

A Secret Rapture?

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When some Christians think about eschatology, the idea of a secret rapture is usually one of the first things that comes to mind. Yet this understanding of our Lord's return is a position held by a small vocal minority of Christians, whose ability to dominate popular Christian media and publishing gives the unfortunate perception of greater significance than really exists. Given the popularity of the dispensationalist teaching about a secret rapture as evidenced by the success of the Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' "Left Behind" series, another response is required in addition to what has already been said.

According to J. Dwight Pentecost, the pretribulation conception rests upon several essential presuppositions: (1) a "literal interpretation" of the Scriptures; (2) "The church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan"; (3) "The church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament. This present mystery age intervenes within the program of God for Israel's rejection of the Messiah at His first advent"; and (4) "This mystery program must be completed before God can resume His program with Israel and bring it to completion." This is an important admission, since the only way one could arrive at a secret pretribulation rapture is if these presuppositions are in place.

Since we have called into question all four of these presuppositions, it should now be clear that the dispensational framework is a house built on sand. The pretribulation rapture is not, contrary to the dispensationalist claim, inductively developed from the biblical text. It is based upon a selective and a priori—laden use of the biblical data. And, if fundamental assumptions are false, it is highly likely that any conclusions reached based upon them are also false.

The literalistic interpretation of the Scriptures associated with dispensationalism is highly problematic. The dawn of the messianic age and the kingdom of God does not constitute a parenthetical period in redemptive history until such a time when God is ready to deal with national Israel and finish his original plan of redemption. It is clearly prophesied in the Old Testament that God's redemptive purposes include Gentiles (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Isa. 49:6). Therefore, the church is not a "mystery" during this age because the mystical body of Jesus Christ, the church, is the fulfillment of God's eternal purposes. If the formation of Christ's church and the salvation of the Gentiles is part of God's eternal plan (cf. Eph. 1:9-11), then the presuppositions mentioned by Dr. Pentecost are no longer viable.

How the literalistic hermeneutic of the dispensationalist determines the interpretive outcome in advance can be seen when we look at those texts which treat the second coming of Christ and how dispensationalists interpret them. To make his case for a pretribulation rapture, Pentecost lists some seventeen distinctions between the rapture and the second advent, which, he says, serve as the basis for contending that there are yet two future comings of Jesus Christ." When Pentecost argues that because a distinction is made in those texts discussing the return of Christ to the earth with believers being "raptured away" and a physical manifestation of Jesus Christ, this requires two mutually exclusive events separated by a seven-year tribulation. His

conclusion, therefore, is highly suspect. The methodology itself prevents the interpreter from looking at all the data with any semblance of objectivity. Carried through in other instances, this would, for example, force us to argue that because the Bible reveals that there are three persons called God in the Scriptures, there must be three Gods. Of course, such a conclusion can only be made with-out dealing with the other important line of evidence in the Scriptures, which teaches us that God is one. But this is what dispensationalists do when looking at those texts which deal with the second advent of Jesus Christ. They downplay the importance of those texts which teach that these are different aspects of the same event.

Therefore, when the Bible speaks of Christ's second coming as one event with several elements (the catching up of believers and the bodily return of Christ), dispensationalists interpret these verses in light of an a priori distinction between the rapture and the second coming. They base this on the presupposition that the Gentile church must be removed at the start of the tribulation period. But this distinction between different aspects of the second coming in no way forces us to the conclusion that these must be two distinct events separated by the seven-year tribulation. In fact, if we look at the biblical data without dispensational presuppositions, we would never conclude that the coming of Christ consists of two separate events seven years apart, with one of them being secret.

One of the most telling criticisms is the language used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the very passage used by dispensationalists as a proof text for two comings of Jesus Christ and the secret rapture. Three times in the passage, Paul used terminology to convey the idea that Jesus Christ's return to earth will be accompanied by divine announcements which are clearly universal in nature. In verse 16, Paul mentioned that *"the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God."* The whole thrust of the three-fold announcement is that God himself will proclaim the return of Jesus Christ so loudly that the whole world will hear. Not only so, but the world will also witness the subsequent catching away of believers (v. 17). If dispensationalists are correct in saying that this coming is a secret, then only believers will hear the divine declaration. As my colleague, Rev. Ken Jones, so aptly puts it, this turns the thrice-repeated announcement of Christ's return into something akin to a cosmic dog whistle. It is another example of a text where the champions of literal interpretation cannot take the key passage literally. What is worse, if dispensationalists are correct about a secret rapture, then Jesus does not have two advents but three.

