

## **Dispensationalism and the Rapture: A Theological Analysis**

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The rationale for a chapter on the rapture in a book on dispensationalism is that dispensationalists have been predominantly pretribulationists. Dispensationalists by and large have been interested in eschatology, and have made the coming of our Lord an important focus of their theology and ministry. Thus, in this chapter I shall examine three theological concerns related to the rapture. The three issues are: dispensational ecclesiology and the rapture; the incompatibility of premillennialism and a posttribulation rapture; the Olivet Discourse and the rapture.

I think it will help to state more precisely the purpose of this chapter. As can be seen from the topic to be discussed, the intention is not to give a careful exegesis of certain passages to find out if they favor or are at least compatible with dispensationalism and pretribulationism. At the same time a theological analysis does not exclude or ignore sound exegesis. Rather, the concerns to be examined are broad, overarching and structural issues. This should not surprise us as theology is a synthetic discipline. By that I mean it seeks to systematize and harmonized information or data from a variety of sources and texts.

### **Dispensational Ecclesiology and the Rapture**

As mentioned before, dispensationalist have commonly been pretribulationists. For many a belief in the former was taken as determinative in favor of the latter. However, more recently the relationship between dispensationalism and pretribulationism has been challenged most thoroughly by Robert H. Gundry.<sup>1</sup> I would like to set out his arguments, and then evaluate them.

He begins with the thesis that if there is an absolute silence in the OT about the Church, a complete discontinuity between God's program for Israel and the Church, and sharp breaks between dispensations, this would favor pretribulationism. On the other hand, if there is a partial revelation of this present age in the OT, some relationship short of identification between Israel and the Church, and dispensations that changed gradually, having transitional period, then the door to the presence of the Church in the tribulation would be open.<sup>2</sup>

Gundry argues for the latter group of relationships. First, he points out that the dispensational argument that the Church is a mystery in the OT is used to set it sharply apart from Israel. However, he cautions those who take this argument as decisive against the Church's presence in the tribulation. All agree that there are a large number of Gentile saints who will be alive on the earth during the tribulation period (e. g., Rev. 7:9-17). For the moment, bracket the question as to whether they belong to the Church or not. There are no OT passages which mention these saints. Therefore, OT silence does not preclude a presence in the tribulation.<sup>3</sup>

However, one might argue that mysteries that are distinctive of the Church such as the equality of Jews and Gentiles, the Church as the bride of Christ, are nowhere specifically used of these tribulation saints. This, Gundry argues, is significant only if posttribulationist bear the responsibility or burden of proof to show that these Gentiles are members of the Church. If not, then it is not necessary to state everywhere what is true of them. That is, whatever is said of members of the Church elsewhere in the NT will be true of these Gentile saints if they belong to the Church whether stated explicitly or not. Thus, this argument ends in a stand off.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, there are a number of mysteries that are not revealed until the NT that will culminate in the tribulation. Some examples which Gundry cites are "the mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thes. 2:7), "the mystery of God" (Rev. 10:7) and "the mystery of the harlot BABYLON" (Rev. 17:5-7).<sup>5</sup> He concludes his argument by pointing out that the Church and the rapture as such are never called a mystery. Only one aspect of the rapture, the translation of living saints, is called a mystery (1 Cor. 15:51.2).<sup>6</sup>

Second, there are, to Gundry's way of thinking, OT prophecies that specifically mention and imply the present age. Our Lord's present session at the right hand of the Father in heaven is predicted in Psa. 110:1 and is presently being fulfilled (Acts 2:34-5). The Church occupies a period of time foretold and related to Israel, namely the nation's worldwide dispersion (Deu. 28:25, 64, 65; 30:1-4). From this it follows that if the Church can be present during the time of Israel's dispersion, she can also be present during the time of her trial. Furthermore, most dispensationalists see an interval between week sixty-nine and seventy in Daniel 9:24-27. The Church exists during this period though it is not mentioned, and the destruction of the Jerusalem is predicted though it occurs in the Church age. Gundry concludes that this demonstrates that this present age is not unforeseen in the preceding, and is not unrelated to the future of Israel as predicted in the CT.<sup>7</sup>

Gundry says that the CT not only predicts the present age, but the NT applies OT prophecy to the Church. Examples he cites are as follows: Acts 2:16-21 is a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32; Galatians 3:16 quotes Genesis 13:15 and 17:8, applying the promise of the land of Palestine to Abraham's spiritual seed; Paul's mission to the Gentiles in Acts 13:46, 47 is based upon Isaiah's OT prediction that salvation would come to them (49:6); Paul's statement in Romans 15:7-13 that Jewish and Gentile Christians have a duty to receive one another is based on what he finds in four different CT prophecies: 2 Sam. 22:50, parallel Ps. 18:49; Deut. 32:43; Ps. 117:1; Isa. 11:10; Peter's teaching that the prophets predicted that grace would come to the Gentiles (1 Pet. 1:10-12); and the new covenant of Jer. 31:31-34 is applied to the Church in Hebrews 8:8-13; 10:15-17.<sup>8</sup>

