

## Why, Indeed?

“The Blessed Evangelical Mary: Why We Shouldn’t Ignore Her Any Longer, by Timothy George. *Christianity Today* (December 2003): 34-39.

The cover art and the title of the main article in the December 2003 issue of *Christianity Today* seems deliberately designed to provoke Protestant sensibilities. If so, I surmise that it achieved its purpose by drawing many to read Timothy George’s softly-pedaled polemic in support of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, who is God manifested in the flesh. After reading the article, however, one wonders whether any real purpose has been served, given its conflicted desire to retain a patina of Evangelical theological respectability by maintaining the traditional distance between Protestant and Catholic understandings of the role of Mary and, at the same time, to explore ways in which Evangelicals can “embrace” Mary. What is ultimately missing in the article is not a persuasive argument for the need of highly extolling Mary in our worship but rather a persuasive argument for the need to extol Mary at all in our worship.

This distinction may seem fine, but in many respects it reflects a crucial distinction in the focus of the New Testament for Protestants and Catholics. For Catholics, there is a focus on both mother and Child; for Protestants, the focus is on Jesus only (Mark 9:8). George’s article, no matter how much it labors to provide theological support, simply fails to make a biblical case for involving Mary in Christian worship, especially since the New Testament emphatically declares that God’s speaking is now in the Son (Heb. 1:2). Our worship should be directed to Him alone and even through Him alone because He is the singular focus of God’s New Testament economy. In the last of these days it behooves us to “hear Him” and not to be distracted from holding Him as the unique Head (Mark 9:7; Col. 2:19). The article’s attempt at rapprochement with Catholic theology will only produce forms of self-imposed worship that, ultimately, will carry off many believers as spoil (vv. 23, 8), defrauding them of their prize (v. 18), which is Christ, not Mary, as the mystery of the indwelling God in their experience (1:27; 2:2). With Christ as the hope of glory in us, both the unbiblical regard for Mary in Catholic theology as an Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, Co-redemptrix, and Mediatrix and the overwrought regard for her in this Evangelical article as someone who

can help us by “pointing” us to Christ seem to be wantonly misplaced.

## Reassessing Mary’s Role

“The Blessed Evangelical Mary: Why We Shouldn’t Ignore Her Any Longer” (hereafter “Blessed”) begins by recounting John Knox’s experience of throwing a statue of Mary into a river when he was asked to kiss it. This event serves as a trope for the article’s reconsideration of the role of Mary. Essentially, it asks whether or not we need to “throw her overboard once and for all” (36), or whether it is possible for evangelicals to find appropriate ways to honor Mary. In developing the trope, “Blessed,” in essence, suggests that while we should “not...kneel down before statues of Mary,” we also should not throw *her* overboard (36). “Blessed” attempts to find some theological middle ground on the issue of Mary, and it calls for an Evangelical reassessment of the role of Mary in our experience, if not in our understanding, of the faith. “Blessed” asks, “Without compromising the Reformation principles of *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola scriptura*, can we understand and honor Mary in ways that are scripturally based and evangelically motivated?” (36).

In order to develop an “evangelically motivated” understanding of Mary, “Blessed” begins by addressing legitimate Protestant concerns associated with the worship of Mary by affirming the need for distance from certain Catholic teachings about Mary. “Blessed” acknowledges, “Protestants believe that an undue extolling of Mary obscures, if it does not contradict, the sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the unique Savior and only mediator between God and human beings” (36). It further notes,

we find no biblical warrant for the kind of devotion to Mary that flourishes among many of the Catholic faithful. Mary’s perpetual virginity (the belief that she had no children after Jesus and remained a virgin throughout her life), immaculate conception (that she was born without the stain of original sin), and bodily assumption (that she was taken body and soul into heaven after she died without seeing corruption) are extrabiblical beliefs that cannot be traced to the earliest historical memory of the church. (34)

By acknowledging these concerns upfront, which are by no means insignificant to Protestants, “Blessed,” no

