

Getting Caught Up in the Clouds:
The Role of the Rapture in Modern Evangelical Christianity

by

A Proposal for an Honors Thesis Project with the Department of Religion

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The rapture is a prominent topic in modern conservative Christian teaching and has gained great popularity in evangelical culture and media. I am proposing a detailed analysis of Christian conceptions of the rapture, which will conclude with my own thoughts attempting to account for the popularity of rapture doctrine and imagery in modern evangelical Christianity. In the course of my thesis, I intend to address such questions as: When was the concept of the rapture first introduced and by whom? What was the Christian landscape when the idea was first set forth? How has it developed from the time of its conception to the present? How have different groups acted upon rapture teachings? What is the role of the rapture in modern Christianity? How can the popularity of rapture imagery and teaching be explained? How long will the rapture remain such a central doctrine in conservative Christianity? The paper will be divided into five parts, including an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The remainder of this proposal briefly outlines the contents of each of these sections.

It is nearly impossible to understand the role of rapture doctrine in modern Christian evangelism without an appreciation for the apocalyptic landscape from which the concept first emerged. Some scholars, such as Bart Erhman, argue that the Christian apocalyptic tradition began with Jesus himself, who they argue was an apocalyptic prophet of the 1st century.¹ For the purposes of this research, the focus will be on more recent apocalyptic movements out of which rapture doctrine developed. One such movement that will be featured is the Millerite movement, which was headed by a simple, uneducated farmer from upstate New York named William Miller. Miller's infamous prediction for the end of the world, which he calculated would come

¹ See Bart D. Erhman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

sometime in 1843, led to an event that has since been labeled “the great disappointment.” Miller revised the exact date several times, but on October 23, 1844, upwards of 100,000 people gathered to await the glorious return of Christ,² an event that obviously never occurred. While Miller remains an extreme example, understanding events such as the “great disappointment” will help to contextualize rapture theology in the greater body of apocalyptic doctrine.

The first chapter of the thesis will familiarize readers with John Nelson Darby (1800-82), the concept of the rapture, including its origins in text, and the movement known as dispensational premillennialism. Dispensational premillennialism, a worldview wherein human history is dictated by God and righteous believers are designated a privileged position,³ serves as the looking glass through which the rapture was conceived and through which it has to be understood. Darby’s conception of the rapture was grounded in the world view known as dispensationalism, a concept developed by Darby himself that human history is divided into separate eras, or dispensations. The premillennial stance, the position of the majority during Darby’s time, asserts that the world is becoming more and more helplessly corrupt. This preordained decline will culminate in a seven year period of tribulation that will end drastically with the return of Jesus and the establishment of the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth.⁴ When Darby developed the idea of a ‘secret rapture,’ it was his way of providing the elect with an alternative to enduring these seven years of hardship predicted in the book of Revelation (see Rev. 11:2 and 13.5).⁵ Darby envisioned a scenario in which the righteous would suddenly evaporate into thin air, presumably taken by Christ to heaven, leaving behind only a pile of their

² Bart D. Erhman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12-14.

³ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

⁴ Paul Boyer, “The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States” *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism: Vol. 3 Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age*, Ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Continuum, 1998), 149-150.

clothing and any other items on their persons. In his development of this concept, Darby relied textually on a passage from 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which reads: “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”⁵ While the majority of scholars agree that a ‘secret rapture’ was not what Paul envisioned when he wrote his letter to the church in Thessalonica, the idea has become a critical component of evangelical doctrine.

In the second chapter, the focus will move to major apocalyptic movements that have incorporated the rapture, to varying degrees, as a part of their central theology with a focus on more contemporary movements. Many of the more popular modern evangelists, such as Hal Lindsey, Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and others, will be considered. Hal Lindsey’s book entitled *The Rapture: Truth or Consequences?* presents his own his defense of rapture theology and followed his most renowned work entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which was the best selling non-fiction book (this term is used with hesitation) of the 1970s.⁷ Pat Robertson’s novel *The End of an Age* is a story of the chaos on earth preceding the end of time. His book represents one of many literary apocalyptic precursors to the *Left Behind* series, which is an extremely popular Christian apocalyptic fiction series that will be the topic of the third chapter of the thesis. Billy Graham has also written a book, similar to Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, called *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, in which he provides his own interpretation of biblical apocalyptic literature in light of current events. These evangelists each embrace their own conception of the rapture, and the aim of this chapter will be to identify and assess these sometimes differing conceptions in order to gain an appreciation of the role of the rapture in conservative Christian ministries.

⁵ Frykholm, 16-17.

⁶ NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)

As a way of providing a specific example of a form that rapture theology can take in modern American popular culture, the third chapter will focus on the phenomenon that is the *Left Behind* series. This twelve book series begins with the occurrence of the rapture, in a scene where a number of people on a commercial flight suddenly disappear, leaving behind only their clothing and any accessories on their persons. The first chapter of the first novel ends with Rayford Steele, the pilot of the plane and husband to born-again Christian Irene Steele, attempting to cope with “the terrifying truth...that he knew all too well. Irene had been right. He, and most of his passengers, had been left behind.”⁸ The *Left Behind* series has experienced enormous success, selling over 62 million copies over the past eight years. At the time of writing, the final installment of the series, *Glorious Appearing*, had reached the #1 spot on the bestseller lists for *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, authors of the *Left Behind* series, are also featured as the cover story of the most recent issue of *Newsweek*.⁹ In the article, David Gates writes that “they’re arguably the most successful literary partnership of all time, and if you define success in worldly terms, you can drop the ‘arguably.’”¹⁰ The goal of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the apocalyptic politics of the *Left Behind* series and to attempt to account for its startling popularity.

To conclude the thesis project, I will consider the final two questions that I posed in the introduction to this proposal, namely: how can the popularity of rapture imagery and teaching be explained and how long will the rapture remain such a central doctrine in conservative Christianity? The first of these questions will be addressed by drawing on evidence from all

⁷ Erhman, 7.

⁸ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 19.

⁹ *The Official Left Behind Series Site*, Christianity.com, Tyndale House Publishers (29 May 2004), <<http://www.leftbehind.com/>>.

¹⁰ David Gates, “Faith and Fiction: Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are an Unlikely Team with a Shared Evangelical Fervor—and America’s Best-Selling Writers,” *Newsweek* (24 Jan. 2004), 44.

previous sections of the paper. By comparing commonalities among the various apocalyptic figures, movements, literature, and media previously considered in the thesis, I hope to be able to isolate the driving forces behind what Amy Frykholm has called “rapture culture” in America.¹¹ Once I am able to determine the constitution of these elements, then I can begin to forecast how long these factors might persist and what their demise could mean to the future of the rapture in evangelical Christianity.

I will begin work on the project in the winter term of 2005, and I will complete the thesis paper the following term. Professor Susan Ackerman has agreed to be my advisor. I have done previous coursework with Professor Ackerman, including a class entitled “The End of the World,” in which our study focused on apocalyptic literature, movements, and communities from ancient times to the present. This coursework served as my introduction to the study of Christian apocalypticism and has helped to prepare me for undertaking this particular thesis topic.

¹¹ See Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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