

The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church

I have never been afraid to talk (or write) about eschatology. Through the years, I've discussed the various views and positions. But I have said very little about the pre-wrath position. Lately I've been getting emails asking what I think about it and requesting that I reply to some of the arguments put forth by the advocates of the pre-wrath end-times scheme. So, I suppose it's time to do so.

In this article, I do not plan to write an extensive rebuttal of the entire position. Others have ably done so. Nor do I plan an extensive defense of the pre-trib position. Our website is replete with such material.

The purpose of this article is to explain why I am personally not convinced of the pre-wrath position. Along the way, we'll examine and reply to some of the primary arguments and assumptions that lay at the core of pre-wrath thinking.

But, it's always best to start at the start. So let's define some terms.

What Is Pre-Wrath?

The pre-wrath position is simply an eschatological outlook that posits that the church will remain on Earth for a large portion of the "great tribulation" and will be removed (raptured) just prior to God pouring out His wrath. That removal of the church will occur concurrent with the return of Christ in judgment. The term "pre-wrath" derives from the timing of the rapture, just prior to the wrath of God.

I have a great deal of agreement with the pre-wrath position:

- We both see a future for ethnic Israel.
- We are both convinced of a literal 1000-year reign of Christ (millennium).
- We are both expecting a time of trouble (great tribulation) and the return of Christ prior to the inauguration of His kingdom (premillennial).
- We both agree that the church will not endure the wrath of God.
- We both espouse a "literal" or "face value" reading of the Bible.

The place where we part company is on the timing of the catching away of the church (rapture).

I am convinced that the church will be called away to "meet the Lord in the air" (1Thes. 4:17) prior to the commencement of the seven-year period known as Daniel's 70th week. That time period begins with a pact between a future world

ruler (commonly called “Antichrist”) and national Israel that will include the rebuilding of their temple and a restoration of the sacrificial system. That seven-year period is also known as “the great tribulation.” The belief that the church will be taken to meet the Lord prior to the seven-year time of trouble and distress is called “pre-tribulation.”

Because Daniel tells us that the “little horn” (Antichrist) will break his covenant with Israel at the mid-point (Dan. 9:27), some folk postulate that the church will remain on Earth until that event. That position is known as “mid-tribulation.”

Others argue that the church will remain throughout the seven-year period and will not be gathered to Christ until after the tribulation has run its course. That position is known as “post-tribulation.”

Pre-wrath is unique to those three positions inasmuch as it does not foresee the rapture of the church at a specific pre, mid, or post point in the timeline. Rather, it concludes that the church will remain through the earliest portions of the seven-year process – even enduring wrath that they say comes from Satan, but not God – and will be removed just prior to the outpouring of God’s wrath.

All four of these views are premillennial in nature and differ merely with regard to the timing of the rapture.

Where Did The Pre-Wrath Position Come From?

The contemporary pre-wrath position is fairly modern, first appearing in the 1970’s. It was publicized, and perhaps created, by a man named Robert Van Kampen. Van Kampen became wealthy after founding a mutual fund investment firm called Van Kampen Investments, Inc.

The company was established in 1974 by Robert Van Kampen in Chicago. He developed a niche bond product when he pioneered insurance coverage for tax-exempt bond funds. After New York City’s near-default in 1975, investors flocked to Van Kampen’s insured unit investment trusts.

In 1982, the company broke records in the industry by introducing a \$125 million Insured Municipal Income Trust (IMIT), soon followed by an even larger \$128.5 IMIT. By 1983, the company now known as Van Kampen Merritt, Inc. had sold nearly \$7 billion of trusts and was the nation’s third-largest firm in that arena.

In 1984, Van Kampen sold the firm to Xerox Corporation for about \$200 million. However, after eight years, in 1992 Xerox decided to shed all its financial-services units starting with Van Kampen. Xerox had initially planned to offer stock in Van Kampen to the public. However the investment

firm Clayton, Dubilier & Rice made a better offer and bought 80% of Van Kampen from Xerox for approx \$360 million. The remaining shares were held by Xerox and staff of the firm.

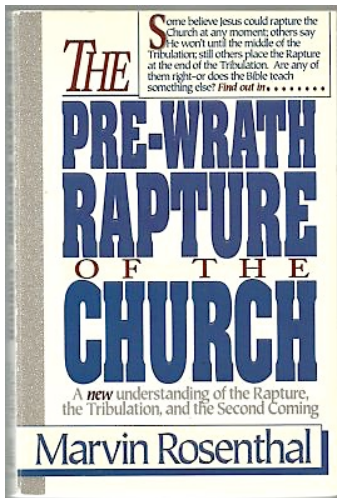
In 1996 Morgan Stanley bought Van Kampen American Capital Inc from Clayton for \$745 million to help it build its money management business. Morgan Stanley merged the business with its own money management business but continued to use the Van Kampen name.

In 2009, Morgan Stanley announced that Van Kampen would be sold to Invesco for \$1.5 billion.¹

Van Kampen is also reputed to have possessed one of the largest collections of rare and antique Bibles in the U.S. He died in October of 2000, at the age of 60, while awaiting a heart transplant.