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doubt, seeks to establish the *bona fides* of its Evangelical credentials in order to offer its subsequent reassessment. “Blessed” notes that

Protestants are right to be concerned about these issues, especially when such extreme devotion to Mary remains unchecked at a popular level. But,” it asks, “in reacting to Catholic excesses, have we gone to the other extreme? Must nearly everything we say about Mary be couched in the language of dissent and disbelief?” (36)

In essence, “Blessed” asks whether evangelicals have overreacted by throwing overboard both the statues of Mary and Mary herself. Implicit in the rhetorical question is an affirmative answer. And given this answer, “Blessed” then embarks upon its justification for an Evangelical reassessment of Mary, declaring, “It is time for evangelicals to recover a fully biblical appreciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her role in the history of salvation, and to do so precisely as evangelicals” (36).

What is startling about this call to “recover” a biblical appreciation of Mary is the fact that the article gives no explicit reason why there is even a need for such a recovery. There seem to be only two implicit possibilities, neither of which the article plainly articulates, because to do so would instantly expose the intrinsic futility of its argument. These possibilities include, first, a desire to assuage Catholic concerns about Protestant theology by suggesting that a more prominent role for Mary may be possible in the ongoing development of Evangelical theology, or second, a desire to temper Protestant criticism of Catholics for their extreme but misplaced devotion to Mary, thereby hoping to foster an atmosphere of rapprochement or reconciliation between the two camps over this issue. Both possibilities, however, are destined for failure because the divide between Catholics and Protestants is not over how much to honor Mary but why she should be honored.

Mary is honored by Catholics precisely because she is believed to be above others in the Body of Christ, to the point that she is viewed by many as a Co-mediatrix with Christ, and she is increasingly being advanced as a Co-redemptrix with Christ. Supporting these extrabiblical views are the attributions of perpetual virginity, immaculate conception, and bodily assumption. No confessing Catholic will reject these views, just as no confessing Protestant, as the article indicates, should or would accept them. For the Catholic, Mary is worthy of honor, adoration, and even worship because her life, and hers alone, embodies these “mysteries.” For the Protestant, however, Mary is not deserving of any special place because these “mysteries” are not supported by the Word of God. Consequently, any new honor or appreciation that a Protestant could extend toward Mary would not be

predicated upon an acceptance of these “mysteries.” The faint praise that “Blessed” could possibly elicit from Protestants would not be perceived or received as true honor by a Catholic but instead as a continuing manifestation of “dissent and disbelief.” Thus, the continuing rejection of these “mysteries” would assuage none of the enduring Catholic concerns about Protestant theology.

Mary is not honored by Protestants precisely because she is believed to be above no one in the Body of Christ. Those who do the will of the Father who is in the heavens are the brothers, sisters, and mothers of the Lord (Matt. 12:50). And although Mary was a God-ordained vessel through whom God was manifested in the flesh, and thus is, in fact, the *theotokos*, the God-bearer in support of the truth that Jesus is God, this distinction affords her no special place in the Body of Christ. She was a believer, a member with a unique and necessary function, but no more necessary than the function that is intrinsic to the uniqueness of every member of the Body of Christ—even though this aspect of the revelation of the mystery of Christ is hard for Catholics and Protestants alike to perceive, accept, and experience (Eph. 3:4). It is hard for Catholics because their view of the Body is so hierarchical that it is nearly impossible to appreciate the necessity, honor, and abundant comeliness of the members who seem to be weaker (1 Cor. 12:22-23). It is hard for Protestants because their view of the Body is so individualistic that it is quite possible for one member to say to another, “I have no need of you” (v. 21). Within the sphere of the Body of Christ, Mary is no more or no less important than any other member, although she has importance, just as every member has importance. But given the unwillingness of Protestants to afford special prominence to her, it is indeed unrealistic to expect that a “tempered” discourse alone would lead to rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants. At the most, there would be polite but continuing and entrenched disagreement.

