

THE CHURCH AND THE TRIBULATION: A REVIEW

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Though posttribulationalism has many advocates, it has not had many published scholarly defenses. In 1956 George E. Ladd published *The Blessed Hope*; in 1962 *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* by J. Barton Payne appeared; and the book under review, *The Church and the Tribulation* by Robert H. Gundry, was released late in 1973. Dr. Ladd's book was popularly slanted; the thesis of Dr. Payne's was never widely accepted (and is severely criticized by Dr. Gundry in an addendum); ^{while} and the book under review by the chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at Westmont College attempts to be more exegetically based.

The competence of the author is unquestioned. Having been reared and widely read in the pretribulational view, he presents it accurately though he occasionally succumbs to the temptation to argue overmuch details not widely held by pretribulationalists. He is, of course, entirely capable of doing accurate exegesis.

This exegetical approach of the book tends to make it more like a maze than a guide. The discussion is overly intricate and will be difficult ^{for} many readers to analyze. Caught in this maze, some may be content to assume that they have been persuaded of the validity of posttribulationalism rather than endeavoring to cut through to the heart of the arguments to test their accuracy. In other words, in reading this book one could easily become so overwhelmed by details that he could easily get himself into a position whereby he is unable to discern the validity of the conclusions.

The thesis of the book is threefold; "(1) direct, unquestioned statements of Scripture that Jesus Christ will return after the tribulation and that the first resurrection will occur after the tribulation, coupled with the absence of statements placing similar events before the tribulation, make it natural to place the rapture of the Church after the tribulation; (2) the theological and exegetical grounds for pretribulationalism rest on insufficient evidence, non sequitur reasoning, and faulty exegesis; (3) positive indications of a posttribulational rapture arise out of a proper exegesis of relevant Scripture passages and derive support from the history of the doctrine" (p. 10). We shall examine these in reverse order.

It is acknowledged by pretribulationalists that a detailed theology of pretribulationalism is not found in the Fathers, yet it is not conceded by all posttribulationalists that imminence was not in the teachings of the early church (p. 180). In arguing against imminence Dr. Gundry asserts that "the early Christians were not so devoid of common sense as to believe that Christ might come at any moment and at the same time believe that they must first experience the tribulation" (pp. 179-80). Yet in another place he states that "an expectant attitude toward the Lord's return does not contradict a posttribulational belief in necessarily preceding events" (p. 29). He thus denies imminency (p. 33) while allowing for it (and renaming it "expectancy") by suggesting that the fact that since the days of the tribulation will be shortened "no one will be able to calculate the end of the tribulation with certainty" (p. 42). The author's conclusion is that pretribulationalism did not become known and widely held until the mid-nineteenth century (he makes no allowance for development in the understanding of doctrine). This is generally true, but the author's inference that since the historical evidence confirms posttribulationalism, pretribulationalism exegesis is faulty, does not follow. By the same logic baptismal regeneration would be established as true since the proponents consider their opponents' exegesis faulty and historical evidence can be cited to support that error.

Much more important is the second aspect of the thesis. Does pretribulationalism rest on insufficient evidence, non sequitur reasoning, and faulty exegesis? We shall confine our discussion to two of the most important pretribulational arguments: the relation of I Thessalonians 4:13-18 to 5:1-10 and the meaning of the promise in Revelation 3:10.

The thrust of Dr. Gundry's attack on the pretribulational interpretation of I Thessalonians 4 and 5 is twofold: the ease with which Paul moves from a discussion of the rapture in chapter 4 to the discussion of the Parousia in 5 demonstrates that he is talking about events that occur at the same time and not events separated by seven years. This is enforced by the use of de in 5:1 which "contains a mixture of a continuative sense and a slightly adversative sense" (p. 105). Secondly, the day of the Lord does not begin, according to the author, until the second coming; hence the rapture is posttribulational. Both of these contentions (the continuance of the same thought in chapter 5 and the question of the beginning of the day of the Lord) rest on exegetical considerations and thus furnish good tests of the validity of pretribulational versus posttribulational exegesis.

If 5:1-10 is a contrasting subject from that which has been discussed in 4:13-18, then a pretribulation viewpoint is much more valid than a posttribulational one. If there is "close connection with the foregoing thought" (p. 105), then the posttribulational view seems more justified. The exegetical basis on which the decision is to be made in favor of posttribulationalism is, according to Dr. Gundry, the "slightly adversative" sense of de in 5:1. While it is quite true that in the use of de a contrast is often "scarcely discernible," it is equally true that sometimes it is used "to emphasize a contrast."¹

¹ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 170.

