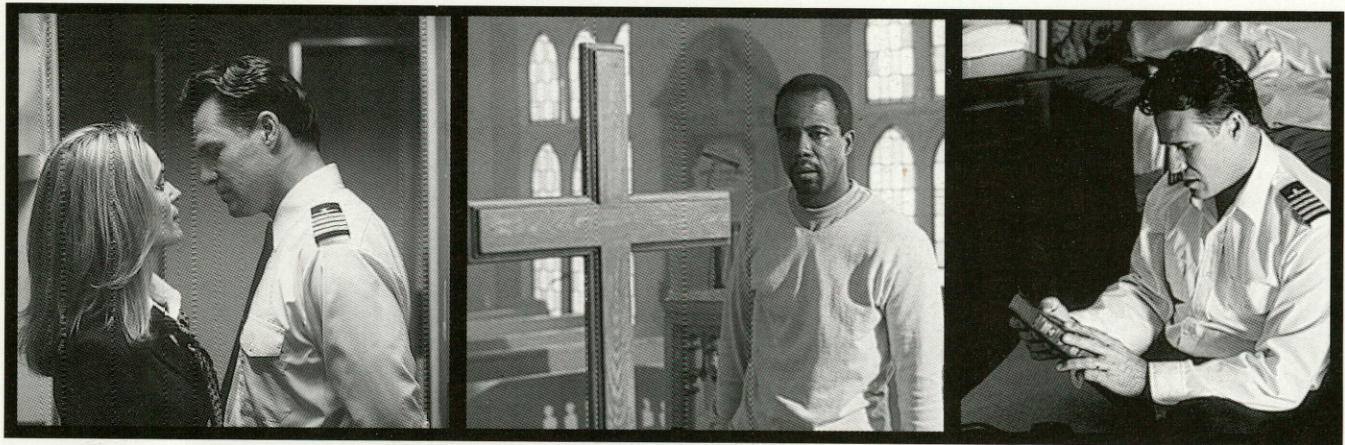


A Theological Review

by Kendra Haloviak

L*eft Behind: The Movie* exhibits the dangers of using Scripture as a crossword puzzle for last-day events. Based on the first book in the series of the same name by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, the film focuses on the notion of the rapture, which provides its theological foundation. Through a literal reading of isolated Bible texts found mostly in the book of Daniel, screen writers Allan McElroy, Paul LaLonde, and Joe Goodman, and director Vic Sarin mark the beginning of the final years of Earth's history with the global disappearance of true Christians. Those left behind must endure seven years of demonic deception and brutal persecution. The great tribulation, a type of Protestant purgatory, is a last chance to gain salvation by being faithful to God and by resisting the Antichrist. The film's portrayal of events surrounding the rapture mixes computer game graphics with images reminiscent of recent violence in Jerusalem and Gaza.

Although claiming to be based on a careful, literal reading of Scripture, this interpretation neglects the basis of New Testament faith: Jesus Christ. In the film, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are scarcely



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mentioned. Rapture theology emphasizes human actions that take place long after Calvary, without making a critical connection between the cross and the last days. The rapture and great tribulation are concerned with human actions instead of the meaning of Jesus' actions on behalf of humanity. This omission is the film's greatest failure. The omission also underscores that *Left Behind* is definitely a film for the "converted" (defined as evangelical Christians who believe in the secret rapture). An unbeliever does not stand a chance; he or she is left in quiet despair and/or disbelief. Like the film's major characters, viewers who recall Bible study lessons and sermons from childhood may turn to God in this crisis. Such viewers are told that each local and global event has been predicted in Bible prophecies (including "the abomination of desolation" which, according to an error spoken by the Rev. Barnes, is found in "Daniel 9, chapter 27"). Perhaps such viewers will become believers, suddenly understanding some of the most challenging passages in the Bible in a matter of moments. The rest of us walk away dumbfounded and depressed. This film does not contain good news.

Instead of emphasizing Christ, this film, like the book series after which it is named, is most interested in catastrophe and chaos. The intriguing characters are those taking temporary control over humanity during this time of global confusion. War on Israel by an invasion from the north is miraculously stopped, even as a Jewish scientist, Chaim Rosenzweig, discovers the answer to world hunger. He will quickly be manipulated by Nicolae Carpathia, the Antichrist figure. Supposedly humanitarian in his goals, Carpathia will end up deceiving the whole world. As air traffic controllers, pilots, and drivers of trucks and cars disappear, those left behind must face plunging airplanes and out-of-control vehicles on the world's highways. Only Carpathia offers a hopeful future. He

states: "people will follow me wherever I lead them." Before the film is over, Carpathia commits acts of brutal violence followed by a display of supernatural powers over the minds of people. Where is God? I first asked that during scenes immediately following the rapture, as people sat weeping quietly near the clothing of someone who had been taken. Other images include dogs trying to find their vanished owners, their leashes dragging behind on the ground, and parents left behind holding a child's clothing, toys, or blankets. In the words of Chloe Steele, a left-behind teenager, "what could be worse than this?" I kept thinking: What picture of God could be worse than this?

The film's interpretation of prophecy completely ignores the social contexts in which the prophecy's words were first spoken and written. Equally ignored are the meanings of symbols in early and later apocalyptic writings. Literal readings are misreadings. Numbers, creatures, and nations convey particular ideas in apocalyptic literature. By quickly transporting the symbols from the time of most apocalyptic writings (B.C.E. 200 to 200 C.E.) to contemporary contexts, interpreters miss much of the relevance initially intended.

My favorite scene in the film takes place in a small church in Chicago. The Rev. Barnes, who has been left behind, admits that "knowing and believing are two different things." He falls on his knees before the alter in the sanctuary and pleads with the Lord to use him to reach others. Walking into the sanctuary behind him is Rayford Steele, one of the main characters in the story. Rayford had previously resisted the faith of his wife and son, and has just discovered their empty clothing. As the Rev. Barnes says the words, "Lord, please use me," Rayford responds from the back of the church, "He already has." The Rev. Barnes kneeling before the alter portrays true Christianity as



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humble. In contrast, most of the film professes to know all the answers. (A link from the movie's official Web site suggests, while playing the song "I'll Fly Away" and showing pictures of people flying to heaven out of the earth and sea, that here can be found true answers for anyone left behind after the secret rapture.)

I kept being grateful that my own denomination, although far too close for comfort at times to the film's theology, resists the film's premise: that humanity will experience the secret rapture prior to the great tribulation and return of Jesus Christ to Earth. Seventh-day Adventism offers alternative interpreta-

tions to the rapture. When Adventism proclaims that victory was already won at the cross, it avoids a theology that diminishes Christ. When Adventism shares a picture of a gracious God, evil forces diminish; God's victory far outweighs the power of evil. When Adventism takes Bible study seriously, the wonder of apocalyptic literature, symbolic language, and the social contexts of Revelation are explored.

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A Response by Readers

by Albert and Mabel Olson

Editor's Note

When Spectrum readers Albert and Mabel Olson told us that they had picked up the "Left Behind" books and ended up reading them with their Bibles open, checking facts as they went, we thought their comments about the video would interest other Spectrum readers.

There are now eight volumes in the "Left Behind" series of books published by Tyndale House Publishers. Left Behind, the title of the series and the first book, refers to the rapture, which forms the major event in the first book. The movie is only a sketchy version of the