Urbana Theological Seminary

I’ll Fly Away... Or Will I?

An Evaluation of the Doctrine of the Rapture

New Testament Survey

BI502

By

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In the introduction to her book Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America, sociologist Amy Frykholm marvels at the success of Jerry B. Jenkin’s and Tim LaHaye’s Christian fiction series Left Behind, stating, “The narrative of the rapture, drawn from the tradition of Christian fundamentalist apocalypticism, has achieved unprecedented popularity.”Indeed, all twelve of the novels in the series have been on the New York Times, USA Today, and Publisher’s Weekly best-seller lists, and the final 6 volumes in the series debuted at number one. LaHaye and Jenkins have not only been the primary stimulus behind the quadrupling of their publisher’s net worth, they find themselves in the elite company of J.K. Rolling, Tom Clancy, and John Grisham as the only authors whose work necessitated a first print-run of two-million or more copies. While some contest Frykholm’s assertion that “Left Behind has brought this religious ‘subculture’ fully into the mainstream,” it is certain that rapture-oriented thinking dispensed via Left Behind has been added in increasing measure to the stew of eschatological viewpoints in the pews on Sunday mornings across the United States. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to gain an understanding of the historical and Biblical reasoning behind the

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1 Amy Johnson Frykholm, Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America (Oxford University Press US, 2004), 3.

2 Dan Mathewson, “End Times Entertainment: The Left Behind Series, Evangelicals, and Death Pornography,” Journal of Contemporary Religion 24, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): 319-337. Matheson goes on to say, “By 2005 . . . most of the twelve novels in the original series had been translated into 33 languages. There are now at least eight separate spin-off series, including a children’s series of 40 novels, and a host of non-fiction by-products, including various Bible study guides, devotional aids and trivia handbooks. Impressive, too, is the array of non-print spin-offs: three full-length feature films, books on tape and CD, dramatic radio performances, software, screensavers, computer wallpaper, a mobile phone prophecy service, a web site, a worship CD, an on-line prophecy club, an e-newsletter, and the video game” (321).


4 Frykholm, Rapture Culture, 3.
theological event known as “the rapture” and to evaluate the rapture in light of other Biblical evidence.

While the imagery of the end times has engendered much speculation and debate over the centuries, it was John Nelson Darby’s “unprecedented advocacy”\(^5\) of the secret rapture as recently as the 19\(^{th}\) century that sparked the rapture controversy. Darby, once an Anglican priest in Ireland, taught the theological system known as dispensationalism among the Plymouth Brethren in Britain. C.I. Scofield furthered Darby’s dispensational convictions when he published a study Bible constructed on a dispensationalist understanding of Scripture. Dispensationalists like Darby and Scofield contend that God relates to mankind differently during different time periods, or dispensations, of world history. Scofield’s study Bible posited seven dispensations: innocency, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and kingdom.\(^6\)

While Darby, Scofield, and others like Charles Ryrie, a theology professor Dallas Theological Seminary, were not the first to divide the work of God into various epochs,\(^7\) two theological innovations of the dispensationalist framework they espoused are worth noting. First, dispensationalists believe in a strict dichotomy between the ethnic nation of Israel and the church. Stanley Grenz writes:

> Classical dispensationalism maintains a thoroughgoing separation of, even a metaphysical distinction between, Israel and the church. At its heart is the principle that there are two peoples of God. Traditionally dispensationalists have asserted that Israel

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\(^7\) Most notably, Augustine outlined 6 stages of salvation history in *The City of God* which were leading toward a seventh and final epoch of eternal Sabbath rest. Ibid., 95.
is God’s national people, whereas the church of Jesus Christ constitutes God’s spiritual or heavenly people.\(^8\)

While many biblical scholars view the church as a continuation of Israel, dispensationalists maintain that God has plans for ethnic Israel that are distinct from those of the church. This two-people-of-God doctrine “led to dispensationalism's most controversial and distinctive doctrine—the secret, any-moment, pre-tribulational Rapture ("catching away") of the church.”\(^9\) The rapture, the second primary innovation of dispensational theology, stipulates that while the church is raptured away to enjoy the instantaneous presence of Jesus, “God will use the tribulation in order to prepare the Jews to receive their Messiah, Jesus, at his return.”\(^10\) Though there are several Scriptures that may hint at a secret rapture,\(^11\) 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 is the crown jewel of the dispensationalist doctrine of the secret rapture, wherein Paul writes:

> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.\(^12\)

Though the word “rapture” is not explicit in this passage, it stems from the Latin word *rapio*,\(^13\) Jerome’s translation of the Greek word *harpazo*, which means “to take away, snatch, seize, catch, or carry away by force.”\(^14\) Certainly, Paul describes an event at the second coming of Christ when believers will meet Christ in the air. However, is this a depiction a secret rapture?