Are we then left in an exegetical stalemate? By no means. Good exegesis will not fail to notice that Paul writes in 5:1 peri de and that he uses that phrase elsewhere in his writings to denote a new and contrasting subject (see I Cor. 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12 and, in the section under discussion, I Thess. 4:9 and 13). So while the posttribulational contention that the same subject is being discussed in 4:13-18 and 5:1-10 might be supported by the use of de alone, it is completely nullified by the use of peri de, and the pretribulational use of the passage is thereby strongly supported exegetically. It would appear that it is not pretribulational exegesis that is faulty.

The second question raised by posttribulationism from this section is that of the beginning of the day of the Lord. Dr. Gundry contends that that day does not include the tribulation period at all; therefore, acknowledging that the rapture does precede the day of the Lord, he concludes that it is posttribulational. Isaiah describes the day of the Lord as that time when men shall go into the caves and the rocks and holes of the earth (2:12, 19). This includes the same event depicted under the sixth seal judgment as well as other judgments of the tribulation period. Dr. Gundry feels, however, that since he has demonstrated elsewhere that the sixth seal brings us to the end of the tribulation there is no support for pretribulationalism in this reference from Isaiah. However, he seems not to be quite certain of this, for he wrestles with the problem of how then can people be saying peace and safety (I Thess. 5:2-3) at the coming of the day of the Lord if, in fact, that day does not begin until the second advent of Christ. He offers the suggestion that "perhaps just before Armageddon there will be a lull, a seeming end of world upheavals,

which will excite men's hopes for the peace which has so long eluded them . . ." (p. 92). But he has already diagrammed his outline of the Revelation (p. 75) as placing the bowl judgments of Revelation 16 between the fifth and seventh seals. Those bowl judgments hardly describe a "lull" which will cause men to think they are in peace and safety. If, as Dr. Gundry admits, the sixth seal is pre-Parousia, then the beginning of the day of the Lord is also. The cry of peace and safety at the beginning of that day requires that that day begin before the intense judgments of the tribulation days. It is not the pretribulational view of the beginning of the day of the Lord that rests on insufficient evidence.

The promise of Revelation 3:10 is given extended discussion (pp. 53-61). The conclusion is that the phrase tereo ek tes horas means emergence from within the hour or protection issuing in emission. Simply stated, this means that the church will go through the tribulation and emerge from it at its close at the Second Coming, but will be kept in the meantime from the testing of that time. This conclusion is arrived at by examining other possible meanings of ek and choosing "out from within" as the correct one here; by stating that tereo means "guard"; and that thus the phrase means a protection issuing in emission. Again the temptation to dismember a phrase has caught the author in an exegetical fault. For those for whom the almost tedious discussion of various shades of meaning of these and related words is unhelpful, if not meaningless, they should simply look up tereo ek in the lexicon where the specific use in Revelation 3:10 is said to mean "protect someone from someone or something".²

2 Ibid., p. 822.

(P) The "something" from which believers are promised protection is the "hour" of worldwide trial which is coming. Apparently recognizing the force of the total phrase ("kept from the hour") the author suggests two ways to "undercut the stress on the term 'hour'" (p. 59). One is to make the usual distinction between the events of the tribulation years and the time itself. The believer, we are told, will be present during the time but will be delivered from the experiences of that time and in this way he is kept from the hour. The other suggestion is that the hour of testing is not the entire seventieth week of Daniel (which the author considers to be yet future) but only the very last crisis at the close of the tribulation. This is consistent with his view of the day of the Lord, but no outline

of the sequence of judgments of the Revelation can confine the "hour of testing which shall come upon the whole earth" to the "last crisis." It does not seem that pretribulational exegesis is the one guilty of non sequitur.

The first part of the thesis is that "direct, unquestioned statements of Scripture that Jesus Christ will return after the tribulation and that the first resurrection will occur after the tribulation, coupled with the absence of statements placing similar events before the tribulation, make it natural to place the rapture of the Church after the tribulation." One example given of such a "direct" statement is the first harvest of Revelation 14:1-16 which "is best taken as symbolic of the rapture" (p. 83)! Other such "direct" statements are found in "chronological data in passages concerning the resurrection" (p. 151). Another "direct" statement is related to the fact that "John does not mention the Church as on earth" in Revelation 4-18 just as he does not mention the church as being in heaven, which latter omission not only cancels out the former and which "may do even more, viz., create the presumption that the last generation of the Church is still on earth in these chapters since John has described no rapture" (p. 78; See also p. 49).