As the story goes, Van Kampen began developing the pre-wrath position while living in Chicago. He writes that he attempted to reconcile the Bible with the various existing rapture theories. But, finding both the pre and post-tribulation positions lacking, he set out to construct another approach.

His first real convert was a fellow named Marvin Rosenthal. In 1990, Rosenthal wrote a book entitled, "The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church" (Thomas Nelson).



The subtitle of Rosenthal's book reads:

"A *new* understanding of the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Second Coming."

The word "new" is both in italics and in a different color than the rest of the type.

Despite the fact that later pre-wrath advocates would claim that the early church fathers support their view, Van Kampen and Rosenthal admitted to its novelty.

Van Kampen apparently subsidized the publication of Rosenthal's book by purchasing thousands of copies and sending them out to ministers and churches. That's how familiarity with the new position spread.

Van Kampen later penned a book of his own called "The Sign." It was released in three editions (1992, 1999, 2000) by Crossway Books.

Later, he wrote and released “The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple” (1997) via Revell Publishing. These books were also purchased in bulk and sent out free on request.

In the late 1990’s, I had a series of short, amiable correspondences with Robert Van Kampen, after which he sent me copies of both his books. I read them thoroughly. And let me be clear to say that I am not faulting him in the least for working hard and making money. Nor is there anything wrong with him buying large quantities of his own books and distributing them for free. He invested his own resources in something he was passionate about. That’s admirable. My differences with the pre-wrath position have to do with the content of the arguments he makes in the books, not with how the books came into being.

I was also subscribed to the Sign Ministries newsletter until it was no longer available. The name was changed to Sola Scriptura, which ceased operations in December 2012. Over the years, friends and online listeners have sent me pre-wrath materials, links to YouTube videos, websites, etc. And I’ve paid attention to it all ... to the best of my ability.

Since Van Kampen’s passing, various men have carried the pre-wrath mantle, including Marvin Rosenthal², Alan Kurschner³, and Charles Cooper⁴.

And, speaking of Charles Cooper, in a YouTube video entitled “Charles Cooper Interview – Prewrath Rapture” (uploaded in 2011) he also admits to the very recent development of the position, stating –

“Scholars over the decades have argued about the timing of that event [the rapture], and we’ve come to categorize them as either pre-tribulational, mid-tribulational, or post-tribulational. And those were the basic categories until about twenty years ago when we introduced the concept of a pre-wrath rapture which has really kind of taken the place of the old mid-trib argument.”⁵

I’m not sure when the interview was actually recorded, but Cooper estimates that the pre-wrath position began a mere 20 years prior.

Pre-wrath Basics

These are the major tenets of the pre-wrath position:

- The Rapture will occur near the end of the period of time known as Daniel’s 70th week, just prior to the onset of God’s wrath.
- The Tribulation (the first large portion of the 70th week) is not the wrath of God, it is the wrath of Antichrist.

- The Day of the Lord (synonymous with God's wrath) does not begin until after the heavenly signs and the Second Coming.
- The Rapture will occur at the Sixth Seal (Rev. 6:12) and before the Seven Trumpets (Rev. 8:6).
- The Second Coming is a singular event that includes the rapture of the church as well as Christ's return in judgment.
- Michael is the Restrainer of II Thessalonians 2.

Why I Differ With the Pre-Wrath Position

As the pre-wrath position has gained adherents and expositors, it has naturally undergone further development. It would be easy to get "lost in the weeds" attempting to respond to every fine point and nuance. So I will be concentrating on the "big ideas" and demonstrating the inconsistencies that have prevented me from embracing the pre-wrath view.

To some degree, this is a matter of interpretation. Everyone who approaches the Bible brings opinions and suppositions with them. Once you are convinced of a position – any position – you will search to discover evidence of that position. The question I ask when reading the pre-wrath material is, "Is this the best, most contextually-consistent understanding of this text? Or, is there another, equally-valid understanding of this passage?"

The pre-wrath folk can be quite dogmatic (more on that later). Sometimes I think that what they lack in substance, they make up for with insistence. But, if their proof texts can be shown to be stretching a point, ignoring or truncating pertinent info, or resting more on assumption than exegesis, then no amount of insistence is convincing.

And that brings us to our first area of contention. It is a good example of how the pre-wrath position is dependent on assuming a conclusion while ignoring the text that would undermine the position.

One Taken, the Other is Left

On page 295 of his book, *The Sign*, while attempting to demonstrate that the rapture and appearance of Christ are concurrent events, Van Kampen writes --

In response to the disciples' question "what will be the sign of your coming?" Christ illustrates his teaching concerning His "coming" by giving the example

of Noah and the Flood. "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah... And they [the world] did not understand until the flood came and took them all away, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Then [at his coming] there will be two men in a field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left" (Matt. 24:37, 39–41; cf. Luke 17:34–36). When the one is "taken," the other is "left."

