

Semiclassic Posttribulation Interpretation

by John F. Walvoord

Semiclassic posttribulationism is a view that holds the church will go through the tribulation, but the tribulation itself is not yet fulfilled, and it faces major problems in interpreting the New Testament.

Scripture: Daniel 9:27, Daniel 12:2, Matthew 24:21, Matthew 24:31, Revelation 13:5, Revelation 20:4

Topics: "Eschatology", "Tribulation Period"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the majority posttribulation view, highlighting the diversity of viewpoints among posttribulationists and the difficulty in establishing broad categories due to the various subdivisions within this belief system. He delves into the historical interpretation claim of posttribulationism, pointing out the differences between contemporary posttribulationism and the views held by early church fathers. Walvoord also addresses the doctrine of the tribulation in semiclassical posttribulationism, emphasizing the disagreements among posttribulationists regarding the nature and extent of the tribulation period. Furthermore, he explores the sequence of events related to the second advent, focusing on the lack of biblical proof for a rapture of living saints or a resurrection of the church in the events surrounding Christ's second coming.

Transcript

The Majority Posttribulation View

If the eschatology of liberal scholarship is excluded, probably the majority view of posttribulationism can be classified as semiclassical. Because of the great diversity of viewpoints among the posttribulationists themselves, it is difficult to establish broad categories such as this in the study of posttribulationism today. However, in contrast to the purely classical view of J. Barton Payne, described in the previous article, and the purely futuristic views of George E. Ladd and Robert H. Gundry, most contemporary posttribulationists can be designated as following a semiclassical view.

Within this broad category several subdivisions can be noted. First, some posttribulationists emphasize the contemporary character of the tribulation, and while not insisting that all predicted events prior to the second coming have been fulfilled, they assert as their major point that the church is already in the great tribulation. Hence, they argue it is folly to debate whether the church will be raptured before the tribulation. Second, some POSTtribulationists in this school of thought who are contending that the church is already in tribulation find certain aspects of the tribulation still future. These unfulfilled aspects may be limited to certain major events which are yet to be fulfilled or major persons who are yet to be revealed. They

assume, in contrast to the classic position, that the second coming could not occur any day. Third, some, like Alexander Reese, find a specific seven-year period still future, as anticipated in Daniel 9:27, but tend to find some of the predictions of the Book of Revelation as contemporary or past and, accordingly, are not, strictly speaking, futurists like George E. Ladd. When posttribulationists charge pretribulationists with not always agreeing among themselves on some details, they do not seem to realize the extent of diversity of opinion in their own ranks, even when subdivided into broad categories. In the analysis of semiclassic posttribulationism which follows, the main trends will be traced even though there may be those in this classification who hold views different from the broad trend.

The Semiclassic Claim To Be The Historical Interpretation

A major emphasis in most posttribulationist presentations is the argument that they represent the historical view of the church and that pretribulationism arose only one hundred and fifty years ago. Alexander Reese, for instance, on the first page of his preface in reference to pretribulationism says, "These views, which began to be propagated a little over one hundred years ago in the separatist movements of Edward Irving and J. N. Darby, have spread to the remotest corners of the earth, and enlisted supporters in most of the Reformed Churches in Christendom, including the Mission field." [1] Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1937), p. xi. The argument that posttribulationism must be accepted as true because it has been the view of the entire church until recently has been emphasized and reemphasized. Long lists of great scholars who are posttribulationist are often compiled, usually without regard as to whether they are premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial, as if that did not make any difference. Also, there is almost complete disregard of the varieties of opinion among these posttribulationists in arguments which support their conclusion. Posttribulationists advancing this view take for granted that the posttribulationism of today, and especially their particular type of it, is precisely what the church has held through the centuries.

