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Of Prophets and Propaganda: An Exploration of Modern Christian Dispensationalism Using the Work of Martin Riesebrodt

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Modern dispensationalism in the United States has been a thorny sociological problem. The sociodiscursive mechanism(s) by which dispensationalist preachers are able to propagate their message has yet to be determined. The theoretical work of Martin Riesebrodt, specifically his discussion of salvific demand, legitimation, and discursive and behavior-regulating practices, sheds light on Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's best-selling Left Behind series and the equally popular dispensationalist writings of John Hagee. Dispensationalists create a demand for their message through the interpretation of current events using the apocalyptic lens of the dispensational scenario, which points to the imminence of the rapture and the global doom that will follow. As part of the propagandizing discourse (discursive practices) that promises escape from this cataclysm, dispensationalists preach a set of behavior-regulating practices that seek to constrain and control the actions of their adherents.

INTRODUCTION

Christian dispensationalism commands a large audience in the United States today. The central theological premise of Christian dispensationalism is that the world is nearing its end with the return of Jesus. Preceding that return, however, will come seven years of disasters and oppressive world dictatorship following an event known as the “rapture”—a moment when true Christians are taken to heaven to escape the coming apocalypse. Despite dispensationalism’s long-standing and profound influence on U.S. Christianity and its continuing influence in the lives of millions of Americans, little work has been done to determine the mechanisms that legitimate the dispensationalist message among its adherents. Sociological approaches have been more interested in its influence than in the mechanics of how the various end-time visions and prophecies are discursively propagated and ideologically reinforced. Concepts drawn from the work of Martin Riesebrodt illuminate how the internal workings of dispensationalist discourse and ideology entice and control adherents within the dispensationalist milieu.

Martin Riesebrodt’s concept of conversion consists of “stimulating the demand . . . to avert misfortune, overcome crises, and dispense salvation” (Riesebrodt 2010:155). This demand, referred to hereafter as “salvific demand,” is often predicated upon “religious propaganda” involving both “discursive practices” and “behavior-regulating practices.” As Riesebrodt points out, discursive practices support the salvific demand by creating “knowledge concerning interventionist

practices” (Riesebrodt 2010:75). Equally important, “behavior-regulating practices” involve the “avoidance of sanctions or the accumulation of merit” (Riesebrodt 2010:76). Behavior-regulating practices may also be seen as “interventionist practices” if they are thought to influence the deity. What is necessary for the producers of religious propaganda is the legitimation to create salvific demand, though Riesebrodt addresses this issue only obliquely (Riesebrodt 2010:94). These obviously interconnected ideas combine into a conceptual apparatus that may be applied to apocalyptic groups and have proved especially useful in two key cases of modern Christian dispensationalism: the work of pastor, author, and televangelist John Hagee and the best-selling Left Behind series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

THE DISPENSATIONALIST MILIEU

Modern Christian dispensationalism originated in the 1820s with the Plymouth Brethren movement in Ireland. It quickly spread throughout the United Kingdom and to the United States. Not associated with any one denomination, dispensationalist thinking has been popular in the United States ever since. According to dispensational belief, the New Testament and Hebrew Bible predict the imminent return of Jesus.¹ Dispensationalism held that Jesus’ arrival would be preceded by the return of the Jews to Israel, and the movement gained tremendous credibility in 1948 with the founding of Israel, seemingly fulfilling this key expectation. Dispensationalism also predicts a set of apocalyptic disasters called the “tribulation” that would be immediately followed by Jesus’ appearance, known as the Second Coming. Dispensationalism today still anticipates these events in the near future.

Modern-day dispensationalism, like fundamentalism, is thought to have been spawned by urbanization coupled with social and economic changes, which threaten traditional family structure and gender relations, as well as by a moral shift with the increase of leisure time and the turn toward consumerism (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003; Ammerman 1994; Riesebrodt 1998). Such changes played into the dispensationalist scenario, which predicted an increase of sin and apostasy as part of the earth’s end-times.

A number of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals (churches and even denominations) embraced various forms of dispensationalism. By 1900, dispensationalism “had become a bedrock doctrine for vast numbers of conservative Protestants” (Boyer 1994:92). The Schofield Reference Bible, which was the textbook of the movement, presented the King James Bible along with dispensationalist commentary. It sold between 5 and 10 million copies from 1909 to 1967.

Hal Lindsey’s (1972) popularization of dispensationalism in his best-selling book *The Late Great Planet Earth* made the movement part of popular culture. Lindsey viewed current events through the lens of dispensationalism, applying biblical prophecy to modern warfare, disasters, and economics, which at the time played into pervasive fears of global conflict and nuclear destruction.² This created a cottage industry of prophetic “signs” watchers focused on contemporary global political developments.

