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# Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulational Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald

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Did the key elements of the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture originate with a young Scottish girl named Margaret Macdonald, as advocated by another "Mac"—Dave MacPherson? This is the thesis put forth in a number of publications for over 15 years by MacPherson, a newsman turned rapture researcher. MacPherson's major book *The Great Rapture Hoax*<sup>1</sup> is one in a series of revisions of his original discourse *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin*.<sup>2</sup>

Dave MacPherson is convinced "that the popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800's."<sup>3</sup> "If Christians had known [this] all along," bemoans MacPherson concerning the historical beginnings of the pretribulational rapture, "the state of Christianity could have been vastly different today."<sup>4</sup> He thinks this ignorance has been due not merely to a historical oversight, but rather to a well-orchestrated "cover-up" carefully managed by clever pretribu-

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<sup>1</sup> Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983). A condensed version is entitled *Rapture?* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1987). This writer's copy of *Rapture?* has footnote numbers in the text, but the notes were left out.

<sup>2</sup> Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City, MO: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973). Next came *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City, MO: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> *The Great Rapture Hoax*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

lational leaders each step of the way.<sup>5</sup> Before discussing the background of the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture, this article first discusses the background of Dave MacPherson.

### MacPherson's Background

Dave MacPherson is dedicated to disrupting belief in the pre-tribulation rapture, since, according to his interpretation, it has been the cause for great disruption in his own life. "Back in 1953 I had a jolting encounter with the Rapture," is the first sentence in one of MacPherson's books.<sup>6</sup> This is a reference to his expulsion from a Christian college in California for propagating views that conflicted with the pretribulation view. He suggests that this experience was so devastating that it accounts for a setback in his Christian life. Because of his discouragement MacPherson and a friend got drunk in Mexico and passed out. MacPherson says this was a brush with death because of the many dangers that could befall someone in that condition in Mexico. Later he was involved in a wreck with a car while riding his motorcycle, and he almost lost his left arm. But these were not the beginning of his nor his family's troubles because of the pretribulation rapture.<sup>7</sup>

Trials and tribulations due to this doctrine seem to run in the MacPherson family. Dave's father, Norman, had planted a church in Long Beach, California and was doing quite well until a group of new people in the church caused a commotion over the timing of the rapture. Norman MacPherson was forced out of this prospering church because he had shifted from the pretribulation to the post-tribulation view of the rapture.<sup>8</sup> He then started another, less successful church in Long Beach.

<sup>5</sup> The cover-up emphasis is greatly stressed in MacPherson's *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1975). Jim McKeever's forward compares the pretribulation cover-up to the Watergate cover-up. MacPherson even alleges that Dallas Seminary groomed and commissioned Hal Lindsey for the purpose of popularizing the pretribulation rapture for the Jesus Movement in the early 1970s (pp. 131-32).

<sup>6</sup> *The Great Rapture Hoax*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Sumner has noted that MacPherson has a bad habit of attributing all kinds of personal tragedies to the pre-trib teaching: his mother's death, his sister's inability to have more children, his own failure to follow through on his calling as an evangelist, and other matters. ("Looking for the Blessed Horrible Holocaust!" A book review of *The Late Great Pre Trib Rapture, The Biblical Evangelist*, May 1975, p. 8). Sumner also states that MacPherson's lovable dog, Wolf, apparently became demon-possessed just about the time MacPherson was about to write his first anti-pretribulation book, savagely biting his writing hand several times. ("Hope? Or Hoax?" *The Biblical Evangelist*, February 1984, p. 7).

<sup>8</sup> Norman S. MacPherson authored posttribulation books, *Tell It Like It Will Be* (N.p.: By the author, 1970), and *Triumph through Tribulation* (Otego, NY: By the author, 1944).

In 1983 MacPherson declared, "Fifteen years ago I knew nothing about Pre-Trib beginnings."<sup>9</sup> He began his quest by writing to his father and received an answer that indicated a lack of consensus among scholars, "so I decided to do some research on my own."<sup>10</sup> MacPherson's investigation gathered steam when he found a rare book in 1971 by Robert Norton, *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets; In the Catholic Apostolic Church* (1861). "The important part in Norton's book," claimed MacPherson, "is a personal revelation that Margaret Macdonald had in the spring of 1830."<sup>11</sup> MacPherson uses this finding to project the notion that the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture is of demonic origin through a 15-year-old Scottish lassie.

