

The Rapture: Cosmic Segregation or Antidote for Oppression? A Critical Response to the “Racial Ideology of Rapture”

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Abstract: This article offers a much-needed critical response to a 2016 essay published in *Perspectives in Religious Studies*. In this essay, author Nathaniel P. Grimes suggested that the doctrine of the rapture was an idea used to promote “cosmic segregation,” a heavenly avenue of escape for white supremacists from blacks and other ethnic groups which society had marginalized. Framed against contemporary notions of social justice, the article will first expose Grimes’s flawed methodology used to validate positions condemning the rapture as a racist doctrine before building a positive case for the rapture as a biblical antidote for oppression against minorities in the current economy.

Key Words: Rapture, cosmic segregation, white supremacy, social justice, suppression

Introduction

In keeping with trending social issues, a recently published article in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* by Nathaniel P. Grimes made a bold, if not sensational, claim: the

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dispensational understanding of the church's rapture is a racially coded theology legitimizing evangelical mistreatment of minorities in America since the wake of the Civil War.² Perceiving the rapture to be a doctrine invented by Darby and exploited by Scofield, Moody, and other Caucasian leaders of the American Bible Conference Movement, Grimes posited the pretribulational rapture was an idea used to promote a "cosmic segregation," a heavenly avenue of escape for white supremacists from blacks and other ethnic groups that society had marginalized.

The current article will offer a critical response to Grimes's thesis by first exposing a flawed research methodology he used to validate positions condemning the rapture as a racist doctrine. Additionally, against the backdrop of contemporary hotbed notions of social justice, the essay will positively build a case for the pretribulational rapture as a biblical antidote for oppression against minorities in the current economy. The thesis will be supported by two main drives: (1) The church is a spiritual, non-political institution comprised of the most marginalized people-groups in human history forming a collective body whom Christ will spare from impending devastation and doom upon the earth; and (2) The imminent appearing of Christ as taught in the pretribulational rapture demands an urgency in applying biblical social justice themes out of love for all ethnicities in obedience to Christ.

New Wine in Old Wineskins

It is nothing new to hear that the doctrine of the rapture is under attack. Critiques range from those leveled by conservative Reformed scholars to liberal critics condemning the doctrine as heretical, cultic, or even the handmaiden to the prosperity gospel.³ Lately, the doctrine concerning the pretribulational

² Nathaniel P. Grimes, "The Racial Ideology of Rapture," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 211–21.

³ Professor of NT at the Lutheran School of Divinity in Chicago, Barbara R. Rossing, surfaces in Grime's essay and perhaps represents the worst of mischaracterizations and *ad hominem* rhetoric describing the rapture as "a destructive racket" (1); "an invention" (19); "a false gospel of

rapture of the church is getting hit from a newer angle causing a stir in the church: social justice. Taking it one step further, recent advocates of social justice now claim dispensationalist teaching regarding the church's rapture promotes a racist, cosmic segregation. According to one such critic, Nathaniel P. Grimes, "Rapture portrays God's answer to the destructions of the sins wrought in the nineteenth century by war, greed, and white supremacy as a move to create a state of cosmic segregation."⁴ On the surface, there is not much to critique in Grime's statement. That a collective group of believers on this earth will indeed be "segregated" from the earth's wickedness—which certainly includes fleshly supremacist notions—is a staple belief within pretribulationism. However, as Grimes's essay plays out, the "segregation" he has in mind is the picture one usually draws in connection to racism characterized by 19th century slavery and 20th century Jim Crow policies. For Grimes, rapture theology viz., pretribulationism, was born in the wake of crises provoked by the American Civil War and has chiefly served to "legitimize" evangelical abandonment of society's most marginalized.⁵

Flawed Research Methodology

Though space limits a full critical analysis, there is much to critique in Grimes's research. For instance, in his article "The Racial Ideology of Rapture,"⁶ Grimes provides minimal direct quotation from those whose rapture teachings he believes justified racism such as Scofield, Moody, and Darby, choosing rather to depend on secondary sources that have clear anti-dispensational or anti-evangelical axes to grind.⁷ One such

prosperity combined with promise of escape from any consequences," used in connection with Jimmy Baker (4); even going so far as to say: "The Rapture vision invites a selfish non-concern for the world. It turns salvation into a personal 401(k) plan that saves only yourself" (18). See Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

⁴ Grimes, "Racial Ideology," 219.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 211–21.

