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The “Left Behind” View is Out of Left Field

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ “Left Behind” books are immensely popular, and their movie may be too, but the “Left Behind” view of the End Times is filled with very serious errors about what the Bible really teaches about the End Times.

A Statement by Dr. A. L. Barry
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ST. LOUIS, December 11, 2000—Look atop the NEW YORK TIMES best-seller list for fiction and you will find THE MARK, the eighth in a series of “Left Behind” books by collaborators Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. These novels, fictionalized accounts of the so-called Rapture of the church and the rise of the Antichrist during the subsequent seven-year “Tribulation,” are “true to prophecy,” according to their authors. LaHaye and Jenkins claim to base the series on the Biblical book of St. John’s Revelation. They make the same claim about the soon-to-be-released “Left Behind” movie.

In truth, however, the fascinating book of Revelation is not meant to be read as a literal account. Instead, it is written in highly symbolic language and, through grand visions and pictures, presents important truths about the power of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ. Unlike the “Left Behind” view of the End Times, St. John’s vision of what will occur when Christ returns is not chiefly characterized by mass confusion, chaos and hysteria. Certain people—those whom LaHaye and Jenkins call “the true believers”—will not suddenly vanish in thin air while others are “left behind,” holding the clothes, eyeglasses and even the dental fillings of those “caught up” in the Rapture. Airliners in flight will not suddenly become pilotless or city busses driverless, sending their passengers careening to their deaths. Spouses will not wake up next to an empty pair of pajamas or nightgown. This sort of haunting imagery may sell books, but it is not what the Bible says.

John’s Revelation, although certainly pertaining to the Final Judgment and the need for all people to be ever watchful and ready for it, is also about eternally joyful events. It is about heaven, which in Revelation is described as the “New Jerusalem,” a beautiful place where all who trust in Christ will live eternally in the presence of God and their fellow redeemed. It is about the wedding of the Lamb, Jesus, to His bride, the Church. It is about the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting, “Hallelujah! Our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!” It is about the rewards awaiting those who persevere in the faith.

LaHaye and Jenkins, by overlooking these complementary themes in Revelation and focusing instead on just one slant—the potentially frightening aspects of the Last Judgment—sidetrack their readers from the positive Gospel encouragement of the Apocalypse: the joy of the Lord’s return. They thus obscure the Gospel truth of just how beautiful the end will be for all believers in Christ, not just those relatively few believers (as the authors assert) with a special, inside understanding of End Times theology.

This brings to mind an even greater error and danger, of the “Left Behind” books: the idea that there will be a “second chance” for people who do not have trusting faith in Jesus Christ. This too is completely contrary to the Bible, which teaches that NOW is the time of salvation. When Christ returns on the Last Day, all things will come to an end, with no second chances. The resurrection of the dead, and the taking of those still alive at the time, and their judgment, will be total, involving everyone who has ever lived. This is why Christians have such a burden to tell the good news about Jesus now, before this present age ends.

The historic position of Christianity, embraced by the majority of Christians in the world today, is that there is just one great occurrence at the end of history: Judgment Day. That day, for all its power and majesty, will be far simpler and more conclusive than the complex, ongoing chain of events envisioned in the “Left Behind” books.

Like other flawed apocalyptic views, the LaHaye/Jenkins view relies on date-setting for anticipating the end (when in fact no one knows the hour when Christ will return). It looks for “signs” of prophecies being fulfilled in the churning events and endless flare-ups of the Middle East (another iffy proposition). The entire “Left Behind” series, including the “Left Behind” movie scheduled for release in February, is an unbiblical flight of fancy (known by the term “dispensational premillennialism”) receiving far more press than it deserves.

If there is anything good about these books, it is, one hopes, that they will lead people to seek the truth about the End Times. And seeking that truth, such people will, by the blessing of God, discover that those who trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have the assurance that because of His death and resurrection for us, we have the full and free forgiveness of our sins.

We may not know all the details about the end of the world, but we do know that books like the “Left Behind” series do not point us in the right direction. We also know that we need not be anxious or troubled about the End Times. Nor should we get all caught up in speculating about them. We live in the time of the “now” and the “not yet.” We have salvation in Christ now, but we do not yet have the final blessing of our salvation: life in new bodies in the presence of Christ forever in heaven. Therefore, though we do not know when our Lord will return, we are nonetheless able to look forward to His Second Coming with confidence, hope, joy and anticipation, always being ready to welcome Him who promises us, “‘I am coming soon. Amen.’ Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

—The Rev. Dr. A.L. Barry is president of the 2.6 million-member Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, America’s second-largest Lutheran denomination.