\(^8\) Grenz, *The Millenial Maze*, 95.


\(^11\) Mt. 24:36-44, 1 Cor. 15:51-57 and Jn 14:3 are sometimes cited as supporting the doctrine of the secret rapture.

\(^12\) All Biblical citations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.


wherein the church universal will be taken to safety with Christ and spared the tribulation? Or does this passage refer to something else?

Contrary to dispensationalists, there is Biblical warrant to believe that Paul had something other than the secret rapture in mind when he penned 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. George Eldon Ladd writes of the Biblical insufficiency of the rapture doctrine when he states, “While dispensationalist theologians retain the view of a twofold return of Christ, many of the usual exegetical arguments have been surrendered.” He then goes on to reference the well-known dispensationalist John Walvoord who said that “a coming of Christ before the great tribulation for the church, is not explicitly taught in Scripture,” noting that this admission by Walvoord was omitted from later editions of his book *The Rapture Question*.

The first strike against the secret rapture comes from an alternative understanding of what is meant by the phrase “to meet the Lord in the air” in verse 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In the two other instances where *apantēsis* (“to meet”) is used in the Bible, the word refers to a meeting in which a person or group goes to meet another person outside of a city only to escort the visitor back into the city. Such meetings often occurred when a dignitary visited a city as a means of honoring and welcoming the guest in a spirit of celebration. In Acts 28:15 a group of believers from Rome journey outside the city to meet Paul and his cohorts for the purpose of escorting the group back to Rome; and in Matthew 25:6 *apantēsis* is used in an eschatological parable in which the virgins go out to meet the bridegroom who has come for his bride. Grenz writes that the image intended by the use of *apantēsis* is “borrowed from oriental wedding practices,” and

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16 Ibid.
17 Crossway Bibles, *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008), 2310.
Erickson adds that in the parable of Matthew 25, “The virgins do not go out to meet the bridegroom and then depart with him. Rather, they go out to meet him and then accompany him back to the wedding banquet.” He goes on to conclude that the use of apantēsis seems to indicate “our meeting with the Lord in the air is not a case of being caught away, but of meeting him and then immediately coming with him to earth as part of his triumphant entourage. It is the church, not the Lord, that will turn around at the meeting.”

A second strike against the secret rapture is that dispensationalists view the rapture as a means for the church to be spared from the tribulation of the eschaton, but the Scriptures do not clearly uphold such a view. In his book Christ and the Future, Cornelius Venema writes, “Unless the Bible reader brings to these passages (passages used in support of the rapture) a preconceived doctrine of two distinct phases of Christ’s return, there is little prospect that such a teaching would be discovered from them.” Indeed, the preconceived interpretive framework of dispensationalists has led to an unjustified interpretation of multiple texts regarding the church’s alleged exemption from tribulation. The dispensationalist leaning Moody Handbook of Theology speaks of the church’s immunity from the tribulation when it states:

It is inconceivable that the church will be on earth to experience the wrath of God . . . The church is the bride of Christ, the object of Christ’s love, not His wrath (Eph. 5:25). It would be a contradiction of the very relationship of Christ and the church for the church to go through the punishments of the Tribulation . . . (cf. Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Thess 2:13, Rev. 3:10).

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20 Ibid.

21 Cornelis P. Venema, Christ and the Future: The Bible’s Teaching about the Last Things (Banner of Truth, 2008), 138.

Commonly cited in support of the church’s exemption from the wrath of God, perhaps because of its proximity to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, is 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 which states, “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.” However, many are quick to point out the Biblical teaching of the church being saved from God’s wrath in no way necessitates that the church gets a “Get Out of Jail Free” card from the tribulation of the end times. It is a fallacy to equate the wrath of God in passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:9 with the final tribulation because the wrath (orgē) of God most often refers not to the specific end times tribulation, but to the eternal outpouring of His wrath on sin in hell. Thomas Schreiner, in his *New Testament Theology*, stipulates, “Normally for Paul, God’s wrath is eschatological, denoting his final judgment.”

A distinction, therefore, must be made between the eternal punitive wrath of God and the suffering of the tribulation. Further, in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 “wrath” is contrasted with “salvation,” and in verse 10, salvation is defined as living with Christ not for a seven year period but for an undefined amount of time. It follows that the word “wrath” in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 more likely refers to eternal wrath in contrast to eternal salvation, than it does the wrath of the tribulation. The church will be saved from the ultimate wrath of God in the eternal sense, but it is a non sequitur to assume that such passages necessitate the deliverance of the church from end times tribulation.

