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Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and the Rise of Popular Premillennialism in the 1970s

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HAL LINDSEY'S *THE LATE, GREAT PLANET EARTH* AND THE RISE
OF POPULAR PREMILLENNIALISM IN THE 1970s

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

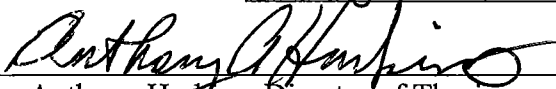
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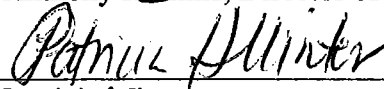
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Cortney S. Basham

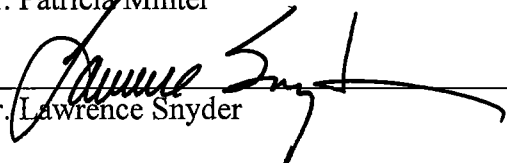
August 2012


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How people think about the end of the world greatly affects how they live in the present. This thesis examines how popular American thought about “the end of the world” has been greatly affected by Hal Lindsey’s 1970 popular prophecy book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. *LGPE* sold more copies than any other non-fiction book in the 1970s and greatly aided the mainstreaming of “end-times” ideas like the Antichrist, nuclear holocaust, the Rapture, and various other concepts connected with popular end-times thought. These ideas stem from a specific strain of late-nineteenth century Biblical interpretation known as dispensational premillennialism, which has manifested in various schools of premillennial thought over the last 150 years. However, Lindsey translated this complicated system into modern language and connected it with contemporary geopolitics in powerful ways which helped make *LGPE* incredibly popular and influential in the 1970s and beyond.

This paper includes an introduction to some essential concepts and terms related to popular premillennialism followed by a brief history of popular prophecy in America. The second half of this thesis examines the social, religious, and political climate of the 1970s and how Lindsey’s success connects to the culture of the Seventies, specifically conservative reactions to the various social movements of the 1960s. The last major section discusses Lindsey’s malleable theology and the power of interpreting the Bible “literally.” In the 1970s, conservative theologians and denominations won the battle to

define certain concepts within Christianity including terms like “literal,” “inerrant,” and related terms, and Lindsey’s treatment of “the end times” reflects these definitions and how they affect Biblical interpretation. Finally, the conclusion fleshes out the appeal of popular premillennialism in the 1970s and into the present day.

“This book is more up-to-date than tomorrow’s newspaper!” ~back jacket of Hal Lindsey’s *There’s A New World Coming* (1973)

Introduction

How people think, or do not think, about “The End of Time” greatly shapes how they live in the present as well as their view of history. Many evangelical Christians in America believe that the end will come with the reappearance of Jesus Christ. The events leading to this return have been a source of debate and contention throughout the history of Christianity. Historically, difficult theological problems like the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), and other lofty and complicated concepts have been hammered out by councils of church leaders, great thinkers, and theologians. For example, nearly all Christians abide by the boundaries established at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 regarding the humanity and divinity of Jesus. While Christians may disagree on the balance of Jesus’ humanity and divinity, the 520 bishops at Chalcedon clearly confirmed the duality of His nature.¹ But, there are few such agreed upon boundaries regarding the “end times.” Nearly all early Christian creeds affirm a second coming of Christ, but how and when that event occurs has been a matter of debate in Christian history, especially in the last 150 years.

In recent decades, eschatology (the study of end times) has become part of mainstream American culture. Movies like *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Omen*, *The Rapture*, *The Seventh Sign*, *End of Days*, and even *Ghostbusters*, all played upon characters, ideas,

¹ Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 66-81.

and imagery taken from Christian premillennial theology. The *Left Behind* series, a set of fictional Christian novels penned by Christian evangelist Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry Jenkins, has surpassed 65 million in sales. Once viewed as a complex theological system filled with wild and bizarre imagery, premillennial ideas have become mainstream end-times imagery in America. The explanations for the popularity of books, movies, and theology that include the workings of one world government, a rising Antichrist figure, a world war known as Armageddon, and a future one thousand year reign by “true Christians” as well as references to “the Antichrist,” the number 666, or the Mark of the Beast all come straight out of dispensational premillennial theology.

This thesis analyzes the cultural and theological impact of the work that arguably had the greatest influence on the popularization of this theology, Hal Lindsey’s 1970 book *The Late, Great Planet Earth (LGPE)*. How did a book drawing heavily from Biblical prophecy (especially Revelation) and predicting the end of the world through a complicated theological system become the number one selling non-fiction book of the 1970s? In order to fully contextualize its significance, this paper examines the history of modern premillennial thought, interprets the ideological and cultural climate of the 1970s, and analyzes the origins and process of Lindsey’s popularization of the complex theological system known as dispensational premillennialism. I argue that Lindsey did not develop a new way of thinking about Biblical prophecy as much as he took an existing ideology and filtered it through familiar language, thus making it more accessible for mass consumption at a time of widespread social uncertainty. Americans latched on to Lindsey’s ideas for a variety of reasons. Primarily, Lindsey offered answers to difficult questions surrounding the state of America and the world in the early 1970s.

The nuclear threat, the sexual revolution, the “Me-ism” of the 1970s, the legalization of abortion, the burgeoning world population, and various other world events were perceived by many as “attacks” on traditional Christianity. These perceptions fueled Lindsey’s argument that people were living in the last generation. His ability to connect these threats and current events to the Bible, and more specifically, to images in the book of Revelation as well as Old Testament Biblical prophecy, proved to be a powerful elixir for readers looking for God in what was perceived by many Christians as a godless age.

Lindsey followed an interesting path to his status as a “prophecy expert” and top-selling author. Born in Houston, Texas, in 1930, he served in the United States Coast Guard as a young man and was employed as a tugboat captain on the Mississippi River when he converted to Christianity in the 1950s. He became terribly interested in Bible prophecy and, in 1958, he enrolled at Dallas Theological Seminary which was known for its strong adherence to premillennial theology and studied under a number of well-known prophecy writers. Dallas president John Walvoord was the most prominent of his teachers, having written a number of highly popular books that interpreted world trends and current events through methods that Lindsey would later mimic. Lindsey’s initial evangelistic success came in the late 1960s while involved with Campus Crusade for Christ, a parachurch ministry, on the campus of the University of California-Los Angeles. His experiences in open-air preaching at UCLA eventually led Lindsey to give a series of lectures on Bible prophecy on the campus and the week-long event increased in attendance every night. The material from these lectures along with the help of a ghostwriter eventually produced the landmark *The Late Great Planet Earth*.²

² Paul Boyer, “The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalyptic in the United States” in Bernard McGinn (et al, eds.), *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

LGPE received little attention from mainstream book reviewers, as evidenced by the dearth of reviews in major newspapers. However, it did not take long for *LGPE* to reach robust sales number. Sales were strong out of the gate, as *LGPE* topped 1.5 million in sales by October of 1972,³ and when Bantam Books picked up *LGPE* and reprinted it in 1973, the book sold another 1.6 million copies in just over a year.⁴ By the mid-1970s, the book “had a print run of 6 million” and was well on its way into the stratosphere.⁵ While *LGPE*’s meteoric sales curve surpassed all other non-fiction books in the decade, it was also the brightest star in a constellation of heavenly books in the 1970s.

