

Where is "the Church" in Revelation 4-19?

OVERVIEW

Where is the church during the seven-year Tribulation, as outlined in Revelation 4-19? If posttribulationism were correct, you would expect to see the church mentioned as being on earth during this time. However, that is not the picture one sees in Revelation 4-19. This writer demonstrates through investigating many of the details of Revelation 4-19 that the church is pictured in heaven with Christ, having been raptured before the Tribulation began. You can become informed of the overwhelming support for the pretribulationist understanding of this issue through this essay.

The Roman emperor Domitian banished the apostle John to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (Rev. 1:9). It was there that John heard the command of Jesus Christ: "What you see, write in a book, and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia" (Rev. 1:11 NKJV). John recorded what he saw and heard, and then he sent the volume to seven local churches located in key cities within the Roman province of Asia; namely Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamonia, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 1:11).

The content of the book of Revelation can be divided into three sections, based upon Christ's command: "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this" (Rev. 1:19 NKJV). These three sections reveal a time sequence: past, present, and future.

What had John just seen? He had just seen a symbolic vision of Jesus Christ standing in the midst of seven lampstands that represented the seven local churches (Rev. 1:12-18,20). This content forms the past section of the book ("the things which you have seen"). The present section ("the things which are") can be seen in the seven individual letters to the churches (Rev. 2-3). The future section thus forms the major part of the book (Rev. 4-22). The prepositional phrase "after this" (*meta tauta*) literally means "after these things." It is found three times (1:19; 4:1 [twice]). The third section begins with these words: "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this" (4:1 NKJV).

The future section (Rev. 4-22) contains an introduction, revealing the throne of God the Father in heaven and the taking of the seven-sealed scroll by Jesus Christ (4-5). The seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are then described (5-16). The judgment of Babylon is then set forth (17-18). The second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth is finally presented (19:11-21). The millennial kingdom, the great white throne judgment, and the eternal state close out the prophetic revelation (20-22).

The typical futurist interpretation of the book contends that chapters 4-19 describe what will take place in the seven years preceding the second coming of Christ to the earth

(19:11-21). Consistent advocates of premillennialism hold this position regardless of their particular view on the rapture of the church.

However, only those who embrace the pretribulational rapture (or the pre-seventieth-week-of-Daniel rapture) will argue for the absence of the genuine church on the earth during these entire seven years. What evidence can be found within Revelation 4-19 to show that the true church is in heaven when the events of these chapters are taking place? The following looks at nine indications.

The Mention of the Church

The words "church" or "churches," so prominent in chapters 1-3, do not appear again in the book until the last chapter (22:16). The singular "church" and the plural "churches" together occur 19 times in the first three chapters (1:4,11,20 [twice]; 2:1,7,8,11,12,17,18,12,19; 3:1,6,7,13,14,22).

The term "church" (ekklesia) literally means "a called out group." It has two main usages in the New Testament. It can be used of the body of Christ, which He is building in this age (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:1-6). It is composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles made one in Christ (Eph. 2:15-16). The term can also be used of a local congregation of believers (Acts 14:27; Gal. 1:2). It is so used in this second sense in the book of Revelation.

However, there is a strange silence of the term in chapters 4-19. That fact is especially noteworthy when you contrast that absence with its frequent presence in the first three chapters. One good reason for this phenomenon is the absence of the true church and true evangelical churches in the seven years preceding the second coming. The true believers of the church have gone into the presence of Jesus Christ in heaven before the onset of the events of the seven-year period. The church is not mentioned during the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments because the church is not here during the outpouring of these judgments.

The Admonition

The recurring phrase "unto the churches" (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22) is conspicuously absent in a similar admonition (13:9). All seven letters to the churches end with this admonition by Christ: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (NKJv). Each individual person in each individual local church was to hear and to apply the truth that Christ gave to all of the local churches. For example, a believer in the church at Ephesus could profit spiritually from what the Savior said to the churches at Pergamos or at Philadelphia.

Satan, the beast, and the false prophet are the three main enemies of God and His people during the seven-year period (13:1-18; 19:20-20:3). The beast, symbolic of the military-political dictator of the end times, will rule for 42 months, the second half of the seven-year period. John recorded this truth about him: "All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (13:8).

At this point, John records the warning: "if anyone has an ear, let him hear" (13:9). Period! There is no mention of "saying to the churches," a phrase which is repeated seven times in the seven letters. If the previously mentioned churches (Rev. 1-3) could possibly be

in the seven-year period to face the wrath of the beast, then why wasn't the admonition addressed to them? The obvious answer is that they won't be on earth at that time.

There is the mention of "saints" in the context (13:7,10). These saints, however, are those who get saved during the seven years after the true church has been taken into heaven.

