

A Critique of Pretribulationism

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Pretribulationism is a system of doctrine which teaches that there will be a future coming of Jesus Christ, at a moment in history prior to the space-time happenings associated with what Holy Scripture calls "the great tribulation" (Revelation 7:14). I know the doctrine well. I once believed that it was Holy Spirit inspired doctrine. I no longer hold such a persuasion.

What on earth caused me to change my mind? Why do I now consider such a doctrine to be erroneous? As ridiculous as it might seem, the answer is shockingly simple: Like the noble Bereans, I searched the Scriptures for myself, and to my great dismay could not find it (Acts 17:11). Yes, I had been taught it, and had been teaching it, but to my chagrin, I discovered that it was a doctrine without one single explicit scriptural support text.

Need such a phenomenon cause surprise? Down throughout history, "the tradition of the elders"—doctrines which originate in the minds of men—have insidiously tended to eclipse the teachings of the Word of God (Mark 7:1-13). Mention might be made of such doctrines as "Purgatory" and "Papal Infallibility." There is not one jot or tittle anywhere in Holy Scripture which would explicitly sanction such notions; yet, millions of professing Christians accept them without reservations. Likewise with pretribulationism!

Possibly, most pretribulationists will be scandalized by my words. But they can soon set the record straight. All they would have to do is produce one single reference from Scripture which declares that the Second Coming (or "a" second coming) of Jesus Christ will take place before the Great Tribulation. I say again, astonishing as it might seem, there is not one single passage anywhere in the entire Bible which teaches such a doctrine.

On occasion, I have found that a few pretribulationists will acknowledge this fact. However, to offset the consequences of such an admission, they usually counter with what they sincerely think is a convincing parallel argument. In their attempted rebuttal, they allow their minds to dismiss the whole point because, as they contend, orthodox Christianity believes in the doctrine of the Trinity, yet there is not one single passage anywhere in Scripture which explicitly teaches it. They apparently fail to realize that the controversy is not about an explicit word, be it "pretribulationism" or "Trinity," but about doctrines represented by words. Anyhow, the doctrine of the Trinity is explicitly taught in passages such as Matthew 28:29 and 2 Corinthians 13:14. The grammatical form in both passages distinguishes between three personal entities, yet implies clearly that all three are equal. Would that those believing in a pretribulational coming of Christ could find passages half as clear as those which teach the doctrine of the Trinity.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that the Bible does indeed teach a Second Coming of Christ. Over and over, in many verses, it is set forth in the clearest of terms (Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, et passim). However, nowhere is it stated that this Coming will take place before the Tribulation, but—just for the record—in unmistakable syntax, it is stated that "the Son of man" will come again "AFTER" the Tribulation (Matthew 24:29-31). To the best of my knowledge, no pretribulationist questions the fact of a posttribulational coming.

If then there is no explicit Scripture for the pretribulational doctrine, from whence did it come? This is a disturbing question. No one has yet found evidence of the doctrine prior to the nineteenth century. Historical research has provided evidence that its earliest forms broke ground through the influence of Edward Irving, founder of the Catholic Apostolic Church. Later they were pruned by the productive pen of John Nelson Darby. But, and this is the disturbing point, apparently the original seed was planted in the midst

of a "Pentecostal-like" manifestation; through the medium of an extra-biblical "revelation."

Gradually, since the middle of the nineteenth century, by means of inference and deduction, all manner of facile argument has been used to reinforce what is nothing more than a specious theory, that, sad to say, causes lamentable division among many Christians. Why, oh why do Pretribulationist people insist on exalting such a theory to the level of cardinal importance, and continue to make it a requisite for cooperative fellowship in the cause of the Gospel?

Beyond the all-important fact that the theory does not have one single explicit passage of Scripture to support it, and that it made its debut in questionable circumstances during the last century, there are also the awkward necessary deductions it imposes upon the simple straightforward interpretation of Scripture. For example:

1. It contends for a Second Coming before the Second Coming. Regardless of the words which might be used, if the Lord Jesus Christ comes again before the Tribulation period, and then three and a half, or seven years later He comes yet again, the end result is two separate "second" comings. How well I remember the serious manner in which ministerial colleagues, who held to both the Pretribulation and the Post-tribulation comings, used to argue over which of the "two" comings was intended in passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:7, or Colossians 3:1-4. There is not a scintilla of evidence that believers in the apostolic age were ever plagued by such disconcerting problems.

2. It predicates a last trumpet before the last trumpet. Again, it makes little difference how much double talk is heard, the fact remains that the "last trumpet" of 1 Corinthians 15:52 can hardly be the "last" if it will be followed by seven more associated with the end of the Great Tribulation (cf. Revelation 8,9 and 11:15-18). Let it be noted how when the last of the seven trumpets does blow that it synchronizes with the beginning of Christ's

reign, the coming of God's wrath, the time of the resurrection, and the giving of rewards, cf. Revelation 11:15-18. How "coincidental" that the Pretribulation "last" trumpet involves essentially the same things. cf. 1 Corinthians 15:51-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 5:2, 9; 1 Timothy 6:14,15; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8.