⁷ E.g., Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas 1841–2001* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2010); Barbara R.

example is an essay written by Michael Cartwright, an essay that Grimes intersperses throughout his article.⁸ In Cartwright's essay, itself largely dependent on questionable research,⁹ Cartwright draws loose connections between premillennial-dispensationalism and the racism surrounding the Reconstruction period. Describing dispensational hermeneutics in terms of platonic rationalism with prejudiced undertones, Cartwright goes so far to claim, "A dispensationalist hermeneutic may serve to conceal racist patterns of thought."¹⁰

Of the few times Grimes does quote from a dispensational thinker relevant to the time period, like C. I. Scofield, Grimes does so out of context, leveling charges of racism without any actual firsthand support. Simply referring to the prophetic declaration in Genesis 9 in the *Scofield Reference Bible* that "from Ham will descend an inferior and servile posterity" and using it to suggest that Scofield promoted a sense of security for "white identity" since the "white elites of Dallas" would be able to escape "the negroes" by way of rapture defies responsible

Rossing, *Rapture Exposed*; Douglas Frank, *Less than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); and Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadows of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875–1982* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). Of the four, Weber's is perhaps the fairest in his analysis, especially his first edition published in 1979 (an historical survey stopping at 1925), which grew out of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago. Nevertheless, the use of these and other secondary and tertiary sources in Grimes's article showcases a biased research methodology, with very few primary or firsthand sources represented.

⁸ Michael G. Cartwright, "Wrestling with Scripture," in *The Gospel Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 71–114.

⁹ Examples include his dependence on overtly biased sources that have merely handed down repeated mischaracterizations of dispensational thought (such as Douglas Frank), and inaccurate, yet easily verifiable historical details (such as his inaccurately associating of C. I. Scofield with Dallas Theological Seminary [Grimes, "Racial Ideology," 94]).

¹⁰ Cartwright, "Wrestling," 174–175, n 48.

research in a stunning display of illegitimate jumps.¹¹ Indeed, not a hint of racism is present in any of the few direct quotations Grimes supplies by either Scofield¹² or D. L. Moody.¹³ Moreover, his treatments of J. N. Darby, though as prominent it is for his study, lacks any direct quotation from Darby himself, being entirely dependent on anti-Darbyite or anti-dispensational sources.¹⁴ It is Grimes's dependence on secondary and tertiary resources that unfairly mischaracterize premillennial-dispensationalism as racist theology—nothing from actual premillennial-dispensationalists or pretribulationists themselves. In light of such research methods, one is reminded of historian Jim Owen who wrote in *The Hidden History of the Historic Fundamentalists*: “More is required from the critic than ... to build one's reputation as a scholar by painting unflattering graffiti on their tombs.”¹⁵

A final yet major flaw should be noted concerning Darby and Grimes's thesis, that is, because the doctrine of the rapture was birthed in the wake of the American Civil War with ties to slavery, therefore the rapture contains racist ideology. Though Grimes suggests that Darby, a citizen of the UK, “pioneered” rapture doctrine,¹⁶ he neglects disclosing that there was no recent slavery or civil war in Europe out of which to posit a supposed racist rapture. The Slave Trade Act of 1807 and The Slavery Abolition Act (1833/34) were both passed by Parliament,

¹¹ See Grimes, “Racial Ideology,” 215. Moreover, in another instance, Grimes admits the curse of Ham in Genesis 9 known to yield inaccurate racist interpretations by some was an outdated argument “no longer in vogue” (213) at the time of Scofield but uses the same text to justify blaming Scofield and rapture theology as producing racism (215). In any case, Scofield does not use Genesis 9 in any way whatsoever to refer to blacks and/or minorities or the rapture.

¹² *Ibid.*, 215, 218.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 217, 218, 219.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ Jim Owen, *The Hidden History of the Historic Fundamentalists 1933–1948: Reconsidering the Historic Fundamentalists' Response to the Upeavals, Hardships, and Horrors of the 1930s and 1940s* (Lanham, MD: University P, 2004), 14–15.

¹⁶ Grimes, “Racial Ideology,” 214.

criminalizing the institution of slavery in Europe long before the American Civil War ensued (1861–65). This suggests there was no justified racist social milieu occurring in England and Ireland that would propel Darby or any other European dispensationalist to “invent” a rapture doctrine to escape blacks and other minorities.¹⁷ Yet, Grimes frames his entire argument around the American Civil War and American white supremacy as birthing the doctrine of the rapture while simultaneously positing that Darby invented the rapture in England. It seems Grimes cannot reconcile the contradiction, that Darby invented the rapture in the UK *and* that it originated in America in the context of American slavery and white supremacy.¹⁸ In actuality, “rapture theology” predates 19th century America and Europe by far. Scholars have long documented its origin as stemming from an early theology of imminence, even tracing it to within the first few centuries of the church.¹⁹

¹⁷ The term “justified” here is in the context of government-approved, institutionalized slavery which would then “justify” such racist notions. This author is *not* suggesting that racism is ever morally “justified,” nor is he so naïve as to believe that racism did not exist in Europe merely because of Parliament’s official prohibitory acts.

