

Concerning the coming  
of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and our being gathered  
to him... 2 Thess. 2:1

A Lutheran Response  
to the “Left Behind” Series



A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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# A Lutheran Response to the *Left Behind* Series

## Introduction\*

A provocative interpretation of the book of Revelation, indeed of the entire Bible, was offered in 1995 when Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins published *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*. At the start of this book, on a 747 bound for London's Heathrow Airport from Chicago, the flight attendants suddenly find half the seats empty, except for the clothes, wedding rings and dental fillings of Christians who had been suddenly swept up to heaven. Down on the ground cars begin crashing, spouses wake up to find only bedclothes next to them, and all children under twelve disappear as well. The pilot of the 747—Rayford Steele—soon comes to the sickening realization that the rapture has just occurred. Elsewhere, Pastor Bruce Barnes and his church secretary, Loretta, both of whom are also left behind, quickly realize what is going on. The next eleven books in the series (with the final book, *Glorious Appearing*, released in March 2004) chronicle the tribulations suffered by those left behind and their struggle to survive as they seek to spread the Gospel of Christ to a dying world. At the same time, the books unfold like disaster movies, from car crashes and

\* In a September 27, 2002 memo to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, President Gerald Kieschnick reported "a growing concern in our church about the impact that the popular *Left Behind* series of books is having on people today, including members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod." After sharing his conviction that "this is a legitimate concern and that some attention needs to be given to the matter," the President requested that "the Commission review this topic and prepare a statement on it that will be helpful to our people as they exercise discernment when reading such literature."

This document is the Commission on Theology and Church Relations' response to this assignment from the President. It is the Commission's hope that this report will help LCMS pastors, teachers and professional church workers to familiarize themselves with the theological presuppositions of the *Left Behind* literature, review "what Lutherans believe" about the end times, and respond to questions from members, students, prospective members, and others about this series. The document could easily be adapted for use in a Bible class or discussion group for those who wish to investigate this topic in a more in-depth manner. The Commission has attempted to prepare this document in a way that also makes it readable and accessible to lay people (both Lutheran and non-Lutheran) who are familiar with the *Left Behind* series and have questions about its compatibility with the teachings of Scripture. For easy reference, a basic glossary listing some technical "end times" terms is provided at the end of the document.

pandemonium initially caused by the rapture itself to the subsequent worldwide “Wrath of the Lamb Earthquake,” oceans of blood, fiery hailstones, World War III and war in the Middle East—all leading up to Armageddon. According to LaHaye and Jenkins these novels, with their fictionalized accounts of the rapture and the rise of the Antichrist during the subsequent seven-year tribulation, reflect the true teaching of the Bible.

By serializing the tribulations of the book of Revelation the *Left Behind* novels have become the all-time best-selling Christian fictional series. A visit to [www.leftbehind.com](http://www.leftbehind.com) reveals (among other things) an encouragement to view two *Left Behind* full length movies, buy a CD entitled “Left Behind Worship: God is With Us” and purchase “Left Behind”—a board game. The website also offers for sale *Left Behind: The Kids Series*. It is estimated that Tyndale Publishing House has sold over 55 million copies of the *Left Behind* books.

In these unsettling times when absolute truth claims are an increasingly rare commodity in Western culture, the *Left Behind* appeal to certain future events offers an anchor. In the midst of increasing threats of terrorism and chaos, millions of people are looking to these novels to provide answers to some of today’s most pressing questions. Where are the events in the Middle East finally taking us? Will there be an all-out worldwide nuclear war? And what about the predictions of an all-out social, environmental and economic meltdown? Through their interaction with these books many people believe they have discovered answers to these questions, as well as comfort, strength and inspiration for Christian living. They are offered the assurance that God is at work in the world, judgment is coming and Christ will return soon.

To be sure, these books have heightened awareness of such end-time topics as the millennium, the rapture, the Antichrist and Armageddon. Yet the ideas expressed in the *Left Behind* series are in many ways contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture. Though containing a fictional story line, the books promote a theology that is, in important respects, at odds with the biblical revelation.

## General Response

This response to the *Left Behind* series does not attempt to deal with every detail in the books themselves, nor does it attempt to address every theological issue raised in them (e.g., conversion, sacramental theology, Christology, etc.). Rather, it focuses on the theological framework that underlies the series. This framework is outlined in the companion book to these novels, also written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and titled *Are We Living in the End Times? Current Events Foretold in Scripture...and What They Mean* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1999). This book makes it clear that the doctrinal foundation for *Left Behind* is premillennial dispensationalism, a system of theology that divides history into seven dispensations with the final era being a 1000-year earthly reign of Christ.

When the first-century church was faced with uncertainty and confusion regarding the end times, the apostle Paul demonstrates his pastoral concern in the words, “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy ...” (2 Thess 2:1–2). Paul then goes on to provide apostolic counsel to the Thessalonians, concluding his discussion with these words: “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word” (2 Thess 2:16–17). In this same spirit, the present investigation seeks to address the current confusion over end time issues so that Christians may be encouraged and strengthened in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The goal is to bring a scriptural and Christ-centered witness, and to clarify end times details so that the biblical teaching of Christ’s Second Coming might bring true peace, comfort and joy to those who trust in Christ.

It may be helpful at the outset to identify certain aspects of the general theological orientation of the *Left Behind* series. First of all, the central theological focus in the *Left Behind* series appears to be less on the person and work of Christ as such, and more on certain historical events and developments that the authors believe will unfold in the “last days” as they are depicted in the prophetic writings of Scripture. It is certainly appro-

priate to examine the “end times” teachings of Scripture. But it is important to do so in light of the central teaching of Scripture, which is justification by grace through faith in the historical person and work of Jesus Christ. Second, when the *Left Behind* series does give attention to the person and work of Christ, it does not consistently maintain a central focus (as do the Holy Scriptures) on the completed and fully sufficient work of Christ accomplished through His suffering on the cross, His atoning death, and His resurrection on behalf of all people. Rather, the central Christological focus of the *Left Behind* series is on Christ’s future, unfinished work—namely, the second (and third, and even fourth) coming(s) of Christ. As a result, the novels tend to emphasize God’s power, sovereignty, wrath and judgment far more prominently than they do God’s mercy and grace, patience and forgiveness for sinners offered through Jesus Christ.

