



MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

THE END TIMES



Are we utterly obsessed or dangerously indifferent?

**RICHARD
BAUCKHAM**

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talks prophecy and apocalypse*

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LETTERS

CAN STAR TREK TEACH US LESSONS ABOUT NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT? MARK WOODS IS TAKEN TO TASK, VULCAN-STYLE.

TRIDENT: MASSIVELY WRONG

I applaud *Catalyst's* timely debate on the issue of Trident renewal.

However, I must object to Mark Woods' article, firstly over a matter of tone. He effectively labels opponents of Trident as 'naive cowards'. In contrast, Symon Hill's article does not anywhere negatively characterise those who think differently to himself. There was no need for Mr Woods to resort to name-calling – Parliament and the media do enough of this already.

I have several issues with Mark's arguments, but I will restrict myself to only two observations, one negative, one positive.

Firstly, Mark makes it sound as if the existence of nuclear weapons has been a history of straightforward avoidance of nuclear catastrophe. The catalogue of potential disasters in previous years is too long and too frightful to mention here. This leads to an obvious truth: the longer nations retain nuclear arsenals, the more likely it is that some accident, misunderstanding or terrorist incident could trigger a genocidal nuclear war. In all my letters over the years to my MP,

the MoD and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, no-one has attempted to answer this obvious point.

Secondly, the international agreement in Paris over climate change.

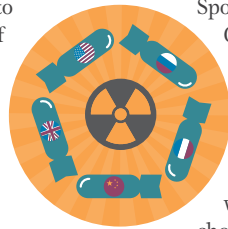
In the light of this significant breakthrough it makes no sense for nations to continue to insist on retaining nuclear weapons. As Spock of the USS Enterprise might have said, "It's illogical, Captain". Of course, we belong to a sinful human race with an apparently limitless capacity for evil.

However, we miss our way if we call the significant evil of nuclear weapons a 'necessary evil'.

The Paris agreement should give us hope for a similar international agreement banning all nuclear weapons, similar to the existing treaties which ban chemical and nuclear weapons. The Pope and Anglican Bishops all agree that this would be a worthwhile aim.

It is our calling to realise the kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven". This is not naivety or irresponsible cowardice; it is our Christian hope.

Colin Cartwright



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NOT WITH A BANG, BUT WITH INDIFFERENCE



ESCHATOLOGY EMBODIES THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRISTIAN HOPE.

In many Christian circles, especially outside the US, talk of the End Times can trigger an involuntary roll of the eyes, just before they glaze over. End Times theology has for too long been fertile ground for overworked imaginations and underworked minds. Dates come and go. Blood moons wax and wane. You know the kind of stuff.

But it's all too easy, and all too wrong, to write off something that has serious biblical roots. In Matthew 24 Jesus responds to Peter's question about the sign of his coming and the end of the age and refers in verse three to famines, earthquakes and the need to beware false teachers claiming to come in his name. But he goes on to say in verse nine: "then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death... many will fall away..." which seems to suggest this refers to the persecutions in the decades that followed.

Then it gets really confusing, because Jesus continues in verse 29, saying: "immediately after the suffering of those days" they will "see the coming of the Son of Man." Certainly many in the early Church, Paul included, seemed to live with the expectation that Jesus would return sooner rather than later.

We're told in verse 36 that, "about the day and the hour no one knows... not even the Son" – oh how I wish people would believe that – and in case you're



tempted to relax after the passing of 2,000 years, verse 40 adds a worrying detail that on that day, "two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left." Apocalyptic imagery can be frightening, a trait that has not been lost on some of its more colourful exponents.

End Times theology has real-life, right-here, right-now implications. From the late 19th century in the US, an evangelical reading of the End Times has led many, especially on the conservative political right, to a deep suspicion of government interference in personal affairs. We see this from guns to Obamacare. If your assumption is that all governments will yield to a totalitarian leader who will be the Antichrist (1 and 2 John), then everything from the Feds and the UN, to the EU is viewed

with suspicion. And candidates for this despotic ruler have ranged from Popes and Ayatollahs to Tsars, with Putin a particular favourite right now.

Lest you think this is pure fancy, with little in the way of potential negative consequences, consider the influence of End Times thinking on many Christians' unquestioning support for the modern state of Israel.

End Times theology shapes society and history, but it also shapes mission. If your belief is that Jesus will return only when the nations have been reached (Matthew 24: 14), then your methodology might just focus on reaching the greatest number at the quickest speed. This kind of short-termism can lead you to conclude that even if the planet is being destroyed – nuclear holocaust, or global warming – it doesn't matter. Boom! Jesus is coming back!

One practical outcome that I hope for from reading this edition of *Catalyst* is that pastors might have a greater confidence to return to the apocalyptic passages in Scripture and preach on them. We will serve our people well by clarifying and defusing the obscure imagery, but we will also declare the wonderful apocalyptic truth of the risen Christ returning triumphantly to his people in the renewed creation.

