

'Beam me up' theology: The debate over 'LeftBehind'

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

The hugely popular "Left Behind" series of novels continues to frustrate mainstream pastors and biblical scholars who object to an "end-times" theology they consider just as fictional as the books' genre. The readers are real, however. The tenth and most recent volume in the series, *The Remnant*, picked up 2.4 million orders in the two months before its July release.

In a little-noticed resolution passed overwhelmingly by the 2001 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), delegates declared that the theology of the series is "not in accord with our Reformed understanding" of the New Testament Book of Revelation. The resolution urged pastors to lead their congregations through studies of the novels if they are causing "confusion and dissension."

In addition, the Lutheran Church– Missouri Synod said the books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are "filled with very serious errors about what the Bible really teaches." A critical analysis in December 2000 by the late A. L. Barry, then-president of the church, remains on the synod's Web site.

By contrast, the Assemblies of God Web site carries a friendly interview with LaHaye from 2000, along with the denomination's stance on "the rapture" as a "blessed hope." For the sinner, "to be left behind will involve indescribable suffering as God judges a rebellious and disobedient world," according to the Assemblies' doctrinal statement.

Recently joining the fray was evangelical scholar Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary, a prolific author of New Testament studies. In the August issue of *Bible Review* magazine, Witherington noted the popular appeal that apocalyptic literature has in unsettling times. "Unfortunately, not all apocalyptic thinking is good apocalyptic thinking, and this is especially true of the so-called dispensational theology that informs these novels," Witherington wrote. "The most distinctive feature of dispensational theology is what I call the 'Beam me up, Scotty'

belief.”

In a similar vein, Bill Hull, a Samford University research professor, told Associated Baptist Press recently that “dispensationalism,” in which God tests humans in certain time periods, remains a minority view among theologians. The ideas, spread in the 1860s by English evangelist John Nelson Darby, gained popularity with the publication of the influential Scofield Reference Bible in 1909, which contains long footnotes outlining Darby’s views. A dispensationalist precursor to the “Left Behind” series was Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*—a record-breaking best seller in the 1970s.

The supernatural plot in the LaHaye-Jenkins novels, published by Tyndale House, has true believers taken from the earth in a “rapture” that precedes seven years of suffering—the great tribulation—for those left behind. Drawing on images in Revelation, the books predict an Antichrist demanding universal loyalty and acceptance of a “mark of the beast” on their bodies. Plagues and suffering ensue until Jesus returns to establish a 1,000-year reign on earth.

Hull, former dean of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, contends that the “Left Behind” series perpetuates “a massive misunderstanding” of scripture. Hull discounts LaHaye’s account of “a secret rapture where unbelievers don’t know why people have disappeared.” He notes that Revelation 1:7 says that when Christ returns, “Every eye shall see him.” The present dean of the Louisville seminary, Danny Aiken, told the news service that he agrees with the books’ general theology, but is concerned about liberties the authors take with scripture.

“A well-informed minister should be reading the ‘Left Behind’ series, because his people are,” Aiken said.

At least one survey has shown that only half of the series’ readers can be called evangelicals. But even nonevangelicals have at least a vague sense of awful predictions in the Bible. Months after the September 11 skyjacking attacks, a *Time* /CNN poll found that 59 percent of Americans believe that prophecies in Revelation will come true. Nearly a fourth think the Bible predicted the terrorist attacks specifically.

Two critiques of the novels have appeared over the past year in *Bible Review*. British scholar N. T. Wright, who has engaged in debates with liberal Jesus Seminar leaders, wrote in the August 2001 issue that the huge U.S. success of the “Left Behind”

series “appears puzzling, even bizarre” on the other side of the Atlantic.

The dramatic end-time scenario of believers being snatched up into heaven is an incorrect interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Wright said. That passage about meeting the Lord in the air “should be read with the assumption that the people will immediately turn around and lead the Lord back to the newly remade world”—similar to residents meeting a visiting emperor in open country, then escorting him into the city, he said. Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, according to Wright, are not the same as Gospel passages about “the Son of man coming on the clouds” (such as Mark 13:26 and 14:62), which “are about Jesus’ vindication, his ‘coming’ to heaven from earth.”

Witherington’s column in *Bible Review* a year later seconded Wright’s interpretation of the Thessalonian verses, arguing that, according to Paul, those meeting Christ in the sky would return to earth to reign with him there. Witherington also disputed an “unwarranted” view by dispensationalists that the last generation of Christians are “exempt” from tribulation. “Why should the last generation of Christians expect to do less cross-bearing than previous ones?” he asked.

“The idea that John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, intended his message to be understood only by a late 20th-century or 21st-century Western Christian audience is not only arrogant—it flies in the face of what John himself writes in Revelation 2-3,” said Witherington. “Here John states quite clearly that his intended audience was Christians in western Asia Minor at the end of the first century A.D.”