It is true, of course, that God’s Law must be proclaimed clearly and fully alongside the Gospel. But the underlying thrust of *Left Behind’s* story line tends to shift the central focus of the Law away from the ultimate and all-important judgment of eternal separation from God in hell as a result of sin to the threat of facing earthly suffering, horror and tribulation at the hands of the Antichrist. Accordingly, it shifts the focus of the Gospel away from the free and incomparable gift of forgiveness and peace with God in Christ now and forever to the hope of being delivered from earthly sufferings and tribulation through the rapture of the church.

Although the fictional characters in the book that come to faith in Christ after being “left behind” certainly cling to the hope of eternal salvation, the fundamental and non-fictional message of the books is analogous to the Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory where intense suffering is experienced before entering into eternal life. Put another way, the *Left Behind* message may be construed as saying: “Don’t be left behind. Accept Christ now so you will not have to endure the terrible earthly suffering and tribulation to come.” This different center of theology, along with its different understanding of Law and Gospel, has profound implications for how Christians view the hope of Christ’s Second Coming, bear witness to their faith and live out their lives in this world. To offer just one example, in *Left Behind* trusting God for the future is often overshadowed and outweighed by a curiosity to know the details of that future, thus diminishing the apostolic counsel, “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7).

# Specific Issues

## The Rapture and Millennium

The first person to propose the end time scenario adopted by *Left Behind* was an Anglican priest turned traveling evangelical preacher named John Nelson Darby. Darby arrived in the United States from England in 1862 for the first of seven visits, bearing his new understanding of Christ's Second Coming. Darby and minister Cyrus Scofield, who would expand the evangelist's ideas in the influential *Scofield Reference Bible*, divided God's relationship with people into seven ages, or dispensations (the current sixth era began with the death of Jesus). Their vision included a rapture in which Christians will be snatched up to heaven before the beginning of an increasingly hellish seven-year tribulation (see "Diagrams of Millennial Views" in the Appendix at the end of this report).

Prior to Darby's influence, most Christians understood the "rapture" as an event that would happen simultaneously with the final resurrection and the end of the age. Yet Darby uniquely repositioned it to take place at the end of the era of the church and just before the tribulation. He then taught that at the end of seven years of tribulation Christ would return and defeat the Antichrist and commence the seventh dispensation—the millennium, a 1000-year glorious reign on earth.

Triggering the events that lead to Christ's 1000-year reign is the rapture. The term "rapture" comes from the expression "caught up" in 1 Thess 4:17: "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." The idea, according to *Left Behind*, is that the coming of Christ will occur in several phases. The first phase will be Christ's imminent return for believers to "rapture" his church. All Christians (along with all infants and children who have not reached the age of discretion) will meet Christ in the air. Those who are alive at the time will be immediately transferred and taken to the heavenly mansions that Christ has prepared for them.

Accordingly, this rapture of the church means that Christians will not be on earth at the start of the tribulation period because with the rapture God has ended the church age and has resumed dealing with Jews, specifically the nation of Israel. The church is also raptured to keep Christians from the wrath of God that will be poured out during this tribulation. Then, after seven years, Christ will come to end the tribulation and begin

the seventh dispensation: the Savior's 1000-year reign on earth in which Christians will reign with Christ from his capital in Jerusalem. The *Left Behind* literature distinguishes this rapture and the inauguration of the millennial reign by referring to the former as "the blessed hope" of Titus 2:13a and to the latter as "the glorious appearing" of Titus 2:13b.

Prior to 1830 (the advent of Darby's teachings) there is no indication that any Christian church embraced this pre-tribulation "secret" rapture doctrine. Rather, up until then Christians believed that Jesus would come again visibly at some undisclosed time to judge—once and for all—the living and the dead. This is what is affirmed in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. These statements of faith do not teach a two-stage coming of Christ as do the proponents of the *Left Behind* series—a coming first "for his saints," and later "with his saints." According to the historic creeds there will be one final eschatological event: the second and final coming of Christ. The rapture and the Second Coming are equated and are therefore synonymous. At this moment in history, not just Christians but *all* of humanity will respond to the Savior. Christ's exaltation will mean, says Paul, "...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10–11).

Moreover, the *Left Behind* series presents the rapture as an event that is not initially understood by all (or even most) people. But there is no biblical evidence of a secret rapture. The context of Paul's teaching in 1 Thess 4:17 (quoted above) is important, for in 1 Thess 4:16 the apostle writes: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." The "loud command," "voice of the archangel," and "trumpet call" indicate that when Christians are "caught up together with them in the clouds" (1 Thess 4:17) the overwhelming sounds will be heard by all people. Put another way, Christians will not be the only ones who experience the event of being "caught up" because the command, voice and trumpet in 1 Thess 4:16 indicate that it will not be secret. Jesus confirms this when he says in Mt 24:30: "...all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky...." At least five more biblical passages from Daniel to Revelation affirm that He is coming with clouds and that *every* eye will see Him (Dan 7:13; Lk 21:27; Mk 14:62; Acts 1:11; Rev 1:7). There is therefore no evidence that Scripture teaches a secret rapture.

Nor does the book of Revelation teach a pre-tribulation rapture of Christians. Instead, it teaches that God will preserve His people in the face of persecution and suffering (Rev 3:10; 14:12). Additionally, since Christ will resurrect all believers and unbelievers on Judgment Day, Revelation states that there will be no second chance for repentance (Rev 11:18; 20:11–15).

The *Left Behind* understanding of the rapture tends to foster a dangerous “wait and see” attitude. That is to say, non-Christian readers of the series might conclude that if millions of Christians suddenly disappear, then—and only then—will they repent and believe in Jesus. Before that they might “take their chances,” believing that they will get a second opportunity during the Seven Year Tribulation. However, Jesus states in Mt 25:10: “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.” This “shut door” indicates that there will be no salvation offered after the one-time Second Advent of our Lord.

