

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## A Comparison of J. Oliver Buswell's Mid-Trib Position with the Pre-Wrath Rapture View

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A little over a year ago, I was reading through Buswell's *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* in preparation for a lecture on the mid-tribulational rapture position.<sup>1</sup> I was immediately struck by some of the similarities between Buswell and the more recent pre-wrath rapture view advanced by Robert Van Kampen and Marv Rosenthal. After asking a friend to review Buswell to make sure the correlation was not just in my imagination, I thought it fruitful to present a comparison of the two views. The significance of such a correlation might mean that (1) the pre-wrath rapture position is not so new since the general framework for it exists in the classical mid-trib position of Buswell, and (2) it has essentially been refuted in the past long before its own formal presentation. This is especially noteworthy in light of the claims by proponents of the pre-wrath view that it is eclectic in its choosing of what is good from most other rapture positions.

### THE MID-TRIB POSITION OF J. OLIVER BUSWELL

J. Oliver Buswell was a professor and the third president of Wheaton College (1926–1940). This tenure was followed by a brief stay at Faith Theological Seminary. From 1941 to 1956 he served as President of what was to become Shelton College in New York City. From 1956 until the later years in his life, Buswell held the position of Dean of the Graduate Faculty at Covenant College and Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Throughout his ministry he taught philosophy and theology. Although the author of several books, he is best known for his original two-volume systematic theology which was mentioned earlier. He earned a Ph.D. from New York University but also received honorary

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study the one volume compilation of the original two volumes is being used, J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). Hereafter, this work shall be cited as simply *Buswell*.

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doctorates from the Evangelical Theological College (later Dallas Seminary) in 1927 and Houghton College in 1936.<sup>2</sup>

Buswell was a leader among conservative Presbyterians who championed a premillennial yet mid-tribulational view of the rapture of the Church. His presentation is sometimes difficult to follow. Nonetheless, he shows a deep and abiding love for the details of the Word of God. He is usually careful to tell you when he is speculating and when he is exegeting what he believes to be a clear text. For our purposes here, several points emerge in his basic scheme for the mid-trib rapture:

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- The first 3½ years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week see nothing more than general trials and troubles that the world always goes through.
- The Antichrist is revealed with the abomination of desolation half way through the 70<sup>th</sup> week.
- The two witnesses of Revelation 11 are killed halfway through the 70<sup>th</sup> week.
- During the 3½ days when the dead bodies of the two witnesses are left in the streets to be seen, Christians will experience tremendous and intense tribulation. This tribulation is not characterized as the wrath of God but as the wrath of man.
- At the end of the 3½ days, the two witnesses are resurrected and raptured (Rev 11:11–12) which is a picture of the rapture of the Church. This is associated with the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet in Revelation 11:15 (which in turn is associated with the trumpet of 1 Corinthians 15:52—“at the last trumpet”).
- At this point, the Church is raptured and joins Christ in the air.
- Four things could be said about the remaining 3½ years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week:
  1. Christ remains in the air with his saints for the next 3 1/2 years, watching the ensuing developments on earth.
  2. The millennial reign of Christ begins and, thus, overlaps the judgments of the vials.
  3. The wrath of God is poured out on the earth.
  4. Antichrist generally prevails on earth.

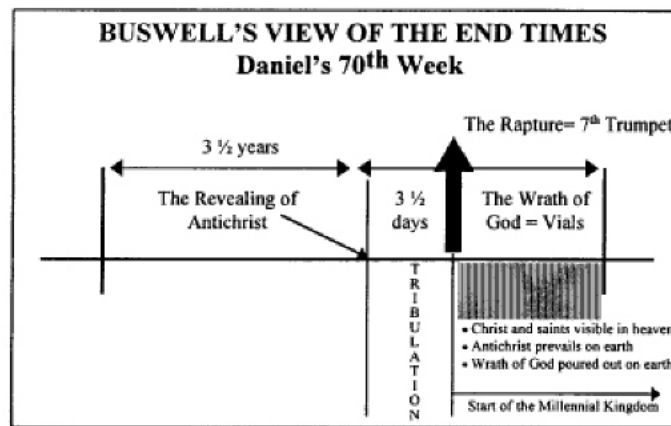
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<sup>2</sup> One wonders if Buswell held to the mid-trib view at the time that he was granted his honorary doctorate from the Evangelical Theological College.

