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**WHEN TRUTH GETS LEFT BEHIND**

By Gene Edward Veith

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## SYNOPSIS

The *Left Behind* books are bigger than Harry Potter. The series of children's books about a school for witches has sold 12 million copies, but the series of apocalyptic novels has sold 20 million. One might rejoice that a conservative, Bible-believing, evangelical title has finally broken through into the mass market and thus, presumably, into the culture as a whole; but unfortunately, the great popularity of the series is spreading confusion and misunderstanding about the end times.

Speculation about when Christ will return and attempts to decode the Bible's prophecies have been popular for centuries. The various eschatological positions — premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism — have their advocates, all of whom base their position on Scripture. The problem is, Scripture is not clear on all of these questions — which makes the various interpretations possible — so Christians ought not approach them with such certainty. Christians should be leery of building their faith on expectations of Christ's imminent return, rather than what Christ has already done for us on the cross.

The *Left Behind* novels are fiction, not theology, so they must be approached as literature. They have some good moments — the shots at liberal theology and the New Age movement; horrific thrills; suspense that builds through book after book — but they fall short as Christian literature. The style does not fit the content; the story is plagued by bathos and lapses in verisimilitude; and the Christian themes often miss the mark, with the actual gospel of Jesus Christ getting short-changed.

The popularity of the *Left Behind* series might open the door for other Christian authors. Effective Christian writing will communicate the faith without making the faith seem fictional.

What would we think if a Christian book — or, better yet, a series of Christian books — would dominate the *New York Times* bestseller lists over the course of a half dozen years? Let's further suppose these books would be uncompromising, no-holds-barred advocates of the Bible, politically incorrect when it came to resisting the contemporary demand for moral and religious "tolerance," insisting on biblical morality, and espousing Christ as the only way to salvation. What if these books had broken out of the Christian ghetto and could be found in every Barnes & Noble bookstore, in every newsstand, and with every secular book dealer? What would we think if these books sold millions of copies in a culture that has become so secularized as to seem openly hostile to Christianity? What if this culture bought 20 million? We might think it was the end of the world!

The *Left Behind* series by the popular Christian teacher Tim LaHaye, collaborating with the professional writer Jerry Jenkins, has accomplished all of this. The 10 books in this series portray the coming of the Antichrist, the plagues in Revelation, and the Great Tribulation, all through the eyes of Rayford Steele, an airline pilot, and Buck Williams, a journalist. After the Rapture, during which all of the world's Christians suddenly disappeared, both men were "left behind," though they later came to faith and became part of a "Tribulation Force" of underground believers who resist the Mark of the Beast and try to hang on until Jesus comes back.

One ought not begrudge the books' success, for there was a time when Christian titles were artificially kept off the bestseller lists, no matter how many they sold. *Left Behind* may be breaking down barriers in the publishing industry for explicitly Christian books. It is probably unfair to subject them to too much theological scrutiny, since, as their authors insist, they are only works of popular fiction, not theological treatises. It may be helpful to sort out fact from fiction, however, especially in books that have become so popular as to make them potentially influential in the way people, Christians and non-Christians alike, understand the Christian faith.

### **APOCALYPSE NOW**

I remember when I was a boy rummaging around my grandmother's bookshelves and finding a book that blew me away. It was about how the prophecies in the Book of Revelation, specifically the Great Tribulation and the Second Coming of Christ, are being fulfilled in current events. With its eerie illustrations of demonic beasts and elaborate charts and timelines, I could hardly put it down. On the other hand, I was somewhat lost at the references to all of the 10-nation confederacies and the political figures who were candidates for the Antichrist. None of them existed anymore. This particular book was published, as I recall, in the 1890s. Although I found the book utterly persuasive, it was clear to me that there must be something wrong in its argument since Jesus had not come back when it said He would.

Later in college, I read a book that went over the same ground, nearly a century later. *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey, published in 1970, made essentially the same case, though with a different cast of characters and different current events. Remembering my grandmother's book, I remained skeptical; but Lindsey's book caused a sensation among young Christians. The book sold 15 million copies, its sales on a par with all 10 *Left Behind* books. It even dominated the *New York Times* bestseller list of the 1970s, hailed as the "number one nonfiction bestseller of the decade."