John Walvoord has noted:

MacPherson made these charges against pretribulationism and then afterward went to great lengths to find historic verification. . . . Readers will be impressed that as a newsman MacPherson builds a strong case for his position, but will be less impressed when they begin to analyze what he has actually proved.<sup>12</sup>

### MacPherson's Claims

Irvingite Robert Norton included a handwritten account of Margaret Macdonald's "prophecy,"<sup>13</sup> which MacPherson says was the fountainhead for J. N. Darby's development of the pretribulational rapture doctrine.<sup>14</sup> MacPherson does not say that Macdonald included a clear statement of the pretribulational rapture, but that she "separated the Rapture from the the Second Coming before anyone else did."<sup>15</sup> According to MacPherson, Darby pilfered this two-stage teaching from Macdonald and then developed it systematically, skillfully passing it off as the fruit of his personal Bible study.

Macdonald's so-called revelation that MacPherson cites to make his case revolves around two key phrases.<sup>16</sup> "Margaret dra-

<sup>9</sup> *The Great Rapture Hoax*, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), pp. 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> "Her revelation was first published in Robert Norton's *Memoirs of James & George Macdonald, of Port Glasgow* (1840), pp. 171-76. Norton published it again in *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets; In the Catholic Apostolic Church* (1861), pp. 15-18" (MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax*, p. 125).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-57.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> The following books are some of those that have the full text of Macdonald's ut-

matically separated the *sign* of the Son of man from the *coming* of the Son of man,<sup>17</sup> declares MacPherson, based on her phrase, now look out for the sign of the Son of man<sup>18</sup> MacPherson argues that she equated the *sign* with the Rapture—a Rapture that would occur *before* the revealing of Antichrist<sup>19</sup> He bases this on her statement, I saw it was just the Lord himself descending from Heaven with a shout, just the glorified man, even Jesus<sup>20</sup>

### MacPherson's Errors

MacPherson makes two major errors in his attempt to argue that Margaret Macdonald originated the basis for the pretribulation rapture First, it is highly doubtful that the Macdonald prophecy refers to a two-stage coming of Christ, as MacPherson advocates Therefore it would be impossible for this source to be the basis for a new idea if it did not contain those elements MacPherson has misinterpreted Macdonald's words by equating her use of *sign* with a rapture Rather, she is saying that only those who are spiritual will see the secret *sign* of the Son of Man that will precede the single, posttribulation second coming of Christ In other words only those who have the light of the Holy Spirit within them will know when the Second Coming will take place because this spiritual enlightenment will enable them to have the spiritual perception to see the secret sign (not the secret rapture) These are her own words

all must, as Stephen was, be filled with the Holy Ghost, that they might look up, and see the brightness of the Father's glory I saw the error to be, that men think that it will be something seen by the natural eye but tis spiritual discernment that is needed, the eye of God in his people Only those who have the light of God within them will see the sign of his appearance No need to follow them who say, see here, or see there, for his day shall be as the lightning to those in whom the living Christ is Tis Christ in us that will lift us up—he is the light—tis only those that are alive in him that will be caught up to meet him in the air I saw that we must be in the Spirit that we might see spiritual things John was in the Spirit, when he saw a throne set in Heaven it is not knowledge about God that it contains, but it is an entering into God I felt that those who were filled with the Spirit could see spiri-

terance MacPherson's *The Incredible Come Up* idem *The Great Rapture Hoax* R A Huebner *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Revealed* (Millington NJ Present Truth Publishers 1976) pp 67-69 Hal Lindsey *The Rapture Truth or Consequences* (New York Bantam Books 1983) pp 169-72 William R Kimball *The Rapture A Question of Timing* (Grand Rapids Baker Book House 1985) pp 44-47

<sup>17</sup> *The Great Rapture Hoax* p 128

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* p 125

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* p 129

tual things, and feel walking in the midst of them, while those who had not the Spirit could see nothing.<sup>21</sup>

