



LaHaye on the Rapture on Thick

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By Carl Olson

You've met an old friend for coffee, and he starts talking about an exciting series of books he's reading. "They've really got me thinking," he remarks, "about this whole 'left behind' thing."

If you have no idea what he's talking about, there's a good chance either that you're a Catholic or that you've been living in Greenland for a while. But there's also a chance that your friend is being snookered into accepting beliefs about the "end times" that are contrary to Catholic teaching and being produced by dyed-in-the-wool, Catholic-bashing fundamentalists.

The books, of course, are the best-selling, slickly produced, heavily publicized apocalyptic potboilers called the Left Behind series, authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. They offer a fictionalized account of what the authors believe will happen in the near future: the so-called "rapture," a secret coming of Christ to snatch away all true Christians from the earth, leaving behind all others. This "rapture" is then followed by the "tribulation," a seven-year period filled with death, blood, and God's wrath. The characters are fictional, but the events, LaHaye assures readers, are found in the Bible.

The first book, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Tyndale, 1995), was meant to be the one and only volume published. But when the earth's last days failed to materialize and the sales started to mount, more volumes were produced. This past November the eighth book of the series, *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World*, was published and quickly clawed its way up the charts, topping the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* lists, just as its predecessor, *The Indwelling: The Beast Takes Possession*, had done earlier in the year. The ninth book, *Desecration*, will be released this October.

The series has shattered sales records in Christian fiction, with over twenty million copies sold. It's also spawned a children's series, audio tapes, companion "non-fiction" books, a "Prophecy Bible," and even a cinematic offspring, *Left Behind: The Movie*, which sold 2.8 million copies in video format and was touted as the most expensive film starring Kirk Cameron ever produced. The only thing missing from this onslaught of apocalyptic paraphernalia are coffee mugs, Cameron action figures, and prophetic Palm Pilots.

My Fundamentalist Background

I'm no stranger to this rapture business. Raised in a fundamentalist, anti-Catholic, rapture-believing home, I spent many hours reading, hearing, talking, and even singing about what it meant to be "left behind." At Bible camps and youth meetings we'd sing "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," a popular ditty about the rapture. (It appears on the *Left Behind* movie soundtrack.) I recall enthusiastically belting out the catchy chorus: "There's no time to change your mind/The Son has come and you've been left behind."

In addition, I was reading books by Tim LaHaye many years before the *New York Times* had ever heard of him. LaHaye was well known among fundamentalists, making a name for himself by writing books such as *The Act of Marriage* (a fundamentalist sex guide for married couples), *Transforming Your Temperament*, and *The Battle for the Mind*. He was like Freud, Dr. Ruth, and Billy Graham rolled into one.

LaHaye was also a "Bible prophecy expert," writing works about the biblical book of Revelation, the Middle East crisis, and the impending doom of the world. He was — and remains — a bona fide opponent of papists, a Bob Jones University product who pulled no punches when it came to describing the endless

evils of the "Romanist" church.

Fast forward to 1997. My wife and I are entering the Catholic Church. Finally, no more forty-minute sermons, lectures against drinking good beer, or having to read LaHaye books. But around the same time we were embracing the papist apostasy that LaHaye had warned about, I was seeing his name at book stores, on the Internet, and — Lord have mercy — in the hands of Catholics. I heard that even a few priests and DREs were recommending his books! Catholics who didn't know that a new Catechism had been published were reading the Left Behind books with an enthusiasm that I can only describe, sadly, as rapturous. What was going on?

Harmless Entertainment or Fundamentalist Propaganda?

LaHaye had hit upon a clever, if not completely original, way of spreading his rapture gospel: Write a thrilling novel aimed at fans of John Grisham, Danielle Steele, and other supermarket Shakespeares. In an interview with Larry King on June 19, 2000, both LaHaye and Jenkins talked candidly about how the books are written and for what purpose.

