

a selection from Conciliar Press' newest book:
ULTIMATE THINGS by Dennis Eugene Engleman

On the way to work in the morning, faced with the mundane reality of rush-hour traffic, drivers may find themselves confronted with extraordinary messages. One such is the bumper sticker which admonishes: "WARNING! In the event of Rapture, this car will be left driverless!"

Contemplation of such a scenario produces astounding mental images: Without warning, people begin to float up from the freeway, executives waving briefcases and truckers still clutching C.B. radio microphones, while their abandoned vehicles careen wildly or (with God's merciful intervention) coast safely to a stop. The sky is gradually filled with the gently ascending, cheering bodies of the Elect. Below, those who are left behind stare dumbfounded, anxious and resentful. "Who are these people, and why are they flying?" they ask.

Such a visible and large-scale forsaking of the laws of nature cannot be hidden or disguised for long. Sooner or later someone realizes that all the *Christians* are gone! The churches are empty. Only "unbelievers" are left on Planet Earth. After the initial shock, however, these intransigents (why else would they be unbelievers?) go on about their business. "Good riddance!" they snort.

And from this point on, all the grim events of the last days begin to unfold—without any Christians on hand to suffer through them.

ESCAPING TRIBULATION

The appeal of "the rapture" to the modern mentality is easy to understand. It is comforting for believers to speculate that they will suddenly and effortlessly be whisked away into heaven without the trouble of dying first. In God's Kingdom

they will crowd around the Throne and watch like spectators at a cosmic sporting event as the unfortunate ones remaining on earth endure the Great Tribulation. Having been removed from the playing field before the final period gets underway, they will be impervious to the deceptions and persecutions of Antichrist as he overpowers the whole world.

Because of its promise to spare Christians the onslaught of the end times, belief in the rapture has attained immense popularity in recent years. Its sudden promi-

nence is less a function of believers' rekindled faith, however, than of its own newness as a doctrine. The rapture was, in fact, unheard of before the nineteenth century, and represents a recent and radical reinterpretation of Scripture. That such a theological reworking has been unquestioningly, even enthusiastically, accepted by a great many people is indicative of a subtle and profound change in contemporary Christian thought, the real effect of which needs to be understood.

Saint Paul's First Epistle to the



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Thessalonians is generally cited as the primary scriptural basis for the rapture: "We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up ["raptured"] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

A supporting argument for the rapture is sometimes based on the observation that, in the Revelation of Saint John, the Church is mentioned by name only in the first five chapters, and (supposedly) not at all after the Great Tribulation begins. This is taken to indicate that the Church has been "raptured" into heaven by then.

The most telling critique of this doctrine is simply the fact of its newness. It developed from a series of visions experienced by a Scottish woman named Margaret Macdonald in 1830. She believed that a "spirit of prophecy" had revealed to her that, prior to Christ's Second Coming, He would come secretly to remove all Christians from the earth. This novel idea was quickly adopted into both Catholic and Protestant doctrines, and spread throughout Europe and America.

Following Macdonald's "visions," Christ's words to the church of Philadelphia were marshaled in support of the "rapture" concept: "I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth" (Revelation 3:10). The Lord's High Priestly Prayer shows, however, that He will keep His followers "from the hour of trial" not by removing them from the world, but rather by protecting them from the world's evil: "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15).

The concept of Christ rapturing believers was completely unknown during the first thousand years of Christian history, during which time there was but one Christian Faith throughout the world. The Seven Ecumenical Councils of A.D.

325 through 787, in which all the essential doctrines of Christian Truth were declared, never mentioned a rapture.

Father Michael Pomazansky points out the traditional Christian teaching on this subject: that "even the elect will suffer on earth during the 'tribulation' period, and that for their sake this period will be shortened (Matt. 24:21-22)."

It has been suggested by various modern writers that the term "elect" refers not to pre-Tribulation Christians, but to those Jews, allegorically 144,000, who are to convert to Christ in the heat of the last days. But the Scriptures teach otherwise. Saint Peter addresses his first epistle to "the pilgrims of the Dispersion . . . *elect* according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1, 2, emphasis added). Saint Paul admonishes the Colossian Christians, "Therefore, as the *elect* of God . . . put on tender mercies" (Colossians 3:12, emphasis added). From these passages it is clear that the "elect" are all faithful Christians.

Nor will Christ come secretly, as He Himself declared: "Therefore if they say to you, 'Look . . . He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it" (Matthew 24:26). The Fathers affirm that the Lord's Return will be unmistakably and suddenly apparent to all mankind: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:27).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In order to recapture the traditional understanding of the event Saint Paul is describing to the Thessalonians in the passage quoted earlier, one needs to be clear on when it is to take place. Saint Paul is speaking of the moment of Christ's Second Coming—that is, not before the Great Tribulation, as the rapturists teach, but at the culmination of it: "we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord . . ." (1 Thessalonians 4:15).