Macdonald is clearly concerned with spiritual insight for several reasons: (1) Stephen *saw* into heaven; he was not raptured or taken to heaven. (2) The sign will be seen only by the spiritually enlightened. It will not be a natural or physical sign, but one perceived by "spiritual discernment." (3) She is discussing "the sign of his appearance," not His actual appearance. (4) Once a person has been so enlightened, he will not need direction from others. He will be guided directly by "the living Christ." (5) The emphasis is on seeing: "John was in the Spirit, when he *saw*," "those who were filled with the Spirit could *see*." Posttribulationist Kromminga observes that Macdonald's "prophecies made it plain that the return of the Lord depended upon the proper spiritual preparation of His Church."<sup>22</sup>

Anti-pretribulationist John Bray agrees that Margaret Macdonald was teaching a single coming, not a two-staged event. "The only thing new in her revelation itself seems to be that of just Spirit-filled Christians being caught up at the second coming of Christ following heavy trials and tribulation by the Antichrist,"<sup>23</sup> notes Bray. In other words Macdonald seems to have been teaching a *posttribulationial, partial rapture*. Bray further explains:

It seems to me that Margaret MacDonald was saying that Christians WILL face the temptation of the false Christ (antichrist) and be in "*an awfully dangerous situation*," and that only the Spirit IN US will enable us to be kept from being deceived; and that as the Spirit works, so will the antichrist; but the pouring out of the Spirit will "*fit us to enter into the marriage supper of the Lamb*," and those filled with the Spirit would be taken while the others would be left. . . . Margaret MacDonald did teach a partial rapture, of course, but this did not necessarily mean that the teaching included a tribulation period FOLLOWING THAT for the other Christians. . . . It would not be right to take for granted that Margaret MacDonald believed in a tribulation period following the appearing of Christ unless she had definitely said so. Rather, it would be more logical to think that her view would have been the same as prevalent among the futurists at that time, that is, tribulation then the second coming.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-27.

<sup>22</sup> D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church: Studies in the History of Christian Chiliasm* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1945), p. 250.

<sup>23</sup> John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, n.d.), pp. 21-22. Interestingly Bray argues that Emmanuel Lacunza, a Jesuit priest from Chile, writing under the assumed name of Rabbi Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra as a converted Jew, came up with a two-staged coming in the 1790s.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

Another point MacPherson makes to support his opinion is that "Margaret Macdonald was the first person to teach a coming of Christ that would precede the days of Antichrist."<sup>25</sup> This would mean, according to MacPherson, that Macdonald had to be teaching a two-stage coming. However, it is highly questionable, as already noted, that Macdonald was referring to the rapture, as MacPherson insists. Also Macdonald was still a historicist; she believed the church was already in the tribulation and had been for hundreds of years. Therefore the Antichrist was to be soon revealed, but before the second coming. She said believers need spiritual sight so they will not be deceived. Otherwise, why would believers, including herself, need to be filled with the Spirit to escape the deception that will accompany "the fiery trial which is to try us," associated with the Antichrist's arrival? Further, she certainly includes herself as one who needs this special ministry of the Holy Spirit, as can be seen from this passage from her "revelation."

... now shall the awful sight of a false Christ be seen on this earth, and nothing but the living Christ in us can detect this awful attempt of the enemy to deceive. . . . The Spirit must and will be purged out on the church, that she may be purified and filled with God. . . . There will be outward trial too, but 'tis principally temptation. It is brought on by the outpouring of the Spirit, and will just increase in proportion as the Spirit is poured out. The trial of the Church is from the Antichrist. It is by being filled with the Spirit that we shall be kept. I frequently said, Oh be filled with the Spirit—have the light of God in you, that you may detect satan—be full of eyes within—be clay in the hands of the potter—submit to be filled, filled with God. . . . This is what we are at present made to pray much for, that speedily we may all be made ready to meet our Lord in the air—and it will be. Jesus wants his bride. His desire is toward us.<sup>26</sup>

Ryrie also notes a further misunderstanding of Macdonald's "prophecy":

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.<sup>27</sup>

Macdonald, then, was a posttribulationist. She believed the church would go through the Tribulation. This is hardly the beginnings of pretribulationism! Walvoord observes,

Readers of MacPherson's *Incredible Cover-Up* will undoubtedly be impressed by the many long quotations, most of which are only window

<sup>25</sup> MacPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up*, pp. 155-56.

