

## Evaluating Premillennialism

(Part II)

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### Cornelis P. Venema

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema is Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Doctrinal Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Indiana. He is co-editor of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* and contributing editor of a column on doctrine for the monthly periodical *The Outlook*. His writings include two studies of creeds and confessions: *But For the Grace of God: an Exposition of the Canons of Dort* and *What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*. He gained his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary for work on the theology of John Calvin and has served as a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church in Ontario, California, and south Holland, Illinois. He and his wife Nancy have four children.

### ***Christ's Return and the Rapture***

No evaluation of Dispensational Premillennialism may ignore its teaching of a two-phased return of Christ, the first phase of which is commonly known as the rapture. This feature is its most widely known aspect. Popularized by such best-selling books as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the film *The Return*, and bumper stickers warning others that in the event of the rapture the vehicle will be without driver and possibly passengers — Dispensationalism has enjoyed a large following among conservative Christians, especially in North America.

The view that has predominated in Dispensationalism is known as *pre-tribulational rapturism*. As noted previously, the older classical version of Dispensationalism held that the first phase of Christ's return, his 'coming' or 'parousia', would precede a seven-year period of tribulation, and that the second phase of Christ's return, his 'revelation' or 'appearing', would introduce the millennium or one-thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth. The first phase, Christ's coming, is the rapture<sup>1</sup> of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, an event that represents Christ's coming 'for' his saints in contrast to his subsequent return (the second phase) or coming 'with' the saints. Though this view has been somewhat modified in more recent Dispensationalism, it remains far and away the most popular view among dispensationalists to this day. The views known as mid-tribulationism and

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'rapture' comes from the Latin Vulgate translation's use of *rapiemur* (*raptus*), to render the expression 'caught up'.

post-tribulationism, as the terminology suggests, differ as to the timing of the rapture, but have relatively few defenders.<sup>2</sup>

In the notes of the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, the rapture is viewed as an event that can occur at any moment.<sup>3</sup> There are no events in the biblical timetable for the future that must occur before the first phase of Christ's return can take place. Christ's return for his saints will be preceded by the resurrection of all believing saints. After the resurrection of deceased saints, all living believers will be immediately transformed. All of these saints, resurrected and transformed, will then be caught up (raptured) with Christ — whose return to earth will only be partial and for this purpose alone — and meet him in the air. Thus, the church of Jesus Christ will be raptured from the earth and taken to heaven for a period of seven years, the 'marriage feast of the Lamb', during which period great tribulation will befall the earth.

While the raptured church enjoys this period of the marriage feast, a number of events will occur upon the earth. A period of tribulation will begin, the latter half of which will be a period of 'great tribulation'. This fulfils the prophecy of Daniel 9:27. In this latter half of the period of tribulation, the Antichrist will arise, the beast out of the sea, who will impose great cruelties on the earth and pretend to be divine. During this period of great tribulation, the elect of the children of Israel and a great number of the Gentiles will be saved. The end of this period of great tribulation will witness a period of intensified opposition to the people of God. The kings of the earth, the armies of the beast and the false prophet will join forces against the people of God. However, Christ will return with his saints and destroy all of his enemies at the battle of Armageddon. Thereupon, the millennial kingdom, during which Christ will rule upon the earth, will commence.<sup>4</sup>

## I. CHRIST'S RETURN NOT A TWO-PHASED EVENT

Though we have not included in this summary the many details and variations upon this view, these should be sufficient for our purpose. Two key questions must be addressed in respect to pre-tribulation rapturism. First, does the Bible teach that Christ's return will take place in two phases, separated by an intervening period of seven years' duration? Second, does the Bible teach that the first of these phases will be the rapture envisioned by Dispensationalism?

To some extent we have already treated the first question by noting that the return of Christ is a consummating event at the end of the present age, but some of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *Basic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 125—181.

<sup>3</sup> *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on Luke 21:27, 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Titus 2:11, Revelation 19:19. See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4: pp. 367—8; and J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), pp. 202—4.