¹⁸ It should be noted that though Grimes is more focused on the ways rapture-belief developed in America rather than proving the origin of the doctrine itself, or that it is inherently racist, his essay nevertheless is pervasive with strong (illogical) inferences that inevitably lead one to summing the doctrine *is* racist—since those who taught it were supposedly racist. In any event, the tension present in Grimes’s article regarding Darby as the doctrine’s inventor and its inherent racism as carried over and birthed in America cannot be relieved.

¹⁹ See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 193–205; cf., William Watson, “Medieval Dispensationalism (A.D. 430–990),” in *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary P, forthcoming). For an interesting historical survey of the mid-to-late 19th century disputes surrounding the idea of the Lord’s “imminent” return, see Richard R. Reiter, “A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 9–44.

Rapture Theology and Post-Civil War Black Ministers

Contrary to Grimes's description of rapture theology being racially coded and peddled by white supremacists of the 19th century, various Civil War era African American pastors and thinkers eagerly adopted rapture theology—and did much to promote it. A notable example is 54th Massachusetts Regiment veteran, the Reverend Eli George Biddle. A minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Biddle understood that the rapture of the church and subsequent premillennial return of Christ would ultimately put an end to all injustice in the world, even predicting that all racial prejudice and intolerance will cease in the church. At the imminent appearing of Christ, “all iniquity, injustice, unrighteousness, and impiety will be overthrown,” declared Biddle.²⁰ In light of Biddle's decidedly dispensational-pretribulational positions, it is surely strange that Grimes would suggest, “The racial ideology of Darby's dispensationalism had effectively served to exclude [black ministers].”²¹ In reality, Biddle and many of his black contemporaries viewed the rapture of Christ's body as the immediate and divine relief of injustice expected for those believers most oppressed.²²

Rapture and the Oppressed

Throughout his well-articulated, yet flawed, article, Grimes asserts the doctrine of the rapture served a 19th century politico-sociological purpose leaving devastating effects “from which neither America nor the church has recovered.”²³ In actuality, at

²⁰ Elder E. George Biddle, “The Restoration of all Things,” *Star of Zion* (February 1927): 1–5. See also Biddle's two-part series, “Pre-Millennialism: Or the Doctrine that the Second Coming of Christ Precedes the Millennium,” *Star of Zion* (August and September 1922). Cf. Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism Between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2017), 82–83.

²¹ Grimes, “Racial Ideology,” 218.

²² Although it does appear that Biddle wavered back and forth on his premillennialism as time went on, he never flatly rejected it or his belief in the pretribulational rapture. See, e.g., Mathews, *Doctrine and Race*, 82–86.

²³ Grimes, “Racial Ideology,” 211.

the risk of being marginalized by Confederacy sympathizers who permeated local civic magistrates, many churches during the Civil War and post-war periods (even within the Southern Presbyterian tradition) held to dispensational doctrines like the rapture while simultaneously promoting themes of justice that sought to benefit oppressed minorities. This they accomplished by emphasizing an obedience to the NT, especially via evangelism-outreaches seeking to build Christ's church. Prominent dispensational leaders of the time included none other than John Nelson Darby who believed the present state of the church, as evidenced by its unbiblical emphasis of secular politics, was a "ruined" economy just like the others before it.²⁴

Influencing a swarm of American Christians, Darby frowned upon churches tied to denominations enveloped in political earthly affairs. He heavily praised independent assemblies that were bound together by nothing other than the public evangelization of the lost with a gospel message that resonated with society's poor and marginalized as well as the edification of believers, those who waited obediently for Christ to receive them to himself (John 14:3).²⁵ Indeed, it was their belief in the pretribulational rapture of the church that gave the most satisfactory hope to those Christians most marginalized by society, knowing that at any moment they can be "caught up"

²⁴ For more on Darby's position on the church's "ruin," see this author's chapter, "Luther Meets Darby: The Reformation Legacy of Ecclesiastical Independence," in *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, ed. Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary P, 2017), 109–44.