The *Left Behind* series causes more confusion when it promotes the idea that there is not just one return of Christ (the rapture), nor two (Christ’s appearing to usher in his 1000-year rule), but three comings of Christ. The last advent, it teaches, will be at the end of the millennial reign or the Great White Throne Judgment of Rev 20:11–15.

However, when discussing these events the Bible uniformly uses singular nouns. We find, for example, “time” not times in Dan 12:1–2; “the hour” not hours in Jn 5:28–29; “day” not days in Acts 17:31; and “a resurrection” not resurrections in Acts 24:15. In other words, “the rapture,” “the blessed hope,” “the glorious appearing” and “the final judgment” are terms that designate one event: Christ’s Second Coming. There is but one future hope for the church, the bodily return of Jesus Christ. This will be the end of history on this earth as we know it, not the beginning of a glorious, earthly kingdom.

## Israel and the Church

An important component of the LaHaye/Jenkins manner of biblical interpretation is their belief that God will reestablish an earthly kingdom with the nation of Israel. These authors believe that by crucifying Jesus the Jews rejected the earthly kingdom offered to them, but God did not reject the Jews.

*Left Behind* assumes that because this kingdom was offered to (and then refused by) the Jews, it will be offered again in the future. In what way? The Old Testament prophecies of the restoration of national Israel to the land in the last days will be fulfilled literally. The series of books is built upon the belief that the promise of returning to the land was fulfilled with Israel’s re-birth as a nation in 1948. At that time the prophetic fuse was relit and now history is racing toward the end, and at an accelerated pace. For this reason the current events in the nation of Israel are of vital importance for followers of the *Left Behind* series.

So what about the church? According to *Left Behind*, as an alternate plan or as a parenthesis, Christ established the church because Gentiles believed what the Jews rejected. This is the “Church Age,” or sixth dis-

pensation, and it must end with the rapture before God can re-establish His primary work with the Jews and bring about the culmination of history—the seventh dispensation, Christ’s reign on earth.

A biblically based response to the future of the Jews, however, is to join the apostle Paul in his earnest prayer for the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom 9:1–3). There always has been and always will be a remnant of Jews who are saved (Rom 11:5). It is not as though the rejection of some of the Jews serves no purpose. On the contrary, because the Jews were broken off in unbelief, the Gospel has gone to the Gentiles, who through grace now partake of its blessings and join with Christian Jews to constitute the Israel of God, the church of Jesus Christ (Rom 11:11–16). In Romans 11 Paul defines this relationship between Jews and Christians when he distinguishes between natural branches (the seed of Abraham according to the flesh) and foreign branches (Gentiles) who have been engrafted into the same tree. There is certainly a difference in their respective histories and genealogies (not all are natural branches), but in Christ both Gentile and Jewish believers are now the seed of Abraham (Rom 11:17–24).

The Bible does not support the teaching that God has a special plan for bringing Jews to faith in Christ. This is because when it comes to God’s plan of salvation there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, Israel and the church. Rather than teaching that these are two separate communities with two different futures, the Scriptures testify to a continuity between the old and new covenants and thus to a continuity between Israel and the church. Put another way, Old Testament Israel is a type and precursor for the church, for it is prophesied in the Old Testament that God’s redemptive purpose includes Gentiles (e.g., Gen 12:3; 22:18; Is 49:6). Therefore, the church is not an interruption in the redemptive plan of God, but the fulfillment of His eternal purposes.

Perhaps the root of the *Left Behind* interpretation of the Bible is this misunderstanding concerning the relationship between Israel and the church. The authors’ confusion lies in their belief that the Old Testament promises given to Israel have not been fulfilled in the church. That is to say, LaHaye and Jenkins teach that God has two distinct plans, one for Israel and another for the church. In their view, each has a distinct identity and destiny, with Israel’s on earth and the church’s in heaven.

The *Left Behind* series embraces this belief because it understands the following terms as being synonymous: Israelite, Hebrew, Jew and Israeli. In their literature LaHaye and Jenkins make statements like this: “God promised the land to the Jews when they came out of Egypt.” “Beginning with Abraham the Lord promises to bless the Israelis forever.” However, biblically, theologically and historically these four terms—Israelite, Hebrew, Jew and Israeli—each have different definitions. Unpacking the terms, while a somewhat challenging and complex task, yields important insights.

First, an Israelite is an Old Testament believer in Yahweh, the God who revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who in subsequent historical events confirmed His promise to send the Seed (Christ) who would crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15). Second, the term "Hebrew" is often used by Old Testament Israelites to identify themselves to non-Israelites. Joseph, for example, describes himself as a Hebrew to both Potiphar and Pharaoh and Jonah describes himself as a Hebrew to the sailors on the boat. To this extent, the terms "Israelite" and "Hebrew" are synonymous in the Old Testament. These believing Israelites (or Hebrews) are the spiritual forefathers of all who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Rom 4:12, 16).

The term "Jew," however, is more complex because the term has both racial and religious connotations. Hence, there are people who consider themselves both Jewish by race and Christian by faith. These people often refer to themselves as Messianic Jews who embrace Jewish ethnicity along with faith in Jesus Christ (e.g., "Jews for Jesus," or participants in "Apple of His Eye," an LCMS ministry to and for Jews).

Whereas the term Jew can simply identify a person's race or ethnicity, it may also define someone who is neither an Israelite nor a Hebrew, but rather a person who is an adherent of the religion called "Judaism"—which is distinct from the Christ-centered faith of the Old Testament. Adherents of Judaism profess allegiance to the Old Testament, but they also embrace, to some extent, the Mishnah, Talmud and other ancient rabbinic writings. Belief in these documents promotes an interpretation of the Old Testament that is not consistent with the Christ-centered, grace-based teaching of the New Testament. Modern-day Judaism varies widely in religious commitments and beliefs. Several of the more prominent branches of this religion include Hasidic, "orthodox," "conservative," and "reformed."