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- At the end of the 70th week of Daniel, Christ stops his watching and comes down to earth with His saints to destroy Antichrist and to continue his millennial reign on the earth.

Although Buswell comes across as a man of conviction concerning all of these things, he does so with a demeanor of humility. His greatest criticisms are directed not against his premillennial brothers with different tribulational views, but against preterists whose teachings often questioned or obscured the reality of a literal Second Coming.<sup>3</sup> For an example of his undogmatic and charitable spirit, one can review his discussion of the seven trumpet judgments.<sup>4</sup> An overview of Buswell's position can be seen in the diagram below.



## THE POSITION OF THE PRE-WRATH RAPTURE

Robert Van Kampen, the inventor of the pre-wrath rapture position, has told us that his view has found the common denominator that harmonizes or reconciles the basic truths that both pretribulationism and posttribulationism had wrongfully isolated.<sup>5</sup> The common denominator or key that unlocked everything for him was identification of the cosmic sign given in Matthew 24:29–31.<sup>6</sup> He makes an astounding claim:

Within a few hours of comparing Scripture with Scripture, I realized that, by God's grace, I had found the common denominator that made the biblical truths of both

<sup>3</sup> Buswell, 400.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered: Plain and Simple* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1997), 46–47.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47.

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pretribulationism and posttribulationism come together perfectly, without contradiction, inconsistency, or unreconciled passages.<sup>7</sup>

Two important considerations emerge from this statement. First of all, there is the claim that the pre-wrath view takes the good from both the pre-trib and post-trib positions. In this sense, the pre-wrath rapture view is seen as an eclectic view. Equally important, however, is the absence of any mention of the mid-trib view in his discussion here. Why no mention? It could be that he is dealing with the two major views that have existed. However, should he not have wrestled with the good points in the mid-trib view as well to see how that position contributed to the issue? Perhaps it also has something to do with the fact that the pre-wrath view has a similar, although not identical, framework. In light of the discussion above, Buswell can easily be heard saying the same thing.

The best expression of the pre-wrath rapture view has been given by Marv Rosenthal:<sup>8</sup>

- The first 3½ years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week are the beginning of sorrows but do not constitute any wrath of God, only the trials and tribulations of life. In fact, Rosenthal insists that the word "tribulation" is never used for the first half of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week.<sup>9</sup>
- The term "Great Tribulation" applies to a second period of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week for which there is intense tribulation or persecution of Christians. This period lasts an indeterminate amount of time but less than 3½ years. Most of the diagrams show it ending half way through the last 3½ years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week.<sup>10</sup>
- The first six seals cover the time from the beginning of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week until the end of the Great Tribulation (roughly 5¼ years). In their entirety they constitute the wrath of man through Antichrist.
- The sixth seal marks the coming of cosmic signs that precede the trumpet judgments.
- The Lord raptures the Church at the end of the Great Tribulation.
- The Day of the Lord is the time of God's wrath that covers roughly the last half of the second 3½ years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week. This follows the rapture of the Church. This time of wrath is God's anger poured out on all mankind including Israel and the nations.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