Many Lindsey fans expected Jesus to come back by no later than 14 May 1988. This was based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus had said to His disciples: "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Matt. 24:32-34).

Lindsey interpreted the fig tree to be a symbol for Israel. The budding of the tree supposedly referred to the founding of the state of Israel on 14 May 1948; thus, the generation in which this happened will not pass away until Jesus comes back. Since a generation supposedly is 40 years in the Old Testament, that would put the Second Coming no later than 1988. Furthermore, since Lindsey calculated that there would be seven years of tribulation first and that Christians would be "raptured" or taken up to heaven to escape the unpleasantness, 14 May 1981 was considered by many to be the beginning of the end.<sup>1</sup> No later than that day, many Christians were expected to disappear, whereupon the unbelievers who were left behind would face seven years of the Antichrist and vials of wrath until Jesus returned to begin a reign on earth that would last a thousand years.

Of course, that date came and went. Nobody was raptured. Other dates were proposed. New candidates for the Antichrist were nominated. As the year 2000 approached, millennial fever heated up again, bolstered by the secular apocalypse promised by the Y2K bug that would crash the world's computers and spell the end of our civilization. Meanwhile, *Left Behind*, the first book in the series, came out in 1995, with the other books coming out yearly (two in the climactic year 1999).

It is interesting to speculate why end-of-time books, beginning with *The Late Great Planet Earth* and continuing through each of the *Left Behind* titles, managed to become secular bestsellers, while books about the Bible, salvation, and the Christian life cannot even find room on the Barnes & Noble religious shelves. The prospect of imminent apocalypse apparently is more exciting and more marketable than ordinary Christianity.

### **MILLENNIALISM**

The expectation of the imminent return of Christ has been a recurrent theme in the history of Christianity. In the days of the early church, the beginnings of the Middle Ages, and the Reformation era, some Christians were convinced that the Second Coming was just about to happen. The millennialism of *Left Behind*, however, has its origins in the nineteenth century.

In 1830 in Port Glasgow, Scotland, it was reported that Margaret MacDonald had received a revelation by God during a healing service. According to her vision, Christ would come in two stages. First, Christ would remove His church from the world. Then would come the Great Tribulation, after which Christ would establish an earthly kingdom that would last a thousand years.

This was the first formulation of the popular notion of “the Rapture,” with the Tribulation happening only to those left behind. MacDonald’s ideas were subsequently picked up by John Nelson Darby, who founded the Plymouth Brethren in 1847 and who incorporated the rapture of the saints into his dispensationalist interpretation of Scripture. Darby’s theology became influential within a number of American evangelical circles and was further popularized when C. I. Scofield incorporated it into the notes of his Scofield Study Bible in 1909, an edition widely used to this day.<sup>2</sup>

This approach to eschatology is the most common (but not the only) contemporary expression of *premillennialism*. The term refers to the thousand years of peace and joy alluded to in various places in Scripture (e.g., Rev. 20:2–3). The premillennialists believe Christ will come back *before* the thousand years to reign on earth, after which Satan is allowed loose one more time until he is totally vanquished.

The premillennialists were, in part, reacting against another kind of millennialism that also rose to prominence in the nineteenth century. The *postmillennialists* believed that Christ would come only *after* the thousand years of peace and that Christians would eventually come to rule the earth, establishing, through evangelism and Christian social action, the kingdom of God on earth. Christian activism would thus hasten the return of Christ.

During the Reformation, certain radicals were advancing the notion “that before the resurrection of the dead the godly will take possession of the kingdom of the world.” This position was rejected by both the Lutheran Augsburg Confession and the Reformed Helvetic Confession.<sup>3</sup>

Later Reformed thinkers in the United States, drawing on some speculations by Jonathan Edwards, formulated a postmillennialist eschatology in which Christians would indeed take over and reform the world, ushering in the Second Coming of Christ. Before long, this view, which at first emphasized the effects of world evangelization, was taken up by the new liberal theology. Caught up in the utopian spirit of the nineteenth century belief in progress, these “modernists” replaced “crude salvationism” with the social gospel. Postmillennialism served as the impetus for the church as social reformer, opening the door to the left-wing political activism that characterized twentieth century mainline denominations. Since conservatives can play the same game, some of today’s Christian political activists on the right have revived postmillennialism.

