

Dave MacPherson's The Rapture Plot: Weighted and Found Wanting

by Frank Marotta

Since the early 1970's, Dave MacPherson has aggressively attacked the pretribulation rapture by attributing its origin to Margaret Macdonald, whom MacPherson considers to be occult influenced. He claims J.N. Darby derived the pretribulation rapture from her and this was done secretly, lest the true origin of the rapture be discovered. MacPherson develops this idea in his books *The Incredible Cover-Up* and *The Great Rapture Hoax*. It has been successfully demolished in works by R. A. Huebner, Thomas Ice, and Gerald Stanton,¹ to name a few.

MACPHERSON'S SEVENTH VERSION

MacPherson's latest book is *The Rapture Plot*. It claims to reveal ". . . the most astounding historical revisionism of the past century" (p. 138). The plot is that brethren scholar William Kelly used his periodical *The Bible Treasury* to conceal that J.N. Darby took the pretribulation rapture from the Irvingites. This was accomplished by alleged misrepresentations of Irvingite prophetic views in Kelly's 1889-1890 articles on the Catholic Apostolic Church. In these same articles Kelly is alleged to have created a smoke screen by emphasizing Irvingite heterodoxy. Then in 1903 (13 years later), having discredited the Irvingites, Kelly was able to credit Mr. Darby with pretribulationism in his article, "The Rapture of the Saints, Who Suggested It, or rather on what Scripture?" This "plot" is considerably more dull than his Margaret Macdonald material and is equally lacking in any substance. That an orthodox Christian such as William Kelly should write articles exposing a contemporary heterodox sect should surprise us no more than a Christian periodical of today printing articles exposing Mormonism. Nor is it shocking that an ardent pretribulationist as Kelly would defend the history and doctrine of the rapture. We fail to see any plot at all.

In our research on Catholic Apostolic and Irvingite works, we have never found a claim that anyone outside their group "stole" their doctrines. Consider the Catholic Apostolic apologist William Bramley-Moore, a contemporary of William Kelly. In his work *The Church's Forgotten Hope*, (a significant work never discussed by MacPherson) Bramley-Moore skips over Margaret Macdonald and credits John Asgill in 1703 as ". . . the only individual who, since the Reformation [until 1830] had given a clarion testimony" to the hope of translation (p. 251)! We will not manufacture a "plot" or "cover-up" regarding the failure of MacPherson and others to credit Asgill. (Asgill taught that *individual* translation was possible, similar to Enoch or Elijah. His view is distinct from pretribulationism.) More relevant to our discussion, Bramley-Moore never claimed the brethren or anyone else "stole" the Irvingite prophetic views.

Recently, the most extensive critical analysis ever produced on Irvingite doctrine declared that they were still primarily historicist, while Darby and the Brethren had become futurist. Further, Columba G. Flegg notes that the Brethren teaching on the rapture and the present invisible and spiritual nature of the church,

were in sharp contrast to Catholic Apostolic teaching, . . . There were thus very significant differences between the two eschatologies, and attempts to see any direct influence of one upon the other seem unlikely to succeed—they had a number of common *roots*, but are much more notable for their points of disagreement. Several writers [referring specifically to MacPherson] have attempted to trace Darby’s secret rapture theory to a prophetic statement associated with Irving, but their arguments do not stand up to serious criticism.²

HISTORICAL DEFICIENCIES

MacPherson professes to be a historian (p. 233). His work is lacking in historical method. Consider his claim that William Kelly, as editor of Darby’s *Collected Writings*, manipulated them. Regarding Darby’s *Notes on Revelation* (1839) MacPherson writes:

We’ve previously noted that a chart (listing no artist or date) accompanying this work shows the church in heaven no later than Revelation 4 –additional manipulation and further contradiction of Darby’s Revelation 12 basis! (p. 152)

I have inspected a xeroxed copy of the 1839 edition of this work published by Central Tract Depot, London. The chart in question is there and shows the church in heaven in Revelation chapter 4! MacPherson’s speculation is without foundation. A true historian would inspect the original source materials before making the claims that MacPherson does. He is governed by an agenda, not a desire for unbiased historical research.