The 1970s were a boom time not just for Christian books but for all religious books, and *LGPE* clearly rode this wave. In 1975, sales for all book publishers increased 7.9 percent from the previous year, but popular religious titles enjoyed even more wild success. According to the Association of American Publishers, sales of general religious books leaped an astounding 23.6 percent in 1975 over the previous year’s sales. Furthermore, the popularity of these books had risen steadily for five consecutive years before this enormous mid-decade spike. Clearly, Lindsey did not have a monopoly on huge sales. Billy Graham’s *Angels* rang up 1.2 million in sales as a hardback title in about one year. Bibles, hymnals and other yearly published books of church practice enjoyed a healthy bump in sales during this time as well (13.5 percent), but they paled in comparison to the sales of popular religious titles.⁶

Furthermore, the demographic of buyers of these popular religious books reached far beyond traditional fundamentalist strongholds. John Bass, executive vice president of

³ Edward B. Fiske, “There Are Those Who Think It Is Imminent,” *New York Times* (8 October 1972), E8.

⁴ “Golden Millions,” *New York Times* (10 February 1974), 341.

⁵ “Editor’s Choice,” *New York Times Book Review* (23 May 1976), BR14.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Christian Booksellers Association in the mid-1970s, indicated that the highest sales figures came out of not only the Bible belt, but also the Midwest and Southern California. He pointed to numerous reasons for the boom in sales in these areas. First, he suggested that the growing need for a “personal relationship with and understanding of God” was growing during the 1970s. Also, authors like Lindsey and Graham focused their energies on communicating spiritual truth to laypeople, not just pastors and ministers. Bass also suggested that the Jesus boom on college campuses in the 1960s had some staying power. College students who had converted to Christianity in the Sixties were now in the 28-35 year-old demographic. Finally, religious publishers began to advertise and market as aggressively as their more secular counterparts.⁷ Use of modern technology and marketing had been a hallmark of Christian fundamentalism since the 1930s. Christian radio, colleges, pamphlets, and summer camps built a massive underground fundamentalist army during the 1930s and 1940s. Christian publishers routinely followed the lead of wily secular marketers’ use of technology in every decade of the 20th century, so this came as no surprise. Still, *LGPE* reached unprecedented heights as “popular prophecy.”

Bass also noted that the primary purchasers of these books were married women aged 28-35 and female Christian authors also had much success. While Hal Lindsey and Billy Graham might be the most recognizable and best-selling of the group, female authors like Corrie ten Boom, Marabel Morgan, and Catherine Marshall were not far behind. Corrie ten Boom’s *The Hiding Place* and *Tramp for the Lord* were ranked #1 and #2 on the New York Times best-selling paperback list in May of 1976. Marabel Morgan’s *The Total Woman* fell right into the 28-35 year-old female wheelhouse selling

⁷ Ibid.

over 750,000 copies in hardcover by mid-decade.⁸ Catherine Wood Marshall's *Adventures in Prayer* was also a mainstay on the bestseller lists. While most fundamentalists adhered to "male headship" in the household, many Christian women were leading in the world of Christian book writing and bookselling. Morgan's *The Total Woman* focused on the joys of submitting to her husband, stating that, "It's only when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, reveres and worships him and is willing to serve him, that she becomes really beautiful to him. She becomes a priceless jewel, the glory of femininity, his queen!" This writing came during an era of debate on the Equal Rights Amendment, the rise of feminism, and Billie Jean King's defeat of Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match. Ironically, conservative Christian concern about feminist activity created a market for female Christian writers writing against feminism.⁹

To understand the appeal of Lindsey's work, one must first understand the basis for his fantastical claims. A relatively brief history of premillennialism followed by an examination of interpreting the Biblical book of Revelation will help clarify not only what Lindsey was claiming but how he came to these conclusions. Lindsey's premillennialism held relevant answers to pressing questions for many Americans.

To understand the history of premillennialism, certain terms need clarification. Like many complex theological ideas, *premillennialism* includes several variations. For the purposes of this paper, premillennialism refers to a general strand of interpretative thought regarding Biblical prophecy referred to as *dispensational premillennialism* or just *dispensationalism*. According to this belief, God has divided the time of all creation into specific periods or "dispensations" and has dealt with problems within those

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: the Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2002), 161-76, for an overview of feminism in the early 1970s.

dispensations in specific ways. Further, the present time is the sixth dispensation (the “Ecclesiastical” or “Grace” dispensation) which commenced with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and is the one which precedes the final period of tribulation which will commence roughly at the time of the Rapture and end with Christ’s return with his church. To be clear, in this paper, premillennialism refers to a larger school of thought and dispensationalism is a faction within premillennialism to which Lindsey belongs.

It is important to understand that not all premillennialists are dispensational premillennialists. In 1977, Dale Moody, a Southern Baptist theologian, composed a series of writings describing four major millennial views for the popular Baptist newspaper *The Western Recorder*. He described his view as historical premillennialism, and the others as amillennialism, postmillennialism, and dispensational premillennialism. He criticized dispensationalism, and Hal Lindsey specifically, stating that,

“Dispensationalism tries to make ‘this generation’ [a phrase used by Jesus in some apocalyptic passages], as Hal Lindsey calls it, but Jesus always meant the generation that witnesses the preaching and death of Jesus, as any concordance will reveal. If he had reference to the second coming, as *The English Bible* and *The Living Bible* wrongly assume, then he was mistaken. If he had reference to the Fall of Jerusalem, as I believe, he was a true prophet and the Son of God.”¹⁰

In addition to these factions of premillennialism, completely separate schools of Christian eschatological thought exist, including amillennialism, postmillennialism, and a number of other millennial views that are quite different from any form of premillennialism.

While a detailed understanding of them is not vital to this paper, a brief overview will help draw contrasts between these schools of Christian millennial thought. Generally speaking, amillennialists view the “end times” as the current church age and reject the notion that Revelation contains information relating only to the last days and how they

¹⁰ Dale Moody, “Dispensationalism,” *Western Recorder* (24 February 1977): 10.

will unfold. Amillennialists believe that Christ will return in his own time.

Postmillennialists, in contrast, believe that the world will be Christianized and improved, eventually ushering in a golden age of Christianity that will prompt Christ's return.

