

The Rapture: Truth or Speculation?

Dennis Bratcher¹

With the recent popularity of the *Left Behind* series of books and films, there has been a lot of renewed speculation about "end times" prophecies and the timing of what is popularly termed "the rapture." This is the idea that Jesus will return to the earth and secretly take ("rapture") all Christians while leaving the rest of humanity to suffer through a long period of turmoil in which evil will prevail in the world (called "the Great Tribulation").

But serious students of Scripture have continued to question whether such speculation is warranted from the biblical evidence. Many have questioned what alternatives there might be to such widespread popular belief in a rapture of the church.

As far as alternative views to the popular concept of the rapture, there aren't many. At least, not many that are credible from the perspective of Scripture. The simple, and biblical, answer to the question of end time events and their sequence is: **we do not know**. That is not very satisfying for many who need to have something specific to believe about everything or who think that having all the correct beliefs is the only way to be righteous. But I would contend that if we are going to stick to Scripture as closely as we Protestants claim to want to do, we need to admit that we really do not know a lot of things. We need to come to terms with the fact that there are a great many things that we would like to know for which Scripture does not provide answers. Rather than trying to create our own truth from speculation, "we do not know" is probably the best place to leave it.

The "Agreed Statement of Belief" of the Church of the Nazarene, for example, simply says, "¶ 26.8 That our Lord will return, the dead will be raised, and the final judgment will take place." It is important to note that the concise statement of the "Agreed Statement of Belief" affirms a theology, not a description of events. It affirms the Second Coming, which is a way (like the First Coming) to say that God will not forever leave this world the way it is. It also affirms the resurrection, which is the primary statement of human hope in all of Scripture. And it affirms the judgment, which is a way to affirm the idea of human responsibility and accountability for actions. When all is said and done, what more do we need?

¹ <http://www.crive.org/rapture.html>

Beyond using the language of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the entire Article of Faith of the Church of the Nazarene on the "Second Coming" provides no further detail:

19. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will come again; that we who are alive at His coming shall not precede them that are asleep in Christ Jesus; but that, if we are abiding in Him, we shall be caught up with the risen saints to meet the Lord in the air, so that we shall ever be with the Lord.

This may imply what is popularly viewed as the "rapture," although it totally avoids the debates about the precise sequence of events that have dominated this topic in the United States since the millennium and Adventist movements of the mid to late 1800s. It could be read equally as a theological statement rather than a precise sequence of events, which is undoubtedly how it was intended. Certainly the biblical references can be read that way. In other words, this is a matter of biblical interpretation, with those who have developed a detailed plan of the rapture making large assumptions about the meaning of certain passages.

There is nothing in the Bible that specifically requires what is popularly called the "rapture." As the heading of this Article of Faith says clearly, it is a statement about the **Second Coming**, not about the rapture. The Second Coming is different than what is commonly meant by the "rapture" in places like the *Left Behind* movies. That concept of a "rapture" is usually a so-called "secret" rapture, in which only Christians are taken while non-Christians and apostates are "left behind" to suffer the torments of the tribulation.

The traditional debates surrounding the ends times are whether the final establishment of God's Kingdom will be before (pre-millennialism) or after (post-millennialism) the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth (the millennium, Rev 20:1-10). Pre-millennialism takes two forms that debate whether the Second Coming will come before (pre-tribulation pre-millennialism or dispensationalism) or after (post-tribulation pre-millennialism or historic millennialism) a period of tribulation. Most popular beliefs in evangelical Christianity, such as the *Left Behind* series, are of the dispensationalist variety (pre-trib pre-mil) in which the Second Coming is divided into two events, a rapture of the saints, often called a "secret rapture" because the saints will be taken instantly without a revelation of Jesus, and a later public revelation of Jesus at the end of the tribulation.

As is clear in the Article of Faith, the Church of the Nazarene takes no position on either the millennium or the rapture in dispensationalist or pre-millennial terms. It does not define the nature of the Second Coming, only that it will occur using the biblical metaphors from 1 Thessalonians. Except for some

historical anomalies, this has been the position of the Church almost from its beginning.