Fourth, an Israeli is a citizen of the 1948 state of Israel who may or may not identify with the religion of Judaism. These people are sometimes referred to as "secular" Jews.

In view of these four definitions, it is accurate to speak of certain people who are alive today as Jews and Israelis. But it is inaccurate to say that there are any Israelites or Hebrews living today. Yet this inaccuracy pervades the theology of *Left Behind*, and by failing to make this distinction the authors identify modern-day Jews and Israelis as the Old Testament recipients of God's promises. Yet the Bible teaches that the promises made to Israelites and Hebrews in the Old Testament find their fulfillment not with Jews or Israelis, but rather with Christ and his church.

Therefore, in contrast to the theology of *Left Behind*, in the present age God does not have two different plans, one for Jews and one for the church. Rather, the New Testament consistently speaks of there being *one* true vine or *one* foundation or *one* way or *one* olive tree. These are symbols

portraying the unity within the one elect people of God made up of both Jews and Gentiles, who by faith are declared to be children of Abraham, who “is the father of all who believe” (Rom 4:11).

Similarly, Paul uses expressions such as “one new man” (Eph 2:13–16), “heirs together with Israel,” and “members together of one body” (Eph 3:4–6) to emphasize that God has taken Jews and Gentiles and made them one in Christ. John the Baptist preached, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (Lk 3:8). From a New Testament perspective, the true descendants of Abraham are not present-day Jews or Israelis, but rather believers in Jesus. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

The promises of inheritance that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ, Abraham’s true Seed (Gal 3:16). All spiritual benefits are derived from Jesus, and apart from him there is no participation in the promises made to Abraham (Gal 3:26–29). Since Jesus is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, all who bless Him and His people will be blessed and all who curse Him and His people will be cursed (Gen 12:3; Gal 3:7–8). These promises are not directed toward any particular ethnic group. The church, and not Jews or Israelis, is the true Israel of God (Rom 2:28–29; Phil 3:3; Gal 6:16).

According to Scripture, salvation is neither earned nor deserved. Nor is it based upon ethnic descent or natural birth (Jn 1:13; Lk 3:8; Eph 2:8–9). Apart from Christ there is no special divine favor upon any member of any ethnic group (Rom 3:9–10; 22–23). In privileging ethnic Jews or modern Israelis with a distinct plan of salvation, *Left Behind* obscures this central teaching of the Bible.

## The Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments

*Left Behind* fails to recognize the distinctions between Israelite, Hebrew, Jew and Israeli because LaHaye and Jenkins err when they fail to appreciate the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and the ways in which the latter completes and fulfils the former. In privileging the Old over the New Testament, *Left Behind* contends that Old Testament prophecies regarding these events must be literally fulfilled (e.g., the restoration of the nation of Israel to her land, the revival of the Roman Empire, a reign of Christ on earth after His return, the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstatement of its sacrifices).

It is clear from Scripture, however, that the Old Testament is to be read in the light of the New Testament. Colossians 2:16–17 provides this guide

for the proper interpretation of the Old Testament: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” However, *Left Behind* argues that redemptive history takes a kind of U–turn in the millennial age as the reality in Christ returns to the types and shadows of the Old Testament. The future is therefore not a consummation but a return to the past. This understanding obscures the person and work of Christ because it sees the ultimate reality not in Him but in the types and shadows of the Old Testament.

But if in the Old Testament the revelation of God’s acts in the history of Israel came in shadows, images, forms and prophecies, then the New Testament announces the reality, substance and final fulfillment—all in the history of Christ. The question is not whether the promises of the Old Testament are to be understood literally or spiritually. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Testament shadows or in terms of the New Testament realities.

Moreover, there is an organic unity that exists between the Old and New Testaments as stated by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers in the classic formulation “Scripture interprets Scripture.” This principle is undermined by the approach of the *Left Behind* series to the degree that it attempts to interpret Scripture in light of current events, especially events occurring in Israel and the Middle East.

A problem for the *Left Behind* series, to the extent that it claims to be an expression of theology, is that the prophetic portions of the Old Testament are treated as a self-contained entity to be read apart from Christ and the New Testament. Overlooking the unity between the Testaments almost amounts to treating the Old Testament as a non-Christian Jewish book. To teach, for instance, on the basis of Ezekiel 40–48 that the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt during the millennium and that the sacrificial system will be reinstated is to raise questions about Scripture’s teaching that Jesus Himself is the New Temple (Mt 12:6; Jn 2:12–22) and that His bloody sacrifice on the cross is fully sufficient for all people of all time so that no further shedding of blood is necessary (Heb 10:18).

It follows that the present state of Israel is not a prophetic realization of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, a day should not be anticipated in which Christ’s kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in the land of Palestine, its capital in Jerusalem, its constituency, or its ceremonial institutions and practices. Instead, the present age will come to a conclusion with the arrival of the final, eternal kingdom of the Messiah.

## The Land of Israel

The land of Israel plays an important role in the *Left Behind* series because LaHaye and Jenkins embrace the belief that God has forever promised the land of Israel to the Jews. In fact, in their book *Are We Living in the End Times?* LaHaye and Jenkins call Israel's becoming a state in May of 1948 a "super sign," the beginning of the last generation before the rapture of the church. That the Israeli settlement of Palestine was to occur, they say, is indicated by numerous Old Testament promises that grant the land forever to Israel. This teaching is often understood as a form of Zionism, a nationalistic Jewish movement that believes the land of Israel belongs to the Jews.

However, the land never did belong to Israel as such. Throughout the Old Testament the land belongs only to God (cf. Ps 24:1), for He is the one who gives it to Israel (e.g., Deut 6:10–11). Land could not be permanently bought or sold (cf. 1 Ki 21:1–16). It could not be permanently given away, let alone stolen or confiscated. The land was never at the disposal of Israel for its national purposes.