Blithely ignoring these realities, which are predicated on fundamental disagreements concerning why Mary should or should not be honored, “Blessed,” nevertheless, embarks upon a rhetorical, but largely futile, effort to find a more balanced understanding of Mary. It tries to find an understanding that is based on the Bible and recognized by the fathers of early church history and even of the Reformation. Its findings are presented in the form of five biblical representations of Mary’s status: spotless bride and pilgrim sinner, virgin mother of a man, the God-bearer, handmaiden of faith, and pointer to Jesus (36-39). In its subsequent development of these points, the article variously cites the views of Ignatius of Antioch, Luther, Zwingli, Bullinger, and even Calvin. Drawing upon these writings, the article deftly moves from criticizing the Catholic tendency to promote the direct worship of Mary to propounding an Evangelical alternative of using

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Mary to direct our worship toward Christ—whatever difference, if any, that may entail at an existential level.

### Representing Mary's Roles

Of the five biblical representations of Mary, "Blessed" spends the majority of its rhetorical effort on the last two: handmaiden of faith and pointer to Jesus. It covers the first three rather quickly. In regard to Mary as a spotless bride and pilgrim sinner, "Blessed" acknowledges that the Bible portrays her as both "faithful and faithless, obedient and interfering, perceptive and opaque, *simul iustus et peccator*, 'at once a just person and a sinner'" (37). While this is true, does it say anything deep at all? This same Protestant formulation applies to all the members in the Body of Christ; thus, there is no basis for higher honor merely as a consequence of this representation. The true purpose of its inclusion seems to be to garner support for the article's attempt to elevate Mary in the eyes of Protestants by rhetorically applying the Protestant formulation of *simul iustus et peccator* to the history of Mary.

In regard to Mary as the virgin mother of a man, "Blessed" affirms the miraculous virgin birth of the Lord. As prophesied in Isaiah 7:14, "the virgin will conceive and will bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel." All professing Catholics and Protestants believe this, so is any new ground broken that would cause Protestants to further elevate their appreciation of Mary? No! And in regard to Mary as the God-bearer, "Blessed" merely clarifies the historical context of the term *theotokos*, which was used in the Christological debates to defend the divinity and humanity of Christ, not to elevate Mary. This is helpful because it underscores our crucial need to focus on Christ rather than Mary. Accepting this representation for what it is—an uplifting of truth related to the person of Christ—however, ironically, diminishes the article's effort to uplift our appreciation of Mary.

"Blessed" focuses on the role of Mary as the handmaiden of faith and as a pointer to Jesus because faith and Christ play a central role in Protestant theology. As such, its desire to promote a higher appreciation of Mary can be most easily facilitated by linking Mary with the central role of faith in God's plan of redemption, rather than works. "Blessed" begins by denying any prominence given Mary as a result of her special circumstances, saying, "She is called blessed not because of her virginity or even her humility, but because she was chosen as the person and place where God's glory would enter most deeply into the human story" (38). It then goes on to argue that Mary is the preeminent example of justification by faith.

Above all, the Reformers recognize Mary as the one who hears the Word of God and responds in faith, and thus is justified by faith alone. Mary was a disciple of Christ

before she was his mother, for had she not believed, she would not have conceived. Mary's faith too is not the achievement of merit, but the gift of divine grace. This means that when we praise and love Mary, it is God whom we praise for his gracious favor to his chosen handmaid. (38)

Why there is a need to praise and love Mary for being no different from every other sinner who has been justified by faith alone through grace alone is never explained. Nevertheless, "Blessed" finds great significance in the handmaiden of faith imagery, noting that the Reformers were "quick to point out" that "Mary is the embodiment of grace alone and faith alone" (38). Based on this finding, "Blessed" leaps forward from the annals of the Protestant Reformation to the present to suggest that "contemporary Protestants, along with the Reformers," therefore, "should highly extol Mary in our theology and worship" (38). This is a breathtaking leap—from regarding Mary as a mere exemplar of the truth of justification by faith to regarding her as a focal point for our theology and worship, and this simply because she is an exemplar of something that is true for all believers. If we highly extol Mary because she was justified by faith, should we not equally and highly extol all the believers, and if we do this, is it even possible to "highly" extol Mary, relatively speaking? And given this, if a "higher" extolling was ever formulated in response to the reassessment propounded by "Blessed," would it not really just be idolatry, the unnatural and abominable elevation of man in relation to God?

