

Overview of Posttribulationism

Description of Posttribulationism

Posttribulationism, also known as historic premillennialism, teaches that the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ are facets of a single event which will occur at the end of a tribulation period. The church will be on earth during the tribulation to experience the judgment of God.

Second to pretribulationism, posttribulationism is the other most widely held view among conservative evangelical churches.

Types of Posttribulationism

1. Classic Posttribulationism

This view within posttribulationism believes that there is no seven-year tribulation period. Rather, the church has always been in the great tribulation and therefore the tribulation has been largely fulfilled. It is in this light that the rapture and second coming of Christ is after the tribulation.

This view has been held by some throughout church history and the leading modern proponent of it has been J. Barton Payne.

However, it has been rejected by most posttribulationists due to its inconsistent blend of amillennialism with premillennialism and its untenable view that the events leading up to the return of Christ were fulfilled in the past.

2. Futurist Posttribulationism

This view became popular in the twentieth century, particularly with the publishing of George Ladd's book The Blessed Hope, in 1956. It is now the most predominant view of posttribulationism.

Ladd was premillennial and viewed the tribulation as a future seven year period prior to the second coming of Christ. He believed the church would pass through this tribulation period and be raptured at the second coming.

3. Dispensational Posttribulationism

Robert Gundry's book The Church and the Tribulation (1973) put forth an odd combination of dispensationalism and posttribulationism. Gundry seeks to maintain a distinction between Israel and the Church in the tribulation. It has gained very little acceptance due to the belief that dispensationalism logically leads to pretribulationism.

Arguments for Posttribulationism

a. Ad Hominem Argument

An ad hominem argument is an attack upon a person rather than upon an issue. This is a posttribulationist attack of pretribulationism.

This argument is centered around the beginnings of pretribulationism, particularly of J. N. Darby and even to saying that he had moral character flaws. Also attacked are C. I. Scofield and L. S. Chafer for not having doctoral degrees.

b. Argument from History

This is the claim that pretribulationism is a nineteenth century doctrine and is not found in the creeds of churches or councils. Since it is newer it cannot be accurate.

Answer:

- The Bible is the basis for doctrine and not the early church.
- The early church did not discuss eschatology to a great extent and therefore it was an underdeveloped doctrine.
- Posttribulationism is not found in the early church creeds either.
- The early church did believe in the imminent coming of Christ, which is a foundation for pretribulationism and is logically denied by posttribulationists.

c. Argument from the Nature of the Church

Posttribulationists in one form or another equate the church with Israel. Since there are saints and elect people in the tribulation period they conclude that these are the same as the church.

Answer: Those saints in the tribulation are from the regathering of Israel and the true church is no longer present on earth.

d. Argument from the Denial of Imminency

The doctrine of the imminent return of Jesus Christ refers to the belief that Christ could come at any moment. This does not necessarily mean that He will return soon or that He must return soon, but simply that it remains a real possibility.

However, in order to hold to posttribulationism, you must either deny this doctrine or give it a new meaning. This is because if the church must first pass through a seven year time of great tribulation then the rapture is not imminent. Most posttribulationists believe in imminency for the tribulation period but not the rapture.

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Their basis for denying immanency is two-fold:

- There are intervening events that are stated in the Scripture that must take place before the return of Christ - for example, the evangelization of the world, Peter's death as foretold by Christ in John 21:18, the destruction of Jerusalem.

Answer: All of the items in the Scripture presented against immanency are general, not specific. In other words, they could have occurred at any time. Christ did not specify when Peter would die, only that he would. The description of the evangelization of the world occurs in a passage that deals with the tribulation period (Matthew 24:14). Also, these arguments against immanency are now moot because they have occurred.

- Immanency was not held by the early church but arose with Darby in the 19th century.

Answer: Certainly the apostles believe the coming of the Lord was near (2 Corinthians 5:2-3; Philippians 3:11; 4:5; James 5:8, etc.). The early church indeed followed the apostles as Thiessen notes, "They also taught His personal return as being immediately.... We may say, therefore, that the early church lived in the constant expectation of their Lord."

In fact, the early church fathers believed in the imminent return of the Lord but at the same time believed in a posttribulational rapture. Why? Because they believed they were living during the Great Tribulation and that Rome was the Anti-Christ.

The reformers also believed in immanency because they thought they were in the tribulation period and the Papacy was the Anti-Christ. The early church father and the reformers were not wrong on their idea of the near return of the Lord but were wrong concerning the tribulation.

e. Argument from the Resurrection

Posttribulationists argue that since Revelation 20 describes a resurrection after the tribulation, the church will go through the tribulation.

Answer: There is a resurrection after the tribulation and also a resurrection before the tribulation. Isaiah 26 and Daniel 12:1-2 show that the resurrection of Israel comes after the tribulation. The church however will be raised at the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

f. Argument from Rapture Terminology

Posttribulationists are amused by the idea of "two resurrections". They argue that all three New Testament words used for the rapture ("parousia" or coming, "apokalupsis" or revelation and "epiphaneia" or appearing) are used in connection with the return of Christ after the tribulation.

Answer: The problem with this argument is that it forces the words to carry a technical sense while they are general words. A simple use of a concordance will show that these words are used to refer to a variety of items. For example, "parousia" was used of the coming of Titus (2 Corinthians 7:6-7), the coming of the lawless one (2 Thessalonians 2:9), of Paul himself (Philippians 1:26 KJV) and of the day of God (2 Peter 3:12). None of these refer to the same coming. The definition depends on the context.

Analysis of Posttribulationism

The two most serious reasons why posttribulationism is deficient are as follows:

- Posttribulationism necessarily denies the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ. The church is exhorted in the Scriptures to look for the Lord's return (Titus 2:13), not for signs, and to be comforted by the coming of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The exhortation to purify ourselves in view of the Lord's return has significance if His coming is imminent (1 John 3:2-3). These factors are inconsistent with the church going through the tribulation.
- One of the most significant problems that posttribulationism faces is the Biblical description of people who are alive in the millennium in unresurrected bodies. These people can bear children and carry out common occupations (cf. Isaiah 65:20-25; Zechariah 8:5). Since resurrected people do not propagate (Matthew 22:30), there would be no way to populate the kingdom unless some unresurrected people enter the millennium.

Pretribulationism teaches that those who believe in Christ at the second coming will enter the millennium in unresurrected bodies. However, posttribulationism is forced to have all believers translated at the second coming of Christ. This leaves no one in unresurrected bodies to populate the kingdom and leaves no one even to join with Satan at the conclusion of the millennium in rebellion to Christ (Revelation 20:7-10). This is a serious problem for the posttribulationist to overcome.