

A Personal Story of the Journey Out of Christian Zionism ¹

By Don Thorsen Ph.D, Christian Zionism, Rapture & the Holy Land, Conference at Fuller Theological Seminary, October 4, 2008



Introduction

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Let me share with you the story of how I first embodied and then repudiated the beliefs, values, and practices of Christian Zionism. Of course, when I developed my view of eschatology, neither I nor others with whom I was familiar used the terminology of Christian Zionism. Instead my view was best described as premillennial and pretribulational eschatology, including belief in a secret rapture of Christians that would imminently occur. But my largely subconscious view of Israel and the United States' involvement in Mideast politics was essentially that of Christian Zionism. I gave unconditional preference to biblical prophecies thought to be predictive of Israel's nationalistic resurgence, and the coming of Armageddon and the cataclysmic end of the world as we know it.

Although I grew up with Christian Zionistic beliefs, values, and practices, I rejected them because of my increased study of scripture and because of the disgraceful social implications of a premillennial and pretribulational eschatology. I will share my journey chronologically, beginning with the formation of my earliest thoughts about the end times and ending with my professional development as a professor of Christian theology.

1960s: Growing Speculation

I grew up as a teenager during the 1960s, so the occurrence of the Six-days War, also known as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, was a big deal. The capture of Jerusalem by Israel sparked all kinds of eschatological speculation by Christians that I knew, including my pastor and high school Sunday School teacher, who were the earliest shapers of my views about the end times.

I would describe the Free Methodist Church in which I grew up as being part of an evangelical Christian denomination. The denomination was evangelical largely because it was a charter member of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The NAE came into existence in order to avoid, on the one hand, the fundamentalism of the American Council of Christian Churches, founded by Carl McIntyre, and on the other hand, the theological liberalism of what became known as the National Council of Churches.

Although my denomination was evangelical, my local church and its leaders were more fundamentalist in their beliefs, values, and practices. Their tendency toward fundamentalism probably was due to various reasons. It was no doubt influenced by their lack of seminary training and their fascination with popular preachers, teachers, and authors who promoted dispensational theology and eschatology. For example, it was not uncommon to have traveling evangelists come to our church and speak about the end times. They would sometimes display throughout our church large posters, approximately six feet high and ten feet long, which graphically displayed a literalistic interpretation of the events of the Book of Revelation. Over time, presentations would have improved graphics with the use of overheads, movies, PowerPoint, and other media.

People in church, including me, were fascinated by the fantastic imagery, dazzling colors, and promise of predicting the future. My fascination increased with the development of Christian rock and roll music, especially the 1969 song by Larry Norman, entitled "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." The song ends powerfully with the words, "you've been left behind." The words influenced Christians then as well as in later decades, including the enormously popular Left Behind series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which started in the 1990s and continue today. Another media source that promoted eschatological speculation was the scary 1972 movie entitled "A Thief in the Night," which graphically described what would happen when the rapture occurred. Its formula of speculation and fear whetted the appetites of millions, inside and outside churches, who craved the fantastic and superior notion that they knew the future!

1970s: Questions Arise

The pinnacle of eschatological speculation occurred after the 1970 publication of Hal Lindsey's book entitled *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which became the most popular trade book during the 1970s.² Lindsey presented a dramatic portrayal of the Book of Revelation, including speculation about the roles of Russia, China, and even the United States in the end times. Although it can be debated about how explicitly he predicted the date of the rapture (1988),³ few readers came away without a dramatic sense of the imminence of the parousia—the second coming of Jesus Christ.

I remember reading Lindsey's book and was hooked on the topic. My pastor and high school Sunday school teacher were also entranced by eschatological speculation. They would preach, teach, and encourage all types of media that promoted anticipation of the end times. They also promoted the state of Israel, supporting every politician and political party that unquestioningly supported Israel's precarious existence in the Mideast. Although I was not aware of the social, political and economic realities of Arab-Israeli relations, I ghoulishly relished any bad news that arose. Bad news about wars and rumors of war in the Mideast fueled my excitement about the imminent return of Jesus Christ. I did not really care about Israel any more than I cared about Arabs; I just looked forward to the parousia.