The Wife of the Lamb

The church, as a body-unit, is not seen after chapters 1-3 until the marriage of the Lamb is discussed (19:7-9). Here is the description:

Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints (19:7-8).

The church is called Christ's "wife" (gune). Paul used the metaphor of husband and wife to describe the relationship of Jesus Christ to the church (Eph. 5:22-33). The wife is seen as a complete, definite unit in heaven even before the actual second coming of Christ to the earth (19:7; cf. 19:11-16). There is no sense that part of the wife is in heaven and another part is on earth.

The wife has also been rewarded prior to the second coming of Christ to the earth. Her accountability can be seen in the fact that she "has made herself ready" (19:7). However, no believer deserves any reward for what he has done for the Lord. The divine conferral of reward is still an expression of His redemptive grace, thus the text reads: "And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen" (19:8). The linen is defined as "the righteous acts of the saints" (19:8 NKJV). The phrase "righteous acts" is the translation of a plural noun (ta dikaiōmata). It seems to refer to the righteous deeds done by genuine believers rather than to the imputed positional righteousness of Christ (Rom. 3:22; 4:22-5:1).

Thus, the judgment seat of Christ has already taken place in heaven before He returns to the earth. All believers in this church age know that they will have to give an account for what they have done since they have been saved (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Since the wife has been rewarded prior to the return of Christ to the earth, then the wife had to be raptured into heaven before that event.

Christ's Activity

The focus of Christ's activity changes from chapters 1-3 to chapters 4-19. In the first three chapters, His ministry was in the midst of the seven churches on earth. He is commending, criticizing, and correcting them. In chapters 4-19, however, His activity occurs in heaven. He is occupied with the seven-sealed scroll and the judgments that proceed from it.

As the living Head of the church, His body, He is presently building His church (Matt. 16:18). He is in us and we are in Him His attention is on the church. However, that emphasis disappears in chapters 4-19. In the seven years prior to His return to the earth, He is preparing the world and Israel for His coming. The church is now completely with Him in heaven by way of resurrection, translation, and rapture. That phase of His creative and redemptive purpose has been finalized.

24 Elders

If the 24 elders represent the church, then the church is already in heaven before the opening of the seal judgments. The elders have a prominent part in chapters 4-19. They are mentioned 12 times (4:4,10; 5:5,6,8,11,14; 7:11,13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). They are first mentioned as present in heaven around the throne of God the Father "Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads" (4:4 NKJV).

Who are these elders? Do they represent angels or men? If human, do they symbolize Old Testament believers, New Testament believers, or both?

The numerical adjective "twenty-four" is significant. King David divided the Levitical priesthood into 24 orders (1 Chron. 24). Each order performed priestly functions at the tabernacle and at the temple for eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath. In the distribution of the work load, each order would function two weeks per year. In so doing, each order represented the entire priestly tribe and the nation of Israel before God. Thus, the number "twenty-four" came to be representative of a larger, complete group. Thus, the "twenty-four elders" is a phrase which denotes more than two dozen specific persons; rather, the elders stand in for an entire group of personal beings, either angels or humans.

Three features about their description are striking. First, they are "sitting" on thrones. They are not standing, flying, or hovering. Have angels ever sat in the presence of God? No Scripture verse says that they have ever done so. However, Jesus promised every believer in the church age: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also over came and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Rev. 3:21 NKJv). God positionally has made every believer to "sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). The "sitting" feature of the elders better suits men than angels.

Second, the elders were "clothed in white robes" (himatiois leukois). These words were previously used of believers within the churches (3:5,18).

Third, the elders had "crowns" (stephanous) on their heads. These are crowns gained by achievement and victory. Again, believers in the churches were promised crowns (2:10; 3:11; same word). In the epistles, believers in this church age are promised crowns for specific accomplishments: the incorruptible crown for living a spiritually disciplined life (1 Cor. 9:25); the crown of rejoicing for impacting lives to receive Jesus Christ as Savior (1 Thess. 2:19); the crown of righteousness for loving the appearing of Christ (2 Tim. 4:8); the crown of life for loving Christ in the endurance of trials (James 1:12; cf. Rev. 2:10: the crown of life given to the believer-overcomer at Smyrna for being faithful unto death); and the crown of glory for faithful pastors (1 Peter 5:4). Holy angels do not wear crowns, but believers can and will wear them.

The triple description of the 24 elders as sitting, clothed, and crowned speaks for an identity of redeemed people, notably the believers of this church age.