Third, Gundry argues that without the belittlement of the importance of the day of Pentecost and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the dispensational change from Israel to the Church took place in a period of time beginning early in Jesus' ministry and ending sometime after Pentecost. For instance, Jesus defends his disciples against the Pharisaic charge that they do not fast by saying that the old dispensation is passing away and that a new is coming in (Mk. 2:21, 22). Jesus teaches that the "prophets and the Law" ceased with John the Baptist (Mt. 11:13 Cf. Lk 16:16), and that "grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17)." This last statement is a reference to the whole public ministry of Jesus, so that grace and truth began

before Pentecost. Jesus made all foods clean (Mk. 7:18, 19) before his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, as well as the giving of the Spirit. He gave instructions to his disciples about the future Church, its establishment (Mt. 16:18) and discipline (Mt. 18:15-18). The teachings of Jesus, obviously given before Pentecost, are said in the NT to the foundation of the Church (1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 25; 1 Tim 6:3; Heb. 2:3). Even with the Church's existence after the day of Pentecost, the baptism of the Spirit moves to the Gentiles over a period of time, the preaching of the gospel goes first to a predominantly Jewish audience (Acts 3:12) and finally throughout the Gentile world in Paul's mission. The destruction of the temple in 70 A. D. forcibly brings an end to animal sacrifices. Thus, Gundry argues, if there is a transitional period at the beginning of the Church age, it is not unreasonable to think that there will be one at the end.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, while the Church is unique in many ways, Gundry points to the essential unity of all saints and the things that they have in common. The latter are more fundamental and lasting. Abraham is the father of all who believe although he is an CT saint (Rom. 4:11; cf. vv. 12, 16), and those who believe are called the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). All believers receive Christ's imputed righteousness. Gentile believers are grafted into the wild olive tree of Israel (Rom. 11:16ff.). Gentiles who were far from God, are now brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13). The perfection and completion of CT saints requires NT saints (Heb. 11:40). In the New Jerusalem the gates bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the foundations have the names of the twelve apostles inscribed on them (Rev. 21:12, 14).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, if both the Church and Israel are to go through the tribulation, then God will work through two covenant people at the same time. Such a possibility is not beyond God's ability. Dispensationalists who are also premillennialist hold that during the millennium the Church will rule the earth with Christ (1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 5:10) and all other saints--CT and tribulation. In addition to the different groups of saints who will reign, there will be those who still have their natural bodies as well as those who have received their glorified bodies. Presently, with the return of the Jews to Palestine from dispersion, we have a hint of God's simultaneous dealings with the Church and Israel, just as was the case during the era of the Church's beginning.

Gundry realizes that the issue is not merely that God is dealing with groups of people at the same time, but that there are two groups of redeemed people and witnesses. They will coexist, possibly live by different regulations and conceivably preach variations of the gospel. These are legitimate questions, but they do not "preclude the possibility of the presence of the Church in the tribulation."<sup>11</sup> One way in which this might be resolved is that there would only be one group of redeemed people in the tribulation, the Church. Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah would be part of the Church as presently is the case (Rom. 11:5), and would be raptured at the posttribulational coming of Christ. Jews who are not converted and survive to the end of the tribulation (Rev. 7:1-4) will repent, believe and be saved as they look on their descending Messiah. They will have missed the rapture, but will enter the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies as subjects of the restored Davidic Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the Jewish cast to Daniel's seventieth week does not preclude the possibility of the Church's presence any more than it does a large host of Gentile saints according to Gundry. While the Church did not figure in the first sixty-nine weeks, neither did a large group of Gentile saints such as will be part of the seventieth week. Thus, the seventieth week is considerably

different in this respect from the first sixty-nine. As a matter of fact, God is not just dealing with Israel, but is cleansing, converting and imparting righteousness to her (Dan. 9:24). These goals do not prevent God from dealing with the Church at the same time. The desecration and destruction of the temple in A. D. 70 is related to the abomination of desolation by the Antichrist (Dan. 9:27). The former was within the Church age, and it is more natural that the latter should be as well.<sup>13</sup>

In a posttribulational understanding of the tribulation, God's sole witnessing body will be the Church, which consists of saved Jews and Gentiles. Only at the millennium will Israel be reinstated as God's witness. This is more reasonable than the pretribulational position since Israel is experiencing final and bitter chastisement.<sup>14</sup>

An objection might be that this is out of keeping with the fact that the world will be evangelized by 144,000 Jews. Gundry responds that there is not a single statement in Scripture that supports that common claim. It is Jesus who says that the gospel will be preached in the whole world (Mat. 24:14), but he does not identify who will be the preachers. The two passages which speak of the 144,000 (Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-5) say nothing about evangelistic activity. They are called "servants" in 7:3 without further explanation. In the other passage there follows a vision of an angel with the everlasting gospel (14:6, 7), but there is nothing that links the 144,000 with the preaching of that gospel. Some try to relate Isaiah 43:10 where it says, "You are my witnesses" to Revelation in support of the view that they are preachers. However, Gundry rejects this view, holding that the context shows that the word should be understood as "spectators" of God's mighty works, not "preachers" of the gospel.<sup>15</sup>

Gundry is to be commended for his helpful and thorough treatment of the relationship between dispensationalism and a pretribulational rapture. There are a number of things on which I am in agreement with him. He is correct in showing that dispensationalism is not a monolithic theological position. There are those who would see the discontinuities between Israel and the Church in more radical terms, and others who would not make these differences in such contrasting ways. He is right that the more one emphasizes the distinctions between Israel and the Church, the more that distinction favors a pretribulational rapture of the Church.

I think that he is also right in arguing that those who do not make the strictest contrast may hold to dispensationalism, a moderate or measured form as he calls it, and come to a view of the rapture other than pretribulational. I think that his argument shows that there is a certain independence between one's views on the relationship of Israel and the Church and the rapture. Not all dispensationalists must come to a pretribulational rapture position.

Having said that, I think dispensationalism of all forms best accords with a pretribulational rapture. By that I mean that I would not take as *laissez faire* an approach to the relationship between dispensationalism and a position on the rapture. It seems to me that the pretribulation rapture is most dependent on two premises.<sup>16</sup> The first is that the Church is a distinct body from Israel and saints of other ages. This is not to deny that there are similarities among all the saints, but to see that the Church is not identical with any of them. The second is that there is a future period of unprecedented judgment, divine wrath. This period has a variety of purposes, but none of them related to the Church. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the

Church is removed before this period begins. If these premises are true, and I think that they are though I have not defended them here, then I think that dispensationalism best harmonizes with pretribulationism.