However, in a much more general sense and totally apart from the idea of a "secret" rapture (which is nowhere to be found in Scripture), the idea of a "rapture" can be connected with the Second Coming, but only in a very derived way. In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 Paul describes the Second Coming not only in terms of the resurrection of the dead, but also that those alive will be "caught up" with those resurrected to meet the returned Christ in the air. In early Latin translations (the Vulgate) the Greek word for "caught up" in this verse was translated by the Latin *rapiemur*, from which we get the term "rapture." But from a single word used in a Latin translation, and the ambiguous concept of "caught up," to extrapolate the detailed sequence of events that are often promoted in movies and by prophecy experts is to force the biblical text to say far more than it does or can.

It is important to know that the term "rapture", and most of the popular ideas associated with it, arose out of the dispensational and millenarian (Adventist) movements of the mid to latter 19th century. That suggests that the idea of a "rapture," especially the idea of a "secret" rapture, is far more historically and culturally conditioned than it is a biblical or theological truth. The same is true for the entire dispensational and Adventist theology, as well as some of the more unorthodox spin-offs (e.g., H. W. Armstrong's original World Wide Church of God). Both the disillusionment of World War I and the Cold War of the 40s-70s, as well as the Vietnam War, allowed the apocalyptic view of history that dominates dispensational and millenarian theology to flourish. It also fit well with some aspects of revivalism (scare 'em into heaven) as well as the rise of fundamentalism in the years following World War I.

The passages given in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene concerning the Second Coming, which comprise most of what Scripture has to say in any direct way about it, give a wide array of perspectives. A brief survey of those passages will reveal how little information there really is about the event. And most of those passages actually have other issues in mind than even dealing directly with the Second Coming, let alone trying to provide a detailed sequence of events.

Matthew 25:31-46 is an apocalyptic section, a specific genre or kind of literature that uses "end of the world" language. It was a popular type of literature even in the two centuries before Christ as the Jews were under Greek and then Roman occupation. But most scholars understand that this language is poetic and metaphorical (as in Revelation) used to make theological statements, not as a "roadmap" of the end of the world.

John 14:1-3 has nothing of the rapture, but only speaks of the Second Coming. And here it is thoroughly theological with Christ as the "Way."

Acts 1:9-11 gives the account of Jesus' Ascension with a statement of the Second Coming. Most have focused on "in the same way" to prove a rapture. But it is not at all clear from the text that the reference is to a physical and visible descent.

Philippians 3:20-21 is only indirectly about the Second Coming, emphasizing the transformation of human beings. It has nothing about a rapture.

First Thessalonians 4:13-18 is apparently the most graphic description of the Second Coming, and provides most of the imagery associated with the idea of the rapture. But a careful reading of this passage in context will reveal that Paul is answering questions about what would happen to those who have already died at the Second Coming. This comes from a time when most Christians believed that the Second Coming would be shortly after Jesus' Ascension. Paul's whole focus in these verses is not on describing the physical nature of the rapture, but is on the issue of those who have already died and their relationship to the Second Coming. To take all of this as a literal description of the nature of the Second Coming without placing it within that primary contextual concern easily leads to distortion. Paul's whole point here is still an emphasis on the Second Coming. Whether people are dead or alive will make no difference. That is his point.

Titus 2:11-14 is only incidentally about the Second Coming, with no hint of a rapture. Likewise Hebrews 9:26-28 has no hint of a rapture and only incidentally refers to a judgment.

Second Peter 3:3-15 provides another apparently detailed account of the Second Coming. But again, we need to keep in mind that the primary concern in context is the discouragement among the early Christians over the delay of the Second Coming (probably 60 years or so by then). This passage reverts to the rather stereotyped apocalyptic language that serves to emphasize the certainty of the Second Coming in the midst of doubts. The very fact that it picks up the Old Testament concept of the "Day of the Lord" says that the language here is archaic and metaphorical, drawing on ancient concepts to emphasize the stability of God's purposes as well as human accountability (see The Day of the Lord). Again, to assume that this language can only be read as a literal description of a rapture is to misunderstand the nature of the material here.

