

Robert Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple*, Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997; 211 pages

Robert Van Kampen, in *The Rapture Question Answered*, has given a summary of his position on the timing of the rapture of the Church. This position, known as the pre-wrath rapture of the Church, apparently originated with Van Kampen himself beginning with personal Bible study in 1984. His book follows a more comprehensive book on prophecy entitled *The Sign* which is also the name of an Internet site at <http://www.signministries.org/> which advances Van Kampen's prophetic ideas. *The Rapture Question Answered* also serves as a companion to the earlier work by one of his converts, Marv Rosenthal, entitled *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (1990).

Van Kampen's book begins with a chapter affirming the need to follow a literal "at face-value" hermeneutic. Other views of the timing of the rapture have occurred, in his mind, because of the abandonment of taking the Bible in a straight-forward way. While the adoption of literal hermeneutics is to be applauded as well as his rejection of evolution (which is used as an illustration in the chapter), it is not at all clear that the book has demonstrated that all other views have abandoned such an interpretive approach.

Irony exists in this respect when one notices that the first passage he mentions in the chapter is the often quoted verse (I Cor. 14:33) which says that God "is not a God of confusion" (p. 16). Van Kampen takes this particular verse in anything but a literal way when he uses it to mean that God's Word has no confusion in it. While this present writer would agree that the Bible is not a convoluted collection of contradictory statements, one cannot take this verse as addressing this issue since the context shows that the statement is referring to order in church worship services. So initially one must fight some suspicion that the author is really serious about his claimed approach to Bible interpretation. Unfortunately, this notion is not eased by reading the remainder of the book.

Chapter two contains some interesting biographical information concerning Van Kampen's pilgrimage with the rather arbitrary climax that the sign of the coming of Christ as described in Matt. 24:29-31 is "the key to understanding the timing of Christ's return" (p. 47). Chapter three establishes his view of basic features of the Day of the Lord wrath including the need to see the rapture as initiating (on the same day) this awful time of judgment. Again much of the arguing is based upon Van Kampen's understanding of the Olivet Discourse. Consequently, chapter four gives an overview of the major teachings of this section of Matthew's Gospel. The fifth chapter highlights the major issue of whether or not the church is mentioned in the Olivet Discourse, a view that pretribulationists, according to Van Kampen, want to minimize or eliminate since it would not fit their overall perspective. Chapter six attempts to harmonize Paul's teaching on the rapture with that of Christ. Chapter seven adds the interpretation of the Book of Revelation to the discussion while chapter eight applies supposed knowledge of the Greek language to various texts in the debate showing that original language studies support the pre-wrath rapture. A final chapter entitled "So, What's the Big Deal" is largely devoted to criticism of the theological enemies of Van Kampen's position, especially Dallas Theological Seminary.

One of the strength's of Van Kampen's book is that it is written in simple language to aid a layman in understanding prophetic texts. Even the sections devoted to Greek language are stated in ways that any reader can understand what the view actually teaches. However, the lay reader may not be astute enough to see the naïve approach to the Bible and argumentation that undergirds the presentation. Many assumptions are made concerning contrary positions (especially pre-trib) and various textual facts, a characterization that is also true of Marv Rosenthal's earlier work on the pre-wrath rapture. The conscientious reader will be frustrated that the context of a host of passages is ignored completely. In summary, the book is a clear case of theological arguing which appeals to the logic of positions rather than to serious exegesis of the Bible.

One such example is Van Kampen's enigmatic appeal to Matt. 24:27-40 (p. 106-7). He seems to believe that pretribulationists view the rapture of the church as absent from the Olivet Discourse. It is not clear if he is aware that there are a minority of pre-trib dispensationalists who do see the rapture of the church in that passage (although this reviewer is not one of them). So Van Kampen attacks the view that the rapture is not in the passage with his illustration concerning polling he has done in various classes he has taught: "with no exceptions and no fence-sitters, *every* member of *every* class has concluded that this passage [Matt. 24:27-40] describes the rapture of the saints, not the battle of Armageddon. In fact, to date there has yet to be a single vote for the battle of Armageddon! Not a one!" (p. 107; italics his). Such arguments are meaningless. He has only shown that at best his own experience has been limited. Certainly if his illustration is true, he has not been around strong dispensational classes of late. Toussaint's excellent commentary on Matthew as well as Barbieri's contribution in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* are two examples of pretribulationists who take the verses in question to apply to the Second Advent of Christ to destroy his enemies at the end of the battle of Armageddon. This is a common, and possibly majority, view within the pre-trib camp at present.

