

Three Reasons to Abandon the Expectation of a Secret Rapture

Part 2: It's Not Taught in Church History

There are three ways we ought to view any doctrine, and in this order:

1. Biblically – Is it taught in the Bible?
2. Historically – What does church history have to say about it?
3. Subjectively – How does it make you feel?

The error many make is by inverting this order and starting with “Does it feel good?” This should be our final method of vetting. There are many Biblical concepts that don’t “feel” good.

In our last post we dealt with the only four passages in the Bible that speak explicitly about the rapture. In this post we’re briefly going to deal with the issue of the historicity of the doctrine of a secret rapture; that is “Can we find anyone in church history teaching it?”

Second to being Biblically bankrupt, the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory has been assailed by critics for being absent from the preaching of the church through history before the 1800’s. Over the years a handful of writers who hold to the Pre-Tribulation Rapture theory have attempted to address this claim to debunk it (a small few). The indictment against the theory is that no one taught it until John Darby presented in between 1827 and 1830. In 1857 Darby claims that he came to his end-time doctrine “30 years ago.” But contemporaries of Darby (such as Tregelles) claim that he began declaring it in 1830 when he adopted it from supernatural experiences of a young woman from Glasgow named Margaret MacDonald.

The debate still rages as to whether or not Darby came up with the idea of a secret rapture of if he adopted after hearing it presented by another. At the end of the day, it’s inconsequential WHERE he got it from, because one thing is sure: before 1827 (or 1830 if you take the view that he adopted it from MacDonald) the idea of a secret rapture occurring before the “Great Tribulation” cannot be found on the pages of church history.

The most recent contribution to the controversy over the historicity of the Pre-Trib doctrine is the book entitled “The Truth Behind Left Behind” written by Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice who are staunchly in favor of the eschatology taught in the “Left Behind” series. The final chapter of the book is given to tackling the claim that “all attempts to find a Pre-Tribulation Rapture any earlier than around 1830 do not hold up to historical scrutiny” (a verbatim accusation rightly leveled by Gary DeMar and quoted in the book). Hitchcock and Ice give 15 pages to survey church history to ward off the critics and round out their apologetic on this issue.

In those 15 pages we find only MORE glaring problems with the Pre-Trib view. First, the chapter begins with a quote from Ryrie saying that just because a doctrine hasn’t been taught throughout church history doesn’t mean that it’s not true. The quote revealed the trajectory of

their broader argument (i.e. They have nothing substantial to show from church history that points to a historical belief in a Pre-Tribulation rapture). The fact of the matter is, church history is in agreement: there is no secret rapture. The only examples that the authors could conjure up are about a dozen quotations of modern writers explaining why THEY BELIEVE certain church fathers taught a secret rapture and a single quotation from a church father about a secret rapture. The problem with these two pieces of evidence is that (1) modern subjective opinions without historical documentation don't carry any weight and (2) the meaning of the only quotation they could muster is widely debated.

In other words, the weight of the argument rests upon a dozen biased opinions and one nebulous historical quotation. It would've better served the purpose of the book if they avoided the issue altogether. Instead they just exposed the weakness of their view historically.

To their credit, they rightly pointed out that church fathers through history have expected an imminent return of Jesus (i.e. Jesus can come any minute). To their shame though, they allude to the idea that Jesus coming "imminently" is equivalent with Jesus coming "secretly." And our fathers would take great offense at that idea as the two are far from congruent as far as historical theology is concerned.

Jesus cannot and will not come "at any minute;" nor will He come secretly to relocate believers to heaven for the greatest hour of human history. Paul made it very clear:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him...Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the falling away comes FIRST, and the man of lawlessness is revealed... (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3)