The meaning of this passage in this context clearly is that those who are "taken" are taken to be with the Lord at the Rapture when He comes (see 1Thess 4:15), and those that are "left" are left for judgment "like [in] the days of Noah" – again indicating that the Rapture and judgment will occur back to back.

The assertion that Matthew 24 includes a reference to the rapture of the church is essential to pre-wrath theology. And the notion that the 'one taken/one left' passages speak of that rapture permeates pre-wrath literature. And yet, it's an utterly untenable position. I'm not basing that statement on my own preferences or prejudices, but on the text itself.

Van Kampen parenthetically references Luke 17:34-36. That's the parallel passage to the Matthew citation. It reads --

"I tell you, on that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken, and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken, and the other will be left. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left." (Luke 17:34-36)

But, the passage doesn't stop there. The conversation between Jesus and His apostles continued --

And answering they said to Him, "Where, Lord?" And He said to them, "Where the body is, there also will the vultures be gathered." (Luke 17:37)

Now we know why Van Kampen only cited the first three verses and truncated the fourth. It undermines his contention and his position. But that's not dealing honestly with the text. Jesus was not referring to those "taken to be with the Lord at the Rapture when He comes." He was speaking of a gathering of people to the place where the carrion birds would eat their flesh.

We see that prophecy fulfilled in Revelation 19 –

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He

has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great." (Rev. 19:11-18)

Despite Van Kampen's claim that "The meaning of this passage in this context clearly is that those who are 'taken' are taken to be with the Lord at the Rapture." -- that's not *clear* at all! Simply insisting on something does not make it so.

According to the scripture reference in the back of his book, despite writing 521 pages, Van Kampen never once addressed or cited Luke 17:37. He referenced Luke 17 a total of seventeen times. He even cited Luke 17:34-36 four times. But, in every case, he avoided the verse that would undermine his theory.

This failure to properly cross-reference the Bible (and obvious attempt to avoid contrary passages) was one of the first places where I began doubting that the pre-wrath position could deal forthrightly with the Bible without cherry-picking some verses and avoiding others.

A similar act of avoidance occurs in Alan Kurschner's book, "Antichrist Before the Day of the Lord." In it, he writes –

In conjunction with Jesus explaining the sign, he ominously utters the proverb, "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather" (Matt. 24:28). This verse is related to what came before it and what comes after it. It is a pivotal structural verse in that it distinguishes two epochs of human history, conveying the principle that where moral corruption exists, divine judgment is required. When the world's depravity has reached full to the brim, God's eschatological judgment will begin. This comports with the narrative structure of Matthew 24 because everything preceding verse 28 describes moral corruption, and everything following it describes divine judgment. In short, the proverb serves as a warning that the day of the Lord's judgment will begin when Christ returns. There may be an additional point of this proverb, as well. People will no more miss the presence of the Son of

Man when he returns than vultures will miss the presence of corpses. Jesus' return will be obvious. (pg.69)

By relegating Jesus's words to a mere proverb, Kurschner avoids the future physical reality that would undermine his argument. Jesus did not identify the birds gathering to the corpses as anything other than a prophetic statement. And the notion that birds feasting on dead bodies actually means that the return of Christ will be obvious because vultures don't miss the presence of corpses is fanciful, at best.

The fallacy of Kurschner's assertion that Matthew 24:28 is a mere proverb would be undermined by simply cross-referencing Luke 17:37. According to the scripture index in the back of his book, Kurschner never references Luke 17:37. On page 128, while attempting to prove that the rapture and God's wrath happen "back-to-back," he cites Luke 17:28-35. But verse 37 is conspicuous in its absence.

For both Van Kampen and Kurschner to miss the most pivotal explanatory text on the topic of 'one taken/one left,' I can only surmise that the omission is purposeful.

That sort of failure to properly handle all the pertinent texts leaves me less-than-convinced that I should adopt the position.

Is Matthew 24 About the Church?

In Van Kampen's quote above, he applies Jesus's words in Matthew 24 to the church. Even though pre-wrath advocates agree that there is an eschatological distinction between the Church and Israel (including a future kingdom and restoration of national Israel), they disagree with the notion that Christ's words in Matthew 24 are directed specifically at the Jews and/or national Israel. By inserting the church into that passage, they have their primary text for insisting that the return of Christ and the catching away of the church are concurrent, back-to-back events. Equally, they assert that references to the "elect" and "saints" in Matthew 24 must necessarily refer to the Church.

If it can be proven that the Olivet Discourse has nothing to do with the church, or its catching away, a major plank of the pre-wrath position is toppled. In his article "The Rapture in Matthew 24," Charles Cooper admits –

"A defense of the PreWrath rapture position stands or falls with the conclusion that Matthew 24 deals with this important event (the rapture)."⁶

But, it is impossible to read what Jesus actually said and apply it in any consistent fashion to the church. Read His words –

“Therefore when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.” (Matt. 24:15-21)

Details matter. This pericope includes several very important details:

- ❖ Jesus makes direct reference to Daniel’s prophecy concerning the “abomination of desolation.” He is drawing from Daniel 9 --

“Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place. So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate.” (Dan. 9:24-27)

That prophecy concerns Israel and Jerusalem specifically – “*your people and your holy city.*” The idea that Jesus has now applied some portion of that prophecy to the church cannot simply be asserted. It must be proven contextually and exegetically.