<sup>4</sup> *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on Daniel 9:24, Revelation 7:14, 11:2, 19:19.

arguments offered for the idea of a two-phased return of Christ have not yet been directly addressed.

In the earlier period of Dispensational Premillennialism, it was suggested that the New Testament uses the three common terms for the return of Christ — *parousia* (presence, coming), *apokalupsis* (revelation) and *epiphaneia* (appearance) — to distinguish the two phases of Christ's return. The first term was said to be the term for Christ's initial coming, his coming 'for' his saints at the rapture. The second and third terms were said to be used for Christ's coming at the end of the seven-year period of tribulation, his coming 'with' his saints.

This claim, however, cannot withstand scrutiny. The New Testament shows clearly that *parousia* and *apokalupsis* are used interchangeably, as are *apokalupsis* and *epiphaneia*, to refer to the one return of Christ at the end of the age. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, the Apostle Paul uses the first term, *parousia*, to describe the rapture. But in 1 Thessalonians 3:13, he uses the same term to describe the 'coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints'. According to Dispensationalism, this latter event occurs only at the revelation of Christ, seven years after the rapture. Similarly, in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, the Apostle Paul uses the term *parousia* to refer to the event when Christ will destroy the 'man of lawlessness' or Antichrist, an event which in Dispensationalism is said not to occur until the revelation at the end of the seven-year period of tribulation. Most unsettling to the dispensationalist argument is the fact that this passage uses two of the three terms for Christ's return in close proximity, as synonyms, when it speaks of how Christ will 'bring to nought' the man of lawlessness 'by the appearance of his coming'.

Moreover, both the terms *apokalupsis* and *epiphaneia* are used in the epistles of the Apostle Paul for what dispensationalists would regard as the first and second phases of Christ's return. In 1 Corinthians 1:7, *apokalupsis* is used to describe what would be called the rapture, since the believers in Corinth are said to be 'waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ'. However, in 2 Thessalonians 1:7,8, this term is used to describe what dispensationalists would regard as the 'revelation' or 'second' second coming of Christ. The same interchangeability is evident in 1 Timothy 6:14, where *epiphaneia* is used to describe the rapture, and in 2 Timothy 4:1, where it refers to Christ's coming as Judge of the living and the dead.<sup>5</sup> In its use of these terms, the New Testament offers no support for the idea that this return will occur in two distinct phases.

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<sup>5</sup> Some dispensationalists also argue that a sharp distinction is to be drawn between the 'parousia' and the 'day of the Lord', that is, the revelation of Christ after the seven-year period of tribulation. For a moderate expression of this distinction, see the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 19:19. However, in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2, these expressions are used to describe the same event — 'Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the

In arguing for a two-phased return, dispensationalists, in addition to the appeal to the use of terms, also insist that the church will not suffer the tribulation, including the great tribulation that will characterize the seven-year period between Christ's coming and his revelation. This insistence, however, cannot be sustained by appeal to the New Testament Scriptures.

In the Olivet Discourse recorded in Matthew 24, Jesus, in reply to the disciples' question, speaks of a great tribulation that will occur prior to his coming. This tribulation will be so severe that it will be shortened for the sake of the elect (verse 22). The reference in this passage to the elect indicates that believers will not be raptured before the tribulation of those days, but will experience it themselves. Dispensationalist teaching maintains that the elect in these verses can only refer to the Jews and not to the church, noting that the term 'church' is not used in this chapter. This is an argument from silence, and it is considerably weakened by the fact that the Gospels seldom use the term 'church'.<sup>6</sup> The most evident reading of this passage is to take it as a reference to tribulation that befalls the people of God, the elect (whether Jew or Gentile), before the return of Christ at the end of the age.