In the early 1970s, our church appointed a new senior pastor: Wes Nelson. He was excellent in many ways. So, among the many questions I had, I asked him about eschatology. Pastor Wes graciously talked with me and realized my passion for the

subject. However, he thought my views were too narrowly dependent upon dispensational sources. Indeed, Pastor Wes expressed concern about the truth of pretribulational and premillennial interpretations of the Bible. I remember him telling me a story about a fellow seminarian who had left school because he was convinced that Jesus would return in a few years. However, after dedicating himself to evangelizing people before the parousia, Pastor Wes said his friend had eventually become disillusioned, cynical, and impoverished for having foolishly based life decisions upon the faulty assumption of Jesus' imminent return.

So, I started reading other perspectives about eschatology. I read scholars such as George Eldon Ladd about posttribulational and midtribulational views of premillennialism. Sadly, I discovered that authors would write for dozens and dozens of pages about one or two verses, and their conclusions seemed to have more to do with their presuppositions than about the content of scripture. I had not yet studied historical critical exegesis, but I realized—even as a teenager—that extensive rationalization was necessary for promoting a particular viewpoint. For awhile, I held a posttribulational premillennial view of eschatology, but it was not a heartfelt belief. More than anything, a posttribulational view made me aware of the practical implications of one's theory of eschatology. Our ideas, after all, have practical implications, and I had not previously noticed the social, political, economic, and—indeed—ethical indifference that seemed to permeate dispensationalism. Dispensationally oriented authors that I read appeared almost gleeful about tragedies that occurred, not just in the Mideast, but everywhere. They did not seem to care about injustices; they did not even seem to care about people. They only seemed to care about the cataclysmic end of the world.

1980s: Sorting Priorities

During the 1980s, I finished seminary and did doctoral studies in theology. Eschatology had not continued to be a focus in my life, but I did solidify my beliefs on the topic. After further study, amillennialism became more appealing to me biblically, historically, and practically in everyday life and ministry. It goes beyond the purpose of this personal story to give an apologetic for amillennialism. Suffice it to say that it persuaded me far more than other views.

One could argue that the institutions of higher education that I attended largely did not affirm either pretribulational premillennialism or Christian Zionism. However, my beliefs on the topic had been developed long before I began doctoral studies in theology. If anything, my studies helped me to articulate what I already believed.

I remember teaching an adult Sunday school class one time, and I talked a little about eschatology. I honestly shared with the class about my journey from pretribulational premillennialism and posttribulational premillennialism to amillennialism. In response, one of the senior members of the class chastised me about the evolution of my beliefs. He wondered how I could possibly become a professor of theology, since my beliefs had changed. He continued by saying, somewhat sanctimoniously, that his beliefs had not changed in more than fifty years! I graciously thanked him for his opinions, but I privately felt dismayed that someone would brag about not having changed one single

belief, value, or practice throughout his adult life. What kind of life had he lived? Then, again, I thought that, knowing him, he may well not have changed a single belief. I felt somewhat sad for him because I do not think he had learned much as an adult. He was so concerned about appearing consistent that he assiduously avoided the prospect of learning anything from anyone at anytime.

During the 1980s, the Cold War waned. Despite all the angst it caused among people in the United States for the past several decades, the Cold War did not greatly enhance apocalyptic speculation. Biblical writings about eschatology did not address foreign lands far from the Mideast. So countries like Russia, China, and the United States and their contemporary problems did not generate the same passion for the end times. Without world events stimulating apocalyptic emotions, eschatology waned in my interests as well as in the interest of others.

1990s: Teaching Eschatology

I taught eschatology during the 1990s in the Haggard Graduate School of Theology at Azusa Pacific University, which is a seminary for training church leaders. Most of my students are quite conservative, though they range widely in theological background and training. My approach to teaching eschatology is to present a spectrum of views, trying to present the best arguments for each theological perspective. Fortunately, Azusa Pacific does not affirm a specific eschatology, other than to affirm that Jesus will someday come again. So, I feel liberty in teaching the subject. I put most emphasis upon challenging my students to decide what they believe for themselves, since they are training to be leaders in the church.

Aside from teaching about scripture and church historical views, I also challenge students to consider the practical, real life implications of their eschatology. Most of my students have not thought about the relationship between theory and practice when it comes to considering their views of the end times. Fewer have thought about the implications of eschatology for their philosophy of ministry. But their eschatological views have a profound impact upon what they value and practice in church leadership. It also impacts how they and their parishioners live socially, politically, and economically. The variety of implications of their eschatological views often astounds them, yet I encourage the students to consider all dimensions of their beliefs, values, and practices. It is incumbent upon them as future leaders to be self-aware socially, politically, and economically as well as theologically.