Dispensationalism paints a quite different picture than either of these two interpretations by arguing that while God's exact timetable might not be discernible, specific historical, current and future events are predicted by the Old Testament prophets and Revelation.

Further, for Lindsey, much of Revelation points to events in "this generation" and indicate that Jesus' return will be "soon." Before examining Lindsey's particular brand of premillennialism, an understanding of the origins and evolution of dispensational premillennialism is needed.

Origins and History of Popular Premillennialism

From the Revolutionary War through the Civil War period, postmillennialism dominated the American eschatological landscape. It gained popularity during the first Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s and was further popularized by Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century. Postmillennialists believed that the prophecies of Revelation were happening in the present time and that a golden age of Christianity loomed on the near horizon. The coming millennium (the "one thousand years" referenced in Revelation 20) would be the final stage of history. The world would be thoroughly Christianized and after one thousand years of Christian bliss, Christ would return and close the door on human history, taking his church of true believers back to

heaven with him for eternity. Since Christ's return came after the one thousand years, this ideology became known as "postmillennialism."¹¹

Early premillennialists in pre-Civil War America did not differ greatly from their postmillennialist counterparts. They also viewed current events as relevant to the coming of Christ, but believed that Jesus would return before this anticipated "golden age" (hence, the name "pre"-millennialist). Both groups believed that this golden age would consist of a world of peace, prosperity, and utopian society implemented and governed by Christ. This issue of timing was the primary difference between the two theological positions.¹² This seemingly secondary issue would eventually change the face of evangelical Christianity and set the stage for more clearly drawn theological lines in the near future.

Premillennialism was destined to be more than a mere secondary issue in American Christianity. The Millerite movement of the early 1840s served as an important marker in premillennial date-setting and greatly influenced the evolution of prophecy interpretation in America. In the 1840s, William Miller, a Baptist lay preacher from Low Hampton, New York, preached views not unlike British premillennialists in the mid-nineteenth century but set hard dates for Christ's return based on his interpretation of Biblical prophecy. He stated, "I am fully convinced that somewhere between March 21st, 1843, and March 21st, 1844, according to the Jewish mode of computation, Christ will come."¹³ "Father Miller" did not pull these dates out of thin air or make wild predictions without a rationale; he meticulously calculated his window for Christ's return by

¹¹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 49. Also see Revelation 20:1-6 for the "millennium passage."

¹² *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹³ Quoted in Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 87.

applying an elaborate numerical system to the Holy Scriptures. This bold and precise approach to prophecy rested upon Miller's two basic philosophies regarding Scripture. First, he believed that the book of Revelation related to specific periods of history. Second, he interpreted the Bible "literally" whenever possible. He did interpret certain images, numbers, and parables as symbolic, but these were exceptions to his general rule.¹⁴

Miller's elaborate date calculations came from tedious numerical acrobatics based on his interpretation of the Old Testament prophecy book of Daniel. In Daniel 8:14, a character described as the "holy one" says to Daniel, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."¹⁵ Miller interpreted this reconsecration (or cleansing) as the second coming of Christ and the dawning of the millennium. He settled on the year 1843 by interpreting the 2,300 days as 2,300 years which began in 457 BC, when seventeen hundred Jews led by Ezra returned to Jerusalem. This starting year in turn derived from his reading of Daniel 9:24: "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy." Using Christ's approximate crucifixion year of 33 AD as this "end of sins," Miller traced back 490 years (70 weeks times 7 days) to get to 457 BC.¹⁶

Miller traveled extensively throughout the northern United States proclaiming his ideas on the nearing return of Christ, building up a considerable following of upwards of

¹⁴ Kyle, *Last Days*, 88. A full discussion of terms like "literal" or "plain" interpretation appears later in the paper. The defining of these terms is a major part of premillennialism.

¹⁵ *Holy Bible: New International Version*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). All biblical quotes are taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶ Kyle, *Last Days*, 89.

fifty thousand people and likely thousands more who secretly believed that his prediction would come true. Of course, 21 March 1843, came and went without Christ's return, but Miller and his followers cited a miscalculation and set a new date of 22 October 1844. Anticipation swelled again, but their hopes were dashed by the dawn of 23 October 1844. The Millerites were left to deal with crushing despair and crafting an attempt to move forward, and American prophecy enthusiasts learned a valuable lesson. Future prophecy interpreters would focus more on Matthew 24:36: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The setting of specific dates for the second coming became nearly obsolete after the Millerite fiasco.¹⁷ While Lindsey deftly avoided setting a hard date for prophetic events, he did make some more general claims in his writings which will be discussed in sections below.

Like many believers of popular premillennialism in the late twentieth century, the Millerites did not seem to their neighbors like peculiar fanatics. In fact, their normality made their beliefs appear all the more reasonable. A diverse collection of fairly common, northeastern Americans made up the Millerite movement. The Millerite approach was popular because it was based on the democratic principle that anyone could interpret Biblical prophecy by merely reading the Bible "literally." Advanced seminary degrees and knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and other ancient languages were not necessary for prophecy interpretation in Miller's eyes. According to Miller and those like him, the "plain" answer almost always was the correct one.¹⁸ This emphasis on literalness, practicality, and simplicity remained a theme in popular prophecy throughout the twentieth century, but later popular premillennialists also learned to make more malleable

¹⁷ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 80-82.

¹⁸ Boyer, *When Time*, 82-84.

predictions. Too many debacles like the one that Miller orchestrated could seriously erode the viability of their theological position. This malleability would keep modern prophecy “experts” like Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, Pat Robertson, and others in the forefront of visible Christianity for decades.

After the Civil War, liberal evangelicals began to question some fundamental tenets of evangelicalism in light of changes in science and modern thought. New advances in the natural sciences led many to reject the supernatural tendencies of postmillennialism and eroded faith in the Bible as a scientifically accurate document. The coming “kingdom of God,” formerly viewed as coming from some other place to earth, now became understood by many as an internal change within the individual. This “liberal” approach frightened conservative Christians, and premillennialism offered a theological view that retained many of the supernatural aspects being abandoned by some liberal evangelicals.¹⁹

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) led this post-Civil War premillennial charge. Darby, an ordained minister in the Protestant Church of Ireland, traveled all over the world preaching his theology. From 1859 until his death in 1882, he spent the bulk of his time preaching in the United States. Darby’s theology viewed history in periods called dispensations (hence, the term dispensational premillennialism), during which time God bestowed salvation upon humans in different ways. The previous dispensation, he argued, ended with Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, and the next one would begin with the Rapture—a calling away of true believers to meet Christ “in the air.” Darby believed that

¹⁹ Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 17-18, 51.