It is also important to observe that in this same passage dealing with the 'signs of the times', Christ describes the rapture in a way that indicates that it will not only follow the period of tribulation but also mark the close of the age. In Matthew 24:31, we read the following description of what will occur after the tribulation of those days: 'And He [the Son of Man] will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.' This description is similar to the language used in 1 Thessalonians 4: 16—17 to describe the events that will occur at the time of the rapture — the descent of the Lord, the sound of the trumpet, the gathering of the elect. It is difficult to see why these passages should be taken as descriptions of different events, as in Dispensationalism, which sees the description in Matthew 24 as the second phase of Christ's return and thus as an event distinct from the rapture. It is not difficult, however, to see why Dispensationalism is compelled to distinguish these passages: if Matthew 24:31 referred to the rapture, then that would place the rapture after the period of tribulation rather than before it.

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day of the Lord has come.' For a more complete evaluation of Dispensationalism's teaching of a two-phased return of Christ, see George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); and Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke the word 'church' is used in only three places (once in Matthew 16:18, twice in 18:17). It should also be noted that the immediate reference of these verses in Matthew 24 is the tribulation experienced at the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Although I have previously argued that the secondary and more remote reference of these verses is to a period of tribulation preceding the return of Christ at the end of the age (of which this earlier tribulation is an antitype), the obvious reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in these verses strongly militates against the dispensationalist view.

The same kind of difficulty confronts the dispensationalist when it comes to the teaching of 2 Thessalonians 2, with its description of the man of lawlessness, who will come before the day of the Lord. According to Dispensationalism, the events of this passage will occur during the period of tribulation, especially the great tribulation, between the time of the rapture and the time of Christ's revelation. However, this would undermine the point of the Apostle Paul's teaching in this passage. The point of this passage is to warn the believers in Thessalonica not to be deceived into thinking that the coming of the Lord has already occurred (verse 2), because the man of lawlessness and the great apostasy must occur first. This passage, which is written primarily to Gentile Christian believers — and not Jewish believers, as dispensationalists commonly teach<sup>7</sup> — speaks of a number of events that will precede the coming of Christ and the day of the Lord. These events include the period of tribulation and the Antichrist that Dispensationalism places after the rapture, but which in this passage will occur before the rapture or the coming of the Lord to grant relief to his people or church.

Though it would be possible to explore these passages further, it should be evident that the problem facing Dispensationalism at this point is the same problem confronted in our previous discussion of the return of Christ as a consummating event at the end of the age. Unless the Bible reader brings to many of these passages a pre-conceived doctrine of two distinct phases in the return of Christ, there is little prospect that such a teaching would be discovered or proven from them. The biblical teaching is that Christ will return after the period of tribulation to grant his church relief and his enemies eternal destruction (*2 Thess.* 1). These consequences of Christ's return coincide and therefore do not permit the teaching of two distinct phases in the return of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

## II. THE RAPTURE OF 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13—18

In order to complete this consideration of pre-tribulational rapturism, we have to give some attention to 1 Thessalonians 4:13—18, which is the one passage in Scripture that directly describes the rapture. A careful study of this passage will show, however, that it does not teach the pre-tribulational rapture advocated by Dispensationalism.

The first observation to be made about this passage is that it is addressed to a pressing question in the church at Thessalonica. Among these believers, some were fearful that those saints who had previously 'fallen asleep' in Jesus would not take part in the joy and blessedness accompanying the coming of Christ. For this reason, the Apostle Paul begins this passage by saying:

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<sup>7</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, note on 2 Thessalonians 2:3.

<sup>8</sup> It is instructive to observe that two passages in the book of Revelation (2:22; 7:9—17) refer to 'great tribulation' in reference to circumstances that are, from the point of view of the present, in the past. These passages illustrate how the dispensationalist restriction of tribulation, especially great tribulation, to the seven-year period between the first and second phases of Christ's return, does not fit the biblical pattern of teaching regarding the future.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the Word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.

These words indicate how strong their fears were and how much the apostle wanted to assure them by an answer from the Word of the Lord himself.

