

Where Did Pretribulationism Originate?

For some reason people often become overanxious about the antiquity of a doctrine. If it is ancient, they think its age somehow enhances its truthfulness. If it is recent, they are not so certain that it can be true.

Now, of course, the history of a doctrine is not unimportant, but the importance is mainly in discovering how people formulated it, discussed it, or perverted it. If a doctrine began to be discussed by the early church, then with all that history behind us, we ought to be expressing it very accurately today. If a doctrine began to be discussed only in recent centuries, then we may properly expect that formulation and discussion will still be going on today. But to be true, a doctrine must be in the Bible, not simply in church history.

Some of the early church Fathers taught baptismal regeneration. That scarcely makes it a true doctrine. The early church did not spell out a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. That scarcely makes it an untrue doctrine.

The early church believed in tribulation, the imminent coming of Christ, and a Millennium to follow. The early church was clearly Premillennial but not clearly Pre-Tribulationist, nor was it clearly Post-Tribulationist when measured against today's developed Pre- or Post-Tribulation teachings.

Development in eschatology really did not come to the fore until the modern period of church history, which began after the Reformation. During this period Post-Millennialism was first proposed; it then faded, but more recently has had a revival, even claiming as converts some long-time Amillennialists. During this same period Amillennialism has flourished, as has Pre-Millennialism. Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have both Pre-Tribulationism and Post-Tribulationism been systematically expounded.

Systematic Post-Tribulationism apparently developed as people began to reject the expanding influence of Pre-Tribulationism. That is not to say that all early Post-Tribulationists were first Pre-Tribulationists before abandoning that position. It is to say that when a more detailed Pre-Tribulationist scheme developed, some reacted to it and began to expound a more detailed Post-Tribulationist scheme (see George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], pp. 43-54).

Undoubtedly J. N. Darby gave the greatest initial impetus to a systematic Pre-Tribulationism as we know it today. Darby was concerned about the purity of the church, a purity he could not find in his Church of England because of its alliance with the state. That led him to begin meeting with an already existing group of others who felt the same way and who gathered for fellowship and deeper Bible study. In time, he saw the church as a special work of God, distinct from His program for Israel. This truth, integrated with his Pre-Millennial eschatology, led him to the position that the Rapture of the church would be before the

Tribulation and that during the Tribulation God would turn again to deal specially with Israel. Those views were accepted and promoted by others, and it was against that teaching that systematic Post-Tribulationism developed.

A number of attempts have been made to discredit Darby's Pre-Tribulationism by claiming that he did not get his views from the Bible but from a heretic and a mystic. The heretic was Edward Irving (1792-1834), who was deposed in 1833 from the Church of Scotland on the charge that he held the sinfulness of Christ's humanity. Prior to this, manifestations of tongues and healings appeared in his church in London, and his congregation had become a rallying point for millennial expectations.

It is one thing to recognize that the Irvingites were vitally interested in prophecy; it is another thing to claim that they taught a Pre-Tribulational Rapture; and it is quite a different thing to imply that Darby was influenced by them. It has been my observation that most critics of J.N. Darby have not studied Darby's writings, more than twenty volumes; they simply quote someone who attacks Darby. This disingenuous treatment of Darby's work only does a disservice to serious scholarship.

At best, the Irvingite eschatology is unclear. One of their group drew a time distinction between the epiphany (the Lord's appearing and rapture) and the parousia (the Lord's coming to earth), but it was not seven years. Another placed the Rapture at the same time as the last bowl judgment of Revelation 16 (which is the last judgment of the Tribulation period) and *after* the setting up of the ten-nation federation. Still another wrote that the Rapture will take place as the Lord is on His way down to earth, which is standard Post-Tribulationism (see R. A. Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered* [Morganville, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers, pages. 21-25]).

The Irvingites obviously did not teach Imminency, nor that the seventieth week of Daniel would intervene between the Rapture and the Second advent, doctrines that Darby clearly taught in the Powerscourt conference of 1833. A historian puts the matter in proper perspective.