Is the absence of "direct" statements of a posttribulational rapture overcome by anything that makes it "more natural to place the rapture of the Church after the tribulation" (p. 10)? A most revealing answer to this question is found in the author's discussion of a question pretribulationalists have been raising for some years and which, as far as the reviewer knows, has not been attempted to be answered in posttribulational writings until now. The question concerns populating the millennial kingdom and is simply this: since posttribulationalism teaches that "there is no reason why Jesus cannot come for His saints and continue to descend with them" (p. 159) at the second coming (thus removing all the righteous from the earth and giving them resurrection bodies), and if the judgment of Matthew 25:31-46 occurs at that time (thus consigning all the then living wicked to the lake of fire), who will remain in earthly bodies to begin populating the millennial kingdom? Acknowledging the seriousness of this question for the posttribulational position, Dr. Gundry admits: "we are forced to put the judgment of the nations after the millennium. For if it were to take place beforehand, none of the wicked (goats) could enter the millennium" (pp. 166-67). This is strange exegesis for a premillennialist (which Dr. Gundry is), for the Scripture is quite plain as to the time

of the judgment as being "when the Son of man shall come in his glory" and when he shall "sit upon the throne of his glory" (Matt. 25:31). His understanding of this verse is that there is a gap within it of the thousand years of the millennium so that the judgment of the sheep and goats comes after the millennium.

But where will believers in earthly bodies come from to populate the millennial kingdom? The author has two suggestions: either the judgment of believers will not take place until the 75 days after the second coming (Dan. 12:12) which presumably would allow for some to believe after the posttribulational rapture and then be judged ~~all~~^{and enter the Kingdom in earthly bodies} during those 75 days (p. 164), or he thinks that the 144,000 will continue as sealed unbelievers during the entire tribulation and then turn to Christ at the second coming and be those who populate the millennial earth (p. 82). Apparently he does not explain how they can be on earth during all this time and sing "a new song before the throne, and before the four living ones, and the elders" (Rev. 14:3). In summary: perhaps the clearest thing said about this question is the admission that posttribulationalism is "forced" into their possible answers.

This seems to be typical of much of the book. While the attacks on pretribulationalism are many and not at all decisive, when the author tries to fit together his exegesis into a posttribulational system, he has to force either the exegesis or the system. Let those who may feel overwhelmed by the many little points brought up in the pages of the book look carefully for an attempt to put together a posttribulational system. It is one thing to attack another viewpoint; it is quite another to build one's own. The book has much of the former, little of the latter.

Just what is the posttribulational system according to this book? This is not an easy question to answer simply because the viewpoint is not systematized, but here are some of the salient features.

The seventieth week of Daniel is yet future, and the church will be on earth during that period (p. 49). The 144,000 will be a group of unsaved people who will be supernaturally protected from dying during that period so that they accept the Lord when he comes at the second coming and be those who populate the millennial kingdom (p. 82). The 24 elders are 24 beings who lead the worship of God in heaven (p. 70). On the earth the church will not suffer the penal judgments of God but will endure persecution

from other quarters (p. 51). She will be looking for the Lord's return though it will not be imminent and yet it will be in some sense imminent since the days will be shortened and no one will be able to predict with certainty the time of Christ's return (p. 42). The day of the Lord will not begin with the tribulation or any part of it (p. 95), and yet it may begin before Armageddon because there may be a peaceful lull at that point (p. 92), which lull will fit somehow into the sequence of seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments which will find somewhat concurrent fulfillment (p. 75). The promise of Revelation 3:10 will be fulfilled when the church emerges from within the tribulation at its end. Then the Lord comes for His saints, meeting them in the air and continuing to descend with them to the earth (p. 159). There will be no formal judgment of living Israel at this point but only a purging out of the rebels and the Lord brings them toward the promised land through heathen countries (p. 168). The so-called judgment of living Gentiles (the sheep and the goats) does not take place at the second coming at all but after the millennium (p. 166). Believers will not be judged until after the millennium though they will receive their crowns of rewards at the second coming (p. 169).^P All of this allegedly presents a picture of the future that is "harmonistic" (p. 15), "natural" (p. 10), and exegetically preferable.^P But does it?