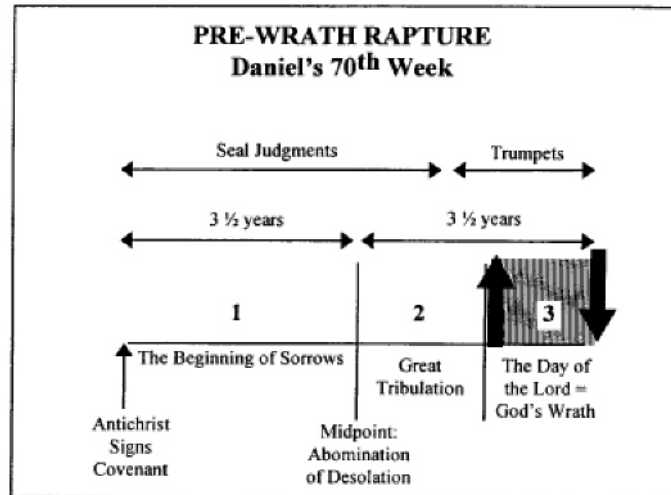
<sup>8</sup> Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 103–08. Rosenthal in making this observation has failed to read his Greek New Testament carefully in Matthew 24:9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 108–110.

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- This time of God's wrath actually extends for thirty days after the end of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week as God's bowl judgments are poured out on the nations who persecuted Israel. This thirty-day period is based upon Daniel 12:11.



## MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BUSWELL AND PRE-WRATH RAPTURISTS

The purpose of this paper is not to prove that the two views are identical. There are, in fact, some points of serious disagreement. First, pre-wrath rapturists place the rapture immediately before the trumpet judgments that make up the wrath of God. The sixth seal given in Rev 6:12–17 heralds this wrath, and the multitude of the redeemed that are shown in heaven in Rev 7 represent the raptured saints. The seventh seal then introduces the seven trumpet judgments.

On the other hand, Buswell places the rapture at the other end of the trumpets, in particular, with the seventh trumpet. The rapture is not pictured by the multitude in Rev 7. In that passage, Buswell follows the interpretation of many pretribulationists who see that group as saved martyrs who “meet death in a troublous time.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, concerning the rapture Buswell argues:

It is my opinion that in the coming to life and Rapture of the two witnesses (Rev 11:11ff.) we have an exact synchronization of events. The two witnesses are caught up into heaven “in the cloud” at the same moment that the elect of God are caught up together in clouds to the meeting of the Lord in the air (1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:13–18).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Buswell, 439–40.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 456.

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Consequently, the actual placing of the rapture within the argument of the Book of Revelation is different for Buswell.

A second, but related, difference between pre-wrath proponents and Buswell is the key passage that is used to unlock the timing of the wrath of God. For Rosenthal's pre-wrath view it is Revelation 6:12–17. The cosmic signs of this passage (vv. 12–14) are synchronized with many other passages in the Old Testament and with the Olivet Discourse (see Matt 24:29). In particular, Rosenthal sees the language of Revelation 6:17, "For the great day of his wrath is come," to signify that the wrath of God is about to occur. It has not been occurring prior to this time. The basis for this conclusion is a belief that the Greek for "is come" is a dramatic aorist. In fact, Rosenthal's entire scheme collapses if he is wrong on this point.<sup>13</sup> His view uses this dramatic announcement to point ahead to the silence that follows the seventh seal which in turn anticipates the seven trumpets as the wrath of God. Consequently, the rapture of the Church takes place immediately after this dramatic announcement and before the seven trumpets.

Contrary to this approach, Buswell dismisses the aorist statement as "but a reaction of the ungodly to cosmic disaster."<sup>14</sup> Also, unlike Rosenthal, he targets the announcement of the arrival of God's anger given in John's presentation of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:18.<sup>15</sup> Buswell comments

But not only does the seventh trumpet announce the beginning of the earthly reign of Christ, the voices of the twenty-four elders further announce, "The nations were angry and Thy wrath has come and the time ... to destroy those who are destroying the earth." These words, I believe, refer to the outpouring of the vials of the wrath of God, and the destruction of the Beast and the False Prophet, and of the armies of the Beast.<sup>16</sup>

He goes on to highlight the following announcement of rewards for the saints (v. 18) which he correlates to 1 Corinthians 15:51–52.<sup>17</sup> With the last trumpet established, he believes his case is made.

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent rebuttal of points such as these in the pre-wrath view, see Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Is There a Pre-Wrath Rapture?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, edited by Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1995), 381–411.

