

**“*Left Behind* fiction and the Evangelical Crisis”**

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This lecture will describe the re-invention of evangelicalism in the movement’s most significant cultural products. One of the most obvious signals of the particularity of evangelicalism in the USA can be found in the unprecedented success of its *Left Behind* novels. Since the publication of their first installment in 1995, the series has sold an estimated 65 million copies, with the ninth in the series knocking John Grisham from the no. 1 spot in *Publisher’s Weekly* to become the best-selling adult novel in the world. The series is taking its distinctive brand of evangelicalism to a larger audience than ever before. But, as it does so, it is making significant changes to the historic content of evangelical theology, most obviously in its downplaying of ecclesiastical commitments and in its spirituality of the Christian life. This lecture will show how rapture fiction represents the evolution of faith.

Forget about Stephen King, John Grisham or Harry Potter. The most successful series of novels in the world today does not describe the adventures of a trainee wizard, a fast-thinking lawyer, or monsters returning from the dead, but events that many evangelicals associate with the end of the age. *Left Behind* is the most astonishing English-language literary phenomenon of the early twenty-first century. Since 1995, when the first of the novels was published, the rapidly-expanding series has sold over sixty-five million items associated with its franchise. *Deseccration*, the ninth book in the series, became the world’s top selling work of adult hardback fiction in 2001, displacing work by John Grisham, which had maintained the position for the previous five years. The authors of this series, Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, have claimed never to have expected this level of popularity, but they have not been slow in exploiting it to the full. The series’ spin-offs have included a board game, a spectacular website, clothes, music CDs, comic books, a controversially violent video game and the dramatisation of (so far) three titles, the first of which was the most expensive evangelical movie ever made. Put the sales in perspective: these novels have sold half as many copies in ten years as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has in fifty.

And these texts are likely to be more enduring. While *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in a pseudo-medieval Neverland, the world of *Left Behind* is chillingly like our own. The true believers, from the USA, face the appalling prospect of an Antichrist based in Iraq. Multinational organizations become the face of the new evil. The United Nations facilitates the worst regime the world has ever known. Technology allows for unprecedented invasions of privacy. Evangelicals are pushed to the cultural sidelines. Even the American government capitulates. And all of this was published several years before the second Gulf War. Whatever you think of it, *Left Behind* is a publishing sensation.

### **Where has *Left Behind* emerged from?**

The *Left Behind* novels, with their controversial mixture of political conservatism and eschatological hope, emerge from a popular version of a system of evangelical theology known as ‘dispensationalism’. This kind of theology – a variant of which is dramatised in the *Left Behind* series – was developed in the nineteenth century to argue that Jesus Christ could at any moment secretly return to ‘rapture’ to heaven all true believers, with everyone else left behind; that those left behind would enter a seven-year period known as the ‘tribulation’; that, during the tribulation, a sinister dictator would rise to power to rule over a revived Roman Empire based in Europe; that this ‘Antichrist’ would mount the most savage persecution the world has ever seen; that this persecution would be focused on Jews, including those who have converted to the Christian faith and those Gentiles who have been persuaded by their evangelism; that this persecution would be made possible by the Antichrist’s sophisticated use of innovative technology, which might include a technological ‘mark of the beast’; and that his terrible regime would be ended by the second coming proper, when Jesus Christ would return with his people to defeat his enemies, bind the devil and establish his millennial kingdom of 1000 years. The end of the millennium would be followed by the final rebellion, the final battle, and the inauguration of the new heavens and earth. The *Left Behind* novels dramatise one variant of this complex theology, and chart the fate of the ‘tribulation force’, a small band of those who come to faith after the rapture to face the consequences of Christian discipleship in a world governed by the most evil – and most powerful – man in history.

Dispensationalism – like many other forms of Christian teaching about the end of all things – promotes a very black-and-white view of the world. Like the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation, in which it bases many of its claims, dispensationalism argues that the on-going conflict between good and evil will ultimately result in the destruction of everything unrighteous. The most basic message of dispensationalism, like that of all other evangelical theologies of the end, is that Jesus Christ will return to earth as the Victor, completing the new creation that has begun in the salvation he has provided to his people. Those who have never committed their lives to him will be eternally condemned. In that sense of moral judgement, dispensationalism is well within the orbit of traditional Christian orthodoxy.

