

A BIBLE STUDY COMPANION

to

A Lutheran Response to the “Left Behind” Series



A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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A Bible Study Companion

to

A Lutheran Response to the “Left Behind” Series¹

Study One: An Overview of “End Times” Viewpoints

Introduction

The past century had its share of plagues, famines, and wars. According to historians, more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen hundred years combined. Conflict continually erupts in the Middle East and terrorism is almost always in the daily news. Such atrocities have even reached American and European soil. These events, according to the theology of the *Left Behind* series, are signs of the imminent return of Jesus. The following Bible study examines this viewpoint and how its interpretation of current events affects how the rest of Scripture is understood.

The first person to propose the end times scenario adopted by *Left Behind* was a nineteenth century Anglican priest turned traveling evangelical preacher to the United States named John Nelson Darby. Minister Cyrus Scofield expanded on Darby’s teachings and laid them out in his influential *Scofield Reference Bible*.

Today this view of the end times, called premillennial dispensationalism (also referred to as dispensational premillennialism), has become very popular. It is taught by several evangelical denominations and is the basis for the all-time best-selling Christian fictional series, *Left Behind*. These books have heightened awareness of such end times topics as the millennium, the rapture, the Antichrist, and Armageddon. Yet the ideas

¹ The April 2004 report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations titled *A Lutheran Response to the “Left Behind” Series* is available from Concordia Publishing House (www.cph.org) and can be found online at www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=509. Those using this study—both leaders and participants—are encouraged to read this report and to use this Bible study in tandem with it. For a more in-depth study of end times issues, see the 1989 CTCR report *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism*, which is also available from CPH and online at www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=509.

expressed in the *Left Behind* series are in many ways contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture. Though they contain a fictional story line, the books promote a theology that is in important respects at odds with biblical revelation.

Introductory Questions

1. According to the Bible, what is the defining event of the end of the world? (Dan. 7:13–14; Matt. 24:29–31; Rev. 6:12–17)

Answer: The return of Jesus Christ in His glory will herald the destruction of this sinful world, the judgment of unbelievers, and the restoration of His people in the new heavens and the new earth. For further discussion, see also Is. 66:15–24; Dan. 7:9–14; Joel 2:1–11; Matt. 26:62–64; John 14:1–4; Acts 1:6–11; and 1 Thess. 5:1–3.

2. Why does God wait to bring the Last Day? (Matt. 13:24–30; 1 Tim. 2:1–4; 2 Pet. 3:8–10)

Answer: God waits because in His great mercy He desires all people to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

3. What is the “millennium”? (Rev. 20:1–7)

Answer: The “millennium” is the “thousand years” mentioned only in Revelation 20, which describes the period of time when the people of God reign with Christ. The various views of the end times are based on differing understandings of what this period is and when it takes place. Premillennial dispensationalists read this text as a reference to a literal thousand-year period in which believers reign over the earth with Christ. The amillennial view (held by most Christians throughout history, including The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod [LCMS]) understands the thousand years as a figurative number of completeness depicting the reign of Christ in and with His church. This reign of Christ was inaugurated by His birth and will be fully revealed at His second coming on the Last Day. This period is called the “Church Age.” More information regarding both of these views is discussed below.

4. What is the “rapture”? (1 Thess. 4:17; Matt. 24:40–41)

Answer: All believers who are alive at the time of Christ’s second coming will be “caught up” in the clouds with their Lord at His return (i.e., “raptured”). However, according to the *Left Behind* view, this is a secret coming of Christ in which believers (as well as all children who have not reached “the age of accountability”) are taken from the earth. The only people left on earth, this view holds, are unbelievers who will suffer during the seven years of tribulation. But according to Matt. 24:37–41 and its reference to the flood, the

first to be taken away at the second coming will be unbelievers. Believers will be left to inherit the kingdom prepared for them (Matt. 25:34). According to the Bible, therefore, it is good to be “left behind” (as were Noah and his family), since those “taken away” will face judgment. Amillennialists, therefore, believe that texts such as 1 Thess. 4:17 and Matt. 24:37–41 refer to the final, visible coming of Christ on the Last Day. The rapture is examined further in the second part of this Bible study.