²⁵ These distinctive elements of Darby's ecclesiology is especially pronounced in two of his notable essays: "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ," and "On the Formation of Churches," both in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, vol. 1, ed. William Kelley (Winschoten: Heijkoop, 1971). For good summaries of Darby, his influencers, and those he himself influenced, see Crawford Gribben and Mark Sweetnam, "J. N. Darby and the Irish Origins of Dispensationalism," *JETS* 52, vol. 3 (September 2009): 573–76; and, Bruce A. Baker, "The Early Life and Influence of John Nelson Darby" *JMAT* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 110–26.

together to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess 4:17) and be relieved of earthly pains like racism.²⁶

Spirituality (Not Passivity) Leading to Rapture

Churches that garnered praise by notable 19th century dispensational leaders in particular emphasized a renewed “spirituality in the church,” a position that refused to push secular politics and authority onto church members. This traditionally reformed doctrine which early dispensational thinkers adopted, maintained a distinction between church and state—the former’s purview being spiritual, the latter’s being secular.²⁷ Emphasizing a spiritual authority only so far as Scripture demands, its “Most ardent proponents,” Snoeberger explains, “were found in the pulpits of ‘border churches’—churches positioned along the geographical boundary between the Union and Confederacy, and easily the most vulnerable of all to violent schism.”²⁸ Indeed, pastors who advocated such a spirituality in the church during the Civil War, like Samuel McPheeters who led the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, were forced through un-Christian political means to resign their pastorates for refusing to stand with any civil legislature supporting states’ rights that

²⁶ Despite the fact that the Greek word ἀρπά[-ζω] / [-γμός] (“seize[-ure],” “snatch,” or “caught up”), which the Vulgate translated as *rapti*[-ura] / [-io] (“rapture”) occurs 14 times in the NT, some such as Barbara B. Rossing—from whom Grimes draws support in his article—definitively declares: “No specific passage in the Bible uses the word ‘Rapture’” (*Rapture Exposed*, 21). Rossing represents a slew of either uninformed or biased, non-exegetes who still hold on to the erroneous claim that the Bible nowhere uses the word contrary to the preponderance of actual biblical data (e.g., Matt 11:12; John 6:15; 1 Thess 4:17; 2 Cor 12:2; Jude 23; Rev 12:5, et al.). For a sound biblical defense of the pretribulational rapture position, see Richard L. Mayhue, “Why a Pretribulational Rapture?” *MSJ* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 241–53.

²⁷ See Russell D. Moore and Robert E. Sagers, “The Kingdom of God and the Church: A Baptist Reassessment,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12 (Spring 2008): 68–86, esp. 70.

²⁸ Mark A. Snoeberger, “A Tale of Two Kingdoms: The Struggle for the Spirituality of the Church and the Genius of the Dispensational System,” *Detroit Seminary Baptist Journal* 19 (2014): 57.

legalized slavery or for not swearing allegiance to federal government policies during church services.²⁹

Churches such as Pine Street Presbyterian and even Walnut Street Presbyterian Church led by pre-tribulationist James Hall Brookes who publicly defended McPheeters, promoted spirituality in the church by emphasizing personal holiness and evangelism while actively waiting for the imminent appearing of Christ. They did so by recognizing the economic distinction between the Christian church as entirely spiritual and the Jewish theocracy under which national Israel was formed in the OT.³⁰ As such, ecclesiology, not eschatology, was the governing doctrine that formed these early dispensationalists' belief in rapture and any cultural engagement they thought complemented such a belief. Because they viewed the church as purely spiritual and relieved of all legalistic politicism or theocratic notions that motivated national Israel, they were freed to engage the poor and underclass solely as spiritual ministry.³¹ Keeping civic debate at an arm's length, these churches advocated for the evangelism of all races and promoted holy living in the church as they sought

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 61–63. A primary and sympathetic source account of the schisms endured by McPheeters due to his spirituality-in-the-church emphasis is Charles Hodge, “The Complaint of Rev. Dr. McPheeters,” *The Princeton Review* 3 (July 1864): 551–75. Hodge, like Brookes, adamantly defended the ousted McPheeters.

³⁰ Snoeberger, “Tale,” 57–58; cf. n17. For an in-depth analysis on Brookes and his positions see, Carl E. Sanders, “The Premillennial Faith of James Hall Brookes” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995).