Scripture remained silent on the length of time between Christ's death and his return, and this waiting period came to be called the "Great Parenthesis" by many Christians.²⁰

The basis for many of Darby's ideas had existed since the late 12th century in the writings of Joachim of Fiore. Joachim broke from the tradition of interpreting Revelation as allegory and saw Gog and Magog as actual nations and the Antichrist as an actual person. He even set up time periods corresponding to various dispensations of history. But, no one since had built a system quite as detailed and elaborate as Darby's.²¹ He drew from both Old Testament prophecy and New Testament end-times passages to back up his claims about the Rapture, the coming millennium, the Antichrist, and other premillennial staples, and he tirelessly promoted his ideas on a global scale. He also learned well from the Millerite fiasco and avoided setting a concrete date for Christ's return. Even though premillennialism retained a penchant for connecting Biblical prophecy with historical events through all sorts of numerology and symbolism, date-setting regarding Christ's return became a cardinal sin. This may have been rooted in pragmatism, but more likely, it stems from scriptures like the aforementioned Matthew 24:36-37, which states that "no one knows the day or hour...of the coming of the Son of Man." Further, Darbyites eschewed hard date-setting because they felt it sank "to the level of prediction of astrologers," as Darby put it.²²

As a result of his comprehensive approach, Darby's dispensational premillennialism put down deep roots in American Christianity. In 1909, one of Darby's students, Cyrus I. Scofield, successfully merged dispensational premillennial theology and Scripture in his *Scofield Reference Bible*. Darby created the theological system, but

²⁰ Boyer, *When Time*, 87-88.

²¹ Kyle, *Last Days*, 47-49.

²² *Ibid*, 89-91.

Scotfield's notes alongside the Biblical text indelibly marked American Christianity with the ink of dispensational premillennialism. Many Christians read Scotfield's notes as an infallible guide to prophecy interpretation, and held his ideas as "Biblical" doctrine. Scotfield's Bible had sold nearly ten million copies by 1967, and 2.5 million more copies from 1967-1990. As such, Scotfield's Bible represents one of the most important works in fundamentalist literature and probably surpasses even *LGPE* as the most effective vehicle ever for spreading dispensational premillennialism to the masses.²³ That said, Lindsey translated premillennialism into modern language in a readable, accessible book that resonated with the average reader in ways that a Bible commentary could not.

Like William Miller, Scotfield claimed that anyone could interpret Bible prophecy. He proclaimed the twentieth century was "the layman's age," and believed that too much formal education probably hindered one's ability to understand the Scriptures.²⁴ By "plainly" interpreting Bible prophecy, it was clear to Scotfield and his followers that the world was doomed to destruction. He boldly and confidently asserted that the earth inexorably was moving toward a day of total catastrophe. When accused of being a pessimist, Scotfield responded by painting his view of the coming calamity as optimistic. Because believers would be raptured up to meet Christ in the air, they would avoid the coming torment.²⁵ "I am no pessimist," argued Scotfield, "I am the most inveterate optimist because I believe the Bible."²⁶

Scotfield's brand of "plain" interpretation of the Bible became an important plank in the fundamentalist platform. Definitions of "fundamentalists" or "fundamentalism,"

²³ Ibid, 97-99.

²⁴ Ibid, 99-100.

²⁵ Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics*, (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1986), 8.

²⁶ Quoted in Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 101.

and “evangelical” are in order here. For the purposes of this writing, “fundamentalist” means “conservative Protestants who diagnose modern American culture as a depraved condition, and who have organized themselves to counter that depravity by enforcing a strict traditional morality.”²⁷ The term “evangelical” refers to Christians who adhere to salvation through Christ alone as well as God-inspired scriptures, but exhibit more flexibility in the interpretation of the Bible and of human origins. While *The Fundamentals* (1905-1915), a series of writings laying out the basic tenets of Protestant Christian fundamentalism, did not argue exclusively for premillennialism, they ran parallel and sometimes intersected those touting biblical prophecy as evidence of God’s hand at work in the world. A twelve volume set, *The Fundamentals* were sent free of charge to three million Protestant leaders thanks to the financial backing of Lymon and Milton Stewart, two prominent Los Angeles oilmen. In the 1920s, conservative theologians at Princeton’s Presbyterian seminary adopted a formal statement supporting biblical inerrancy. Largely influenced by *The Fundamentals*, the denomination adopted a set of five basic tenets that came to characterize the fundamentalist movement: absolute inerrancy and divine inspiration of the Bible; the virgin birth of Jesus Christ; salvation only through Christ; the physical resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of believers; and the genuineness of the scriptural miracles. Not all Princeton theologians adopted each of these tenets, but this platform certainly steered people toward a conservative, “literal” interpretation of the Bible.²⁸

²⁷ Christopher Toumey, “Evolution and Secular Humanism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61(2), 276.

1993: 276) provides an excellent short definition of fundamentalism.

²⁸ Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 32-33.

This formalization of conservative doctrine was catalyzed by the modernism of the 1910s and 1920s. Modernist Christians' textual criticism of the Bible, the rise of evolutionary science, new social sciences like psychology, and the focus on the humanity of Biblical authors greatly alarmed conservative Christians. Furthermore, these new scientific ideas were being taught to the throngs of American children matriculating into public schools at a rate unprecedented in American history. Kentucky antimodernist William Bell Riley published the *Menace of Modernism* in 1917, and rang the alarm bells warning of the twin specters of liberal theology (pluralism) and evolutionary naturalism. The menace came from modernism's attack on Biblical authority, the moral bedrock of American culture. Riley feared that an entire generation of educated Americans stood on the brink of moral suicide.²⁹

In light of the work of Riley and those like him, many conservative Christians reached across denominational lines to present a more unified front against modern science and Biblical criticism. For example, while stressing pious living over theological stances, the Methodist-inspired holiness movement viewed the Bible as infallible and supported fundamentalism's basic views. Pentecostalism also was part of this confederation of conservative Christianity although Pentecostals stressed the Holy Spirit's miraculous work over intellectual or theological issues. The new "heresy" of modernism, therefore, united traditional conservative Christians of many stripes and set the stage for a defining moment in American religious history in the twentieth century.³⁰

The infamous Scopes "Monkey" Trial of 1925 significantly, if indirectly, affected popular premillennialism. Although the events in Dayton, Tennessee, focused primarily

²⁹ Carpenter, *Revive*, 37.

³⁰ Larson, *Summer*, 33-35.

on the battle of evolutionary theory's place in public classrooms, they also set the course for fundamentalism in the twentieth century. The Scopes trial has often been treated as a resounding defeat of fundamentalist Christianity in America. In 1931, *Harper's* magazine editor Frederick Lewis Allen's book *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* announced the decisive victory of science over religion. Then, in 1960, the depiction of the trial in the motion picture *Inherit the Wind* further ingrained the idea that evolution achieved a landslide victory in the trial. These two documents served as bookends for a thirty-year period of misinterpretation regarding the Scopes case.³¹

From the evolutionist perspective, Scopes' defender Clarence Darrow had scored major points for the intellectual camp with his masterful examination of prosecutor William Jennings Bryan on the witness stand. Darrow befuddled Bryan, and Allen rightly picked up on Bryan's confusion and how it cast fundamentalist Christianity in a poor light. Bryan flailed helplessly in his attempts to answer Darrow's questions regarding the date of God's creation, how Eve was formed from Adam's rib, where Cain found his wife, or where Jonah's "great fish" originated. Bryan admitted that he had read little on the subject of evolutionary science or critiques of biblical text. Darrow therefore caught Bryan completely unprepared to defend the intricacies of his own faith.