¹ Boyer (1994) argues that dispensationalism took hold in the United States as part of a negative response to liberalism that used critical methods to read the biblical text. The authority of the text thereby was diminished and the text itself became much more opaque, requiring sophisticated methods to elucidate its meaning. In contrast, dispensationalism reasserted the authority of the Bible and its particular relevance to the present by arguing that the text was actually speaking about present events. It likewise championed biblical analysis as a process of reading the text by cross-referencing passages, thus presenting the text as transparent and accessible.

² Boyer (1994) argues that much of modern dispensationalism is predicated upon the fear of nuclear weapons. In light of the ever-escalating arms race of the Cold War, the threat of a real nuclear/secular apocalypse was integrated into a religious worldview that had instead God’s finger on “the button” rather than unpredictable (and possibly unstable) world leaders.

Dispensationalism was supported by Bible colleges and conservative seminaries. It was supplemented with “Prophecy Conferences” outlining the dispensationalist belief system and making connections to world events. Dispensationalists were also prominent in televangelism. This combination of institutional support, cultural anxiety, and burgeoning avenues of distribution allowed dispensationalism to move into the mainstream.

Dispensationalism’s organizational structure and forms of authority are unique. Many prominent dispensationalist leaders head “ministries” that are para-church organizations usually associated with broadcast media rather than churches (Boyer 1994). Their authority is charismatic (in the Weberian sense): these ministries, perceived as communicating the divine message, speak to an audience who responds.

Dispensationalism as a charismatic discourse continues to hold adherents due to the persistence of these factors and a renewed cultural emphasis on the Middle East. The U.S. focus on Israel and the Middle East as the theater of economic, political, and military action in the 21st century has produced a cultural environment primed to hear the charismatic call of the dispensationalists.

Two vastly influential dispensationalists, John Hagee and Tim LaHaye, exemplify this charismatic authority. Hagee, a conservative Protestant³ dispensationalist⁴ from the Pentecostal tradition, pastors the nondenominational Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. With a membership of 20,000 (John Hagee Ministries 2012), Cornerstone was number 65 on *Outreach Magazine’s* top 100 largest churches in 2008.⁵ A Barna Group survey in 2005 ranked Hagee as the 10th most trusted spokesperson among Pentecostal pastors (Barna Group 2005).

Yet, Hagee’s prominence derives more from his publications and television presence than his pastoral standing. Several of his books have appeared on the New York Times Best Sellers list from 1996 through 2010, and at least one has sold more than a million copies. Additionally, he hosts *John Hagee Today*, a twice-daily broadcast on Trinity Broadcasting Network, and his weekly sermon is nationally syndicated. He has recently started an Internet video channel. It is

³ The issue of categorizing individuals like Hagee becomes difficult. I believe that Hagee is rightfully labeled a fundamentalist because he holds that the Bible is both inspired (authored by God) and inerrant (without error, including in such areas as history, science, and predictions of the future). However, this is not a term Hagee ever uses to describe himself (preferring the term evangelical). However, evangelical is likewise too nebulous a term. Different surveys have used the terms “born again,” “evangelical,” or “fundamentalist” to try to identify this group, but problems still abound (Smith 2000). I have chosen the more neutral term “conservative Protestant” except when using other academic and statistical work and then I have used the language employed there.

⁴ Dispensationalism posits a rather complicated historical periodization (called dispensations). The most important of these, however, is the dispensation of the Christ and the Apostles, which is then followed by the “Great Parenthesis” (a period of time in which the prophetic clock is stopped) that is ended with the rapture of the church (when believing Christians are caught up to heaven). The rapture is the starting point of the great tribulation, a period of time when the Anti-Christ becomes world dictator, and a series of catastrophes are visited upon the earth. The tribulation ends with the return of Christ and the establishment of Christ’s kingdom on earth (see below for more details). Dispensationalism sees tremendous import in the founding of the nation of Israel. The return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel was an important part of dispensationalism in the 19th century and thus saw its validation when Israel became a nation in 1948. This seeming fulfillment of a dispensationalism prediction became the cornerstone of the entire movement.

⁵ This is a significant decline from 2007 when it was listed at 31 (Frykholm 2008). In 2009, however, Hagee’s church dropped off the *Outreach Magazine* top 100 largest churches list. The 2008 *Outreach*, in contrast to Hagee’s web site, noted the actual attendance at 8,406 (Outreach Magazine 2008). Given that the lowest number in the 2009 survey was just over 5,600, this indicates that attendance in Hagee’s church had fallen off by over a third. Undoubtedly, this has to do with Hagee’s 2008 election year endorsement of John McCain who later rescinded his acceptance of Hagee’s endorsement in light of several videos that appeared on YouTube where Hagee had called the Catholic Church “the Whore of Babylon.” The media began to play Hagee and Jeremiah Wright material together, casting the narrative as a war of embarrassing pastors, which ultimately led to both McCain and Obama distancing themselves from the pastors (Reston and Silverstein 2008).

difficult to know exactly the scope of Hagee's reach;⁶ nonetheless, it is clear that as a televangelist, he has a very broad ministry.