The land of Israel, furthermore, is conspicuous by its absence in the teachings of Jesus. He makes only a few explicit references to the land in the Gospels. The strongest is found in the Beatitudes. In Mt 5:5 Jesus quotes from Ps 37:11, where the blessing of the meek is the inheritance of the land. Yet it is not the land of Israel but the entire earth that they will inherit. And, in light of the strong eschatological dimensions of the Sermon on the Mount, this earth is the "new heaven" and the "new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pt 3:13).

Additionally, like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem as a judgment on Israel (e.g., Lk 19:41–44). But He did not promise that there would be another return to the land. Instead, He predicted the coming of the kingdom of God in terms drawn from Daniel's vision of the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days to receive His kingly authority (Mt 24:30–31; Lk 21:25–28; cf. Dan 7:13–14). It can only have been deliberate that Jesus had so little to say specifically about the land of Israel and so much about "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky" (Mt 24:30).

The turning point for the disciples comes with the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Until this point they shared the same nationalistic understanding of the land as other Jews of the first century (cf. Lk 24:21; Acts 1:6). This same Jewish nationalism is also foundational to the *Left Behind* series. This belief looks forward to God's decisive intervention in history that will restore political sovereignty to the Jews within the Promised Land.

After Pentecost, however, the apostles used Old Testament language concerning the land of Israel in new ways. LaHaye/Jenkins also acknowl-

edge this, but their dispensational grid of interpreting the Bible tends to separate the Epistles (the sixth dispensation) from the Gospels (the fifth dispensation) and to teach that the Epistles primarily relate to the church. In their teachings, therefore, the “heavenly land” in the Epistles is only for Gentiles, while the Jewish hope of an earthly land still remains as a separate part of God’s plan for the world. According to LaHaye and Jenkins, this Jewish hope is witnessed from Exodus 20 through Malachi, continuing through the Gospel of John (the fifth dispensation) to Rev 20:1–6 (the seventh dispensation). These books of the Bible, in their view, promise the land of Palestine to the Jews.

However, as noted earlier, the New Testament makes no such distinction between two people groups with two different eschatological hopes. In Jesus Christ the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile has been broken down (Eph 2:14–15) and now both groups have not only one Lord and one Father, along with one Baptism into one body, but also one hope (Eph 4:4–6). Peter speaks of this hope as an inheritance that, unlike the land, “can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Pet 1:4). Paul likewise asserts, “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

In his letter to the church in Ephesus Paul applies the promise of the inheritance of the land in this way: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Eph 6:1–3). In its Old Testament setting, this Fourth Commandment promises that obedient children will live long on the land the Lord God is giving them. But Paul here applies the same promise to the children of Christian parents living 700–800 miles from the land of Palestine. These children of Gentile and Jewish Christians who submit willingly to the authority of their parents will, Paul promises, enjoy long life on the earth, indeed eternal life—the new heavens and the new earth.

Similarly, the book of Hebrews indicates that Christians have the land (which is described as the rest into which they have entered through Christ) in a way that even Joshua did not achieve for Israel (Heb 3:12–4:11). In Heb 11:13–16 the central Gospel motif is the land. The pilgrimage of faith is set in three scenes: (1) a land from which they set out in faith, (2) the present context of wandering, and (3) the hoped-for homeland that is a “better,” indeed, “heavenly” city.

Finally, Peter speaks of the Second Coming of Jesus in conjunction with the final judgment and the punishment of unbelievers (2 Pet 3:10–13). To this same apostle of the circumcision (Gal 2:7) Jesus says nothing about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel in the land of Palestine (Acts 1:6–7). Instead, as his readers contemplate the promise of Jesus’ Second Coming,

Peter fixes their hope upon “a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet 3:13).

To summarize this section, there is no suggestion that Jesus or the apostles believed that the Jewish people still have a divine right to the land, or that the Jewish possession of the land would be an important—let alone central—aspect of God’s plan for the world. Rather, present day spiritual descendants of Abraham will inherit not the land, but the new heaven and new earth. And for Paul these descendants of Abraham are those Jews and Gentiles who through faith in Christ have been declared righteous (Rom 4:1–12).

For Christians the promise of the land has become a promise that they will inherit the world (Rom 4:13). Indeed, they will inherit a new world, “for the first heaven and first earth” will pass away (Rev 21:1). Here the imagery of the land is a picture of restored paradise that finally has come to consummation. It is not, however, just a return to an earthly paradise (like a restored “Garden of Eden”), but a reconstructed cosmos with resurrected people. The consummation of God’s work of redeeming the fallen world is no longer merely a portion of the earth. Instead, the entire cosmos participates (Rom 8:19–23). Hence, the land was promised to Abraham, taken possession of under Joshua, and subsequently reinterpreted by Jesus, Paul, the author of the Hebrews, and Peter as a new heaven and new earth.

## The Book of Revelation

Despite the importance of certain Old Testament prophecies, the major biblical background for *Left Behind* is the book of Revelation. According to LaHaye and Jenkins, after the letters to the seven churches (chapters two and three) Revelation is a prophecy concerning events that will occur during the last seven years—before the coming of Christ to establish his earthly kingdom—when God will pour out His wrath on a sinful world. They also hold that the last three and a half years is the Great Tribulation spoken of in Dan 9:25–27 and in the Savior’s Olivet discourse (Matt 24:15–25).

This theology is built upon the belief that the tribulation period will witness a restoration of the fourth worldly kingdom spoken of in Dan 2:42–45. The feet of iron and clay represent the latter phase of the kingdom. This kingdom is also represented by the terrible beast of Dan 7:7–8, the *Roman Empire* that will be restored in time for the tribulation. In the *Left Behind* novels it is significant that the Antichrist—Nicolae Carpathia—comes from *Romania*.

