**CATHOLICS: CAPTURE THE MEANING OF THE RAPTURE by Phillip Bellini**

What do the numbers 200, 380, 838, 1000, 1260, 1533, 1844, 1914, and 1988 all have in common?

They are all dates when large groups of people thought the world would end. And these are to name just a few. Every time a new book comes out where the author states he has “calculated” the year of Christ’s return, the books sell fast and many become breathless at the approaching date. Regarding the 1988 prediction, the author thought he had been able to make some important numerical calculations from Scripture and history that led to a sure-fire prediction. But somehow, I could not imagine how such an age-old puzzle as the date of Christ’s return could be solved using a calculator. More importantly, I knew that Our Lord had stated flatly to His disciples that “of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son(in his human nature), but the Father only” (Matthew 24:36).

Guess what? The world is still here!

The second coming of Our Lord is no doubt in many ways a mystery. We will never figure it out completely, not before it happens, perhaps not even after it has taken place. But there is still a great deal we can know about Christ’s return, and no Christian should be ignorant of what God the Father has revealed to us.

Why does it matter? Because “the Truth will make you free” (John 8:32) and a whole lot wiser and holier, too. Jesus Christ, who died and rose from the dead, Who ascended into heaven and is reigning in glory with the Father, is coming back to earth! He is coming to raise the dead of every generation and then to judge the living and the dead, to set this messed-up world aright. You may not think often of these impending events, but they concern you deeply. You will be one of those whom Christ judges. How well you are able to prepare for that sobering occasion depends in part on your knowing the Truth – the Truth about the reasons He came to earth the first time, the reasons He is coming back, and the plans He has for you in the meantime.

Sadly enough, a mistaken and rather novel idea about Christ’s return, rooted in fundamentalist Protestant teaching, is making the rounds of our culture these days. It’s most often referred to as “the rapture.” To help you understand why this teaching is false and even dangerous, here are seven frequently asked questions with brief answers that will help you avoid the pitfalls of being caught in rapture fever.

**What exactly is the “rapture” teaching all about?**

Simply put, the rapture idea is a claim that Jesus Christ is coming back to earth, not once more, but *twice.* One of those times, this teaching asserts, He will come secretly to snatch away true believers from the world so they can escape the “great tribulation” – a time of unprecedented natural catastrophes and the brutal persecutions of the Antichrist. Then, according to this scenario, after several years of horror, Christ will return one last time in glory to judge the living and the dead. This secret “snatching” has been dubbed the “rapture” (or “secret rapture”) from a Latin verb that means “caught up” or “snatched.”

If you are Catholic when Jesus comes, many of the preachers of this idea insist, you had better be careful. If you have failed to renounce some of the essential beliefs the Church has taught you, too bad. You are not a true Christian. You will be left behind.

That claim is simply not true. It is a dangerous error. Nevertheless, the runaway bestsellers in the *Left Behind* series of novels, and other media products being promoted with them, are pushing the misguided “secret rapture” agenda, and their teaching can be seductive because they are packaged as entertainment. Catholics are often urged by their non-Catholic friends to read the novels or view the movie version.

**Why doesn’t the Catholic Church accept the “secret rapture” idea?**

Quite simply, because it’s alien to both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

Though the *Left Behind* preachers claim that the rapture doctrine comes from the “plain sense of Scripture,” the truth is that no one ever seems to have discovered this “plain sense” until well after the Protestant Reformation, and even then it didn’t gain much popularity until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How could the “plain sense” of Scripture in this regard have escaped the attention of the worldwide Christian community – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant – for a millennium and a half?

It’s important to note that this isn’t really a Catholic-Protestant disagreement. The majority of Protestants throughout history and even the majority of those alive today don’t believe in a “secret rapture.” None of the major leaders of the Protestant Reformation – Martin Luther, John Calvin, John, Knox – nor even later leaders such as John and Charles Wesley ever taught such a doctrine. All these Protestant teachers would find the idea as unbiblical as the Catholic Church does. And many Protestant teachers today loudly denounce the doctrine.