Saint Matthew is in agreement, and describes the scene in detail: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the

Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:29-31).

This being "caught up . . . in the clouds" and being "gather[ed] . . . from the four winds" is a portrayal of the instantaneous spiritual transformation that will occur after the Great Tribulation, when the Lord returns in glory: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51, 52).

THE COUNTDOWN

The Word of God cannot fail. Someday everything that is prophesied to happen will happen. "When the transgressors have reached their fullness, a king shall arise, having fierce features, who understands sinister schemes" (Daniel 8:23). When the time is ripe, Antichrist will arrive on the world stage. He will not appear as a devil, but as a wise benefactor to humanity. Through deception, he will induce virtually all mankind to love and accept him, and even proclaim him king. Everyone will acknowledge his authority because of his apparent goodness and generosity. But once he has attained complete worldly power, he will show his true intent: to compel all people to worship him as god.

Once Antichrist has seized worldwide control of politics, economics, and religion, he will thoroughly and systematically annihilate any resistance to his authority. Then the persecution of those who have not surrendered to him, will become so intense that, as the Lord says, "unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22).

Christians will be imprisoned, tortured to make them deny their faith in Christ, brutally murdered, deprived not only of home and sustenance, but even of the means to purchase food. Those will be

times of unparalleled horror, of complete spiritual darkness, of such unimaginable suffering that even the communist Gulag was just a dress rehearsal by comparison. It will be the greatest agony of blood and tears that the world has ever seen, or will ever see. "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24:21).

When these awesome events transpire, what will be the fate of those who have expected the rapture to isolate them from the Great Tribulation? It is safe to assume they will be unprepared to face the crisis. What's worse, they will not understand what is really happening! They will reason that, since they are still on earth, the Antichrist cannot possibly have come yet. This attitude was articulated by the respected Protestant theologian Arthur W. Pink: "The Antichrist cannot appear before the Rapture of the saints," he asserted. As long as the rapture has not yet occurred, "then, here is proof positive that the Antichrist *has not yet appeared*."² Not expecting the Deceiver, those awaiting the rapture could be completely taken in by his deception and unwittingly become his disciples.

A SATANIC DECEPTION

What could be more diabolically clever than for Antichrist to persuade his victims they need never fear even meeting him? Viewed from this perspective, the common conception of the rapture as a pre-Tribulation "emergency eject" seems to be far more than just a minor misinterpretation of Scripture. It is instead a demonic subterfuge designed to lure many into dangerous complacency. What is more trustworthy—a vision of one person from the nineteenth century or the consensus of the undivided Church of Jesus Christ?

The rapture theory is not so much an outright falsehood as a subtle corruption of truth, a beguiling invitation to be at ease and sleep just when the most stringent wakefulness and caution are needed. Such deception or twisting of God's Word is exactly the technique that Satan, Antichrist's source of power, has used successfully against mankind, be-

ginning in the Garden with Adam and Eve.

Satan's deceptions are beyond mere human ability to resist or even detect. "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Whether by astounding miracles or seemingly insignificant distortions of the gospel, Satan continues to dupe humans just as he has from the beginning.

One of Satan's greatest achievements has been to separate people from the living traditions of the Church and to instill in their minds the notion that each person has the right and ability to interpret Scripture for himself. The contemporary concept of the rapture is a logical result of this mistaken attitude.

THE PROTECTION OF TRADITION

Holy Tradition, the living repository of Christ's teachings, has appropriately been called "the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church" (Vladimir Lossky, contemporary Orthodox theologian). Without this Spirit-filled Tradition, the gospel cannot be correctly understood, nor can Satan be defeated.

Saint Basil the Great, writing in the

fourth century, declared, "Concerning the teachings of the Church . . . we have received some from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly, through apostolic tradition. Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source—no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church. If we attacked unwritten customs, claiming them to be of little importance, we would fatally mutilate the Gospel."³

In these perilous times, it is imperative that Christians look beyond the shallow interpretations and speculations of modernity, to the firm ground of authentic Christian teaching, rooted in the Holy Scriptures. The witness of the Holy Spirit in Christendom is a millennium of unified thought, beginning with the times of the Apostles, upon all the questions which confront believers even today. And it is from this wealth of consistent Christian thought that doctrines such as the rapture can be seen as the dangerous ploys they really are.

¹ *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, St. Herman of Alaska Press, p. 345.

² *The Antichrist*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 33.

³ *On the Holy Spirit*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 98.

"ULTIMATE THINGS is a clarion call for Orthodox Christians to remain true to Christ and the Church in the days ahead. For those who have found themselves nearly pulled to pieces by the morass of conflicting modern interpretations of the apocalyptic Scriptures, here is an opportunity to confront some of the traditional teachings of those who seek to represent the mind of the historic Church of Jesus Christ.

—From the foreword by Fr. Thomas Hopko,

Dean, St. Vladimir's Seminary, Crestwood, New York

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