LaHaye, the prophecy expert, provides Jenkins, the storyteller, with a notebook outlining the future "biblical events." LaHaye, Jenkins stated, "gives me a fairly ambitious work-up before each book. I get a notebook from him that shows the chronology of the biblical events and any character plot ideas, that type of thing. But mostly I get his commentary . . . And I really immerse myself in those notebooks." He later added: "But when we cover the biblical events, we try to tell those exactly the way we see them coming down if they're literal, and putting these fictitious characters in the way."

When King noted, "You're dealing here with [an] evangelical tool," LaHaye agreed, and Jenkins chimed in: "It is true. Yes. When I first met Dr. LaHaye, I was impressed that he wanted to reach two different audiences. He wanted to encourage the church, those who were already persuaded. And he wanted to persuade unbelievers."

Make no mistake. For LaHaye and Jenkins, almost everyone who doesn't agree with their view of the "end times" is an "unbeliever." And that goes double for Catholics, who are special fodder for fundamentalist evangelistic efforts.

The strong bias against Catholicism is obvious in LaHaye and Jenkins' *Are We Living in The End Times?* (Tyndale, 1999), written as a companion volume to the Left Behind books. This "non-fiction" book is dedicated to "the millions of readers of the Left Behind books with the prayer that this book will help them gain a clearer understanding of end-time Bible prophecy." It contains several pages of tried-and-not-so-true attacks on the Catholic Church.

Claiming that the Roman emperor Constantine's "profession of faith" was a sham, LaHaye and Jenkins detail the kinds of "corruption" that eventually entered the once-pure early Church: "prayers for the dead, making the sign of the cross, worship of saints and angels, instituting the mass, and worship of Mary — which in the church of Rome was followed by prayers directed to Mary, leading to the 1950 doctrine of her assumption into heaven and in 1965 to the proclamation that Mary was 'the Mother of the Church.'"1

St. Augustine is glibly described as a "Greek humanist" whose introduction of "man's wisdom" further "pav[ed] the way for more pagan thought and practice." Furthermore, St. Augustine's "spiritualizing of Scripture eventually removed the Bible as the sole source of authority for correct doctrine. At the same time, the Scriptures were locked up in monasteries and museums, leaving Christians defenseless against the invasion of pagan and humanistic thought and practices. Consequently, the Dark Ages prevailed, and the Church of Rome became more pagan than Christian."2

Such a view of history does raise a couple of questions: Can anyone name the top five museums of the fifth century? And do people really believe this trash? Yes, they certainly do, which is exactly what the authors are counting on.

The fundamentalist history lesson continues with a description of Catholicism as "Satan's Babylonian mysticism" and an obligatory reference to the "pagan practices" of "selling indulgences, teaching the doctrine of purgatory, and praying to Mary." What? No mention of the blasphemous lighting of candles and singing of Ave Maria? No, instead it's on to the Jimmy Swaggart-inspired fable of the "40 million persons"

— all true Christians — killed by the Catholic Church. And so it goes, a veritable cornucopia of the Top Twenty Anti-Catholic Clichés, conveniently lacking only footnotes and documentation.³

The Dispensational Background

The rapture idea gained popularity in America as part of a fundamentalist religious movement known as dispensationalism — a movement that includes folks such as LaHaye, Jenkins, Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell and others. To be more specific, they are pre-millennial, pre-tribulational dispensationalists. They believe (1) there will be a one-thousand-year reign of Christ on earth in the future; (2) “true believers” in Christ will be raptured, or taken up to heaven prior to a seven-year period of worldwide tribulation; and (3) history has been divided into seven different dispensations or eras. In each of these, God tests particular people, they fail, and then He judges them.

The two most distinctive beliefs of dispensationalists are also the beliefs most clearly contrary to Catholic teaching: (1) a radical separation between Israel, the “earthly” people of God, and the Church, the “heavenly” people of God; and (2) the rapture. Of course, it’s the rapture that makes the headlines, sells the books, and sends many Catholics into confused tailspins. The rapture is the central theme of the Left Behind books, which begin with that event and then follow a group of characters, the “Tribulation Force,” through the seven years of tribulation, which will end with the battle of Armageddon and Christ’s second coming.