David

David Kerrigan
General Director

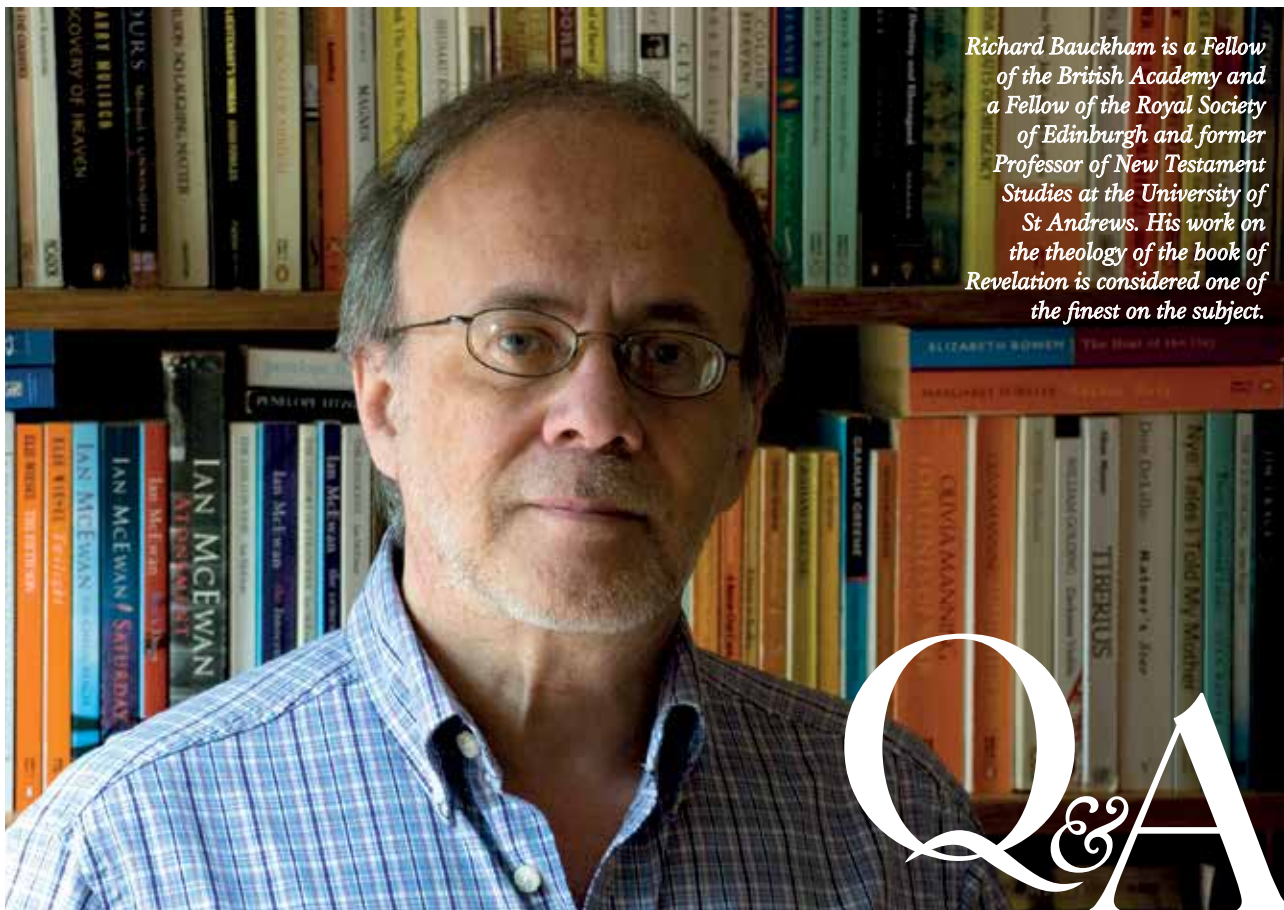
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Q&A

RICHARD BAUCKHAM

GOD'S HOPE IN AND FOR THE WORLD DOES NOT REST IN RESCUING US FROM A DOOMED CREATION.

What, today, do you think people are most often getting wrong about the issue of the End Times?

I suppose it depends on what sort of Christian circles you are looking at. My impression of the American scene is that an awful lot of evangelicals are lapping up this *Left Behind* eschatology, with the Rapture and that sort of thing. You could divide eschatological views more or less into optimistic and pessimistic as far as

this world goes.

The Rapture notion, that everything is getting worse, but it doesn't really matter because Christian believers will escape from it before it gets really, really worse – that seems to be very escapist and irresponsible, because people have no reason to care about the world they live in, about the society they live in, and so forth. I think it is exegetically indefensible.

And the other one is the more optimistic view. There is quite a lot of Christian thought which has absorbed the modern idea of progress into a Christian version, so that the kingdom of God is this incremental progress of humanity towards a utopian future. There are many versions of that in the modern world, it is a kind of modern secular eschatology. A lot of Christian thought in the modern period has baptised that, as it were.

Why is it exegetically indefensible to treat things like the Rapture seriously?

Well, it seems to me to be largely based on the passage in 1 Thessalonians which talks about the coming of the Lord and believers who are alive at the time being caught up in the clouds in order to be with him. I think that most exegetes agree now that, first of all, that it is an image. And eschatology very largely deals in images. It doesn't give us literal pictures of what is going to happen at the end. What use would those be? What it gives us is images which convey something of the meaning of the final events.

And what is the final image? The general idea is that this is like a king in the ancient world coming to a city, and the people of the city, a delegation of the city, go out to meet him. The point is to escort him into the city – not to leave the city with him. It is to greet him and to lead him into the city. So the idea that it is taking people up into the sky is a misunderstanding of that basic image.

What do you think accounts for its popularity?

That's a difficult question, isn't it? It has been very well propagated in various forms. I have not read these *Left Behind* novels but they are obviously a very attractive way of reading about this stuff. They capture people's imagination, they are widely available – I have been told there has been a problem in the States with ministers who don't take this view themselves. It is so popular among their congregations, who read the *Left Behind* novels, that they really hesitate to challenge it. A lot of people read this stuff and there is no real challenge to that way of seeing things from people who know better or ought to know better.

I don't think that view is anything like as common among evangelicals in this country as it is in America. I think that is

with the idea – I mean, you can look around the world and it seems very dark. I frequently watch the news and feel terrible about the world at the moment. So much bad news. To have the sense that this is God's predestined way of bringing things to a close and we are not going to

But what you have got in the United States is a massive world power, which I don't think you can simply say is a force for evil – or that it is a force for good. It is balanced between the two, it has great potential for either and lots of different things are going on.

“ THE SENSE THAT THIS IS GOD'S WAY OF BRINGING THINGS TO A CLOSE AND WE ARE GOING TO ESCAPE FROM IT HAS AN OBVIOUS APPEAL ”

have to be involved in it – and are going to escape from it – I think that has an obvious appeal.

You've called Revelation a text for political resistance against Rome, which I think can be applied to other, contemporary empires. Is there a danger in applying that today?

