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A REVIEW ARTICLE

"WHAT DO I CARE, I'D BE GONE TOO"

Richard J. Vincent

"What do I care, I'd be gone too." These were the last words of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, authors of the incredibly popular *Left Behind* series, during a Larry King interview on the success of their popular fictional series.¹ I believe that this statement concisely summarizes a fundamental problem behind the current fascination with the series itself.

Larry King ended the interview with this question: "Do you know what Billy Graham thinks of the *Left Behind* series?"

Jenkins responded:

I'd be interested to hear that myself. . . . I do know that his secretary reads them. When I worked with him, I got to know her. And she wrote and said she was reading the first one on an airplane and, of course, the rapture occurs. She said she was hoping that her pilot wasn't a believer and would disappear. And then she finished, "Well, what do I care, I'd be gone, too."

For those who do not already know, the *Left Behind* series chronicles what many evangelicals believe will be a seven-year tribulation period sandwiched between the Lord's secret coming for his church (the so-called secret Rapture) and his final public coming in judgment to wrap

up this present age. In short, the story involved in this fictional series has to do with events in God's future plan for this earth that the contemporary church will not experience because of her disappearance into the heavens at the time of the Rapture.

If LaHaye's view of the end is correct, (and this is a very big "if"), and the church of God is spared this seven-year period of tribulation and judgment, why is there so much interest among evangelicals concerning this period of time? If evangelicals will actually be removed from the events described in the *Left Behind* series, why then do so many care so intensely about these books? It certainly is not because these books will become classical fictional literature that will stimulate minds and move hearts thirty years from now. Dr. Graham's secretary's comments should actually suffice to answer this question for all believing Christians: "What do I care, I'll be gone!"

Then why *do* we care so much about this series? Why is the series so unbelievably popular? Why has *Left Behind* become a multi-million-dollar franchise with spin-offs, merchandising, and both a recently released video and a soon-to-appear movie? Why does this series currently hold the heart of evangelicals more than any other book series? Why do we gleefully anticipate each episode chronicling in full color the demise of the world as we know it?

Arguably, the problem lies in a callous streak in evangelicals who love to satisfy their carnal curiosity in sensationalistic speculations concerning events that have no ultimate connection to their life or conduct. It is safe to speculate about such horrific realities if one is certain he will be exempt from participating in them. Like a roller-coaster ride that offers safe thrills, the *Left Behind* series takes us from one terrifying perch to another without fear of personally suffering any negative consequences. It is "safe" reading about a frightening future—a future that the

series' most avid and committed readers feel certain they will not have to face, believing they will have been raptured away before things get really ugly.

The popularity of the *Left Behind* series draws attention to a strange inner emptiness within popular American evangelicalism. We obviously have a craving for sordid spectacles—the sales figures are proof of this. The books are satisfying some hunger within the evangelical soul. But the question is: "At what price to our true well-being?"

In short, is this a book that is truly valuable to the Christian community at large if it leaves us all saying, "What do I care, I'll be gone"?

It's clear there are other problems with the series besides the apathy it generates in North American Christians. For example, the series falls short in communicating the clear and true message of Revelation—that the Lamb of God *reigns* even in the midst of evil, rebellion, and chaos. He is the one who opens the seals and carries out God's eternal purpose. The throne of God is central to Revelation, evidencing the Lamb's rule in the midst of evil. Only those who follow the Lamb, and overcome—not through carnal power, but through faithful obedience—are delivered from God's righteous judgments. Does anyone really get a sense of God's sovereign rule from the *Left Behind* series? Is it understood that the Lamb *reigns even in the midst* of the terror?

Moreover, LaHaye's view is as inconsistent as it is sensational. (His non-fictional writing in the field of eschatology shows this even more plainly.) Though he claims to hold to a "literal" hermeneutic in his treatment of Revelation, like most who defend this key to prophecy he picks and chooses what he determines to be literal. In the book of Revelation, a ferocious beast arises out of the sea, a dragon with seven heads and ten horns appears, and a woman rides the back of the dragon, while a lamb slain in heaven

oversees the entire scene. It is interesting that none of these things "literally" happens in LaHaye's prophetic system. Instead, these figures merely *represent* actual people. In short, he treats Revelation *literally* when it suits his purposes but like all who hold to the same system, LaHaye insists he alone treats the book "literally."

But, again, these points are secondary. The biggest problem, to my mind, lies in the smug apathy that lies behind the morbid fascination generated by the series. Evangelicals feel as if they are actually accomplishing a genuinely spiritual task when reading *Left Behind*, when in reality, I fear they are really in danger of merely indulging a carnal curiosity.

In the end, the *Left Behind* series gets one thing right: Jesus is coming back! But even here it *distorts* the historic and biblical message. If the authors were absolutely honest, they would be forced to admit that Jesus comes back twice in their books (once in secret for his church, later in public to wrap things up). Thus, Jesus' Second Coming is not *really* his Second Coming but his *third* coming. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a goal to history is probably enough to make some seriously consider whether they are living in light of this goal or not.

Some defend the overall value of this series by emphasizing that it is a good evangelistic tool. Sadly, this may be proof that the Beast has truly possessed us as evangelicals in a way that few of us notice—we care more for pragmatism (what works) than for what is true. If the series is not true, at least in its essential argument, then conversions to Christ are not primarily *because* of the series, but *in spite* of the series. Our concern for truth must take precedence over our concern for what works. But when sensationalism reigns supreme and Indiana Jones-like cliffhangers become the norm, in both popular culture and the church, truth will almost always take a back seat in the joyride of the

apocalyptic thrill-machine.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the series lies in the sales figures it generates. If this series remains as popular, as it currently is, over the course of the next few books, you can rest assured that this financial juggernaut will continue in another form. Having sold over 15 million units so far, the series alone is worth its weight in gold to both the authors and the publishers. I am no prophet, but you can mark my words, once the twelve books are complete, Tyndale, or some other publisher, will offer a contract to Jenkins (and LaHaye, if he is still alive), to continue the series well into the new millennium. And thus we'll have even more speculative sensationalism concerning the millennial kingdom from the dispensational perspective. (Of course, a thousand years of peace may not be nearly as exciting as seven years of tribulation, but perhaps the books can quickly progress to the exciting end when the Devil is released!)

The bottom line is that *Left Behind* seems really to be nothing more than Stephen King for Christians. It has all the chills, thrills, and cliffhanger endings without the cussing and sex of its secular counterparts. (In this case the violence is okay.) It also has about the same amount of substance as a popular King novel; it is high in entertainment value and low in nutrients. It is "safe" reading, guaranteed to excite those who no longer are excited by the glories of Christ and the challenges of life in the real world.

In a day when few read such classics as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, or Pascal's *Pensees*, it is a shame that we are wasting our time with apocalyptic soap operas. At least the books above contain applications for our Christian life in the present. I am certain that no one, after reading these books, will end up exclaiming, "What do I care, I'd be gone anyway!" The fact that someone can say this after reading the *Left Behind* series reveals

how little it truly nourishes the soul's love for God and for others.

Author

Richard J. Vincent is associate pastor of College Park Church, Indianapolis, Indiana. This is his second contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He is married and the father of a daughter. He is webmaster of: www.theocentric.com.

Note

1. Aired on June 19, 2000. Transcript available at: <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0006/19/lk1.00.html>