But dispensationalism moves beyond what the church has always believed. In developing the idea that the rapture will occur before the tribulation, and by suggesting a period of history from which Christians will be removed, dispensationalism represents a real departure from the church's historic faith. This does not necessarily mean that it is wrong, merely innovative; but the novelty of dispensationalism is even more marked in the publications of those popular prophecy 'experts' who write their own political and cultural fears into their exegesis of biblical truth. A long line of prophecy 'experts' has found in Scripture all manner of references to the problems of the present. Every anti-hero of the day has been written into the scenario of the end, from Cold War Communism to the New Age movement to the increasingly powerful United Nations. What these villains have in common is the danger to the American way of life they are believed to represent. In that sense, popular dispensationalism is a theology strongly inflected by fear. From the late nineteenth century to the present day, dispensationalism has articulated an ultimately American doomsday.

### **Dispensationalism and American culture**

The development of dispensationalism throughout the twentieth century has been profoundly marked by the American context of its most influential exponents. In concentrating on the biblical description of the end of the world, these leaders have not retreated into some unusual cultural backwater. From colonial times to the present day, American Protestantism has been deeply affected by a persistent interest in the end of the world. America's earliest evangelical leaders published extensively on apocalyptic and

millennial thought. Increase Mather, for example, built on the foundation of the earliest settlers to argue that Jesus Christ would return before the millennium (this has become known as ‘pre-millennialism’). In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards adopted certain aspects of the humanistic optimism of his day and argued from Scripture that Jesus Christ would return after the millennium (this has become known as ‘post-millennialism’). Throughout the nineteenth century, American evangelicals continued to maintain both positions, with the theologians based in Princeton Seminary consolidating Presbyterianism’s post-millennial expectations while others with equally evangelical credentials adhered to the several varieties of pre-millennialism that were evolving through the period. But the destruction of the First World War shattered the optimistic expectations of the evangelical post-millennialists, and a new generation of pre-millennial thinkers seized the initiative. In 1917 the Revd Cyrus Scofield published the second, and more popular, edition of the study Bible that was to make his name – and his theology – famous. Selling millions of copies, and with the kudos gained from being published by Oxford University Press, the *Scofield Reference Bible* was to dominate the apocalyptic thinking of several generations of American evangelicals, disseminating its innovative brand of dispensational and pre-millennial thought. Despite the rapid rise of a-millennialism – the belief that the thousand-year period described in Revelation 20 is a general symbol of all of the church age rather than a definite period in the future – pre-millennialism dominated the twentieth-century American imagination. Throughout evangelicalism were many whose ‘hope was built on nothing less than Scofield’s notes and Moody Press’.

By the mid-twentieth-century, dispensational pre-millennialism had become part of the American cultural mainstream, but its influence greatly extended after the 1970s. At the end of that decade, an estimated eight million Americans were ‘firmly committed’ to the variety of dispensationalism the novels advance. Today, that number has multiplied. Two televangelists who share a commitment to a premillennial worldview, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, claim to communicate with 100 million supporters every week. Adherents of the dispensational worldview can be found throughout the entire spectrum of American life – and even in the Oval Office. In 1971, the future President Ronald Reagan stated his conviction that ‘the day of Armageddon isn’t far off

... Ezekiel says that fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God's people. That must mean that they'll be destroyed by nuclear weapons.' Significantly, it was to an evangelical association that President Reagan made his famous (and apocalyptic) reference to the 'evil empire' of Soviet Russia. Several administrations later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, supporters of dispensationalism have 'probably' become 'the most powerful lobby in the United States'. A number of recent commentators have argued that their concerns pervade the theological interests and political policies of George W. Bush. In a Christmas 2004 'end of the world' special, the British newspaper *The Economist* reported fears that 'nutty, apocalyptic, born-again Texans are guiding not just conservative social policies at home, but America's agenda in the Middle East as well, as they round up reluctant compatriots for the last battle at Armageddon'. Dominating the imaginations of successive Presidents, evangelical apocalypticism has certainly come in from the cold.

With friends in high places and in low, the 'rapture' has become a central part of American folklore. The widespread appeal of this system of theology has been signalled and consolidated by the massive popularity of *Left Behind*. It has been a long time since any evangelical author has been of sufficient public interest to make the cover page of *TIME* or *Newsweek* – but, in the last four years, the authors of *Left Behind* have been featured on both. Their variant of dispensationalism – the ultimate American nightmare – has been granted the ultimate American accolade.