Hagee figures in conservative politics as well. He founded Christians United for Israel (CUFI) in 2006, which supports Israel and Israeli policies. Boasting more than 400,000 members (Hanley and Hughes 2010), it has attracted involvement from both American and Israeli politicians, including the Israeli Prime Minister (Duin 2008). In return, CUFI has donated more than 50 million dollars to Israel since 2006 (Chabin 2010). While some have been suspicious of his motives (Eberhart 2007), Hagee is regarded as a force in Republican politics (Hanley 2007; Hanley and Hughes 2010; Posner 2006).

Tim LaHaye (who is not a pastor) has published, previous to the *Left Behind* Series, Christian self-help books, which were very successful, as well as several dispensationalist-oriented prophecy books, which were not. He became better known for a critique of U.S. society when, as a founding member of the Moral Majority, he published a manifesto against "secular Humanism" (LaHaye 1980). This manifesto would be part of the religious right's critique of American society for the next 30-plus years (Chapman 2010). Unsuccessful in direct politics,⁷ he created a voter mobilization organization for the religious right that also recruited conservative Protestants to run for office (Williams 2010).

With Jerry Jenkins, LaHaye published the book *Left Behind* in 1995 (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995). A tremendous success (Memmott 2005), it soon led to a 12-book series, which has sold more than 63 million copies, as well as two other series and three movies. The book series creates a dispensationalist world that shows the postrapture future in vivid and often violent detail.

Hagee and LaHaye's authority as religious leaders does not come through traditional means. Rather than education or church position, their appeal is charismatic in nature and conveyed through their publications and televangelism. Their ability to connect modern events to biblical prophecy in ways that resonate with their audience has grown over time. Their undeniable breadth of influence merits further investigation as primary examples of charismatic authority and dispensational evangelism. Hagee and LaHaye do not simply speak to a defined congregation; their audience numbers in the millions. Studying a nondenominational group like dispensationalists requires a method that can elucidate the discursive mechanisms through which a cultural milieu attains ideological coherence and an appeal that reaches beyond the fundamentalist subculture.

A CONTENT APPROACH

In the academic literature, studies of Christian apocalyptic groups, as Boyer (1994:19) notes, "are rare." Many studies merge the notion of Christian apocalypticism with that of millennialism. The pioneering work of Talmon (1966) and Cohn (1970) established millennial studies as a separate area of study in sociology/anthropology. Studies of cargo cults often focused on the idea of millennialism as a form of protest, usually the result of significant economic disparity created by colonialism (Burrige 1980; Cohn 1970; Wilson 1973; Worsley 1987).

"Relative deprivation" theory, another variation of the protest argument, attempts to downplay the class issue that earlier theorists often emphasized (Aberle 1970; Allan 1974). This approach

⁶ Ministrywatch.com states that Hagee's ministry is available in 92 million homes. TBN (n.d.) boasts that its channel is available in 104 million homes. On the other hand, its self-published ratings are .0288 percent from December 2010, which equates to roughly 3 million viewers, though again how many of these viewers are watching specifically Hagee is impossible to know. Additionally, demographic information for these viewers would help complete the picture but are likewise closely held by the network and John Hagee Ministries.

⁷ LaHaye's denunciation of the Catholic Church became an issue for Jack Kemp's presidential campaign. LaHaye had been hired on as an advisor and he quickly was forced to resign.

has been particularly popular among New Testament scholars who have used sociological models for understanding early Christian apocalypticism (Collins 1984; Gager 1975).

A more recent approach attempts to treat apocalypses as a form of rhetoric or narrative (O’Leary 1998; Wagar 1982). This approach frequently moves between the social aspect of apocalyptic groups and the ideological nature of apocalyptic discourse. Often, this kind of approach has focused on the question of identity and the way that apocalyptic groups attempt through rhetorical means to negotiate group dynamics and the group’s interactions with the larger social world (Bromley 1997; Frykholm 2007; Shuck 2004). These rhetorical studies allow a more significant exploration of sociological factors, while at the same time recognizing that apocalyptic groups are often in dialogue *within* the movement as well as with the larger culture outside the movement.