To the contrary, the Scriptures testify that believers are called to remain faithful under the weight of persecution far more frequently than they are given an easy escape from such trials.

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24 For a detailed discussion of the normal usage of “wrath” (orgē), as distinguished from tribulation (thlipsis) see Erickson, 1227.
Jesus warns his disciples on more than one occasion that they will face persecution in the world, and often these warnings come in eschatological discourse.\textsuperscript{25} Paul, likewise, viewed persecution as a normal calling for Christ followers and even appears to glory in affliction at times because of the evangelism and personal sanctification that results from such tribulation.\textsuperscript{26} Peter also teaches that tribulation is the vocation of the church when he writes the following to the churches in Asia Minor:

\begin{quote}
But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.\textsuperscript{27}

Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed . . . if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Certainly, Peter’s inspired words stand at odds with the thought deemed “inconceivable” in \textit{The Moody Bible Handbook}, namely, that Christ would allow his bride to undergo tribulation.

Given the way John begins the book of Revelation, it is more inconceivable that the church would not undergo tribulation, than it does that they would not be raptured away. In Revelation 1:9 John writes, “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and testimony of Jesus.” It seems that one would be hard pressed to convince John—in exile as a “partner in the tribulation”—that the church gets a free pass out of tribulation and that “God

\textsuperscript{25} Jn. 15:18-21, 16:33, Mt. 10:16-42, 24:3-14.

\textsuperscript{26} Acts 14:22, Col. 1:24-25, Phil. 1:12-21, 3:10, 2 Tim. 3:12.

\textsuperscript{27} 1 Pt. 2:20b-21.

\textsuperscript{28} 1 Pt. 3:12-17.
will fulfill his program for the church by translating the church out of the earth before resuming His program for dealing with Israel and with the Gentiles in the period of Tribulation.”

To be certain, none of these passages of Scripture depicting the persecution of the Church directly discount the doctrine of a secret rapture. However, they do reveal a mountain of Biblical testimony undergirding Erikson’s conclusion, “Since the church has experienced tribulation through its history, it would not be surprising if the church also experiences the great tribulation.”

A third strike against the secret rapture comes from the nature of dispensationalism itself. In a brief sketch of the history of dispensationalism, Walvoord states:

Generally speaking, the pretribulational view is followed by those who consider premillenialism a system of Bible interpretation while the posttribulational and midtribulational positions characterize those who limit the area of premillenialism to eschatology.

As Walvoord admits, dispensationalism is a synthetic system, and while in many instances it serves as a useful tool in interpreting God’s redemptive work throughout history, there are other instances in which it—like other theological systems—leads its adherents to turn a blind eye to the grammatical and historical foundations of a given text. Just as mechanical systems necessitate a variety of components to ensure the viability of the whole system, so too, theological systems necessitate individual components that make the whole system work. Perhaps one reason Darby innovated and vigorously promoted the secret rapture is because it is a necessary component for the vitality of the whole dispensational system. The secret rapture, therefore, does not spawn from the text itself, but from the theological need arising from a

29 John F. Walvoord, The Rapture Question (Zondervan, 2010), 38.
30 Erickson, 1228.
31 Walvoord, The Rapture Question, 18.
If one starts with dispensational presuppositions, especially the belief that Israel is completely distinct from the church, then one will likely find the secret rapture in the text. For the rapture serves as a convenient escape hatch for the church to “get the heck out of Dodge” before the tribulation is used to bring ethnic Israel to faith prior to the glorious appearing of Christ. However, the dispensationalist system—the homestead of the rapture doctrine—should be discounted based on historical and Biblical reasons.

Dispensationalism arose in a post-Enlightenment era when the scientific method was first being brought to bear upon biblical studies in the mode of critical scholarship. Conservatives longed to maintain a straight-forward reading of the text, presumably out of a spirit of faithfulness to the Word of God. However, critical study made a fully literal hermeneutic difficult to uphold and many of the conclusions drawn by liberal scholars in this era made conservatives uneasy with the elasticity of the Biblical interpretations arriving on the scene. Dispensationalism came to the rescue for conservatives in need of some firm footing with its emphasis on a “literal” hermeneutic. Religious historian George Marsden writes, “Although not fully explainable in terms of their social causes, dispensationalism and holiness teachings were partially a response to cultural conditions.”

