

LEFT BEHIND

I Thessalonians 4: 1, 13-18

The Rev. Ernest O. Martin
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As a child, were you ever left behind in a restaurant, supermarket, department store, or park? Three of my six children can tell you of such incidents. To cut down on these traumatic events, we adopted the practice of counting off before we drove anywhere in the car.

It's terrifying to be lost, separated, or left behind. The horror of such an experience may account for the remarkable appeal of the "Left Behind" series of 12 novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The 12 books have had sales of 60 million copies, and have been translated and sold throughout the world. Have you been one of the more than 100 million readers? If so, what was it that drew you to the books? Did you identify with those people left behind, or were you gratified to be among those caught up in "the rapture", and embraced by a loving God?

I suppose most of us take it for granted that we will be among "the saved." After all, we are good, law-abiding citizens who accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and we are more or less regular in our church attendance.

The 12 novels are based on the Book of Revelation, and the account of Jesus' return to redeem the faithful, and to transport them to heaven. The title of the series, "Left Behind," comes from those who are not saved, and who are left behind to be destroyed by God.

Christian theology of the first century was built around the belief in the speedy return of the Lord. Early Christians assumed that all who accepted him and received the Spirit would take part in the blessed event. But time passed, and the Lord did not come! No trumpet of God sounded. They were still being oppressed and harried. They were victims of the inevitable scoffing of the pagans and Jews around them, who ridiculed the Christian hope. Why did the Lord not come, when the need was so great? And what would happen to members of their community who had died? Would they have a glorious resurrection and become part of the new age?

The Apostle Paul addressed these questions in his Letter to the Thessalonians: "We want you not to remain in ignorance, brothers, about those who sleep in death; you should not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again; and so it will be for those who died as Christians; God will bring them to life with Jesus. For this we tell you as the Lord's work: we who are left alive until the Lord comes shall not forestall those who have died; because at the word of command, at the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet-call, the Lord himself will descend from heaven; first the Christian dead will rise, then we who are left alive shall join them, caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord."

Paul was convinced that Jesus would return during his (Paul's) lifetime. He hoped personally to present to God the members of the churches he had formed. He was wrong in this and changed his views as the years passed. Still hoping for the coming, he was forced to accept the possibility that death might cut him down before his hope was fulfilled.

The early Christians were persecuted by the Roman officials for their refusal to worship the emperors, both living and dead, as gods, and to worship Roma, the personification of Rome, as a goddess. To give hope to the early church, the Book of Revelation was written and circulated among the churches. The book was in the form of apocalyptic literature, which means a vision or revelation of things to come. It was a short book, about 25 pages in modern publications, with 22 chapters. The essence of Revelation was the conviction that the power of evil would be overcome by the direct intervention of God, who would create an entirely new, perfect, and eternal age under his control for the everlasting enjoyment of his righteous followers from among the living and the resurrected dead. This theme was common among the Jewish, Christian, Persian, and Mohammedan cultures. The Book of Revelation was accepted as part of the Christian Bible in the year 367.

The Bible as we know it today consists of 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. It includes mythology, history, poetry, prophecy, biography, letters, and visions of things to come. It was not until the invention of the printing press that the Bible became more available to the

public at large, and it was translated into native languages. With the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, the Bible came under attack from the scientific community. Swedenborg, a scientist and mystic, proclaimed that the Bible should not be seen as a science textbook, but it was a spiritual guide, and written with an inner or spiritual meaning. Protestants declared that the Bible was the inspired Word of God, and that every word was to be interpreted literally. Through a study of Bible genealogy, Archbishop Usher determined that the world was created in six days, in 4004 B.C. A Nova TV program last week proclaimed that the world is billions of years old. Take your pick: creationism or evolution.

In the 19th century, Christian Fundamentalism emerged in the United States, as a response to what was viewed as the deterioration of the Protestant faith. Tension developed between the seminaries of the main-line denominations, and people back home in the pews. Students for ministry were taught to view the Bible critically, and in the light of 2,000 years of church history and scientific advance. Swedenborgianism and Unitarianism developed in the northeast of our country, in the early 1800's, and they spoke out against many of the orthodox doctrines of Christianity, including the vicarious atonement, that Jesus died as a substitute for us, to spare us divine punishment. They also declared that the stories of creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, etc. were not historical. Twenty-second and Chestnut Street in Philadelphia was labeled "Heretics' Corner", where the Swedenborgian Church and the Unitarian Church stood side by side.