Even though "Blessed" does not knowingly advocate this kind of idolatrous elevation, it still tries to find a role for Mary in our worship, and it does so by identifying Mary as a pointer to Jesus. With respect to her capacity as a pointer to Christ, "Blessed" defines a role for Mary that "Protestants can and should embrace," as long as we "do not think of the mother of God, an object of devotion by herself, in isolation from her son" (39). "Blessed" captures its implicit effort to assuage Catholic concerns and temper Protestant sentiment in one succinct sentence: "We need not go through Mary in order to get to Jesus, but we can join with Mary in pointing others to him" (39).

The attempt of "Blessed" to foster some sort of rapprochement by finding some added significance to Mary as a pointer to Christ, in reality, only underscores the ultimate futility of the article. If pointing to Christ has some theological significance, should we not ask with equal gravity: Is Mary the only one who can point to Christ? Cannot all the believers hold forth Christ as the word of life? And if pointing to Christ is all that Mary can do for Protestants who rightfully refuse to acknowledge the extrabiblical, even heretical roles assigned by Roman Catholicism to Mary, is there really a special role or even a need for a special role for her in our theology and worship, especially

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when this role is fulfilled spontaneously in the life of a believer who lives in the experiential reality of being joined to the Lord? (1 Cor. 6:17). Rather than attempting to define a more limited, but still extrabiblical role for the “Blessed Evangelical Mary,” especially one that violates the organic reality of the Body of Christ, it would be better to spend our time in praise and thanks to the One who is God overall, blessed forever, our Christ (Rom. 9:5).

by John Pester

## The Truth Left Behind

*The Truth behind Left Behind*, by Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2004.

By now, it is not news that Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkin’s twelve-part *Left Behind* series is wildly popular. With over 60,000,000 sold in the series and a long presence on best-seller lists, the novels have enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim. In addition to becoming both a religious and cultural reference point for Christians and non-Christians alike, the end-times view that it presents has reinvigorated pre-tribulationism as the default eschatology of a sizeable majority of evangelicals. This fictional account of the end times has won the hearts and minds of millions of America’s born-again believers and now is a dominating influence within the current generation of believers.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive reception of the series by evangelical believers, it has also received its share of critiques, especially from Roman Catholic, Reformed, and some fundamental Baptist theologians. In response to this mixed reception, Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice authored *The Truth behind Left Behind* (hereafter *Truth*). According to the authors, this book serves a dual purpose. First, it buttresses the series’ pre-millennial and pre-tribulational end-time view against attacks mounted by the proponents of amillennial, post-millennial, and anti-dispensational schools of thought. Second, it functions as a “concise primer on prophetic events” (19), a companion volume of sorts, to friends of the novels’ eschatological perspective.

The first section of *Truth* surveys the major features of the *Left Behind* series’ end-times topology. These features, in order of appearance, are the rapture, a coming Russian/ Islamic invasion, Israel, salvation for those left behind, a seven-year tribulation, New Babylon, Antichrist, and the mark of the beast. *Truth*’s view of the rapture, as implied in the series’ title, is that the entire church is raptured before the seven-year period known as the tribulation.

