

THE JESUS MOVEMENT AND THE RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

*Even if you don't believe it's gonna to come true.
Even if you don't believe it's gonna to happen to you.
He's gonna come down, take a last look around
And with both feet off the ground you'll be homeward bound.*
—Larry Norman, *Bootleg* Record Album, 1971

Recently with the release of the new *Left Behind* movie, the blogosphere was flooded with anti-pre-trib rapture posts from a number of famous leaders and many not-so-famous ones as well. Many of these articles were either from or directed to the under forty-age class of Evangelical Christians. Many stated that pretribulationism is wrong and not taught anywhere in the Bible, usually without citing any biblical support for their declaration. Most of the pundits suggest that one can go and enjoy the movie but do not fall for the underlying premise that it could in any way actually take place in real history. Often commentators criticized rapture believers by saying, when people hold such views they want to escape responsibility in this life, while noting that it was alright to enjoy the movie since it is pure fiction.

“EVEN IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE”

I was involved in the early 1970's revival usually known as “The Jesus Movement.” It was a time when God's Holy Spirit was opening the eyes of many who were thought to be the least likely to come to Christ in North America. Yet, from about 1968 till the mid 1970s, the last revival in America took place impacting many young people below the age of thirty years old. Many trends that are still widespread among Evangelicals today were introduced through the Jesus movement almost half a century ago. One of the biggest impacts was the beginning of contemporary Christian music into churches and as a tool for evangelism. Larry Norman (1947–2008), who recorded over 100 albums, is considered by many to be the father of contemporary Christian music, which in the early 70s was known as “Jesus Rock,” even though a majority of the groups were a blend of Folk music and Rock.

The pre-trib rapture was at the heart of the message of the Jesus movement and singers like Larry Norman included it in many of his songs in the late 60's and early 70's. In fact, in 1969 Norman released what is considered to be the first full-blown Christian rock album with Capitol Records entitled “Upon This Rock.” The album cover sports a picture of Norman getting raptured. One of the songs on this album was “I Wish We'd All Been Ready,” which is about unbelievers being left behind at the rapture to go through the tribulation. The current release of the *Left Behind* movie ends with this song, although regrettably not sung by Norman.

In 2013 a comprehensive study of the Jesus Movement was released entitled *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America*.¹ The book included survey results of over 800 people involved in the movement. Under the question: “Favorite ‘Jesus Music’ Songs,” by far the number one song at the top of a list of twenty was “I Wish We'd All Been Ready.”² That was also my experience in the movement as well. Seems that song was almost always sung when we got together.

A few other questions were quite informative in relation to the popularity of pretribulationism. "Were you convinced that Jesus' return was imminent during your involvement with the Jesus People movement?" was an interesting question. About 80% said, "Yes," while only 10% said, "No."³ The next question was, "Did you believe in the 'Rapture' during your involvement in the Jesus People movement?" 90% answered, "Yes" with only 4% saying, "No." Not surprisingly, as the author says, "hands-down winner" of the most popular author and book was Hal Lindsey and *The Late, Great Planet Earth*.⁴ I bring these matters up because it was during the 1970s that pretribulationism was part of the revival culture of that day when Evangelicalism was growing as a result of winning unbelievers to Christ and teaching them the literal meaning of God's Word. This literal interpretation of Scripture included a general literal approach to Bible prophecy and the rapture. The literal view of Bible prophecy was set against most of the mainline Protestant churches of the day that did not follow the dispensational understanding of the Bible. Thus, they did not hold to a pre-trib rapture. It was in this context that Larry Norman wrote a song about the rapture. He spoke about how all believers will be taken in the rapture whether they believe in it or not. (Note the words of Norman's song at the beginning of this article.)

KICKING AND SCREAMING

Often when I am speaking on the truth of pretribulationism from the Bible, I point out that even those Christians who do not believe in pretribulationism or have never heard of the rapture will be taken up in that great event. I like to say that some will likely go up kicking and screaming. Of course, I add, such will not actually be the case since we will be changed into our new resurrection body at the moment of rapture so that we will no longer have a sin nature that will oppose God's plan for His church.