I think there may be two dangers. One is the danger of literalism – of straightforwardly identifying the dangers of Revelation with some power in the modern world. I think the images from Revelation alert us to the kind of things that happen in history, rather than enabling us to see this particular political thing is the Beast with seven heads, or whatever.

The other danger I think is probably black and white thinking that might incline us to see some aspect of the world as entirely evil. Lots of situations have potential for good in them and potential

The danger of an apocalyptic oversimplification of history is what can arise. The black and white thing is terribly useful in crisis situations where you're really up against it: where Christians are being martyred, as in the early Church, for example, or in 17th century Japan – a political force that is intent on stamping out Christian faith or intent on genocide. For those kinds of things I think black and white imagery becomes very appropriate.

Is it important for us to have this stuff right or can we muddle through without it?

I think we can be open about details. The general sense is that God has a purpose for his whole creation. This is not just about our spirits going up to heaven. It is about the purpose of God for the whole creation. To have this conviction, that God in the end intends a good destiny for his whole creation – he didn't make his creation for it to just perish or to go bad. He made his whole creation to, in the end, be redeemed and taken to his own eternal life, a renewed creation.

I think that general worldview, which can face up to the horrors of history and, at the same time, have confidence that God's purpose for the whole is good... I think we really, really need that context in order to live the rest of our lives, and to have hope in God, or to have hope for the world. To have a faith that isn't like the Rapture and those other versions of a hope that are just escape from the world. It is hope for the world because ultimately it is based on the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead.

part of the difference. I've never seen the *Left Behind* novels in this country. Some people have them, but they don't circulate, there isn't that sort of very effective, imaginative propaganda for that view around. Simply how the view is put across I think partly accounts for its popularity.

And I suppose there is a great appeal

for evil. Of course, you get the crisis situations – I think it is hard to see much good in Islamic State, I'm quite happy to use a black and white apocalyptic characterisation of Islamic State. But other parts of the world today, let's say the United States – there are people who identify the United States with the Beast.

“ THE RAPTURE IS EXEGETICALLY INDEFENSIBLE ”

WHERE TO START WITH THE END TIMES?

Understanding key apocalyptic scriptures

THE BEAST, THE RAPTURE, THE FOUR HORSEMEN AND WHY THE BOOK OF REVELATION IS A BIT LIKE SCI-FI.

Have you ever felt as though your world was ending? With forces beyond your control taking over the present, leaving the future uncertain and terrifying? If so, then you're not alone. From serious illness, to bereavement, warfare and natural disaster, humans have always lived in the shadow of 'world-ending' scenarios. The question is *how* to live under such a shadow? This is the pastoral question that drives much of what the Bible has to say about the 'end of the world', and it finds its most potent expression in the Lord's Prayer: "your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6: 10).

The question, however, is whether these End Times scriptures are referring to some future event, or to an alternative way of living in the present. Most of the popularist readings of the End Times passages tend to throw them into the future, and to then look for signs as to whether that future is imminent. The current and genuine fears about global warming, climate change, or a post-

antibiotic world generate high levels of fear, anxiety, denial, or activism amongst Christians, and lead many to conclude that the end is nigh. But people have been predicting the imminent end for thousands of years, and so far no-one has set a date which has been proved right. As Jesus said, "Not even I know the date and time my Father has set" (Matthew 24: 36).

The 'end of the world' passages tend to use a style of writing which has become known as *apocalyptic*. It takes its name from the opening of the book of Revelation, and simply means 'revealed'. It is primarily about the revelation of heavenly mysteries, passing on to its readers heaven's perspective on their earthly situation. Apocalyptic was a genre greatly enjoyed by the Jews in the couple of hundred years before the time of Jesus, and it functioned for them in a way not dissimilar to how science fiction functions for us today. If we were to watch an episode of *Star Trek*, or a futuristic sci-fi film, we would know that what we were watching wasn't a detailed prediction of what the future would be like. Nor

would we sit around trying to work out at what date it would all come true. Sci-fi at its best is a literary genre that is set in an imaginary future in order to free people's minds from the trammels of their present lived reality, and to create the imaginative space for fresh reflection on issues which are of relevance to the real world of the here and now. This was how *apocalyptic* functioned in the first century: it used futuristic, out-of-this-world images and stories to help those reading it to gain a new perspective on their lives. It frequently used the literary device of a vision or dream to provide a context for the vivid images which depicted alternative ways of understanding the world. So a wicked empire might become a fantastical many-headed beast or a corrupt prostitute, while struggling churches might become shining stars or a faithful woman.

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

There are certain key images which people have latched onto as they seek to work out whether what they are reading about in the Bible is relevant to the future or to the present, and we'll spend a few moments unpacking some of these, starting with the number of the Beast.

It's likely that Nero is the solution to this particular enigma. The Jews used to take names and substitute letters for numbers, and then add these together to



The Crowned Virgin Vision Of John, Gustave Dore, 1897

arrive at the 'number' of a name. They called this process 'numerology', and believed that you could tell something important about a person by the number of their name. So when Revelation says that the 'number' of the name of the beast is 666 (Revelation 13: 18), it seems likely that the author has an individual in mind. If you take the Greek for Nero Caesar, transliterate it into Hebrew and turn it into a number you get, you guessed it, 666. This is also the number you get from the Greek word for 'beast', reinforcing the point that the number of the 'Beast' is indeed the 'name' of Nero. One can imagine John as a first century equivalent to a modern fan of the cryptic crossword, working meticulously with letters and numbers to demonstrate his belief that

Nero is a manifestation of the satanic Beast.

Some have sought to tie in the number of the Beast with the idea of an Antichrist figure who is still to come, but 'antichrist' actually comes from the first two letters of John in the New Testament, where it is used to refer to those who are wilfully opposing the Lordship of Christ.

THE RAPTURE

Another topic people spend a lot of time on is the idea of a future 'Rapture'. This is the notion that at some point in the future, not long before the end of the world, all faithful Christians are suddenly going to be snatched from the earth to heaven, leaving the rest of humanity to face the horror of the 'Tribulation'. A

number of recent successful Christian novels and films have popularised this idea, dramatically describing cars left without drivers, aircraft without pilots, and so on.

