

Tim LaHaye: The Left Behind Series

by Carl E. Olson

(Catalyst 12/2004)

Two years ago I was engaged in an e-mail exchange with a Fundamentalist pastor, who wrote:

But as an effort to still save your soul, if indeed my concerns for you are true, may I urge you to reexamine the Mariolatry of the Church you have bought into. I will not badger you with the unscriptural practice of making Mary “the mother of God” or “the Queen of Heaven” which comes from Babylonish paganism not Christianity or Scripture.

It was typical Fundamentalist fare, but the man who penned it was no ordinary Fundamentalist. He was Dr. Tim LaHaye, one of the most influential Christians—Catholic or Protestant—in America over the past thirty years. A founding member of the Moral Majority, LaHaye is best known today as creator/co-author of the mega-selling *Left Behind* books, the most popular works of Christian fiction in history. Since 1995, when the first *Left Behind* novel appeared, the “end times” series (now twelve volumes strong and with two more coming) has sold some sixty million copies.

Since entering the Catholic Church in 1997, I’ve written over two dozen articles and a major book about the *Left Behind* theology propagated by LaHaye and many others through books, television, and radio. As a former believer in the “Rapture” and premillennial dispensationalism (the most common form of the *Left Behind* theology), I know how confusing this topic can be for Catholics. But I was—and still am—surprised by how many Catholics fail to see how biased against Catholicism are the *Left Behind* novels and companion volumes produced by LaHaye.

For example, one Catholic fan of the *Left Behind* books scoffed at my concerns about the novels. "You know," he said, "they actually have the Pope raptured. So they cannot be anti-Catholic." I encouraged him to read the books more closely since the passage he referred to, from the second book of the series, *Tribulation Force*, is actually an example of how the Catholic Faith is attacked in the *Left Behind* books:

"A lot of Catholics were confused, because while many remained, some had disappeared—including the new pope, who had been installed just a few months before the vanishings. He had stirred up controversy in the church with a new doctrine that seemed to coincide more with the 'heresy' of Martin Luther than with the historic orthodoxy they were used to." (Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995], p. 53.)

In other words, the new pope is secretly Raptured despite being Catholic because he embraces the views of Martin Luther and has therefore renounced Catholic teaching. So those Catholics who *reject* the Catholic Faith can be "saved" and Raptured, with the logical conclusion being that Catholics who are loyal to the Church are not "saved," are not true Christians, and will not be Raptured.

The leading Catholic character, the American Cardinal Mathews, is a greedy, power-hungry, Biblically-illiterate egomaniac whose devious actions apparently result from his adherence to "normal" Catholic beliefs and practices (*Tribulation Force*, pp. 271-278). He becomes the new pope and the head of Enigma One World Faith, an evil, one-world religion. Taking the title *Pontifex Maximus Peter*, he declares war on anyone believing in the Bible. His anger is especially directed towards true Christians from "house churches, small groups that met all over the suburbs and throughout the state," an obvious reference to Fundamentalist and Evangelical Protestants.

Cameron “Buck” Williams, “a senior staff writer for the prestigious newsmagazine *Global Weekly*” presses Cardinal Mathews for his explanation of the disappearance of millions from earth and his interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9:

“‘Now you see,’ the archbishop said, ‘this is precisely my point. People have been taking verses like that out of context for centuries and trying to build doctrine on them.’ ‘But there are other passages just like those,’ Buck said.”
(*Tribulation Force*, p. 54-55.)

Afterwards Buck writes an article in which “he was able to work in the Scripture and the archbishop’s attempt to explain away the doctrine of grace.” In other words, Catholicism is a false religion based on works, not grace, and the Catholics who were Raptured were those who went against official Church teaching.

This reflects LaHaye’s beliefs in *sola fide* (salvation by “faith alone”) and *sola scriptura* (no authority except the Bible), two cornerstones of the Protestant Reformation. In *Revelation Unveiled*, his commentary on the final book of the Bible, LaHaye writes, “Rome’s false religion too often gives a false security that keeps people from seeking salvation by faith. Rome is also dangerous because some of her doctrines are pseudo-Christian. For example, she believes properly about the personal deity of Christ but errs in adding Babylonian mysticism in many forms and salvation by works” (*Revelation Unveiled*, p. 269). Anyone familiar with the early ecumenical councils will find this amusing, but Fundamentalists unfamiliar with Church history take LaHaye’s depiction of the Catholic Church as Gospel truth.