Those left behind are not true members of the church; they are unbelievers who have not been born again. The Russian/ Islamic invasion of Israel, for which *Truth* finds confirmation in Ezekiel 38 and 39, is timed to occur before the rapture, and thus before the tribulation and our Lord’s return. Israel, in turn, is viewed as “God’s super sign” of the end times (56). According to *Truth*, if one understands Israel’s place and role in history, one can know exactly what God is doing, what He will do, and when He will do it. *Truth* then delves into the contentious question of whether those who are left behind can be saved. The book speaks of a great revival that the tribulation will occasion and assures concerned readers that those who miss the rapture will still be able to receive the Lord whom they previously rejected. In this section, *Truth* also defends the concept of a seven-year tribulation based on Daniel’s prophecy of seventy weeks and various passages in Revelation. On the topic of Babylon, *Truth* defends a literal interpretation of a restored Babylon (“New Babylon”) as Antichrist’s political, economic, and religious capital, which rises from the banks of the Euphrates on the site of the ancient city. In its concluding discussion of apocalyptic events, *Truth* speaks of the mark of the beast, considers the implications of receiving or rejecting it, and seeks to dissuade readers from trying to guess the name behind the number. In the final part of the section, *Truth* encourages unbelievers to not just know the signs of the tribulation but to receive the One who can rapture them before it begins.

The second section in *Truth* aims to answer questions concerning biblical prophecy and dispensationalism. It also provides a cursory history of the historic and modern church’s interpretation of the rapture. These three chapters define the *Left Behind* series’ approach to biblical interpretation and its general position with regard to eschatology. There are four chief shortcomings in *Truth* (and, by extension, in the *Left Behind* series). First, it adheres to an event-driven eschatology, according to which worldly events dictate the fulfillment of God’s purpose in this age. Second, it holds that the criterion of rapture is merely justification and regeneration and neglects the believers’ need to grow in the divine life, an indispensable prerequisite of rapture. Third, it teaches that all believers are raptured before the onset of the tribulation. Fourth, it argues for the possibility of salvation for those who miss the rapture and are alive during the tribulation. In these respects, *Truth* is in error.

### *Truth*’s Event-driven Eschatology

*Truth* clearly conveys that its end-time view and that of the *Left Behind* series is driven by events. Seven of the ten chapters in the first section are devoted to one “key” event or another (18). Hitchcock and Ice even recommend their book as “a concise primer on prophetic events” (19, emphasis added). According to *Truth*, the

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catalysts for the rapture and other eschatological developments are almost exclusively world events. As stated by *Truth*, prophecies (e.g., the return of Israel, the preparation of New Babylon, the ascent of a strong leader in Europe) are being fulfilled before our eyes, which “prompts us to look more closely at *all* the international headlines” (73).

Among the players on the eschatological world stage, *Truth* considers Israel to be “God’s super sign,” the “grand indicator” of what He is about to do on the earth (56, 73).

The regathering of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is an essential element in the Left Behind view of the end times...Almost every important event in this landmark series hinges on the existence of the nation of Israel...For those who hold to the Left Behind view of coming events, the regathered nation of Israel truly is the “super sign” of the end times...The current state of Israel is prophetically important because the Jewish people have been regathered in order to fulfill events during the coming seven-year Tribulation period, following the Rapture. (57)

In considering the seven-year peace pact that is to be made between the Antichrist and Israel, *Truth* notes that “the stage is set for *the very event that will trigger* the Great Tribulation and usher in the final days of the world as we know it” (66, emphasis added). Describing Israel as “the powder keg fuse for the final world conflict” that is now “beginning to smolder” (73) and identifying the return to its homeland as “the number one sign of the end times,” *Truth* leaves no doubt as to the importance of world events as they relate to the end of this age (74).

While we share *Truth*’s realization concerning the importance of prophesied world events to the end times, *Truth*’s emphasis marginalizes the greatest sign of the Lord’s return and the rapture: the preparation of matured believers to be Christ’s bride. By ignoring this indispensable point, *Truth* betrays a near total lack of insight into the true driving force behind the Lord’s return.

**T**he age of the church is regarded in the New Testament as an age of mystery (Eph. 3:9). Many students of the Bible (Hitchcock and Ice included) have correctly posited that the age of the church is the gap between the last two weeks of the seventy weeks prophesied by Daniel (9:24-27).<sup>1</sup> This gap, unlike the seventy weeks proper, does not have to fit into a strict prophetic time-line. Consequently, even though readers of Daniel’s prophecy can calculate to the day the beginning of the first week or the sixty-third week of Daniel’s prophecy, the duration of the church age is mysterious. In the context of Daniel’s weeks, it is a mystery whose duration is enigmatically related more to the spiritual condition of the believers than it is to the condition of world events.