The idea actually originates in the 19th century, and is based on a verse in one of Paul's letters (1 Thessalonians 4: 17), where he is addressing the pastoral issue of why Christians are still dying if Jesus is supposed to have defeated death. Tom Wright suggests imagining a king returning to his home city in celebration; the people go out to welcome the king and then bring him back to their city. The image in 1 Thessalonians is of those who have died having gone out to welcome their returning king (Jesus), who is coming to the earth. Those who are 'left behind' on the earth are the faithful Christians who are patiently awaiting the coming of their king.

MILLENNIALISMS

Another 'hot topic' which people often associate with the end of the world is the 'Millennium'. This is one of those words which has acquired something of a life of its own, which has taken it far beyond the pages of the book where it started (Revelation 20: 6-7). In contemporary culture, the Millennium has come to mean a dawning thousand-year golden age, such as the 'Age of Aquarius' or even the Third Reich of Nazi Germany.

For some Christians, the 'coming Millennium' is regarded as the key to understanding the end of the world. But within the book of Revelation itself, the 'thousand years' of the Millennium has a much more pastoral function, offering comfort and assurance that when seen from above, the martyrdom of the faithful believer is the precise opposite of what it appears to be when seen from below. A persecuting emperor might reign for a decade or two, but Christ reigns, and all the martyrs with him, for a thousand years!

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

One of the great enduring images of the End Times is that of 'the four horsemen of the Apocalypse', and the picture of four great stallions galloping across the sky at the end of time is one that many of us know well (Revelation 6: 1-8). However, the things people have done with them don't always do justice to the images themselves.

Rather than being something that will happen at some point in the future, it makes more sense to understand the

image of the four horsemen as a picture of the way the world was, is, and will be. In the world of the first century, Revelation's author John saw death, suffering, war, economic injustice, plague, and pestilence rampaging through the world and creating nothing less than hell on earth. His great insight is that these evil forces are set loose in the world whenever humans create and re-create 'empire': whenever humans construct those satanic political/ economic/ideological/military institutions ('empires') which take for themselves the power and privilege and devotion that by rights belongs to God alone.

THE WHORE OF BABYLON

Another of the Bible's powerful images for the 'empire' that displaces God from the centre of the cosmos is that of 'the great whore of Babylon'. We meet her towards the end of the book of Revelation (chapter 17), and she is presented as a pastiche of the goddess Roma.

The Romans personified their empire as a female goddess (think of Britannia symbolising the British empire), and statues and paintings of Roma were common. John reworks this image of the empire as a beautiful, virginal, noble, pure woman, and describes her instead as a prostitute, as the 'great whore'. Instead of the Roman empire being a system of trade which benefits all parties (which is how it presented itself), John paints it as an economic system which corrupts those who buy into its benefits. It is no accident that the great whore rides the great beast which symbolises the military power and might of the Roman empire.


It is so often the case that economic corruption and military might go hand in hand, colluding together to take wealth from the earth by both deception and force. It is a legitimate question to ask where, in our world, can we see the great whore of economic oppression in league with the great beast of military might, seducing and compelling the world into submission. The hopeful promise of Scripture is that such beasts are not eternal, and that God is at work to bring all that is evil to its ultimate end and all that is good to its ultimate goal.

THE NEW EARTH

The Bible ends with a vision of a recreated cosmos, the "new heavens and new earth" (Revelation 21). At the centre of this vision of the renewal of all things lies an image of the Church, depicted as a city and called the "new Jerusalem".

In the first century, the temple in Jerusalem was the place where the Jews

St John added a new image
2000 years ago •



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👍 3 likes
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The Vision of the Seven Candlesticks, Albrecht Dürer 1941

believed God lived. The city of "new Jerusalem" is offered as an alternative to the city of Babylon (Rome), and the invitation is for those who have seen the evils of Babylon to transfer their citizenship to the "new Jerusalem". In today's world of rampant nationalism and divisive tribalism, the challenge to give one's primary allegiance to the heavenly city rather than to any earthly power offers a powerful antidote to the evils of ethnic tension and division.

Those who follow Christ through

suffering are those who share in the great resurrection of all things. But more than this, the churches have a crucial part to play in the re-creation of the cosmos, as they faithfully bear witness to the in-breaking kingdom of God in the midst of the present. Those who pray and live out "your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven", are those who bring the future into being in the here-and-now, and so give shape to the alternative, hopeful future that Scripture proclaims.

WHO IS THE

ANTICHRIST?

WHERE SHOULD WE BE LOOKING FOR THE ANTICHRIST? THIS ANSWER MAY SURPRISE YOU.

The roots of the idea of the Antichrist lie in ancient dualistic thinking about the struggle between good and evil. Mythological fables from the Ancient Near East, such as the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*, told of battles between a deity and a monster or dragon of chaos. Similar concepts are found in Hebrew thinking, for example, in the idea of the sea monster Leviathan in Psalm 74: 14 (cf Isa 27: 1):

“You crushed the heads of Leviathan, you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness” (NASB).

In apocalyptic literature, the concept of an arch-enemy of God is expressed in mysterious, symbolic terms. In Daniel 7, for example, a “little horn” is destroyed by the Ancient of Days, and the kingdom given to a “son of man”. In the New Testament, 2 Thessalonians speaks of a “lawless one” who, at the End Times, will set himself up as God and be destroyed by Christ (2 Thess 2: 1-12). The book of Revelation, drawing on the traditions in Daniel, speaks of a beast with many heads which has to be annihilated (13: 1-10). In the Synoptic Gospels a variation of the idea is found (Mark 13: 6, 21-22; Matt 24: 5, 23-24; Luke 21: 8): the End Times will be heralded by false messiahs and prophets who will lead people astray.