The fact is that contemporary semiclassic posttribulationism differs from the historical view in a number of particulars. Secondcentury premillenarians interpreted contemporary events as identifying their generation as being in the end time. History has proved that they were wrong, and events that they identified as proof were not events of the end time. The same error can be observed in identifying contemporary posttribulationism with that of the Protestant Reformers. Some of the Reformers identified their contemporary events as being in the end time and looked for the coming of the Lord either momentarily or soon. Again their posttribulationism was based on an error in judgment. Most contemporary posttribulationists are more cautious and concede that many years may elapse before the second coming will be fulfilled.

The element of imminency is usually lacking in the semiclassic posttribulationist interpretation. While it is true that the postapostolic church did not understand or teach pretribulationism in the modern sense, neither did they teach posttribulationism as it is being advanced today. The fact is the early church, concerned with many other problems, did not resolve the tension between believing that Christ could come at any moment and the fact that many prophetic events had to be fulfilled before He could come again. Most modern interpreters believe that the early church fathers were quite immature in many areas of doctrine, as witnessed by the long centuries which elapsed before such doctrines as the Trinity, sin, and justification were carefully formulated. Because the early church, beginning with the third century, tended to abandon the literal interpretation of prophecy, their principles of interpretation did not permit any real advance in the understanding of the prophetic program. Each succeeding generation seems to have spiritualized prophecies to fit its own day, only to have history prove that they were wrong. The historical

argument, while it is commonly advanced by posttribulationism, is accordingly an insufficient basis to determine the issues between pretribulationism and posttribulationism. The issue, as most conservative theologians agree, is the question concerning what the Bible teaches. The very fact that posttribulationists differ so radically in their interpretation of major elements of prophecy related to the end time should make clear to an impartial observer that they have not resolved their tensions and problems. As will be shown in later discussion, the reason for this is their lack of agreement on principles of interpretation as well as their exegesis of key passages.

The Doctrine Of The Tribulation In Semiclassic Posttribulationism

Posttribulationists are not in agreement on the character, nature, and extent of the time of trouble preceding the second coming of Christ. While they hold that the church will go through the tribulation, they are in disagreement among themselves as to what the tribulation itself is. In general, they may be divided into three classifications: (1) those who hold that the tribulation extends throughout the entire age from the first coming of Christ to the second coming; (2) those who hold that the church is already in the tribulation but that the great tribulation is still future; (3) the futuristic school which, in contrast to the semiclastic interpretation, holds that the tribulation is completely future, usually identifying it as the last seven years preceding the second coming of Christ, based on a futuristic interpretation of Daniel 9:27 and Revelation 4-18 .

In holding that the church must go through the tribulation, most posttribulationists tend to identify the church with Israel or at least hold that the church and Israel are both members of the spiritual community. As even pretribulationists agree that there are saved people in the tribulation time, posttribulationists assume that they have proved that the church itself is in this period. A familiar text used by posttribulationists is Matthew 24:31, "And He shall send forth His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." The term elect is commonly taken as referring to the church and therefore because there are elect in the tribulation as proved by Matthew 24:31, they hold that the church is in the tribulation. Norman S. MacPherson, for instance, says, "There is nothing here to indicate who the elect are, although there is every likelihood that the term refers to the Church, ..." [2] Norman S. MacPherson, *Triumph through Tribulation* (Otego, NY: First Baptist Church, 1944), p. 8. Alexander Reese goes a step further and says it is "supreme rubbish" to argue whether the elect is equivalent to the church. [3] Reese, *Approaching Advent*, p. 207. Reese, of course, begs the whole question in assuming what he is trying to prove. Everyone agrees that the saved of all ages are the elect. The question is whether the term church and particular expressions like the body of Christ include all the elect. In the passage cited, some take the word elect to refer to Israel as an elect nation.

All agree that there are elect individuals in the great tribulation, but posttribulationists tend to assume without proof that this is identical in meaning to the church. While the word church is used to indicate a congregation or a physical assembly of people in both the Old and New Testaments, there is not a single instance in the entire Bible where the word church, as indicating a body of saints, is ever used in a passage dealing with the tribulation. It is this crucial point which posttribulationists fail to take into account. There will be a gathering of the elect at the end of the tribulation, but Matthew does not indicate anything concerning its nature, and the purpose of the gathering as it relates to the introduction of the millennial kingdom. The strong, dogmatic statements of posttribulationism do not change the fact that Matthew does not mention either rapture or resurrection in this passage.