A text-translation problem within the context of the praise of the elders must be addressed (5:8-10). The elders sang a new song, saying:

You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth (5:9-10)

In this song of redemption, notice the first person plural personal pronouns ("us" and "we"). Both the King James version and the New King James version, based upon the

received Greek text (Textus Receptus), indicate that the elders are praising God for their own salvation.

On the other hand, the New International version, based upon the critical Greek text, has this translation:

You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.

Notice the usage of the third person plural personal pronouns ("them" and "they"). The New American Standard Bible also has the third person pronoun. The Majority Greek Text has the third-person pronouns, and that fact is noted in the margin of the New King James version. With the usage of the third-person pronouns, the elders seem to be praising God for the salvation of another group. Those who believe that the elders are angels are quick to point out that interpretation.

However, can people speak about themselves in the third-person rather than in the first person? The song of Moses and of the children of Israel, expressed after their deliverance from Egyptian bondage and their passage through the Red Sea, contains these words: "You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation" (Exod. 15:13 NKJV). The Israelites are definitely singing about themselves, and yet they sing in the third person. Thus, if the third-person text translation (in Rev. 5:8-10) is accepted as the preferred, original text translation, that fact alone does not preclude the possibility that the elders are singing about their own salvation.

Again, if the third-person text translation is viewed as the original, then the fact that other Greek texts before 1611 (the year that the King James version was published) contained the first person is very significant. It shows that people before 1611 held to the view that the elders were redeemed people. Critics of the pretribulational rapture position, consequently, cannot argue that the proponents of the pretribulational rapture have superimposed their dispensational bias upon the passage.

Angels are set in contrast to the elders: "Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders" (Rev. 5:11 NKJV). They sang praise to Christ without any reference to their redemption or to the salvation of others: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing" (5:12 NKJV). If the elders are angels, then the song would appear to be redundant. The second song and the contrast between the elders and the angels suggest that the elders are humans.

The term "elder" (presbuteros) is never used of angels in the Bible. The word itself denotes maturity and growth. It is contrasted with "younger" (1 Tim. 5:1-2). How could angels be designated as elders when all of the holy angels were created at the same time. In other words, they are of the same age. In contrast, the elders of a local church were to be men of spiritual experience (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). When Paul called "for the elders of the church" at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus, they came as the official leaders and as the representatives of all the believers in Ephesus.

The more plausible explanation of the 24 elders is that they represent a group of redeemed people. Who are these people? Since the believers within the Old Testament period will not be resurrected until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth (Dan. 12:1-3; Rev. 20:4-6), the elders more likely represent the redeemed of the church.

The Heaven-Dwellers

The beast, that great military-political leader of the end time, will open his mouth "in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven" (Rev. 13:6 NKJV). Who are these heaven-dwellers? They are contrasted with earth-dwellers (12:12; 13:8,14). The earth-dwellers are both human and unsaved. Thus, the heaven-dwellers seem to be human and saved. The verb "dwell" (skênöuntas) is the same word used for Jesus Christ's incarnation: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14 NKJV). A similar word (skênös) is used to describe the believer's present body as a "tent" (2 Cor. 5:1,4). The verb ("to dwell") or the noun ("tent") is never used of angelic activities or bodies.

In the critical Greek text, the phrase "those who dwell in heaven" is in apposition to "His tabernacle" (the connective "and" is omitted). This equation suggests that the heaven-dwellers, as God's tabernacle, is a specific group with none to be added. If that is so, then their description better fits the raptured church, since more people will be saved in the second half of the seven-year period.

John's Experience

John's experience should not be equated with the rapture of the church. John wrote: "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me saying, Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this" (4:11 NKJV). Some claim that this event clearly indicates the fulfillment of the main rapture prediction (1 Thess. 4:13-18; Old Scofield Bible, p. 1334). Others see the experience of the apostle as a symbolic representation of the translation of the church (New Scofield Bible, p. 1356).

There are some similarities: the voice and the trumpet (4:1; cf. 1 Thess. 4:16). However, the differences in the two accounts are much greater. At the rapture, the believers will hear the voice of an archangel, whereas John directly heard the voice of Christ (4:1; cf. 1:10). There is no mention of Christ's descent from heaven when John went into heaven. There is no mention of a meeting in the air at a point between heaven and earth. There was no permanent change in the body of John. The experience of John parallels those of Paul (2 Cor. 12:1-7) and of Philip (Acts 8:39).

The Lampstands and the Lamps

The individual lampstands, which represented the seven churches (Rev. 1:12,20), should not be equated with "the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne" (Rev. 4:5). Hal Lindsey claimed that the movement of the lamps from earth to heaven was evidence for the removal of the church from earth into heaven before the outpouring of divine judgment (There's a New World Coming, p. 86).