³¹ Although the notion of a split between a spiritual church and secular world is an area that both Grimes and I certainly agree on, we have different starting points and consequently evaluations of that development. For Grimes, the notion of a split is precisely what he attempts to challenge by arguing against the idea of the church as purely spiritual and apolitical. He does this by presupposing *history* as the guide to ecclesiology and thus views the church as bearing a distinctly political role to play on the earth. Though I recognize the legitimacy of history as an important tool for one's ecclesiology, I nonetheless presuppose the authoritative NT as the only infallible guide for ecclesiology—regardless of how fallible men have developed such a doctrine throughout history.

to obey Christ's command to render to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's before Christ's return (Matt 22:21). Although the origin of the doctrine of the spirituality-of-the-church emphasized a distinction between secular political affairs and Christian spiritual affairs during the present economy, the distinction, in time, did yield an eschatological emphasis by dispensational proponents.³² Those who advocated such a distinction between secular legislature and spiritual living, as even John Nelson Darby did,³³ also taught that the church, a *spiritual* body comprised of believers from all backgrounds and ethnicities—even those most oppressed—would at any moment be raptured and forever relieved of fleshly social ills and earthly political agendas.³⁴ Such a doctrine ran congruent with Paul's description of the church in Galatians 3 that "there is neither slave nor free ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28). As such, the sin of racism has no place in the body of Christ or biblical rapture theology.

³² As Larry Pettegrew observed, it was never about "date setting," or an overemphasis on eschatology for the pretribulationist; rather, it was about holy living during the church age. Pettegrew quotes James Brookes who stated, "Many suppose that this [prophecy] is the only topic discussed, and some have circulated the report that we have fixed the day, or at least the year, of our Lord's return. But there is not a shadow of truth in either the surmise or the statement" (*Believers' Meeting at Clifton Springs*, 403, quoted in Larry Pettegrew, "The Rapture Debate at the Niagara Bible Conference," *BSac* 157, no. 627 [July 2000]: 349, n17).

³³ Snoeberger, "Tale," 60.

³⁴ It is worth reinforcing that Darby's conviction over the rapture of the church grew out of, not only his literal interpretation of the NT, but also his view of the spirituality-of-the church. Indeed, it was the church's spiritual character as distinct from the worldly affairs on earth that yielded so neatly to a pretribulationist rapture. As such, he was able to say in his *Collected Writings*, vol. 11, "Prophecy does not relate to heaven. The Christian's hope is not a prophetic subject at all" (156). Thus, *ecclesiology* was the primary doctrine supporting Darby's pretribulationist rapture, not his eschatology. Cf., John Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1957), 16, who, representing most modern pretribulationists, takes a stance similar to Darby's.

Remarkably, this runs overtly counter to Grimes's thesis that "rapture theology" is historically racist since it was developed in the wake of the Civil War by those who, at one time or another, allegedly supported Confederate abuses of blacks and sympathized with legalized slavery and/or white supremacy. Rather, it was what is today referred to as the pretribulational rapture that provided the ultimate positive antidote to oppression and gained its profound following in America *precisely because* of the issues surrounding slavery and the Civil War. Though Grimes claims his article does not "judg[e] the motivations of individual premillennialists" but rather aims to trace "the disastrous sociological effects" that the doctrine of the rapture has had on America,³⁵ his essay is replete with one-sided anti-dispensational biases, yielding only conclusions that do in fact judge the intentions of godly leaders from a previous century. A few notable examples will suffice.

One is Grimes's affirming quotation from Michael Phillips's *White Metropolis*, where Phillips draws an absurd comparison between dispensationalism, whiteness, racism, and Manicheanism. Attempting to connect to Phillip's false-comparison, Grimes goes so far as to suggest that the racism he believes is embedded in the rapture is the result of the dispensationalist's plain reading of Scripture.³⁶ Another instance is found in Grimes's concluding analysis: "Premillennialism in America was both shaped by white supremacy and in turn served to shape history in ways that disproportionately afflicted black people and others identified as non-white—those on the underside of society."³⁷ How one is to distinguish between the doctrine of premillennialism and those who promoted it is anyone's guess. Grimes does not offer an answer, only the

³⁵ Grimes, "Racial Ideology," 211, 220. In various places, Grimes seems to confuse the distinction between premillennialism and pretribulationism, often equating the two. It deserves clarifying here that while the latter always includes the former, the converse is not necessarily true. Historic-premillennialists, for example, are traditionally *posttribulational* while dispensational-premillennialists are traditionally *pretribulational*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 215–16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

implication that they are synonymous. In any case, there is little merit to Grime's contention that fundamentalists' or dispensationalists' lack of efforts in social action or reform was because of a supposed pessimism demanded by their premillennial eschatology. Rather, as Snoeberger has well outlined using the father of American Dispensationalism James Brookes as an example, it was these pastors' conviction over the spirituality-of-the-church, not premillennial eschatology, that informed their resistance to large scale political social reform.³⁸