Divisions between premillennialists and postmillennialists are major, even within American evangelicalism. So are the subtle distinctions within each camp. For example, some premillennialists are “pretribulationists,” believing that the church will get raptured before the tribulation, while others are “posttribulationists,” believing Christians will not get raptured until they have first gone through the hard times.

These fine points of biblical prophecy are not mere examples of antichrists dancing on the head of a pin; rather, they have broader implications as to how Christians are to live in the world. The postmillennialists will tend to be activists, optimistically believing Christians really can improve the world. They therefore pour themselves into politics, the arts, and culture-making, confident that God’s foreordained providence is on their side. The danger, though, is that postmillennialists may sometimes think that the church’s business is to save the earthly society rather than to save souls, becoming a political cell rather than a supernatural institution whose kingdom is not of this world.

Premillennialists, in contrast, will tend to see the world spiraling downward in a satanic free fall. Since it is futile for Christians to do much to stop it, they resist entanglements in a world soon to be ruled by the Antichrist. They tend to be separatists, establishing their own subcultures, rather than trying to influence the culture in which they find themselves. To their credit, they will be skeptical of utopian claims and will resist the temptations of an intrinsically non-Christian culture. Their temptation, though, will be to ignore their callings to be salt and light in the secular arena.

In the words of one of the *Left Behind* novels, speaking of what Christians can do to fight the Antichrist, “Scripture didn’t seem to indicate that even Christ’s followers would be able to do more than simply bear up against him. The Antichrist was on a course foretold centuries before, and the drama would be played out to the end.”<sup>4</sup>

Most Christians, historically, have been neither postmillennialists nor premillennialists. Their eschatology is based not on the coming of some millennial age but is focused squarely and simply on the coming of Christ, who, in the words of the Nicene Creed, “shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.” Instead of arcane attempts to interpret puzzling prophetic symbolism, these *amillennialists* concentrate on the clear words of Christ, who said that His return will be unmistakable, that it could happen at any time, and that it will come as a complete surprise (Mark 13).

In His discourse on the end of the age, Jesus warned against jumping to end-time conclusions. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars,” He said, “do not be alarmed” (Mark 13:7). “If anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it” (v. 21).

As for those who claim to know when He is returning, Jesus Himself dismissed every speculation: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v. 32). *No one knows*, which would presumably include premillennialists, postmillennialists, and amillennialists. Jesus said *He doesn’t even know!* Though churches are split and fellowship is denied over such issues, His second coming is a mystery known only by God the Father, hidden even from believers, who are to be ready at any time.

No wonder the biblical prophecies have been applied in so many different ages: the signs are always right for His coming. “You have heard that the antichrist is coming,” said the Apostle John, but “even now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18). We are already in “the last hour” (v. 18). Tribulations, temptations, false teachers, and persecutions must be faced by Christ’s people throughout the history of His church.

What about the specific prophecies, the fig tree, the mark of the Beast, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? Do these point to specific people and events, as in *Left Behind*? Might they be demonic forces, powers, and principalities at work in the heavenly places beyond our direct perception?

Those who advocate scenarios of the end times tend to string Old Testament and New Testament prophecies together, taking passages out of context and fitting them into a completely different timeline. Some prophecies have already been fulfilled, however, in the Babylonian captivity of Israel, in the coming of Christ, and in His death and resurrection.

Some Old Testament prophecies do use symbolism to describe specific kings, famines, and wars, but it is not always easy to tell what is a symbol and what it is symbolizing. In the fig tree account, for example, is Christ referring to the end of time or to the horrible attack on Jerusalem, which led to the diaspora of the Jews and the destruction of the Temple? This happened in A.D. 70 to “this generation” that Jesus was addressing, which indeed did not pass away until what He predicted came true.

End-time theorists often claim to be taking the Bible literally, but they really are not. In *Left Behind*, the horns of the beast are 10 United Nations representatives. The seal of the Lamb is a literal mark on the forehead (visible only to believers), while the mark of the Beast is a computer chip. Some things are literal (the locusts with the body of a horse, the tail of a scorpion, and a human face), but others are symbolic. How do we know the novels’ symbols are not references to real events, and the novels’ literal renderings should not be symbolic?