However, the focus on issues of identity, although instructive, suffers from an overemphasis on the subjectivity of the individual participants. Shuck (2004) and Frykholm (2007), for instance, try to enter the mind of dispensationalists, and relative deprivation theorists also ground their theory in psychological categories (Reed 2010). Martin Riesebrodt has seriously challenged this type of approach, arguing that it has three drawbacks: an excessive individualism, a presumption of complete consciousness of action, and “*ex post facto* reflection” (Riesebrodt 2010:83). Of even more importance to the present study, however, he also questions whether such an emphasis is adequate for the development of a robust theory, particularly when dealing with large social movements like dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism encounters yet another problem with subjective understandings: the problem of disconfirmation. Every moment the rapture fails to materialize is potentially a moment of disconfirmation. Major events that have been seen as portents of an imminent rapture have trailed out into oblivion. As a result, the dispensationalist’s beliefs are static only in terms of form, but not content. This raises the problem of *ex-post-facto* rationalization to a new level since a current event may be prophetically significant at one moment and then may lose prophetic significance the next (e.g., Russia’s invasion of Georgia).⁸ Such fluidity of interpretation must create doubt about the ultimate utility of subjective approaches.

Riesebrodt offers a more appropriate method for understanding a phenomenon like dispensationalism—a content approach to religion. He argues that the actions and beliefs of people need to be interpreted in “the context of institutionalized social and cultural meaning” (Riesebrodt 2010:83) rather than the reverse. To that end, Riesebrodt suggests that a new focus upon the artifacts of religious production is necessary, particularly in terms of practices that relate to interactions with superhuman powers. Previous approaches to dispensationalism may have put “the cart before the horse” by focusing on subjective meaning first. Riesebrodt’s return to a content approach that examines institutionalized meanings provides a useful corrective, particularly for analyzing dispensationalism. Thus, Riesebrodt directs us toward the analysis of discursive practices, specifically how such practices create a context that makes dispensationalist orientations and practices meaningful even in the face of shifting significations and disconfirming events.

Riesebrodt’s proposals are then clearly relevant to my dataset. Discursive practices—the work of religious intellectuals—both justify and explain behavioral practices. A narrative analysis of the written discourses of LaHaye and Hagee reveals the way their particular discursive practices and the behavioral practices they prescribe for their adherents create salvific demand.

⁸ For instance, in 2008, John Hagee saw tremendous prophetic import in the Russian invasion of Georgia. For Hagee, this was the first step in creating free access for Russian armies to launch an invasion of Israel (Hagee 2008). However, shortly after Hagee wrote this, Russia withdrew from Georgia and this “prophetic sign” suddenly lost any significance and is not mentioned in Hagee’s subsequent work.

Given that my interest is specifically on discursive practices in dispensationalism, my method has been to do the following: (1) conduct a narrative analysis of books, sermons, newsletters, and publications that have been produced by or about John C. Hagee and Tim LaHaye; (2) analyze the audience of the *Left Behind* books through a readership survey conducted by the Barna Group in 2001 (Barna Group 2001; *Left Behind* 2001); and (3) determine the kind of audience that would be receptive to the discursive practices of Hagee and LaHaye using the Pew 2006 Religion and the Public Life Survey.

Excluding his pastoral and devotional works, the majority of Hagee's dispensationalist writings from his early publications in the 1970s to his most recent publications dwell on a significant world event (such as the financial crisis of 2008 or the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, for instance), which is then set within a fuller explanation of the dispensationalist timeline. Hagee's work is highly consistent, and the examples I have chosen demonstrate common key points that Hagee makes and also underscore recurring patterns in his writings and in the practices that he advocates. Furthermore, in the practices themselves, an inherent logic as well as consistent patterns can be identified. Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series offers an instructive comparison with Hagee, especially in terms of practices that the novels advocate and the social implications of such practices.

John Hagee and Christian Zionism

As a dispensationalist, John Hagee expects the world to increase in terrors, culminating in a seven-year period called "the tribulation." The tribulation will be a time of unthinkable horrors and destruction spearheaded by the Anti-Christ. Natural, economic, and military disasters will kill billions. The chaos and bloodshed will end with Christ's triumphant return, when he will destroy his enemies and set up his reign in Jerusalem.

Hagee teaches that born-again Christians will be "raptured" from earth prior to the start of the tribulation. This promise of salvation is passionately expressed at the end of *Attack on America*: "Today this same Jesus offers you peace and salvation. Embrace Him today. Kiss Him. For tomorrow will come wrath and judgment" (Hagee 2001:256). The combination of promise, offer, and threat exemplifies Hagee's rhetorical strategy in creating salvific demand, the desire to be spared misfortune and achieve salvation.

For dispensationalism, then, salvific demand is predicated upon an expectation of a coming world dictator (the Anti-Christ) who will tightly control political, social, religious, and economic structures in order to persecute first Israel, and then Christians converted during the tribulation. Before these events, world affairs will have deteriorated to the point that the world is set up for the Anti-Christ to walk on stage and take the reins of the world power system. Thus, Hagee's ability to create salvific demand also depends on him showing that events are lining up to produce this scenario.