Two Views of the End Times

Although various views of the end times have surfaced throughout Christian history and are present also today, the focus here is on two end-times scenarios. The first is pre-millennial dispensationalism, the view espoused by the *Left Behind* series. The second is the historic position of most Christian churches (including the LCMS), often called amillennialism. These two scenarios are included in the chart provided on the back page of the CTCR’s *A Lutheran Response to the “Left Behind” Series* (see this report at www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/LeftBehind.pdf) and are discussed briefly below.

1. Premillennial Dispensationalism

Description: Taking a literal view of all descriptions of the end times in the Bible, the premillennial dispensationalist view (espoused by the *Left Behind* series) reads much of the Book of Revelation as a straight line of chronology. Everything in the book reads like a novel, in which each chapter’s events take place after the events of the previous chapter.

Definition: A *dispensation* in this context means a period of time in the unfolding of God’s dealings with humanity. According to the *Left Behind* view, God acts differently toward humanity in each dispensation. There are seven dispensations: (1) Innocence (before the fall); (2) Conscience (the fall to Noah); (3) Human Government (Noah to Abraham); (4) Promise (Abraham to Moses); (5) Law (Moses to Christ); (6) Grace (the Church); and (7) The Kingdom (the millennium).

The “Church Age” (the sixth dispensation) ends with the rapture, the secret return of Christ when all believers and children not yet at “the age of accountability” are invisibly taken to heaven. This is followed by seven years of suffering and destruction called the tribulation. After this, Christ returns visibly as judge to usher in the seventh dispensation. He gives authority to believers so that they may reign over the earth with Him for one thousand years. During this same time, generations come and go so that unbelievers increase. This ultimately results

in a group of wicked people who are a part of Satan's "little season" (Rev. 20:3, 7) that comes at the end of the thousand years. Christ then returns again for the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11–15) that ushers in the new heavens and new earth.

2. Amillennialism

Description: This view takes the thousand years as a figurative reference to the era of the church, which lasts from the ascension of Christ until His final return. The end is marked by the return of Christ, the final judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. As noted above, this has been the dominant position of the Christian church throughout its history and is the position of the LCMS. This view is discussed in more detail in study five.

Discussion Question

The *Left Behind* interpretation of the second coming looks at Scripture primarily from the viewpoint of Christ's future, unfinished work. In contrast, the Lutheran Church believes that the center of the biblical revelation is justification by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ (see John 19:30; 1 Cor. 2:2). How do these differences in the central teaching of Scripture affect one's understanding of the end times?

Answer: The *Left Behind* series emphasizes the work of Christ on the cross less than the unfolding of Scripture in current events. While there is nothing wrong with an appropriate examination of end-times teaching in the Bible, it is important to do so in light of the central teaching of Scripture: the justifying work of Christ accomplished through His death and resurrection and given freely by grace through faith in Him.

Focusing on Jesus in His glory results in an over-emphasis on His power, sovereignty, wrath, and judgment. Such an approach tends to neglect His mercy and grace for sinners brought about by His death and resurrection. The *Left Behind* view sees faith largely as a means of avoiding suffering under God's wrath here on earth, while Scripture teaches that faith is the instrument through which we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation (Eph. 2:8–9). The *Left Behind* interpretation of the Bible also shifts the focus away from Christ's fulfillment of Old Testament promises that point to Him as our sin-bearing Substitute. According to the Bible, Jesus Christ alone gives us eternal life with God, and faith in Him engenders hope even in the midst of earthly suffering (see Rev. 7:9–17).

Study Two: The Rapture

The Rapture

The word *rapture* comes from the Latin for the term *caught up* in 1 Thess. 4:17. The *Left Behind* series interprets this verse to mean that all Christians (along with all infants and children who have not reached the age of accountability) will meet Christ in the air at the time of His “secret” and “invisible” coming. All believers who are alive at this time will be immediately transferred and taken to the heavenly mansions that Christ has prepared for them. Unbelievers will be “left behind” to suffer during the seven-year tribulation.

The full context of 1 Thess. 4:17 (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11), however, shows that this passage has a different meaning. According to verse 13, the primary purpose of this text is to comfort those who are unsure that there is life after death, not to discuss the details of Christ’s second coming, the final judgment, and the chronology of the end times.