That’s right: The rapture is not the same event as the Second Coming. It’s a different flight, which leaves at a secret time, does not involve an actual landing by Jesus, and has a completely different purpose from the Second Coming. In the rapture, “true believers” are silently “caught up” to Christ in the clouds; in the Second Coming they return with Christ to beat the snot out of the Antichrist, establish the millennial kingdom, and help organize animal sacrifices in the newly rebuilt Jerusalem temple. (More about that in a bit.)

The distinction between the rapture and the Second Coming is the basis for the entire Left Behind story line, and LaHaye has written entire volumes on the matter, most notably *Rapture Under Attack: Will You Escape the Tribulation?* (Multnomah Press, 1998). In that book he declares that they are “obviously two separate events,” claiming that the rapture of the church is “certainly not the Second Coming, but only the first important stage.” Oddly enough, after stating that it is “untrue” that he teaches “two comings,” he writes that there are “two comings of Christ: once for His church and secondly to the world with great glory.”⁴

We should keep in mind that today the rapture doctrine has spread beyond the bounds of the dispensationalist movement. Not all “rapturites,” as we’ll dub the folks who believe in the rapture, are dispensationalists. Many evangelical Protestants accept the notion but have no idea about dispensations, a radical distinction between Israel and the Church, and other distinguishing marks of the dispensational worldview. But even though all rapturites may not recognize the roots of their belief, they’re still influenced by those roots.

Where’s That in the Bible?

Rapturites admit that the term rapture does not occur in the Bible, but explain that it’s taken from the Latin word *rapiemur*, which St. Jerome used to translate the Greek word meaning “caught up” in this passage from St. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess 4: 15-17).

Another favorite rapturite passage also comes from St. Paul:

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed (1 Cor 15: 51-52).

According to adherents of the rapture theory, this blessed event will happen secretly and silently — which is why these proof texts are so puzzling, referring as they do to shouting, the trumpet of God, and the voice of an archangel (which has to be loud). The common rapturite explanation given for this apparent contradiction is that only those being raptured will see Jesus, and will hear him shout, the archangel speak, and the trumpet of God sound.

That's a handy explanation — except the Bible doesn't say anything about it. In fact, the Bible never mentions a rapture distinct from the Second Coming. So how does the rapturite arrive at these two different events?

One justification often given is that three different words are used for the Second Coming — *parousia*, *apokalypsis*, and *epiphaneia*. Rapturites claim these refer to different events. The problem is that rapturites often apply the distinctions inconsistently. For instance, they claim that *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 refers to the rapture, but that the same word in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 describes the Second Coming.

The more important reason for the false distinction, however, is a so-called "literal" interpretation of Scripture resulting in a radical dichotomy between Israel and the Church, which necessitates two separate comings of Christ. LaHaye writes that there are "two keys to understanding the prophetic Word of God. First, one must interpret the Bible literally unless the context provides good reason to do otherwise. Second, we must understand that Israel and the church are distinct! If a person fails to acknowledge these two facts of Scripture, all discussion and argument is fruitless. The issue is not so much prophecy as it is one's view of Scripture and the church."⁵

LaHaye knows his views are at odds with Catholic teaching. That's one reason he repeatedly attacks St. Augustine, claiming he "laid the foundation for destroying doctrinal integrity by introducing Catholic doctrines that have lasted until this day in a form of Christianized paganism — Christian in name, pagan in origin and practice. This never would have happened if they had continued to take the Bible literally, whenever the plain sense of Scripture made common sense."⁶ His being annoyed that a Catholic bishop actually taught Catholic doctrine is surprising; his implying that the "plain" sense of Scripture should be obvious to all — especially in books such as Revelation and Daniel — is laughable.

It's doubly laughable because of how much and how harshly rapturites often disagree among themselves. One of the long running debates within the movement is over the timing of the rapture. While most rapturites, like LaHaye, are pre-tribulationists (teaching that the rapture occurs prior to the seven-year tribulation), some are mid-tribulationists, claiming that believers will be raptured in the middle of the seven years. Others, called post-tribulationists, insist the rapture takes place at the end of the tribulation and is simultaneous with the Second Coming. And yet they all use the same passages of Scripture, especially those from Daniel and Revelation, to arrive at wildly different positions!