The Bible is not a secret code. It is the Word of God, containing His law and His gospel on every page, including the prophecies. The Book of Revelation warns Christians not to follow false teachers, tyrants, and the idolatries of the world. It gives consolation that through every persecution, plague, and trial, Christ is with His church and that He will vindicate the saints, who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

### **THE FICTIONAL APOCALYPSE**

Of course, LaHaye, Jenkins, and other Christians are entitled to their eschatologies. My point here is that exact renderings of biblical prophecies as a key to current events is problematic and can only be speculation. To assert them as doctrine is to claim more knowledge than Scripture actually gives us.

To their credit, unlike *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which dominated the *nonfiction* bestseller lists of the 1970s, they have written the *Left Behind* books as fiction. They offer an imaginary experience of what one particular interpretation of the last days might be like. It can be enjoyed as science fiction; its one-world government a dystopia like George Orwell's and its demonic monsters like Stephen King's. If Christian ideas, including the gospel, can be worked in, so much the better.

Taken this way, *Left Behind* would be relatively harmless. Some people, however, including many Christians, have trouble distinguishing fact from fiction. The preceding theological critique was therefore in order; yet how is the series as a work of fiction?

The books are solidly in the genre of popular Christian fiction, like most of the novels in Christian bookstores. They make few concessions to the secular literary or publishing scene. Some Christians think they need to water down their Christian ideology in order to achieve popular success. The success of *Left Behind*, with its unabashed cultural conservatism and no-holds-barred insistence that Jesus is the only way to salvation, proves that Christians do not have to be timid to be popular.

I also appreciate how the books dramatize the tension between Christianity and culture, how they show that good can be spun to appear bad (those "intolerant" Christians getting in the way of global happiness), and how the bad gains support by making itself seem good (the Antichrist appearing like a caring individual). Its shots against the current demand for "tolerance" are also well taken, as are the portrayals of why a one-world government and a global, New Age religion that purports to combine all of the world's religions are such insidious ideas. Though most of the books' buyers are probably Christians already, these points need to be made in the current intellectual climate.

The books are written in brief scenes that jump from one group of characters to another, making the plot fast moving, a technique that characterizes popular thrillers such as the Tom Clancy novels. Putting a character in jeopardy, then cutting away to someone else in another subplot, leaving that character in jeopardy to pick up the earlier action — such "cliff hanger" techniques build suspense and keep a reader turning the pages.

Part of the books' appeal is probably also due to the aesthetic of the serial. Just as a soap opera viewer gets absorbed into a never-ending drama and has to keep tuning in to see what happens, a series of books with an ongoing plot, continuing over the course of years, can become addicting.

In the *Left Behind* books, the action becomes increasingly intense with every volume. At first, we see characters who were left behind picking up the pieces after the Rapture, then coming to faith themselves. The rise of the Antichrist is gradual. All hell doesn't break loose until the fifth book, *Apollyon*. Even then, believers are spared all of the horrors, but once the Antichrist is killed and rises from the dead, believers now must suffer. The scenes in *The Mark* of Christians refusing the mark of the Beast — even though it means imminent martyrdom — are some of the most effective, genuinely religious scenes in the series.

To write effectively about such things, however, requires a style that evokes both horror and wonder in the reader. This is a challenge for all writers struggling to present the mysteries of the Christian faith. Milton described his search for "an answerable style" to write about such sublime topics as the rebellion of Satan and the Fall of Adam and Eve. Here we see the limits of the *Left Behind* series as serious Christian novels.

The style of *Left Behind* has no texture. The language has no power of its own, no evocative meanings or emotional resonance, just a one-dimensional telling of what happens. Much of the story is dialogue, characters talking back and forth. There is not even much description. We are told that a character looks up into the sky and sees San Francisco under aerial attack. There is no re-creation of what he sees — is the sky filled with bombers? Are fighter planes strafing the crowds? Are missiles streaking toward their targets? Surely when the Antichrist has a new temple built in Jerusalem, the subject calls for some description of what it looks like, probably some tacky, grandiose, contemporary architecture in contrast to the majesty of Solomon's original temple. What does the city of New Babylon look and feel like? To use the old creative writing principle, there is too much telling and not enough showing.