Finally, both Revelation 1:7-8 and 22:7-20 also provide rather graphic apocalyptic imagery for the Second Coming. However, a careful reading of Revelation will reveal that most of the imagery in the book is intended to make theological statements, not to portray literal scenes or actions. The problem in interpretation is what criteria to use to determine that one passage should be taken literally yet another passage is only imagery. It is not adequate

interpretation to assume that fantastic beasts are only symbolic imagery, yet Jesus coming in clouds must be taken as a literal description.

There are other biblical passages that are popularly used to support the idea of a rapture. For example, is one most commonly assumed in popular imagination to describe a rapture:

24:37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 24:38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 24:39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 24:40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 24:41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 24:42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 24:43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 24:44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Yet the passage itself is not really about a rapture. Once again the focus is on the Second Coming (Gk, *parousia*, "coming," vv. 3, 39; also v. 27) without any necessary connection to the idea of a rapture. The emphasis of the passage using the illustration of Noah is on the preoccupation of people with their own lives and pleasures apart from God. The Noah illustration carries with it overtones of judgment, that the people who are oblivious to their responsibility to God will be caught unaware when God requires accountability. The passage concludes with an appeal to live faithfully in the present with an eye toward that accountability (24:46 ff).

In rapture theology, those who are "taken" are assumed to be the Christians while those who are "left behind," presumably to suffer the pains of the tribulation, are the sinners. Yet this identification is nowhere made in this passage. In the Noah story those who were "taken" by the flood ("swept . . . away," v. 39), used here symbolically for the judgment of God, were the sinners while the righteous Noah and his family were those who were "left behind." Yet popular rapture theology rather deftly inverts what this passage says in order to fit it with a doctrine pieced together from isolated verses all over the Bible.

Unless we start with the idea of a rapture and use it as a lens through which to read this passage, there is really nothing in this passage to teach a rapture. It remains a strong condemnation of indifference and preoccupation with self-interest in light of the promised Second Coming of Christ that will bring judgment on sinners. But that does not require a rapture.

Along the same line, Jirair Tashjian notes (The Second Coming):

. . . in Matthew 13:41-43, which is an interpretation of the parable of the Wheat and Weeds, the focus is on the culmination of the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus says, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." If there is going to be a rapture, it is the evildoers who are "raptured" and thrown into the furnace of fire!

All this says that the biblical references that are most used to support a rapture do not clearly support the idea at all. They all firmly support a Second Coming (whatever form that might take), a Resurrection, and a Judgment, all without giving any solid details about any of them.

Is it possible that the biblical writers did not know any more about the details than we do? They clearly knew the theological truth about these three elements that also appear in the "Agreed Statement of Belief" to which I referred earlier, and clearly communicated them in various ways and places. But they may not have known the details. Maybe that is why there is no clear picture of the details in Scripture, which is what fuels the debates. For the biblical writers to know all the details would require a particular view of the nature of Scripture and revelation that is far more in line with modern fundamentalism than with a Wesleyan view of plenary inspiration that is primarily "soteriological" (concerning our salvation: "all things necessary to our salvation").

Because of the perversions of most modern end-times speculations, especially that of the dispensationalists in which "rapture" means something very specific, I have found it to be more helpful to stick to the concept of a Second Coming, of which the *Manual* statement is a good example, and avoid the term "rapture" and the debates about end-time details that this idea necessarily provokes.

I think we would have our hands full if we understood from Scripture how to live today, let alone trying to figure out what will happen in the end times from virtually non-existent evidence. I think Jesus made that point quite well in Matthew 6:33-34: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. . . do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

So, again, the simple, and biblical, answer is, we do not know. We **do** know "That our Lord will return, the dead will be raised, and the final judgment will take place." I'm perfectly happy with that.

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