More serious is Van Kampen's discussion in the next three paragraphs. He challenges pretribulationists that they can not have it both ways: (1) believing the teaching that no man knows the hour of Christ's coming (Matt. 24:36) and (2) holding to the description in the context as referring to the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the battle of Armageddon (Matt. 24:27-40). In short, Van Kampen assumes that these two things can not be held simultaneously by pre-trib rapturists because tribulation saints would be able to know the time when Christ would come at the end of the tribulation.

However, as to the reference that no man knows the hour of the coming of Christ, which is also described in terms of the thief who comes in the night (v. 42-44), one can demonstrate that this terminology is used of both the rapture of the Church and of the Second Advent at the end of Armageddon. For purposes here one needs only notice that "thief in the night" terminology and "watchful" imagery are used by the Apostle John in Revelation 16:14-16 in a context dealing directly with Armageddon. The Bible itself seems to assert rather forcefully that tribulation saints will not be able to trace the developments of that time so precisely. Here, Van Kampen would be served to see how posttribulationists and pretribulationists interact on these ideas.

On the second score, Van Kampen virtually ignores the pre-trib arguments that the coming of Christ in the Olivet Discourse is a coming in judgment not rapture of the saints. The judgment found in the words "For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together" (Matt. 24:28) is missing from his summary of events in Matt. 24. He inadequately handles the taking away in judgment of those in Noah's day and its analogy to those taken in

judgment when Christ comes. The parallel passage in Luke 17:26-37, which clearly shows that the ones taken are taken in judgment, finds no place whatsoever in Van Kampen's presentation. In his chapter entitled "That's Greek to Me," he does try to show that the basis for the pretrib reading of judgment in the passage is based upon the pretrib misuse of the Greek word for "taken" which can also mean "receive" (p. 178-82). However, besides overstating the case lexically, he misses the point entirely. The basis of the pretrib approach is contextual. The end of that passage giving the disciples question "Where [are they taken]" and Jesus' judgment related answer are left out of Van Kampen's synthesis. In addition, there is no indication that he has thoroughly thought through the similarities related to Daniel 7 and its judgment imagery when the Son of Man comes.

Another related example of Van Kampen's weak analysis and oversimplification is his attempt to show that the rapture must immediately start the Day of the Lord judgments (p. 58-64). He feels that the pretrib position requires all seven years of the tribulation to be the Day of the Lord. This is, of course, an assumption. Not all pre-trib expositors accept that designation. If it is accepted, it is also not clear that the rapture must immediately precede the Day of the Lord. There could be an indefinite gap between the rapture and the Day of the Lord. Van Kampen apparently believes that the fact that the rapture must kick off the Day of the Lord is the death knell for the pretrib position. It would create a bottle-neck of activities before the Day of the Lord which would destroy imminency, a highly prized belief of pretribulationists. However, his argument is that pre-tribs do not use the analogies of Noah and Lot properly. The text, according to Van Kampen, says that on "the day" that Noah entered the ark and on "the day" that Lot left Sodom, judgment came. For Van Kampen, this implies that the rapture of the Church occurs on a specific day to kick off the Day of the Lord judgments (not the Second Coming judgments). This approach is based upon the already held conclusion that the passage is talking about the rapture. In the discussion above, it was pointed out why this reviewer disagrees with Van Kampen on that view. The references to "the day" here refer to the single day when Christ returns to earth and not to the rapture of the Church.

Unfortunately, virtually every page of the book lends itself to this kind of analysis. This reviewer would hope that those holding to the pre-wrath rapture of the Church would do more solid exegetical work if they want the view to be considered by exegetically-minded pretribulationists. Van Kampen gives the impression that he has not read much of the detailed arguments of pretribulationists. By the same token, those pretribulationists who also do poor exegetical work should be warned in the same way. Pastors and laymen alike should read broadly the works of those who do detailed arguing from all sides before accepting any novel and enterprising view. The first glance, in the case of the pre-wrath rapture, will give a false picture of the weak basis that lies underneath.

By Mike Stallard