Darby's opponents claimed that the doctrine [of the Rapture] originated in one of the outbursts of tongues in Edward Irving's church about 1832. This seems to be a groundless and pernicious charge. Neither Irving nor any member of the Albury group advocated any doctrine resembling the secret Rapture. As we have seen, they were all historicists, looking for the fulfillment of one or another prophecy in the Revelation as the next step in the divine timetable, anticipating the Second Coming of Christ soon but not immediately." [Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: (U. of Chicago Press, 1970), pg. 64]

There is no connection between Darby's Pre-Tribulationism and the Irvingite teaching. The mystic was an adolescent named Margaret Macdonald (c. 1815-c. 1840), who lived in Port Glasgow, Scotland, and who, it is alleged, influenced both the Irvingites and Darby with regard to a Pre-Tribulation Rapture. That is the charge leveled by Dave MacPherson in *The Incredible*

Cover-Up' (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1975, especially pages. 31-32). MacPherson further alleges that Darby not only received his Pre-Tribulation Rapture concept from Miss Macdonald (when she was 15), but that he deliberately hid from his followers where he received it, since she was also involved in speaking in tongues and receiving visions (pg. 85).

Let me quote excerpts from MacPherson's report of Margaret Macdonald's handwritten account of her 1830 Pre-Tribulation revelation in order to ascertain if she in fact did teach a Pre-Tribulational Rapture.

... the spiritual temple must and shall be reared, and the fulness of Christ be poured into his body, and then shall we be caught up to meet him... The trial of the Church is from Antichrist. It is by being filled with the Spirit that we shall be kept... O it is not known what the sign of the Son of man is ... I saw it was just the Lord himself descending from Heaven with a shout... Now will THE WICKED be revealed, with all power and signs and lying wonders, so that if it were possible the very elect will be deceived—This is the fiery trial which is to try us. [pages. 151-54] Several observations are in order.

1. This adolescent distinguished spiritual believers from other believers and saw only the spiritual ones participating in the Rapture. MacPherson wrongly concludes from this that she meant to teach a secret coming. In reality, she was teaching the partial rapture view.

2. She saw the church ("us") being purged by Antichrist. MacPherson reads this as meaning the church will be raptured before Antichrist, ignoring the "us" (pp. 154-55). In reality, she saw the church enduring Antichrist's persecution of the Tribulation days.

3. She identified the sign of the coming of the Son of man (Matthew [24:30](#)), which clearly appears at the end of the Tribulation, as being seen at the same time as the rapture. MacPherson says she either believed in a very short Tribulation period, or, more likely to him, she understood that the sign would be seen only by Spirit-filled believers before the wicked one is revealed (pg. 143). In reality, she reveals by this statement complete confusion, though taken at face value, her vision equated the sign at the end of the Tribulation with the Rapture—hardly Pre-Tribulationism!

As for the very young and chronically ill Margaret Macdonald, we can only truthfully label her as a "confused rapturist," with elements of partial Rapturism, Post-Tribulationism, perhaps Mid-Tribulationism, but never Pre-Tribulationism.

By Darby's own testimony, he claimed that his ideas came from the Bible, particularly his understanding of the distinctiveness of the church (in 1826-28), that he believed the Rapture would be a considerable time before the second coming (in 1830), and that there would be a parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel (no later than 1833). He seemed to be unsettled about the secret aspect of the Rapture as late as the 1840s (Sandeen, pg. 34, and R. A. Huebner, *'The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered'* [Morganville, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers,], pg. 74).

These are the essential facts concerning the history of Pre-Tribulationism. Actually both systematic Pre- and Post-Tribulationism are recent developments, since the church did not study the field of eschatology until after the Reformation (see James Orr, *'The Progress of Dogma'* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], pages 24-30).

The ultimate question remains: Is the teaching biblical?

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