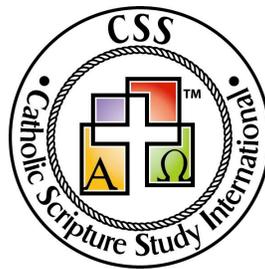


Will Catholics Be ‘Left Behind’?

*A Study by Carl E. Olson
Edited by Jennifer Phelps*



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Lesson 1

Will Catholics Be ‘Left Behind’?



The ‘Rapture’ and the Left Behind Books

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The authors of the best-selling *Left Behind* books claim that their fictional format conveys the meaning of the book of Revelation to modern-day readers. But that “meaning” is based on a belief system known as dispensational premillennialism, which teaches that the “Rapture” and the second coming of Jesus Christ are two events separated by a time of tribulation that will inaugurate a 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth. The idea has been around fewer than 200 years, and it’s built upon skewed understandings of the Church, the kingdom of God, and the end of the world. One of the central premises in this system of belief is the “Rapture”—the sudden snatching away of Christians from earth immediately prior to a time of tribulation. This study will look at many of the major questions raised by the *Left Behind* books, as well as examine why the books have achieved such widespread popularity.

One of the Author’s Early Encounters with *Left Behind* Thinking

Carl Olson grew up in a devout Fundamentalist Protestant home in western Montana. His father was a founding elder of a small Bible chapel, and the family attended services there several times a week. After college, Carl began a serious study of the history and teachings of the Catholic Church, and he became a Catholic in 1997. This is a snapshot from his youth.

It was the first week in August, and I was at junior-high Bible camp. The sun was setting over the lake at the close of a beautiful day. About 30 of us sat around a campfire. The camp leader, a guitar hanging from his shoulder, led us in songs and choruses as the logs popped and sparks flew. The last song was one I’d sung many times before: “I wish we’d all been ready. There’s no time to change your mind. The Son has come, and you’ve been left behind.”

“Do you know what the song is about?” the leader asked. He went on to tell us about the “Rapture.” “What if Jesus were to come back tonight?” he asked. “Would you go to meet Jesus in the air?” Afterwards he prayed and invited us to stand up if we’d made a decision for Jesus. “You don’t want to be left behind. This may be your only chance.”

'Left Behind' Lesson 1

Ken was one of the elders in our little church, along with my father and two other men. He was outgoing and friendly, with a great sense of humor. But he was very serious when it came to the “Rapture” and the approaching Tribulation. Many of his sermons explained the sequence of “end times” events, from the “Rapture” through a millennial kingdom. On the dashboard of his battered yellow truck was a faded sticker: “Warning: The Driver of This Vehicle May Vanish at Any Moment. Ride at Your Own Risk.”

Ken explained to me that the “Rapture” would cause great confusion. “Imagine how many car wrecks and airplane crashes there will be when Christians are taken up in the ‘Rapture,’” he remarked matter-of-factly. This image of chaos was further imprinted in my mind by a painting in our church library of a large city at the moment of the “Rapture.” The saved believers, clad in white, rose above the earth as driverless cars veered into one another, into buildings, and even into pedestrians. High above everything was Jesus, patiently waiting, fixed in an aura of brilliant white light.

One night our youth group watched a movie titled *The Thief In The Night*. It was about a man who hadn't been saved when the “Rapture” came, but after the disappearance of several friends he realizes his mistake and sees the horrible truth—he's experiencing the Tribulation. Because of this he becomes a Christian, but Christianity is punishable by death. Everyone's supposed to receive the “mark of the beast” on their forehead—otherwise, they cease to exist as far as the government is concerned. They're unable to have bank accounts, to be employed, or to buy food. The unfortunate man in the film is chased and persecuted for his belief in Jesus Christ.

After the movie we talked about how the “mark of the beast” will change people's lives. “It's coming soon,” the youth leader said. “I know the Lord will be returning in my lifetime because the Bible says so.”

Why aren't Catholics and Lutherans saved?” I asked my mother.