### **Left Behind fiction**

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that with widespread popular appeal and a stringent moral commitment, the *Left Behind* series has made as many enemies as friends. Selling in venues as different as Christian bookshops and airport terminals, the series has split American popular opinion. An increasing number of newspaper and magazine articles feature the authors, note the financial success the novels have provided, and systematically criticise their political and cultural assumptions. Catholic leaders complain of the series' overt Protestantism, and secularists complain of their socially conservative opinions: why, they ask, should everyone except evangelicals be condemned to hell?

No-one is claiming that the novels are high art. The first major book-length study of the series complained that the novels' characters 'seem flimsy and ill developed, the

plot contrived, and the writing thin'. Other critics complain of the series' cultural conservatism. Melani McAlister, Professor of American Studies at George Washington University, notes that although the novels 'claim to be about the future ... they are also very much about the present'. Amy Johnson Frykholm, author of the first major study of the series, has agreed, finding in the novels a 'conservative, patriarchal, even racist agenda that mirrors that of the Christian Right'. Elsewhere she complains of 'a strong conservative agenda, a hostile antifeminist perspective, hints of anti-Semitism, and an overt homophobia', and quotes another reviewer's description of the series as 'hard-core right-wing paranoid anti-Semitic homophobic misogynistic propaganda'.

The reception has not been any warmed in the United Kingdom, where the series has most often been discussed in connection with left-leaning European dissatisfaction with the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. From serious newspapers like *The Independent*, to serious literary reviews like *The Times Literary Supplement*, to mainstream television documentaries, the series has been repeatedly identified with all that European liberals find most objectionable about the American Christian Right. There is a strong streak of snobbishness in many of the British reviews. Thank goodness, they seem to say, that audiences on our side of the Atlantic are too clever for this.

This snobbery is most obvious in British newspaper coverage. *The Times* described the *Left Behind* series as 'the oddest literary phenomenon in the English-speaking world ... Nostradamus rewritten by Jeffrey Archer'. *The Independent on Sunday* argued that the series' appeal is 'clearly bound up in class. Nobody with an educated view of either religion or literature would give it the time of day.' The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewed *Glorious Appearing* (2004), the final novel in the initial twelve-volume series, and noted the 'awkwardness' with which its authors blended 'folksy humour, treacly sentiment and religiously justified bloodbaths'. Nevertheless, the series' plots offer 'very precise implications' for public policy, the *Times Literary Supplement* complained, for 'the God worshipped by LaHaye and Jenkins considers abortion to be wrong, has it in for gay people and feminists, and opposes most forms of government regulation, especially gun control.' For its high-brow British readers, the novels are simultaneously much too American and much too conservative to be models of good taste.

But it would be a mistake for British audiences to assume that American conservatives have been uncritical of the series. Seventh-Day Adventists have argued that the series is too soft on Roman Catholicism, erring in its identification of the Antichrist, who, they claim, is obviously the Pope. Catholic writers, sharing many of the series' ethical commitments, nevertheless complain that it is too hard on their communion. Within evangelicalism, writers as diverse as confessional Presbyterians and non-confessional fundamentalists have complained of what they perceive to be the series' lack of Biblical and theological caution. At times they dismiss what they perceive to be its 'dramatic expression of ... foolishness'. At other times, they point to the series as a dramatic manifestation of Antichristian influence within the evangelical mainstream. Even a number of leaders within dispensationalism have criticised the series for what they perceive to be a radical re-writing of the end. In particular, they have insisted that those who have rejected the gospel in this age will not be granted a second chance of salvation in the tribulation, completely countering the series' most fundamental assumption. Strangely, therefore, despite its phenomenal success, the series is not at all representative of the mainstream dispensational tradition with which it is often identified.

That dispensational mainstream has frequently been challenged by rapture fictions. Dispensational theology has been adapted into novels since before World War One, and into films since the 1970s. Again and again, these fictions have focused on the spectacular impact of the rapture, and the devastation and chaos of the tribulation. In showing their heroes coming to faith in Jesus Christ, they have made their agenda brilliantly clear: the only way a person can be saved from sin and assured of salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. *Left Behind* has taken some of these central tenets of evangelicalism to a wider audience than ever before. Recent reading surveys indicate that the series has attracted a wider readership than any Christian novel series ever published. Almost certainly, many of those reading the novels for the first time believe that they are being exposed to an authentic and reliable exposition of the Christian faith. My concern is that this series – like a great deal of evangelical rapture fiction more generally – may be a less reliable guide to the theology of the Bible than its many millions of readers suppose.