In Revelation John introduces a frank statement with regard to the preparation of the church as a bride as the precursor to the Lord’s return: “Let us rejoice and exult, and let us give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife *has made herself ready*” (19:7, emphasis added). This preparation refers to the believers’ active experience and enjoyment of the Lord’s work in them, which results in the bride being presented to Him without spot and wrinkle (Eph. 5:26-27). The testimony of the Scriptures is that the Lord will not complete the rapture of the overcoming saints until after she has prepared herself for her Bridegroom.

The role that the church plays in the Lord’s return is also illustrated in Revelation 2 and 3, where the responsibility to overcome the degradation of the church is placed squarely onto the shoulders of the church and the believers who compose it. Unless there are overcomers in the church, the Lord will not return. The overcomers in the church are thus the unique catalyst for the Lord’s return. Israel’s becoming “tender” and its putting forth “leaves” after returning to her land do *portend* the Lord’s return (Matt. 24:32), as do various events and developments among the Gentile nations. But nowhere in the Bible does it say that Israel or the nations are the determining factor (“the powder keg fuse”) in the commencement of the seventieth week of Daniel, the occasioning of the rapture, and the Lord’s return to consummate the age. Contrary to *Truth*’s position, world events of any sort may indicate, but do not necessarily precipitate, eschatological events (vv. 32-33, 6-8).

**R**egrettably, an event-driven eschatology also has a negative impact on a believer’s daily living. A Christian who truly expects the rapture, tribulation, and Lord’s return to unfold simply because outward world events seem to align with prophecy may have little or no understanding of the vital importance of the need to be part of the prepared bride. Conversely, the believer who realizes that the bride must make herself ready and that the Lord will not return until there are prudent virgins who have prepared themselves to meet their Bridegroom will cooperate with the Lord so that he can bring the Lord to the earth and end the age (25:1-13). Those in the first group wait for the Lord’s return; those in the second *hasten* it.

### *Truth*’s Inaccurate Criteria for Rapture

*Truth*’s failure to grasp the key role that the prepared bride plays in the rapture and the Lord’s second coming causes the book to miss a unique qualification for the believers’ rapture—maturity in the divine life. *Truth* asserts that the only criterion necessary for the rapture of the believers is their new birth through believing in Christ: “at the Rapture, all living believers will be translated into heaven” (28). This is not so. The preparation of

the believers is not merely one of receiving the Lord's grace but one that involves the growth of the divine life within them throughout their lifetime. Indeed, the rapture of the believers represents the culmination of their growth in the divine life. In Luke, the Lord is a Sower who sows Himself as the seed of life into the believers' hearts (8:4). Paul enlarges upon this in 1 Corinthians, likening the believers to many grains who constitute God's crop (3:9). The Lord's intention is to harvest these grains for His satisfaction (Exo. 23:19; 34:22, 26; Lev. 2:12; 23:10; Prov. 3:9). According to D. M. Panton, Mark 4 reveals "the vital principle of all harvesting" (25). Verse 29 says, "But when the fruit is ripe, immediately he sends forth the sickle, because the harvest has come." According to this principle, grain is gathered once it is ripe, not before. Not surprisingly, Revelation depicts the rapture of the believers in terms of a ripening harvest. According to this principle, the first believers to be raptured are the first ones to mature. These are thus called the "firstfruits to God and to the Lamb" (14:4). According to the context of the surrounding verses in chapter 14, these must correspond to the ones whom the Lord promises to keep out of the hour of trial (3:10). After these first-ripened ones are reaped, the larger harvest is gathered: "And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, Send forth Your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come because the harvest of the earth is ripe" (14:15). This verse clearly indicates that the timing of harvest depends upon the ripening of the grain. From these verses, it should be plain that the Bible does not speak of a collective rapture of all the saints; rather the timing of rapture is according to the individual believers' maturity in the divine life (1 Thes. 5:23; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Rom. 8:29-30, 23; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