As for interpreting the Bible "literally," ask a rapturite to interpret John 6:50-58 or 1 Peter 3:21 literally. They will insist those passages, respectively addressing the Eucharist and baptism, are written metaphorically. But the book of Revelation — filled with images of a dragon, a multi-horned beast, locusts, bowls, trumpets, and Jesus with a sword coming out of his mouth — is meant to be interpreted literally?

This inconsistent reading of Scripture leads to a Gnostic-like division between Israel and the Church, much like the one proposed by the ancient arch-heretic Marcion. Dispensationalists insist that most of the Old Testament promises to Israel, especially of an earthly messianic kingdom, were never fulfilled and must be realized in the future. When Christ came, the dispensationalist believes, He offered an earthly kingdom to the Jews, but they rejected him, leaving the Messiah without a people to call His own.

But not to worry: God gave Jesus a new and spiritual people, the Church, and decided to take a break from the Jews for a while. In this scenario the Church is Plan B, a "parenthetical" insert into history. Compare that to the Catechism's declaration that "the world was created for the sake of the Church" (CCC 760)!

In this view, God would like to get back to business with the earthly people and fulfill all His outstanding promises. But He's been patient for the sake of Jesus' bride, the Church. Nevertheless, the proper time for this final business to take place, according to LaHaye and other rapturites, is now. (What a surprise: When

was the last time a “prophecy expert” said the end would come after the expert himself was dead?)

In order for God to fulfill His promises to Israel, He will need to remove the Church, the “heavenly people,” via the rapture. At that time the “prophetic clock,” which had suddenly stopped when the Jews rejected Jesus, will start ticking again, setting off a series of long-awaited events, including the tribulation, the battle of Armageddon, the Second Coming, the millennial reign, and then, finally — one thousand and seven years after the rapture — the start of eternity with God.

All this should make it clear that even though both rapturites and Catholics seek to interpret the Bible “literally,” they mean quite different things by that word. In the Catholic tradition, interpreting the Bible literally means to discover, by sound exegesis, what the original author intended (see CCC 115-1116). For rapturites it means discovering the meaning of present or future events at the expense of historical context.

A good example of this tendency is the rapturite belief that animal sacrifices will be renewed in the rebuilt temple in Israel during Christ’s earthly millennial reign. Although the Left Behind series hasn’t arrived there yet, no doubt the books will depict such activity. In his commentary *Revelation Unveiled*, LaHaye explains:

[The biblical book of] Ezekiel goes into great detail regarding the matter of worshipping in the Temple, even pointing out that the sacrificial systems will be reestablished. These sacrifices during the millennial Kingdom will be to the nation of Israel what the Lord’s Supper is to the Church today: a reminder of what they have been saved from. No meritorious or efficacious work will be accomplished through these sacrifices. Instead, they will remind Israel repeatedly of their crucified Messiah. . . . 7

Such an idea is at odds with Catholic teaching on several counts: What it says about Christ’s sacrifice and the Eucharist is faulty, and the Catholic Church has officially rejected the belief in a literal millennial reign of Christ on the earth (see CCC 676). But another glaring problem with LaHaye’s interpretation of Ezekiel chapters 40 through 48 is its inconsistent and disingenuous nature.

Just for starters, his literal interpretation assumes that the physical temple will be rebuilt and that sacrifices will be offered in it — yet he then insists that these offerings of dead critters are merely reminders of Christ’s death. But you won’t find any reference to “reminders” in Ezekiel. On the contrary, you’ll read about “sin offerings,” “burnt offerings,” and “peace offerings,” all sacrificed in order to have a right relationship with God. This is just one example of how the dispensational methods of interpreting Scripture are so often inconsistent, forced, and misleading.

