Baptist Book Review:

Not Afraid of the Antichrist: Why We Don't Believe in a Pre-Tribulation Rapture by Michael L. Brown and Craig S. Keener

By Laurence M. Vance, Ph. D.

Adherence to the doctrine of the pre-trib rapture is something that is overwhelmingly found among Independent Baptists and to a lesser extent among conservative Southern Baptists and evangelicals. These, after all, are the groups most associated with dispensationalism and the literal interpretation of the Bible. But it is a doctrine that is increasingly under attack, hence the necessity of this review.

Michael Brown is the founder and president of FIRE School of Ministry in Concord, North Carolina, and host of the daily radio program *The Line of Fire*. Born and raised a Jew, he converted to Christ as a teenager. He holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages and Literature from New York University. He has written more than thirty books, contributed to major scholarly reference works, been a visiting or adjunct professor at seven seminaries, and debated Jewish rabbis. His website says that he "is widely considered to be the world's foremost

Messianic Jewish apologist." However, Brown is also a noted proponent of the Charismatic Movement. I remember him from when I lived in Pensacola, Florida. For four years he was a leader in the Brownsville Revival headquartered at the Brownsville Assembly of God church in Pensacola. This revival was the Charismatic Movement on steroids, and featured religious ecstasy, claims of miraculous healings, and people lying on the floor for hours after being "slain in the Spirit." Brown was dismissed by the church in 2000. He tells us in *Not Afraid of the Antichrist* that he has prayed "one hour straight in tongues" (p. 43), but that there is "no such thing as pre-Trib rapture" (p. 46).

Craig Keener is the F. M. and Ada Thompson professor of biblical studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. He was previously professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, for fifteen years. Keener holds a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies and Christian Origins from Duke University. He too has written more than thirty books, and five of them have won awards in *Christianity Today*. Keener is a genuine biblical scholar, as his massive commentaries on John and Acts attest. He is the editor of the *Bulletin for Biblical Research* and has served as president of the Evangelical Theological Society. He is also a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, and I have spoken with him several times at meetings. However, Keener is a huge proponent of women in ministry and the continuation of "spiritual gifts" until

the end of the age. Like Brown, he has spoken in tongues. Both Keener and Brown have penned responses to John MacArthur's book on the Charismatic movement, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (2013). Yet, Keener maintains that "every single verse used in support" of the doctrine of the pre-trib rapture "is loose—that is, out of context" (p. 25).

After a foreword by Denver Seminary's Craig Blomberg, acknowledgments, a preface apparently written by both authors, and an introduction "penned mainly by Craig" (p. 15), *Not Afraid of the Antichrist* is divided into three parts: 1. Why many doubt 'Left Behind' theology, 2. What does the Bible say? 3. Implications for us today. Each part contains four chapters. The book concludes with endnotes, a Scripture index, and an untitled page with information about the authors. There is no bibliography. Scripture quotations are from nine different English versions in addition to the authors' own translations. Although there are occasionally references to "Michael" or "Craig," it is not always clear which author wrote which chapter. I have not read any of Brown's books, but I do own many of Keener's books. They are scholarly, academic, and important works, even if one does not agree with everything in them. *Not Afraid of the Antichrist* is a big change for Keener. Not only does he have a co-author, his style is very condescending. The style is definitely not academic, as he acknowledges in the preface, and the 49 endnotes are indeed "few and far between"

(p. 15). The book is "addressed to a wide audience" (p. 36) and "meant to educate *and* encourage, to inform *and* inspire" (p. 15).

Both Brown and Keener, in their "earliest days as believers" (p. 14), attended churches that taught a pre-trib rapture. Although they are now "convinced that this teaching is not found in Scripture," they "never divide from others over the subject" (p. 14). The authors have "friends and colleagues who hold to it" (p. 14), and they acknowledge that "some of the finest believers on the planet hold to a pre-Trib Rapture" (p. 187). Yet, these fine believers make "extra assumptions beyond what any passage says" (p. 23), take all of verses to prove a pre-trib rapture "out of context" (p. 25), "construct secondary arguments" (p. 36), and are "cult-*like*" because they "discount the clear testimony of hundreds of Scriptures because of a questionable system of interpretation" (pp. 187-188).