<sup>26</sup> *The Great Rapture Hoax*, pp. 127-28.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know about the Rapture* (Chicago: Moody

dressing for what he is trying to prove. When it gets down to the point of proving that either MacDonald or Irving was pretribulationist, the evidence gets very muddy. The quotations MacPherson cites do not support his conclusion.<sup>28</sup>

Second, in spite of MacPherson's great amount of research and writing he has yet to produce hard evidence that J. N. Darby was influenced by Macdonald's utterances, regardless of what they meant. MacPherson only assumes the connection. Throughout MacPherson's writings, he keeps presenting information about issues, developments, and beliefs from Great Britain during the early 1800s, apparently thinking that he is adding proof for his thesis that "the popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800's."<sup>29</sup> Much of the information is helpful and interesting, but does not prove his thesis. If his research were represented as a river, it would be a mile wide (amount of information) but only an inch deep (actual proof). Even if Darby developed the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture after Macdonald's utterance, specific proof would be needed to make a link between Macdonald and Darby. Instead MacPherson only offers speculative guesses about how Darby used his training for the law profession to manipulate Christians by hiding the supposed true origins of his teaching on the rapture. Perhaps MacPherson is using his investigative journalism training and experience to smear Darby.

### Scholarly Responses to MacPherson's Claims

"A few Pre-Trib leaders have long asserted that scholars scoff" at his findings, declares MacPherson. "The following quotes from leading experts tell a different story!"<sup>30</sup> True, many scholars have complimented MacPherson on his effort; however, most have not endorsed or agreed with MacPherson's thesis. F. F. Bruce's comments are typical: "This makes most interesting reading. . . . It is an illuminating book."<sup>31</sup> MacPherson takes such general statements about his book as agreement with what he is saying. Most scholars, however, while saying that MacPherson's work is valuable, stop short of

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Press, 1981), p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> *The Great Rapture Hoax*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Dave MacPherson, "Some Reactions to Dave MacPherson's Research" (unpublished paper, n.d.). MacPherson says that these scholars endorse his book. However, most of the comments are recommendations of the book, but not endorsements in the sense that they necessarily agree with MacPherson's thesis.

<sup>31</sup> F. F. Bruce, quoted by Dave MacPherson in "Some Public Reactions to *The Great Rapture Hoax*" (unpublished paper, n.d.), p. 1.

agreeing with his conclusion. Bruce, long associated with the Brethren movement but one who does not agree with the pretribulation rapture view, says, "Where did he [Darby] get it? The reviewer's answer would be that it was in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager students of unfulfilled prophecy. . . . direct dependence by Darby on Margaret Macdonald is unlikely."<sup>32</sup>

Various scholars reveal that they think, in varying degrees, that *MacPherson has not proven his point*. Most if not all of the following six writers whose statements are quoted do not hold to the pretribulation rapture teaching. Ernest R. Sandeen declares,

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. . . . Since the clear intention of this charge is to discredit the doctrine by attributing its origin to fanaticism rather than Scripture, there seems little ground for giving it any credence.<sup>33</sup>

Historian Timothy P. Weber's evaluation is as follows:

The pretribulation rapture was a neat solution to a thorny problem and historians are still trying to determine how or where Darby got it. . . .

A newer though still not totally convincing view contends that the doctrine initially appeared in a prophetic vision of Margaret Macdonald. . . .

Possibly, we may have to settle for Darby's own explanation. He claimed that the doctrine virtually jumped out of the pages of Scripture once he accepted and consistently maintained the distinction between Israel and the church.<sup>34</sup>

American historian Richard R. Reiter says,

[Robert] Cameron probably traced this important but apparently erroneous view back to S. P. Tregelles. . . . Recently more detailed study on this view as the origin of pretribulationism appeared in works by Dave McPherson. . . . Historian Ian S. Rennie . . . regarded McPherson's case as interesting but not conclusive.<sup>35</sup>

Posttribulationist William E. Bell asserts,

It seems only fair, however, in the absence of eyewitnesses to settle the argument conclusively, that the benefit of the doubt should be given to Darby, and that the charge made by Tregelles be regarded as a possibility but with insufficient support to merit its acceptance. . . . On the

<sup>32</sup> F. F. Bruce, Review of *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin in Evangelical Quarterly* 47 (January-March 1975): 58.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), pp. 21-22.