### **The Incompatibility of Premillennialism and a Posttribulational Rapture**

To understand the importance of this argument, it is helpful to have some idea about the character or nature of arguments.

The character or nature of arguments.--Arguments are generally classified in two ways. First, there are conclusive arguments. The two most common forms of this kind of argument are arguments where the premises are known to be true and the conclusion follows necessarily from those premises, and arguments where the assumptions of a position are taken as the premises of the argument and these premises are shown to generate a contradiction--this latter argument is called a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Conclusive arguments are decisive for or against a position. They leave no question about the truth of a view. The problem with this type of argument is that it is impossible to find one for every issue. It is difficult to find premises that opponents agree are true, and often the conclusion of an argument does not follow necessarily from its premises. For this reason, a second sort of argument is needed. Second, other arguments are reliable arguments. These kinds of arguments are more common than the former type. The conclusion of a reliable argument rests on good, adequate or appropriate evidence. Arguments of this sort do not rule out the possibility of all alternative positions. Rather, they show that their conclusion has good or adequate justification.

Now I am ready to apply this distinction to the argument that I am about to give. First, this argument is directed at those who are both premillennialists and posttribulationists. The problem does not arise for amillennialists, since the difficulty is related to an earthly reign of Christ. Second, the argument is of the first sort. If it is correct, it shows that the two views, premillennialism and posttribulationism, are incompatible. That is, there are conditions in Scripture that these two views cannot meet.

The argument. The argument is that there must be an interval between the rapture of the Church and the second coming of Christ so that there can be those who are saved and enter into the millennium in nonglorified, physical bodies. Because of the importance of this argument, let me develop it in some detail.

First, we need to see the necessity for saints with nonglorified bodies. Scripture teaches that the millennium will see a dramatic curbing of evil and the flourishing of righteousness. However, sin will still exist (e. g., there are sacrifices, Isa. 19:21; Eze. 43:13-27, and there will be a rebellion that closes the reign of Christ on this earth, Rev. 20:7-10). Moreover, there will be sickness and death (Isa. 65:20). Houses will be built, and vineyards will be planted (Isa. 65:21-22). None of these things are usually thought of as a part of the glorified state, particularly sinning.

It may now be asked how this causes difficulties for a premillennial-posttribulationist eschatology? The problem centers in the fact that on this view the rapture and the second coming are simply parts of a single complex event. Believers will be glorified as they are caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and they will immediately return to this earth with Christ, to set up his kingdom and to rule and reign with him. All the righteous will be glorified at Christ's coming either through translation or resurrection (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thes. 4:13-18). All the righteous will enter the kingdom in glorified bodies.

According to pretribulationist and midtribulationist at least, all the wicked will be excluded or prevented from entering the kingdom or millennial age, the wicked among the Gentiles at the sheep and goat judgment (Mat. 25:31-46) and among the Jews when the Messiah causes them to pass under the rod (Eze. 20:37). The problem for the posttribulationist now can be stated in two ways. First, where do the sheep come from in the sheep and goat judgment? Or, second, if all who enter the kingdom are both righteous and glorified, and there are no wicked, how can they sin in the millennium? There clearly is a need for some righteous, nonglorified saints. Only then will it be possible for them to sin, and for them to have children who will sin and some who take part in the rebellion against God at the end of the millennium.<sup>17</sup>

Not all premil-posttribulationist have seen the problem, but many have and have tried to offer a variety of solutions to this problem. One of the most common is to identify the righteous with Jews who believe in Jesus as their Messiah as he returns to the earth after the rapture. They will be saved and will enter the kingdom in nonglorified bodies (Zec. 12:10-13:1; Rom. 11:26). Gundry has a variation of this proposal. He thinks that the 144,000 may comprise the Jewish remnant who will be physically preserved through the tribulation.<sup>18</sup> They will not receive the mark of the beast, and will be saved at Messiah's return. This group will include both men and women, and they will replenish the millennial earth. He holds this in spite of the fact that Revelation 14:4 says that they have not defiled themselves with women, that is, they are celibate. Gundry thinks that this is a reference to spiritual, not sexual, celibacy. This is a way of saying that they have not been seduced by Satan and the Antichrist.<sup>19</sup>

I am unconvinced that this solution is the answer to the problem. First, there is good evidence that the repentance precedes the return of Christ (Hos. 5:15-6:3; Mat. 23:29). The sight of the Messiah is the cause of intense mourning over the years of rejection (Zec. 12:11-14). The return of Christ is signaled by Israel's acceptance of their Messiah rather than the occasion for the acceptance of salvation.<sup>20</sup> Second, there are numerous passages that teach that Gentiles will populate the millennial earth in nonglorified bodies (e. g., Isa. 19:18-25; 60:1-3; Zec. 14:16-21). This solution would only permit Jews into the kingdom in physical bodies.

A second suggestion is to deny that all the wicked die at Christ's return to this earth.<sup>21</sup> To have all the righteous raptured and all the wicked slaughtered would result in a dramatic depopulation the earth. This is not required by Scripture. All that it teaches is that the actively rebellious unbelievers will be destroyed in fulfillment of Revelation 19:15-18 and Jeremiah 25:31. Thus, many, even the majority, will be slain but not all.<sup>22</sup>

Bell is right when he says that not all the wicked will be destroyed at Christ's return. However, the complete elimination of the wicked from entrance into the kingdom is not simply

the result of those who die at Christ's return, but also the separation of the wicked from the righteous in the judgments mentioned above (Eze. 20:37 and Mat. 25:31-46). So while it is true that not all the wicked will be slain at the return of Christ, those who survive will be separated in the judgments and prevented from entering the kingdom.