The greatest confusion of posttribulationists, however, is in their concept of the tribulation itself. George L. Rose holds that the great tribulation began with the apostolic period. He states, "The records left us in the book of The Acts of the Apostles leaves no room to doubt that 'tribulation' began almost as soon as the church was born..."[4] George L. Rose, *Tribulation till Translation* (Glendale, CA: Rose Publishing Co., 1942), p. 68. Rose goes on to point out that in Acts 8:1-3 there was "great persecution" of the church, and he holds that "great persecution" is the same as "great tribulation" and that the same word for tribulation is used in Matthew 24:21 in speaking of the "great tribulation." According to Rose, the church of course goes through the great tribulation because it is already in the great tribulation.

Fromow, in a similar way, holds that the church is already in the great tribulation. "The Church is already passing through 'the Great Tribulation.'"[5] George H. Fromow, *Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation?* (London: Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, n.d.), p. 2. Fromow goes on to say:

This term Great embraces the whole period of the Church's course on earth and should not be confined to the final three and one-half years or the second half of Daniel's seventieth week of intensive tribulation. It began with the first saints after the Fall, includes all who washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb until the Second Advent of Christ.[6] Ibid.

Fromow begins the great tribulation with Adam instead of with the early church. In holding this position, he ignores the plain teaching of Scripture that the great tribulation is the last three and one-half years preceding the second coming of Christ, as brought out in Daniel 12 where it is defined as a period of approximately twelve hundred and ninety days and as it is defined in the Book of Revelation as a time of forty-two months (Rev 13:5). This is why Christ used the great tribulation as the specific sign indicating that the second coming of Christ was near (Matt 24:15-22). The problem here, as it frequently is in posttribulationist interpretation, is that the argument is based on a nonliteral interpretation of prophecy in which expressions like "the great tribulation" are spiritualized. All agree that the saints have had problems and tribulation since the beginning of the human race. The Bible teaches, however, that these present trials are not to be confused with the great tribulation which is declared to be unprecedented and therefore unique, which will close the end of the age preceding the second coming (Dan 12:1; Matt 24:21).

In contrast to the position that the church is already in the great tribulation, Alexander Reese definitely advances the concept that the seven-year period predicted by Daniel 9:27 as preceding the second advent is still future. In an extended discussion, he supports a literal view of this last seven-year period as being yet future. He states, "...the eschatological character of the Seventieth Week is assumed throughout this volume..."[7] Reese, *Approaching Advent*, p. 30. On the basis of his strong stand for a future period, Alexander Reese could be classified as a futurist like George E. Ladd. However, in his treatment of the Book of Revelation dealing with the end-time trouble, he tends to support at least some of the findings of the historical school (which believes that the fulfillment of the seals is in some sense already under way), although he does not accept what he refers to as "the extravagances of the Historical School..."[8] Ibid., p. 33. retributionists, of course, would agree with Reese that the last seven years preceding the second coming are still future.

Reese is in error, however, in holding that the futuristic view of the last seven years was that which was held by the early church fathers. As J. Barton Payne has brought out, the early church fathers thought they were already in the period, and that is why they did not give consideration to a possible pretribulationist interpretation. They tended to identify their persecutions with the persecution of the great tribulation. Like the early church fathers, Martin Luther also held that the church was already in the great tribulation. Luther

wrote, "The last day is at hand. My calendar has run out. I know nothing more in the Scriptures." [9] Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Luther's Works*, 56 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 54:134. This diversity of opinion among the semiclastic posttribulationists should make clear that posttribulationism, as it is held by this school of thought, is not the same as that held by the early church fathers, and their constant assertion that they are in the tradition of the time-honored interpretation is only partially true.