Biblical scholarship has seen some of these figures as historically contingent. For example, the common view is that the “little horn” in Daniel 7 and 8 refers to Antiochus Epiphanes, the second Seleucid king who reigned from 175 to

164 BC. Antiochus dedicated an altar to Zeus in the Temple and sacrificed a pig on it, thus defiling the most sacred place of the Jewish people. Others, however, think the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD is in mind here. In 2 Thessalonians, it may be that the “lawless one” refers to the Emperor Caligula, who declared himself to

biblical Antichrist figure, Christians have never been able to resist the temptation to identify individuals or regimes as the arch-enemy of God, who will usher in the End Times. In the medieval period, Jews and heretics were candidates for the distinction, and during the Reformation, the papacy was the obvious choice. Peter the Great, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin have all been candidates. Search Google today and you will find that the papacy still appears as a popular contender, along with such diverse characters as Osama Bin Laden, Hillary Clinton, Bill Gates and Britney Spears, among others.

“ Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin have all been candidates, along with Osama Bin Laden, Hillary Clinton, Bill Gates and Britney Spears ”

be divine. In Revelation, Roman emperors such as Nero or Domitian, who persecuted the Church, may be the implicit referents.

That there is no one ‘biblical’ Antichrist figure is underlined in 1 and 2 John, the only places in Scripture in which the actual term “antichrist” is used (1 John 2: 18, 22; 4: 3; 2 John 7). John explicitly says that the Antichrist is the one who denies the Father and Son (2:22) and, moreover, in this “last hour” many such have come (1 John 2: 18). 2 John speaks of “deceivers” who have gone out from the Church into the world, people who do not acknowledge Christ as in the flesh. These people, he says, are the Antichrist. This leads many scholars to believe that John has in mind a docetic heresy in which the true humanity of Christ is denied.

Despite the fact that there is no one

We should have learned our lesson by now. Clearly, all this says more about our own prejudices and fears than those whom we denounce as the personification of evil. We would do well to return to the Johannine letters and heed the warnings that the antichrist – resistance to Christ – comes from within the Church itself. It is identifiable, to use the words of Bernard McGinn, in that “religious self-deception that is always in danger of sliding into self-satisfaction and then into persecution of others.” This, of course, is not to say that there is not evil in the world, and that Christians should not name it as such when they see it. But it is a salutary warning that it is always easier, and more psychologically satisfying, to point the finger at others than to examine ourselves.

Dr Steve Finamore

Principal of Bristol Baptist College and author of *God, Order and Chaos: René Girard and the Apocalypse*



WHY THE MILLENNIUM MATTERS FOR MISSION

COULD YOUR VIEW OF THE END TIMES BE HAVING AN EFFECT ON YOUR ATTITUDE TO OUTREACH?

Sometimes people talk about the last times as though they were talking about the number of angels that can dance on a pinhead: the issue may raise interesting biblical and theological questions, but the answers do not make any real difference to the things that actually matter. This attitude is summed up in the popular joke that gets used to end discussions of these questions: “I’m a panmillennialist – it doesn’t matter whether you’re a premillennialist or a postmillennialist

because it’ll all pan out in the end.”

I want to suggest that in fact these things really do matter. This is because they can have a profound effect on the way we live and on our priorities. As Robert Clouse argues, “Many attitudes that a Christian has about society, the Church and its purpose, education and culture, and even current events are conditioned by the sort of eschatology he holds.” I want to go further and argue that our approach to mission may also be conditioned by our understanding of the last times. If I’m right about this, then the

study of biblical prophecy may turn out to be very significant indeed.

There are lots of different approaches to understanding the Bible’s teaching about the End Times (Amillennialism and Historic Premillennialism, for example) and many of these find their focus on the interpretation of the 1,000 year period, often called the Millennium, that is mentioned in Revelation 20. It is not possible to do justice to all of these in an article of this length. Instead I shall try to address two of them in some detail, because they are the ones where the issues become clearest.

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

Most dispensationalists, taking their lead from JN Darby and from the notes found in the *Schofield Reference Bible*, have a heightened sense of the imminence of Christ's coming in the air to take away his people and leave the rest of the world to endure the 'Great Tribulation'. This tribulation is understood as a seven year period at the end of which Christ will come to earth to establish his millennial reign. This is the perspective of the novels that make up the *Left Behind* series.

Such a perspective will inevitably affect our understanding of mission. The world is seen in negative terms, as something caught in a downward spiral and from which Christians are about to escape. The world is a place to be avoided rather than engaged with. In these circumstances, all that matters is persuading people to become believers. The Church becomes seen as a lifeboat where we huddle together as we wait to be rescued. There is no real need to emphasise discipleship or to encourage people to commit to extensive periods of specialised training; the time is short and the task is urgent.

One writer who has explored this issue in some depth is the Latin American theologian Oscar Campos. He argues that evangelical mission thinkers from his continent are having to work hard to undo the legacy of the North American dispensationalist faith missions that dominated the Protestant evangelisation of their homelands. They sense a lack of depth to discipleship and a reluctance to engage with societal questions and, in the light of this, are trying to promote understandings of the Church's missionary task that are more kingdom-oriented and integral in their approach.

In general, those who hold premillennialist views, especially those associated with dispensationalism, tend to be pessimistic about the world and about human society. Some of them have argued that there is no real reason for Christians to be concerned about caring for the environment, since the whole earth is about to fall under the authority of the Antichrist. You may remember that Hal Lindsey's book that had great currency in the 1970s and 1980s was called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. In addition, these views can lead to a separatist attitude towards culture and art. These things are disparaged and Christians are discouraged from engaging with them.

Next, since there are signs of biblical

prophecy being fulfilled all around us, there is a constant attempt to identify events and leaders with things mentioned in the Bible. One outcome of this is that teaching on significant issues can change from one year to the next.

Finally, I have heard at least one dispensationalist preacher speak in praise of the attitude of those who, they claim, have such a strong sense of the imminence of Christ's return, that they are 'waiting for the Rapture with one foot already in the air'. This may not necessarily be conducive to active missional engagement.