A third approach to the problem is just to affirm that the wicked will enter into kingdom as required by the fact that there are a number of passages that teach that wicked live in the kingdom (e. g., Isa. 37:32; 66:15-20; Joel 3:7, 8; Zec. 14:16-19; Rev 20:7-9). This, however, is no solution at all. No premillennialist disagrees that evil will exist in the millennium. But this depends on the entrance of wicked into the millennial age, and if there are passages that teach that they will not enter the kingdom, then to say that the wicked do enter is to contradict Scripture. What passages teach that they will enter?<sup>23</sup>

By far the most common solution offered to this problem is to argue that there are two resurrections but only one general judgment. There is a premillennial resurrection of all the righteous, but only one judgment including both righteous and wicked postmillennially. All the righteous will enter the kingdom, and enjoy its blessings. But not all wicked will be eliminated. Many will die in the judgments that precede the second coming, but not all will be destroyed. The judgment of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46 occurs after the millennium, not before. Thus, there will be unrighteous individuals, though a greatly reduced number, who enter the kingdom. This is Gundry's view.<sup>24</sup>

The key question for this view is whether the judgment in Matthew 25 can be harmonized with and is identical to the one in Revelation 20. Gundry thinks they can. Where there are differences like the presence of good and evil persons in Matthew and only wicked in Revelation, they are harmonizable. Rewards given at Christ's coming need not be done at a formal judgment. The rewards and punishments, eternal life and everlasting punishment, better precede the eternal state than the millennial kingdom.<sup>25</sup>

While some of Gundry's arguments are weightier than others, it is noteworthy that he does not deal with the setting of the judgment scene: "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him" (vv. 31-32a). This seems clearly to set this chronologically at the time of Christ's return in Matthew 24:30 after the tribulation.

There still remains the question as to why the reward is eternal life and the punishment everlasting punishment. I have argued elsewhere the reward and punishment do not constitute a good reason for identifying the judgment in Matthew with the one in Revelation. First, Matthew 25:31 unmistakably sets this judgment at the time of Christ's second advent before the millennium in a premillennial scheme. Second, Isaiah 24:21-22 teaches that there is a period of confinement before final consignment to Hell. Luke 16:19-31 teaches that between death and resurrection the wicked are punished. It is a time of torment, and justifiably called eternal punishment, although it is the first phase. Third, since the millennial kingdom is the first phase of the eternal kingdom (1 Cor. 15:21-28), eternal life is not an inappropriate name for the reward of the righteous. Jesus told his disciples that they had eternal life as he spoke. Furthermore, all the righteous will be resurrected and receive glorified bodies by the beginning of the millennium,

making it correct to say that they have received eternal life. Finally, even if the reward and punishment could be shown to be references to the final or eternal state, that would not close the matter. It is not uncommon in prophetic literature to have two events foreshortened or telescoped, so that they might appear to be temporally successive, but in reality separated by many years (e. g., Isa. 61:1-2 where both advents of our Lord are treated though separated by at least two thousand years; Dan. 12:1-2 and Jo. 5:29 teach two resurrection which are to be separated by a thousand years).

A significant variation on this last approach is offered in the writings of Douglas M. Moo.<sup>26</sup> He begins by saying that this argument is the most difficult for his position to handle. The difficulty is related not just to the argument itself, but also to the fact that the evidence is both sparse and complex.<sup>27</sup> He then goes on to offer a number of suggestions. First, he says that the presence of evil, natural processes and ultimately rebellion against God are problems for all forms of premillennialism in that these conditions seem to be more appropriate during this present age rather than in a millennium. However, he acknowledges that it is claimed that the need for people in natural bodies is a special problem for the posttribulationist.<sup>28</sup>

Second, he thinks that there is not a lot of evidence for saints with natural bodies and the existence of evil. However, he does say that these conditions are taught in Scripture, and therefore the problem cannot be avoided by a posttribulationist premillennialist.<sup>29</sup>

Third, Moo thinks that there are two suggestions that serve as possible solutions to this problem. The first is that it is entirely possible that some unbelievers will enter the kingdom in nonglorified bodies. He bases this on the fact that while some texts teach the universality of judgment on unbelievers at Christ's return, they do not clearly specify that this is at the beginning of the millennium. Moreover, he suggests that the universality of judgment may involve the telescoping of events that are premillennial and postmillennial. This, he thinks, is the reason that Matthew 24:31 says the judgment will be premillennial and the rewards and punishment seem to point to a postmillennial judgment. "Thus passages that describe a universal judgment along with Christ's return have as their purpose to specify the ultimately universal effects of Christ's victory; they do not require that all are judged at the same time . . ."<sup>30</sup> And Revelation 19 does not require that all the wicked will be destroyed at the return of Christ so there will be unbelievers to enter the kingdom.<sup>31</sup> The second suggestion is that the millennial saints who have natural bodies are Jews who turn to Christ at his coming.<sup>32</sup>

Let me evaluate Moo's proposal, discussing issues in an order different from the one he set out. First, the matter over whether the conversion of Jews at the time of Messiah's return precedes or coincides with his coming, and thus do not participate in the rapture, is of minor significance. The reason that I say this is that, even if true, it only would account for Jews in natural bodies in the millennium, not Gentiles.

Second, I think that it is questionable whether this argument rests on sparse evidence. But again even if that were true, that would not justify the dismissal of this problem. In fairness to Moo I do not think that this is his point. He says that the problem cannot be avoided.