Here are a *few* of the many deficiencies that I found in *The Rapture Plot*:

1. MacPherson states that the key symbol of the pretribulation rapture for Margaret Macdonald is the catching up of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 (p. 47-49). If this is true, one wonders if MacPherson has ever read Revelation 11. Before the witnesses are caught up (verse 12), the beast makes war with them and kills them (verse 7). Thus the two witnesses go through tribulation *before* they are killed, raised and caught up. So if Macdonald’s teaching is based on this passage, she is certainly posttribulation! Actually, there is no doubt that the woman who said, “The trial of the Church is from Antichrist” was posttribulation.

MORGAN EDWARDS AND THE RAPTURE

2. Recently it has come to light that the 18th century Baptist Morgan Edwards held to a pretribulation rapture (see *Pre-Trib Perspectives* Sept/Oct 1995). If MacPherson were to regard Morgan Edwards as pretribulation, then both his Macdonald “cover-up” and his Kelly “plot” would be for naught. In *The Rapture Plot* he recklessly labels Edwards a posttribulation historicist. He writes: “. . . it’s obvious that Edwards interpreted these 1260 days [of Revelation 11] as *years*” (p. 266). This is a blatant falsehood. Edwards wrote in his *Two Academical Exercises*:

When these witnesses will appear is hard to say; for though their time of *prophesying in sackcloth* [sic] is 1260 days or three years and a half (allowing

thirty days to a month) yet they may preach out of sackcloth long before; for the 1260 days refer only to the time that the holy city and the outer court of the temple shall be trodden under the foot of the Gentiles (or Antichrist and his army) viz. 42 months, which make exactly 1260 days, allowing 30 to a month (Rev xi.2). . ." (p. 19)

It is clear from the above that Edwards does not believe the two witnesses had appeared yet. The preaching in sackcloth are 1260 literal days; if they were years (clearly they are *not* from the context) then they had not as yet begun, which is unlike historicism in any form. The "prophesying out of sackcloth" that Edwards speculates the two witnesses will perform is *before* Revelation 11:2. Edwards is futurist and literal in his consideration of prophetic time in Revelation 12:7-11 (p. 8), Daniel 8:14 (p. 20), Daniel 12:12,13 (p. 21), Revelation 12:14 (p. 23), and Daniel 12:11 (p. 23).

3. MacPherson writes on p. 267 of *The Rapture Plot*:

Edwards' basis for holding to a rapture three and a half years before the second advent (and a future millennium) may well have been the Revelation 11 witnesses on whom he focused. This chapter has a period of three and a half days (verses 9, 11) that historicism can view as three and a half *years*. Since the spirits of these dead witnesses conceivably go to be with Christ during the same days, days preceding the final advent—historicist Edwards could see in this symbol a rapture three and a half *years* before the same advent.

Compare this with Morgan Edwards:

Another event previous to the *Millennium* will be the appearing of the son of man in the clouds, coming to raise the dead saints and change the living, and to catch them up to himself, and then withdrawing with them, as observed before. This event will come to pass when Antichrist be arrived at Jerusalem in his conquest of the world; and about three years and a half before his killing the witnesses and assumption of godhead. (Edwards, p. 21)

MacPherson's speculation is without foundation; Edwards distinguishes the saints caught up from the two witnesses, both as to time (the saints caught up three years and a half *before* the witnesses killed) and identity. Edwards identifies the witnesses as Elijah and the Apostle John (Edwards, pp. 17-19); MacPherson fails to inform his readers of this fact. The catching up of the witnesses is *after* the three and a half days (verse 12), not before. MacPherson also fails to inform his readers of Morgan Edwards linking the rapture to I Peter 4:17, "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God" (Edwards, p. 7)