Of course, none of this is to deny that there are some very positive outcomes to the dispensationalist position and the kind of expectation it promotes. It is often associated with a strong emphasis on evangelism and on personal holiness, as well as a genuine sense of urgency about

was important to preach the gospel – first and foremost because it would bring salvation to those who embraced it, but also because, so they trusted, the gospel would have a transformative effect on society as a whole. Indeed, in time, the transforming power of the gospel would lead to an extended period of peace, prosperity and justice which, while not perfect, could be identified with the promised Millennium.

These perspectives gave rise to both a degree of urgency and to a sense that missionary work was something which could have a view to its longer-term impact. There was an emphasis on discipleship, on mentoring, on training the next generation of leaders and so on. Furthermore, advocates of this position encouraged church members to become involved in politics and public

“Waiting for the Rapture with one foot already in the air may not be conducive to active missional engagement”

reaching those people groups who have not yet had an opportunity to respond to the gospel.

POSTMILLENNIALISM

Where the premillennialist believes that Christ will return to the earth in order to establish an earthly reign lasting 1,000 years, postmillennialists argue that he will return after a long period, which corresponds to the Millennium, of relative peace and prosperity, brought about by the advance of the gospel and its effects on human society. There is a great deal of evidence that this vision of a transformed world inspired lots of missionary endeavour.

Lots of interesting material was gathered by Iain Murray for his book about the Christian hope. It is possible that he overstates his case somewhat, but he succeeds in showing that many of the leaders of the Great Awakening in the United States, of the evangelical revival in Britain, and of the early Protestant missionary movement, including BMS World Mission, were influenced by postmillennialism. They believed that it

administration.

Of course, there were difficulties with this view. Wars fought between ostensibly Christian nations suggested that the transformational power of the gospel on society was not all that had been hoped for. In addition, in the hands of many, postmillennialist views became too easily associated with Enlightenment ideas about the inevitability of human progress. Finally, the emphasis on social transformation meant that the task of evangelism was seen by some to be less significant.

Of course there are other views about these things that might be considered. But, whatever conclusions we may reach about these issues, I believe we need to take seriously the biblical material that urges us to live in the light of Christ's coming (Romans 13: 11-12) and the promise of Jesus that “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (Matthew 24: 46 NRSV). Our work is mission and our view of the End Times ought to encourage us to be doing it, and doing it well.

FOUR MAYBES



W H Y W E
D O N ' T
T A L K
A B O U T
T H E E N D
T I M E S

HALF OF US ARE UNCOMFORTABLE EVEN DISCUSSING THE END TIMES. THE
OTHER HALF ARE UNSHAKABLY CERTAIN ABOUT WHAT WILL HAPPEN.
PERHAPS WE NEED A FEW 'MAYBES' TO RESTORE THE BALANCE.

When was the last time you heard one of your Christian friends speak about Christ's return, or about biblical prophecy concerning 'the end of the age', or about the new heaven and the new earth? When did you last hear a preacher dare to venture past Revelation 1 to 3? Some may have skipped over to chapters 21 and 22, but most who have dipped their biblical toes into the choppy waters of Revelation often turn tail and run back into the comparatively still waters of the Pauline epistles. In brief, what has happened to eschatology? Did I miss the new, revised job description that told Christians to relegate 'the End Times' to 'desirable' rather than 'essential'?

As Geoffrey Penn writes: "Eschatology is neither remote nor esoteric, but is highly relevant to Christian living." And Simon Ponsoby: "Christianity is eschatology, and eschatology is hope." Yet, eschatology has either dropped down or dropped off the agenda of most churches and out of most Christian dialogue. Why is this?

Here are a few 'maybes' as to why we might struggle with eschatology and some thoughts to encourage us to recapture the wonder of all creation's destiny:

MAYBE #1

Maybe what bothers us is those believers who insistently 'just know' what is going to happen – and perhaps when. They have worked out all the details and there is no chance of discussing other possibilities – or softening their rhetoric. Eschatology easily divides Christians into two groups – those who cannot get into it and those who cannot get out of it.

But we should not shy away from the people with extreme views or from the complex issues. How many of us really understand the Rapture, the mark of the Beast, the Tribulation, the Millennium or the battle of Armageddon? What we need is to put in the hard work of both concentrated prayer for wisdom and discernment, and rigorous biblical study. If only we knew the Old Testament better – of the 404 verses in the book of Revelation, 278 contain one or more allusions to Old Testament passages. What this tells us is that a thorough grounding in the Old Testament will go a long way in helping us not to stray into the fantastical. Are we being 'left behind' to the bizarre theological extremes that can shout loudly? If you type "is David Cameron the Antichrist" into Google, you will get around 650,000 results!

“Eschatology easily divides Christians into two groups – those who cannot get into it and those who cannot get out of it”

Academia can have a bad press – ivory tower theologians – but I think we need more, not fewer, men and women prepared to grapple with ancient manuscripts, anthropology and archaeology to help the rest of us comprehend disputed texts such as those in Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, as well as Revelation.

MAYBE #2

Maybe the emotive topic of heaven and hell is what keeps our mouths closed.

Heaven is somewhat more straightforward. Yet, when we get to the issue of hell, there is much gnashing of teeth. Talk of judgment and hell do not go down well in our society of relativism and tolerance. Universalism will always be an attractive standpoint because, even if there is some sort of punishment, God will ultimately save everyone. John Stott – even while promoting annihilationism – commented, "it is not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?"

So, what message do we live and share? Whatever we might imagine the future to be – with all the mysteries of God – we need to fall humbly before our God recognising that everything is in his hands. Our quandaries are not helped by the mixed messages we can send – God loves everyone unconditionally, but if you decide not to accept this love, God will punish you forever in hell.

While we need to continue to reflect on all this, what we can say is that whatever judgement, punishment and hell entail, that great day will deal with everything from humanity's greatest acts of compassion to humanity's most horrific injustices.