This means the pretribulational rapture of the church was at most a logical corollary or implication from these leaders' spirituality-of-the-church position and *not* their supposed pessimistic end-times views demanding cultural passivity. Held by reformed and dispensational thinkers alike, the spirituality-of-the-church underscores two distinct realms birthed in the wake of Christ's first coming that operate within their own divinely-appointed jurisdictions viz., the church and the state.³⁹ Teasing this distinction out yields logically to a pretribulational rapture for the former's main mission is spiritual, not political (e.g., the Great Commission). The state, on the other hand, will once again return to a theocracy after the church is removed, first to one that is distorted and evil (2 Thess 2:3–8), followed by one that is characterized by peace, righteousness, and justice in fulfillment of prophecy (Luke 1:32–33; Matt 19:28; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 20:2 – 6; cf. Isa 2:2–5; 11:6–11; 19:24–25).

Rapture Demands Social Justice

One's theology of rapture, if indeed biblical, does not in any way "legitimize" evangelical's abandonment or mistreatment of minorities, as Grimes suggests.⁴⁰ In fact, by its distinct virtue of

³⁸ Snoeberger, "Tale," 63–64.

³⁹ Todd Magnum, *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936–1944* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 8–10; 103–106, provides as strong a case as any demonstrating the affinity shared between old Princetonian Reformed thinkers and dispensational thinkers concerning the spirituality-of-the-church.

⁴⁰ Grimes, "Racial Ideology," 211.

imminence leading to an urgent proclamation of the gospel before Christ's appearing, the pretribulational rapture is the very catalyst that stimulates both evangelism as well as correcting societal ills. This is because, as Peter warned, "the end of all things is near" (1 Pet 4:7).⁴¹ In other words, it is *because* the end time is approaching, a time realized at either Christ's rapture of his church or his return with the church, that Christians are to show love and hospitality to those around them as good stewards of God's grace (vv. 8–10).⁴² This urgency demanded by dispensational-premillennialism runs contrary to both amillennial and postmillennial theologies that posit either a gnomic or virtually indefinite period of time before the return of Christ.

Whereas non-pretribulational options allow for passive engagement with culture—the thought being a sort of “time is on our side” notion—the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture rebukes such passivity knowing time is approaching its end. For those who hold to a pretribulational rapture, time is certainly counting down with each second representing a moment to win souls for the gospel—even if only giving a cold drink to a thirsty beggar in the name of Christ. Those who truly understand the doctrine of the rapture of the church do not sit idly by in the face of social evils, accepting them as the inevitable signs of the times—for example, the legalized genocide of countless numbers of minority races called abortion.

Former Fuller Seminary president Richard Mouw, who is not a dispensationalist, understands the positive social implications

⁴¹ The (consummative) perfect active indicative ἤγγικεν (“is near” or “is at hand”) highlights its temporal function and stative aspect. Peter’s usage suggests the current state of affairs is the result of Christ’s first advent, and it is a state of affairs approaching its final destination which is the return of Christ. Cf. BDAG, 2165.2, BibleWorks.

⁴² Though it lies outside the scope of this paper, an argument can be made for a distinctly dispensational reading of Peter’s admonition by underscoring his placing of οἰκονόμοι (literally, “dispensation-ers”) with χάριτος θεοῦ (“grace of God”). Without pressing in too hard, Peter may be hinting at Christian responsibility in what is commonly referred to as the current “dispensation of grace.”

of the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture perhaps better than many who claim to be dispensational. In answering his own stated question as to why those who hold to a pretribulational rapture actively protest societal evils when those very evils seem to run congruent with biblical prophecies, Mouw defends such rapture advocates with integrity:

Because they believe that obedience to the gospel requires us to speak out against evil, even if we have no realistic hope for success in stemming the tide, prior to God's final victory in history. If Jesus is to return during their lifetimes, they want to be found faithfully opposing all that dishonors his name, even if the things they oppose are prophesied in the Bible as signs that the end is in sight.⁴³

Indeed, Mow captures well the inevitable tension the Bible presents with commands to love one another, including our enemies, and do good for everyone (Gal 6:10), even going so far as to step in and fight on behalf of the oppressed (Prov 24:11–12). Believers are to do these good things *as well as* expect the final days to “come with difficulty” (2 Tim 3:1) marked by evil people who will “go from bad to worse” (v. 13). This is, as George Marsden termed, a “paradoxical tension” that Christians must hold in balance; but good must still be done while there is opportunity.⁴⁴ Those who hold to a pretribulational rapture, most notably dispensationalists, therefore, cannot be thought of as clinging to a “racially coded theology” that justifies racism, as

⁴³ Richard J. Mouw, *The Smell of Sawdust: What Evangelicals Can Learn from their Fundamentalist Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 100.

