

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
I'm here today to ask for your help with something. This is something that may seem trivial to you, silly, but I don't think it is.

You see, there are a lot of Christians out there going around with some very wrong ideas. And because they haven't bothered to examine those ideas, they are spreading them to non-Christians. And so those who do not yet believe in Christ are getting the wrong idea about the rest of us who do. And in the end, the Gospel suffers, because it's being distorted.

This all started for me a few weeks ago when I learned that there was a new movie coming out, called "Left Behind." No, actually, it started before that, but it came to a head for me when Newsday splashed the whole "Left Behind" series across the cover of its second section a couple of weeks ago. They devoted an entire two page spread (plus the cover and some spill-over) to the series of books called "Left Behind" on which the new movie will be based. Now, how many of you out there know what the books of the "Left Behind" series are about?

They're about all the terrible things that all the non-believers will have to go through when the Christians are snatched up into heaven in that thing called "the Rapture."

Honestly, I haven't read a one of them. Not a word. I'm told they're a pretty good read, actually. Fairly exciting and well paced if you like light reading. I might actually enjoy them if the whole idea of the series didn't make me nearly sick to my stomach.

Yes, that's right. Sick to my stomach.

You see, while the books may be fun, and while they have been wildly popular, they are based on a horrible mis-interpretation of the Bible.

I can't stomach them because they do my wonderful Jesus such a horrible disservice that I can't even stand to touch the paper they're printed on. These books take as their basic pre-supposition that there will be this thing, at some time in the future, (It doesn't really matter if you think it's soon or not, it still does our God a dishonor,

no matter when you think it might come) that there will be this “Rapture” thing. That God will snatch the Christians (oh, and probably not all the Christians.. Just the right believing ones!) out of the world before a period of tribulation. (Most people who believe in the rapture think the period will be about seven years.)

And that, brothers and sisters, is what I need your help with. Because lots of Christians accept this horrible teaching about the rapture without thinking much about it, without examining the Scripture on which it is based.

And because of them, lots of non-Christians are getting the idea that we all accept this idea, that this is a basic feature of Christian belief, when, thanks be to God, it isn't at all. In fact, it is a denial of all that we as Christians stand for.

But I'll get back to that idea later.

And just in case you're tempted to think that this isn't really all that important, Remember that there will soon be a movie out to go with this series of “Left Behind” books, a movie and series which just take the Rapture for granted, that don't even encourage their readers to think about what it is that they're accepting, that don't even pay any attention to the horrible abuse of the Holy Scriptures that lies behind the whole notion of the Rapture.

It isn't just a silly idea held by a few misguided people. If it were, I wouldn't be here begging for your help.

Did you know that the most popular religious web site on the Internet is devoted to the Rapture? I think it's called Rapture Watch, and it is devoted to the tallying of the “signs” by which people can determine how close we are to the moment when we are all grabbed out of our cars and airplanes and dinner table conversations to be taken up into heaven.

And this is, please remember this, *the most popular religious web site on the entire Internet.*

That means that a lot of people are getting their ideas about Christianity from these folks who buy into this doctrine of the Rapture. And a lot of them are not yet Christian. And I'll bet that, after reading that stuff, they never will be either!

You know, if somebody really wants to distort the Holy Scriptures like that, really wants to believe that sort of thing, I know that's their right as an American. And if they want to turn their back on the God and Father of Jesus Christ in favor of this other God that we see in the teachings about the Rapture, then I guess that's their privilege, too.

But when it gets splattered across the front page of section two of Newsday, And when it comes out in movie houses as a teaching that we can take for granted, And when it becomes the most popular source for information on Christianity on the entire Internet, Then I get upset. I get upset because my lord and savior is being misrepresented.

I get upset because His Father in heaven is being turned into something hateful.

I get upset because the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to which I have given my life, is being turned into a cheap horror thriller where the monster is more horrible than Freddy, or Jason, or Chuckie ever could be, and that monster is God.

And so I'm asking for your help. I hope that, after today, you'll go out and tell people. Tell people that there is no such thing as the Rapture. Tell them that most Christians don't believe this trash. Tell them the truth.

Now, if you're going to do that, you're going to need some information. You probably don't think much about the Rapture, and you shouldn't. So you probably don't know how people get this crazy idea out of the Scriptures, or how they distort them to get to this place, so I'm going to tell you. I'll give you this information.

And if you want it in writing so you can check it for yourself (I would love it if you did) , I'll give you that, too.

First, where does this idea of the Rapture come from?

It finds it's origins around the year 1832, with a preacher named John Darby. I hate to admit that this man had been, before he began all this, an Anglican priest, but he was. And he was still preaching in England at the time.

And he began teaching this doctrine that is called Dispensationalism. Now, I'm not going to try to explain the whole of dispensationalism to you today, because it isn't necessary, and because dispensationalism is just as big a monstrosity as the Rapture. And frankly, I can only deal with one monster at a time. But at the heart of his teaching of dispensationalism was the notion of the Rapture. You could, I suppose believe in dispensationalism without believing in the Rapture, but I've never heard of such a person.

So anyways, he starts teaching about the Rapture.

And the idea really catches on, especially through some biblical prophecy conferences, and because of a biblical commentary by a man named Scofield. You've probably heard of his annotated Bible, the "Scofield Bible."

And it's been with us, in some form or other, every since. There are two huge seminaries, (not Episcopal ones) devoted to teaching this kind of Christianity, and it's not going away any time soon.

Now, you need to understand, briefly, where the ideas that get twisted into the Rapture are found in Scripture.