<sup>35</sup> Richard R. Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand

whole, however, it seems that Darby is perhaps the most likely choice—with help from Tweedy. This conclusion is greatly strengthened by Darby's own claim to have arrived at the doctrine through his study of II Thessalonians 2:1-2.<sup>36</sup>

John Bray does not accept the MacPherson thesis either.

He [Darby] rejected those practices, and he already had his new view of the Lord coming FOR THE SAINTS (as contrasted to the later coming to the earth) which he had believed since 1827. . . . It was the coupling of this "70th week of Daniel" prophecy and its futuristic interpretation, with the teaching of the "secret rapture," that gave to us the completed "Pre-tribulation Secret Rapture" teaching as it has now been taught for many years. [This] makes it impossible for me to believe that Darby got his Pre-Tribulation Rapture teaching from Margaret MacDonald's vision in 1830. He was already a believer in it since 1827, as he plainly said.<sup>37</sup>

Brethern scholar Roy A. Huebner considers MacPherson's charges as "using slander that J. N. Darby took the [truth of the] pre-tribulation rapture from those very opposing, demon-inspired utterances."<sup>38</sup> He concludes that MacPherson

did not profit by reading the utterances allegedly by Miss M. M. Instead of apprehending the plain import of her statements, as given by R. Norton, which has some affinity to the post-tribulation scheme and no real resemblance to the pretribulation rapture and dispensational truth, he has read into it what he appears so anxious to find.<sup>39</sup>

It seems, then, most likely that Margaret Macdonald did not teach *any* of the features of a pretribulation rapture doctrine as MacPherson suggests, and therefore she could not have been a source for the origin of that doctrine.

The whole controversy as aroused by Dave MacPherson's claims has so little supporting evidence, despite his careful research, that one wonders how he can write his book with a straight face. Pretribulationists should be indebted to Dave MacPherson for exposing the facts, namely, that there is no proof that MacDonald or Irving originated the pretribulation rapture teaching.<sup>40</sup>

Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 236.

<sup>36</sup> William E. Bell, "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (PhD diss., New York University, 1967), pp. 60-61, 64-65.

<sup>37</sup> Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching*, pp. 24-25, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered*, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67. Huebner said in a letter to this writer, "I'm working on a book on Darby. I have researched the matter more deeply and can demonstrate that he held the immediate coming in 1827 already; with testimony to the fact other than Darby's own. But this book will probably go to press in about 2 years, if the Lord wills" (letter dated March 20, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 47.

## The Progress of Dogma

If the pretribulation rapture is taught in the New Testament, as this writer believes, why did it take 1,800 years for Christians to realize this doctrine? The answer lies in the fact that the *timing* of the rapture is more the product of one's theology than the proof-texting of specific passages.<sup>41</sup> Thus the historical development of a certain theological climate led believers to give attention to this New Testament subject. The recovery of the pretribulation rapture as taught in the New Testament awaited the proper progress of dogma.

In 1897, James Orr, a British postmillennialist, delivered a series of lectures at the Western Theological Seminary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania on the progress of dogma. Orr's thesis was that, generally speaking, the historical development of the church's understanding of her doctrine parallels the logical development of systematic theology. He said, "The articulation of the system in your text-books is the very articulation of the system in its development in history."<sup>42</sup> Orr makes his case by noting the order in which virtually all theology textbooks logically develop their systems.