“There are many reasons,” she replied. “But one is that they don't believe in the book of Revelation. They deny that it's the Word of God. They believe it's only symbolic and has nothing to do with the ‘end times’.”

“But don't they have the same Bible we do?” I asked.

“Maybe,” she shrugged. “But they don't believe in it.”

Should the *Left Behind* Books Be Taken Seriously?

Years ago I mentioned to a Catholic friend that I was starting to work on a book critiquing the *Left Behind* novels. I explained that my book would examine dispensational premillennialism, the apocalyptic belief system presented, in fictional format, within those books. (Before that time, there hadn't been a single Catholic book written specifically dealing with this topic.) Dispensational premillennialism teaches that the “Rapture” and the second coming of Jesus

Christ are two events separated by a time of tribulation that will inaugurate a 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth. “Why?” she asked, obviously bewildered. “No one takes that stuff seriously.” That remark, and other conversations, reinforced my desire to write *Will Catholics Be “Left Behind”*? Far too many people—including a significant number of Catholics—don’t recognize the attraction and power of this fairly recent Fundamentalist phenomenon. Nor do they appear to appreciate how much curiosity exists about the “end times,” the book of Revelation, and the “Rapture”—the belief that Christians will be taken up from the earth prior to a time of tribulation and the second coming of Christ.

While writing the book, I encountered a number of questions and comments—almost all from Catholics—that indicate how much confusion exists about matters of eschatology (the branch of theology dealing with death, resurrection and judgment), not to mention ecclesiology, historical theology, and the interpretation of Scripture. I wonder how many copies of the *Left Behind* books must be sold before the fiction-based theology that they propagate will be considered a serious challenge to Catholicism and main-line Christian beliefs about the second coming of Jesus Christ—more than 60 million? That number actually is where sales stand as I write this, making the novels the biggest-selling series of Christian fiction ever (the series now consists of 13 books and at least two more are scheduled to be published). In addition to the books, there are the two movies, CDs, children’s books, devotionals, greeting cards, and a host of other products, along with a Web site that attracts hundreds of thousands of fans every month.

But that’s only part of the larger picture. The biggest-selling work of non-fiction (other than the Bible) since 1970 is dispensationalist Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which sold more than 40-million copies and established the blueprint followed by a number of other popular, self-described “biblical prophecy” experts (including Tim LaHaye, creator and co-author of the *Left Behind* series). LaHaye’s first work of “biblical prophecy” was *The Beginning of the End*, essentially a carbon copy of Lindsey’s mega-seller. In the years that followed, Lindsey and LaHaye, along with authors such as Salem Kirban, David Wilkinson, Dave Hunt, Grant Jeffrey, John Walvoord, and others, produced a string of best-selling books warning of the rapidly approaching “Rapture,” the Antichrist, and the Tribulation.

The success of these books indicates that belief in the “Rapture” has become mainstream, influencing even nominal Christians and non-Christians. While Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians dwindle in number and influence, Fundamentalist and conservative Evangelical groups continue to grow, increasing their secular influence. A majority of these Fundamentalists—including “non-denominational” Christians, “born-again” Christians, Baptists, and members of the Assembly of God churches—believe in some form of dispensational premillennialism, and some are antagonistic toward the Catholic Church.

Harvard historian Paul Boyer, author of *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, estimates that as many as 40 percent of Americans believe in “biblical prophecy” and hold to eschatological beliefs such as those propagated in the *Left Behind* novels. Admittedly, such numbers are nearly impossible to verify. Still, it safely can be said that tens of millions of Americans believe in the “Rapture” and would readily accept the *Left Behind* books as presenting a fairly accurate, fictionalized depiction of the fast-approaching end of the world.

The ‘Rapture’ According to *Left Behind* and Similar Books

In LaHaye’s *Left Behind* novels and related books by other authors, the “Rapture” is described as the sudden removal of Christians (or “true believers”) from the earth who are caught up to meet Jesus in the air. The most commonly accepted dispensationalist scenario is that the “Rapture” and the second coming of Jesus Christ are separated by a period of seven years. Grant Jeffrey, a best-selling “prophecy teacher” from Canada, explains that dispensationalists believe that Jesus Christ will first return to catch up his saints in the “Rapture” and then return again to the earth with all of his saints at the battle of Armageddon. In *Prince of Darkness: Antichrist and the New World Order*, Jeffrey writes that the “Rapture” will “occur without warning at some point in time before the events of the Tribulation period.”