Third, I think that the key issue involves Matthew 25:31-46 and the telescoping of events in prophetic literature. I obviously do not disagree with the general point because it is one I have made as well, citing examples of cases that I think exhibit this characteristic. Clearly, then, the question is whether Matthew 25 is a case of telescoping. Moo does not say much about how a premillennial and postmillennial judgment might be blended in a single text. I can think of at least three. The universality of judgment might take place twice, once premillennially for those in the tribulation and once for every one postmillennially. Or, the universality of the judgment might be a reference to the combined events before and after the millennium. Or, again, the universality of judgment might be understood as a premillennial judgment of the righteous and a postmillennial judgment of the wicked.

Regardless of which one of these approaches to telescoping one takes, I fail to see that it solves the problem. If two universal judgments, one premillennial and one postmillennial, are telescoped into one verse, this is probably more a case of multiple fulfillment of a text. However, this has not relieved the problem since you have the universal exclusion of the wicked from the kingdom at the beginning of the millennium and from eternal blessedness at the end. In fairness to Moo, I doubt that this is what he means.

It is more likely that Moo thinks that the universality of judgment is either the result of both the premillennial and postmillennial judgments, or that the righteous are universally judged premillennially and the wicked postmillennially. I think that this is why he cites the Daniel 12:1-2 and John 5:29 as examples of telescoping.

It is clear that there are many ways in which such a telescoping could be done. However, there are two reasons that I think any approach will fail. First, a postmillennial judgment in Matthew 25 places the event outside the temporal framework of the disciple's question in 24:3. Second, there are a number of passages that teach that the wicked do not enter the kingdom, and that those who do enter the millennial age have been converted. The following passages teach either directly or indirectly that the wicked do not enter the kingdom. The rebels in Israel will be rooted out before the establishment of the kingdom (Eze. 20:37, 38). In Matthew it is only to the sheep that Jesus says, "Come, ye blessed of the Father, inherit the kingdom" (25:34). He never says to the wicked premillennially or postmillennially, enter my kingdom. Rather, his words are, "Depart from me" (25:41). Moreover, the Scriptures testify that only those who have been converted will enter the kingdom (Isa. 16:5; 18:7; 19:19-21, 25; 23:18; 55:5-6; 56:6-8; 60:3-5; 61:8-9; Jer. 3:17; 16:19-21; 31:33-34; Amos 9:12; Obad. 17-21; Zec. 13:9).

To escape the incompatibility between posttribulationism and premillennialism wicked Gentiles have to be permitted into the kingdom, and it seems to me that the witness of Scripture is overwhelming against this.

### **The Rapture and the Olivet Discourse**

A third important theological consideration is the Olivet Discourse and its relation to the rapture. It is our Lord's longest prophetic discourse, and it comes as he looks forward to the cross. It is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels: Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5-38. There are three issues that require attention. First, are the disciples representatives of the

believing remnant in Israel or the Church? Second, is the time of the fulfillment of the discourse at the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. or is it eschatological? Third, is the rapture in the Olivet Discourse? While I have separated these three questions for ease and clarity of discussion, it will become clear that they are interrelated.

Whom do the disciples represent?--One of the questions that must be answered is whether the disciples are representatives of the believing remnant in Israel or as the foundation of the Church. The importance of answering this question can be seen in the fact that the discourse comes as the result of the disciples' question. Moreover, the word "you" occurs repeatedly throughout the discourse, often in the emphatic position.

Gundry gives one of the most complete discussions of this issue. He points out that the disciples are a transition group between the believing remnant in Israel and the Church. To deny the possibility that they might represent the Church because the discourse is in the synoptic gospels fails to account for the facts of the matter. Jesus gives instructions to the Church in Matthew 16:18 and 18:15-18. He promises the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:26). The teaching of the apostles was first given to them by Christ himself (Ac. 2:42 Cf. Mt. 28:20). The longest account of the Olivet Discourse is in Matthew which is the particularly Jewish Gospel. However, it is the only Gospel where there is a direct reference to the Church, and the discourse is also found in the two non Jewish Gospels of Mark and Luke.<sup>33</sup>

While the discourse has a decidedly Jewish imprint on it, Gundry cautions against deciding against its teaching is not for the Church. He thinks that the key element is to be found in the fact that the nation of Israel has passed out of divine favor by Matthew 24-25 because of their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah. On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem to the hosannas of the pilgrims from Galilee. The leaders of the nation, however, reject him. By Tuesday they challenged Jesus' authority, and he responds with three parables of judgment. This marks their final rejection of him and his setting aside of the nation. The second parable ends with "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (Mt. 21:43). By Matthew 23:37-39 he gives his sorrowful farewell to the nation itself. Thus, it is best, Gundry thinks, to see contextually that Jesus is turning from the Jews, and preparing the disciples for his death and his outline for the future.<sup>34</sup>

Gundry thinks that the Jewish elements in the discourse can be met if those Jews are ethnic, not religious Jews. That is, they are nationally related to the nation of Israel, but they are religiously a part of the Church. Thus, the descriptions and instruction with a Jewish character are given to Jewish Christians of the future. We should no more deny the books of Hebrews and James a place in the Christian canon because of their Jewish flavor than to demand that the disciples represent Israel and not the Church. Even the Sabbath regulation have a plausible explanation. Jesus is not telling these Jewish Christians to follow them, but he simply recognize that if their flight came on the Sabbath in a Jewish society that practiced the Sabbath regulations, there would be reduced service to travelers.<sup>35</sup>

Support for the contention that the disciples represent the Church can also be found outside the Olivet Discourse. Previous to receiving the discourse, they had been given instruction on Church discipline (Mt. 18:15-18). Two days after this discourse, they received the Upper

Room Discourse and participated in the institution of the Lord's Supper, a rite given to the Church. Some weeks later they were baptized in the Holy Spirit and formed the nucleus of the first church in Jerusalem. They are the foundation of the Church (Eph. 2:20), and so on.<sup>36</sup>

Much of what Gundry says I can agree with. He is right in seeing that the disciples are a transitional group, one time representing Israel and another the Church. He is correct in reminding us that the Gospel are not devoid of teaching for the Church, even the Gospel written to the Jews, Matthew. We can agree that the Olivet Discourse comes at a time when the leaders of Israel have officially rejected Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and Jesus is now preparing for the cross and the establishment of the Church which includes both Jew and Gentile. However, that is not the end of the matter. At least as good a case can be made for the disciples as representatives of the remnant in Israel in the Olivet Discourse.