Its opening sections are probably occupied with matters of Theological Prolegomena—with apologetics, the general idea of religion, revelation, the relation of faith to reason, Holy Scripture, and the like. Then follows the great divisions of the theological system—Theology proper, or the doctrine of God; Anthropology, or the doctrine of man, including sin (sometimes a separate division); Christology, or the doctrine of the Person of Christ; Soteriology (Objective), or the doctrine of the work of Christ, especially the Atonement; Subjective Soteriology, or the doctrine of the application of redemption (Justification, Regeneration, etc.); finally, eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things. If now, planting yourself at the close of the Apostolic Age, you cast your eye down the course of the succeeding centuries, you find, taking as an easy guide the great historical controversies of the Church, that what you have is simply the projection of this logical system on a vast temporal screen.<sup>43</sup>

Many scholars acknowledge that eschatology was the last major area of systematic theology formulated in detail by the church. Orr's view of doctrinal development gives the framework for understanding *why* a number of the details of prophecy were only under-

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<sup>41</sup> An example of this is the dispensational distinction between Israel and the church, which is developed exegetically, but applied theologically to things like the timing of the rapture.

<sup>42</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

stood later in church history. This is not to suggest that Orr's view is correct in every detail. But all can agree that eschatology has been a late development within the church's history. Dispensationalist Gerald Stanton wrote in 1956,

During these past nineteen centuries, there has been a progressive refinement of the details of Christian theology, but not until the last one hundred years has Eschatology come to the front to receive the major attention and scrutiny of foremost Bible scholars. It is not that the doctrine of Christ's coming, or any of its special features, is new or novel, but that the doctrine has finally come into the place of prominence it rightfully deserves. With that prominence there has come a greater discernment of prophetic detail.<sup>44</sup>

It seems clear that prophecy—especially the futurist form of premillennialism—has only been developed in a detailed way since the Reformation and especially during the last 150 years. The following section presents some reasons why the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture has been a later development in the history of the church.

### Development of Eschatology

The early church had a clear but undeveloped view of eschatology. They were premillennial, but had not formulated the system into anything that matches the sophistication of today's theologies. Nathaniel West, a Presbyterian pastor, said in the late 1800s concerning the predominance of chiliasm in the early church, "History has no consensus more unanimous for any doctrine than is the consensus of the Apostolic Fathers for the pre-millennial advent of Christ."<sup>45</sup>

Even though the early church was clearly premillennial, many of the details and implications of that doctrine had not been worked out. J. N. D. Kelly, a leading authority on early church doctrine, wrote along that line.

Four chief moments dominate the eschatological expectation of early Christian theology—the return of Christ, known as the Parousia, the resurrection, the judgment, and the catastrophic ending of the present world-order. In the primitive period they were held together in a naive, unreflective fashion, with little or no attempt to work out their implications or solve the problems they raise.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), pp. 223-24.

<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel West, "History of the Premillennial Doctrine," in *Premillennial Essays*, ed. Nathaniel West (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1879), p. 332.

<sup>46</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 462.

Harry Bultema echoed this perspective and underlined the undeveloped nature of the early church's premillennialism as something that "was not taught on the basis of any philosophical principle, but on the basis of oral tradition which had been received from the mouth of the apostles themselves."<sup>47</sup> This likely explains why chiliasm, though undeveloped in detail, was so widely held.

By the fifth century A.D., the amillennialism of Origen and Augustine had virtually eliminated all traces of premillennial teaching. This continued until shortly after the Reformation. In the early 1600s premillennialism began to return as a factor within the church after more than a "1,000-year reign" of amillennialism. This time premillennialism was not alone. A new approach known as postmillennialism grew up side by side with the premillennial revival. Many post-Reformation Puritans were divided between a mild form of premillennialism and the newly developing postmillennialism popularized and systematized by Daniel Whitby in the early 1700s. However, the majority of post-Reformation Protestants continued to hold to the amillennialism of the Roman Church.

Postmillennialism was popular for most of the 1700s until the French Revolution at the end of the century caused the optimism of Christendom to wane. Premillennialism then made its greatest surge as the 1800s began. However, premillennialism, like postmillennialism and amillennialism, was still dominated by the "historical" school of interpretation. By 1826, the more literal interpretation of the prophetic portions of Scripture known as "futurism" began to supplant the "historicism" of the previous 500 years.<sup>48</sup> This environment of a literal, futurist, premillennial framework interacting with the progress made by systematic theology provided the momentum that led to the understanding of the pretribulational rapture.