## The evangelical crisis

So why can these novels, which have taken evangelicalism far beyond its normal boundaries, be considered a ‘bad thing’? Well, I should make plain, as I develop my critique, that I speak as an evangelical, and as one who shares many of the hopes and fears the novels articulate. Of course, it’s paradoxical to discuss an ‘evangelical crisis’ by referring to the products that have most successfully moved from the subculture to the cultural mainstream. But let’s think for a few moments about the central tenet of evangelical spirituality – the notion of conversion. How do the novels dramatise that elemental change?

Elsewhere, the subculture surrounding the series celebrates their achievement of these goals. The fourth book in the *Left Behind* series, *Soul Harvest* (1998), was dedicated to ‘our brand-new brothers and sisters’ – evidently those who had made a profession of faith after reading novels in the series. At the end of 2002, *Today’s Christian* reported that the authors had received letters from 3000 people indicating that they had ‘received Christ’ after reading the *Left Behind* books. In 2003, the authors teamed up with biographer Norman B. Rohrer to illustrate the series’ life-changing potential. *These will not be left behind: True stories of changed lives* (2003) documented a number of testimonies of those whose profession of faith had been directly linked to the books.

So, it could be argued, perhaps people are experiencing conversion through reading this series. But across the evangelical board, other writers have expressed concern at the series’ representation of the gospel. Is it possible that *Left Behind* contains a serious misrepresentation of the Christian faith? Professor Shantz has provided you with a handout to which I’d like to draw your attention at this point. It sets out a series of quotations from the series. You might want to take a look at the first one, now.

*“Pastor Billings walked the viewers of that tape through a prayer. We were to tell God we knew we were sinners and that we needed his forgiveness. We were to tell him we believed Jesus died for our sins and God raised him from the dead. Then we were to accept his gift of salvation and thank him for it.”*

*“Seems too easy.”*

Well, perhaps it is – but the problem is that the novels (and their readers) just aren’t sure.

There's no doubt that the novels emphasize the importance of the gospel. The series first exemplifies the movement from popular American religiosity to genuine faith when Irene Steele, wife of one of the series' most significant characters, becomes interested in 'real preaching and teaching'. Much to her husband's consternation, she becomes preoccupied 'with the end of the world, with the love of Jesus, with the salvation of souls'. Rayford is not altogether happy with the changes in his wife, and finds her new church just 'a little too literal and personal and challenging'. *Left Behind* presents the journey towards true faith as a journey towards the social margins.

While the success of their series has catapulted dispensational ideas into the centre of American popular culture, therefore, the authors are only too aware of the marginal status of their convictions. Despite recent conservative victories, the novels imply, Americans cannot assume that the patriotic rhetoric of the state shares any vital dynamic of saving faith. Yet, at the same time, the series is incredibly optimistic about the number of people who will be involved in the rapture. On one trans-Atlantic 747, 'more than a hundred people' are taken by the rapture. In Mel Odom's *Apocalypse Dawn*, another novel marketed under the *Left Behind* franchise, fully one third of the global population disappear.

While these figures look incredibly optimistic, neither Jenkins nor LaHaye could be accused of complacency about the human condition. Pausing from fast-paced apocalyptic action, one character in *Desecration* explains that humanity is 'born in sin and separated from God'. *Nicolae* explains that good works cannot purchased salvation because

'the Bible is clear that all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags. There is none righteous, no not one. We have turned, every one, to his own way. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In the economy of God, we are all worthy only of the punishment of death.'

Salvation, the novels properly continue, 'is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast'.

Theologically, I think, the novels are at their best when, as here, they simply echo Scripture. These quotations, for example, pulls together statements from Isaiah 64:6, Isaiah 53:6 and Romans 3:23 to reflect a number of central themes in the Biblical

teaching of human need. The novels exhort their readers to ‘understand the depth of your own depravity’ and to realise that those who are not Christians are ‘dead in ... sins’. As one character puts it, ‘you need to be saved because you cannot save yourself.’ The novels are equally insistent that salvation can only come through Jesus Christ. He is the one who ‘offers the free gift of salvation to anyone who believes’. His kingdom is ‘exclusively for those who have made the right decision ... [to] call on the name of the Lord’. *Left Behind* often gets it wonderfully right.