To that end, Hagee interprets current world events as ominously significant in keeping with the dispensationalist scenario. The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin provides a good example. In his 1996 book, Hagee (1996:8) asserts: "The shot that killed Yitzhak Rabin launched Bible Prophecy onto the fast track." Hagee argues that since Rabin became a martyr for peace, the success of the peace accords he started was assured, resulting in Israel losing more of its divinely ordained homeland in the compromise. As Hagee sees the future, the Anti-Christ steps in during this process to break the diplomatic logjam between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the seven-year dispensationalist timeline will begin. Thus, salvific demand is created by linking current events to the dispensationalist scenario.

Hagee's writings (discursive practices) also become a platform for preaching behavior-regulating practices. In his case, these practices may be characterized as Christian Zionism

(Goldman 2007; Spector 2009; Weber 2005), which entails advocacy of U.S. foreign policy to support an expansionist Israel. Founding his position on God's biblical promise to Abraham, Hagee demands Israel not "negotiate away the national identity they had gained by conquest, United Nations charter, and divine right" (Hagee 2000:29). Because the founding of Israel validates the dispensationalist system according to Hagee (2000) and other dispensationalists, the preservation of the state of Israel is equivalent to the preservation of that system of belief.

In his discursive practice, the treatment of Israel is central and of paramount importance. Hagee argues that God's treatment of a country will depend upon its treatment of the Jewish people and, by extension, its support of Israel. A country that supports Israel will be blessed by God and can expect God's divine providence and protection; otherwise, that country will be vulnerable to its enemies and cannot expect divine aid (Hagee 2007). This double-edged promise mandates a set of behavior-regulating practices for dispensationalists, including advocating a right-wing U.S. foreign policy on Israel by voting, lobbying congress, and contributing financially.

The power Hagee wields to influence thinking and behavior in these matters does not derive from an institution or established religion. He creates salvific demand through his discursive practices, and he self-legitimizes through a charismatic-prophetic authority that connects biblical prophecies to current events, especially regarding Israel. For adherents, he becomes the voice of divine revelation with special knowledge of certain key events' meanings and their place in heralding a coming future reality. Thus, Hagee grounds his own legitimation in fulfilled biblical prophecies. As the dispensationalist reading of the Bible has accurately "predicted" events in the past (particularly concerning the life of Jesus), so will biblical prophecies of the end-times be ultimately fulfilled (Hagee 1996).⁹ Hagee's authority then is tied directly to the authority of the Bible.

Hagee's legitimacy is also wrapped up in the dispensational interpretive system, although he recasts it not as interpretation but as a straightforward reading of the Bible in the tradition of Scottish Common Sense Realism (Marty and Appleby 1994). It is the Bible, then, that Hagee seeks to defend and the Bible's ability to serve as a prophetic instrument. Hagee, as the preferred master interpreter of the Bible, claims the charismatic power to mediate and translate this message into the language of modern events like the biblical prophets of old, who, Hagee implies, spoke to their time as Hagee does to his. Better yet, by claiming the biblical text as his source rather than visions or ecstatic experience, his authority is insulated from accusations of heresy. In a nation where large majorities acknowledge the Bible as the Word of God (Pew Research Center 2006), Hagee thereby ensures his own, and his message's, legitimacy.

Hence, through legitimation legerdemain, Hagee as biblical interpreter of God's word and its warnings creates a salvific demand, which he reinforces by connecting current events to future events in the dispensationalist timeline. This salvific demand also enjoins a set behaviors-regulating practices that specify an unquestioning support of the Israeli government and an expansionist agenda for Israel, thus potentially altering outcomes, not just predicting them.

⁹ Hagee claims that the 88 prophecies he explores represent only a "handful" of scriptural messianic predictions. But the alert reader will find many of these so-called prophecies dubious at best. For instance, one of the last prophecies that Hagee cites is Psalms 68:18 ("Thou hast ascended on high") that Hagee claims was fulfilled at Jesus' ascension. However, that is only the first line of v. 18, which continues: "you took many captives, you received gifts from people, even the rebellious that you, Lord God, might dwell there." Certainly, these other events are not fulfilled in the Jesus story, nor is there any indication in this psalm that it is referring to the Messiah, rather than its explicit subject, which is God (YHWH). Many of these "prophecies," then, are proof texts that are partial and out of context. However, Hagee is depending on the reader not to carefully study the texts; rather, his hope is that the case is made by the multiplicity of examples.