In addition, the description of our Lord’s return in verse 16—the “cry of command,” the “voice of an archangel,” and the “sound of a trumpet”—does not speak of a hidden, secret coming of Christ. In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul continues to teach about the same event, which constitutes a singular day of the Lord (see vv. 1–3). This is at odds with the *Left Behind* end-times scenario that includes at least three “days of the Lord.” Christ’s first end-times coming, according to this view, occurs at the rapture. His second appearance takes place at the end of the seven-year tribulation and will usher in His thousand-year earthly reign. The third and final appearance happens when Jesus comes to put an end to Satan’s “little season” (Rev. 20:3, 7) in order to bring about the new heavens and new earth.

Discussion Questions

1. What do the following passages have to say about the coming of our Lord?
 - a. How many returns of Christ will there be? (Dan. 12:1–2; Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:28–29)

Answer: One day, one hour, one resurrection of the dead. These texts indicate that there will only be one return of Christ, not several (see also Acts 17:31; 24:15).

b. Who will see Christ when He returns? (Dan. 7:13; Luke 21:27; Rev. 1:7)

Answer: Every eye will see Him come in His glory. Scripture does not teach a “secret” coming (see also Mark 14:62 and Acts 1:11).

2. What are the dangers of the *Left Behind* view of the rapture and the several comings of Jesus? (Matt. 24:45–51; 25:1–13)

Answer: If people will have further opportunities to believe in Christ after the rapture, then an attitude of apathy may arise. Lost is the sense of apostolic urgency expressed in texts like 2 Cor. 6:1–2. Jesus does not discuss second chances but speaks of one opportunity to believe before His return in judgment. For example, in Matt. 25:10, He teaches that at His second coming the door will be shut and there will be no second chance (see also Heb. 9:27).

Further, *Left Behind* allows the rapture to serve as the main topic of the Christian witness to unbelievers. This shift in emphasis replaces the central component of the Christian witness—namely, that the *Gospel* is the power of God for salvation (see Rom. 1:16). Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) to bear witness to Christ’s death and resurrection, which have brought about salvation for those who are still under the Law (Rom. 10:13–15).

The *Left Behind* view not only offers the rapture as a sign of salvation for those who are left behind, but it also encourages believers to dwell on the visible signs of current events. Both hopes are misguided because they turn attention away from the means of grace instituted by Christ for the benefit of His people. God has revealed that it is through His Word and sacraments that He calls people to faith in Christ, not any other way.

Study Three: Israel and the Church

Premillennial dispensationalist writers suggest that a proper understanding of the end times hinges on the question of the nation of Israel. At issue, then, is the relationship between the Old Testament nation of Israel and the New Testament church.

The *Left Behind* View of Israel and the Church

Left Behind assumes that, because the Kingdom was offered by God to (and yet refused by) the Jews, it will be offered to them again in the future. Those who espouse this view point to the creation of the political state of Israel in 1948 as a sign of the beginning of these events. Current events in the Middle East, therefore—and especially in Israel—are of vital importance in the *Left Behind* interpretation of the Bible.

Discussion Questions

1. How might *Left Behind* use the following verses to support its view of a separate covenant for the people of Israel? (Ezek. 37:7–11, 21–23; Luke 21:24; Rom. 11:25–27; Rev. 7:2–8)

Answer: If these passages are taken out of their context and their type of literature is ignored, they may seem to suggest that a separate plan of salvation remains for Israel.

2. What is the *Left Behind* view of the role and place of the church? (see Acts 28:28)

Answer: In the *Left Behind* view, God's plan changed to a salvation of the Gentiles because the Jews rejected their Messiah, Jesus. This is a temporary plan that will cease with the rapture. After that the seven-year tribulation will begin and God will reinitiate His primary plan, which is to save His "chosen people," the Jews.

What is in a name?