- ❖ The abomination of desolation will stand “in the holy place.” That is the temple in Jerusalem, which contains the holy place and the “holy of holies.”
- ❖ Those whom Jesus warns to flee to the mountains “are in Judea.”

- ❖ Jesus's intended audience is to pray that their flight is not "*on a Sabbath.*" The Sabbath is the token of the covenant formed between God and Israel exclusively —

"It (the Sabbath) is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed." (Exod. 31:17)

If Jesus's words were intended for the church, His emphasis on the Sabbath flight makes no sense. The church is not required to observe Israel's Sabbath ordinances.

- ❖ For then will come the "great tribulation." That language would have been familiar to Jesus's listeners. Daniel describes it like this —

"Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." (Daniel 12:1)

Look at the language. Michael stands guard "over the sons of your people." That's Israel. And when the time of great distress comes, "your people" will be rescued.

Jeremiah also describes this same time of terrible trouble. And, to put a fine point on it, Jeremiah refers to it as the time of "Jacob's trouble." Jacob is Israel. These are Israel's prophecies.

Now these are the words which the LORD spoke concerning Israel and concerning Judah: For thus says the LORD, "I have heard a sound of terror, of dread, and there is no peace. Ask now, and see if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And why have all faces turned pale? Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; And it is the time of Jacob's distress (KJV – Jacob's trouble), but he will be saved from it." (Jer. 30:4-7)

So, when we piece it all together, we have Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, speaking to a Jewish audience about things predicted by Israel's prophets concerning the temple, nation, city, and Sabbath of the Jews. There is no mention of the church. Neither is there even the implication that Jesus was intending to include the church in His comments. Yet, the pre-wrath position insists that Jesus's words in Matthew 24 are not exclusive to the Jews, they do include the church, and that the 'one taken/one left' scenario is the rapture of the church rather than a gathering to be eaten by birds.

It's just more than I can accept and I find it cumulatively unconvincing.

Their rebuttal

Now, when a person like myself draws the conclusion that Matthew 24 is directed at the Jews, not the church, the pre-wrath advocate will usually counter by referring to Matthew 16:18 --

"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."

... and Matthew 28:19-20 --

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Since Jesus made reference to His Church, they argue, it is impossible to say that Matthew's gospel is not for and about the church. Likewise, since the "great commission" in Matthew 28:19-20 instructs the church to teach new converts everything that Christ commanded, that would include Matthew 24 and therefore it applies to the church. (This is Van Kampen's essential argument on page 503 of his book, The Sign.)

It's an unconvincing argument, though. I openly admit that those passages have bearing on the church. But, context determines meaning. The context of Matthew 16 is not the same as the context of Matthew 24. And Jesus's instructions to His apostles before and after Calvary are very different.

Prior to the cross, He said things like --

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 10:5-6)

After His death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus instructed --

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Matt. 28:19)

The Olivet Discourse was presented to a Jewish audience before Christ's Passion. That was before He instructed the message to be carried to all the nations. So, Matthew 28:19 does not support the idea that Jesus was referring to the Gentile church in Matthew 24.

In other words, the pre-wrath assertion that Matthew 24 is full of references and warnings to the church simply doesn't wash. The context of Matthew 24 is for and about the Jews. The church is not named, nor under consideration in the Olivet Discourse. And it does not contain any reference to the rapture.

That being the case, according to Charles Cooper's own standard, the defense of the pre-wrath rapture falls.

Is the whole seven years God's wrath?

The pre-wrath scheme breaks up Daniel's 70th week into distinct sections. The first half they deem "the great tribulation," while the second half encompasses "the Day of the Lord." The great tribulation, they argue, is not God's wrath. It is the wrath of Antichrist. The church will undergo that wrath. However, at some point in the second half of the seventieth week, God will unleash His wrath, the Day of the Lord occurs, and the church is taken away just prior. The rapture is God's way of "cutting short" Antichrist's tribulation.

I am not convinced that this scheme is biblically consistent. First off, the Biblical authors never refer to the "great tribulation" as "Antichrist's tribulation." That's a construct unique to the pre-wrath position. The Bible simply describes the rise, rule, and destruction of Antichrist as events that occur during the 70th week.

A question of seals

The pre-wrath advocates point to the 6th seal in Revelation 6 as the point where God's wrath is unleashed --

And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. And the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?" (Rev. 6:12-17)

Here we find an area of agreement. Inasmuch as this outpouring of wrath comes from God and the Lamb, the church must not be present. Christ will not pour out His wrath on His bride, His own body. And Paul wrote that we who are in Christ are not appointed to wrath (1Thes. 5:9).