⁴⁴ It is this very tension—which dispensationalist/pre-tribulationists hold in balance—that exposes a major weakness in Joel Carpenter's fascinating study, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997). Throughout the book, Carpenter presents the early dispensationalist desire for revival as inconsistent with their descriptive eschatology, but he does so by misunderstanding their true motive for revival. Dispensational-pretribulationists have always understood that wrath is indeed coming, a horrific future event that in turn motivates their desire for societal repentance and salvation, much like Jonah toward Nineveh.

Grimes posited. Nor, can they be charged with neglecting social action that honors the Christ of Scripture as scholars such as Bahnsen, Gentry, and North have repeatedly charged.⁴⁵

Again, Mouw, a critic of dispensational theology, recognizes such mischaracterizations that dispensational-pretribulationists have endured unfairly. With honest transparency, he confesses, “The dispensationalist perspective was supposed to undercut Christian social concerns—but long before I ever heard of Mother Teresa,” says Mouw, “I saw dispensationalists lovingly embrace the homeless in inner-city rescue missions.”⁴⁶ Likewise, another notable critic of pretribulationist-dispensationalism, Calvin University professor Joel Carpenter, expressed sentiments similar to those of Mouw: “As eager interpreters of ‘the signs of the times,’ they were among the first Americans to see—and denounce—the Nazi’s persecution of Jews.”⁴⁷ Carpenter would go on to describe the urgency fundamentalist-dispensationalists displayed toward those in society whom they reached as an outworking of their belief in the rapture, even admitting that it

⁴⁵ The charge of societal neglect is overwhelmingly so in Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *House Divided: The Break Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), esp. 13–138; moreover, Gary North’s monthly newsletter, “Dispensationalism in Transition: Challenging Dispensationalism Code of Silence,” published by the Institute for Christian Economics, available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/141399309/Dispensationalism-in-Transition>, is a poorly argued denunciation of dispensationalism that also inaccurately represents the social implications of the pretribulation rapture.

⁴⁶ Mouw, *Smell of Sawdust*, 101.

⁴⁷ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 244. Contra the outlandish claims by Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. in, “Anti-Semitism and Dispensationalism,” *Modern Preterism*, 2011, https://www.preteristarchive.com/2011_gentry_anti-semitism-and-dispensationalism/. Remarkably, Gentry attempts to make an argument that dispensationalism is more guilty of anti-Semitism than Reformed-supersessionism by claiming the former “frequently citing academic works” from ultra-critical or liberal authors who are themselves inconsistent with their claims, and that they [dispensationalists] celebrate the return of Jews to the modern state of Israel while anticipating their “wholesale slaughter.” The incredibly overt strawman arguments and irresponsible mischaracterizations against dispensational theology by all three scholars (Gentry, North, and Bahnsen) is nothing short of stunning.

was they, in contrast to liberal optimists that had “the more realistic outlook” on society.⁴⁸ Indeed, dispensational-pretribulationists motivated by nothing other than an urgent call to love, care for, and evangelize the most oppressed in the world—before the opportunity is lost at the church’s imminent disappearing—is the indelible legacy of rapture theology.

Rapture as Oppression’s Divine Antidote

The doctrine of the rapture insists on believers actively making disciples for Christ who in turn influence culture by their very lives while there is still time—“In order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 4:11). Contrary to Grimes’s premise of the rapture being a racial “cosmic segregation,” it is actually a divine antidote to wicked, racial oppression. Referred to by Paul as “the blessed hope,” the rapture of the church demands a vibrant Christian life as believers live and minister to others in this present age being “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11–14).⁴⁹ Gerald Priest notes, “While it is scripturally true that Christians are to occupy until the Lord’s return, this injunction does not mean we squat and wait no more than we swat at everything that does not suit us. We are to reach out into the world evangelistically without becoming tainted by the world, which is not an easy task. ... Befriending the lost in this world need not translate into befriending worldliness.”⁵⁰

One must not forget that pretribulationists (or fundamentalist-dispensationalists) did in fact fight what they considered to be the social evils of their day, most prominent

⁴⁸ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 244–45; cf. 108–109; See Mouw, *Smell of Sawdust*, 102; and Timothy P. Weber, “Premillennialism and the Branches of Evangelicalism,” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 14–15, for a similar conclusion.

