

REPUDIATION OF THE “RAPTURE”

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The average American is aware of the periodic claim that “the end is near.” When Y2K was approaching, outcries of doom, global disruption, and Armageddon were widespread. Hal Lindsey achieved nationwide attention over thirty years ago with his national bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). A more recent repackaging of the dispensational brand of premillennialism is the popular *Left Behind* book series (see “The Official...”).

Every so often, a religious figure captures national attention, announcing the impending return of Jesus—even to the point of setting a date—only to fade into the anonymity from which he arose when his claim falls flat, but having achieved his “fifteen minutes of fame”, (see Whisenant and Brewer, 1989). The sensationalism sells well and tweaks the curiosity of large numbers of people. Incredibly, this pattern has been repeating itself literally for centuries!

Such is the case with the alleged “Rapture.” It comes from the Latin word “*rapere*,” which means, “to seize, snatch out, take away.” Dispensationalists apply this word to the idea that Christ will come suddenly and secretly in the air to snatch away from the Earth the living saints and the resurrected bodies of those saints already deceased. This rapture is supposed to occur just prior to the seven-year Tribulation period, which, in turn, will be followed by the Millennium.

Proponents claim that the Rapture will be secretive. We are told that families will be shocked by the strange disappearance of a mother, father, or child. Driverless cars will collide in the streets (thus the bumper sticker: “In case of rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned”). A man and wife will be in bed; she hears a noise, turns her head, and finds him gone. Planes will crash with no pilots found. These sensational and dramatic examples illustrate the view that the Rapture will be an invisible coming of the Lord for His saints, leaving visible results of chaos and confusion among the remaining unbelievers.

In reality, the word “rapture” is not found in the Bible, though it is claimed to be the Latin equivalent of *harpadzo* translated “caught up” in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (NKJV). Lindsey admitted, “[i]t is not found in the Bible” (1970, p. 126), and noted

that the word “translation” is just as suitable. Yet the word “translation” does occur in the New Testament. Paul referred to the fact that God “has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Colossians 1:13, emp. added). So when an unbeliever obeys the Gospel, receives forgiveness of sins, and is added to the church of Christ, he is taken out of the world and transferred to Christ’s kingdom. This use of the term is certainly a far cry from the idea that it refers to Christians being raptured from the physical Earth to meet Jesus in the air.

The New Testament uses three terms to refer to Christ’s return. First, *parousia* is translated “coming, presence, or advent.” Second, *epiphaneia* is translated “appearing, manifestation, or brightness.” Third, *apokalupsis* is translated “revelation.” Dispensationalism holds that *parousia* (“coming”) refers to the “Rapture” that occurs seven years before the *epiphaneia* (“appearing”) or *apokalupsis* (“revelation.”) Accordingly, at the “Rapture,” it is claimed that Jesus will come for the church only, while at the “Revelation,” Jesus will return with the church, and put an end to the “Tribulation” and “Armageddon.”

The primary passage used to support the idea of a “rapture” is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. But this passage was not actually given to deal with the return of Christ. Its purpose was twofold. First, it was designed to reassure Christians that their deceased loved ones would be able to share in the Lord’s return. Second, it informed Christians that those who are still living when Christ returns will have no precedence or advantage over those who have already died. This dual function of the text constitutes a very different emphasis from the one imposed upon it by dispensationalists.

The dispensational distinctions made between the three New Testament terms that refer to Christ’s return are simply untenable (see Boettner, 1957, pp. 163-164). For example, dispensationalists assert that the “coming” (*parousia*) in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1 refers to the “Rapture.” Yet the same word is used in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 to speak of Jesus coming “with” His saints, thereby coinciding with the dispensational concept of the “Appearing” or “Revelation” seven years after the “Rapture.” Dispensationalists apply 2 Thessalonians 2:8 to the “Antichrist,” and therefore must understand this as a reference to the “Appearing” seven years after the “Rapture.” Yet the verse uses the expression “the manifestation (i.e., “brightness”—*epiphaneia*) of His coming (*parousia*).” Thus the term “coming” is used in the New Testament to refer to both dispensational concepts of the “Rapture” and the “Appearing,” and the two expressions are, in fact, combined in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 to refer to one and the same event.