Keener gets to the crux of the issue in his introduction. Based on their reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, the authors do believe in a rapture. However, the question is "whether this catching up happens before or after the final time of Tribulation" (p. 24). From then on the book is just recycled George Ladd and Robert Gundry, but with a new twist: it just simply isn't fair that the last generation of Western believers escape the Tribulation when previous generations of Christians have suffered persecution in this life.

In the first section of *Not Afraid of the Antichrist*, the authors

raise some questions about the pre-trib rapture, explain why they left behind their "left behind" theology, explore views about the end times throughout church history, and dispense with dispensationalism. Section two examines support for a pre-trib rapture in the Old Testament, makes the case that the rapture and the second coming are one and the same, evaluates some pre-trib arguments, and presents some post-trib passages. Section three discusses the coming tribulation, tells us how to live in light of post-tribulationalism and the return of Christ, and reminds us that even though we will face tribulation, we should "live in expectation of God's promise for a renewed world where suffering and death will be no more" (p. 219).

The authors continually maintain that the doctrine of a pre-trib rapture began with John Nelson Darby about 1830, but there is no interaction with the works to the contrary of Morgan Edwards, William C. Watson on dispensationalism before Darby, or R. A. Huebner on Darby. Keener brings up the work of Dave MacPherson and his claim that Darby got his idea for a pre-trib rapture from Edward Irving who got it from Margaret MacDonald who got it in a vision. But then he acknowledges that MacDonald's prophecy "sounds more post-Tribulational" (p. 61). So why bring it up? But the guilt by association doesn't stop there. We are told that "The Way International, a cult that denies Jesus' deity, is pre-Tribulational" (p. 63). "Some prophecy teachers" hailed "the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* circulated in the

1920s" (p. 66). Pre-tribulationalism is termed "Left Behind" theology to identify it with the novels and movies of that name. Edgar Whisenant's book *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*, which all serious pre-trib advocates repudiated when it was published, even garners a mention.

In his chapter on Old Testament support for a pre-trib rapture, Brown fails to mention the great type of Enoch, a living man taken by God from earth to heaven who never dies. He views God protecting the children of Israel from the death of the firstborn as confirming "the post-Tribulation position, namely, that God can preserve His people *here on the earth* while He pours out His wrath *on the very same earth*" (p. 89). Of course he can. But the question is not about what God *can* do, it is about what God *will* do. God is able to "multitask" (p. 98), says Brown. He can deal with "the Church and Israel at the same time" (p. 98) during the Tribulation period. So the argument that the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7) is for Israel is "specious" (p. 98). So which is it? Does God want the last generation of Western believers to experience tribulation or does he want to preserve them on earth while others experience tribulation? Brown's "most decisive Old Testament text in our discussion" is Isaiah 26:20-21 and the larger context of "the Apocalypse of Isaiah" in chapters 24-27 (p. 94). But here he equates Israel with all believers.