### **Pretribulational Ingredients in the Doctrine of the Pretribulational Rapture**

The doctrine of the pretribulational rapture is built on and derived from certain hermeneutical and theological factors. Walvoord

<sup>47</sup> Harry Bultema, *Maranatha! A Study of Unfulfilled Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1985), p. 293.

<sup>48</sup> LeRoy Froom says, "Samuel R. Maitland, in his treatise of 1826, challenged the generally received year-day principle, as applied to the 1260 days of Daniel and the Apocalypse. In this he assailed the whole Protestant application of the symbols of the little horn and the beast of the Revelation—avowing that it was yet to be fulfilled in a personal and openly infidel Antichrist, with the days of his career as literal days" (*The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Co., 1946], 3:281).

is the leading present-day defender of this doctrine. The major headings that group his 50 arguments for the pretribulation rapture into categories,<sup>49</sup> show that the early 1800s were the first time a climate existed conducive to the development of the doctrine.

First, since the pretribulation rapture is a subdoctrine within premillennialism, and premillennialism alone, it requires a premillennial environment in which to thrive. Before the 1800s there were only two major eras of premillennialism: the early church (till about A.D. 400), and after the Reformation (the 17th century). Therefore almost two-thirds of the church's history has existed without a premillennial witness (1,200 years). It was impossible for a doctrine (the pretribulation rapture) to spring up in an environment lacking a necessary ingredient from which to build (premillennialism). So the fact that premillennialism began gaining popularity after the French Revolution is a major factor in its development.

Second, when premillennialism returned to Christendom the dominant hermeneutical approach to key eschatological books, like Daniel and Revelation, was the historicism of the previous 600 years. As noted earlier, Maitland established the futurist hermeneutic for the first time since some of the church fathers. Futurism is the product of a more literal interpretation of key eschatological themes. It sees, for example, the Antichrist as a future person, not as the pope of the Roman Church. The 1,260 and 2,300 days are seen as natural or literal days and therefore as yet future. The tribulation period is also to be taken as a future, literal time. Thus the literal hermeneutic of futurism was restored and further developed, which the pretribulation teaching requires in order to maintain certain distinctions such as that between Israel and the church.

The return of premillennialism and the literal, futurist hermeneutic included widespread belief in the nearness of the return of the Lord (imminency); the hopeless apostasy of the church; the great tribulation in the near future; and the conversion of the Jews and their return to Israel as a nation. Brethren historian Harold Rowdon noted that "a distinction was drawn . . . between the 'epiphany' and the 'advent' or 'parousia' of Christ."<sup>50</sup> This along with a gap between the two comings formed for the first time a climate that resulted in the development of the doctrine of the rapture before the tribulation.

Another reason the theological climate, combined with Bible

<sup>49</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), pp. 269-76.

<sup>50</sup> Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren 1825-1850* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1967), p. 18.

study, is likely the major factor in the development of the pretribulational rapture doctrine, is the fact that when it was taught, many others, influenced by the same climate, embraced the teaching. It is one thing to come up with an idea, but most ideas become accepted only when the public is ready. It seems that many others were already thinking along the same line as Darby, which accounts for the spread and acceptance by many of the teaching of the pretribulational rapture.

### Conclusion

F. F. Bruce's conclusion as to where Darby got the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture seems to be correct. "It was in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager students of unfulfilled prophecy. . . . Direct dependence by Darby on Margaret Macdonald is unlikely."<sup>51</sup> Dave MacPherson has failed to demonstrate that Macdonald's "prophecy" contains latent rapture ideas, nor has he linked Darby to her influence with clear, historical evidence. This is why the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture did not begin with Margaret Macdonald. Perhaps Darby's training at Dublin accounts for many of his views, especially his views on the nature of the church. Walvoord concludes,

Any careful student of Darby soon discovers that he did not get his eschatological views from men, but rather from his doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, a concept no one claims was revealed supernaturally to Irving or Macdonald. Darby's views undoubtedly were gradually formed, but they were theologically and biblically based rather than derived from Irving's pre-Pentecostal group.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bruce, Review of MacPherson's book, p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 47.



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