However, where we differ is that the pre-wrath advocates argue that the preceding seals in Revelation 6 are all representative of Antichrist's wrath, not God's. Therefore, the church will endure the things described in those five seals.

So, let's look at the text and see how these seals begin –

And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" And no one in heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth, was able to open the book, or to look into it. And I began to weep greatly, because no one was found worthy to open the book, or to look into it; and one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals."

And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came, and He took it out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."

And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.

And I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come." And I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him; and he went out conquering, and to conquer.
(Rev. 5:1-6:2)

Details matter. God has a scroll in His own hands. It is sealed with seven seals and written on the front and back. Whatever comes from this scroll is God's doing. No one in Heaven, on earth, or under the earth is worthy to open it. Jesus Himself advances and takes the scroll. Consequently, worship breaks out. The Lamb breaks the first seal and Antichrist goes forth, conquering and to conquer.

Through the balance of chapter 6, Jesus opens each successive seal, bringing about war, famine, death, and finally the wrath of the Lamb. There is no hint or indication that the first five seals are anything other than God's doing, unleashed by Christ's authority. Not a word is said about the first five seals being Antichrist's tribulation.

The very least we can say about the seals is that whatever tribulation they produce; it is coming directly from Christ, under His authority and sovereign hand, from first to last.

And, if that is the case, the church cannot be here when the first seal is opened and the successive waves of increasing woe from God occur on Earth.

In other words, where the pre-wrath position is concerned, I remain unconvinced.

Does the Rapture Happen Concurrent with the Appearance of Christ in Judgment?

This is an essential element of pre-wrath teaching. In order to keep the church on earth until the last possible moment, the return of Christ in judgment must happen immediately after the catching away of the church. The two events must occur back-to-back. Van Kampen writes –

The correct timing of the Rapture, however, is *clearly revealed* by Christ in His Olivet Discourse, is confirmed through Paul in his Thessalonian epistles, and verified further by John in the book of Revelation. (Sign, pg. 289. Italics in original.)

The pre-wrath advocates rely on the Olivet Discourse to prove their contention. Once they are content that they have proven their point, they use the Olivet Discourse as the template for reading Paul's writing and the book of the Revelation. Notice that, according to Van Kampen, Paul and John "confirm" and "verify" what is supposedly "clearly revealed" in the Discourse.

Van Kampen continues –

The essence of the pre-wrath position is that Christ will rapture his church *immediately after* He cuts short the great tribulation by Antichrist and *immediately before* He unleashes His day-of-the-Lord judgment on the ungodly world. (Sign, pg. 290. Italics in original)

So, how does he prove this contention? By placing emphasis on Christ's comparisons between the Son of Man's return and the events surrounding the flood and Sodom.

“And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.” (Luke 17:26-30)

Van Kampen explains –

On the day that the Son of Man is revealed, Christ says, it will be just as it was in the days of Noah and Lot. God will deliver His faithful from persecution and then, on the same day, begin His destruction of the wicked who remain. (Rapture Question, pg. 59. Italics in original.)

This conclusion is based on several extra-textual assumptions. Like, how do we know that the church is actually the reference point for Christ's example? Given the fact that the book of Revelation likens Israel in Judea to a woman who flees to the wilderness to be protected for three-and-a-half years (Rev. 12:6), couldn't we just as easily apply the Noah and Lot stories of deliverance to Israel, the original audience for the Olivet Discourse? Of course we could.

Or, do we have any actual evidence that Jesus meant the Noah/Lot scenarios to be “rapture of the church” references? No. No, we don't. That's an assumption on the part of the pre-wrath folk.

So, what does Van Kampen do?

Well, in his Sign book he parlays from the Noah/Lot contentions on pages 292-294 directly to his “one taken and the other left” argument on page 294. He hopes that the connection is strong enough to convince his readers that the appearance of a supposed rapture in Christ's “one taken/one left” prophecy will also carry over into the Noah/Lot reference.

But, as we've already discussed, I don't see any evidence that the Olivet Discourse includes any reference to the rapture at all.

Let's review:

- ❖ The "one taken/one left" phrase refers, according to Luke 17:37, to the battle of Armageddon and carrion birds feasting on flesh.
- ❖ The Noah/Lot references may simply be a warning that people won't see the Day of the Lord coming.
- ❖ If there is a deliverance message embedded in the Noah/Lot references, it cannot be to the church (since the church neither existed as Jesus spoke, nor is there any indication in Christ's language that He was addressing the church).
- ❖ The Olivet Discourse can only be applicable contextually to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, praying that their flight wouldn't be on the Sabbath, when the abomination of desolation is in the temple.

In other words ... I remain unconvinced.

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

So, is there any biblical evidence that the rapture and appearance of Christ in judgment are *separate* events? Yes, there is. And if this evidence is compelling, then the pre-wrath position cannot be true.

For instance, the return of Christ in vengeance and wrath is described in Revelation 19:11-21 --

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King Of Kings, And Lord Of Lords. And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and

he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great.