Since *Left Behind* holds that the Old Testament promises given to Israel are not fulfilled in the church, the nation of Old Testament Israel in its view must be preserved in order to receive the fulfillment of these promises. Accordingly, the *Left Behind* series understands the following four terms to be synonymous: Israelite, Hebrew, Jew, and Israeli. God's promises to the Israelites of the Old Testament, therefore, are applied to modern-day Jews, and especially to the 1948 state of Israel. But these four terms actually have different definitions. They are as follows:

Israelite: An Old Testament believer in Yahweh (the LORD), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Hebrew: Used by Israelites in the Old Testament to identify themselves to non-Israelites.

Jew: This term indicates an ethnicity and/or an adherent to Judaism (which is not the Christ-centered faith of the Old Testament).

Israeli: A citizen of the 1948 state of Israel, which is not the same as the Israel of the Old Testament. Modern-day Israelis are sometimes called “secular” Jews.

Discussion Questions

1. Does God really have a separate plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles? (Matt. 28:18–20; Rom. 10:12–17)

Answer: No, God has only one plan for the Jews as well as the Gentiles, and that is faith in Christ as the way to salvation.

2. Why are these distinctions between Israelite, Hebrew, Jew, and Israeli important? (Rom. 4:12, 16; Gal. 3:29; Phil. 3:3).

Answer: The *Left Behind* interpretation of the Bible understands these terms to be synonymous. It contends that since Abraham was a “Jew” and an “Israeli,” the promises that God made to him do *not* find their fulfillment in Christ and the church but rather in ethnic Jews and especially the 1948 state of Israel. Paul teaches, however, that Israelites and Hebrews are the spiritual forefathers of *all* who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. People may no longer say, “We have Abraham as our father” (Luke 3:8), for there is only one way to the Father and to eternal life, and that is through Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

3. What is the relationship of the Old Testament nation of Israel to the New Testament church? (Rom. 3:21–30; Gal. 3:26–29)

Answer: The promise given to Abraham (e.g., Gen. 12:2–3) is fulfilled in Jesus. Those who are in Christ—both Jews and Gentiles—are the sons and daughters of Abraham. It is not possible to claim God’s favor on the basis of an ethnic relationship with Abraham (Luke 3:8), for this ignores the only name given by which people may be saved (Acts 4:12).

4. In the *Left Behind* view of the Old and New Testaments, the Old Testament—especially its promises about the end times—should be used to interpret the rest of Scripture. But how is a person directed to read the Old Testament? (Luke 24:44; John 5:39; Col. 2:16–17)

Answer: The Old Testament needs to be read in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The New Testament functions as the definitive interpretation of the Old Testament (see 2 Cor. 1:20).

5. What are the dangers of the *Left Behind* understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments?

Answer: First, such an understanding implies that there are different plans of salvation for different groups of people, which is contrary to Scripture. Second, if modern Jews and Israelis had a covenant with God distinct from that of the church, then there would be no reason for the church to preach Christ to them. This stands in opposition to Christ's mandate to proclaim the one Gospel to all people. Third, God's love shows no partiality or favoritism, but remains the same for all people (see Acts 10:34; Matt. 28:18–20; Rom. 3:21–30).

6. But what about Romans 11:26, where Paul says that "all Israel will be saved?"

Answer: As the CTCR explains on page 39 of its 1989 report on *The End Times*:

In summary, "all Israel" consists of the groups mentioned in [Romans 11] v. 25, the believing part of the Jews and the "full number of the Gentiles." "All Israel" is the whole olive tree consisting of the natural branches (Jews who believed), the wild olive branches (Gentiles who believe), and the regrafted branches (Jews who will believe). These constitute the "all" in verse 32 [and in verse 26]. "All Israel" is made up of "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord" (10:13), the elect of the Jews and Gentiles, the "New Israel" (Rom. 4:11–12, 16; 9:24; Gal. 3:26–29; 6:15–16).²

² For a more detailed treatment of Rom. 11:25–27, see *The End Times*, 34–39.

Study Four: Israel and the Land

The Promise of the Land

The creation of the 1948 state of Israel is important to the *Left Behind* view—so important, in fact, that it is sometimes referred to as “the super-sign of biblical prophecy.” *Left Behind* sees this historical-political event as the definitive sign that planet Earth is living in the last generation before the rapture of the church. *Left Behind’s* understanding of the role of the land of Israel requires study of scriptural prophecies concerning “the land.”