One stylistic problem that creeps into much religious writing is "bathos." This is what happens when a writer describes something lofty, serious, and awe-inspiring in trivial terms. Going from the sublime to the ridiculous

breaks the intended mood and often makes a reader laugh when he or she is supposed to be impressed. In the *Left Behind* series, the triviality of the style often conflicts with the magnitude of the content.

Notice how the Bible, which is inspired in style as well as substance, describes one of God's mysterious judgments: "Out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth....The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces" (Rev. 9:3, 7). The language is utterly simple, yet it is resonant and awe-inspiring. In *Apollyon*, however, these terrifying beings are reduced to funny-looking insects with a really bad sting. At one point, Buck is whacking them with a tennis racket.

Those who have been sealed by the Lamb have a mark on their foreheads, a cross that only fellow-believers can see. At one crucial moment, a nurse rubs a man's head with alcohol to make sure his mark won't come off so that the Tribulation Force can make sure he is really a Christian.

Bathos breeds emotional incongruities as well. When the Antichrist assumes power, the writers slip into a romantic subplot with high-school-like dating problems. Then there are the unintentionally funny lines ("Rayford knew global terror was entirely new to Amanda. It was new to *him*."<sup>5</sup>)

Another problem with weak fiction is uneven *verisimilitude* (feeling of reality). A story does not have to be realistic, but it does have to be believable. However wild and fantastic the story, it has to maintain a "similitude" to truth so that the reader can, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's terms, exercise that "willing suspension of disbelief" necessary to enter into the fictional world.

In *Left Behind*, we can usually grant the strange things happening to them, but the characters often react to them in unbelievable ways. When a mushroom cloud rises over O'Hare airport, when the U.S. cedes its sovereignty to a One World government, and, later, when 200 million demonic horsemen slay one-third of the earth's population, no one seems that upset. When the saints suddenly disappear, major cities are paralyzed; yet, nobody seems to take notice of the Rapture.

A Christian story might be thought to have more connections to the actual practice of Christianity. The portrayal of the church is odd. When believers meet, they don't seem to worship. They just study Bible prophecy. There is a fine moment when a pastor realizes that his congregation has been raptured but he, never having had a true faith, has been left behind. The event leads to his conversion and to a "soul harvest" of many other new believers, but after the pastor puts his new congregation together, he eschews "anything traditionally churchy."<sup>6</sup> Even if all of the real Christians were raptured and the church had to start over, why wouldn't worship be important to Christians going through trials and tribulations?

Moreover, while there are a lot of new Christians during the soul harvest, no one ever gets baptized. One does not have to believe in the efficacy of baptism as a means of grace to recognize that new converts should be baptized (Mark 16:16). Instead, the "sinner's prayer" is given an almost sacramental status. Some of the characters have come to believe, but until they come to a point of "decision," they don't receive their mark.

The books include commendable witnessing to their vast readership, but there could be more explanation of what the gospel is — not just a command "to receive Christ" but the proclamation of what He has done for us in atoning for our sins on the cross so that we can receive forgiveness and salvation as a free gift. There is some of this, but it is of secondary importance in the series. The gospel instead should be the center of the Christian faith in a way that eschatological speculations are not.

If the scenario described in the *Left Behind* books were to actually take place, with biblical prophecies being fulfilled to the letter in front of our eyes, we would be walking by sight instead of by faith. This is why the Christian life is usually not so cut and dried — why our tribulations are more of the internal variety as opposed to horse-shaped locusts with crowns on their heads.

As for the evangelistic or apologetic impact of the *Left Behind* series, while God may use any earthen vessel, it remains to be asked: Does such a fictionalized treatment make Christianity more or less believable? Is the Bible turned into nothing more than science fiction or horror fantasy? Christian readers and writers should be mindful of

the danger of fictionalizing the faith, downplaying what is central in favor of mere exercises of the human imagination.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Don Matzat, "The Great Premillennial Hoax," *Issues, Etc., Journal*, 1 (2000), tells of his experiences with this movement, including the views of Bible prophecy and the projected date of the Rapture described here, as well as his reasons for finally rejecting this eschatology.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 *Augsburg Confession*, Article XVII, and *Helvetic Confession*, Chapter XI. The quotation is from the former, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 51.
- 4 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 364–65.
- 5 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Nicolae* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1997), 19.
- 6 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 220.