Lindsey, in his book *The Rapture*, explains that “the word ‘rapture’ means to snatch away or take away. But whether we call this event ‘the Rapture’ or the ‘translation’ makes no difference—the important thing is that it will happen. It will happen! Someday, a day that God only knows, Jesus Christ is coming to take away all those who believe in Him. He is coming to meet all true believers in the air.” Lindsey goes on to caution that this coming of Christ in the clouds mustn’t be confused with the second coming of Jesus Christ: “All who interpret the Bible in a literal sense believe in the fact of the Rapture and that it is distinct from the second coming of Christ.” Lindsey’s beliefs are identical with those presented by LaHaye in the *Left Behind* series.

The Mission of *Left Behind*

LaHaye and his co-author, Jerry Jenkins, have made it clear that the *Left Behind* books were written to provide their interpretation of *The Revelation to John* (the Apocalypse), which they believe outlines events that will take place in the very near future. In an interview with Larry King on June 19, 2000, 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 dispensational biblical interpretation. Jenkins said that LaHaye gives him “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.” Jenkins added that when the two cover these predicted biblical events, “we try to tell those exactly the way we see them coming down.”

In his introduction to *The Truth Behind Left Behind*, written by Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, LaHaye states: “The God who gave me the idea for a work of fiction based on the facts of future Bible prophecy and led me to partner with Jerry has chosen to bless the series beyond our wildest dreams.” He adds: “Sold in 37 countries around the world, these books have helped countless believers and unbelievers alike to understand the wonderful plan God has for their future . . . and the future of all mankind.” In an interview printed in *Pentecostal Evangel* magazine, LaHaye boasts that “*Left Behind* is the first fictional portrayal of events that are true to the literal interpretation of Bible prophecy. It was written for anyone who loves gripping fiction featuring believable characters, a dynamic plot that also weaves prophetic events in a fascinating story.” Although lacking in modesty, the authors clearly believe that their novels are far more than just entertaining works of popular fiction.

Even when presented with the faulty theological premises underlying belief in the “Rapture,” some Catholics still insist that the *Left Behind* series is just good fun—light reading with a sound moral message. Some, however, go even further and claim the books have changed their lives, provided answers about the end of the world, and made sense of the Bible—particularly the book of Revelation. One Catholic reader of the series criticized me for condemning the books “because they’re successful.” The fact is that I’ve strongly critiqued the *Left Behind* books because they’re written by an author with serious animosity toward the Catholic Church who’s propagating a theology that’s incorrect, misleading, and at odds with historic Christianity.

The *Left Behind* Theologian

LaHaye, a graduate of Bob Jones University, is a Fundamentalist pastor, author, and speaker who’s been well-known since the 1970s. He’s pastored a mega-church in San Diego, founding Family Life Seminars and the PreTrib Research Center. He’s written non-fiction books on marriage, sexuality, and personal growth, many co-authored with his wife Beverly. Some of these titles include *How To Win Over Depression*, *The Act of Marriage*, *Spirit Controlled Living*, *How To Be Happy Though Married*, and *Anger Is a Choice*. LaHaye published his first work of “biblical prophecy” in 1972, *The Beginning of the End: Amazing Fulfillment of Prophecy Tells Earth’s Future*.

A year later he published *Revelation: Illustrated and Made Simple*, a commentary with a heavy dose of anti-Catholic rhetoric. It’s since been republished as *Revelation Unveiled*. In 2001, the Tim LaHaye School of Prophecy was founded in conjunction with Liberty University, a dispensationalist Bible school founded by Jerry Falwell and located in Lynchburg, Virginia. Falwell and LaHaye co-founded the Moral Majority in the 1980s. LaHaye is now in his late 70s.

