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Thomas D. Ice

Liberty University, tdice@liberty.edu

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WHEN TRUTH GETS LEFT BEHIND

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

As sales and influence continues to grow in the *Left Behind* series, so does jealous opposition and criticism. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, authors of the multi-million, number one bestsellers, do not attack anyone else's views of Bible prophecy. They merely present their views in novel form. Opponents of this unprecedented series attempt to draw attention to their neglected views by hitching their wagons to the *Left Behind* series by writing critical books and articles against the novels.

One such critic is apparent Seventh Day Adventist Steve Wohlberg. He has come out with both guns blazing by producing at least two books, audio and video tapes, and a web site against the *Left Behind* series. I have a copy of his book *The Left Behind Deception*.¹ All of this appears to be an effort to generate some kind of hearing for the faint voice known as historicism.

WHAT IS HISTORICISM?

Those who followed events surrounding David Koresh of Waco may be interested to know that he, along with Adventists, are some of the few historicists of contemporary times, even though this view enjoyed dominance from the time of the Reformation until the beginning of the twentieth century. "The historicist view, sometimes called the continuous-historical view, contends that Revelation is a symbolic presentation of the entire course of the history of the church from the close of the first century to the end of time."² This spiritualistic approach is built upon the day/year theory, whereby the 1260 days (literally 3 1/2 years) of Daniel and Revelation cover the time (1260 years) of the domination of anti-Christ over the church. Another variation would be to apply the day/year theory to the 2300 days of Daniel 8. Thus, the role of the historicist is to figure out when anti-Christ came to power (i.e., the Roman Church and the Papacy) and add 1260 or 2300 years and you have the time of the Second Coming and the defeat of anti-Christ. So if this time started some time during the reign of Constantine, say 350, then you add the two together and you would come out with 1610. American William Miller used a variation of the day/year theory by using the 2300 days of Daniel 8:4 as the basis for his scheme.

Another feature of historicism is seen in their effort to correlate events of Revelation with events occurring in the present church age. As the historicist sees contemporary events creeping closer to the Second Coming of Christ in Revelation 19, this leads to further date-setting as to the precise year with their day/year scheme. Not only are Seventh Day Adventist historicists in their views of prophecy, but so are the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses. This explains why Jehovah Witnesses have been such big date-setters. They have merely implemented the logic of the day/year theory.

"The historicist is constantly confronted with the dilemma of a far-fetched spiritualization in order to maintain the chain of historical events," claims Dr. Tenney, "or else if he makes the events literal in accordance with the language of the text he is compelled to acknowledge that no comparable events in history have happened."³ The

demise of historicism has resulted in less date-setting in our own day than had occurred during the era when historicism was popular.

THE DAY/YEAR THEORY

Wohlberg made an amazingly errant statement about the seventy-weeks of Daniel 9:24, when he said the following: “Just about all Bible scholars accept this—that this period is actually a day for a year—representing 490 years.”⁴ No they don’t, because days are not mentioned in the text. For those aquatinted with Hebrew, they will notice that the same word appears twice at the beginning of verse 24. That word is “*sâbu’îm*,” meaning “seventy sevens.” This Hebrew word appears first as a plural noun, followed by the participle form, functioning as an adjective. That this Hebrew phrase should be rendered as “seventy sevens,” is unanimously agreed upon by representatives of all interpretative schools. There is also great consensus that the “seventy sevens” refers to years, since this is what Daniel was contemplating in Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14, as evident in Daniel 9:2. Thus, our Lord has in mind seventy weeks of years, or 490 years.⁵

Wohlberg just declares that days are used for years in Daniel 9, when there is no such thing at all in that text. After having declared that, he says, “this is where we get the prophetic principle that days are to be understood as years.” If it is to be gotten anywhere, it is pulled out of thin air, since nowhere does the text of Holy Scripture ever say what he says. Yet the whole theory of historicism, which he is eager to advance, is totally dependant upon a dictum that is found nowhere in the Bible. No wonder biblically knowledgeable Christians have totally given up on the historicist system.

THE GAP

As if Wohlberg’s previous error was not enough, he then proceeds to heap factual error upon factual error, from which he builds his false arguments against the *Left Behind* theology. Wohlberg says the following:

Guess who was one of the very first scholars to slice Daniel’s 70th week away from the first 69 weeks, sliding it down to the end of time? It was the Evil Empire’s very own Francisco Ribera! Ribera’s primary apparatus was the seventy weeks. He taught that Daniel’s 70th week was still in the future. . . . This is exactly the scenario used by Hal Lindsey and a multitude of other current prophecy teachers. . . . this GAP idea originated with the Jesuits.⁶

His wild conspiracy theory is bad enough, but he should at least attempt to base it upon accurate historical facts. In fact, it is doubtful whether Jesuits ever held a gap view. What is not in doubt is that the pre-Catholic, early church held just such a view.⁷ This is even admitted by fellow Seventh Day Adventist, LeRoy Froom in his *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, that Hippolytus (c. A.D. 200) “*separates by a chronological gap from the preceding sixty-nine weeks, placing it just before the end of the world.*”⁸