Because *Truth* teaches that those who are born again will be raptured prior to the tribulation and does not speak of the responsibility of the believers to "grow unto salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2), it leaves readers unaware of the fate of those who are not ripe at the time of the Lord's rapture of the firstfruits (cf. Lev. 23:22). It would not be too much to say that millions of genuine believers, having been brought forth in Christ's resurrection as many "grains of wheat" (John 12:24), will ironically find themselves left behind when the firstfruits are raptured by virtue of the simple fact that the spiritual books they read never encouraged them to mature in the divine life.

### **Truth's Inaccurate Understanding of the Rapture's Participants**

The teaching of the simultaneous rapture of *all* the saints at the beginning of the seven years of tribulation is what the authors call the "linchpin" of the entire Left Behind series (21):

The Left Behind theology is built upon a belief in the Rapture.

This is the conviction that in a moment of time, in the blink of an eye, every true believer in Jesus Christ will be physically transported up into the clouds to meet Jesus, then return with Him to His Father's house in heaven. (21)

Because *Truth* neglects maturing in the divine life as the unique qualification for rapture, its teaching on the timing of the believers' rapture also is erroneous.<sup>2</sup>

A number of passages in the New Testament indicate that some believers will be raptured before the great tribulation, which is the last three and a half years of Daniel's seventieth week. Revelation 7:9 implies that before the onset of the great tribulation, some believers already will have been caught up by Christ. It would be wrong, however, to assume that these verses indicate that *all* believers will be simultaneously raptured. Many passages, in fact, indicate that while some are taken, others are left. In Matthew 25, for example, the Lord says that of two Christians one will be raptured and the other will be left. The rapture of the man-child in Revelation demonstrates this principle. While the man-child, the stronger part of all God's people throughout the ages, is raptured, the woman who brings him forth is left to flee into the wilderness and remain there for one thousand two hundred sixty days (Rev. 12:5-6). Both the woman and the man-child signify God's people, but only the man-child is raptured before the tribulation. The Bible is unequivocal on this point. Based upon their level of spiritual maturity, some believers will be raptured before the tribulation; others will be left to endure it.

### **Truth's Mistaken Understanding of the Gospel during the Tribulation**

*Truth* also maintains that people can and will be saved (i.e., born again) following a pre-tribulation rapture (76). This is stated on the authority of Revelation 7:9-17, which says of the great multitude that they had "come out of the great tribulation" (v. 14). *Truth* apparently assumes that the tribulation spoken of here is that which is spoken of in Matthew 24:21 (79-80). The tribulation mentioned in Revelation 7:14, however, actually refers to the tribulations, sufferings, persecutions, and afflictions experienced by God's redeemed people throughout the ages. The multitude standing before the throne are those who have matured in the divine life through the great suffering that has encompassed the believers throughout the age of grace.

According to the Scriptures, the gospel that is preached and believed during the tribulation is the "eternal gospel" (14:6)—a gospel that is significantly different from the

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gospel of grace preached throughout the centuries preceding the final three and a half years. During the tribulation, the eternal gospel will be preached to the inhabitants of the earth by an angel who flies in mid-heaven. The contents of this gospel is the content of his preaching: “Fear God and give Him glory because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who has made heaven and earth and the sea and the springs of waters” (v. 7). From the context of verse 9, the recipients of the eternal gospel are those who do not worship the beast and his image and receive his mark. These are the “sheep” of whom the Lord spoke in Matthew 25:31-46. During the tribulation the recipients of this gospel will care for God’s people, who will be persecuted by Antichrist and his followers. As a reward for their fear of God, their rejection of Antichrist, and their care for God’s people, they will be saved in the sense that during the millennium they will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. This kingdom is the earth, where the blessing of God’s creation will be (cf. Gen. 1:28-30), and which will be under the kingly ruling of Christ and the overcoming believers (Rev. 2:26-27; 12:5; 20:4, 6) and the priestly service of the saved remnant of Israel (Zech. 8:20-23). Hence, the gospel that will be preached and believed during the tribulation (the eternal gospel) is not for regeneration (the gospel of grace); thus, it will not cause those who believe in it to become the New Jerusalem with the regenerated children of God. This salvation merely results in a restoration to the original state of God’s creation, in which they will enjoy God’s blessing of creation throughout the millennium.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