3. It postulates a resurrection of the saints before the first resurrection. If the resurrection associated with the coming of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 precedes the first resurrection associated with the coming of Christ in Revelation 20:6, then there must be a "first" resurrection before the first resurrection. Such verbal fancy footwork tends to make mockery of plainness of language.

How insidiously powerful are human theories which can take the clear biblical teaching that there are two future resurrections—one before the kingdom reign of Christ and one after—and categorically declare, "No, there are three, for there is also one before the Tribulation period." Lamentably, it is so easy to ignore problems when a theory becomes popular. In the words of the common adage: "Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up!"

Not only does the pretribulation theory tend to make mockery of plain words; thus making a travesty of Divine truth, but it also finds itself embarrassed by the clear implications of passages which deal directly with the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. A consideration of Matthew 24:29-31; Joel 2:30, 31; Acts 2:19, 20 and Revelation 6:12-17 reveals a consistent chronological outline: Tribulation, Heavenly Signs, and then the Day of the Lord. The testimony of Holy Scripture is clear. The Day of the Lord is not tribulation for the saints, but a day of wrath for the unsaved. In that day the godly are delivered and the ungodly destroyed (cf. Isaiah 2:11-19; 13:6-11; 26:19-21; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 2; Zephaniah 1:14-2:3; Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:2-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10; 2:1-10, et passim).

A comparison of 1 Thessalonians 1:10 with Revelation 11:18 suggests that Christians are delivered from the wrath of God at the blowing of the seventh trumpet. A straightforward exegesis of the first two chapters of 2 Thessalonians exposes the nebulous nature of pretribulationism. In the first chapter the "rest" for believers, and the "retribution" for unbelievers are "recompensed" at the time of the "revelation" of the Lord Jesus.

". . . from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

Also in the second chapter, the theme of both deliverance and destruction in connection with the Day of the Lord is repeated (cf. 2:1.8-12). Then, in words which only preconceptions could distort, Paul wrote that two interrelated happenings would precede that day: (1) the apostasy; and (2) the revelation of the man of sin. If believers are to be gathered unto the Lord Jesus Christ in that day, then what else can be concluded but that they will be present to witness the two events which precede it. In the words of Peter Beyerhaus,

"The widespread teaching of a rapture that dodges this serious reality (i.e. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12) must be refuted as a dangerous distortion of New Testament eschatology." Distortion and difficulty must sooner or later result from the imposition of human theories upon Holy Scripture. The whole idea of two separate and distinct future comings being taught to those first century Christians creates an incredible set of conditions. Which of the two was held to be the blessed hope? Did Paul teach one and Peter teach the other? Were the early believers divided into two separate groups: Pre and Post? The implications of such an awkward idea make nonsense out of the tenor

of Biblical eschatology. Surely, the doctrine of Scripture is that the hope of all believers is "The appearing epiphaneia of the glory of the great God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Jehovah, the Saviour God, cf. Isaiah 25:9; Revelation 11:17,18; 15:3,4)

It is this APPEARING which brings the man of sin to destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:8). It is the one event which closes the service of believers in this present dispensation (1 Timothy 6:14). It synchronizes with the judgment of the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1). It is set forth as an anticipatory object of affection (2 Timothy 4:8; Colossians 3:1-4). And when it does take place, Christians will experience an "atomic" change — the redemption of their bodies — and be publicly manifested in glory as "full-standing" sons of God (Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 35-37; 1 John 3:2). At that time, they will enter into complete rest and abundance of joy (2 Thessalonians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7,13; 5:4). And best of all, this APPEARING shall show "who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15).

The FIRST coming of Jesus Christ was associated with His sufferings. His SECOND coming (not His "THIRD") will highlight His glory (1 Peter 1:5-13). There are many facets to this yet future coming, but the consistent testimony of Holy Scripture is that it is one great event which brings this present age to its conclusion. Pretribulationism disrupts this consistency. It unwittingly tortures and twists Scripture until confessions are made which were never contained therein. In the words of Nathaniel West, "It aggravates. It is built on a postulate, vicious in logic, violent in exegesis, contrary to experience, repudiated by the early Church, contradicted by the testimony of eighteen hundred years, rejected by all the three schools of interpretation, and condemned by all the standard scholars of every age. It is an assumption, a petitio, a circulus probandi, a non-sequitor. Kelly himself calls it an 'assumption.' It assumes what it professes to prove, and is refuted by every page of the Word of God. And yet, it offers itself as a matter of faith to thousands of the best and noblest Christian men and

women, intelligent, devout, earnest, evangelical, brave and faithful, who, without a thorough examination, have received it as true!"

No doubt, for the sincere pretribulationist, these words of West will not be easy to take. But, they cannot be dismissed as being a baseless brow-beating. Let the Berean spirit prevail. Let every reference in Holy Scripture to the Second Coming be studied. Let the contexts be considered carefully. Let one simple question be the rule. Is there any statement anywhere in Scripture which declares that Jesus Christ will return before the Tribulation? Human systems of theology, or ecclesiastical creeds must not be consulted. There is only one valid court of appeal; only one Divine authoritative standard: "What saith the scripture?" This, and this alone, is the touchstone for the doctrinal formulations that govern the fellowship of faith. If this be sincerely accepted—no mere lip service—then, most assuredly, Pretribulationism will never be permitted a place in such formulations. God grant that it might be so. Amen.