Most students appreciate exposure to a variety of eschatological viewpoints. Their church or denominational affiliations sometimes complicate their decision making process. Overall they like the liberty of thinking through the issues for themselves. Students feel empowered when they can investigate a hot topic in churches and decide for themselves. They are especially appreciative of being able to consider the multidimensional aspects and implications of their determining their own eschatology.

Students do not usually understand the connection between church and society, between Christ and culture. They have become increasingly aware of culture as a force in society,

but they do not always see how inextricably they and churches are with culture. They naively tend to think that they, churches, and indeed the Bible are exempt from cultural influences. One of the distinct advantages of seminary training is helping future church leaders develop intellectual and social maturity along with religious and personal maturity.

2000s: Encountering Christian Zionism

At the start of the 2000s, my wife and I decided to change churches. It is a long story, but mostly for the sake of our children we began attending a Calvary Chapel. I did not look forward to attending the fundamentalistically oriented church, but it seemed like the best decision for our household. The church was nearby, had more than three thousand attendees, and the children's ministries were dynamic.

Although I had had years of exposure to Calvary Chapels, including students and pastors, I was admittedly unprepared for the dispensational trajectory of the particular church I attended. Church sermons seemed to focus on two foci: evangelism, and the rapture. Prophecy conferences were sponsored by the church annually, and eschatological gurus like Chuck Missler would speak. (Missler, by the way, speculates that UFOs represent a Satanic plan to mask the true meaning of the rapture, when it occurs.⁴) Overall, I considered the Calvary Chapel views more annoying than dangerous. However, during one of the prophecy conferences, which I refused to attend, I noticed a dozen or more picketers. They were toting signs that warned people of the injustices to Palestinians and Palestinian Christians, perpetrated by invited speakers. It finally hit me, I am sad to say, as to how critically important people found the teachings of Christian Zionism.

Frankly, Christian Zionism had not been a term with which I was all that familiar, and I did not use it in my teaching at that time. However, I began to study the topic and increasingly realized its injustice and inhumanity to a variety of people in the Mideast and, indeed, the United States. My discomfort with Christian Zionism increased after the devastating terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. I was appalled when my pastor at Calvary Chapel specifically called the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to be holy crusades against Islam, and that—despite what politicians said—the real reason for going to war was to protect and promote the interests and expansion of the state of Israel. Everything related to Israel was considered virtuous, since my pastor believed in a kind of Israelitism in which all Jews would be saved and that all political and military decisions of Israel should be supported, since they were the linchpin for inaugurating the end times. These views are representative of classic dispensational beliefs and values. My pastor did not really care about Israel, in my opinion; he was mostly concerned about ushering in Armageddon. In fact, he predicted publicly that Jesus would return no later than the end of the decade. His flagrant disregard for justice, impartiality, and compassion led me to leave the church—that and his constant praise for FOX News as the only reliable media available. When I left, the pastor had been preaching as sermon series on the Book of Revelation that had lasted one and a half years, and he still had not completed the book!

I am somewhat embarrassed to admit, theologically speaking, that I attended a Calvary Chapel and subjected my family to their narrow eschatological, dispensationalist, and fundamentalist views. I can only say that my intentions had been for everyone's well-being, especially for the needs of my children. I still teach and encourage my Calvary Chapel students, but I would never attend their churches again. Their pretribulational premillennialism increasingly promotes Christian Zionism. They are by no means the worst proponents, but they are an example of an exasperatingly influential. (Calvary Chapels control more than one hundred Christian talk radio stations across the country, and they have a profound influence upon the politics as well as religion of their listeners.) The social, political, and economic implications of their eschatology are becoming distressingly equated with what it means to be a good Christian as well as a good citizen of the United States. It is civil religion gone amok, especially considering their apocalyptic aspirations; God and country in support of the nation of Israel have become inextricably bound up with one another in being a good Christian and a good American.

- [1.](#) Possible subtitles: Confessions of a Post-pre-tribulational Pre-millennialist, or Why I Am No Longer Waiting for the Rapture.
- [2.](#) Hal Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).
- [3.](#) Expectation for the start of the end times in 1988 was heightened by the publication of *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Is in 1988*, by Edgar C. Whisenant.
- [4.](#) Chuck Missler and Mark Eastman, *Alien Encounters: The Secret Behind the UFO Phenomenon*, rev. ed. (Coeur d'Alene, ID: Koinonia House, 2003).