<sup>14</sup> Buswell, 436.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 457. It is interesting to note that neither Buswell nor Rosenthal see the potential problem in taking only one of the passages as a dramatic aorist with immediate application. The choice of one or the other is quite arbitrary considering all of the other points of correlation.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 457–58.

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There are many other exegetical details that are at variance between Buswell and the pre-wrath advocates. However, these two seem to be perhaps the most important.

## SIMILARITIES BETWEEN BUSWELL AND THE PRE-WRATH RAPTURISTS

In spite of the differences there are a number of striking and revealing similarities between the two approaches. First, and foremost, a three-fold division within Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week is taught by both systems. This shared general framework makes one consider the possibility that the pre-wrath view is just a variation of the earlier mid-trib view. Note the chart below:

Area of Similarity	Buswell's Mid-Trib View	Pre-Wrath Rapture View
Three-fold division of Daniel's 70 <sup>th</sup> Week	First 3½ years not the wrath of God The Great Tribulation equals the persecution of believers while the dead bodies of the two witnesses are on display for 3½ days—this begins at the midpoint of the seven years and is not the wrath of God The pouring out of the Wrath of God, which is the vial judgments	First 3½ years is the beginning of sorrows and is not the wrath of God The Great Tribulation which is part of the wrath of man through Antichrist begins at the midpoint of the seven years The Day of the Lord which is God's wrath (trumpet and vial judgments)

It is not clear whether Buswell's scheme is symmetrical with the 3½ days in the middle of the two 3½ year halves or if the 3½ days begin the last 3½ years. His wording allows for both interpretations. Other views such as the pre-trib and post-trib positions generally divide the tribulation into two parts, namely, tribulation and great tribulation, along the lines of Jesus' wording in the Olivet Discourse.<sup>18</sup> The mid-trib and pre-wrath views might suggest that various biblical passages are forcing the similarities. Regardless, for the purposes of this article, that might suggest that the pre-wrath view really is a form of the mid-trib position rather than being a brand new view.

<sup>18</sup> Rosenthal makes much of the two-fold division in his criticisms of the pre-trib position, 103–13.



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Second, I must confess a certain puzzlement over the lack of emphasis on the actual coming of Christ to the earth in the writings of the pre-wrath advocates. Perhaps the reason is that the controversy is primarily over the timing of the rapture. The diagrams certainly appear to affirm the second of two phases of the coming of Christ. Yet, at times, the position seems to focus on the rapture as an end and not as a kind of beginning. Commenting on Matthew 24:13 (he that endures to the end will be saved), Rosenthal notes:

Even further within the seventieth week, there is still no final harvest—no separation of the wheat and the tares. And if, as some suggest, the end occurs at the conclusion of the seventieth week, then what are these people being saved (delivered) from? If, on the other hand, the Rapture occurs, as the thesis of this book contends, immediately prior to the opening of the seventh seal, then those believers who endure to the end ... will be saved (delivered) from the Day of the Lord wrath.<sup>19</sup>

When I first saw this emphasis, I wondered if the pre-wrath advocates were trying to maintain a kind of unity in the Second Coming much like the post-tribulationists. However, after reading Buswell, I now wonder if that thought should be directed toward the classical mid-trib view. We had noted above that Buswell believed that the millennial kingdom began at the seventh trumpet and rapture of the Church even though Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week had not finished. He bases this largely on the passages announcing the kingdom of Christ in Revelation 11:15–17. In another section, commenting on Revelation 19:11–16, he says:

John says, "I saw heaven standing open." Literally, the perfect passive participle, "having been opened," is harmonious with my speculative suggestion that Christ is visible with His glorified saints in heaven throughout the three and one half year period during which the Antichrist is allowed to prevail upon the earth.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, there is a kind of unity between the rapture and what follows. This unity minimizes the two phases of the coming of Christ. The start of the kingdom at the rapture makes the rapture an end just like in the pre-wrath rapture view. Buswell does not emphasize at all the actual coming of Christ to set His feet on the Mount of Olives. At the least, the Second Coming itself is minimized in light of this kingdom teaching which casts an erroneous shadow of unity from the rapture to the defeat of Antichrist.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>20</sup> Buswell, 483.