While Allen certainly provided valuable analysis of the Scopes trial, he also erroneously credited science with a triumph over fundamentalism through an assortment of misguided claims. This was partly because he relied mainly on his own memory and sensationalist news headlines to construct his writings. For instance, he inaccurately asserted that Bryan stated that the world came into being in 4004 B.C. In truth, Bryan only admitted that he knew little about the intricacies of science and that he believed that

³¹ Edward Larson, *Summer*, 225.

the “days” of creation in Genesis were not literal twenty-four hour days, but long periods of time. Allen only noted Bryan’s “blind faith” in the Bible and used this image of personal humiliation to suggest a sweeping defeat of fundamentalism. Ironically, Bryan would not pass the litmus test of modern fundamentalists. He did not believe in a “New Earth” (around 6,000 years old) and he did not definitively believe in a literal seven-day creation. This purported bulwark of fundamentalism thus looks much more moderate by modern standards.³²

It appeared that a public humiliation had taken place; but, overemphasizing the humiliation clouds the bigger consequence that a watershed between rural religion and urban intellectualism had been reached. After the Scopes trial, the term “fundamentalism” was used to describe nearly every aspect of small-town American Protestantism, a major shift from traditional fundamentalism anchored in eastern and northern cities, and political conservatism. This trend toward conservative, rural religion in the South was not entirely new, but the Scopes trial made it acutely recognizable and accelerated this change.³³

While Darrow and many American evolutionists might have agreed with Allen’s assessment, antievolutionist activity actually thrived during the post-trial decade. In fact, enrollment in fundamentalist colleges reached record heights in the 1930s. Outside of academia, fundamentalist conferences, camps, radio programs, missionaries, and literature fomented a great surge of activity. Calvin College Provost and renowned church historian Joel A. Carpenter contends that fundamentalism provided “ordinary

³² Larson, *Summer*, 226-227.

³³ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 186-188.

people with a compelling critique of modern society.”³⁴ Although no unifying leader the equivalent of Bryan came to the forefront to solidify the movement, this did not remotely signal the demise of the early antievolutionist movement. The Scopes trial actually sparked further antievolutionist action immediately after the decision.³⁵

After the trial, fundamentalists went underground to build their ranks through grassroots efforts. Fundamentalists viewed the new challenges of Darwin, modern scientific thought, and the new biblical criticisms as a type of persecution, similar to what early Christians faced in the first and second centuries. They used these challenges as a method to separate themselves from the apostasy of liberal Christianity and secular culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, fundamentalists also cut ties with Christian groups who desired to compromise their millennial stance.³⁶

Once the fundamentalists labeled liberal Christians as apostate and antichristian, reconciliation became impossible. Many mainstream Christians felt that this would destroy fundamentalist Christianity. However, fundamentalism thrived through their conferences, education, publishing (mainly tracts and pamphlets), face-to-face evangelism, and especially radio broadcasts. Through radio programs like Paul Rader’s *Chicago Gospel Tabernacle* and Charles Fuller’s *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour*, they built a strong army of followers through the technology that so many conservative Christians lamented. In 1930, Christian radio stations reached 9 million homes in the United States; by the end of the decade, it reached 44 million American homes. By 1944, Fuller’s *Old-*

³⁴ Ibid, 233. For an excellent account of the thriving Fundamentalist movement from the 1930s through the 1950s, see Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁵ Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., “From Scopes to Creation Science: The Decline and Revival of the Evolution Controversy,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 83 (1984), 363.

³⁶ Carpenter, *Revive* 38-40.

Fashioned Revival Hour was the top radio program in the United States with an estimated listening audience of twenty million, surpassing both Bob Hope's radio program and the *Ford Symphony Hour*. The music, preaching, letter-reading, and family focus appealed to many conservative Christians, offering old-time comfort during a period of depression in America and political upheaval in the world.³⁷ Premillennialism came as part of the package with this comforting, "old-time" (which was in fact quite new) religion.³⁸ Though criticized by postmillennialists and amillennialists as pessimistic, it offered its adherents answers regarding the fate of the world and its inhabitants, and had good news for believers in Christ.

In the aftermath of World War II, good news was also welcomed in the wake of the new nuclear developments. The atomic bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki prompted a major shift in premillennial thinking. Nearly all premillennialists agreed that fire would be the method used to destroy the Earth once and for all, but prior to the development of the atomic bomb most dispensationalists believed that God would provide some type of supernatural fire to melt the earth with "fervent heat." Post-World War II Christians now saw that *humans* possessed the capability to destroy the Earth by fire. In 2 Peter 3:10-13, St Peter's words to the readers and hearers of his letter now became clear to premillennialists in light of nuclear technology that the Bible prophesied such an outcome:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-39.

³⁸ William A. Pitts, "Southern Baptists and Millennialism, 1900-2000: Conceptual Patterns and Historical Expressions," *Baptist History and Heritage* 34 no. 2 (Spring 1999), 22. Pitts provides an excellent brief history of the development of millenarian thought in the Baptist Church.

the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.³⁹

The “pessimist” label seems appropriate for premillennialists in light of such verses, and some practically embraced the new possibilities for human-made global annihilations.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, a prophecy writer and radio evangelist, denounced the *New York Herald Tribune*'s editorial hope that global atomic destruction could still be averted. Barnhouse gravely stated: “It is already too late. The threads of inevitability have been caught in the mesh of the hidden gears of history and divine plan moves toward the inexorable fulfillment.”⁴⁰

Many other popular American prophecy writers of the early postwar era such as Wilbur M. Smith agreed with Barnhouse. He preached on the “destruction by fire” passage from 2 Peter and speculated that God may have used nuclear power to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, foreshadowing the coming demise for the entire world. Writers like Smith and Barnhouse thus used the rhetoric of terror and contemporary weaponry to illustrate the hopelessness of humanity, a method that Lindsey would also employ in connecting modern technology and warfare with the coming end of time. Smith critically quoted liberal thinkers and theologians’ pre-1914 thoughts on achieving the Kingdom of God through efforts for world unity and peace. He proclaimed that the atomic bomb crushed those “foolish dreams.” Indeed, postmillennial utopias seemed a distant fantasy in the aftermath of the bomb and the rhetoric that followed it.⁴¹

³⁹ *NIV*.