The True Story of the Rapture

Speaking of misleading, did you know that the rapture as taught by LaHaye and others has been around for less than two centuries? The Left Behind series and LaHaye’s other books imply or directly claim that their version of the rapture comes from the Bible, was taught by some Christians in the early Church, and is a sign of true Christianity. But this claim is both wishful thinking and categorically false.

A few Protestant preach-ers in early America taught there would be a secret, invisible coming of Christ for true believers before the end of the world. Before that, a Jesuit from Chile wrote a book including a similar idea — though he believed that it would be a rapture of those Catholics who received Holy Communion regularly, and they would return to earth forty-five days later. (Not surprisingly, the Church didn’t embrace his teaching.) Nevertheless, the rapture doctrine in its current form only gained wide currency in America and Great Britain in the nineteenth century.

The true father of the dispensationalist system that promoted the rapture idea was a rabid anti-Catholic and ex-Anglican priest named John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Darby was a tireless, self-proclaimed reformer who spent his life preaching the rapture and condemning those who didn’t agree with him. Ordained as a priest in the Church of England while in his twenties, he spent some years preaching to Catholics, claiming that at one point he was converting about six hundred to eight hundred a week.

Darby became frustrated with the spiritual laxity of the Church of England and began teaching that “the Church is in ruins!” Christendom had failed, Darby said; Christianity was now being judged by God, and

only a “remnant” — Darby and his followers — would be saved. Based on his conviction that Jesus was “heavenly” (because He was rejected by the earthly people, the Jews) and had only a “heavenly people,” Darby developed a system that required two comings of Christ: the secret rapture of the Church and the public second coming of Christ with His saints. It was a radical break from historical and orthodox Christian views of the Church and the New Covenant — even the views of most Protestants of the time.

For several decades Darby traveled throughout Europe and to America spreading his brand of end time views. Although disappointed with his reception in America, he attained recognition there posthumously when one of his disciples, Cyrus I. Scofield, published the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. Meticulously based on Darby’s dispensational teachings and notes, it featured charts and authoritative-looking footnotes “scientifically” explaining the prophetic truths of Scripture. Within a few decades it had sold close to ten million copies, making it the most influential American fundamentalist book of all time. During the early 1900s the dispensational system made significant in-roads into Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist groups, as well as dozens of “non-denominational” congregations. Dispensational Bible colleges sprang up around the country. Most of the famous later Protestant revivalists in America such as Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham were serious dispensationalists.

When Israel became a nation in 1948, dispensationalists saw that event as the key sign of the times. With Israel restored as a nation, the time of the Church’s removal from earth had to be near. The 1967 conflict between Israel and Egypt further heightened expectations.

In 1970 a fundamentalist youth minister named Hal Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Americans gobbled up his dispensational-lite mix of apocalyptic rhetoric, prophetic mumbo-jumbo, and high-strung writing. It turned out to be the best-selling book of the 1970s, with around thirty million copies sold by 1990. People who didn’t know “dispensationalism” from “hypostatic union” were buying Lindsey’s books in truckloads.

Although the rapture didn’t occur in 1988 as he had hinted it might, Lindsey continued to churn out books, with other rapturites such as Jack van Impe, John Walvoord, John Hagee, and Grant Jeffrey hot on his heels. But Lindsey wasn’t dethroned from his unofficial status as Head Rapturite until LaHaye and Jenkins hit the big-time with their pulp rapture fiction.

The moral of the rapture history lesson? Bad theology leads to bad novels about the end of the world.

Catholics in the *Left Behind* Books

A Catholic recently told me he was bothered by my criticism of the *Left Behind* books. “You know,” he said, “they actually have the pope raptured. So they can’t be anti-Catholic.” I encouraged him to read the books more closely since the passage in question, found in *Tribulation Force* (Tyndale, 1996), is actually an example of how the Catholic faith suffers from cheap shots in the *Left Behind* series:

A lot of Catholics were confused, because while many remained, some had disappeared — including the new pope, who had been installed just a few months before the vanishings. He had stirred up controversy in the church with a new doctrine that seemed to coincide more with the “heresy” of Martin Luther than with the historic orthodoxy they were used to.⁸

Some folks might miss it, but the intent of the passage is obvious to this former Catholic-bashing fundamentalist: The new pope was secretly raptured despite being Catholic because he had embraced the views of Martin Luther and had, by virtue of this fact, renounced Catholic teaching. So those Catholics who reject the Catholic faith can be “saved” and raptured, with the logical conclusion being that Catholics who are loyal to the Church are not “saved,” are not true Christians, and will not be raptured.

