

7) The alleged “Early Church Problem”

In an effort to manufacture their last “problem,” Dr. Kurschner and company argue that the any-moment, Pre-70th Week rapture is not to be found anywhere in the writings of the early church fathers, whereas there is support for non-imminent, *intra*-70th Week, “Pre-Wrath” rapture ideas or arrangements therein. In that vein, we are told the following (with my remarks inserted throughout, so as to clear away the cobwebs):

“The writings from the early church fathers date back to the first century, and of course, **we should never take their writings as proof of one doctrine over another. The Bible is always the ultimate source for our doctrine** *[a good statement as far as it goes, but it still falls quite short. For in truth, the Bible is not only the ‘ultimate’ source for our doctrine, but it is the ONLY source! Sola Scriptura! Nonetheless, had they only stopped here and went no further . . . but then where would their “Early Church Problem” be? Unfortunately, they proceed to entirely undermine even their moderately framed principle, apparently showing how superficially it is held, at least when it comes to the truth of our blessed hope] . . .* At the very least *[however,]* these writings provide insight into what the earliest Christians believed about certain subjects whether those beliefs were right or wrong *[so what value does this have as to the scripturalness or non-scripturalness of rapture schemes? Is the truth of a doctrine strengthened or weakened depending on antiquity and what the majority of such professing Christians held and expressed outside of His all-sufficient God-breathed Word? Is time or antiquity the interpreter of Scripture rather than the Spirit of God leading souls into the truth of His Word alone?].”*

“In conclusion, Pretribbers know they can’t find anything close to Pretribulationism in the early church fathers *[In other words, it doesn’t really matter even if Scripture itself teaches Pretribulation truth, because outside of its inspired walls it cannot be found?!].* The early church almost without exception taught that the rapture would take place at some unknown time after the Antichrist arrived and began persecuting Christians. *[Which tells us that, the earlier and more pervasive error is, the more weight it carries in the minds of Pre-Wrath men! Or so they contend when it comes, at least, to the truth of the blessed hope].”*

As we are aptly cautioned by W. Kelly:

“[O]ne must frankly allow that no importance whatever should be attached to early tradition. Scripture, and scripture alone, is the only sure arbiter, the sole reliable source of the pure truth of God; and the children of God should be the more jealous on this score, as we see around us the unmistakable results of recurrence to tradition in the revived Judaism [or Judaizing] of our day.”

If Pre-Wrath Rapturists wish to go outside the all-sufficient Word of God and appeal to early church history as a fig leaf to prop up their weak and beggarly scheme, that only reveals *their*

own self-consciousness about the lack of any true **Scriptural basis** for their ideas (for confessedly **all** early church fathers held erroneous views on the rapture). Though, in actuality, the earliest views outside of Scripture simply depart in one way or another from the Pretribulation truth and fall along a spectrum of mid and post-70th Week rapturism, or mid and post-Tribulationism. *Nothing to boast about! . . . but rather to seek mercy and light from the Lord to be delivered therefrom.*

If the blessed hope of the any-moment, Pre-70th Week coming of the Lord Jesus for His Church is an “Early Church Problem,” then all *non*-Pretribulation Rapture views have a “Scripture Alone Problem” . . . the Scriptures, I might add, *which predate any “early church fathers”.*

The appeal to what the so-called Apostolical Father's taught or did not teach is truly foolish. Apparently none of them held the true doctrine of justification by faith; and all of them to a man held baptismal regeneration. So much for the Church Fathers and historical arguments. The fact of the matter is, all sorts of false doctrine crept into the Church even during the days of the apostles, as the NT Epistles amply attest (including errors on the rapture itself!). The true doctrine of the Church, its mystery nature with its heavenly calling and hope—wherein is neither Jewish nor Gentile position before God, and absolutely separate and distinct from Israel and its earthly calling and hope—was among the first things to be lost and buried, and with it the Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the Body and Bride of Christ.

“Most pointed too in the bearing on our subject is [**1 Corinthians**] **chapter 15, which proves how little ‘early christian belief’ can be trusted;** for some among them questioned a resurrection, though it does not seem that they doubted the immortality of the soul. . . **Notably again the Epistle to the Galatians calls for a few words in proof that what the early Christians held is not the smallest guarantee for the truth.** For the apostle writes to the assemblies of that considerable region in Asia Minor, where he had himself planted the gospel, to reproach them sadly and solemnly with having **so quickly changed** from him that called them in Christ's grace **to a different gospel** which is not another. It was truly a perversion of the gospel of Christ. *If saints, after the best of all preaching in that early day, could so soon follow judaizers, and fall from grace into legalism as the apostle affirms, can any thoughtful mind be surprised that they might soon slip into defective views and even error about the Second Advent? But we need not assume this. The Epistles to the Thessalonians prove doubly the fact, and not the danger only.* For the apostle, in instructing them more on that glorious truth, had in the First to correct, at least as soon, their mistake about their deceased brethren, and in the Second to expose a still wider and worse error about the day of the Lord for living saints. How plainly the mystery of lawlessness was already at work!”