**So where did the rapture idea come from?**

The doctrine as it is currently taught in fundamentalist circles seems to have evolved in the nineteenth century. In the previous century, however, similar options cropped up occasionally in colonial America.

In the early part of the 18th century, for example, Increase Mather (1639-1723), a Puritan minister in Boston, wrote of Christians being “caught up in the air” before the world was consumed by fire of divine judgment. In 1788, a Baptist pastor and educator of Philadelphia, Morgan Edwards, published an essay promoting a similar idea, teaching that Christians would be taken to Heaven three and a half years before Christ judged the world.

The next hint of such a doctrine appears, surprisingly enough, in the writing of a Chilean Jesuit named Manuel Lacunza. His book *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* was published in Spanish in 1812. In this massive volume, Lacunza concluded that toward the end of the world, Jesus would snatch up from earth the faithful believers who regularly received the Eucharist. Then the Lord would keep them safe for forty-five days while terrible judgments chastised the world. Finally, He would appear with them on earth to judge the human race. This scenario is similar to the *Left Behind* plot. Not surprisingly, though Lacunza was a Catholic, the Catholic Church never embraced this teaching, for the reasons we’ve just noted.

Lacunza’s book was translated into English in 1827 by Edward Irving, a minister of the Protestant Church of Scotland who was later excommunicated from his denomination for teaching that Christ’s human nature was sinful. Apparently under Lacunza’s influence, Irving began preaching the secret rapture, though he, unlike Lacunza, thought it would happen three and a half years before Christ’s final coming.

About the same time, a secret coming of Christ was being preached by John Nelson Darby, a leader of the British sectarian group called the Plymouth brethren. This group experienced numerous conflicts and schisms, some resulting from disagreements over the secret rapture teaching. Historians debate the extent to which Irving may have influenced Darby, but in any case, both “Irvingites” and “Darbyites” came to adopt the secret rapture teaching.

In time, Darby traveled extensively preaching his ideas about the end times, making seven trips to Canada and the United States alone between 1859 and 1874. His ideas began to gain acceptance at the influential “Bible Prophecy” conferences of the time, which in turn shaped the beliefs of tens of thousands of American Protestants. As a result, several well-known evangelical Protestant leaders in America came under his influence. The popularity of the novel idea was also aided significantly by the publication in 1909 of *The Scofield Reference Bible,* at that time the best selling Bible in American history. That book sold nearly two million copies in the first thirty years after its publication, and it promoted the secret rapture teaching.

When Scofield died in 1921, other fundamentalist Protestant leaders continued to spread Dispensational teaching. Dallas Theological Seminary in Texas and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago embraced the new ideas enthusiastically and trained thousands of young men to promote their views in the congregations where they were called to preach. Meanwhile, two world wars made countless Christians world-weary and eager for divine relief.

After the reestablishment of Israel as an independent nation in 1948 – an event many fundamentalists saw as a sign of the end times – interest in biblical prophecy intensified. The tensions of the Cold War and the political, social, and cultural disruptions of the 1960’s further prepared many evangelical Protestants to focus on the “promise” of escape from a seemingly hell-bent world. By the 1970’s, the time was ripe for an array of best-selling books on the end times written from a secret rapture view.

Most notable among these was the best-selling American book of the 1970’s, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), and its sequels, which together have sold more than thirty-five million copies. Author Hal Lindsay’s sensationalist style presented a heady mix of highly selective Bible quotes; news clips of world events that he claimed were “fulfilling biblical prophecy”; frightening “scientific” predictions of natural and man-made catastrophes; and a print version of the old revivalist “altar call,” behind the rapture. Lindsey found a ready audience for the rapture idea, especially among young people with little religious education.

Lindsey has had countless imitators, not just in print, but also in radio, television, film, and video. They have all gotten great mileage out of the “snatched out of tribulation” message. It’s attention-grabbing, it’s titillating, it’s comforting, and it sells.

The *Left Behind* secret rapture story line is thus only the latest incarnation of an old – but not very old – unbiblical idea.