In general, LaHaye and Jenkins put forth the idea that the Antichrist’s confederation will consist of ten kings or kingdoms headed by the little horn of Dan 7:8, also known as the son of perdition (2 Thess 2:3–11). The son of perdition is called the Antichrist and spoken of in Rev 13:11–18,

where he causes all who dwell on the earth to receive the mark of the beast. More specifically, according to the *Left Behind* series Revelation chapters 6–19 indicate that during the seven-year period a number of events will occur on earth. For example,

1. The Antichrist begins his cruel reign. For the first three and one-half years he acts favorably toward the Jews and he even “makes a covenant” with them. Yet in the last three and one-half years he breaks this covenant and begins persecuting them.
2. Out of this persecuted group of Jews come the 144,000 of Rev 7:4 who believe in Jesus and preach the “gospel of the kingdom.”
3. Through their witness a great number of Gentiles are saved.
4. Toward the end of the tribulation several battles take place, the last and greatest of which is called Armageddon (Rev 16:16).
5. At the end of this seven-year period Christ, together with the church, returns in glory to destroy His enemies. The vast majority of the Jews are converted, Satan is bound for 1000 years and believers enjoy the vast blessings of the golden age, which is the millennium.

However, an important clue to interpreting the book of Revelation correctly is to notice its use of different visions covering the same period: the New Testament era beginning with Pentecost and culminating on the last day. We can see, for example, that Rev 12:7–11 and Rev 20:1–6 are parallel in several ways. Revelation 12:7 and 20:1 are both heavenly scenes; Rev 12:7–8 and 20:2 depict angelic battles with Satan; Rev 12:9 and 20:2 portray Satan as “the great dragon...that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan”; Rev 12:12 and 20:3 speak of Satan as having a “short time”; Rev 12:10 and 20:4 tell of how Satan’s defeat results in the kingdom of Christ and His saints; and finally, Rev 12:11 and 20:4 describe the faithfulness of the saints. Thus, Revelation 12 and 20:1–7 depict the same events and mutually interpret one another.

We find another example of how John gives a series of visions that depict the present age from different vantage points in Revelation 6 and 16. In Rev 6:12–14 John says, “every mountain and island was moved out of its place,” while in Rev 16:20 he writes, “every island fled away and the mountains could not be found.” The question then is this: If every mountain and island were moved in chapter six, how can they be back again in chapter sixteen? The answer (apart from its clearly symbolic language) is that Revelation is structured around parallel visions and is not a historical narrative that describes sequences that chronologically occur one after another. This writing style evident in Revelation chapters 6–20 is sometimes called “recapitulation,” in which the same basic pattern is repeated in a variety of formulations.

The book of Revelation contains six different descriptions of the same era, the era of the New Testament church stretching from the day of Pentecost until the Last Day. They are as follows: the seven seals (6:1–8:5); the seven trumpets (8:6–11:19); the vision of the church preserved against Satan’s assaults (12:1–14:20); the seven bowls (15:1–16:21); the vision of Babylon overthrown (17:1–19:21); and the binding of Satan (20:1–10). Each vision gives a different picture of the same time period. The visions are synonymous, albeit with growing intensity. This repetition in the book of Revelation does not exclude a deepening and completing progression in the visions, for judgment builds (as does the terror). Yet Christ is in control and has the last word, victory for His church.

Though Revelation can be difficult to understand because it uses so many symbols, it actually provides a very clear description of the end times that was well understood by the early Christians. For example, after reading Revelation and the rest of Scripture, the early Christians summarized the end times as follows: “[Jesus now] sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.... I believe in...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting” (The Apostles’ Creed).

LaHaye and Jenkins also err when they teach that Nicolae Carpathia, the Antichrist, is primarily a political figure of the “New Babylon” who gives out the mark of the beast. Rayford Steele, Buck Williams, Chloe and the other characters in the novels spend most of their time tracking or evading this Antichrist on their sophisticated computers and bugging devices, with the goal of subverting the political domination of Carpathia.

However, the prophecies of Scripture concerning the Antichrist (e.g., 2 Thess 2:3–12; 1 Jn 2:18; Rev 13:11–18) make it clear that he is not primarily a political ruler. Rather, he is one whose false doctrine spreads the lie that people are not saved completely through the merits of Jesus Christ, that is, by grace alone, by Christ alone, through faith alone. In failing to embrace this teaching of Scripture, the *Left Behind* series wrongly perceives that the culminating battle of history has significant political and military overtones. However, in rejecting all political aspirations Jesus tells Peter, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:53). And again before Pilate he says, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36).

Of course, a key chapter in this entire discussion is Revelation 20. And yet these verses must not be the “tail that wags the dog,” overturning the rest of Scripture, which does not teach an earthly, thousand year reign of Christ. The book of Revelation is apocalyptic, that is, it is deliberately written so as to make it accessible only to insiders. In the case of Revelation those insiders who hold the key to its interpretation are the Christians of seven churches of Asia Minor, as well as believers of all times and places. This key that unlocks the mysteries of Revelation is the Old Testament as

understood in its fullest Christological sense: “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10). That is to say, all prophecy finds its focus not on national Israel but on Jesus, the Christ.

Not only is the Old Testament a major key in understanding this chapter, but so is the fact, as previously mentioned, that the book of Revelation is a part of apocalyptic literature. In apocalyptic literature numbers are symbolic and represent concepts. For example, LaHaye and Jenkins believe that 144,000 Jewish believers will evangelize the world during the tribulation. However, in Rev 7:1–8 John sees the twelve tribes of Israel along with the twelve apostles that make up the church. In this case 12 X 12 (twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of Jesus) and 10 X 10 X 10 (thus inferring wholeness or perfection) indicates all who “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14). The context is an additional key to interpretation. Revelation 7:9 states: “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count....” Thus, the number 144,000 denotes not a literal group of tribulation Jews, but rather the entire church of all races, languages, times and places.

The expression “thousand years” in Revelation 20 also represents completeness. It indicates the complete time period for the church to carry out her worldwide mission as mandated by the Savior, not a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth. In fact, in all the other biblical texts where 1000 years is mentioned, the term is used uniformly in a figurative manner (Ps 50:10; 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8). In the same way, the 1000 years mentioned in Rev 20:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 are not literal, but symbolic. They designate the New Testament era from the time of Christ up to Armageddon, just before the end. Jesus does not need to return to set up an earthly kingdom since He has already established His spiritual kingdom among all believers (Mt 12:28; Jn 18:36; Rom 14:17; Rev 1:5–6). This view is commonly referred to as amillennialism.

