

Is the Church in Revelation 4-18?

Pre-Tribulationists consider it a significant support to their view that the church is not mentioned once by that designation in Revelation 4-18, chapters that describe the Tribulation on earth. By contrast, the word 'church' occurs 19 times in chapters 1, 2, and 3, once in chapter 22, and the phrase "**wife of the Lamb**" once in chapter 21. Yet in chapters 4-18 there is a silence that Pre-Tribulationists say indicates that the church will not be present on the earth during the Tribulation years.

In response, the Post-Tribulationist cites three factors. (1) If the church is supposed to be in heaven during the events recorded in chapters 4-18, why is it not mentioned as being there? (2) The occurrence of the word 'saints' in 13:7, 10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24 shows that the church is indeed on the earth during the Tribulation. (3) Other descriptions of believers in the Tribulation aptly apply to church age believers; therefore, Tribulation believers will be the last generation of church age believers, and that last generation will go through the Tribulation.

The First Argument: The Church in Heaven

To the first question, Pre-Tribulationists reply along either or both of two lines.

Most identify the twenty-four elders as representing the church, and since they are seen in heaven in Revelation 4:4 and 5:8-10, the church is mentioned as in heaven. Some think this argument is nullified since the critical text of 5:9-10 has the elders singing of redemption in the third person as if redemption were not their own experience (thus they could not represent the church, which has been redeemed). But this is really not a strong argument. Notice that Moses sang of redemption that he experienced, in the third person, Exodus 15:13, 16-17.

Pre-Tribulationists also point out that the background of Hebrew marriage customs argues for the church's already being in heaven before the coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation. Jewish marriage included a number of steps: first, betrothal (which involved the prospective groom's traveling from his father's house to the home of the prospective bride, paying the purchase price, and thus establishing the marriage, covenant; second, the groom's returning to his father's house and remaining separate from his bride for twelve months during which time he prepared the living accommodations for his wife in his father's house; third, the groom's coming for his bride at a time not known exactly to her; fourth, his return with her to the groom's father's house to consummate the marriage and to celebrate the wedding feast for the next seven days (during which the bride remained closeted in her bridal chamber).

In Revelation 19:7-9 the wedding feast is announced, which, if the analogy of the Hebrew marriage customs means anything, assumes that the wedding has previously taken place in the father's house. Today the church is described as a virgin waiting for her bridegroom's coming -(2nd Corinthians 11:2); in Revelation 21 she is designated as the wife of the Lamb, indicating that previously she has been taken to the groom's father's house. Pre-Tribulationists say that this requires an interval of time between the Rapture and the Second

Coming. Granted, it does not say seven years' time, but it certainly argues against Post-Tribulationism, which has no time between the Rapture and Second Coming.

The Second Argument: The Word Saints

Actually the appearance of the word *saints* in chapters 4-18 does not prove anything until you know what saints they are. There were saints (godly ones) in the Old Testament (Psalm 85:8); there are saints today -(1st Corinthians 1:2); there will be saints in the Tribulation years (Revelation 13:7, etc.). The question is, Are the saints of this church age distinct from saints of the Tribulation period (Pre-Tribulationism) or not (Post-Tribulationism)? The uses of the word will not answer the question.

The Third Argument: Other Descriptive Phrases

Such phrases include "die in the Lord" -(Revelation 14:13; compare "dead in Christ" of 1st Thessalonians 4:16-18), "those who keep the commandments of God" -(Revelation 12:17; 14:12; compare Revelation 1:9). To use these similarities to prove that the church will be present in the Tribulation requires that similarity means sameness (a major assumption). On the other hand, one would expect distinct groups of saints (i.e., church saints and Tribulation saints) to be described in similar ways since they are all saints.

The same holds true for the use of the word '*elect*', or '*chosen*'. Some have concluded that since the elect are mentioned as being in the Tribulation in Matthew 24:22, 24, and 31, the church will go through the Tribulation. But what elect people are meant? The heathen king Cyrus was called a messiah -(Isaiah 45:1). So was Christ -(Psalm 2:2). Israel was called God's elect, even though the nation was a mixture of redeemed and unredeemed people -(Isaiah 45:4). Christ is also God's elect -(Isaiah 42:1). So is the church -(Colossians 3:12). So are some angels -(1st Timothy 5:21). All elect are not the same, and the chosen ones of the Tribulation days do not have to be the same as the elect of the church simply because the same term is used of both groups.

How Distinct is the Church?

Actually the question boils down to whether or not the church is a distinct entity in the program of God. Those who emphasize the distinctiveness of the church will be Pre-Tribulationists, and those who de-emphasize it will usually be Post-Tribulationists. Distinctiveness means distinct from Israel. Is the church distinct from Israel? If so, then the church will not be a participant in the Tribulation, since during that time God will be dealing primarily with Israel once again. If the church is a continuation of Israel, then one would more readily conclude that she will experience the Tribulation.

The mystery character of the church argues against her being related to Israel and for her being a distinct entity in God's program. God's work in this age of including Jews and Gentiles in the same body is a mystery that was not known in past ages -(Ephesians 3:3-6; Colossians 1:26). But the Tribulation was revealed in the Old Testament -(Isaiah 24). Furthermore, Daniel's prophecy concerning the seventy weeks of sevens specifically concerned

"your people and your holy city" -(Daniel 9:24). All seventy weeks relate to Israel. The church had no part in the already fulfilled sixty-nine weeks and will not be a part of the seventieth week of the future Tribulation either. This will require a pretribulation rapture.

Of course other mysteries appear in the Bible related to other time periods (such as the mystery of God in Revelation 10:7, which will be consummated in the Tribulation period, and the mystery of the incarnation, 1st Timothy 3:16). To use this fact as proof positive that the mystery of the Body of Christ cannot be related only to the period from Pentecost to the Rapture is fallacious. Clearly not all biblical mysteries relate to the church age, but that does not prove that one of them does not.

The Resurrection in Revelation 20:4

Sometimes the mention of a resurrection in Revelation 20:4 is used to argue for Post-Tribulationism in this way: The verse says that there will be a resurrection at the conclusion of the Tribulation; the rapture involves a resurrection of the dead; therefore, the rapture is at the conclusion of the Tribulation. One Post-Tribulationist declares that this is the only passage that indicates the time of the rapture; all other passages are only inferences (George E. Ladd, *'The Blessed Hope'* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], pg. 165).

There are two problems with this conclusion. First, does the presence of *some* of the same features in two different events prove that they are the same event? Of course not. And second, Revelation 20:4 speaks only of a resurrection of the dead, not of a translation of living people, a truth that is prominent and a vital part of the other descriptions of the rapture in 1st Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1st Corinthians 15:51-58.

We can conclude then that neither the use of words like *'church'* or *'saints'*, nor phrases that describe believers, nor Revelation 20:4 will settle the time of the Rapture. But the distinctive mystery character of the church, especially in relation to the prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9, does argue for a Pre-Tribulation rapture. The arguments Post-Tribulationists use really do not show that the Body of Christ is on the earth in Revelation 4-18.

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