Today the Swedenborgian Church is part of the National Council of Churches, and our contribution is respected by the main-line Christian Churches. However, there is a great divide within Christianity, as was evidenced in the recent federal elections. Much of the credit for the Republican victory has gone to the evangelical or born-again Christians who turned out in record numbers to support the candidates whom they believed shared their moral values, i.e. were against abortion and gay marriage.

There is a growing polarization between main-line Protestants and the right wing Fundamentalists or conservatives. And there is also division within Christian churches, as evidenced by efforts of the world-wide Anglican

Church to separate itself from the Episcopal Church in the U.S., because of the U.S. Church's action in consecrating a gay priest as a Bishop.

I point to the 60 million copies of the "Left Behind" series of novels as further indication of the polarization. These novels claim to be based on the Bible, with the focus on the rapture, where Christ would return and sweep up the faithful into heaven, and then destroy everyone else. There are the saved and the damned, and between them is a great gulf fixed.

Polls show that 17% of Americans believe that the Lord will come again, during their lifetimes, to put an end to history. I have spoken of the belief of Paul and the early Christians that the Lord's return was imminent. A number of Christian Churches, including the Millerites, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses set dates for the Second Coming of Christ, ranging from 1874 to 1918 to 1975. Nostradamus is said to have predicted the year 1999. Psychics and astrologers have had other dates.

The language of the Left Behind novels is strong: Jesus appears on a white horse, where "he eviscerates the flesh of millions of unbelievers merely by speaking. ...Men and women, soldiers and horses, seemed to explode where they stood." The unbelievers? "Their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted and their tongues disintegrated." New York Times columnist David Kirkpatrick observes that "the gentle, pacifist Jesus of the Crucifixion now shares the spotlight with a more muscular warrior Jesus of the Second Coming, the Lamb making way for the Lion." Church historian Martin E. Marty calls the Left-Behind Lord "the Rambo Jesus."

Speaking of the Second Coming, Jesus said: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, or the Son, but the Father only... Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker: "Warning: In case of the rapture, the driver of this car will disappear." Other stickers say: "When the rapture comes, can I have your car?"

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor remembers one of her professors saying, "The truth is that Christ comes again

and again and again—that God has placed no limit on coming to the world, but is always on the way to us, here and now. The only thing we are required to do is to notice—to keep our eyes peeled.”

Tyndale Press claims that millions of people have been converted through the Left-Behind novels, although one critic failed to find a single convert who traces her or his conversion to the books. The same claim is also made of the film on the Passion of the Christ.

One reviewer says that the Left-Behind novels suggest “a more exciting life than most of us lead, a life full of mystery, intrigue, and moral certainty...It suggests that the now invisible divide between the righteous and the wicked will be revealed.”

I am disturbed by the crude literal interpretation of the Bible which is the basis of the novels, which pictures the faithful being whisked up into the sky to meet God, and then are transported to some materialistic heaven. If the Lord appears over Jerusalem, will I be able to see him in Seattle, given a spherical earth?

The nature of God portrayed in the literalistic Second Coming is even more disturbing. Stephen Koke, author of “Hidden Millennium: The Doomsday Fallacy”, sees the reigning picture of God as very Judaic—“God as jealous and vengeful, even merciless and by implication self-centered, not the loving God we know.” Where is the God of love and compassion who told us we were to love one another, including our enemies?

Swedenborg said that the Second Coming of Christ is a spiritual coming, into the lives of each one of us, as we open ourselves to his presence. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is within, not up in the sky somewhere, among the planets. When we experience love of one another, we experience the presence of God, in the innermost being of our souls.

God grants us the freedom to choose, and minds to use in making wise and informed decisions. May we employ our God-given capacities to support one another in our spiritual growth and development, in service to the neighbor all our days, without fear of either being whisked skyward or destroyed.