There are two basic texts, though people who believe in the Rapture have managed to find lots of others that seem to support their idea.

The first text is Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. In it he is trying to comfort some of the earliest Christians (this letter was written somewhere around the year 50) whose friends were dying before Christ's return. Remember, Christians in those days expected Jesus to return any minute, literally. And when some of those who had been baptized began dying, it began to raise questions for those who remained. Will these, our brothers and sisters in Christ still be saved? Or did they lose their salvation by dying? When Jesus comes, what will happen to those who have, as Paul puts it, fallen asleep?

Here is his pastoral response to those questions:

4:14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 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.

Then he goes on to say:

5:1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

You can see, I suppose, how people might begin to get the idea. But there is no rapture here. This is just Paul's image of the last day, the time of Jesus' return. There isn't anything in here about the rest of the world being left behind to suffer 7 years of tribulation. He did not believe that. But those who teach about the Rapture take this pastoral text from Paul, one intended to provide comfort to those whose friends have died, and they combine it with texts from the Revelation to John.

In it we find various texts concerning the trials of those who believe in Christ, the trials that *will precede* Christ's return.

7 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens: 8 "I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying--I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 **Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.**

Here the One who speaks to John seems to be saying that some will be spared some of the trials. But there is no mention of being snatched up into the air, just a word of God's love to those who are actually already experiencing persecution.

Indeed, there is a strong sense in Revelation that suggests that those who believe *will be subject to the trials*. Not that they will be taken away.

Rev 14:10 If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

In order to deal with this, those who believe in the Rapture suggest that the saints who are spoken of here are just those who convert to Christianity *after* the rapture. These are the "tribulation saints", many of them Jews who convert during this time.

Never mind that John never mentions the return of Jesus in the air and the removal of the Christians. They take the absence of any mention of the church after a certain point specifically to be a sign that the church has been taken into heaven. Never mind that "the saints" and the Church are synonymous to John. Never mind that in the little apocalypse of Matthew 24 and Mark 13, we see Jesus clearly telling his followers that they will be subject to persecution before the end of time.

Now, some read part of Matthew 24 as a sign of the Rapture.

Matt 24:37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be **taken** (violent, as in “snatched”) and one will be left (or released, or pardoned) . 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

This is an unfortunate way to read this passage, but if you already accept the notion of the Rapture, you can make it agree with you. Trouble is, Jesus is comparing his coming with the flood, not with the ark. And the one who is taken is violently taken. And the word that means “left” can also be translated “released” or “pardoned”. In this passage, you don’t want to be “taken” any more than you’d want to be “taken” by the flood. But folks try to make it support their idea of the Rapture. By making it into something it isn’t. Never mind that in John’s gospel Jesus specifically says to his Father that he *is not asking that we be taken out of the world.*

John 17:15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

Now, you can see that the folks who teach the Rapture have taken Paul’s letter and the Revelation and crammed them together to make something that was never there. Paul never dreamed of any period of trial for those “left behind.” And John never dreamed of anybody being snatched bodily into heaven. And that’s why even people who believe in the Rapture don’t all agree. You see, there are “pret-trib” rapture people, those who believe that we’ll all go right before the tribulation starts. And there are “post-trib” rapture people. Those who at least understand that the Bible does say Jesus’ followers must suffer. So they figure the rapture must come after all that. And then, there are those who they call “mid-trib.” Apparently, there’s supposed to be some event midway in the seven year period that will trigger the rapture. All of this because they’re cramming together texts that don’t belong together and then using that conclusion to mis-read others.

Now, let me suggest something.

Don't argue details with people who are ardently devoted to the whole idea of the rapture.

You won't change their minds.

If they ask, be prepared to tell them why you don't believe it, but don't try to argue the senselessness of it. In the end, you'll argue all day, and nothing will get accomplished. Instead, just let others, people who may not be sure about the whole thing, or people who don't know the Scriptures well, or people who aren't even Christian, let them know that this isn't a Christian teaching, not one that is supported by our Scriptures.

Just don't be silent.

Be willing to witness to the loving God that you and I know. You see, that's what we really need to be willing to do. Not argue details, but tell people about the Jesus we know. Tell them about His Father, our God of love and reconciliation.

That is what we need to be about.

We can argue details all day, but the details aren't really the problem. The problem is that the whole teaching of the rapture turns God into a god of fear. The church becomes the wicked baby sitter who got you to stay in bed by telling you there was a monster under it who would grab your feet if you got out again.

And the monster is God.

The god of the rapture is a vicious, calculatingly mean god who pours wrath on those who displease him like a drunken father angry because the children are too noisy. He takes out this anger on them, and Jesus becomes the co-dependent mother, hiding

away the good child in the closet so that he or she won't be beaten.

That is not my Savior.

That is not my God.

My God loves every one of His children.

My God sent His Son to die to free the world from the curse of death.

My Savior is a mighty one who took on the worst that humankind had to offer and triumphed, not some wimp who comes in the clouds to spirit me away. My Savior is one who suffered for me, and asks that I be willing to suffer for Him and for His children.

My God is not the God of the rapture, and neither is yours. My God is the God of the Cross, and the God of the empty tomb, the God who broke the relationship forever between sin and death, and who bestowed reconciliation on every man woman and child on the planet.

Not some monster,
Not a drunken father,
but my friend,
my lover,
my Savior.

Brothers and sisters, I need your help.
When you encounter this teaching, and you surely will in the months to come, be prepared.
Prepared to show why this isn't a Christian teaching at all.
Prepared to tell those you know about the real Christ who lives and walks with you.
Prepared to share Good News with the world.
Thank you.
Amen.