Discussion Questions

1. What is the promise God makes to Abraham? (see Gen. 11:30–12:7, especially 12:2–3)

Answer: The promise that God gives to Abraham is three-fold. First, he will be the father of a great nation. Second, he will be blessed by God in order to become a blessing to “all the families of the earth.” Third, God will use the land to convey the first two blessings.

2. To whom does the land belong? (Deut. 6:10–11; 1 Kings 21:1–16; Ps. 24:1)

Answer: The land belongs to the LORD, not to the people of Israel. He owns the land and they are only tenants. The land is therefore to be used as God dictates, not according to the whims of people.

3. What is more important than the promise of the land? (John 8:31–42; Acts 3:25–26; Gal. 3:7–9, 14)

Answer: Receiving the gifts promised to Abraham based on faith in Christ is more important than inheriting the physical land of historical Israel. Faith in Christ makes someone a child of Abraham, not the land inheritance.

4. How does Jesus speak of the future of Jerusalem and the temple? (Luke 19:41–44)

Answer: When Jesus speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in these verses, He makes no reference to it ever being rebuilt, or to the restoration of the land inheritance of the people.

5. Where and what is the temple of God today? (Matt. 12:6; John 2:12–22; Heb. 10:18; 1 Cor. 6:19–20; 1 Pet. 2:4–10)

Answer: The new temple is Jesus Himself. His sacrifice on the cross on our behalf is fully sufficient for all people of all times and places, so that no further shedding of blood is necessary. Through the means of grace, the Holy Spirit now dwells in believers so that their very bodies are God's temple. Built together of all Christians, the church is also called God's dwelling place or His temple (see also Eph. 2:19–22).

6. What will follow Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and the giving of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost? Is it a re-establishment of the land of Israel? (Matt. 24:30–31; Luke 21:25–28; Dan. 7:13–14)

Answer: No. The next great event in God's plan of salvation that Christians look forward to is the coming of Jesus Christ in His glory on the Last Day.

7. What is the nature of the promise of the land? (Gen. 17:1–7; Gal. 3:14, 29)

Answer: The land is only a means by which God's promise of blessing to all the families of the earth was to be carried out through Abraham and his descendants. And, it is a means to a *greater end*: the coming of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4).

8. What is the land of inheritance for the Christian? (Heb. 3:11–4:12; 11:8–16; 2 Pet. 3:8–13; Rev. 21:1)

Answer: Christians look forward to the new heavens and new earth, restored without the taint of sin and within the living presence of God.

Study Five: The Book of Revelation and Summary

How to Read the Book of Revelation

Left Behind understands the Book of Revelation as a chronological book that sequentially explains a series of events. This linear way of reading the Book of Revelation, however, creates several problems for proponents and adherents of the *Left Behind* view. It requires, for example, that Jesus return more than once, and it also forces one to explain how the world apparently ends more than once.

Left Behind contends that, after the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2–3), Revelation depicts the events of seven years of tribulation on earth. At this time a kingdom of ten confederated kingdoms arises and is led by the Antichrist. At first he makes a covenant with the Jews (in *Left Behind*, the state of Israel), but in the middle of the seven years he breaks this covenant and begins persecuting the Jews. From these persecuted Jews, 144,000 come to faith in Christ and begin to convert many Gentiles. Toward the end of the seven-year tribulation, a great battle called Armageddon takes place. After Armageddon, Christ returns and destroys His enemies. Believers then enjoy a thousand years of blessings as they rule with Christ on the earth. Toward the end of the millennium, Satan is let loose for his “little season” (Rev. 20:3, 7). This is followed by Christ’s final return to usher in the new heavens and the new earth. This linear reading of the Book of Revelation forces its events to fit a chronological order.

The author of Revelation, however, intends that the book’s contents be read as a reoccurring cycle of events. (In the Old Testament, Joseph’s dreams are repeated for emphasis [Gen. 37:5–10; 41:14–32]. Similarly, Jesus repeats the same point in several different parables in order to drive home His message [e.g., Matthew 13; Luke 15]). Seen in this way, the Book of Revelation presents a series of visions depicting the same time period from different angles, and each cycle of visions increases in intensity. The six visions of the end times in Revelation are a highly figurative description of events that will take place between the first and second comings of Christ. They are as follows: (1) the seven seals (6:1–8:5); (2) the seven trumpets (8:6–11:19); (3) the church and Satan (12:1–14:20); (4) the seven bowls (15:1–16:21); (5) the overthrow of Babylon (17:1–19:21); and (6) the binding

of Satan and his destruction (20:1–15).