As an infant, LaHaye was baptized in the Catholic Church; shortly thereafter his father became a “born-again” Christian and turned against Catholicism. LaHaye, who believes that most (if not all) Catholics aren’t Christian, frequently refers to Catholicism as “Babylon idolatrous religion.” In writing about the Catholic Church, LaHaye rarely provides any citations or sources. Those he does use are heavily biased and based on dubious “facts.” He relies heavily on Alexander Hislop’s *The Two Babylons* (1853-8), a vile anti-Catholic polemic whose numerous errors have been exposed by Evangelical and Catholic scholars.

***Left Behind* and the Catholic Church**

Themes that clearly come across in LaHaye’s works include his ideas that the Catholic Church is apostate (has abandoned the Christian faith), that Catholicism is “Babylonian mysticism” and an “idolatrous religion,” and that Catholics worship Mary but know very little about Jesus Christ. It’s difficult to overstate the dislike—even hatred—LaHaye has for the Church or to exaggerate the ridiculous character of his attacks. He condemns the use of candles in Catholic churches, insists there’s hardly any difference between Hinduism and Catholicism, and emphatically declares that the Catholic Church killed at least 40-million people during the Dark Ages (the medieval period from about 450 to 1450 A.D.).

'Left Behind' Lesson 1

When I questioned LaHaye, via e-mail, about why he never refers to Catholic sources or to official Church documents in his writings, he replied: "Because I think that for centuries the Catholic Church has presented church history in a manner protective of 'Mother church.' . . . I have seen more concern on the part of your church for Hindus, Buddhists, and other pagan religions than they do [sic] for those who love Jesus Christ as He is presented in the Bible and are committed to making Him known to the lost so they will not be Left Behind."

In other words, the Catholic Church simply is wrong and doesn't deserve a fair hearing. LaHaye not only has revealed himself to be an anti-Catholic polemicist—he's also shown himself to be a theologian with a seriously skewed view of God's salvific work. In a newspaper interview, LaHaye is quoted as saying that he and Jenkins have "created a series of books about the greatest cosmic event that will happen in the history of the world." What is this "greatest cosmic event"? The Incarnation? The Cross? The Resurrection? No, LaHaye is referring to the "Rapture"—a modern, man-made belief based on a distorted understanding of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Left Behind and the Bible

Some people believe that the Left Behind books help people to better understand the Bible. According to contemporary Christian music star Michael Smith, the Left Behind series has brought understanding and clarity to the book of Revelation, "usually seen as confusing and dark." This echoes LaHaye's assertion that the book of Revelation "gives a detailed description of the future." A perusal of dispensationalist interpretations written over the last several decades suggests otherwise. Dispensationalists disagree about nearly every major element of the final book of the New Testament, including the identity of the "whore of Babylon" (a reformed Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, Iraq, the United States) and the "mark of the beast" (computer chips, bar codes, Social Security numbers, laser technology).

More importantly, dispensationalists pay little attention to the rich Old Testament allusions or to the 1st-century context of the book of Revelation. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on the modern world. In *There's a New World Coming*, Lindsey proffers that the book of "Revelation is written in such a way that its meaning becomes clear with the unfolding of current world events." Considering that none of Lindsey's interpretations of the book's prophetic utterances has come to pass over the past 30 years—including his conviction that the "Rapture" would occur in the 1980s—one can only wonder at Lindsey's unflagging confidence. Futurists always have been prone to read current events into the book of Revelation's mysterious passages, and prophetic speculators of the past connected it to the French Revolution, the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the founding of the modern Israeli state in 1948. More recent events that supposedly shed light on the apostle John's prophetic vision include the Cold War, the Persian Gulf War, and the conflict with terrorism and Iraq.

The appeal of the "Rapture" is understandable. The idea that those living today are "the generation" of people who will see Jesus Christ's return is attractive and intoxicating. "My prophetic studies have convinced me," LaHaye writes in *Rapture Under Attack*, "that we Christians living today have more evidence to believe we are the generation of His coming than any generation before us." It's no surprise that many people want to hear that they won't have to

die. Such promises of escape from suffering, illness, pain, and potential martyrdom are tempting, but they aren't an option for Catholic Christians. Each person will endure suffering, and the Church will, one day, have to endure a final, great trial. Paragraph 677 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection." The "Rapture" and other ideas that form the basis for the *Left Behind* books, in the end, are long on promises and short on biblical, historical, and theological evidence.