**What Scripture verses are used by rapture believers to try to defend their belief?**

The single scriptural detail that most excites rapture believers is found in a passage about the second coming of Christ in St. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians:

“For since we believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep…We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).”

As we examine this verse, first we must ask how this being “caught up” to Christ described by St. Paul could possibly be a secret, invisible occurrence. The Apostle gives enough details here to make it clear that he is talking, not about a secret rapture, but about a glorious and public event: Christ’s descent from heaven, amid clouds, angels, the trumpet and resurrection.

Nevertheless, we might well ask: What is the purpose of the faithful on earth being “caught up” in the glory of their descending Lord to meet Him as He arrives in triumph?

According to a long line of biblical commentators going all the way back to the early Church, this passage can best be understood when we recognize that St. Paul used imagery reflecting a custom that was common in ancient culture. State dignitaries and victorious military leaders of his time often made grand public visits to a city. Such an appearance was called a *parousia*, the same Greek term that St. Paul and other biblical writers often used to write about Christ’s glorious arrival at the close of the age.

When the illustrious visitor approached a city with his entourage, he was often met by the citizens who wanted to go out to welcome him and then accompany him back into the city. It was a way for the people to honor such a person’s arrival and to take part in the celebration of his coming. This, in fact, was the custom that led to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the day we remember as Passion (or Palm) Sunday. (Matt 21:1-17)

When we find that the Greek word translated here as “meet” or “meeting” (apantesis) is the same term that was used for the gathering of citizens to meet the approaching celebrity, the passage makes perfect sense. Those who are still alive on earth when Jesus returns, gathered together from the ends of the earth by the angels, will have a great privilege: They will be caught up in His clouds of glory to meet the approaching “King of kings and Lord of lords”(1 Timothy 6:15) and to join the saints who souls have already experienced the rewards of living with Him in Heaven. Then they will accompany Him as He enters the world in triumph.

Another text commonly quoted by rapture believers as evidence of a secret snatching comes from the Gospel. Jesus said: “As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left” (Matthew 24:37-41).

These words have been cited in fundamentalist “end times” sermons countless times. The assumption here is that the man taken from the field and the woman taken from the mill were true believers “caught up” at the secret rapture. The two people left behind, then, were not believers.

We should note here that many Christians believe this text applies to the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman armies in the first century, not to the close of the age. But even if we grant that it refers to the “end times,” we need only read again the words introducing this scenario to see the flaw in a rapture interpretation. “As were in the days of Noah…the flood came and swept them all away.” (Matt. 24:37,.39)

In the days of Noah, who was “taken” (“swept…away”), and who was “left”? The wicked were taken away in judgment by the flood waters, and the righteous (Noah and his family on the ark) were left behind in safety. If the rapture teachers are correct in thinking that this passage applies to the close of the age, then it would seem to prove the opposite of what they teach about who gets taken and who gets left behind.

Yet even if we should allow that Jesus is saying the righteous will be the ones taken and the wicked will be left, then the passage still fits the Second Coming scenario we have described: When Christ returns, publicly and in the clouds of glory, the righteous will be caught up to meet Him as He descends to earth, while the wicked remain to await His imminent judgment. No secret, invisible, “extra” coming of Christ is depicted here.

Yet another way in which rapture believers attempt to argue their position from Scripture is to cite verses that say Christians will be spared God’s wrath. St. Paul promises the Thessalonian Christians, for example, that “Jesus…delivers us from the wrath to come” and “God has not destined us for wrath”(1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). But when we examine the Apostle’s references to divine wrath throughout his letters, we find that he usually is referring to the sentence of everlasting punishment in the next life, not to temporary trials in this life.