Questions for Discussion

1. From the viewpoint of *Left Behind*, the Antichrist will be a world political leader. What does the Bible teach concerning the Antichrist? (2 Thess. 2:3–12; 1 John 2:18; Rev. 13:11–18)

Answer: The Antichrist is not primarily a political figure, nor even a single person. Rather, it is an entity that spreads false doctrine. Any teaching (and especially purported *Christian* teaching) that does not clearly proclaim salvation by Christ alone through faith alone is untrue to the biblical revelation and therefore demonstrates characteristics of the Antichrist.

2. How is the millennium of Rev. 20:1–10 correctly understood?

Answer: On pages 18–19, the CTCR report *A Lutheran Response to the “Left Behind” Series* outlines the biblical use of numbers in apocalyptic literature in Scripture. When the 1000 years of the millennium are understood properly, Rev. 20:1–10 refers to the same events as pictured in the first six visions in Revelation (see above)—namely, the first and second comings of Jesus.

3. What is the “kingdom of God”? (Matt. 12:28; John 18:36; Rom. 14:17)

Answer: The kingdom of God is the reign of Christ. As such, it is a kingdom that is really present now in His Word and sacraments. It is also a kingdom that has yet to be manifested in its full glory. The church, therefore, lives within this tension of “the kingdom now, but not yet” (see 1 John 3:2; Rev. 1:5–6).

4. Instead of examining world events and trying in vain to find verses in the Bible that match them so that one may be “rapture ready” and escape suffering, how does the Bible approach the role of suffering—both in this world and in the life of the Christian? (Luke 13:1–5; 21:12–13; 1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 12:1–10)?

Answer: Much of the suffering that Christians endure now is part of the persecution by the world that the baptized are taught to expect. Suffering also provides them an opportunity to be a witness to the sure and certain hope that is theirs in Christ alone (see also Mark 13:9; Acts 14:21–22; Rom. 5:3–5; 1 Pet. 1:3–7; 3:13–17).

5. What is the intended mission of the church? (Matt. 28:18–20; 24:36; 1 Cor. 1:22–23; 1 Thess. 5:2; Rev. 22:12–20)

Answer: The church’s mission is to proclaim the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for the salvation of people, not to look for signs. Rather than looking for signs, the church is to recog-

nize that Christ may return at any time. In view of this fact, believers are to have a sense of urgency for the task of spreading the Gospel “as long as it is day,” since the “night is coming” (John 9:4). The apocalyptic sections of the Bible (like the Book of Revelation) are sources of great strength. From them Christians derive joy, peace, and comfort, knowing that the sufferings encountered in this life do not compare with the glories of the life to come (Rom. 8:18).

6. What is the central truth of the apocalyptic writings of the Bible, and indeed, the whole of Scripture? (Luke 24:25–27, 44; John 5:39, 46; 2 Cor. 1:19–20)

Answer: Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world is the chief teaching of Scripture and the true source of Christian joy and confidence. Therefore, He is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, Old and New Testaments. All biblical revelation converges on Christ and must be viewed in light of Him and His saving work.

Summary

The principal points made in this Bible study may be summarized as follows:

- It is bad to teach that Christ *must* come now. It is worse to teach that Christ *cannot* come yet. It is worst of all to teach that Christ *will not* come again. All of these views are contrary to Scripture.
- There will be no further opportunity for salvation after Christ’s second (and final) coming.
- The rapture and the second coming of Christ are the same event.
- Christ is reigning now, and so are all believers.
- The concept of an earthly millennium contradicts the Bible, the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian), and the consistent position of the Christian church throughout history.
- God’s promises to and for Old Testament Israel have been fulfilled in Christ and in the church.
- The New Testament—not current events—is the interpretive key to understanding the Old Testament.
- The second coming of Jesus will be the *end* of this age, not its beginning.
- The entire Bible points to Jesus as the “super sign” that God’s promises have been fulfilled.