The term "Revelation" (*apokalupsis*) in 1 Corinthians 1:7 is descriptive of what the dispensationalists call the "Rapture," since Christians await it. But in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, it clearly refers to the "Appearing." The term "Appearing" (*epiphaneia*) is used in 1 Timothy 6:14 as the event that terminates Christian activity on Earth, and thus fits the "Rapture" concept. But in 2 Timothy 4:1, 8, the references to judgment fit the "Appearing."

In view of these considerations, the sincere Bible student is forced to conclude that the three words relating to Christ's return in the New Testament are used synonymously and interchangeably. The New Testament simply makes no distinction between the coming of the Lord for His saints ("Rapture") and the coming of the Lord with His saints ("Appearing" or "Revelation"). The dispensational dichotomy is in direct conflict with New Testament terminology.

Additionally, if Christians are to be removed seven years before the "Revelation" or "Coming" of Christ, then no passage should speak of Christians remaining on Earth until the "Revelation." However, many passages do just that (see Boettner, pp. 165-166). For example, in Titus 2:13, Paul referred to the "blessed hope" and the "appearing" as one and the same event, i.e., Christ's coming. In the original language, the two substantives, "hope" and "appearing" (*epiphaneia*) are closely linked by the common article. They are not two separate events, as if to be read: "Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing." Rather, the text is saying, "Looking for the blessed hope and appearing." The one explains the other. The "blessed hope" of Christians is "the glorious appearing" of Christ. Other examples would be 1 Peter 1:13 and 4:13, where the grace on which the Christian is to set his hope is to be received at the "revelation" (*apokalypsei*) of Christ, at which time the Christian may rejoice. But, according to dispensationalism, the Christian should rejoice seven years earlier at the rapture.

Further, the use of the word "end" comes from a word that refers to "full end" and, in the New Testament, always refers to the end of the world, i.e., the Judgment day (see Boettner, p. 168-169). In Matthew 28:20, Jesus promised to be with the disseminators of the Gospel message to the very "end." This means the church will remain on the Earth, preaching the Gospel, until the Judgment Day. But if the church is "raptured away" seven years before the end, she cannot fulfill what Christ commanded her to do! In Matthew 13:39-40, there is no removal of the saints before the "full end." The righteous and the wicked grow together until the very end. The separation of the two comes at the end (not seven years before the end). The

dispensationalist claims that the righteous will be taken out from among the wicked. But the Bible says just the opposite: the wicked will be taken out from among the righteous (Matthew 13:39-40). The doctrine of the "Rapture" asserts that believers will be raised seven years before the "Revelation," and 1,007 years before the end of the "Millennium." But in four separate verses, Jesus Himself said believers will be raised "at the last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). There can be no other days after the last day. So the believers cannot be raised at an alleged "Rapture" before the last day.

Finally, the Second Coming of Christ is nowhere depicted as secret, as the "Rapture" advocates affirm. In fact, just the opposite is true. Christ's coming will be accompanied by "blazing fire" (2 Thessalonians 1:7), the sound of a trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52), a "shout," the "voice of the archangel," and the "trump of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). In fact, "every eye will see Him" (Revelation 1:7). These passages show that all persons everywhere will see and hear this event. In fact, the very passage upon which the doctrine of the "Rapture" is founded (i.e., 1 Thessalonians 4:16), far from describing a quiet and secretive event, is about the noisiest verse in the Bible!

When one is willing to remove from the mind all preconceived, complex, and sensational theological concoctions, and simply let the Bible present its own portrait of the end of time and the Second Coming of Christ, the dispensational viewpoint of a postulated "Rapture" is seen to be totally unfounded.

REFERENCES

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