Table 1: Left Behind readership

<i>Gender</i>	<i>%</i>
Female	57
Male	43
<i>Generation</i>	
Boomers	45
Busters	22
Builders	22
Seniors	4
<i>Region</i>	
South	44
Midwest	27
West	23
Northeast	6
<i>Church</i>	
Nonmainline	65
Mainline	14
Catholic	8
<i>Self-description</i>	
Born-again	84
Evangelical	41
<i>Weekly religious practices</i>	
Pray	97
Read Bible	74
Attend Church	72

Source: Barna Group (2001)

Tim LaHaye and the Left Behind Series

The Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins presents an example of dispensationalism and its discursive practices in another medium, that of fiction. The series revolves around the actions of five main characters who are not Christians when the rapture occurs but thereafter convert and become “the Tribulation Force” who spread the gospel and fight the Anti-Christ. This group of new believers goes through the seven-year tribulation, first as double-agent confidants of the Anti-Christ, then as a rebel force marshaled against the Anti-Christ. The series ends with Jesus’ return and the vanquishing of the Anti-Christ and his armies. A Barna Group study of Left Behind readership in 2001 (see Table 1) identified reader characteristics. Broadly speaking, Left Behind readers are older, southern, white, slightly more likely to be female, usually identify themselves as born-again, and regularly engage in religious practices.

From a social sciences perspective, the Left Behind fiction, like Hagee’s nonfiction, endorses a series of behavior-regulating practices, but they are focused on gender roles and sexuality rather than political action. In Riesebrodt’s (1998) earlier work on fundamentalism, he pointed to changes in women’s roles and sexual practices as significant factors in the development of fundamentalism in the 1920s.¹⁰ Over 70 years later, from 1995 to 2004, these same concerns dominate the Left Behind series.

¹⁰ Riesebrodt is not alone in his estimation of the importance of gender and sexuality as a key issue in fundamentalism. Many other commentators have come to similar conclusions and explored the issues in some detail. See Ammermann (1987), DeBerg (2000), Gallagher and Smith (1999), Ingersoll (2003), and Smith (2000).

A positive role model of the patriarchal practices promoted by the books is seen in the minor character of Irene, the Tribulation Force leader's wife. Irene, who is raptured before the tribulation begins, exemplifies the good Christian woman: staying at home, raising children, and taking responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the family. Even though her husband and daughter are nonbelievers, she dutifully takes the younger son to church and tries, ever so gently, to win the others over. Even so, she is always submissive to her husband's leadership.

This same chord of exemplary attitudes and behaviors is sounded by Chloe, the main female character, but in a younger key. At one point Chloe, who is in her 20s, says to her husband: "Seriously, I don't have a problem submitting to you because I know how much you love me. I'm willing to obey you even when you're wrong. . . . You know I'm going to do what you say, and I'll even get over it" (LaHaye and Jenkins 1998:307). The patriarchal family structure is clearly in place here. The final decision lies with the man. Their marriage is no equal partnership; rather, it is one of male leadership and female submission with possible room for his indulgence of her attempts to assert some independence. The behavior-regulating practices modeled here demand that women respect the patriarchal hierarchy.

Interestingly, Gallagher and Smith (1999) note a growing complexity within evangelicalism, however, when it comes to the issue of "male headship." They find a divergence between evangelical ideology and lived behaviors—behaviors they label "functional egalitarianism" (1999: 181). The difference may indicate a generational divide.¹¹

In contrast, LaHaye's nonfictional work and the work of his wife, Beverly LaHaye, are particularly critical of nontraditional family constructions.¹² Thus, Chloe's assurance that she will "submit" may be read as an attempt to combat the "functional egalitarian" strain arising within evangelicalism by reasserting male domination. A similar message is conveyed by Chloe's demise. She is captured and executed when she goes off by herself in defiance of her training and her husband's leadership, reaffirming that the umbrella of male privilege is ultimately for the security and safety of women in the community. When Chloe veers too far from the doctrine of male headship, the authors show their evangelical readers that the results are serious and catastrophic to the family.

A traditionalist sexuality is another behavior-regulating practice stressed in *Left Behind*. Both Chloe and her husband are virgins on their wedding day. While Rayford as a married man fantasizes about a sexual relationship with a young flight attendant, he fails to act on it. Even so, a great deal of angst over this nonrelationship ensues, including apologies, dramatic meetings (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995:369), and accusations of abandonment (LaHaye and Jenkins 1997:168–69). The uninitiated reader might be taken aback at all the drama about a few stolen glances. Yet, what is clear is that the appropriate behavioral practices promulgated by the books include a tightly controlled sexuality where the very thought of adultery is tantamount to its act. Through the *Left Behind* novels, then, a reader experiences a set of behavior-regulating practices specifically directed at women's roles and the sexual behavior of both men and women that bolsters a traditionalist patriarchal family structure.