One of the points that I have never heard anyone say, nor have I read about it anywhere when opponents of the pre-trib view attempt to explain how the rapture became such a widespread belief among American Evangelicals is the role the Jesus movement played, especially the music that reinforced belief in the great snatch. As one who lived through this time participating in the movement, I know that the music and overall culture and mentality did a lot to reinforce my belief in a pre-trib rapture. Like many, I examined pretribulationism later as to its veracity and continue to examine it to this day in light of Scripture. I have found that it is clearly taught in the New Testament.

Today, as a general trend within American Evangelicalism, we see an exiting of young people from the Church or a tendency to want to be relevant to the pagan culture rather than to God. During the Jesus movement there was an influx of young people into the church through conversion to Christ as their Savior which was often energized by the proclamation of Bible prophecy and the rapture. Today in the Evangelical church most young people, not all, are bored to death with the biblical study of the future. They say it is not relevant to them rather than is it true. So it is not surprising that with the recent release of the remake of the *Left Behind* movie, they generally have shown no interest. I'll bet I have read a couple dozen articles in the last few months critical of pretribulationism upon the occasion of the release of the *Left Behind* movie. Many of the articles just reject out-of-hand the possibility that pretribulationism could be true. They then proceed to make fun of and ridicule this teaching as something one might have gotten out of the *National Inquirer* along the same line as believing in flying saucers and the space brothers. In place of the rapture and Bible prophecy today we tend to see an emphasis upon social action as a focus. We are actually seeing in many

circles a return to the social gospel of old liberalism as an emphasis within many segments of Evangelicalism.

THE RISE OF AMERICAN PRETRIBULATIONISM

As we glance back at history, we see a rise after the American Civil War in the Bible conference movement that featured the exposition of Scripture. This was undergirded by a rise of inductive Bible study as Evangelicals attempted to understand God's plan for history. Thus, inductive studies of individual biblical books were evaluated as to their contribution to the overall plan of God for history. Such inductive study of the biblical text was set against the rise of liberal critical study coming to America from Germany as progressives attempted to destroy confidence in God's Word. Liberalism bolstered an emphasis by Evangelicals upon the fundamentals of the faith and a deeper study of the Bible from a literal perspective. It was out of such a Bible study movement that premillennialism and pretribulationism increasingly made great sense to a majority of Evangelicals. Therefore, the popularity of pretribulationism rose in correspondence with and was supported by this Bible study emphasis within the conservative, Bible-believing wing of the church. The Jesus movement, when it came to its general approach to Scripture, was clearly on the conservative side of these issues and greatly focused on the pre-trib rapture and a dispensational approach to Bible prophecy.

Today the winds within Evangelicalism have changed direction. We are seeing a virtual abandonment of inductive Bible study by the younger generation of Evangelicals in exchange for a form of the social gospel. Thus, it is not surprising to see that many do not base some of their beliefs upon Bible study, but instead upon other factors. Many of the younger Evangelicals today see the rapture and other prophetic events as something that corresponds more with the *National Inquirer* than with a biblical doctrine.

CONCLUSION

Popularity of a doctrine within Evangelicalism has never been the true basis for believing that any teaching is truthful. Instead, vindication concerning the veracity of a teaching is found only in whether it lines up with what the Bible teaches. That has always been the standard, even during times when the pre-trib rapture was more widely accepted within American Evangelicalism. However, the changing winds of today are blowing in a different direction than in previous time and may explain why something that was once very popular among Evangelicals has lately fallen into disfavor. Nevertheless, I know that the New Testament clearly teaches that the possibility of Christ's return in the clouds could happen at any moment, which is still a wonderful blessed hope that encourages believers to live godly lives and engage in spreading the gospel to all peoples and nation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*, pp. 302–03.

³ Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*, p. 297.

⁴ Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*, pp. 305–06; Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth: A Penetrating Look at Incredible Prophecies Involving This Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).