First, if the disciples stand at one time for the remnant in Israel and another for the Church, it is not unreasonable for them to have dual interests. When the leaders of the Jews reject Jesus, we would expect Jesus to begin to give instructions to the disciples in preparation for its founding (e. g., Mt. 18:15-18; the Upper Room Discourse, Jn. 14). However, it should not surprise us that they would also be interested in what had become of the Jews and in particular the promises given to them in the OT. This is supported by the question of the disciples to Jesus at the ascension about restoring the kingdom to Israel (Ac. 1:6).<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Jesus gives the Olivet Discourse with all its Jewish elements to answer this question. This seems to be supported by its connection with Matthew 23 and Jesus' pronouncement of doom on Israel, and the disciples' question provoked by his statement about the destruction of the temple (Mt. 24:3).

Gleason L. Archer offers a different reason that the disciples must be representatives of the Church rather than of converted Israel. He says that to deny that they represent the Church is to deny one of the most basic principles of evangelical hermeneutics, the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture. He thinks that the disciples, though Jews, are true representatives of the Christian church since Jewish believers wrote all but one of the books of the NT, for the first five years of the Church there was scarcely a non-Jew and all the other exhortations and warnings were for them personally and were fulfilled in the subsequent careers. If this is so, this would mean that the only exception would be the Olivet Discourse! It would require that Jesus would be saying look for these signs but you will never see them. If his remarks are really addressed to a future nonexistent group of people, then what Jesus said in the Olivet Discourse comes down to this. I am giving you signs to look for, but I really do not mean you but a generation hundred, even thousands of years, future. Though I am telling you to look for them, you really are not to look for them, because you will not survive long enough to see them. Archer concludes: "This kind of interpretation adds up to a serious violation of the perspicuity of Scripture."<sup>38</sup>

One finds this kind of objection most perplexing. First, God alone knows the time of the fulfillment of prophecies which predict the future. We can now see that the fulfillment has not yet come, but it could have. If we apply this principle to all prediction or promises in the Bible, then the perspicuity of Scripture is violated repeatedly. I think that regardless of one's eschatology, a Bible-believing Christian would agree that we are commanded to look for Christ's return. But that too has not occurred. This generation or one in the future will see it. Does this

violate the clarity of Scripture? I think not. If so, neither does what has been about the Olivet Discourse, although it might be wrong to understand its teaching that way.

This objection, however, hides what is a more fundamental principle about predictive prophecy which deserves comment. It is the widely held assumption that every prophecy of the future must have some near or immediate fulfillment or it can have no meaning or value to those to whom it is given. Let me just make up an example of what I mean. Suppose that we have a prophecy of some future ruler who is going to bring righteousness and prosperity to the people of Israel. Some argue that this must have a fulfillment or prefulfillment in some king, even if it ultimately is fulfilled in the Messiah. If it does not, then it has no meaning or value to those who hear it. I simply think that principle is false, though there may be cases where is a near fulfillment. Certainly, there is no problem in understanding the meaning of what the prophet says, "a ruler is coming." But does it have value to those who hear it? I think so. If Israel is beset by enemies all around her and decaying within because of kings who lead the people in the worship of idols, is it not comforting to know that there is a day coming when God will install a king who will love the Lord and protect his people from their enemies? I may not see that, I am even desire to see that day very much, but clearly that prediction does not violate the clarity of Scripture nor is it valueless to one in trouble.

Douglas Moo also thinks that the disciples represent the Church in the Olivet Discourse. His arguments are different from those already cited. First, he argues that in most contexts in the Gospels the disciples stand for the Christians of all ages. If this were not the case, then it is difficult to understand why they would take Jesus' teaching as instruction for us. Therefore, there must be a clear reason in the context for narrowing the audience from that of all Christians. Such are lacking, he contends, in the Olivet Discourse. As a matter of fact, he set out a number of similarities between this discourse and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Second, the use of the term "elect" of those on the earth at the time of the fulfillment shows that the discourse is directed to the Church. Third, the nature of the exhortations addressed to the disciples at the end of the discourse confirms that it is directed to the Church. These exhortation parallel admonitions given in Luke 12:39-46 and 19:11-27, where the disciples clearly stand for the Church.<sup>39</sup>

I think that each of Moo's points is open to question. First, do the disciples invariably stand for the Church in the Gospels? The answer is surely yes if the Church includes all believers of all times. However, if the Church begins on the day of Pentecost, then that claim is not so clear. However, if they do not, does that not call into question the use of Jesus' teaching for the Church? Not at all. Such a claim overlooks the distinction between those addressed and those to whom the teaching may be applied. The teachings of Jesus may be addressed to a believing remnant in the Israel but have application to believers of all ages, the Church age included. There are indication discussed above, the Jewish elements in the discourse, that require that those addressed be Jews. Moreover, the parallel that Moo cites between the Olivet Discourse and the Thessalonian epistles may be accounted for on two grounds. The first is that the same event is discussed as in the discourse and 2 Thessalonians. The second is that, though the events are different, they have similarities. This is my position on the parallels between the Olivet Discourse and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.<sup>40</sup>

Second, does the term "elect" invariably refer to the Church? It probably does if that term is used only of the Church in Scripture. But even that is not the case. There are at least elect angels. For a dispensationalist there are elect in Israel as well as the Church. However, might one not argue that the overwhelming use of the term is in reference to the Church in the NT so that we should need a very good reason for deciding that it is different here? Such an argument has a good deal of initial appeal, but in the end I think that it is wrong. What one needs to ask is, "Whom would the hearers of Jesus, in the case the disciples, have identified with this term?" I think that it would have been the believing remnant in Israel.