But, problematically, *Left Behind* often gets it right and wrong. It mirrors both the strengths and weaknesses of the evangelical world from which it emerges, and demonstrates the extent to which the movement has been influenced by the tactile romanticism of the age. Buck describes his conversion as his having ‘fallen in love with God’, for example, and, new to congregational worship, marvels at ‘all this hugging, especially among men’. This makes the European in me cringe. But for many readers, already in the subculture, this will not be strange. The difficulty for these readers will be to distinguish the spirit of the gospel from the spirit of the age, to see where American or popular evangelical norms end and where Biblical norms actually begin.

This undifferentiated combination of American evangelical values and Biblical principles is evident in the series’ identification of a group of people who do not need to be saved. Unlike some earlier rapture fictions, *Left Behind* includes among the disappeared both unborn babies and pre-teenage children. Undoubtedly this reflects the growing politicisation of the American Christian right. Tim LaHaye has been an outspoken defender of family values, and has organised anti-abortion campaigns to defend the ‘right to life’. Throughout history, evangelicals have always debated the fate of those who died in infancy or in the womb. In *Left Behind*, these hopes are defined in a theology of the ‘age of accountability’. One of the series’ characters explains the sudden disappearance of children and unborn babies:

‘Up to a certain age, which is probably different for each individual, ... God will not hold a child accountable for a decision that must be made with heart and mind, fully cognizant of the ramifications.’

In its most basic form, this idea signals that those who die before they are able to understand the gospel will not be held accountable for their sins. In Odom’s *Apocalypse*

*Dawn*, that age is specified – every child ‘from newborn to the age of twelve’ is among the disappeared. This presentation of childhood innocence is in stark contrast to the clear statements of the major seventeenth-century confessions of faith, that salvation could only be expected for ‘elect infants, dying in childhood’ – not all children, generally. The ‘age of accountability’ doctrine, as it is developed in the novels, raises serious issues about when responsibility can be said to begin. But it maps well onto the sentimentalism that has engulfed large sections of contemporary evangelicalism.

The series’ combination of American evangelical values and Biblical principles is equally apparent in its presentation of the gospel. The novels balance the limited number of the saved with the claim that those who are not among their number have only themselves to blame. Countering the notion that the evangelical gospel is ‘exclusivistic’, one character exhorts his listener to ‘Understand this: The Bible makes it clear that the will of God is that all men be saved.’ The novels are excellent on the universality of the gospel: ‘He is the one who offers the free gift of salvation to anyone who believes!’ At the same time, problematically, they base that free offer on an unqualified portrayal of God’s ineffective longing to bring salvation to all humanity. Quoting 2 Peter 3:9, one character reminds the readers that ‘God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.’ But there is no explanation as to why the God who predicts and controls the history of the world cannot influence the personal history of its individuals. If, in the novels, he wants to pour judgements on the earth, he can do so; but we are never told why he cannot save every individual, if, as the citation of 2 Peter 3:9 appears to suggest, that is exactly what he wants.

The picture the novels present is of a waiting and hopeful God, who has issued a general invitation to salvation but leaves individuals free to decide on their own destiny. The novels claim that ‘we have an august God – the only supreme, omnipotent potentate.’ But, they continue,

‘if the Bible teaches us one thing about God, it is that he is for us. He is not against us. He wants to bless our lives, and the key to the door of blessing is to give your life to him and ask him to do with it as he will.’

Effectively, therefore, the series does not represent God as sovereign. This ‘supreme, omnipotent’ king stands idly by while humanity decides whether or not to use the key to

the ‘door of blessing’. God’s omnipotence does not ordinarily extend into the lives of individuals, neither the often confusing events of world history, nor the clouds in the sky. In fact, all things considered, he is not really worthy of being called ‘omnipotent’ at all:

‘For generations people have called natural disasters “acts of God.” This has been a misnomer. Eons ago, God the Father conceded control of Earth’s weather to Satan himself, the prince and power of the air. ... And no doubt God at times intervened against such actions by the evil one because of the fervent prayers of his people’

‘Conceded’ is an extremely significant term in any discussion of God’s sovereignty – not least when Scripture represents God as actively engaged in controlling the weather (Job 38:22-29). Nevertheless, the novels rather frankly admit, ‘God left control of [the world] pretty much to Satan.’ It seems, in the theology of *Left Behind*, that God is a careless absentee monarch who has devolved responsibility for his world to a powerful and vindictive enemy.