The dispensationalist system provided a conservative alternative to the problem arising from biblical interpretation: “If Biblical statements were taken at face value and subjected


33 Ibid.
to scientific analysis, major anomalies seemed to appear.” For example, Jesus' teaching on Jewish law in Matthew 5:17-20 seemed to conflict with that of Paul in Romans 10:4. While liberals sought a resolution for such anomalies by broadening the standards for interpreting biblical language, dispensationalists clung ever more closely to a literal reading, invoking their system to explain away any seeming inconsistencies.34

The framework of dispensationalism couldn’t have come at a better time for sincere conservatives who wanted to uphold Biblical inerrancy, but didn’t know how to respond to liberal dissections of the Bible. It allowed Christians to throw apparently contradictory statements (as in the example above) into different dispensations of God’s working in history in order to “resolve” the issue to a level of personal intellectual satisfaction. Conservatives could feel satisfied in their ability to articulate a coherent system of literal Biblical interpretation via the dispensational model in a world that was beginning to reject the authority and inspiration of the Bible.

The historical reasons behind dispensationalism cast suspicion on its validity, but the Biblical reasons against dispensationalism are even more indicting. While pages can be, and have been, written against dispensational hermeneutics, only one mortal flaw will be mentioned here: the dispensationalist understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church.

In dispensationalism, God’s plan for the salvation of ethnic Israel is distinct from his plan for the church; hence, the rapture serves as a sieve to separate the two groups in order that God may deal with each independently. However, the Biblical evidence is not in favor of such a view of the people of God.35 Rather, the church and Israel should be understood as one people, defined as those who are in a faith covenant with the Lord. As Romans 1:16 declares, salvation did come “to the Jew first” and then to Gentiles in a historical sense; however, the means of being

34 Bingaman, “Learning from Left Behind?,” 262.
35 Erickson writes, “The sharp separation of national Israel and the church is difficult to sustain on biblical grounds.” 1230.
included into people of God has always been by faith and did not change in the church age.

Moreover, the Old Testament Scriptures clearly reveal that God’s plan was always that His salvation would extend to the gentile and is not a mere afterthought to the “failed experiment” with Israel. As early as Genesis 3:15, the protoevangelion hints at the redemption that will come not to the Jews only, but to all of Eve’s offspring who live in enmity with the serpent. Further, only a few chapters later, Abraham is declared righteous by his faith and is promised that all peoples of the earth will be blessed through him. Paul picks up on the global scope of salvation by faith in Galatians 3:7-9 where he writes:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

The people of God, therefore, are not those who are born to specific family, but those who have the faith of the forefather Abraham. Israel was to be a people not marked merely with the fleshly sign of circumcision, but to be a people whose hearts were circumcised by faith in covenantal commitment to the LORD. The new covenant people of God, the church, then, is best understood as a continuation of the Israel of faith, because the means of entrance into the people of God remains unchanged. Colossians 2:11-13 contains a description of how the sign of the covenant has been altered from circumcision to baptism, but how salvation in the new covenant is by faith, just as it was in the old:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of

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36 Mt. 3:8-9 is one of many instances in the Scriptures wherein the people of God are defined not by Jewish lineage, but by faith. Here, John the Baptist preaches to the Jews saying, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able to from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”

37 Dt. 10:16
God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses . . .

The new covenant sign of baptism is viewed here as a sign of faith that replaces circumcision, thus indicating that the Church is not a second family of God, but a continuation of the Israel of faith as the family of God. Once the artificial distinction between Israel and the church advocated by dispensationalists is abolished, the secret rapture no longer becomes a systematic necessity, and, based upon the other aforementioned reasons, can be abandoned.

Though there are a handful of additional texts\(^\text{38}\) that deserve the attention of one wishing to close the case on a secret rapture, the aforementioned evidence leads to the reasonable conclusion that the rapture is a historically contrived and artificial eschatological scenario. Rather than a secret rapture, believers should expect that at the second coming of Jesus Christ, the dead in Christ will rise first, and then all who are alive will meet Jesus in the air to usher him back to earth to join him in triumph over evil, sin, and death. Whether or not this will precede a literal millennial reign or not is the source of much debate, but in either case, the evidence of Scripture stands at odds with the recently popularized notion of the secret rapture.

\(^\text{38}\) Many rapture advocates cite Matthew 24:36-51 in support of a secret rapture, however Benjamin Merkle, associate professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Theological Seminary argues “Many interpret these texts to mean that those who are taken are raptured to be with the Lord but those who are left behind will remain on earth to receive God’s judgment. It is my contention, however, that those who are left behind are the ones who are blessed whereas those who are taken are the ones who are judged by God.” Benjamin L Merkle, “Who Will Be Left Behind? Rethinking the Meaning of Matthew 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35” Westminster Theological Journal 72 no 1 (Spring 2010): 169-179, 169-170.
Bibliography