However, there is a difference in the Greek words translated as "lampstands" (luchnid 1:12,20) and "lamps" (lampades; 4:5). Thus, they cannot be seen as equal symbols for the church. If they could, then why did John use a different word? In addition, the "lamps" are defined as "the seven spirits of God" (4:5).

The so-called equation of the lampstands with the lamps should not be used as a proof for a pretribulational rapture.

Israel's Prominence

Israel and God's covenant program with Israel are the central focus of the seven years prior to the return of Jesus Christ. That emphasis accounts for the silence of any reference to the church on earth at the same time.

When John went into heaven, he first saw the throne of God the Father (4:2). He then gave this symbolic description of God: "And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald" (4:3 KJ's').

Why did God reveal Himself in this way? There is a clue in the two precious stones. The jasper (iaspidi) and the sardius (sardiö) are the same two words used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, in the description of the breastplate of the high priest of Israel (Exod. 28:17-21). The breastplate contained 12 stones, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. They were set in four rows with three stones in each row. The sardius was the first stone in the first row; thus it represented Reuben, the oldest of Jacob's sons. The jasper was the last stone in the last row; thus it represented Benjamin, the youngest of the 12 sons.

These two stones, in the description of God, may represent the relationship of God to His chosen people, the nation of Israel. The appearance of the rainbow further substantiates His covenant relationship and the integrity of His pledged word. Thus, these key chapters (4-19) open with God and His relationship to the people of Israel on earth.

The intercalation of the church age is over. God will now complete His program with Israel through the fulfillment of the seventieth week of Daniel (Dan. 9:24-27). The focus has shifted from the church (Rev. 1-3) to Israel (Rev. 4-19).

When Jesus Christ took the seven-sealed scroll, He was described as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (5:5). This description is based upon two Old Testament passages that relate the promised Messiah to Israel.

In the first passage, Jacob informed his 12 sons about what would happen to them "in the last days" (Gen. 49:1). Concerning Judah, he said:

Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the people (Gen. 49:8-10 NKJV).

In the second passage, God gave this promise concerning Israel, the future kingdom, and the Messiah:

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him. The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious (Isa' 22:1-2,10 NKJV).

The seven-sealed scroll symbolizes the right to rule as earth's king. The contents of those seven seals will then occur during the seven-year period prior to Jesus' return to the earth (described in Rev. 4-19). Jesus Christ's right to that scroll is viewed from His

relationship to Israel rather than from His relationship to the church. He is the head of His body, the church (Eph. 1:22-23), but that description is not given here.

A prominent group in the seventieth week of Daniel is the 144,000, the sealed servants of God (7:3-4; 14:1-5). They are "of all the tribes of the children of Israel" (7:4), namely: Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph [Ephraim], and Benjamin (7:5-8). This passage shows the presence of Israel as a national, ethnic entity on the earth and its tribal divisions in that day.

Mounce, who holds to a posttribulational rapture, claims that ten of the tribes disappeared at the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel (722 B.c.) and that the other two lost their identity when Rome destroyed Jerusalem (A.D. 70). He denies the literalness of the number and the names (The Book of Revelation, p. 168). However, Anna is identified as a member of the tribe of Asher during the infancy of Jesus (Luke 2:36). Also, if Judah is not literal in 7:5, is it literal in 5:5? A better explanation is that God is using Israel, rather than the church, to serve Him on earth during the seven years prior to Christ's return to the earth.

The second half of the seven-year period will begin with the forced exit of Satan from heaven to earth and his subsequent persecution of a "woman" (Rev. 23:1-17). Who is this woman? She has been seen as Mary, the mother of Jesus, the New Testament church, and as Israel.

John saw this description of her: "Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars" (12:1 NxJv). The mention of the sun, moon, and 12 stars should take us back to the dream of Joseph: "Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, 'Look, I ha dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me'" (Gen. 37:9 NKJv). Jacob understood the meaning and said: "Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?" (Gen. 37:10 NxJv). In the interpretation, Jacob is the sun, Leah (or perhaps Rachel) is the moon, and the 12 sons of Jacob are the 12 stars.

The woman was present at the birth of Christ (12:5) and will also be present on earth during the 1260 days prior to Christ's return to the earth (12:6,13-17). In using the "law of previous reference" as a principle of interpretation, only the nation of Israel would qualify as the meaning of the woman. This position finds support in the Old Testament passage (Gen. 37:9-10), in the actual historical situation at the time of Christ's birth, and in the promise of a restored, regenerated nation of Israel.

Where is the church in Revelation 4-19? An investigation into those chapters will show that the church will be in heaven with Jesus Christ. When will she go there? She will be raptured there before the events of Revelation 4-19 occur.