The issue of legitimation is raised through the character Judah Ben Tzion, the spiritual head of the "Tribulation Force," who functions as a stand-in for the authors, especially LaHaye, who is publicly acknowledged to be the Bible scholar of the writing team (Memmott 2005). Through

¹¹ This is not a point that Smith explicitly makes; however, a careful reading of his article shows this, in fact, to be the case. Smith notes occasionally how differences in ages tend toward more conservative (older) or more liberal (younger) perspectives (Gallagher and Smith 1999:219, 227). More explicit age considerations in his data would serve to validate/refute this.

¹² Beverly LaHaye was founder of the Concerned Women for America, a self-consciously antifeminist group that was particularly interested in advocating for "family values" generally conceptualized through traditionalist notions. Both Tim LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye have been outspoken on this issue (Gallagher 2003).

Tsion, the books self-legitimate using a method similar to what Hagee employs in his nonfiction discourse. Tsion lists messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament that were fulfilled by Jesus, and therefore, as with Hagee, dispensationalism becomes synonymous with the Bible, the ultimate authority. The interpreter of scripture (Tsion/LaHaye) functions in the manner of a biblical prophet who demands right action and predicts the future that will evolve from present events. Thus, the novel presents itself as prediction not fiction. The characters are invented; the biblical directives and prophecies in the books are not.

Tsion creates salvific demand for readers by means of his prophetic predictions, which reveal to the characters in the book, and by extension to the readers, what will happen in exact detail and unparalleled accuracy. Unlike nonfiction dispensationalist writers like Hagee, whose predictions are often wrong, such missteps are not the problem of the fictional Tsion. This certain outcome in the novels shows the readership that once the tribulation begins, the nebulous nature of predictions and apocalyptic events will suddenly dissolve. Thus, the *Left Behind* plots create salvific demand by emphasizing the reality and surety of the coming cataclysm.

Or to put it another way, if the Bible predicts the events of the tribulation as dispensational theology has taught, and if the *Left Behind* books are based on the work of real scholar prophets (as represented in the novel by Tsion) who can authenticate their messages by appropriating the charismatic authority of the Bible itself, then the prophesied events will assuredly occur as they have been envisioned. Asserting a credible dispensational vision of the future creates salvific demand, which, in turn, strengthens the behavioral demands of the present. If the future is accurately portrayed in the *Left Behind* series, then the requirements that it advances—the salvational practices it underscores—are also clearly set forth and demanded of a readership who seek not to be “left behind.”

ANALYSIS

Apocalypticism is about salvation in its most tangible form. Apocalypticism predicts horrors and chaos worldwide. No country will be spared, and there is no way to short-circuit or forestall these events. They are destined to come. The only way out is salvation through divinely orchestrated escape. As a way to motivate and control behavior, this combination of fear and promise of rescue for the believer is a powerful feature of the dispensational worldview.

Martin Riesebrodt’s work on conversion and religious propaganda outlines a theoretical framework for understanding dispensationalism. The creation of salvific demand (stimulating a perceived need for salvation) plus the discursive practices that organize and justify the theology/ideology and the behavior-regulating practices that identify acts that are prescribed or proscribed are all found in the dispensational works discussed above. These three elements may be combined into a theory that explains the power and long-standing popularity of dispensationalism.

Such a theory encompasses a two-pronged mechanism. The first part of the mechanism is the creation of salvific demand. This is produced by legitimation strategies that reinforce the apocalyptic vision of the apocalypticists and transfer divine authority to them. For Hagee and LaHaye (through the character Judah Ben Tsion), there is a kind of algebra that equates biblical prophecies with the predictions of the dispensationalist model that is opaque to the uninitiated but made clear when dispensationalist ideologists recast the prophecies in terms of present-day events and then reveal them to their readers. By showing that the Old Testament predictions of a messiah apply exclusively and successfully to Jesus, other biblical prophecies of events since Jesus or still to come, as interpreted by dispensationalism, are likewise deemed certain.

Hagee also couples dispensationalist predictions with a correlation of current events to the dispensational timeline. This strategy produces a growing sense of impending doom, which, in turn, intensifies salvific demand. The *Left Behind* series, on the other hand, amplifies this model by

being able to show in great detail the dispensational timeline of events playing out in its narrative world so that readers are convinced of the veracity of prophetic models by the plausibility of the story. Dispensationalists disingenuously claim that these predictions are simply in the Bible for anyone to read; the interpreter merely presents what the Bible “says” and the reader can make up her or his own mind. Yet, the dispensationalist ideologist displays and implicitly claims a secret knowledge of coded references and symbols in the Bible when he interprets ancient prophecies and fundamentally recreates them to make them comprehensible in modern terms. By claiming that these prophecies and predictions are merely a straightforward reading of the Bible, already proven reliable through its fulfilled prophecies of Jesus’ first coming, Hagee and LaHaye tailor their salvific demands for an audience who hold high respect for the biblical text.