⁴⁰ Boyer, *When Time*, 117-118.

⁴¹ Boyer, *When Time*, 118-120.

In fact, popular prophecy after World War II was fueled by the destructive power of the atomic bomb. The modernist and amillennialist hopes of an ever-improving world appeared to be a sham in the wake of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The escalating world arms race seemed to be churning furiously toward the finish line at Armageddon. No longer was there a need for a supernatural fireball from God to fulfill the prophetic Biblical imagery of smoke, fire, and destruction; now, humankind was entirely capable of self-destructing with its atomic weaponry. Passages like 2 Peter 3.11-13 were seen as clear evidence by many premillennialists now that the world could fathom nuclear fallout. In 1961, Los Angeles minister J. Vernon McGee posed this question: “When the Antichrist is sitting there with his finger on the trigger, what will the nations do?” This is not unlike the kinds of questions Lindsey would pose in *LGPE*. They would have to do the Antichrist’s bidding or face annihilation.⁴²

The shifting thought patterns of post-World War II premillennialists now hinged on the diminished role of the United States in prophecy. From the earliest days of America, prophecy writers had believed that the country possessed a special role in God’s divine plan. Now, with few exceptions, postwar eschatologists backed away from this most-favored-nation status that America had enjoyed for so long in prophetic circles. Throughout history, they argued, God had used the United States in His divine plan, but now the nation had lost its zeal for God and wallowed in apostasy. Great nations rise and fall, and America’s time as “God’s country” had ended, according to premillennialists. For Lindsey, the bomb, combined with the cultural upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s and the entrenchment of secular ideology, placed America in opposition to God’s will. For

⁴² Ibid, 125.

many premillennialists, America had now become an ally of the coming Antichrist instead of his or her most formidable enemy.⁴³

In the post-World War II era, premillennial eschatological thought reached previously unprecedented heights. Adding fuel to the already raging fire caused by the destructive power of the atomic bomb, Israel became an independent Jewish state in 1948, which was an important component of the premillennial plan and Lindsey communicated the importance of Israel in the prophetic scheme on a massive scale. Most dispensationalists believe the Jews must have their own nation (established in 1948), must control Jerusalem (retaken by Israel in 1967's Six Day War), and must rebuild the Temple. Lindsey notes that the rebuilding of the Temple is problematic because of one major obstacle: the Muslim Dome of the Rock is built on top of the old Jewish Temple site. But, Lindsey is certain, "Obstacle or no obstacle, it is certain that the Temple will be rebuilt." For Lindsey, it must be rebuilt so that the Antichrist can gain power and set himself up as God in the Temple.⁴⁴ Also, in the late 1960s, the United States was engaged in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, creating numerous battlegrounds: capitalism versus communism, democracy versus tyranny, and freedom versus slavery which Lindsey interpreted as the evil armies called Gog from the North in Ezekiel 38 and Revelation 20. He even includes maps of the Soviet battle plans for its European takeover. The Soviet Union now stepped onto the world prophecy scene and pervaded prophetic literature from the 1950s through the 1980s, often acting as the Antichrist's primary army.⁴⁵

⁴³ Boyer, *When Time*, 252-253.

⁴⁴ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 55-56.

⁴⁵ See Lindsey, *LGPE*, 155 and 159 for the Russian Confederate Army's battle plans. See also Robert G. Clouse, "Late Great Predictions," *Christian History* 18 #1 (1999): 40.

Thus, from 1920 to 1970, premillennial thought underwent significant changes and adaptations. Darby's ideology, Scofield's Bible, the forming of recognizable fundamentalist ideas, the bomb era, and the shift in America's prophetic role all represent important developments in premillennial thought and Christian culture in America during this period. Lindsey's *LGPE* was another important marker in this series of developments. The release of *LGPE* ushered in the era of "popular prophecy" in America, as the book sold 9 million copies by 1978 and an astonishing 35 million (in 50 languages) by 2000. Many of Lindsey's fellow students at Dallas Theological Seminary accused him of simply repackaging his lecture notes with a few added embellishments. Indeed, nothing new or groundbreaking existed in Lindsey's book. The power of this book, rather, came from its accessibility, readability, and his use of trendy phrases and modern jargon to communicate a complex theological system in relatively simple terms. Lindsey could provide answers and comfort to Christians by explaining current events and shifting world views through biblical prophecy. Harkening back to Miller and other early premillennialists, Lindsey reaffirmed that anyone could interpret biblical prophecy if they read it "literally." Lindsey, along with co-author Carol Carlson, took that idea and crafted a book that took a complex theological idea and put into 1960's language. He called the Antichrist "The Weirdo Beast" and described the Rapture as "The Ultimate Trip." This style of prophecy writing appealed to the general public in an unprecedented manner.⁴⁶ Lindsey took modern social ills, current world events, and future problems and viewed them through the lens of biblical prophecy. And, he made it seem orthodox by labeling it as "literal" interpretation. Further, world events did seem more aligned with

⁴⁵ Russia's association with Gog represents a standard view of popular premillennialism in the twentieth century.

⁴⁶ Boyer, *When Time*, 125-127.

dispensational thought than ever before. *LGPE* served as a life raft in a perfect storm of unprecedented dispensational evidence for many Christians. A discussion of the particulars of Lindsey's theology and literal interpretation will come later, but a deeper understanding of the social, religious, and political climate of the 1970s helps one understand why his ideas were so influential.

Social, Religious, and Political Climate of the 1970s

Historian Bruce Schulman contends that “most Americans regard the Seventies as an eminently forgettable decade—an era of bad clothes, bad hair, and bad music impossible to take seriously.”⁴⁷ While “the Sixties” conjure images of political action and civil rights, and the “the Eighties” evoke ideas of materialism and yuppies, “the Seventies” more likely elicit laughter and ideas of aimless cultural wandering, wild fashion, and disco. Schulman counters the idea of the Seventies as a decade of insignificant frivolity by noting that the decade also included *Roe v Wade*; Watergate; the American Indian occupation of Wounded Knee; the first Arab oil shock; Billie Jean King's victory in the Battle of the Sexes; an Academy Awards sweep by *The Godfather*; and Jim Bakker hitting the small screen to create “God's television.” And, that was in 1973 alone!⁴⁸

The religious landscape underwent furious change during the decade as well. While overall church attendance remained relatively flat, there were massive shifts in who attended church. Catholicism remained fairly stable, but mainline denominations suffered heavy attrition. For example, Presbyterian church membership plunged 15

⁴⁷ Schulman, xi.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, xi-xii.

percent from 1973 to 1983, and United Methodists dropped 8 percent. While old bulwarks hemorrhaged congregants, evangelical church attendance rates exploded during the decade. A study in 1978 found that 25 percent of Americans were evangelical. According to Gallup in 1986, that number had risen to 32 percent. The biggest gainers in the evangelical boom were charismatic denominations. The Assemblies of God nearly doubled their number of adherents in the fifteen years after 1973.⁴⁹

This was no clearly defined, uniform movement, but rather a diverse community of evangelicals who shared some core beliefs about Christianity. First, they believed that the Bible was the Word of God and His will could be divined from it. Second, they expected a coming apocalypse, the end of days, and that it would occur soon. This helps explain the appeal of Lindsey's work which focused intently on end times prophecy and how it fit into current world events. Finally, evangelicals stressed personal conversion and salvation through Jesus Christ. A focus on an individual experience of grace, and a personal discovery of God were the hallmarks of the movement, and the method by which people could avoid the horrendous end times scenario that awaited unbelievers.⁵⁰ Lindsey's writing relies heavily on all three of these components.