Rapture teachers may respond that the final tribulation under the Antichrist, along with various natural catastrophes, is in fact the beginning of the divine wrath that culminates in damnation for those who have rejected God. But even if it were true that this is what St. Paul meant when he wrote about “the wrath to come,” then rapture advocated still have a problem in their scriptural interpretation. They insist that even though true believers will be snatched away from harm in the secret rapture, many unbelievers on earth with convert after that startling event. They admit, then, that these last Christians will have to go through the final tribulation. But if God has truly promised Christians that they will escape this divine “wrath” of the last days, then why wouldn’t the “post-rapture” converts escape it as well? They too would be Christians. Couldn’t they claim the same divine promise for themselves?

Perhaps, on the other hand, the rapture believers would admit, that, in their way of thinking, Christians still living on earth (the post-rapture converts) could somehow be preserved from God’s wrath in the last days. Maybe He would hide them out in places of refuge, or perhaps they would experience the adversity as purification rather than “wrath.” (The latter position would actually be closer to Catholic thinking). If so, then all the biblical passages that rapture teachers quote about divine wrath would no longer support a secret rapture doctrine. If God will somehow protect Christians still living on earth from the final divine wrath, then there is no need for Him to “rapture” them away as an escape. His biblical promises of protection imply nothing about Christians’ being taken away to Heaven.

Look carefully through any book of the Bible you may choose. If no passage will you find a straightforward statement such as these: “Immediately before the tribulation of those days, the Lord Himself will descend from heaven.” “Christ will return to earth once in secret to take His people to heaven, and then once again later in glory to judge the world.” “The Lord will take His people out of the world before the reign of the Antichrist, in order to spare them from the divine wrath. In neither the Gospels, nor the Acts, nor the Epistles, nor Revelation does such a declaration appear – nor anything even resembling such a declaration.

As we have seen, there are indeed scriptural passages that rapture theorists have tried to twist or take out of context so they can read into the passage a preconceived idea. But what they claim the passages say certainly does not represent “the plain sense of Scripture.” If it were in the plain sense of Scripture, wouldn’t most Christians be in agreement about it?

What about the early Church fathers? They received their Tradition directly from the Apostles or from those who had known the Apostles personally. They knew Christ’s teaching well enough to be able to identify which books were truly inspired as Scripture and which were not. If the secret rapture doctrine appears in the plain sense of Scripture, why did they know nothing of it?

Or what about the later Fathers, who formulated the creeds of the Church, stating in clear terms the Faith of the Church through the pronouncements of infallible ecumenical Councils? Wouldn’t they have taught a secret rapture if it were according to the apostolic understanding of Scripture?

Why is it that the great medieval theologians, revered Doctors of the Church, knew nothing of a secret rapture? Why didn’t even the fathers of the Protestant Reformation fail to grasp such a clear meaning? Why did such a thought apparently cross almost no one’s mind until the eighteenth century? Why do millions upon millions of Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and even Protetstants who read their Bibles today fail to see this teaching in its pages if it is so obvious.

Are the Church fathers both East and West, the Doctors of the Church, the founders of the Reformation, and the great majority of Christians for the last two thousand years just clueless? Have they simply refused through stubbornness to concede a “plain” truth of the Bible? Or is it more likely that the ones who truly miss the “plain” sense of Scripture are actually there more recent end times enthusiasts – perhaps disenchanted with the state of the world – who somehow manage to find in its pages a secret divine rapture?

**Why is the rapture teaching appealing to so many people?**

People are often anxious about the future, since most of what lies ahead is unknown and cannot be controlled. Not surprisingly, then, many people are attracted to religious teachings that relieve their anxiety by claiming to give them specific knowledge about future events. The rapture notion is especially comforting because it promises that true believers will be spared the “great tribulation” of the last days, when the Antichrist will persecute the Church and terrible natural catastrophes will afflict the world.

History demonstrates that in times of political unrest, rapid cultural change, or social uncertainty – such as we live in today – fears about the future intensify and become more widespread. People are anxious to escape the world and its troubles. During these times, the rapture idea and the larger system of “end times” teachings to which it’s tied tend to increase in visibility and popularity. The *Left Behind* books simply represent yet another “rapture” recycling.