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh. (Rev. 19:11-21)

Clearly, inarguably, this is a description of Christ treading the winepress of the wrath of God. But, He is not alone. He has an army with Him, clothed in fine, white linen.

So who are they and where did they get their white robes?

Well, the first half of this very chapter describes the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Inasmuch as the church is referred to as the bride of Christ (2Cor. 11:2, Eph. 5:25-27, etc.), we can safely conclude that the church will be in attendance at the marriage supper. And those people who constitute the bride receive the very garments they are later described as wearing –

And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God. (Rev. 19:6-9)

So, here's the point. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb occurs prior to the return of Christ in judgment. The church receives robes at the supper and returns with Christ wearing those robes. That demonstrates that these are sequential events. But, if the rapture and the judgment occur concurrently, when does the Marriage Supper happen?

Van Kampen doesn't tell us. In fact, he only mentions Revelation 19:6-8 once in his Sign book, on page 371. He says nothing of the sequence leading to verses 11-21 and instead launches into an extended discourse on how we ought to live as the bride of Christ. This is avoidance, not exegesis.

Several pages later, he writes about "Christ and His Armies" –

Who are "the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean" (Rev. 19:14)? The identity of these "armies...in heaven" is not made explicit in the text, but when this is examined in light of other scriptures it seems there can be no question, in this writer's opinion, as to their identity.

...

When all this is taken together, the only possible conclusion is that "the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean" who accompany Christ at the final battle of Armageddon are in fact the angels of Matthew 13:37-43 and of Revelation 15:6 and that these angels, as Christ explains in his own words, will be the reapers at the end of the age. (Sign, pg. 374-375)

Whoa. Wait ... what?

By avoiding the context altogether, Van Kampen utterly ignores the series of events in Revelation 19 and concludes that the army returning with Christ is made up of angels, not the church. Why would he do such a thing? Because this text upends his system.

This approach to the scripture undermines Van Kampen's credibility as a biblical exegete. But, it is demonstrative of the lengths to which the pre-wrath advocates must go in order to impose their system on the text.

And it leaves me unconvinced, because it does not treat the text fairly. We must adjust our thinking according to what the text actually says, the way it says it, in the context within which it says it. If we cannot do that, something is wrong with our system, our hermeneutic, or our overall theology. Sadly, too much of pre-wrath writing and argumentation fails that test.

Now, in an effort to be as fair as possible, I will point out that in his Antichrist book, in an endnote, Alan Kurschner does admit –

"Therefore, these reasons show that the armies that follow Jesus into battle in Revelation 19:14 are most certainly saints, not angels. To be sure this is not to say that angels will not also accompany Jesus into battle. They likely will, since executing his judgments is a role for angels. But in this particular verse, the armies refer to the redeemed saints." (pg. 221)

He does not delve into the timing of the marriage supper, but I appreciate that he let the context prevail and parted ways with Van Kampen's dodgy exposition.

The Mark of the Beast

And it was given to him (the false prophet) to give breath to the image of the beast (antichrist), so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. (Rev.13:15-17)

In contrast to the 144,000 Israelites who have the seal of God in their foreheads (Rev. 7:3), those people remaining on earth at this point in the Antichrist's reign will have the name or the number of the beast marked in their foreheads or right hands. It is a sign of ownership and a form of worship. Anyone who does not submit is killed. And, everyone who receives the mark winds up judged severely (Rev. 14:9-11).

The pre-wrath position insists that, since the church will remain on earth during "Antichrist's tribulation," they will be presented with the option of taking the mark of the beast. Alan Kurschner confirms this on his website --

God's elect will not lose their salvation because God's sovereign, decretive will perseveres the faith of his people. The eschatological warnings for believers not to apostatize function as a means by which God perseveres his people to the end.

This topic often comes up in eschatological discussions (e.g. Can a true believer take the mark and still be saved? Answer: No believer will take the mark, since his overcoming faith will not allow him.)⁷

So, why will believers refuse to take the mark? Not because they are not present. But because their "overcoming faith" will not allow it. Meanwhile, in his Antichrist book, Kurschner writes –

The choice is clear: Partake of the Antichrist's unholy sacrament and live under his short-lived reign or refuse to worship and be killed for Christ's name and live under Christ's reign forever. God will not accept any exceptions for those who capitulate by taking the mark.

And I agree. There are only two options where the mark is concerned: take it or die.

To be clear, according to Kurschner's understanding of future events, when the mark is offered, the church will be present on earth and believers will refuse the mark and they will die.

So, I cannot help but ask: Who exactly is Christ coming to rapture just before the wrath of God falls? The believers will all be dead.

That's a problem I have asked several post-trib folk to explain, without much success. The saints who are supposedly resisting would be killed. And the people who take the mark are condemned. So where exactly is this church that Jesus is coming to snatch away?

Usually, the reply is something along the lines of, "God will preserve the church during that time – sort of like He did with Noah." But, the pre-wrath folk are not particularly exacting on the details, here.