*Truth*, despite approaching the Bible and its eschatological themes with a pure and proper spirit, reinforces and propounds an eschatology that neither matches the Word of God nor upholds the governing principles in God’s administration. Of greatest concern is the degree to which this book, and the series it defends, neglects the truth most essential to the rapture of the believers: daily growth in the divine life. The fact that the book fails to mention this even once reveals that it contains little or no understanding of the matter and does not convey the realization of its significance in the completion of God’s purpose in this age.

by Nathan Betz

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Interestingly, it is almost certain that this gap was not immediately apparent, if ever at all, to Daniel or any other person who lived before the dawn of the New Testament age. The gap appears only when the reader bears in mind the further revelation of God’s eternal purpose concerning the church as revealed in the New Testament.

<sup>2</sup>*Truth* holds to a seven-year-long period of tribulation that consists of “Tribulation” and “Great Tribulation,” each of which is distinct from the other (27). The biblical terms *tribulation* and *great tribulation*, however, are synonymous when used in connection with eschatological themes, and the period of the tribulation is the final three and a half years of the seventieth week in Daniel’s prophecy. The first three and a half years of the seventieth week of Daniel will not be very different from the time preceding it, except for the fact that a seven-year peace agreement is brokered by the future Antichrist with Israel, and as a consequence, a sense of peace temporarily pervades (1 Thes. 5:3). This will be no more a time of tribulation than the church is currently experiencing. The breaking of the peace agreement after three and a half years, the Antichrist’s placing of his image in the rebuilt temple (Dan. 9:27), and the commencement of the calamities associated with the sixth seal, the trumpets, and the bowls mark the beginning of the three-and-a-half year period known as the great tribulation. During this period Satan and Antichrist will collaborate to torment man (Rev. 8:13—9:11) and persecute God’s people (11:2; 12:7-9, 13-14; 13:7; 6:11), and God will judge Babylon (14:8; 17:1—19:4), unrepentant man (16:1-12; 14:10-11), and Antichrist and his kingdom (16:10-11). These things will constitute a great and unprecedented tribulation (Matt. 24:21). The length of this great tribulation is one thousand two hundred sixty days or forty-two lunar months (Dan. 9:24-27; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6, 14, 13:5; Matt. 24:15, 21).

<sup>3</sup>For more on the millennial destiny of the Gentiles and their salvation according to the eternal gospel, see Witness Lee’s “The Lord’s Judgment of the Gentiles after the War at Armageddon” in his book *The Kingdom* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1980). As to the eternal destiny of those who receive this gospel, Witness Lee makes this important point:

After the millennial kingdom, a part of these nations, deceived by the devil, will rebel against the Lord and will be consumed by fire from heaven (20:7-9). The rest will be transferred to the new earth to be the nations, which will live around the New Jerusalem and walk by its light. They will be the peoples mentioned in vv. 3 and 4. They, as created but unregenerated men, will be maintained to live forever in their created state through the healing of the leaves of the tree of life (22:2). Even for them there will be no more death (v. 4). Under the shining of the New Jerusalem with the divine glory, neither will they be in darkness. (Recovery Version, Rev. 21:24, note 1).

This latter point is enlarged upon by Ron Kangas in “A Brief Presentation of a Biblical Eschatology” in *Affirmation & Critique* V:2, April, 2000.

## Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003.  
Panton, D. M. *Rapture*. Miami Springs: Schoettle, 1988.