

Pretribulationism as the Alternative to Posttribulationism

by John F. Walvoord

Pretribulationism is a logical and consistent system of biblical interpretation that holds that the rapture occurs before the tribulation, and it is supported by the Bible's presentation of the rapture as an imminent event.

Scripture: Titus 2:13

Topics: "Eschatology", "Rapture Theology"

Description

John F. Walvoord concludes his series on posttribulationism by emphasizing the superiority of the pretribulationist view, highlighting the clarity of pretribulationist premises and the authority of Scripture. He discusses the imminence of the rapture, contrasting it with the detailed sequence of events leading to the second coming of Christ. Walvoord addresses the doctrine of a literal tribulation, pointing out the confusion among posttribulationists and the simplicity of the pretribulationist view. He explains the advantages of pretribulationism, focusing on its logical system, exegetical advantages, and practical benefits in maintaining a moment-by-moment expectation of the Lord's return.

Transcript

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the concluding article in this series, which was begun in *Bibliotheca Sacra* with the January-March, 1975 issue. The thirteen articles are available in book form under the title *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).]

Throughout the discussion of posttribulationism in this series, the superiority of the pretribulationist view to posttribulationism has been pointed out. Although it is not the purpose of this study to present pretribulationism as such, as this has been done in the author's *The Rapture Question*,^[1] John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1957). a summary of pretribulationism is in order.

Clarity of Pretribulationist Premises

As demonstrated in the preceding articles, posttribulationism is faulty in its statement of its premises. Because posttribulationists are largely in confusion in their basic presuppositions, they are open to the charge of contradiction and illogical reasoning. By contrast, pretribulationists bring into focus the major issues that relate to eschatology.

The Authority and Accuracy of Scripture

While conservative posttribulationists usually concur with pretribulationists on the authority and accuracy of Scripture, they lack the unanimity evident in all pretribulationists in their doctrine of the Scriptures. It is not uncommon for scholars who defect from pretribulationism in favor of posttribulationism to defect also in their doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. A sequence of events which states in so many words that the rapture is first and the tribulation follows. Many eschatological problems, of course, would be resolved if the Scriptures specifically stated, for instance, that Christ's coming is premillennial or if the Old Testament clearly outlined the first coming of Christ to be followed by the present church age and then the second coming of Christ. The form of divine revelation given in Scripture does not always provide such an itemization.

While the argument from silence is never conclusive, most posttribulationists are not willing to admit that the silence in Scripture concerning a posttribulational rapture is much more significant than the silence in Scripture concerning the tribulation following the rapture. While no passage attempts to relate the rapture to a sequence of events, the second coming of Christ is revealed in a detailed way.

In Matthew 24, as well as in Revelation 4-19, specific revelation of events leading up to the second coming and a description of the second coming of Christ itself is provided. In view of this itemization, it is therefore most significant that the rapture is never mentioned at all when many other events are itemized. Accordingly, the rhetorical question of posttribulationists as to where the Bible teaches a pretribulation rapture actually boomerangs on the posttribulationist because he is unable to come up with any statement of a posttribulational rapture, even though the events preceding and following the second coming are given in great detail.

In the argument from silence, posttribulationists also attempt to evade the fact that the church, the body of Christ, is never mentioned in a tribulation passage. Many posttribulationists spiritualize the tribulation and make the church equivalent to the saints of all ages. The complete silence of the Scriptures on the subject of the church as such in the great tribulation has considerable weight. On the whole, the argument from silence is more damaging to the posttribulational view than it is to the pretribulational interpretation.

Imminence of the Rapture

As presented in all major passages on the rapture, the coming of Christ for His church is uniformly presented as an imminent event. This is in sharp contrast to the presentation of the doctrine of the second coming, which is consistently presented as following a sequence of events--including the return of Israel to the land, the rise of the dictator in the Middle East (sometimes referred to as the Antichrist), and the forty-two months of the great tribulation detailed in the Book of Revelation. The second coming of Christ to the earth in no proper sense can be called an imminent event, even though posttribulationists strain to redefine the English word imminent as meaning something other than an event which is immediately pending. Only by complete spiritualization of the major events leading up to the second coming of Christ can this problem be avoided by posttribulationism, and in this spiritualization a major principle of proper interpretation of eschatology is sacrificed.

The claim of many contemporary posttribulationists that they represent the historic position of the church is true only if they spiritualize the tribulation. Futurists like Ladd and Gundry offer a position that is quite different from the early church fathers and, as a matter of fact, it is more recent than pretribulationism as is commonly taught today. The fact that the rapture is presented as an imminent event is a major argument

for distinguishing the rapture from the second coming of Christ to the earth.

The Doctrine of a Literal Tribulation

Pretribulationists regard the great tribulation as a future event and rightly place the rapture as occurring before this time of unprecedented trouble. By contrast, there is complete confusion among the posttribulationists on this point and an amazing lack of uniformity in applying the principles of interpretation. Posttribulationists are caught in the twin problem of either carrying the church through the great tribulation with resulting martyrdom for probably the majority of the church, or spiritualizing the period and thereby introducing the principles of interpretation that lead not only to posttribulationism, but also to amillennialism and a denial of any reasonable order of events for the endtime.