This undermining of divine sovereignty makes the series’ presentation of the gospel extremely problematic. If, as the novels claim, Satan is ‘pretty much’ in control of the world, apparently able to limit God’s access to its environment, and if, as Scripture and the novels agree, individuals are ‘dead in trespasses and sins’, it is difficult to see how anyone could be saved at all. The novels suggest that God has no ability to intervene in anyone’s state of spiritual death. But if the novels present a faulty view of God, their representation of salvation is equally concerning.

#### ***Left Behind* and the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’**

*Left Behind*, like rapture fictions more generally, does not have much theological coherence beyond its well-known dispensationalism. The question of the sinner’s ability to respond to the gospel is never seriously addressed. Describing the sinner’s ‘depravity’, and showing him to be ‘dead in trespasses and sins’, the series elaborates a theological conundrum that shows characters coming to faith in Christ despite the opposition of the persecuting world, the almost-all-controlling devil, and the revolution of the flesh. The meaning of spiritual death is never fully considered in the series. If ‘there is none that seeketh after God’ (Romans 3:11), and God cannot seek after individuals, then there is no basis for their reconciliation. If individuals are ‘dead’ to God, and he is unable to press

his attentions upon them, it is impossible that anyone should be saved. But, in the novels, reconciliation is possible, and frequently attained, through characters' use of the 'Sinner's Prayer'.

Throughout the series, repenting sinners are repeatedly exhorted to use a version of the 'Sinner's Prayer':

'The God who created you loves you. His Son who died for your sins will return ... How do you receive Christ? Merely tell God that you know you are a sinner and that you need him. Accept the gift of salvation, believe that Christ is risen, and say so.'

'God, I know I'm a sinner ... Forgive my sins and come into my life and save me ... Thank you for sending your Son to die on the cross for me ... I accept your gift and receive you right now ... Amen.'

'Dear God, I am a sinner and separated from you. I believe Jesus is the Messiah and that he died on the cross to pay for my sins. I believe that he rose again the third day and that by receiving his gift of love I will have the power to become a son of God because I believe on his name. Thank you for hearing me and saving me, and I pledge the rest of my life to you.'

'Tell God that you acknowledge that you are a sinner and are separated from him. Tell him you know that nothing you can do for yourself will earn your way to him. Tell him you believe that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for your sins, that he was raised from the dead, has raptured his church, and is coming yet again to the earth. Receive him as your Savior right where you are.'

With this repeated emphasis, the novels' debt to twentieth-century evangelicalism is clear. The efficacy of the 'Sinner's Prayer' is one of the most cherished myths in contemporary evangelical church life. Advocates of its merit have included many of the

most famous evangelists of the twentieth century. The ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ can find support from many of the most significant leaders across the evangelical world.

But that does not mean that it is right. We are commanded to ‘prove all things’, and when we do, we discover that the method of salvation that commonly surrounds the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ is almost entirely a twentieth-century phenomenon. This staple element of modern evangelical conversion did not exist for most of the history of the church. Far more seriously, the methodology of the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ is entirely without Biblical foundation. Across the world, evangelical churches are filled with people who believe that they are Christians on the basis of a prayer they once prayed. But the Bible never teaches us that we are saved through a prayer. Neither do the apostles ever instruct their hearers that praying a prayer with these specified components will guarantee salvation. This emphasis on the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ is perhaps one of the most concerning aspects of the novels’ presentation of the gospel, for we are saved by faith, not the utterance of a prayer, and it is only too possible that the mechanistic idea of salvation the novels develop will encourage people without saving faith to believe they have been saved because they have recited a set form of words. The ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ is a myth that has made possible the corruption of the modern evangelical church, channeling many who have never known the saving grace of God into membership of his churches. It provides its own word of assurance: ‘Thank you for hearing me and saving me, and I pledge the rest of my life to you.’ Tragically, it convinces people that they are Christians when too often they are not.