## Conclusions

The clear witness of the New Testament is that the person of Jesus Christ is the interpretive key to the Old Testament (Lk 24:25–27, 44; Jn 5:39, 46; 2 Cor 1:19–20), and indeed to all of Scripture. Specifically, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for the sin of the world is the chief teaching of Holy Scripture and the true source of Christian joy and confidence. As St. Paul says, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). This message is the only hope of salvation for a lost and condemned humanity.

That is to say, all biblical revelation converges in Christ and is given direction from Him. He is the Cornerstone, the Alpha and the Omega, the

Beginning and the End. All things were created by Him and for Him. He is the very substance, marrow, soul and scope of the whole Bible. The *Left Behind* series fails to do justice to the Christ-centeredness of Scripture by encouraging people to fix their eyes on current events in the Middle East, the nuclear build up in other nations and the ongoing crisis in Israel, rather than upon Christ alone (Heb 12:1–3).

Although the *Left Behind* series does raise legitimate questions about the crucial importance of faith in Christ, some Christians have been shaken in their faith because of the constant onslaught of pessimism in this literature. LaHaye and Jenkins tend to place more emphasis on fear, evil and judgment than they do on the “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17) indicative of the Gospel.

An example of this pessimistic attitude fostered by adherents of *Left Behind* is that of John Hagee (author of *From Daniel to Doomsday: The Countdown Has Begun* and end-times novels such as *Blood Avenger*). Hagee told a BBC interviewer that the end-times began on September 11, 2001. He said, “We are seeing, in my judgment, the birth pangs that will be called in the future the beginning of the end. I believe in my mind that the Third World War has begun. I believe it began on 9/11” (BBC radio “Analysis: American’s New Christian Zionists,” May 7, 2002).

To be sure, an important aspect of the New Testament witness regarding the Second Coming of Christ is Law (e.g., Mt 25:41). It contains strong warnings concerning God’s wrath and His judgment of sinners. But His Law serves the primary message of the Gospel to the end that Christians “encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). This encouragement is based upon the promise that Christ’s “perfect love drives out fear” (1 Jn 4:18).

Current events are not the primary indication that the church is now living in the last days. In fact, since the first advent of Jesus (Heb 1:1–2) and Pentecost (Acts 2:17) the church has understood herself as awaiting the imminent return of her Lord that “will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2). The Second Advent of Jesus will be the end of this age, not the beginning of its greatest glory. In fact, teaching that believers will be raptured out of suffering encourages a false hope of exemption from intensified persecution toward the end (cf. Acts 14:22; 2 Cor 12:1–10). The consistent teaching of the New Testament is that Christians are not only to expect suffering (e.g., Mk 13:9; Lk 21:12; Jn 16:33); they actually may rejoice in it, as St. Paul says, “because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom 5:3–5).

The teaching that God promises through the “rapture” to rescue true believers from the suffering of the “great tribulation” of the end times also raises troublesome questions about God’s care and compassion for the mil-

lions of believers throughout history (and in our present time) who have endured (and are enduring) unspeakable persecution and tribulation as a result of their faithful witness to Christ and His Gospel. Scripture nowhere promises believers an “escape” from trials and sorrows. Rather, it teaches that it is Christ Himself who will “keep you strong to the end” (1 Cor 1:8). Or as the Lord says through St. Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

The *Left Behind* system of theology demonstrates a longing for concrete manifestations of God’s presence, which take the form of signs that adherents believe will take place during the seven-year tribulation, and especially in the 1000-year millennium. However, the Spirit-inspired Old and New Testament Scriptures teach that through the Gospel, the water of Holy Baptism, and the true body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion God testifies to being present with His church right now (Rom 1:16–17; 6:1–4; 10:14–17; 1 Cor 11:23–26; cf. 1 Jn 5:7–8). The assurance of God’s working in the world is therefore not based upon the return to Old Testament types, but rather on the sure Word of the promise of forgiveness imparted in the means of grace, the Gospel and the sacraments.

Like other erroneous apocalyptic views the writings of LaHaye and Jenkins rely to some degree on date setting for anticipating the end. In the novels, for example, *Left Behind* believers are able to predict with great certainty and accuracy impending historical events, including the very day of Christ’s return to begin the 1000-year reign. According to Scripture, however, no one knows the day or the hour when Christ will return. Jesus says, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mt 24:36). While the series intends and attempts to point people to Christ alone for salvation, its preoccupation with the rapture, tribulation and earthly reign tends to distract from the chief message of the apostles. “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:22–23). And it is in this cross that Christians find their one true source of confidence, security and peace, even as they pray, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20).

## Glossary

***Amillennialism*** The teaching, espoused in this document, that there will be no (“a”) literal 1000 (*mille*) year visible earthly kingdom of Jesus. This view is better termed “realized millennialism” because it embraces the idea that Christ is reigning now (cf. Mt 28:18), as are Christians (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1–3). The “thousand years” of Rev 20:1–10 is taken figuratively as a reference to the time of Christ’s reign as King from the day of His ascension until the Last Day. Hence,

the millennium is a present reality (Christ's heavenly reign), not a future hope (a rule of Christ on earth after His return).

**Antichrist:** *Left Behind* believes he is primarily a political ruler who manifests the fourth kingdom of Dan 2:33–35 (Rome) by coming from Romania. However, the Bible teaches that the Antichrist sets himself up in the church (2 Thess 2:2–3) and will promote doctrines that diminish the completed work of Christ.

**Armageddon:** Derived from the Hebrew words *har Megiddo*, “the mountain of Megiddo” in Palestine. Armageddon refers to the battle mentioned in Rev 16:16 and is understood by proponents of *Left Behind* as the final battle of the seven-year tribulation that ushers in the 1000-year reign of Christ on earth. However, Armageddon is the last major onslaught of Satan before the second—and final—coming of Christ. The context of Rev 16:16 indicates that this *last* battle is equivalent to the *last* battles described in Rev 19:11–21 and 20:7–10, for Rev 16:17 states, in part, “and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’”

**Apocalyptic Literature:** Derived from the Greek word *apokalypsis* (cf. Rev 1:1), the term “apocalyptic” means “uncovering” or “revelation.” This genre [kind] of literature, most notably present in Daniel and Revelation, frequently uses visions, colors, numbers and vivid symbolism to make a theological point.