The difficulty of harmonizing the rapture as the blessed hope with the prospect of martyrdom and the problem of maintaining premillennialism while holding to posttribulationism has continued to plague some of the major interpreters of the posttribulationist view. By contrast, the pretribulation view offers a clear and simple explanation. The blessed hope is the rapture of the church before the great tribulation. The second coming of Christ to the earth follows the tribulation. Pretribulationists accordingly are not forced to spiritualize or to evade the plain teaching of Scripture on the subject of the rapture or of the great tribulation. At any time, would be devoid of any real meaning if they had to go through the great tribulation first. While many generations of Christians have died before the rapture, it is evident that the exhortation given to the Thessalonians applies to each succeeding generation which continues to have the bright hope of an imminent return of the Lord for His own.

The exhortations of the major passage on the rapture in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 are similar in their implications. Not a word of warning is given concerning a coming tribulation, but the readers are exhorted to live in the light of the imminent return of Christ. This hope is defined by Paul in Titus 2:13 as "that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ." The hope of a rapture after enduring the great tribulation is hardly a happy expectation, and this passage is difficult for posttribulationists to explain. The hope is not that of resurrection after death and martyrdom, but rather the coming and revelation of Christ in His glory to them while they are still living on the earth. The exhortations relating to the rapture constitute a major problem to posttribulationism.

The Rapture in Relation to Premillennialism

Posttribulationists who are premillennial are caught in the vise of a dilemma. If they spiritualize the great tribulation to avoid the problems of harmonization with a posttribulationist rapture as J. Barton Payne does, they are adopting principles of interpretation that lead logically to amillennialism, which spiritualizes not only the tribulation but also the millennium itself. If, as premillennialists, they take the great tribulation literally, then they have the problem of harmonizing the imminence of the rapture and exhortations relating to it with a posttribulationist rapture. The dilemma facing posttribulationism accounts for the general confusion that exists among them on endtime events.

Logically, posttribulationism leads to amillennialism and pretribulationism leads to premillennialism. Any compromise between these two points of view leads to confusion in principles of interpretation as well as in the interpretation itself. The obvious difficulty in moving from a posttribulationist rapture into a millennium with saints on earth who have not been raptured forces interpreters like Gundry to postulate a second chance for salvation after the rapture, a doctrine nowhere taught in Scripture and expressly denied in the Book of Revelation (14:9-11).

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The evident trend among scholars who have forsaken pretribulationism for posttribulationism is that in many cases they also abandon premillennialism. For those who wish to think consistently and logically from principles of interpretation, the options continue to be (1) a pretribulational rapture followed by a premillennial return of Christ to the earth, or (2) abandoning both for a posttribulational rapture and a spiritualized millennium. It becomes evident that pretribulationism is more than a dispute between those who place the rapture before and after the tribulation. It is actually the key to an eschatological system. It plays a determinative role in establishing principles of interpretation which, if carried through consistently, lead to the pretribulational and premillennial interpretation.

Advantages of Pretribulationism

By way of summary, three major considerations point to the advantages of the pretribulational point of view.

Pretribulationism, A Logical System

While writers in all schools of biblical interpretation can be found who are guilty of illogical reasoning, careful observers of posttribulationism will find that so often their conclusions are based on illogical reasoning. In some cases their arguments hang on dogmatic assumptions which they do not prove. In other cases they draw conclusions from Scripture passages under consideration which the passages actually do not teach. The fact that an interpreter is a great scholar does not necessarily make him a logician; unfortunately, ability to do research and skill in linguistics do not necessarily lead to formation of logical conclusions. The writer believes that a major problem in posttribulationism is logical inconsistency. By contrast, pretribulationism moves logically from its premises and principles of interpretation to its conclusion.

Exegetical Advantages of Pretribulationism

In contrast with posttribulational treatment of major passages on the rapture which differs widely in interpretation, pretribulationists follow a consistent pattern of literal or normal interpretation. This allows the interpreter to explain the passage in its normal meaning--which in many cases is its literal meaning--without resorting to flagrant spiritualization in order to avoid pointed contrast between the rapture and the second coming of Christ to the earth.

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It is rather significant that, without any attempt to establish uniformity in eschatology, the Bible institute movement of America is predominantly premillennial and pretribulational. This has come from taking Scripture in its plain, ordinary meaning and explaining it in this sense. By contrast, educational institutions that have approached the Bible creedally tend to make Scriptures conform to their previously accepted creed with the result that most of them are liberal or, if conservative, tend to be amillennial.

Pretribulationism has continued to appeal to thousands of lay interpreters because it makes sense out of the passages that deal with the rapture of the church. While the majority of biblical scholars may disagree with pretribulational interpretation, it is also significant that they disagree radically among themselves as well; often abandonment of pretribulational interpretation results in abandonment of serious study in the area of prophecy.

Practical Advantages

In all the major rapture passages, the truth of the coming of the Lord is connected with practical exhortation. While it is undoubtedly true that eternal values remain in other interpretations, only the pretribulationists can consistently hold to a moment-by-moment expectation of the Lord's return along with the literal interpretation of the promises that are to be fulfilled following the Lord's coming. For the pretribulationist, the coming of the Lord is an imminent hope. For the great majority of others, there is only the somewhat blurred expectation of how the coming of the Lord really fits in to the pattern of future events. It is for this reason that pretribulationists hold tenaciously to their point of view, defend it earnestly, and believe the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ an important aspect of their future hope.

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