As Lindsey and many other premillennialists viewed the contemporary world they saw proof that Biblical prophecy was being fulfilled in newspaper headlines and geopolitics. For example, in *LGPE*, Lindsey viewed the 1948 establishment of Israel as a nation as the fulfillment of the "fig tree" passage found in Matthew 24:32-33:

Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it (the second coming of Christ) is near, right at the door. I

⁴⁹ Schulman, *Seventies*, 92-93.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

Lindsey contends that the initial leaves of this fig tree unfurled on May 14, 1948, when Israel once again became a nation. Furthermore, he argues that since “a generation in the Bible is something like forty years,” the events of the great tribulation must begin sometime around 1988. To Lindsey, “this generation” refers to the generation that will see the rebirth of Israel along with the other wondrous signs to come, and will witness the culmination of human history.⁵¹

Similarly, Lindsey sees a connection between the nuclear era and apocalypticism. Lindsey’s belief system had existed for generations, but the gigantic response to his modern take on an old theological system stemmed from his joining of this dispensationalist system with current events. On the book jacket of *There’s A New World Coming*, Lindsey’s commentary on the book of Revelation, he boldly proclaims, “This book is more up to date than tomorrow’s newspaper!” Lindsey effectively connected current events with Biblical prophecy. The “European Common Market” was on the rise. The communist Chinese boasted of their ability to field an army of 200 million people. Nuclear holocaust could commence with the mere push of a button. The world was ripe for the rise of the Antichrist--and Lindsey let the world know it in plain terms. Lindsey’s style is particularly powerful for Christian readers, as he connected his prophecy interpretation with his goal of “getting out of the way and letting God speak.”⁵² While Lindsey never claims that his writings are scriptural, he indirectly implies that his

⁵¹ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 53-54.

⁵² Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: Enlarged Edition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), 212-13. This edition of Weber’s book is an updated version of his 1979 work published by Oxford University Press.

interpretation is what God is communicating through prophecy. For him and his readers, this apocalyptic scenario was not mere interpretation, but rather manifestation of what God has said through the Biblical prophets and Revelation.

One foundation for Lindsey's widespread appeal was his dexterity in relating Biblical prophecy to nuclear war and a potentially militarized outer space. During the 1970s, the battle for supremacy in outer space raged furiously. Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* was published just months after the United States' moon landing. For Lindsey and many of his readers, the new space and nuclear technology, especially its potential ties to military weaponry, served as a dark harbinger of the coming destruction. Televangelist and fellow "prophecy expert" Jack Van Impe noted that the planting of a United States flag on the moon fulfilled Jesus words in Luke 21:25: "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars."⁵³ Despite the 1963 atmospheric Test Ban Treaty in place and a developing lull in Cold War rhetoric, Lindsey laid out Revelation's prediction of the coming nuclear fallout with conviction.

In Lindsey's view, Revelation indicates that a massive nuclear disaster loomed on the horizon. Revelation 8:7 tells of "hail and fire mixed with blood" coming down on the earth and burning up "the third part of the trees" and "all green grass." Lindsey interprets this as a dire warning of the coming incineration of vegetation that will result in "massive soil erosion, floods, and mudslides" in addition to causing widespread famine. While Revelation does indeed contain this imagery, many Biblical scholars read Revelation in the context of the first century and read John's imagery as symbols that would have connected with his contemporary Christian readers. In contrast, Lindsey views Revelation as prophecy about the future end of time far removed from John's audience. He suggests

⁵³ Boyer, *When Time*, 237.

that because John had no idea what nuclear weapons were, he could not properly describe the carnage. John's eyes, he wrote, were "unsophisticated as to ICBM's (Intercontinental ballistic missiles)" and so he communicated these images as best he could without up-to-date terminology. Lindsey notes that God graciously leaves two-thirds of the greenery intact, but the environment will be thrown completely off kilter.⁵⁴

Lindsey also sees imagery of nuclear fallout in Revelation 8:8-9 which states "something like a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea," turning one-third of the sea to blood and killing one-third of all sea creatures. Focusing on the words "something *like* a mountain," Lindsey boldly claims that "this is probably either an enormous meteor or, more likely, a colossal H-bomb. A hydrogen bomb exploded in the ocean would look like a huge, flaming mountain smashing into the sea." Lindsey also stirred fear by recounting a conversation that he claims to have had with an anonymous member of the "Senate Arms Race Committee." According to Lindsey, the member spoke of intense paranoia among world leaders that other leaders had their finger on the nuclear button. The member also stated that total nuclear war was "inevitable unless all nuclear weapons are scrapped." As he so often does, Lindsey ends his commentary in this section on a pessimistic note. Lindsey contends that his interpretation of prophecy leads him to believe that regardless of current summit talks on reduction of nuclear weapons, these will fail, ultimately leading to "grave times."⁵⁵ Of course, the pessimism is for those who will not be part of the Rapture, so "grave times" for the world could be interpreted as "good times" for believers. Lindsey never overtly makes this argument in

⁵⁴ Hal Lindsey, *There's A New World Coming*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1973), 130-131.

⁵⁵ Lindsey, *New World* (1973), 131-2.

such stark terms, but it is clear that believers will be saved and reign with Christ and non-believers will burn for all eternity.

Lindsey also sees imagery of the aftermath of nuclear war in Revelation. In 8:12, John's letter says that "one-third of the sun was smitten." The moon and stars were also struck, so that one-third of the day and night turned dark. According to Lindsey, this indicates the "nuclear winter" that will occur after the nuclear holocaust. He laments the current pollution levels and notes that the added pollution of nuclear fallout will block out one-third of all light. The accumulation of these events will result in a terrible worldwide famine and economic disaster. Such a loss of light, vegetation, marine life, and ships "would result in a virtual standstill of world commerce and distribution of foodstuffs." Lindsey believes that these judgments are "designed by God to shock man into changing his mind about Christ." The imagery of nuclear war continues throughout his treatment of Revelation 8-9 as he equates the image of horses with the heads of lions projecting smoke and fire from their mouths with "some kind of ballistic missile launcher" and the "fire and brimstone" referenced in Revelation are interpreted as "clouds of radioactive fallout" and chunks of melted earth and buildings that remain after thermonuclear war. Lindsey contends that God will use these acts of devastation and suffering to help people "to repent and receive God's gift of forgiveness while there is still time."⁵⁶ As he describes this harrowing scene, he hints of even more terrible events coming later in Revelation.