**What are the dangers of the rapture teaching?**

History shows as well that even in its milder forms, eccentric apocalyptic doctrines can lead to harmful delusions. And no wonder – if, as Jesus said, “the truth will make you free,” then error will entrap you and get you into trouble. When we’re seeking the truth about the end of the world, we must not ignore the guidance of the Church.

More specifically, the rapture idea, and the “end times” teachings that usually accompany it, are dangerous because they offer a false hope for the future. If Christians won’t be “snatched” out of the world to escape the “great tribulation,” then those who expect to be spared will be ill prepared when the horrors of the last days actually come. Some may even lose their faith altogether if they conclude that God did not keep His promise, or that their being misled in one religious matter means they have been misled about religion altogether.

As even some evangelical Protestants noted publicly when the rapture teaching first began making the rounds in American religious circles, this teaching can also lead Christians to give up on trying to improve society. If the world is headed to destruction, and God’s plan for His “soldiers” is to escape rather than engage the enemy, then why bother? This attitude is reflected, for example, in the popular bumper sticker that says: “Warning, in case of rapture, the driver of this car will vanish.” “I won’t be here,” the message smugly implies, “to suffer the way you will suffer from the disaster that results when millions of cars in traffic lose their drivers.”

The larger issue here, of course, is the possibility of redemptive suffering. Rapture teachers often imply or even state explicitly that Christians are exempt from suffering God’s just punishments in this life. They fail to understand that suffering can become a channel of His cleansing grace; that many times we suffer because of our sins; and that even when we’re innocent, our suffering at the hands of evildoers can be joined to Christ’s own suffering, thus cooperating with His redemptive word in the world. For all these reasons, God has no plan to snatch His children out of the world when the Antichrist comes.

For Catholics, an even greater danger of the rapture teaching lies in its common association with an anti-Catholic agenda. The writers of the *Left Behind* series, for example, have stated explicitly in other books their conviction that the Catholic Church is a form of pagan “Babylonian” religion that has deceived its members and taken them away from true Christianity. Even the *Left Behind* plot itself calls for a papal election rigged by the Antichrist to that the man chosen to as pope can become a tool for forcing the world into diabolical worship. The previous pope, according to this scenario, was “raptured.” But he was a true Christian believer worthy of escape from the world only because he first had turned away from the Catholic Faith and instead converted to Martin Luther’s Protestant doctrines!

Not all rapture believers are anti-Catholic, of course. But many rapture teachers want to persuade you to leave the Catholic Church. However sincere their intentions may be or many not be, they intend to fill your head with faulty theology and twisted interpretations of Scripture. They will lead you astray in matters of eternal importance. What could be more dangerous than that?

**What does the Catholic Church teach about the end of the world?**

An overview of the Church’s teaching can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See especially paragraphs 668-682; 972; 988-1004; 1015-1017; 1186; 2771-72; 2776. This teaching can be summed up briefly in a few declarations:

* Jesus will return to the earth in a glorious triumph that is universally visible and undeniable – not secret and invisible.
* First, however, the Antichrist will appear to deceive the world and persecute the Church.
* The Church will suffer the great tribulation prophesied by her Lord.
* The final victory of Christ on earth will not come through a gradual improvement in the world’s spiritual condition, nor by a special period on His earthly reign before judgment day. It will take place not *within* history, but *beyond* it, after Christ has brought an end to history by His glorious second coming.
* The Jewish people will come to recognize Jesus Christ as their Messiah before He returns.
* The dead will be raised.
* Christ will judge the living and the dead, and the Devil and his allies will at last be utterly overthrown.
* At the end of time, God’s kingdom will come in its fullness, and all things will be renewed. Not only humanity, but the entire universe as well will be perfected. In this consummation of all things, there will be no more sadness or sin, pain or sickness, death or decay. The saints will reign with Christ, glorified in body and soul, and will enjoy perfect fellowship face to face with God for eternity.
* The hope of God’s coming kingdom should not tempt us to withdraw from earthly affairs.
* In the meantime, Christ’s presence with us through His Word, His Sacraments, and His Spirit draws us closer to the fulfillment of His promise.