4. MacPherson concludes his section on Morgan Edwards by writing:

Edwards' scheme of a rapture three and a half years before the end of a 1260-year tribulation has the same tiny gap a futurist would have if he were to teach a

rapture three and a half *days* before the end of a 1260-day tribulation! Since such a futurist view would be seen as a *posttrib* view, Edwards (who had the same small percentage) should be classified as a historicist *posttrib!* p. 268)

There is a footnote attached which states:

Edwards saw a rapture at the extreme end of the tribulation. The mathematics works out as follows: 3.5 years/1260 years = 0.0027 or 0.27% remaining. That means 99.73% of the tribulation was already past before the rapture. Hardly a pretrib rapture! (p. 268)

As already shown, Edwards did *not* teach anything like a 1260 year tribulation. Nor was he a historicist. Nor was he “posttrib.” But let us apply the same mathematics to some of his alleged pretribulationists. First, consider John Hooper, a contributor to *The Morning Watch*. MacPherson speaks of “Hooper’s pretrib rapture” (p. 200). He also writes of Hooper as “a historicist who saw the final advent in about 1868, Hooper had 37 remaining years where he could fit in between Revelation 16 and Revelation 19...” (p. 200). Let us perform a calculation: 37 years/1260 years = 0.0294 or 2.94% remaining. That means *at least* 97.06% of the tribulation was already past before the rapture (assuming Christ could come immediately). Hardly a pretribulational rapture! Perhaps Dave MacPherson will tell us at what number between 97.06% and 99.73% complete we transition from pretribulational to posttribulational. Or perhaps MacPherson could admit Hooper as posttribulational. Next, let us consider the woman whom MacPherson labels as the first pretribulationist: Margaret Macdonald. He wrote on p. 49 of *The Great Rapture Hoax*:

Margaret, however, had been influenced by historicism and the year-day theory involving 1260 years. . . If only one-tenth of 1260 years remained unfulfilled in her view, she could still believe in a future Antichrist; he would have a total of 126 years in which to do his dirty work.

MacPherson is gracious in allowing 126 years remaining in Margaret’s mind. Especially since she identified Robert Owen, a contemporary, as the Antichrist (*The Rapture Plot*, p. 53). But applying the same mathematical formula that would mean 90% of the tribulation was complete for her! Applying the same method MacPherson does to Morgan Edwards would make her “hardly pretrib!”

5. The importance MacPherson places on *The Rapture Plot* reveals his spiritual condition. He writes on p. 234:

The real test is ahead. If pretrib promoters ignore or twist this book’s documentation, and if their only bottom line is a continuing flow of funds, then I won’t be surprised if God views them collectively as an “Achan” (Josh. 7) and allows a national or even international money collapse!

This statement is incredible. Ignoring *The Rapture Plot* leads to an international money collapse! This extreme notion indicates the mentality under which MacPherson operates.

It is significant that MacPherson is the lone "historian" who has argued a connection between Macdonald and Darby. Considering that there have been numerous historical examinations of both the Irvingites and the Brethren, yet MacPherson stands alone in exposing the "plot," is rather a testimony to polemical bias, not the facts. Those anti-pretribulationists who have adopted MacPherson's revision have done so merely on the basis of his word, not as a result of original research.

CONCLUSION

Dave MacPherson's *The Rapture Plot* is a defective work which distorts history. There is no plot. It misrepresents godly men such as Darby and Kelly. It fails to prove the Irvingites were pretribulationist in the 1830s. It is completely inaccurate concerning Morgan Edwards' teaching. *The Rapture Plot* has the same character as MacPherson's previous works. Christians who desire to feed their souls on truth would be well advised to avoid his works. W

ENDNOTES

¹R.A. Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered* (Millington, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1976). Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J.N. Darby*, Vol. 1 (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1991). Thomas Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulationist Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 147; April-June 1990), pp. 155-68. Gerald Stanton, *Kept From The Hour*, 4th. edition, (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing, 1991).

²Columba Graham Flegg, *'Gathered Under Apostles' A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 436.