Glossary³

Amillennialism: The teaching espoused in this document that believes there will be no (“a”) literal thousand (*mille*) year visible earthly kingdom of Jesus. This view is better termed “realized millennialism” because it embraces the idea that Christ is reigning now (Matt. 28:18–20). The “thousand years” of Rev. 20:1–10 is taken figuratively as a reference to the time of Christ’s reign as King from the day of His ascension until the Last Day. Hence, the millennium is a present reality (Christ’s heavenly reign), not a future hope (a rule of Christ on earth after His return).

Antichrist: *Left Behind* believes he is primarily a political ruler who manifests the fourth kingdom of Dan. 2:33–40 (Rome) by coming from Romania. However, the Bible teaches that the Antichrist sets himself up in the church (2 Thess. 2:2–3) and will promote doctrines that diminish the completed work of Christ.

Armageddon: Derived from the Hebrew words *har Megiddo*, “the mountain of Megiddo” in Palestine. Armageddon refers to the battle mentioned in Rev. 16:16 and is understood by proponents of *Left Behind* as the final battle of the seven-year tribulation that ushers in the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. However, Armageddon is the last major onslaught of Satan before the second—and final—coming of Christ. The context of Rev. 16:16 indicates that this *last* battle is equivalent to the *last* battles described in Rev. 19:11–21 and 20:7–10, for Rev. 16:17 states, in part, “and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘It is done!’”

Apocalyptic Literature: Derived from the Greek word *apokalypsis* (Rev. 1:1), the term *apocalyptic* means “uncovering” or “revelation.” This genre [kind] of literature, most notably in Daniel and Revelation, frequently uses visions, colors, numbers, and vivid symbolism to make a theological point.

Dispensationalism: This is a system of biblical interpretation that distinguishes between seven distinct periods or “dispensations” in biblical history: (1) Innocence (before the fall); (2) Conscience (from the fall to Noah); (3) Human Government (from Noah to Abraham); (4) Promise (from Abraham to Moses); (5) Law (from Moses to Christ); (6) Grace (the Church Age); and (7) the Kingdom (the millennium). Dispensationalists believe that God’s redemptive plan focuses on national Israel, with provision made for Gentiles during the Church Age.

³ For the sake of handy reference, pertinent entries from the glossary of the CTCR’s report *A Lutheran Response to the “Left Behind” Series* are included here.

Eschatology: Derived from the Greek word *eschaton*, “end,” it is the study of the end times of the world.

Last Days: The phrase “the last days” appears twenty-seven times in the New Testament. *Left Behind* believes that, with the creation of the 1948 state of Israel, the world has entered the last days. In several instances, the expression refers to the end of history. However, in most passages (see, for example, Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:1–2 and 1 Pet. 1:20) it is used to describe the eschatological epoch that began in the New Testament with the first coming of Christ.

Millennium: Derived from the Latin words *mille*, “a thousand,” and *annus*, “a year.” *Left Behind* understands the thousand years of Revelation 20 literally. Yet, the Bible teaches that Christ is reigning now and that His gracious rule that began on the day of His ascension will continue until the Last Day when He will hand “over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24).

Premillennialism: This is the view of the *Left Behind* novels, namely, that Christ’s second advent will occur before (“pre”) the “millennium,” understood as a thousand-year rule of Christ on earth. This understanding rests upon these presuppositions: (1) Scripture is to be interpreted in a “literalistic” manner; (2) the church and Israel are two distinct groups with whom God has a divine plan; (3) the church is a mystery, unrevealed in the Old Testament; (4) the mystery age of the church must be completed before God can resume His main program with the Jews and bring it to completion.

Rapture: This refers to the event described in 1 Thess. 4:14–17 when believers will be “raptured” or “caught up” (Latin: *rapiemur*) in the clouds to meet Christ in the air at His second coming. When used in *Left Behind* novels, the term refers to Christ’s secret coming when all believers—as well as all children who have not reached the age of accountability—are suddenly removed from the earth before the seven-year tribulation.

Tribulation: *Left Behind* uses this term to signify the intensified persecution that will occur after the rapture and before Christ’s thousand-year reign on earth. It will last for seven years.