Other examples abound. *Tribulation Force* depicts the leading Catholic character, the American Cardinal Matthews, as a greedy, power-hungry, biblically illiterate egomaniac, whose devious actions apparently are the result of the fact that he holds to “normal” Catholic beliefs and practices. He later becomes the new pope and then the head of an evil, one-world religion called Enigma One World Faith. He is called Pontifex Maximus Peter, and he declares war on anyone believing in the Bible. His anger is especially directed toward “true believers” who meet in small home churches.⁹

For those familiar with fundamentalist-speak, this is a not-so-subtle way of saying that non-denominational “Bible churches” are full of true Christians, while the Catholic Church is evil, anti-Christian,

and fully corrupt. Jenkins has insisted in interviews and on the Internet that since the focus of the books is mostly on Protestants, it's unfair to call the books anti-Catholic. However, I think it's more correct to say that the books condemn most everyone who denies belief in the rapture, whether Protestant or Catholic, but reserve special scorn for Catholics and the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Response: We Believe in the Real Rapture

Many Catholics are surprised to learn that rapturites commonly think the Catholic Church does not believe in the second coming of Christ. This is because most rapturites, oddly enough, equate the rapture with the Second Coming and cannot conceive of one without the other.

Whenever talking to rapturites, mention the Nicene Creed, recited at Mass each Sunday, which states that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." Tell them that if, by the word "rapture," they mean being "caught up" to Christ, then Catholics certainly believe in it. We believe it will take place at the Second Coming. Catholics affirm that this return of Christ for the Church may take place at any moment, when He will also judge all men and usher in His eternal kingdom (CCC 673-682). We also insist, as the Scripture teaches, that He will return only once, not twice.

Be sure to add that what Catholics believe on this issue is the same as the beliefs held by most mainline Protestant groups and by Eastern Orthodox churches as well. In their position on this subject, dispensationalists and other rapturites are actually a small, recent minority of Christians worldwide. It's not just another Catholic vs. Protestant disagreement; it's rapturites vs. all other Christians: Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and mainline Protestants. Even the founders of the major Protestant traditions, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley, didn't believe in a secret rapture.

Why Is This Idea So Popular?

If most Christians throughout history haven't believed in a secret rapture, why are the Left Behind books and rapturite beliefs so popular in America just now? I think there are several reasons.

One is fear: fear of a hostile world, of suffering, and of dying. LaHaye's Rapture Under Attack is subtitled Will You Escape the Tribulation? and contains (as do the novels) lengthy passages about the horror of God's judgment upon the world during the tribulation. This desire to escape an intense time of suffering is palpable among rapturites, as I know from personal experience.

In contrast, the Catholic Church teaches that Christians will go through a time of severe trial before the end of time (CCC 672-675, 769), just as Christ, the Head of the Church, endured suffering and death before His resurrection. This affirmation reveals one great flaw of the rapturite teaching: It minimizes martyrdom, the role of suffering, and the call of Christ for each of us to take up our cross.

Another reason for the popularity of rapturite teaching is the anger many fundamentalists have towards modern culture. They believe that they are God's heavenly people; they feel that they have been unfairly maligned by the secular culture (often true enough); and they long for God to vindicate them. Finally, they are Bible-believing folks who accept the teachings of Scofield, Lindsey, and LaHaye as reliable guides to Bible prophecy. They are usually unaware of the history behind the rapture; they oftentimes don't care.

All these elements in rapturite belief can be a potent brew, so helping rapturites find the truth is an immense challenge. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, our common prayer should be that of St. John, who concludes the book of Revelation with these words: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20).