The viewpoint of Reese, of course, also pinpoints the crucial question as to whether the rapture of the church is imminent. Rose and Fromow (with Martin Luther) held that though we are already in the great tribulation, the rapture could occur any day. And at least some of the early church fathers believed this also. But Reese, believing that the tribulation is yet future, cannot hold to the imminent rapture. In fact, he leaves without explanation why the rapture is uniformly presented as an imminent event in the New Testament.

The semiclastic view, while it is probably the majority view of posttribulationists, does not resolve the major problems which posttribulationism faces in interpreting the New Testament. It is evident by their various views of the tribulation itself that they are almost in complete confusion as to what they mean by the church going through the great tribulation. It is also evident that they are using differing methods of interpretation, some of them almost completely spiritualizing the tribulation and others, like Reese, taking it more literally.

While they argue against the idea that the Bible does not place the church in this time of great tribulation, their arguments always fall short of proof and frequently are circular in that they are assuming what they are trying to prove.

The basic problem of posttribulationism is that they have not agreed among themselves whether or not to interpret prophecy literally, and the great majority do not use the literal method when it would teach a pretribulation rapture. They also differ among themselves on the important question as to whether or not prophecy should be interpreted as teaching a future, literal millennium. Again and again, in examining posttribulation arguments, one is struck by their lack of uniformity in interpreting prophecy in a literal sense.

The fact remains, when all the evidence is sifted, that posttribulationists have yet to prove that the body of Christ is mentioned in any passage dealing with the great tribulation itself or the entire seven-year period leading up to the second coming. In view of the detailed prophecies that deal with this period, with Revelation 4-18 presenting a graphic picture of this end-time period, it is most strange that there should be no mention of saints who can be identified as belonging to the church. This is especially strange in view of the fact that Revelation 2-3 deals specifically with the seven churches of Asia.

Sequence Of Events Related To The Second Advent

Another major problem of posttribulationism is that in the sequence of events relating to the second coming, there is no proof of a rapture of living saints or a resurrection of the church, the body of Christ. In the key passages on the second coming, as in Matthew 24, Jude, and Revelation 19, there is no mention of either rapture of living saints or resurrection of the church. It is most impressive that when resurrection is mentioned in Revelation 20:4, it is specifically limited to the tribulation saints as contrasted to the church. If the tribulation saints were a part of the church, why was not the expression "the dead in Christ" used as in 1 Thessalonians 4? The fact that this group is singled out for resurrection, as if they were a special body of saints, points to the conclusion that the church had been previously raptured.

Posttribulationists also have never resolved the pressing question as to why there is a rapture at the second coming. If, as a matter of fact, the purpose of Christ is to establish His saints in the millennial kingdom, why would saints meet Christ in the air at the rapture if they are going to return immediately to the earth as the posttribulationists teach? Why would it not be preferable for the church to go into the millennium in their natural bodies as the Scriptures make clear other saints will do. The omission of any reference to rapture of living saints or to the resurrection of the church as the body of Christ specifically in the events related to the second coming of Christ to the earth, while an argument from silence, is a very impressive one. How strange that such an important doctrine should be omitted from Scriptures that are obviously detailing the major events of the second advent. While the Old Testament saints are especially mentioned as in Daniel 12:2 and the tribulation saints are mentioned in Revelation 20:4, the church, the body of Christ, is not included in these resurrections.

Further, there is no evidence that any saints living on earth at the second coming of Christ are translated at the time Christ comes back to set up His kingdom. It is rather clear to premillenarians at least that saints on earth at that time will enter the millennium in their natural bodies and populate the millennial earth. Many exegetical problems face the posttribulationists in their attempts to establish biblical proofs for their conclusions. These will be discussed more at length in the examination of the overall presentation of posttribulationists. Next, however, the particular view of the futuristic school and the new posttribulationist dispensational interpretation of Robert H. Gundry need to be examined as major contributions to recent posttribulationism.

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