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A third similarity between Buswell and pre-wrath is the strong distinction held between the wrath of man and the wrath of God. In doing this, both views take the first two time periods within Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week and minimize the direct work of God (all in contradiction to Revelation 4–5 as an introduction to the entire seven years). While strongly affirming that the wrath of God is not for the church, Buswell notes that "tribulation is the common lot of the church in every age."<sup>21</sup> He references passages like Acts 14:21 (it is necessary for us, through many tribulations, to enter the kingdom of God) and 1 Thessalonians 3:3–4 (we should suffer tribulation) with this in mind. Furthermore, he argues that "tribulation is, generally speaking, from the wrath of man."<sup>22</sup> Rosenthal labels all of the seal judgments (which take up the first two periods of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week) as man's wrath through Antichrist.<sup>23</sup> Both Rosenthal and Van Kampen also highlight Satan's wrath as working during this time to heighten the distinction from the later wrath of God.<sup>24</sup> Rosenthal asserts that "the seals are not God's wrath; they are God's promise of eternal protection during *man's* wrath, a wrath precipitated by the Antichrist who is empowered by Satan (Rev 13:4)."<sup>25</sup>

Related to the discussion above is the teaching in both pre-wrath and mid-trib views that the time of Jacob's trouble, the time of intense tribulation or Great Tribulation, cannot be identified with the wrath of God. Concerning the time of Jacob's trouble, Buswell notes that "this most terrible time of trouble is not to be identified with the time of the wrath of God."<sup>26</sup> He also alludes to the fact that the vials of God's wrath are a time that is often mistakenly identified with the Great Tribulation.<sup>27</sup> Van Kampen plainly asserts that "the persecution by Antichrist during the great tribulation will be the wrath of Satan (Rev 12:12), not the wrath of God."<sup>28</sup> In addition, both writers relate this idea to the predictions of cosmic upheavals.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, both positions use the prediction in Matthew 24:29 to help pinpoint the time of the wrath of God. In that verse, Jesus commented that there would be cosmic signs immediately after the "tribulation of those days" which days are taken to refer to the Great Tribulation. To be sure, both views link differently. The pre-wrath view links this verse to Revelation 6:12–14 and establishes the rapture and the beginning of the day of the Lord wrath with that in mind. The mid-trib scenario of Buswell goes to the cosmic

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenthal, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenthal, 145; Van Kampen, 56–58.

<sup>25</sup> Rosenthal, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Buswell, 389.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Van Kampen, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Van Kampen, 47; Buswell, 389.

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signs, which are part of the vials themselves, in Revelation 16 (see also Rev 11:13).<sup>30</sup> However, both argue that there are special cosmic signs which follow the Great Tribulation and precede the wrath of God.

## CONCLUSION

What is the significance of the comparison of the pre-wrath view to Buswell's mid-trib view? For one thing, it has helped me to categorize the pre-wrath view more clearly. Perhaps one cannot be dogmatic about these things. However, the level of differences between the pre-wrath view and the mid-trib view is really not much different from the level of exegetical distinctions that exist among various members of the Pre-Trib Study Group. We share our core commitment to the pre-trib rapture while joyfully studying the details together within the framework of much diversity. Consequently, when I think about the great number of similarities between the rather recent pre-wrath view and the slightly older mid-trib view, I will probably in the future see the pre-wrath position as a variation of the mid-trib view. It is becoming increasingly difficult for me to consider it as an innovative view based upon claims to new insights.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Buswell, 389.

<sup>31</sup> Stallard, M. (1999). "A Comparison of J. Oliver Buswell's Mid-Trib Position with the Pre-Wrath Rapture View." *Journal of Ministry and Theology* Volume 3, 3(1), 83–96.