**Christological:** In its broadest sense, this term promotes a reading of Holy Scripture that focuses upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. A Christological reading of the Bible embraces the belief that God's activity for the salvation of humanity is known only through Christ and not by current events in the Middle East.

**Dispensationalism:** This is a system of biblical interpretation that distinguishes between seven distinct periods or “dispensations” in biblical history: (1) Innocence (before the Fall); (2) Conscience (from the Fall to Noah); (3) Human Government (from Noah to Abraham); (4) Promise (from Abraham to Moses); (5) Law (from Moses to Christ); (6) Grace (the church age); (7) the Kingdom (the millennium). Dispensationalists believe that God's redemptive plan focuses on national Israel, with provision made for Gentiles during the church age.

**Eschatology:** Derived from the Greek work *eschaton*, “end.” The term refers to the study of the end times.

**Last Days:** The phrase “the last days” appears twenty-seven times in the New Testament. *Left Behind* believes that with the creation of the 1948 state of Israel the world has entered the last days. In several instances the expression refers to the end of history. However, in most passages (see, for example, Acts 2:17; 1 Cor 10:11; Heb 1:1–2 and 1 Pet 1:20) it is used of the eschatological epoch that began in the New Testament era with the coming of Jesus Christ.

**Millennium:** Derived from the Latin words *mille*, “a thousand,” and *annus*, “a year.” *Left Behind* understands the 1000 years of Revelation 20 literally. Yet, the Bible teaches that Christ is reigning now and that His gracious rule that began on the day of His ascension will continue until the Last Day when He will hand “over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24).

**Mishnah:** One of the earliest and most influential collections (set into writing about 200 A.D.) of rabbinic oral traditions that to a large extent form the historic Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.

**Premillennialism:** This is the view of the *Left Behind* novels, namely, that Christ’s second advent will occur before (“pre”) the “millennium” understood as a 1000-year rule of Christ on earth. This understanding rests upon these presuppositions: (1) Scripture is to be interpreted in a “literalistic” manner; (2) the church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan; (3) the church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament; (4) the mystery age of the church must be completed before God can resume His main program with the Jews and bring it to completion.

**Rapture:** This refers to the event described in 1 Thess 4:14–17 when believers will be “raptured” or “caught up” (Latin: *rapiemur*) in the clouds to meet Christ in the air at his Second Coming. When used in *Left Behind* novels, the term refers to Christ’s secret coming when all believers—as well as all children who have not reached the age of accountability—are suddenly removed from the earth before the seven year tribulation.

**Talmud:** The Talmud (“the study”) is based upon and includes the Mishnah in its entirety, but adds to it the Gemara (“the completion”), a far lengthier work compiled from the discussions in the Jewish academies of Babylonia and the Galilee region from the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. The authors of the Talmud and its Jewish readership understand the work, to a large extent, as the authoritative transmission of the Old Testament’s oral tradition.

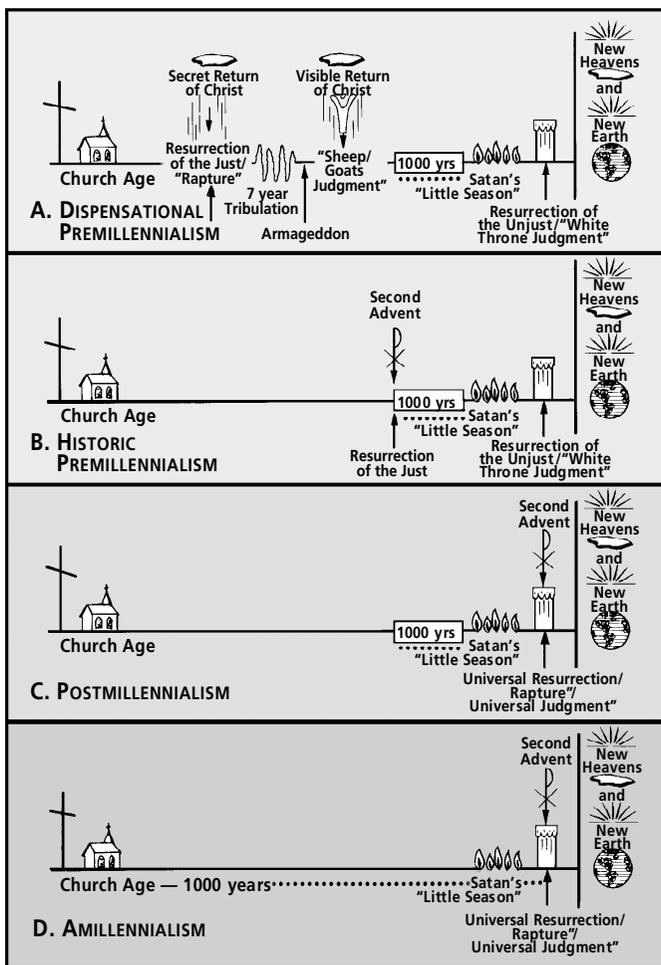
**Tribulation:** *Left Behind* uses this term to signify the intensified persecution that will occur after the rapture and before Christ’s 1000-year reign on earth. It will last for seven years.

**Type:** A person, event or institution in the Old Testament that points to the person and work of Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of a type (e.g., the temple) is called the antitype (e.g., Christ’s promise to destroy the temple and raise it in three days).

**Zionism:** A movement formerly that promoted, and now supports, the reestablishment of the Jewish national state of Israel.

# Appendix

## DIAGRAMS OF MILLENNIAL VIEWS



This diagram of millennial views is reprinted from the CTCR's 1989 report, *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism* (p 43). The Lutheran understanding of the "End Times" is presented in item D. above, titled "Amillennialism."



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