Finally, do not the similarities between exhortation found elsewhere in the Gospels and the NT show that the disciples represent the Church? Let us assume uncritically that this is true, although in other place in the Gospels they may represent the remnant. That still would not settle the case. The similarities might be accounted for because of their general character and the parallels between the rapture and the second coming.

When is the Olivet Discourse fulfilled?--If the disciples represent the believing remnant in Israel, the time of the fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse becomes a important issue. The reason is that those who hold that position on the disciples are divided among those who think that the fulfillment of at least a large part of the discourse transpired with the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. Some go so far as to argue that Matthew 24:29-31 and Mark 13:24-27 are not reference to the coming of Christ, but are rather symbolic descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. This position has often been called the preterist view because it sees so much of the discourse already fulfilled historically.

I would like to give the arguments for this position as set out in a recent work by David J. Palm.<sup>41</sup> Palm's thesis deals primarily with the discourse in Mark, and he argues that verses 5-31 have to do with the fall of Jerusalem. His reasons are as follows. First, Jesus say that that generation would not pass away without all these things being fulfilled. This referred to the disciples' generation, not some future nonexistent generation.<sup>42</sup> Second, there is explicit use of "you" throughout the discourse, often in the emphatic position. This identifies the addressees as the disciples.<sup>43</sup> Third, references found throughout verses 5-31 identify its application to first-century Judea. The system of local councils and synagogues is first-century.<sup>44</sup> Fourth, the warnings to the inhabitants of Judea only make sense to a first-century context, not modern Israel.<sup>45</sup> Fifth, there are indications that the tribulation did not come at the end of all things but historically. Why would one flee if it was the end of all things?<sup>46</sup> Sixth, the parable of the fig tree cease to make sense if one partitions the text between the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of Christ. What can be meant by summer is near, right at hand?<sup>47</sup> Finally, evidence is found in the OT for a symbolic description of divine judgment.<sup>48</sup>

A thorough discussion of these arguments goes beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I would like to respond to the preterist view, taking a futurist position. First, the decisive argument for Palm comes from Matthew 24:34 and "13:30. The break between the historical and the eschatological must come after, not before the passage that is usually associated with Christ's coming because the generation to whom this discourse is addressed will see the fulfillment of the things prophesied. The only way this can be true if one takes these words in their normal sense, is that they were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem.

It does seem to me that Palm, along with others, has put his finger on a problem if you partition each of the accounts in the Gospels into historical and eschatological. Then, it seems that the you has to refer to the disciples, and they have to see the fulfillment of these things. However, I think that the situation is different. The question of the disciples in Matthew 24:3 does contain both a historical and eschatological element. However, it is my judgment that only the Lukean account treats the historical element (Lk. 21:20-24), and it omits the problematic verse. Both Matthew and Mark have the statement but neither of them describes the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70, at least not directly. If Jesus only teaches about eschatological events and they are to occur in a seven year period, then the generation and the use of "you" is a reference to that future time. Note that Jesus is not answering a different question in the different synoptics. He, however, does answer different parts of that question, and this explains at least some of the differences in the accounts.

Second, there are elements in the historical section, as Palm sees it, that must be eschatological. There is the reference to the "abomination of desolation" from Daniel in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14. In Mark a masculine participle is used after the neuter "abomination" showing that Jesus is thinking of a person, the Antichrist of 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>49</sup>

Third, it is very unlikely that what is unusually as a description of Christ's coming is in fact a symbolic representation of the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. The first reason for rejecting the symbolic interpretation is that association of Jesus' coming with the clouds allay has reference to the second advent in the NT. Second, the judgments in Matthew 24:4-28, Mark 13:1-23 and Luke 21:5-24 and the cosmic signs in Matthew 24:29, 30, Mark 13:24-25 and Luke 21:25-27 bear a striking similarity to those described by the author of Revelation in chapter 6. He holds these to be future, and he is presumably writing after A. D. 70.<sup>50</sup>

Is the rapture in the Olivet Discourse? While it is the case that the rapture could be posttribulational even if it were not in the Olivet Discourse, it would be a decisive argument for a position if it could be shown to be there and its time determined. Archer, a defender of a mid-seventieth week rapture, thinks that rapture is there, though he thinks that it is hard to pick out any point in the discourse where it occurs. Suggest some possibilities. Perhaps it is in Matthew 24:14 in "then the end shall come." Maybe it is to be found in verse 27 where the word "coming" is used. However, this seems to be at the end of the tribulation. But in the end he concludes that .. . "the precise timing of the Rapture cannot be clearly ascertained from the text of the Olivet Discourse . . ." <sup>51</sup>

One cannot help but agree with Archer. He may be right about where the rapture is going to occur in the Olivet Discourse, but there little clear evidence for his conclusions.

