Church remain to do it...

Item... John 5; “Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” There is no rapture of but a select few herein indicated. On the contrary the Lord promises to return for all—the good and evil; obviously there can be no “elect” and “saints” left to go it alone during the great tribulation.

Item... when did God promise the Church that it would escape tribulation? Does not, “Ye must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” promise the opposite?

Item... is there really an expert on unfulfilled prophecy? One is reminded of the first Ascension Day when the disciples, who were also all set to be informed about tomorrow, asked, “Wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” The Lord’s answer should cause a rapturist to consider why the first century did not speak much beyond the prophecy which God gave to them. The disciples did not speculate into the tomorrows because in clear and ringing terms the Lord said, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put into His own power.” No doubt the example of the Peters and Johns are good for subsequent centuries as well.

And such has been the historic pattern of the Church. What God has made known that it has confessed from age to age.

Item... 325 AD Athanasias wrote, “From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account of their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith; which except a man believes faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.” Where is the millennium and the rapture here?

Item... our Lutheran Confessions, the Augustana (XVII) “Also they teach that at the consummation of the world Christ will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys,

but to the ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end. They condemn Anabaptists who think that there will be an end to the punishment of the condemned and devils. They condemn also others, who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of this world and the ungodly being everywhere suppressed.”

Finally, in view of these items of Scripture and the Confessions of the Church thereof, is it not risky and reckless to proceed into areas where even angels fear to tread? Consequently, it must ever be our faith and practice to hear and heed what God has said. Moreover, in times and seasons which God has not made our concern, do we not well to commend them to the all gracious God. Unto the self appointed experts of unfulfilled prophecy, what can we say, save the cautions of the Scriptures and the confessions. Well were it for them to desist lest the dictum of God befall them, “Behold, I am against the prophets that use their tongues and say He saith.”

The angels have told us for what to be watching, they said, “This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.” Christ comes for all; gloriously, visibly, immutably!

For this let everyone in Christendom prepare! May God speed the day!