Once salvific demand is stimulated, the second part of the mechanism is the imposition of behavior-regulating practices as a prerequisite to being a member of the saved. With both Hagee and LaHaye, a set of practices that must be both performed and avoided is mapped out. These practices differ in each case. For John Hagee, regulating practices are political in nature and center primarily on American foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel. This political agenda is supported by discursive practices that suggest an exchange of God’s blessing and protection for support of the Israeli government. In the case of the *Left Behind* series, the traditionalist issues of gender roles and sexuality are paramount. Embedded in discursive practices of both approaches are carrot-and-stick promises: those who behave appropriately will rule the world with Christ; those who do not will endure the sufferings and desolation of the end-times with no hope of escape or reward.

These three elements then—salvific demand, discursive practices, and behavior-regulating practices—are interlocking and mutually reinforcing. Engaging in the practices required by the dispensationalists produces a commitment that is self-perpetuating and that generates a community of adherents to these practices. Constant reflection on current events as markers of the coming apocalypse, especially when paired with vivid narrative portrayals of the alternative, enhances the promise of salvation. The theory of apocalypticism proposed here elucidates that the ways dispensationalists effectively exercise behavioral control over their audience and what sort of benefits they offer in return.

Modifications of Riesebrodt’s Theory

Riesebrodt’s theory of religion has proven to be well-suited for this analysis. Still, Riesebrodt’s formulation of interventionist practices needs some modifications to account adequately for the workings of dispensationalism. The conversion that first initiates the individual into the elect certainly qualifies as an interventionist practice. Here, the individual seeks and achieves a direct interaction with deity. Yet, the behavior-regulating practices that are required once one is part of the group sit less well within this interventionist category. Dispensationalism is less about the present moment and more about a rapidly approaching future.¹³ As a result, the behaviors that are required are less about interaction with deity and more about maintaining one’s position as part of the elect. A theory that accounts for dispensationalism must then be less punctiliar and more process oriented. Connecting these elements in Riesebrodt, as I have done, provides for an approach that can account for long-term interventionist practices.

In addition to this difference, dispensationalism requires we pay closer attention to the issue of legitimation, which is less central to Riesebrodt’s theory. Particularly in dealing with prophetic actors who are outside traditional institutional authorizing processes, the issue of legitimation becomes paramount. Here, I have returned to Riesebrodt’s roots by invoking the Weberian

¹³ One of the characters in the *Left Behind* books is, in fact, an assistant pastor who is “left behind.” The lesson here is that a purity of thought and action is required, which makes you part of the elect when mere church titles do not.

Table 2: Pew Religion and the Public Life Survey 2006

	Evangelical or Born Again (%)	Not Born Again (%)
<i>The Bible</i>		
Literal word of God	61	16
Inspired word of God	34	60
Believe in the second coming of Jesus (percent yes)	94	62
Jesus will return in my lifetime (percent yes)	32	12
Is the state of Israel a sign of Jesus' return (percent yes)	57	19
Did God give the land that is now Israel to the Jewish people (percent "Literally True")	65	26
<i>Who do you sympathize more with the Israel/Palestinian dispute?</i>		
Israel	58	41
Palestinians	6	14

notion of charismatic authority. Even so, dispensationalism requires a slightly different approach as the charismatic claims of dispensationalists are not of personal revelation or visions but a mediation and recasting of the meaning of the text to specify the present time with a concomitant prediction of the future. The method of legitimation then becomes a combination of grounding in the biblical texts and then a thorough reconfiguration of the texts within the dispensationalist schema, presented now as the definitive "Word of God."

By expanding and modifying Riesebrodt's work, I have shown how it can be effectively used to understand an unusual religious community like dispensationalism. While the power of dispensationalism itself may be waning,¹⁴ its influence continues undiminished in certain segments of population (see Table 2). As a result, it is important that scholars understand the way dispensationalism operates. Martin Riesebrodt's work makes an important contribution to just such an endeavor.

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¹⁴ This is an issue that is being discussed among dispensationalists themselves. Terry James, a blogger at Rapture-Ready.com, did a post in 2007 in which he noted the ages of the top dispensationalist thinkers in the aftermath of the death of Jerry Falwell. The average age was 75.8. John Hagee was the youngest in the group at 67. "The sudden death of Rev. Jerry Falwell has brought to mind a growing problem in the end-time Christian community. We are losing leaders, and there are none of equal stature to take their place" (James 2007).

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