Another place where dispensational presuppositions get in the way of the clear teaching of Scripture can be seen in the specific terms used by biblical writers to describe the return of Christ. The way these terms were used excludes a dispensational understanding of the rapture. The first of these terms is *apokalypsis*, which literally means "an unveiling" and refers to the removal of those things which presently obstruct our vision of Christ. The term appears in I Corinthians 1:7 where Paul longed for Christ to be revealed; in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 when Paul spoke of Jesus being revealed on the day of judgment; and then several times in 1 Peter when Peter connected Christ's second coming to the final judgment (1:7), to blessing (1:13), and to when Christ's glory is finally manifested (4:13).

The second key term is *epiphaneia*, a word which means "appearance" or "manifestation." It is used in reference to Christ's "coming forth out of a hidden background with the rich blessings of

salvation,” as when our Lord destroys the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:8); where we are instructed to fight the good fight of faith until Christ comes back (1 Tim. 6:14), when Christ comes back in judgment (2 Tim. 4:1, 8); and then where Jesus appears as our “*glorious God and Savior*” (Titus 2:13).

A third term is *Parousia*, which literally means "presence." It points to the coming of Christ that either precedes the presence or results in the presence. In the Olivet Discourse, the term was used several times in reference to our Lord's return or coming (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37). Paul used the term in reference to Christ's return to consummate that resurrection of which he was the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:23). Paul used the term a number of times to refer to our Lord's presence when he comes (1 Thess. 2:19); to our appearance before the Lord (3:13); to the "*coming of the Lord*" (4:15); and to the judgment (5:23). In 2 Thessalonians, Paul also used the term repeatedly in reference to the second coming (2 Thess. 2:1-9), while in James, the Parousia is an object of hope (James 5:7-8). Peter used the term in reference to Christ's transfiguration (2 Peter 1:16), while he placed the word in the mouths of scoffers who say, "*Where is this coming that he promised?*" (3:4). But Peter also used the term in reference to the final judgment and cosmic renewal (3:12).

Even in this brief survey, it ought to be readily apparent that these terms raise a number of difficulties for dispensationalists. All three words were used interchangeably of both the rapture and the second coming. This means that biblical writers did not distinguish between two phases of Christ's return as dispensationalists claim. In one place, Paul used the term *parousia* to describe what pretribulationists assume to be the rapture (1 Thess. 4:15). In another, he used the same word to describe "*when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones*" (3:13), which is the bodily return of our Lord to earth, supposedly seven years after the rapture. In still another place (2 Thess. 2:8), Paul used *parousia* "to refer to the coming at which Christ shall bring the antichrist to naught—which is not supposed to happen. . . until the Second Coming."

The same thing holds true for the word *apokalypsis*. Paul used it in one place (1 Cor. 1:7) "to describe what these interpreters call the rapture: 'as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.'" In another (2 Thess. 1:7-8), "the same word is used to describe what pretribulationists call the second phase of the Second Coming: 'At the revelation [*apokalypsis*] of the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire.'"

This is also the case with the third term, *epiphaneia*. In one place, Paul used the term in regard to what dispensationalists assume to be the rapture: "*I charge you to keep the commandments without spot or blame until the appearing [epiphaneia] of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Tim. 6:13-14). While in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, the apostle "uses the same word to describe the coming of Christ at which he will overthrow the man of lawlessness: And then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus shall... bring to nought by the manifestation [*epiphaneia*] of his coming."

The problem is that this event is not supposed to happen until after the seventieth week of Daniel (the so-called "great tribulation") comes to an end. This means that there is no basis whatever for this kind of distinction pretribulationists make between two phases of Christ's return.. The dispensational theory of the secret rapture cannot be justified from the Scriptures. The Bible teaches that though there are different aspects involved, they are all part of one event—the blessed hope—when Jesus Christ will come again on the last day to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new.