ANTICHRIST

Wohlberg continues to compound error when he says, “The current wildly popular idea of a one-man Antichrist like Nicolae Carpathia who comes only after the Rapture is a new doctrine, at least when it comes to Protestants.”⁹ He is technically correct, but his overall emphasis is not. The idea of a “one-man Antichrist” is the oldest view recorded in church history. It was overwhelmingly the view of the early church. Bernard McGinn has written a book on the history of the church’s beliefs about antichrist. It is clear that the only kind of antichrist that the church believed in for the first 500 years was that of “a one-man Antichrist like Nicolae Carpathia.” “Antichrist was identified with a final non-Christian World Conqueror,” notes McGinn, “who would be a mixture of persecuting tyrant and deceiver (false prophet and magician), while antichrists were conceived of as his predecessors and assistants—Roman officials, and later Jews as well.”¹⁰

In fact the view of a personal antichrist has been the dominate view throughout most of church history.¹¹ The idea that antichrist is not a person, but successive popes is a late view in church history. It is interesting to learn that historicism is generally thought to have first been developed, not by Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers as Wohlberg wants people to think, but by Catholic Joachim of Fiore in the later half of the twelfth century.¹² In fact, it was the Catholic Joachim who taught that the pope would be the Antichrist.¹³

FUTURISM

Another amazing fabrication, that often circulates in historicists circles is the belief that futurism (the prophetic belief of Tim LaHaye and fellow dispensationalists) is the product of a Jesuit conspiracy. “In 1590, . . .” says Wohlberg, the Jesuit “Ribeira applied all the book of Revelation but the earliest chapter to the end time rather than to the history of the Church. Antichrist would be a single evil person who would be received by the Jews and would rebuild Jerusalem.”¹⁴ Wohlberg then says that “Jesuit Futurism” was passed from Ribeira to Cardinal Robert Bellarmine in the early 1600’s, who championed the view within the Catholic Church. However, Wohlberg says that “Jesuit Futurism” came into Protestantism through S. R. Maitland in 1826, went to James Todd at the University of Dublin to Edward Irving and then J. N. Darby. This is pure fantasy, especially the part about Edward Irving. There is no evidence that he was a futurist. His system is has more in common with historicism. An expert on Edward Irving’s eschatology, Columba Graham Flegg, clearly classifies him as a historicist.¹⁵

This is an amazing claim, to say that futurism only began in the late sixteenth century, when it is clear that the earliest views of Bible prophecy found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers (till A.D. 325) are futurist. Dr. Grant Osborne summarizes the views of the early church’s futurism as follows:

This was the method employed by some of the earliest fathers (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus), but with the triumph of the allegorical method (taking a spiritual approach to the book) after Origen and of the amillennial view after Augustine and Ticonius, the futurist method (and chiliasm) was not seen again for over a thousand years. The first to develop once more a literal view

of the book was Franciscus Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit who wrote in the late sixteenth century to counter the Reformation antipapal interpretation. While he was not truly a futurist, he turned the attention back to the early fathers, and after him that view returned to prominence and stands alongside the others as equally valid.¹⁶

Wohlberg says, “*Left Behind* is now teaching much of the very same Jesuit Futurism of Francisco Ribeira which is *hiding the real truth about the Antichrist*.”¹⁷ In reality, the *Left Behind* series is teaching what the Bible literally says about future events, rather than allegorizing them, as do historicists, in their attempt to make them a record of the last two thousand years of European history. Charles says of historicism, “Through the application of this method the Apocalypse became the theatre for the exercise of a perverse ingenuity, on which one arbitrary interpretation had hardly established itself, when it was dislodged by another, no less arbitrary.”¹⁸ It is not surprising that historicism has virtually disappeared from the American landscape. If Wohlberg’s arguments are the best that they have to offer, no wonder historicism is on life-support.

CONCLUSION

Wohlberg’s criticisms of the *Left Behind* series is full of error. In his booklet, *The Left Behind Deception*, he rarely uses any biblical argumentation in his failed attempt to discredit the theology of prophetic futurism. Instead, he demonstrates a very loose view of church history, to put it mildly, while he—in essence—slanders and misrepresents the actual facts of church history at many points as noted above. Wohlberg’s poor attempt to interact with biblical futurism serves only to demonstrate why futurism has displaced historicism as the preferred interpretive approach to biblical prophecy. The *Left Behind* novel series remains an excellent way to not only share the exciting details of end-time Bible prophecy, but it is also a tremendous way to share the gospel of grace to many who have been unapproachable in the past. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Steve Wohlberg, *The Left Behind Deception: Revealing Dangerous Errors About The Rapture And The Antichrist* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2001).

² Merrill G. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 137.

³ Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, p. 138.

⁴ Steve Wohlberg, *The Antichrist Chronicles* audio tape, side B.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of the seventy-weeks of Daniel see Thomas Ice, “The 70 Weeks of Daniel,” in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, editors, *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), pp. 307–53.

⁶ Wohlberg, *The Left Behind Deception*, p. 72.

⁷ For an extensive documentation of this see Ice, “The 70 Weeks of Daniel,” *End Times Controversy*, pp. 349-53.

⁸ Le Roy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols, (Washington: Review and Herald, 1950), vol. I, p. 277.

⁹ Wohlberg, *The Left Behind Deception*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 78.

¹¹ See McGinn, *Antichrist* for documentation.

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- ¹² Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 18.
- ¹³ R. H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913), p. 23.
- ¹⁴ Wohlberg, *The Left Behind Deception*, pp. 63-64.
- ¹⁵ Columba Graham Flegg, 'Gathered Under Apostles' *A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 436-37.
- ¹⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ Wohlberg, *The Left Behind Deception*, p. 71.
- ¹⁸ Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, p. 31.