When a reader complained online that *Tribulation Force* was anti-Catholic, *Left Behind* co-author Jerry B. Jenkins vehemently insisted that the books are “not anti-Catholic” and that “almost every person in the book who was left behind was Protestant. Astute readers will understand where we’re coming

from. True believers in Christ, regardless of their church 'brand' will be raptured" (Amazon.com, August 26, 1999). In June 2003 the Illinois Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement condemning the *Left Behind* books and related materials as anti-Catholic. LaHaye responded by insisting that "our books are not anti-Catholic. In fact, we have many faithful Catholic readers and friends" (Religion News Service, June 26, 2003).

He added that the series is "not an attack on the Catholic church" and, according to a *Chicago Tribune* column (June 13, 2003), "said the bishops are 'reading into these books something that's not there.' The books don't suggest any particular theology, he said, but try to introduce people to a more personal relationship with Jesus." In an interview with the *Chicago Sun-Times* (June 6, 2003), LaHaye explains that the character of Cardinal Mathews is simply that: a character. "What [the bishops] don't seem to realize," he said, "is that every church has some renegade people in it, and we just picked one out of theirs."

But in that same column I insist that LaHaye is "a rabid anti-Catholic." Why? Because LaHaye "is convinced, and he teaches very clearly in his nonfiction books, that the Catholic Church is apostate, it is false, and it is not Christian." He has established a lengthy and consistent pattern of harshly condemning the Catholic Church, attacking her beliefs, and using inflammatory language and factually baseless statements in the process.

LaHaye resorts to the sort of nativist attacks on Catholicism common in the United States during the 1800s, notably in the writings of Alexander Hislop, a Scottish pastor whose book *The Two Babylons the Papal Worship Proved to be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife* (originally written in 1853-1858) attempted to prove that every distinctive Catholic belief and practice is pagan in origin and Satanic in orientation. In *Revelation Unveiled* LaHaye writes that "the greatest book ever

written on [Babylonian religion] is the masterpiece *The Two Babylons* . . . This book, containing quotations from 275 authors and to my knowledge never refuted, best describes the origin of religion in Babylon and its present-day function.” (p. 266). He summarizes Hislop’s main ideas: Catholicism is idolatrous, Satanic in origin, based on secrecy and fear, and filled with pagan doctrines and practices. He then proclaims that “[a]fter reading the above quotations, you may be inclined to think me anti-Catholic, but that isn’t exactly true; I am anti-false religion” (p. 269).

Yet it’s hard to deny LaHaye’s unreasonable (he never provides citations from actual Catholic documents) and even hysterical animosity towards Catholicism in light of his claims that:

- Roman Catholicism, “apostate Protestantism,” Hinduism, and Buddhism will form a system of “pagan ecumenism” and will facilitate the rise of the Antichrist during the Tribulation era (*The Beginning of the End*, [Tyndale, 1972, 1981], 148-51).
- Hindus can become Catholic without renouncing any of their Hindu beliefs (*The Beginning of the End*, 151; *Revelation Unveiled*, p. 275).
- “All that inhibits the ecumenical movement today are the fundamental, Bible-believing Christians.... They are the group called ‘the Church’ that Christ is coming for ... so-called Christ-endom is divided basically into two main groups, the apostates and the fundamentalists” (*The Beginning of the End*, 151-2).
- The Catholic Church is an apostate Church that has mixed paganism with Christianity, resulting in the “dark ages” and the existence of “Babylonian mysticism” (*Revelation Unveiled*, 65-68, 260-277; *Are We Living in the End Times?* [Tyndale, 1999], 171-176).
- “The Church of Rome denies the finished work of Christ

but believes in a continuing sacrifice that produces such things as sacraments and praying for the dead, burning candles, and so forth. All of these were borrowed from mystery Babylon, the mother of all pagan customs and idolatry, none of which is taught in the New Testament" (*Revelation Unveiled*, 66-67).

- Catholics worship Mary, saints, and angels (*Are We Living in the End Times?*, 173).
- The Catholic Church, in large part due to Augustine, removed the Bible as the sole source of authority among Christians and "spiritualized" away the truths of Scripture, and kept the Bible from the common people (*Are We Living in the End Times?*, 174).
- The Catholic Church killed over forty million people during the "dark ages" when "Babylonian mysticism controlled the church" (*Are We Living in the End Times?*, 175).

The *Left Behind* books and their non-fiction companions are filled with poor writing, bad theology, and anti-Catholic bigotry. It's best to leave them behind and rely on Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church when studying the end times—or anything else.

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