

Taken up: Being prepared

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

In discussing two books on the new apocalypticism, [Jason Byassee confesses](#) that he failed as a pastor to know what his people were reading and thinking about the topic. I know what he means. I don't read this stuff either. But a lot of people *are* reading it. Sales estimates for the Left Behind series range from 40 million to 60 million. Whatever the exact figure, authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are surpassing John Grisham in the category of popular novelists. The publisher, Tyndale House, knows a good thing when it sees it: it will spend \$2 million marketing the 12th and final volume, *Glorious Appearing*. Wal-Mart is giving away free copies of the first chapter as a come-on.

Joseph Hough, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, told the *New York Times* that the Left Behind series and the apocalyptic theology it is based on represent a "serious distortion of scripture." It is certainly bloody. When Jesus returns to battle the Antichrist's armies it will be a ghastly massacre. "Tens of thousands of foot soldiers writhing . . . Their innards and entrails gushed to the desert floor."

My attitude has been elitist, I confess. I don't take this stuff seriously. When I see a bumper sticker that announces: "Warning: In case of rapture this vehicle will be unmanned," I chuckle, remembering that a friend once said she thought the reference to "rapture" in the bumper sticker referred to something sexual happening in the front seat. And I remember that my grandmother, who late in life picked up theology from radio evangelists, believed that the Final Tribulation had begun in her lifetime. Grandma, as I recall, for a while regarded FDR as the Antichrist. Then it was Hitler. Next it was Stalin.

What are pastors to do in a religious climate in which millions of people are buying, reading, enjoying and maybe even believing that history is headed toward an enormous bloodbath? We should take seriously the fact that people do ask: What will the end be? Is there some final purpose at work in human history?

For another thing, we should be prepared with biblical alternatives such as Jeremiah 31—in which the prophet looks ahead and sees a time of reunion, when God’s people will return home with tears of consolation, young women will dance, young and old men will be merry, and mourning will be transformed into joy. Or St. Paul, asking the eschatological questions in light of his experience of Christ’s Lordship: “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth” (Eph. 1:10).

Two things I am going to do: put Byassee’s article into my Eschatology/Apocalyptic file (I know they’re different categories!) and put Amy Frykholm’s and Barbara Rossing’s books on the top of my stack for summer reading.