If it's true that the pre-wrath crowd is expecting to survive the tribulation – until Christ returns, sometime late in the seven-year sequence – they should be currently living off-the-grid, hunkered down somewhere where no one could find them. After all, the list in Revelation 13 is pretty complete: small and great, rich and poor, free men and slaves, they all receive the mark. There's not a single word in the pertinent biblical texts about the church surviving, resisting, or being carried along by their "overcoming faith."

Yet, the pre-wrath advocates operate on the simple assumption that they can avoid the mark and somehow live – without buying, selling, or trading – for anywhere from 3 ½ to 6 ¾ years.

Honestly – I'm not kidding, here -- I'm amazed that there are not communities of pre-wrath adherents building underground bunkers and stocking up food. Given the current intrusive recording of our every online keystroke by the NSA, I don't know how the pre-wrath folk think they can hide from the final world government, waiting for Jesus to come get them. You'd think they'd already be preparing, hiding, and getting off the grid. But they're not. They're too busy arguing online.

Again, I remain unconvinced.

The Restrainer

In his second epistle to the church at Thessalonica, the apostle Paul wrote –

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a

message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. (2Thess. 2:1-10)

The question before us is: Who is the restrainer that must be removed before the lawless one is revealed? The pre-wrath advocates say that the restrainer is Michael, the archangel.

Basing an argument on what has yet to be proven

A consistent interpretive tactic employed by the pre-wrath advocates, once they have concluded that the Olivet Discourse includes the rapture of the church, is to compare passages from the Apostle Paul, looking for parallels between his writing and Matthew 24. They offer various charts and graphs to validate their contention that Jesus and Paul were speaking of the same series of events, in the same order, essentially the same way. Then, satisfied that the Olivet Discourse proves that the rapture and the day of the Lord happen concurrently, they read that assumption into their arguments concerning the Thessalonian letters.

Van Kampen employs that technique when attempting to prove the restrainer's identity –

Who, then, is the restrainer to whom Paul refers? Is it the true church? The Holy Spirit? Human government? Who?

The Thessalonian text does not say. But the Greek noun *ekklesia* ("church") is feminine, and "restrainer" in verse seven is masculine, which rules out the church. More important, however, the context of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians is his instruction about what must happen before Christ comes to rapture his saints at the day of the Lord (2Thess. 2:1-2), making the true church of Christ an impossible candidate for the restrainer. You can't make the removal of the saints a condition that must be met before the saints

are removed and the day of the Lord begins, can you? Somehow the logic of that circular reasoning escapes me. (Rapture Question, pg. 124)

Two points require closer inspection.

First:

A little Greek is a dangerous thing. Van Kampen's argument based on Greek genders can just as easily be used against his conclusion. He points out that the word "restrainer" in verse seven is masculine, but *ekklesia* is feminine. That alone is enough to eliminate the church, says he.

But, there's more to the text than verse seven. The identifier "what restrains" in verse six is neuter (τὸ κατέχον). Michael the archangel is masculine. So, Van Kampen needs to demonstrate how Michael satisfies both bits of gender-specific grammar.

And second:

Van Kampen argued –

More important, however, the context of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians is his instruction about what must happen before Christ comes to rapture his saints at the day of the Lord (2Thess. 2:1-2), making the true church of Christ an impossible candidate for the restrainer. You can't make the removal of the saints a condition that must be met before the saints are removed and the day of the Lord begins, can you?

Now, follow his thinking:

Because Van Kampen assumes that he has already proven that the rapture and the day of the Lord are concurrent events, Paul cannot be saying that the removal of the church is what brings about the revelation of the man of sin, because Van Kampen has already concluded that the church has to remain until the Day of the Lord.

Talk about "circular reasoning."

Here's a basic rule of logic: You have to actually prove your contentions before you can use those contentions as facts to support further contentions. Van Kampen – and indeed pre-wrath theology itself – has failed to do that.

Another option for the restrainer

Greek gender rules of grammar are indeed helpful in narrowing down the potential candidates to be the "restrainer." But, whatever conclusion we draw,

we must remember that Paul simply does not identify him. And we should not be overly dogmatic on matters wherein the text is silent. The pre-wrath advocates are insistent on this point because any other restrainer than Michael the archangel leaves open the possibility of a pretribulational catching away. But a strong exegetical, contextual argument can be made that the restraining force is the Holy Spirit, working through the church.

So, let's quickly look at the details.

As previously mentioned, the restrainer is referred to both in the neuter (what) and masculine (he) gender. And there is a suitable "restrainer" who fits both of these gender requirements. The Greek word Spirit (Πνεῦμα) is neuter. But, the Holy Spirit (Αγιον Πνεῦμα) is a person and is masculine.

It's not uncommon for Paul to use the neuter to apply to the Spirit in his writing. We find two clear references to the Spirit in Romans 8:16 and 26, both in the neuter gender.

Given Paul's language, we can conclude that the restrainer was actively suppressing the revelation of the man of sin in his day and will continue to do so until the time when the man of sin is revealed, which hasn't happened yet. So, he has been restraining for at least 2000 years. That eliminates any possibility of the restrainer being a human or a government. And, since he is powerful enough to suppress dark spiritual powers that are seeking to promote the man of sin, he must be equally spiritual, but superior in power.