MAYBE #3

Maybe part of the problem is that eschatology unveils a very different kind of Jesus. Seemingly, most Christians see Jesus as a wandering rabbi or a gentle

healer. However, in biblical prophecies, Jesus is a victorious champion and king of the universe. He will return to establish a glorious, renewed world and defeat permanently everyone and everything that is anti-Christ.

Some Christians seem unsure as to whether they like to picture Jesus as a holy warrior. Nevertheless, while holding onto Jesus the Lamb of God, we also need to hold onto Jesus the Lion of Judah. His current role as our great high priest will transmute into a conquering rider who will judge the world with overwhelming power and holy righteousness. I wonder whether 'our' Jesus is too safe?

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver... 'Who said anything about being safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'"¹

MAYBE #4

Maybe our problem is that our lives are too comfortable. Do we ache for the fulfilment of biblical prophecies, and yearn for the return of our Lord to bring an end to injustice and inequality? Or do we have our five and ten-year plans for ourselves, our families and our churches?

When my wife and I lived in West Africa, we met many Christians who, with the harassment, oppression or subjugation they experienced daily, revelled in the thought that Jesus was coming back soon. We need to remember that the book of Revelation was written for believers undergoing persecution, and recall the voices of the martyrs crying out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6: 10).

It is good to cultivate a global vision and implore our God on behalf of the last, the least and the lost. As someone has said about intercessions: we say them, but we don't always cry them. We need to crave world transformation – your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven – which, of course, will only be completed when Jesus returns.

As churches and individuals, may we become enthralled at the prospect of seeing biblical prophecies fulfilled – heralding the soon and coming king of kings. CS Lewis wrote: "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this." Let me give the last word to John's last words: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen."

¹ CS Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

AN OBSESSION WE'VE *LEFT BEHIND?*

**Are Americans still overly concerned
with the Apocalypse?**

AN AMERICAN BAPTIST REFLECTS ON POPULAR END TIMES OBSESSIONS.

Jesus cautioned his followers against looking for signs of his return.

“If anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it.”

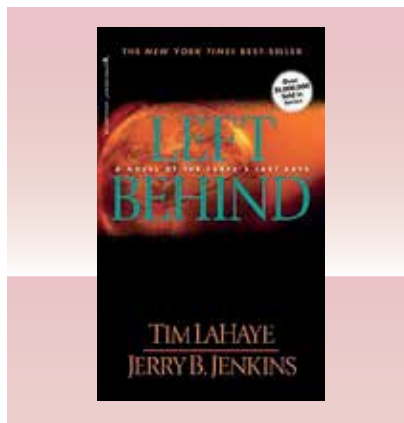
“If anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it” (Matthew 24: 23, 26; also Mark 13).

The reason? “As lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24: 27). In other words, it will be obvious, so sign-watching isn’t necessary.

Instead of fruitless speculation, we are urged to be attentive to putting Jesus’ teachings into practice. The “faithful and wise servant” is the one “whose master finds him doing so when he returns” (Matthew 24: 45-46).

Yet, it has proven too tantalising a topic for many Christians to heed his advice and Christian authors have capitalised on this widespread attraction.

From Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s to Tim LaHaye’s and Jerry Jenkin’s *Left Behind* series published from 1995 through 2007, segments of the US Christian population, including some Baptists, seem enamored



with speculating about the End Times.

While some folks, like John Hagee, Greg Laurie and Hal Lindsey give sustained attention to these matters, broader interest in, and discussion of, these topics among US Christians seems to ebb and flow.

The *Left Behind* series brought a strong, renewed interest in End Times discussions – several of the books held the number one spot on the New York Times bestseller list. As the years have passed, the interest in the series and the biblical interpretations inspiring the books has

seemed to wane.

When the first two books were turned into movies, they were met with mixed reviews and the 2014 re-boot starring Nicholas Cage was even more poorly received.

A few preachers and fringe groups still receive some attention with their predictions of the world’s end, but it seems that we are at an ebb in the ever-shifting tide of End Times fervor.

End Times predictions, like those made by Harold Camping in 2011, might make headlines and elicit limited commentary, but few outside of their inner circle take such declarations seriously.

At the risk of making an over-generalisation about Baptists, my sense is that conversations about the Rapture, the Tribulation, the return of Christ and the precise sequence of these events, when they do happen, are found mostly in Sunday school classrooms and small groups (and in limited instances from pulpits) of more conservative congregations.

Progressive and liberal Baptists rarely, if ever, discuss these concepts. Moderate Baptists might address such matters if asked or when folks like Camping make headlines. They tend to respond by explaining an alternative interpretation of the relevant texts along these lines:

The idea of the Rapture, in which Christians – either before, during or



after the Tribulation (a concept rooted in an interpretation of Revelation 7: 4 as a future, historical event rather than a description of a persecution of Christians taking place when the text was written) – are taken up or “raptured” to heaven, is based primarily on an erroneous interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4: 17.

That verse reads: “When we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up (*rapiemure* in Latin) in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Most mainstream biblical scholars note that this text draws on the imagery of citizens going out to welcome a ruler or dignitary and ushering them into their city with great fanfare and praise. It does not teach the popular notion of Rapture in which “the elect” suddenly disappear from earth and arrive in heaven. It is about Christ coming back to earth, not the people of earth departing for heaven.

The hope of the gospel is not a Rapture in which Christians suddenly disappear from the earth, as was suggested by a once popular bumper sticker: “In case of the Rapture this car will be unmanned.” Rather, it is about heaven (the place where God’s will is always done) coming to earth (the place where God’s will is not always done).

This is why in Matthew 6: 10 Jesus’ disciples are instructed to pray for God’s kingdom to come, for God’s will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

“ *Progressive and liberal Baptists rarely, if ever, discuss these concepts* ”

Yet, my sense is that the average member in a more conservative Baptist church hasn’t heard this alternative perspective. Many know of no other interpretation than that the Rapture is a biblical concept, and the only discussion, if there is any, is at what point it will happen in relation to the Tribulation.