⁴⁹ The substantive present participle προσδεχόμενοι in Titus 2:13 suggests a *proactive* waiting or expecting, one characterized by the good works and personal holiness in the world as stated in the pericope.

⁵⁰ Gerald L Priest, “Early Fundamentalism’s Legacy: What is It and Will it Endure Through the 21st Century?” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 342.

among them being public school policy and prohibition.⁵¹ Though these may reflect “evils” of a generation now past, it was nonetheless their literal interpretation born out of conviction for Scripture’s authority that propelled them to actively engage the culture. Rather than allowing the belief in a pretribulational rapture to keep them from social action, they took to the fight their firm belief in the authority of Scripture. Indeed, at a recent ETS conference, Madison Trammel lists doctrinal loci such as the Bible, sin, salvation, the church, and eschatology as “most directly relevant to cultural engagement” for classic dispensationalists like Ironside, Gaebelein, Scofield and Chafer.⁵²

Moreover and undeniably, it was the zealous urgency caused by the belief in a pretribulational rapture that fueled modern foreign missions and global evangelism—movements often spearheaded by fundamental-dispensationalists, as documented by multiple scholars.⁵³ “Driven by a literal dispensational interpretation of the Bible,” contends Priest, “local church pastors and institute workers challenged young Christians to aggressively win their cities and neighborhoods to the Savior before it was ‘too late.’”⁵⁴ Priest would later suggest, “Following the example of campaign evangelists Moody and Sunday, many

⁵¹ Though the literature is vast regarding early 20th century dispensational/fundamentalist cultural engagement, a good primer is George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Although Marsden displays customary ignorance toward dispensational teaching, e.g., inaccurately stating that each dispensation represents a “different plan of salvation” (40), he is nonetheless recognized an authoritative voice in the history of early fundamentalism.

⁵² Madison Trammel, “Dispensational Theology and Fundamentalist Social Action: A Match Made in Heaven or Strange Bedfellows?” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Far-West conference, Riverside, CA, March 29, 2019).

⁵³ See, for example, Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 28–31; 242–49; Gerald L. Priest, “Fundamentalism’s Legacy,” 335–37; and Larry D. Pettegrew, “*Rapture Debate*, 331–47, as well as his five-part series “The Niagara Bible Conference and American Fundamentalism,” published in *Central Baptist Quarterly* (1976–78).

⁵⁴ Priest, “Fundamentalism’s Legacy,” 335.

ventured out from the churches as itinerant evangelists exposing *personal* and *national* sin and calling for revival in a spiritually destitute land” (emphasis added).⁵⁵ A time was rapidly approaching, taught pretribulationists, when Christians would no longer have a witness in the world by loving those who society had always deemed unlovable.

Indeed, the love of God in Christ compels the church to love the poor, marginalized, and downcast of society in order for God to be glorified—and the urgency to do so is demanded in the doctrine of the rapture of the church. As such, Christ receiving his bride to himself as prophesied in the NT (cf. John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17) before the most devastating period in human history occurs—that is, the doctrine of the pretribulationist rapture—provides the greatest hope for believers of all ethnicities and backgrounds in the current economy as they have the hopeful opportunity to be spared from God’s wrath to be poured out on all the unregenerate (1 Thess 5:9).

Conclusion

The church is made up of the most marginalized people groups in human history. From its inception hated tribes from around the globe fill its ranks. Its homecoming or “rapture” does not promote a “cosmic segregation” as suggested by Grimes. Rather, it serves as a powerful antidote to oppression against minorities demanded by the imminent appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ receiving the church to himself before the great day of wrath on the earth epitomizes the special type of love a husband has only for his bride—a bride as diverse as the countless ethnicities and economic backgrounds that comprise her beauty. It is out of love for their fellow man—no matter the persuasion or ethnicity—and his need to escape impending doom which undergirds the pretribulationist’s zeal for the lost.

The sensational claim by Nathaniel P. Grimes that the dispensational understanding of the church’s rapture is a racially coded theology legitimizing evangelical mistreatment of minorities in America since the wake of the Civil War has been demonstrated to be severely flawed. Contrary to the belief that

⁵⁵ Ibid., 336.

the rapture is a modern doctrine invented by Darby and exploited by other white dispensational leaders in the late 19th century as a “cosmic segregation,” or privileged avenue of escape for white supremacists from blacks and other ethnic groups, this paper defended the pretribulational rapture as a biblical antidote for oppression against minorities in the current economy. As argued, the church is a spiritual (not political) institution comprised of the most marginalized people-groups in human history, indeed a collective body of countless ethnicities and nationalities whom Christ will spare from impending doom upon the earth.