And again, the Holy Spirit is the best candidate to suit those requirements. In his book, "Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?" Henry Thiessen, an authority on the Greek New Testament, confirms my contention, writing –

"The writer (Paul) holds ... that that which "withholdeth" (neuter, verse 6) and "he who letteth" (hindereth) (masculine, verse 7), is none other than the Holy Spirit."⁸

"But," someone may interject, "how can the Holy Spirit be removed if the work of God is continuing well into the tribulation? The 144,000, for instance. How can faith survive on the planet without the Spirit?"

Good question. I don't think Paul is requiring a complete removal of the Spirit in all arenas and aspects of His ministry. The removal necessary to allow the Antichrist to come to power can be a specific removal.

Prior to Pentecost, the Spirit was at work, but He was not indwelling people and producing faith and repentance as He currently does in the church. As a result of that unique presence and indwelling, Paul calls believers the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor. 6:19).

The Spirit of God has been active in the world ever since He hovered above the deep in Genesis 1:2. But, His work in the church has been specific, with a beginning and a conclusion (not an ending, but a determined outcome).

If that's true, then Paul might well be referring to the Holy Spirit's working through the Word of God and the church. And that idea has a contextual base in 2Thessalonians 2:1 – "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him..."

Meanwhile, Paul never, in any of his writing, makes mention of Michael the archangel. To insert Michael into 2Thessalonians 2 is not exegesis (pulling meaning from the text), it is eisegesis (imposing meaning into the text). And while Paul never mentions Michael, he does mention the church, the coming of Christ, and our gathering to him.

Paul also wrote in verse 6, "And you know what constrains him..."

What's more likely? That Paul was referring to Michael, whom he never mentions in any of his writing? Or, that he was referring to the coming of Jesus and our gathering to him, which he just referenced a mere five verses (three sentences) earlier?

I have to go with the latter. Contextually, the conclusion that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, working in the church, is far more exegetically consistent than the notion that he is Michael.

The apostasy

The pre-wrath advocates appear to agree uniformly that the apostasy mentioned in 2Thessalonians 2:3 refers to a falling away from the faith, or some sort of rebellion. I won't go into the details here, but I will provide two links: one to a chapter in my book "A Brief History of the Future" and another to a Sunday morning audio message. In both links I am demonstrating that the Greek word translated "apostasy" has the primary meaning of "departure."

If the exegesis I offer is consistent, then the oft-claimed assertion that there is no clear and perspicuous New Testament text that describes a pre-trib rapture is sufficiently answered and proven untrue.

But, more importantly, if it is true, then Paul refers to "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to him," in verse 1 of 2Thessalonians 2, and refers to the departure of the church prior to the man of lawlessness being revealed in verse 3. Those matters being settled, Paul could not only say, "Do you not remember that while I was with you, I was telling you these things?" but he could equally say, "And you know what restrains him now." Paul has already

explained the gathering and departure of the church in this context, making the identity and removal of the restrainer all the more obvious.

But, since this is not a point on which the pre-wrath scheme hangs, I will merely provide the links so that anyone interested in exploring this topic more fully has some resources to work with.

A Brief History of the Future; Chapter 7 – The Chronos and Kairos:
<http://salvationbygrace.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/HOF-Chapter7-TheChronos.pdf>

Audio message: The Thessalonians. Message 19 – The Departure:
http://www.salvationbygrace.org/Audio/Thessalonians/19_The_Departure.mp3

Wrapping It All Up

Whole books and extensive articles have been written in response to the pre-wrath position. As I wrote at the beginning of this article, it was not my intention to supply a complete rebuttal, but only to explain why I have yet to be convinced by the pre-wrath arguments. The holes in their argumentation and their failure to follow their own hermeneutic standard – “Scripture Interprets Scripture” – leaves me scratching my head.

And, in all candor, my interactions with some of the online pre-wrath proponents have been less-than-encouraging. I am well aware that one bad apple (or a few) doesn't spoil the whole bunch, but I am concerned about the insistent tone and uncharitable tenor of too much of what I've seen and read.

We Christians should stand, without shirking, shrinking or flinching, to declare every truth that the Bible declares. But, in matters of eschatology, concerning things that have not happened yet, a modicum of humility is appropriate.

And, with that, I'll wrap this up. Just let me add, once more, that where the pre-wrath position is concerned ...

I remain unconvinced.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Van_Kampen_Investments

² <http://www.zionshope.org>

³ <http://www.alankurschner.com>

⁴ <http://prewrathrapture.com/charles-cooper>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcvHdQZijZw>

⁶ <http://prewrathrapture.com/the-rapture-in-matthew-24/>

⁷ <http://www.alankurschner.com/2015/08/12/apostasy-and-perseverance-can-a-believer-lose-their-salvation/>

⁸ Henry C. Thiessen, *Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?*, p. 41.