Gundry and Moo take essentially the same position.<sup>52</sup> They see the rapture in two places in the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24:31 and 24:40-41. The placing of the rapture in 24:31 is particularly important in that verse 29 make it clear that what follows is "immediately after the tribulation of those days." The identification of this verse with rapture rests on two grounds. First, Jesus describes a "gathering" that takes place at the sound of a great trumpet, a figure which is found in both 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. The verb "to gather

together" (episunago) is used here, and its noun form (episunagoge) is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 of the rapture. Though both the verb and noun occur only nine times in the NT, it is reasonable, so the argument goes, to identify the two on the verbal similarity and other parallels.<sup>53</sup> Second, the use of the term "elect" shows that it is the Church that is in view.<sup>54</sup>

I have already dealt with the question of whether "elect" is always a reference to the Church in the NT. Let me turn here to the use of the verb "to gather together" in connection with a trumpet. The trumpet is a common eschatological symbol. It has a number of uses. There are seven trumpet judgments in the book of Revelation. There are trumpets that gather the elect. There is a similarity, but the use of trumpets in prophetic literature is not confined to a posttribulational rapture. The noun and verb "gather together" are found only nine times in the NT as Moo admits. Only three of the nine have eschatological significance: Matthew 24:31; its synoptic parallel, Mark 13:27; and 2 Thessalonians 2:1. The other six occurrences are of a non-theological, general character. This term is not a technical term for a posttribulational rapture. The eschatological occurrences are so few that little can be said about the term.

Might not the parallels between Matthew and the Thessalonian epistles suggest a verbal contact? While there are similarities, I think that the differences are more numerous and more significant. Matthew has the elect gathered by the angels, while 1 Thessalonians teaches that the Lord himself will do it. Matthew has the great trumpet call the elect from the four winds; 1 Thessalonians it announces the descent of our Lord. Matthew makes no mention of either a resurrection or the translation of living saints; Rapture passages do, and these are important features in those passages. In Matthew the gathering seems to be on the earth, while in 1 Thessalonians it is in the air. 1 Thessalonians omits any reference to heavenly changes; this is an important element in Matthew 24. In 1 Thessalonians an order of ascent is given; it is not clear that there is any ascent at all in Matthew 24. The dissimilarities in detail and the paucity of occurrences of "gather together" make the identification of rapture in 24:31 rest on the slimmest of evidence.

A second possibility for the rapture is Matthew 24:40-41 and its parallel in Luke 17:34-35 where one is "taken" and one is "left." The verb "to take" is used of the rapture in John 14:1-3. It is possible, however, that the one taken here goes to judgment. However, Moo thinks that it is significant that the verb for "take" is different here from the one in verse 39.<sup>55</sup>

Moo gives enough reasons in his discussion of this text to question his identification. He admits that the one taken in verses 40, 41 may go to judgment, not the kingdom. This seems clearly to be the case from the parallel in Luke 17:34-35. Moreover, the verb "taken" is used in a variety of ways, and is not a technical term of a posttribulational return of Christ. As a matter of fact, it is quite a common word with many general uses.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has not established the pretribulation rapture of the Church. That was not its purpose.<sup>57</sup> Rather I have tried to treat three issues at the interface of dispensationalism and the rapture, and to show that they do not preclude the possibility of a pretribulational rapture. I have tried to show that though there is a certain independence between dispensationalism and a

pretribulation rapture. The former is most compatible with the latter. I have argued that there is an incompatibility between posttribulationism and premillennialism because of the need for nonglorified saints in the millennium. And finally, I have examined the Olivet Discourse to see if requires that the Church is a part of a posttribulation rapture. My conclusion are that the disciples are not representative of the Church, and, though the discourse is eschatological, there is no mention of the rapture in it, a conclusion quite in keeping with a pretribulationism.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), pp. 12-28.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 19-21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>16</sup> For much fuller defense of this claim see John F. Walvoord, "The Coming of Christ for His Church," *Bib Sac* 123 (1966) 3-14.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1957), pp. 92-95; John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 53; Allen Beechick, *The Pretribulation Rapture* (Denver: Accent Books, 1980), pp. 39-57; Gleason F. Archer, "Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture" in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 120-22.

<sup>18</sup> William E. Bell, *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (Ph. D. dissertation, NYU, 1967), pp. 247-48. See also E. Michael Rusten, *A Critical Evaluation of Dispensational Interpretations of the Book of Revelation* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1977), 2 vols.

<sup>19</sup> Gundry, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point see Paul D. Feinberg, "Pretribulation Rapture" in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Posttribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 73.

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<sup>21</sup> Bell, pp. 247-8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> For a fuller discussion of this matter see Feinberg, *Pretribulation*, pp. 74-76.

<sup>24</sup> Gundry, chap. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas J. Moo, "Response: Douglas J. Moo" in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Posttribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 161-65.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 163-4.

<sup>33</sup> Gundry, pp. 129-31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-32.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-33.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon R. Lewis, "Biblical Evidence for Pretribulationism," *Bib Sac* 124 (1968), 220.

<sup>38</sup> Archer, pp. 123-4.

<sup>39</sup> Moo, pp. 192-95.

<sup>40</sup> I have argued this point in more detail in Feinberg, pp. 80-86; 229-30.

<sup>41</sup> David J. Palm, "The Signs of His Coming: An Examination of the Olivet Discourse from a Preterist Perspective" (M. A. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, June, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-18.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., ch. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Moo, p. 191.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 191-2.

<sup>51</sup> Archer, p. 123. For the more extended discussion of this point by Archer see pp. 122-23.

<sup>52</sup> Gundry, pp. 134-39 and Moo, pp. 195-96.

<sup>53</sup> Gundry, p. 135 and Moo, p. 195.

<sup>54</sup> Gundry, p. 135 and Moo, p. 194.

<sup>55</sup> Moo, p. 196. See also Gundry, pp 137-39.

<sup>56</sup> For fuller discussion of this point see John F. Walvoord, "Is a Posttribulational Rapture Revealed in Matthew 24?" GTJ 6 (1985) 262-66.

<sup>57</sup> I have tried to give a case for a pretribulational rapture in Feinberg, pp. 47-86. Even there not everything that could or should be said for the position was said.