“The doctrine of the church is clearly at the root the ONE HOPE, which is found in the intermediate part of the New Testament. For along with the truth of the peculiar calling of the church, as the body commenced by the descent and indwelling of the

Holy Ghost at Pentecost, and thenceforward guided and perpetuated by Him — along with this truth, it will be found that the peculiar aspect of the coming of the Lord, for which I have contended, stands or falls . . . None of them [including the early church fathers] therefore has an adequate idea of the new and heavenly work which God began at Pentecost by the baptism of the Holy Ghost. The consequence is that, if they read of saints in Daniel, in the Psalms, or in the Revelation, they are at once set down as of the church. If they read of ‘this gospel of the kingdom’ in Matt. 24, or of ‘the everlasting gospel,’ — it is to their minds the same thing as what Paul calls ‘my gospel,’ the gospel of the grace of God preached now. Hence follows, and quite fairly too, a denial of any specialty in the walk and conversation of the saints since Pentecost, and a general Judaizing in doctrine, standing, conduct and hopes.” (W. Kelly)

As far as the value of early church fathers goes in terms of the validity or non-validity of doctrine to be held fast, we can do no better than conclude with the following set of observations:

“The marvel is that any man of spiritual judgment who has read them [the so-called apostolical fathers] with care should count them of the least weight, especially on such a matter. They have indeed a sorrowful interest, *as they attest the rapid departure and profound downfall from apostolic teaching.* Can anything be conceived more evident or striking than the immeasurable distance which severs these earliest writings from the scriptures? The Apocrypha, merely human as it is, does not so startlingly differ from the O.T. as do Barnabas, Clemens Rom., and Hermas from the apostles Paul, Peter, and John. Yet these productions were read like the scriptures to Christian congregations in early days; and Clemens Alex. quotes the most heterodox and nonsensical of the three as scripture! Even the Sinaitic Uncial has appended to the N.T. Barnabas and Hermas, as the Alexandrian has Clemens Rom. What a contrast these and all the rest from the dignity, holiness, love, and authority of the inspired Epistles! **These early relics are merely the word of man, betraying not only weakness but trumpery. If able and learned men have lauded them to the skies, it only proves that tradition has blinding power, and that all have not faith.”**

“*These early writings are most defective and, through ignorance of the scriptures, often opposed to the truth;* and so are moderns. Scripture alone is the standard; and the Christian is not left without a divine Guide dwelling in him to lead into all the truth. Let us believe God's word as a whole, and not accept one part while we omit another.”

“*But the principle of looking to 'the early belief' is a false one,* the *ignis fatuus* of the Tractarian movement, and the fully developed lie of Popery; which, if there is to be an interpreter, demands and professes to have an infallible one in itself, the Holy Catholic church, and now indeed the Pope. This of course when plainly stated the Protestant abjures. The Christian, the church, believing in the ever abiding presence and operation of the Holy Spirit sent forth on and since Pentecost, has what the latter confessedly lacks, what the former vainly and madly professes. The Spirit dwells here below to guide

into all the truth, and makes this good in the measure of our faith and spiritual state. For He is here to glorify Christ, not the saint or the church; who are only right in awaiting Christ's coming for our glory with Him. Now is the time for lowly service, unworldly devotedness, and self-renunciation, yea for sharing His rejection and suffering. It is no time for reigning without the apostles, and without Christ; it is the time for entire dependence on Him in separation from the world, content ourselves to be meanwhile reviled, persecuted, and defamed like our betters for Christ's sake. ***The scripture is the standard; in no way what the Christians may have believed, thought, said, or done, even in apostolic days.*** Hence the saints in Rome are warned not to be high-minded but fear; and we have already seen why. It was the very snare which misled them and all Christendom to deny God's faithfulness to Israel, and to claim the succession to Jewish power and honour now on earth, which could not be without forfeiting present rejection and future glory on high with Christ."

"It is the scripture that we accept, not only as the source of divinely given truth but as its criterion. The Holy Spirit is the sole unfailing interpreter, just so far as we look to Christ's glory. If we seek our own things, calling them perhaps the church's glory or right, we have no promise from God and no security for ourselves; but on the contrary we shall have to learn our folly." (W. Kelly, *The So-Called Apostolical Fathers on the Lord's Second Coming*)