After acknowledging their concern that the departed saints might be left out of the joy of Christ's coming, the apostle goes on to answer it more directly with an account of the coming rapture, in which believers will be caught up together with Christ in the air:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

What do these words mean? According to Dispensationalism they teach that at the parousia, or first coming of Christ, the first resurrection will occur, which will be a resurrection of all believing saints, and of them alone. They, together with the glorified saints who are living at the time of the Lord's coming, will be raptured or 'caught up with' the Lord in the air in order to return with him to heaven whence he came. Resurrected and glorified, they will then be with Christ in heaven for the seven-year period of tribulation, at the end of which they will return with him to reign upon the earth for the one-thousand-year period of the kingdom on earth (the millennium).<sup>9</sup>

But is this what is taught in this passage? Four observations suggest that this interpretation is a classic example of finding something in a text that is not there but has been imported into it, and subsequently is extracted from it.

First, when in verse 16 we read that the dead in Christ will rise first, this refers to the fact that those saints who have fallen asleep in Jesus will be raised before the living saints are caught up with them and the Lord at his coming. They will, in other words, enjoy a privilege — being raised first — not granted to those who are alive at Christ's coming. The dispensationalist teaching that this is the first resurrection, the resurrection of believing saints at the time of the rapture, in distinction from the second resurrection, the resurrection of the unbelieving at the close of the millennium more than one thousand years later, is not found in the text, nor is it the point of the apostle's use of the term 'first'.

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<sup>9</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and Revelation 19:19.

Second, this passage speaks of all believers being caught up together to meet the Lord in the air. Dispensationalists maintain that this refers to a meeting in the air which leads to a return of Christ and all the saints with him to heaven whence he came. Returning to heaven, the Lord Jesus and his saints will remain there for seven years. But nothing of this is stated in the text. The text actually speaks of a being caught up together in the air 'unto a meeting' between the Lord and the resurrected saints and the remaining saints who were alive at his coming.<sup>10</sup> The word used in this text for 'meeting' typically means a meeting between a visiting dignitary and representatives of the city or village being visited. Such a meeting would occur outside of the city or village, and the visitor and welcoming party would return to the city.<sup>11</sup> This word is used twice elsewhere in the New Testament (*Acts* 28:15, *Matt.* 25:6), in both cases referring to a meeting which takes place before the parties return to the place being visited. The meaning and use of this term suggests that in the case of the rapture, the saints who meet the Lord in the air will thereupon return with him, not to heaven, but to the earth to which he comes at his parousia.

Third, the result of this rapture, or being caught up with the Lord in the air, is said to be the blessedness of being always with the Lord. This language best fits the circumstance of the final state in which believers, now resurrected and glorified, will dwell forever in the most intimate and unbroken fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Being always with the Lord is not to be limited to a period of seven years in heaven or even one thousand years upon the earth. Rather, the simplest reading of this passage is to take it to be a description of the final state.

And fourth, several features of the description of this rapture do not fit well with the dispensationalist position. The coming of the Lord, as described in these verses, is a visible, public event, one which is signaled by the descent of Christ from heaven 'with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God'. However, in Dispensationalism, the first return of Christ is said to be a secret rapture, in which believers will be suddenly snatched away without notice. This teaching is based partly upon an appeal to Matthew 24:40—41 which is seen to be a parallel description of the rapture, though we have already noted that that passage does not teach a pre-tribulational rapture. But the description in 1 Thessalonians 4:16—18 corresponds to the descriptions of Christ's revelation from heaven at the end of the age in other passages (cf. *1 Cor.* 15:23—24, *2 Thess.* 2:8). These passages speak of Christ's return as a public event that will bring the present period of history to a close.

Thus, the teaching of a pre-tribulational rapture as understood within the framework of Dispensationalism is not founded upon the teaching of any biblical passage. Nor is it a teaching that can withstand careful scrutiny, particularly when measured against the

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<sup>10</sup> The words expressed in most translations, 'to meet', actually translate two Greek words, *eis apanteesin*, literally, 'unto meeting'.

<sup>11</sup> See E. Peterson, *apanteesis*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), I: pp. 380—81.

general teaching of the Scriptures regarding the return of Christ at the end of the age. The Bible teaches neither that believers will be exempted from present or future tribulation at the end of the present age, nor that the rapture will be the event described by Dispensationalism. The one passage that speaks of the event commonly known as the rapture scarcely supports the view that enjoys such popularity among dispensationalists.

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