

THE IDENTITY OF THE TWENTY-FOUR ELDERS

(with implications for the rapture of the Church)

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Soli Deo Gloria!

Introduction. In Revelation 4:4, "four and twenty elders" are seen by the Apostle John sitting on "four and twenty [thrones]" in heaven. The identity of these 24 elders has long been debated. However, most Dispensationalists have traditionally held that the 24 elders represent the completed Church (i.e., the Body of Christ). If that view is correct, the completed Church is in heaven before the 7-year Tribulation (i.e., the 70th Week of Daniel; Dan9:27) begins in Revelation 6, which all but necessitates a *pre-tribulational* rapture of the Church; such a conclusion is seemingly inescapable. Hence, the correct identification of the 24 elders is pivotal to a proper understanding of the chronological sequence of eschatological events.

Analysis. The following list of characteristics/observations associated with the 24 elders as given in the Book of Revelation strongly support their identification as the Church.

- 1) The fact that John saw all 24 thrones occupied suggests they represent a completed body. The Church will be complete at the rapture; if the rapture is pre-tribulational, the Church would be complete and in heaven before the Tribulation begins. In contrast, the nation of Israel will be present on earth throughout the Tribulation, it will continue to increase in population on earth during the Millennial Kingdom, and it will not be completed until the Kingdom's end.
- 2) The destiny of the Church is associated with heaven (Philip3:20), whereas the destiny of Israel is to inherit an earthly kingdom (Ps2:8; Luk1:31-33).
- 3) An "elder" is the highest office in the Church (Tit1:5; 1Pet5:1).
- 4) Thrones signify rulership, and the Church as a Body is promised to reign with Christ (Rev1:6; 1Cor6:3; 2Tim2:12).
- 5) These elders are seen serving in a priestly role in heaven (Rev5:8) and wearing garments associated with the priesthood (Cp., Exod39:27; Rev19:8); only the Church is destined to be both kings and priests (Rev1:6; 5:10; Cp., Heb7:13).
- 6) The 24 elders are "clothed in white raiment" (Rev4:4), which is a promise made to the Church/Bride of Christ (Rev3:5,18; 19:8).
- 7) The 24 elders "had on their heads crowns" (Rev4:4), which are consistently used in the N.T. as a symbol for the rewards available to members of the Church (1Cor9:25; Philip4:1; 1Thess2:19; 2Tim4:8; Jas1:12; 1Pet5:4; Rev2:10; 3:11). Members of the Church will receive their rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom14:10; 1Cor3:11-15; 2Cor5:10), which occurs in heaven following the rapture. In contrast, saints in the nation of Israel will not receive their rewards until

their resurrection, which is associated with the second coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation (Dan12:1-3; Matt24:31).

- 8) The 24 elders are distinct from "angels" (Rev5:11).
- 9) The 24 elders are distinct from Tribulation saints (Rev7:13-14).
- 10) The 24 elders are distinct from the 144,000 (Rev14:3).
- 11) The 24 elders are redeemed from "every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Rev5:9). Only the Church is a body comprised of members who come from all nations (Act15:14; Eph3:6).
- 12) The Church is the Body of Christ and is destined to become the Bride of Christ (Rom7:4; 2Cor11:2; Eph5:23-32; Cp., Gen2:21-24). At the marriage of the Lamb, the "wife" is seen "arrayed in fine linen, clean and white" as promised to the Church and true of the 24 elders (Rev19:7-8; Cp., Rev3:5,18; 4:4).
- 13) The (24) thrones seen by John (Rev4:4) were unnumbered and apparently unoccupied in Daniel's analogous vision of heaven (Dan7:9), which is consistent with: a) the fact that the building of the Church had not begun (Matt16:18), and b) the mystery nature of the Church means it was not foreseen by the O.T. prophets (Eph3:1-6).

Why 24? In the Bible, the number 24 as associated with a corporate body occurs only in 1 Chronicles 24 where King David organizes the Aaronic priesthood into 24 courses; thus, the number 24 seems to be associated with *priesthood*. Whereas the nation of Israel had a priesthood (i.e., a single line of descent from Aaron within one tribe out of a nation having twelve tribes), only the Church as a body is a priesthood (Rev1:6; 5:10).

Conclusion. Neither the nation of Israel, nor the Tribulation saints, nor the 144,000, nor any company of angels satisfy the description given for the 24 elders. All the characteristics of the 24 elders, taken *in toto*, are only satisfied in the completed Church, the Body of Christ. Thus, the "four and twenty elders" are a representation of the completed Church. Furthermore, since the 24 elders are seen by John in heaven (Rev4:4), before the Tribulation begins in Revelation 6, the inescapable conclusion is that the rapture of the Church will be *pre-tribulational*. Amen and maranatha!