"Here, as is known, the so-called Fathers fell into the most serious error, even such as looked for the return of the Lord and His future kingdom over the earth. *But not one of them . . . bore witness to the future national restoration of Israel to the promised land.* They on the contrary embraced the further error of supposing that the risen saints would be in the earthly Jerusalem: **thus ignorantly were the best of them agreeing to blot out the distinctive hopes of both Israel and the church; and so rapid was the departure of the early Christians even from plain prophetic facts. Still earlier had they lost sight of our heavenly relations to Christ, and of the capital truth of the Spirit's presence and action in the assembly here below. The consequence was that then was consummated the fatal scheme of treating the church systematically as Israel improved. Maintain simply and firmly the literal restoration of Israel as wholly distinct from Christianity, and you have a bulwark against pseudo-spiritualism, and a groundwork, if rightly used, for seeing our special and heavenly privileges. The Fathers thought that Jerusalem during the millennium would be the city of the heavenly saints, that the Jews would be Christians, and that all would be together, risen and uprisen, reigning in glory [an incongruous mixture of things heavenly and earthly]". (W. Kelly)**

"Christ is the centre of the counsels of God, and hence of prophecy, which treats of the earth and of His government of it for His own glory. Hence the importance of Israel, of whom, as according to the flesh, came Christ who is over all, God blessed for ever. They are His people by a choice and calling which cannot fail in the end, though there may be and has been a fall and a long continued disowning of them in God's righteous judgment of their apostasy. But mercy will restore them ere long, humbly, joyfully welcoming the

Messiah they have so long rejected. **This had been feebly seen, nay, generally denied, throughout Christendom for ages. Scarcely any error is more patent throughout the Fathers than the substitution of the church for Israel in all their system of thought. Every Father, whose remains have come down to us, is a witness of the same allegorizing interpretations;** not only the Alexandrian school of Clement and Origen, but Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and the Pseudo-Barnabas. The Latins followed in the same wake, not Augustine and Ruffinus and Jerome only, but Tertullian, Cyprian, and Lactantius. ***Not one held the restoration of Israel to their land, converted nationally; the millenarian portion expected that the risen saints would reign with Christ in Jerusalem rebuilt, adorned, and enlarged, not that the Jews would be restored and blessed in the land.*** The medieval writers naturally adopted the same view: so did the Reformers, as far as I am aware, without an exception. ***All fell into the error of putting the church into the place of Christ, and so of leaving no room for His earthly people, besides His heavenly saints and glorified bride.*** They neglected the warning of the Apostle Paul, and assumed that the Jewish branches were broken off that the Gentiles might be grafted in, and take their place gloriously and for ever. They did not pay heed to the prophetic word, as Peter exhorts, but applied systematically the predictions of Israel's blessing in the last days to the Christian church: still less did they appreciate the day dawning or the daystar arising in the heart. Catholics, papists, Protestants, had no real light, no spiritual intelligence, as to the hopes of Israel as distinct from those of Christians.

“Is it not as solemn as it is startling to see thus beyond just question the immediate, universal, and lasting departure of the Christian profession from prophetic truth? But so it is and must be. For the divine glory in Christ as the center for all things in heaven and on earth being the revealed purpose of God (Eph. 1: 10), when this is forgotten, false hopes spring up. Man, self, becomes the end, instead of Christ; the true light is lost, and darkness ensues in the just retribution of God. The effort to make the church all, instead of preserving the real dignity of the church as the heavenly spouse of Christ, lowers her to the position of Israel, a people reigned over, not reigning with Him, His inheritance, not heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ . . . Yet no maxim of interpretation can compare with this most misleading identification for importance, antiquity, or widespread reception. Since the apostles, perhaps beyond every other tradition, has this been accepted always, everywhere, and by all. Fathers, Romanists, Reformed, have alike applied it habitually in their comments, as well as in practice.”

“He [‘Mr. Shackleton’] is also surprised that **truth [as that of the pre-70th Week rapture] so important should only of late have been learnt from scripture.** How could Mr. Shackleton expect such a thing in **the early fathers,** if he is really acquainted with their writings? **Which of them escaped the Galatian leaven?** Now it is remarkable that **this Epistle {Galatians},** which aims at clearing the churches of that country from a **misuse of the law — the bane of the patristic writings generally, is precisely that in which the apostle never speaks openly of the Lord's second coming. What was the use to those who had lost the virtue of His first coming?** The Reformers were too absorbed

in contending for justification, as well as against Popery, to search into prophecy or the church. And what real advance has been made since? I fear there has been in general a departure from much that was then recovered. **Our appeal must therefore be to scripture only.** *The fathers invented the miserable system of expunging Israel and Judah from O. T. prophecy: for them, all was 'the church'; and so with most Anglicans, and almost all 'Dissenters,' to this day. Their lucubrations [the writings of the early fathers] therefore about the Antichrist and the great tribulation are worthless.* The Protestant [*or Historicist*] scheme went farther astray in denying the individuality of the Antichrist, as well as his literal place in the temple at Jerusalem in the consummation of the age, and converting the days into nothing but years. But both alike **Judaized the church by blotting out Israel's true hopes, through misappropriating Jewish scriptures; and Mr. S. is not clear of this error, through which he is bitter against those who would distinguish what is Christian from Jewish.**" (W. Kelly)