Rayford faced this problem of assurance while witnessing to Mac in *Soul Harvest* (1998). He explained that Christ’s death covered the ‘everybody’s sin’ and that ‘all we had to do was believe that, repent of our sins, receive the gift of salvation’:

“I believe all that, Ray, so is that it? Am I in?”

Rayford’s blood ran cold. ... This was too easy.’

And indeed it is too easy. The ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ provides an unstable and uncertain foundation for assurance, and raises more difficulties than it solves. Mac’s apparent coolness to the meaning of the prayer dramatises a fear that stalks the evangelical imagination and drives many to frequent repetitions of its terms. Far from providing true assurance, it often completely undermines it.

The great danger of this traditional evangelical method is that the prayer of faith becomes the object of faith, and the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ becomes the sinner’s hope. In spiritual crises, the anxious soul looks back to words that were prayed, and the assurance these words were believed to guarantee. Yet these words cannot bring salvation – only faith can do that. Our words cannot generate assurance – that springs from the secret working of the Holy Spirit, sowing in believers the graces that John describes in his first epistle. There is false assurance as well as true – note Jesus’ insistence that ‘those Jews which believed on him’ were actually ‘of [their] father the devil’ (John 8:31, 44). A great danger of these novels is that their focus on the ‘Sinner’s Prayer’ points the uncertain to an uncertain basis for hope.

But these problems pale into insignificance when compared to the *Left Behind* project’s most profound challenge to historic evangelicalism. In *Apocalypse Dawn*, the first installment of a new series marketed under the *Left Behind* franchise by the publisher, a post-rapture religious revival breaks out among American troops serving on the Turkish border. One soldier, with pastoral experience, recovers his sense of vocation and begins to baptise his colleagues. *Apocalypse Dawn* defines baptism as ‘the symbolic resurrection of a person accepting the Son of God’s most precious gift’, and uses the character of a former Irish Presbyterian to voice hostility to the practice of infant baptism. But this adult baptism is equated with being ‘saved in Christ’. O’Doyle, the Irish Presbyterian soldier, clearly equates baptism with the experience of salvation, and, after his baptism, feels ‘like I done be reborn’, for his baptism is a process of ‘bein’ saved in the Lord’. When the soldiers ‘decide to get baptized’ they ‘give their souls to God’. *Apocalypse Dawn* therefore appears to teach a Baptist version of baptismal regeneration. The novel challenges dispensationalism’s normal assumptions about the validity of the sacraments in the tribulation period, but presents a much more serious challenge to evangelicalism’s historic discussion of salvation. In *Apocalypse Dawn*, the gospel of evangelicalism itself is at stake. There could be no clearer signal of the modern evangelical crisis. The project’s commitment to historic evangelicalism simply cannot be maintained. *Apocalypse Dawn* subverts the link between the rapture and evangelical faith altogether. *Apocalypse Dawn* moves far beyond the boundaries of evangelical truth.

Christian writers who have turned to fiction have frequently felt the need to defend their projects from the suspicions of others. John Bunyan began *The Pilgrim's Progress* with a reference to Hosea 12:10: 'I have used Similitudes'. But *Left Behind* has a more problematic fictional method than most. Its sales vastly surpass anything that Christian fiction has ever achieved. It is bringing its distinctive brand of evangelicalism to a wider audience than Christian fiction writers have ever previously addressed, and its publishers are channeling their audience into the four new series that *Left Behind* has spawned. It is right that evangelicals, other Christians, and non-Christians consider the message of the books this culture has produced.

From one point of view, the series has a great deal to recommend it. But the *Left Behind* novels, like rapture fictions more generally, emerge from the evangelical subculture to reflect as many of the movement's weaknesses as strengths. The series and its spin-offs demonstrate the significant ways in which theological drift has impacted a once Bible-centred movement. In fact, if these novels are anything to go by, this book's reference to an evangelical 'crisis' might be something of an understatement. With the false hopes of the 'Sinner's Prayer', the impotence of a not-quite-sufficiently-powerful God, with confusion about the impact and effect of human depravity, and a spin-off novel's suggestion that salvation comes in or through water baptism, it is no wonder that so many evangelical leaders are concerned about the relationship between *Left Behind*, the gospel, and the readers of the sixty million copies the series has sold.