

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I hear a lot of people talk about “the Rapture.” What is it?

“The Rapture” refers to Christ removing all the true Christians from the world in an instant. Fundamentalists and evangelicals almost unanimously agree that this will happen immediately before the Antichrist takes control of the world and begins “the Great Tribulation.” Belief in a “pre-Tribulation Rapture” is so widespread that a series of books (the *Left Behind* series) has been a record-breaking publishing success and has spawned a series of successful movies.

The concept of a secret coming of Christ to remove his Church from the world before the rise of the Antichrist — and therefore spare the people of his Church persecution, is, however, a novelty in

the history of Christian thought. There is no evidence of this belief before about 1830, when belief in a two-stage return of Christ began to circulate in Irvingite circles in Glasgow and London. Founded by Edward Irving, the “Irvingites” called themselves “the Catholic Apostolic Church” and practiced speaking in tongues and other charismatic gifts. Margaret Macdonald of Port Glasgow has been identified as originating the concept in 1830 of the “Secret Rapture,” a secret return to “take up” the saints.

The idea was picked up without attribution and spread by John Nelson Darby, founder of a group later called the Plymouth Brethren. It became an important part of

Darby’s teaching known as “Dispensationalism,” which he spread on seven teaching tours of America.

Believers in the Rapture consider it to be taught in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.” But the context (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11) clearly concerns the Second Coming, not a secret coming before the Second Coming.

The Rapture is wishful thinking. That the final generation of Christians will be spared persecution is comforting news to people expecting Christ to return in their lifetimes.

The Rapture may also be popular for another reason. Some Rapturists take no small pleasure in imagining the reaction of those left when all the true Christians (fundamentalists) have been raptured. The non-fundamentalists (Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans and others) who remain will realize that the fundamentalists had been right all along and were the only true Christians. What sweet revenge!

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.