Chapter six of *Not Afraid of the Antichrist* tells us that "the

idea that the Rapture and the Second Coming are two distinct events is contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures" (p. 101). Yet, even the authors believe that "there is one Second Coming, and it has different aspects to it" (p. 107). Those aspects are quite different, so different in fact that the rapture of believers and the return of Christ must be distinguished. There are no signs before the rapture; there are signs before the return. At the rapture, Christ comes for his saints; at the return he comes with his saints. Christ meets Christians in the air at the rapture; Christ returns to earth at the return. Unbelievers are left behind at the rapture; unbelievers are taken away at the return. At the rapture, only believers see Christ; at the return, everyone sees Christ. At the rapture, no changes take place on the earth; at the return, great changes take place on the earth. At the rapture, there is no mention of Satan; at the return, Satan is bound. After the rapture, the tribulation begins; after the return, the millennium begins. Much ado is made over the fact that the same Greek words (like *parousia*) "are used to describe two supposedly separate and quite different events" (p. 102). Brown raised a similar point in the previous chapter as well when he talked about the same Greek word (*thlipsis*) being used to refer to everyday tribulation that Christians will face as well as the "great tribulation" (p. 92). But the coming of Titus (2 Cor. 7:6-7), the coming of the Antichrist (2 The. 2:9), and the coming of Christ (1 The. 4:15)—which are all "separate and quite distinct events"—are all described by the

same Greek word (*parousia*). We are also told that "the word *parousia* refers to someone's actual presence in a place or, more commonly, to their arrival to a place" (p. 113). Thus, it can't refer to the rapture because Jesus "never arrives here on earth" and "is never *present* on earth" (p. 113). An appearing (*epiphaneia*) and a revealing (*apokalupsis*) "must be visible" (pp. 114-115), so these words can't possibly refer to a pre-trib "secret" rapture. The authors believe that Christians are caught up to meet the Lord in the air, but then they descend to earth together with him as he "defeats his enemies and establishes His Kingdom on the earth" (p. 107). The authors are misrepresenting pre-tribulationism. Christ meeting believers in the clouds (1 The. 4:17) is certainly an actual presence and arrival that is a visible appearing and revealing to *believers*. The pre-trib rapture is no more secret than any other view of the rapture. It will be no secret that millions of people have been raptured. And regarding the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, Old Testament saints are not "in Christ" (1 The. 4:16) and neither do they "sleep in Jesus" (1 The. 4:14). Yet, in the post-trib system, saints of all ages are raptured to meet Jesus as he returns to earth.

In the chapters on "evaluating some pre-trib arguments" and "post-tribulational passages," the authors are hopelessly confused because they make no distinction between Israel and the Church and attempt to lump together Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4. In addition, Keener gets rid of the rapture in John 14:2-3 by making it

noneschatological. Jesus brings believers "into the Father's presence by His coming after His resurrection" (p. 158). The authors believe that "the view that Christians are raptured and thus resurrected before the Tribulation makes biblical prophecy far more complex that it needs to be" (p. 29). To the contrary, rejecting a pre-trib rapture and forcing all prophetic events together is what makes biblical prophecy far more complex than it needs to be. Things that are different are not the same. Things that are similar are not the same. Tribulation is not the Great Tribulation. The rapture is not the second coming. The church has not replaced Israel. The judgment seat of Christ is not the white throne judgment. The wrath of man is not the wrath of God. The dead in Christ is not all the saved.

Chapter 10 of the book, "How to Live in Light of Post-Tribulationalism," reads instead like "How to Live in Light of Postmillennialism." It closes with the statement that "the Gospel is spreading through the world at an ever-increasing pace, *with* the Spirit's help, not *without* the Spirit's help, and in the midst of great darkness and evil and apostasy, God's light is shining brighter by the day" (p. 199). This chapter also contains some very dubious statistics taken from Brown's 1997 book, *The Revival Answer Book*, and from The Prayer Foundation (pp. 196-198): two hundred million people "have indicated decisions for Christ" after viewing *The Jesus Film*, twenty thousand Africans "come to Christ" every day, Africa "is now over 50 percent

Christian," every day now the average number added to the body of Christ worldwide averages 174,000."

I note also that the authors believe that "Jesus' true followers must persevere to the end" (p. 206).

I can only recommend *Not Afraid of the Antichrist* to seasoned and grounded pre-trib pastors and teachers who need to see what opponents of the pre-trib rapture are currently saying. This is not a book that Craig Keener should be proud of.

Not Afraid of the Antichrist:
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