Study Questions

1. The *Left Behind* books promote a theology or belief system known as dispensational premillennialism. What is dispensational premillennialism?
2. How important is it, do you think, for Catholic Christians to know about the beliefs promoted by the *Left Behind* books? Do you think that most Catholics have a tendency to overestimate or to underestimate the influence of those books and beliefs?
3. What do you think that the popularity of the *Left Behind* books and similar literature indicates about our culture and about spiritual hunger?
4. What is eschatology (see the glossary with this study or the glossary in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)?
5. According to the authors of the *Left Behind* series and similar books, how are the "Rapture" and the second coming of Jesus Christ related?

Questions for Reflection

1. Describe the first time you heard about the “Rapture.” What did you think it meant?
2. What has been your belief about the “end times”? What or who has influenced your views?
3. Tell about your experiences discussing Catholic teachings about the “end times” with friends or family members.

Catechism Connections

- CCC 659 teaches about the irreversible entry of Jesus’ humanity into divine glory. For information about how Christians are to follow where he leads, see CCC 661.
- Catholics are urged to continue to pray, above all in the Eucharist, to hasten Christ’s return. To learn why, see CCC 671.
- To find out more about how the second coming of Jesus Christ may occur at any moment, see CCC 673.
- CCC 1002 and 1003 teach that, in a certain way, Catholics already have risen with Christ by virtue of the Holy Spirit” through Baptism and participation in the Eucharist.

Supplemental Reading

Read chapters one and two of *Will Catholics Be “Left Behind”?* by Carl E. Olson (Ignatius Press). Also see the following related books:

A Basic Guide to Eschatology—Millard J. Erickson (Baker Book House)

City of God—St. Augustine (Doubleday)

Darby, Dualism, and the Decline of Dispensationalism—Ronald M. Henzel (Fenestra Books)

Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life—Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI (Catholic University of America Press)

Scandal of the Evangelical Mind—Mark Noll (William B. Eerdmann Co.)

The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times—Richard Kyle (Baker Book House)

The Pursuit of the Millennium —Norman Cohn (Harper Torchbooks)

When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture—Paul Boyer (Harvard University Press)

Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. The authors of the best-selling *Left Behind* books claim that their fictional format conveys the meaning of The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) to modern-day readers, but that “meaning” is based on a belief system that promotes the idea of the “Rapture.”
2. Known as dispensational premillennialism, the belief system underlying the *Left Behind* series teaches that the “Rapture” and the second coming of Jesus Christ are two events separated by a time of tribulation that will inaugurate a 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth.
3. The idea of the “Rapture” has been around fewer than 200 years, and it’s built upon skewed understandings of the Church, the kingdom of God, and the end of the world.
4. The success of the *Left Behind* books indicates that belief in the “Rapture” has become mainstream, influencing even nominal Christians and non-Christians.
5. Many of those who believe in some form of dispensational premillennialism are antagonistic toward the Catholic Church.
6. In LaHaye’s *Left Behind* novels, the “Rapture” is described as a sudden removal of Christians from the earth who are caught up to meet Jesus in the air.
7. The authors of the *Left Behind* series admit that the books are written to provide their interpretation of the book of Revelation, which they believe outlines events that will take place in the very near future.
8. Themes that clearly come across in the *Left Behind* series and other works by Tim LaHaye include his ideas that the Catholic Church is apostate, that Catholicism is an “idolatrous religion,” and that Catholics worship Mary but know very little about Jesus Christ.
9. Dispensationalists pay little attention to the rich Old Testament allusions or the 1st-century context of the book of Revelation.
10. None of dispensational Hal Lindsey’s interpretations of the book of Revelation’s prophetic utterances has come to pass over the past 30 years—including that the “Rapture” would occur in the 1980s.

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