Those who have been exposed to other views likely find all of the various perspectives (premillennial, postmillennial, amillennial – views based on an interpretation of the 1,000 years referenced in Revelation 20: 1-10 as a future, historical period) – and the perspectives within the perspectives (pre or mid-tribulation versus post-tribulation Rapture, and dispensational versus historical pre-millennialism) confusing and irrelevant. After three years of seminary and seven years working in religious organisations, I still struggle to keep all of the concepts straight.

Given the complexity of the perspectives, and the general complacency that I’ve found in the average church member regarding these concepts, it might be that the brief, widespread popularity of *Left Behind* had less to do with the

End Times theology it espoused and more to do with folks finding the story entertaining.

Ultimately, Baptists – and Christians of all denominations – can disagree on these issues and still work together to advance the common good. Like so many other tertiary theological matters, the End Times need not divide us.

Rather than quibble over our differences, we should follow the urging of Jesus to be ready always by being active in living out his teachings – making peace; blessing our enemies; being salt and light; practising humility; feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; welcoming the stranger and visiting those imprisoned.

In other words, bearing the “good fruit” of the kingdom of God as we await the day when the prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” comes to fruition – whenever it happens and whatever it looks like.



You can follow Zach Dawes on Twitter
@ZachDawes_Jr.

The End Times

There's more to End Times reading and viewing than *Left Behind*.

BOOKS

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Richard Bauckham

Many consider this the definitive word on understanding the theology, prophecy and apocalyptic intent of the Bible's most often misunderstood book.

GOD, ORDER AND CHAOS: René Girard and the Apocalypse

Stephen Finamore

A fascinating Paternoster monograph applying the French critic and philosopher's ideas to Revelation.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION (SCM Core Text)

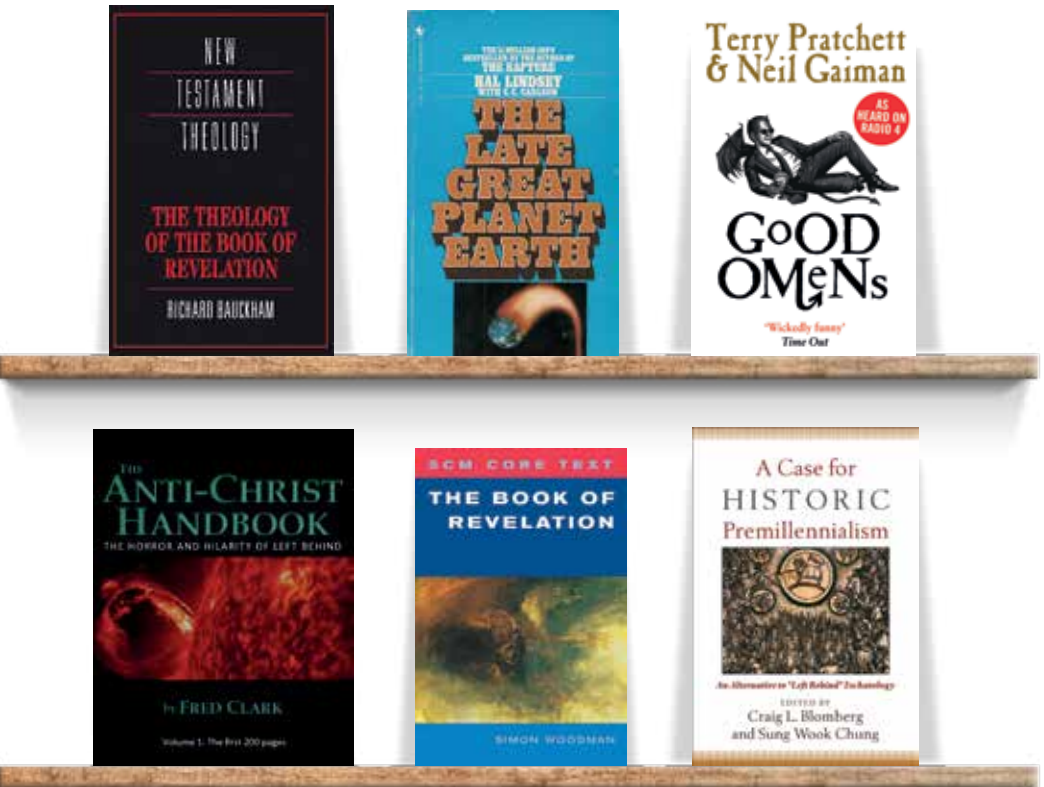
Simon Woodman

Bridging the gap between populist interpretations and hyper-technical academic tomes, this book offers a guide to interpreting Revelation that is both accessible and rigorous.

THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH

Hal Lindsey

Lindsey's immensely popular 1970 book falls more on the *Left Behind* side of the spectrum than some of the other works here, but it was also one of the most popular Christian works of that decade.



THE ANTI-CHRIST HANDBOOK: The Horror and Hilarity of Left Behind

Fred Clark

Clark has for years been writing amusing and insightful line-by-line critiques of *Left Behind* for the Patheos blog under the name Slacktivist. This is his book.

GOOD OMENS: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch

Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett

A darkly comic telling of an End Times story involving an angel, a demon, a young Antichrist and four horsepeople of the Apocalypse. Not particularly Christian, but very thought-

provoking and extremely funny. Recently dramatised at length by BBC Radio 4.

THE SECOND COMING

WB Yeats

Yeats' poem of the End Times is rich with Christian and occult symbolism, and its much-debated meaning may not be entirely in tune with a Christian vision (or be about eschatology at all), but its imagery is enduringly powerful.

FURTHER FURTHER READING

The Meaning of the Millennium, Four Views – Robert G Clouse; Mysterious Apocalypse – Arthur

W Wainwright; A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to "Left Behind" Eschatology – Craig L Blomberg and Gung Wook Chung (editors); The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy – Iain Murray; Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil – Bernard McGinn; And the Lamb Wins – Simon Ponsonby; Eschatology and Politics – the Last Things We Want to Talk About? (Cambridge Papers) – Geoffrey Penn; and, yes, Left Behind – Tim LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins.

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