As stated earlier, the theology that Lindsey espoused in *LGPE* was not original. Rather, it was the zeal with which Lindsey chronicles the future destruction of the world that gave his brand of premillennialism a special place in popular prophecy. Page after

⁵⁶ Lindsey, *New World* (1973), 133-4, 140-1. The "ballistic missile launcher" quote can be found on page 141.

page, his writing bludgeons the reader with images of destruction, terror, war, and fear. Lindsey has drawn considerable criticism for his apparent glee in the coming carnage. Political scientist Michael Barkun observes, “As the exclamation points march forward, it becomes clear that Lindsey finds these prospects enormously attractive. His prose pants on with scarcely a word of sympathy for the hundreds of millions killed or maimed. For him, the tribulation is grand, cosmic theatre, the ultimate Hollywood spectacle.”⁵⁷ Indeed, his tone suggests that he is writing a Hollywood script, not a warning to real people. For example, when discussing the last three-and-one-half years of the Great Tribulation, Lindsey states, “This period will make the regimes of Hitler, Mao, and Stalin look like Girl Scouts weaving a daisy chain by comparison.”⁵⁸ This language typifies the manner in which he attempts to build fear and terror throughout his writings.

The success of *LGPE* suggests that a massive audience for Lindsey’s message and pessimism about humanity existed in the 1970s. Sociologist Vincent Jeffries’ 1974 study of different political generations’ attitudes toward nuclear war suggested that people born after World War II (aged 21-27 at the time of the study) were developing core beliefs and values that differed noticeably from the views of older generations. The authors of this study labeled this the generation of “*Dissent*” in the study. This group formed their political views during the 1960s, a decade rife with activist youth. In contrast, persons aged 28-43 were categorized as the *Cold War* generation while people aged 44 or older were labeled as the *World War II* generation.⁵⁹ The major difference between the *Dissent* generation and the two older generations can be found in their opposition to the use of

⁵⁷ Michael Barkun quoted in Paul Boyer, *Fallout*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1998), 140. Boyer notes this along with most other writers and historians that address Lindsey’s work.

⁵⁸ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 110.

⁵⁹ Vincent Jeffries, “Political Generations and the Acceptance or Rejection of Nuclear Warfare,” *Journal of Social Issues* 30 (1974): 120-2.

nuclear weapons. As a group, 42 percent of the *Dissent* generation unequivocally rejected the use of nuclear weapons compared to 29 percent of the *Cold War* generation and just 14 percent of the *World War II* generation. Concurrently, 62 percent of the *World War II* generation accepted the use of nuclear force by the United States compared with only 36 percent of the *Dissent* generation and 49 percent for the *Cold War* generation. Before 1965, the youth of America tended to favor war as a solution more than the older groups, but in just a few short years that norm underwent a reversal. By the early 1970s, the traditionally more warlike youth had turned into the most antiwar group. Young adults in the 1970s opposed the use of nuclear weapons even more than the youth of the 1960s. The older generations leaned more toward military force, particular the use of nuclear weapons to maintain the security of the United States.⁶⁰

Gender, type of career, and the fear of communism also factored into people's views on the threat of nuclear war as a means of protection. Across the board in Jeffries's study, women rejected nuclear weapons at a higher rate and accepted it at a lower rate than men. Furthermore, "blue collar" workers accepted nuclear war as a means of protection at a higher rate than "managerial" workers or "professionals." Finally, the more respondents indicated a fear of communism, the more likely they were to accept the use of nuclear weapons to fight it. In the early 1970s, the group most likely to accept the use of nuclear weapons was "blue collar" males over the age of forty-four.⁶¹ Perhaps the fact that the number one best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s was a popular prophecy book about nuclear holocaust written by a former tugboat captain in his forties helps its wild popularity make more sense. While he may not have blatantly supported

⁶⁰ Jeffries, "Political Generations," 128-9, 134. See especially Tables 1 and 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

nuclear war, Lindsey tapped a nerve in an era where the forty-something, male, lay Christians accepted the potentialities of the nuclear age at a higher rate than most any other demographic.

Advancements not only in nuclear capability, but also in communication and information technology lent credence to popular premillennialists' warnings of a nearing end of the world. Many viewed the increasing popularity of credit cards and "plastic money" as the movement toward a paperless society and one world economy. One of the "signs of the end" for dispensationalists hinges on the eradication of paper and coined money in favor of electronic transactions. This is connected with the emergence of one, global economy with one currency that will be controlled by the Antichrist. This global purchasing and consolidation of various forms of buying seemed to prepare the way for the coming Antichrist. In *LGPE*, Lindsey asked the question, "Do you believe it will be possible for people to be controlled economically?" He answered his own question by stating, "In our computerized society, where we are all numbered from birth to death...we will have just one number for all our business, money and credit transactions." He also insisted that business leaders planned to handle all monetary transactions electronically. Lindsey viewed the move toward computerized systems as laying the groundwork for the "Future Fuhrer."⁶²

Lindsey suggests that the Beast will force everyone to receive a distinguishing mark on their right hand or forehead and this distinguishing mark might be "a tattoo visible only under ultraviolet light" used for all business exchanges. Those who refuse will be economic outcasts unable to buy or sell products. Lindsey warns that Americans' social security numbers could become the number used for all transactions, eliminating

⁶² Lindsey, *LGPE*, 112-13.

the need for driver's license numbers or other forms of identification. He notes that the number and the technology are in place, and that the rise of the Antichrist could loom just around the corner. He fears that the United States may be inadvertently setting up an Antichrist-friendly economic system that will expedite the rise of a world tyrant.⁶³

Lindsey was not the only person suggesting that this new technology would help usher in the Antichrist and the specter of "one world government," "one world currency," or "one identification number" was commonly linked with the "Beast (Antichrist) passages" in Revelation by many popular premillennialists. These "marks of the Beast" were also referenced by other evangelists and contemporary prophecy writers of the *LGPE* era. In 1973, Merrill Unger described the reappearance of the Roman Empire in modern form as "one of the most astonishing and incredible aspects of Bible prophecy." Throughout the 1970s, prophecy experts watch the European Common Market approach ten members with great interest, given that the Beast of Revelation had ten horns. Once Greece joined on January 1, 1981, evangelist Jack Van Impe exclaimed, "Wow! How many toes? How many horns?" Indicators of convergence regarding global trade, payment, political alliances or centralized power were often portrayed as sign of the end by prophecy experts.⁶⁴

This connection of the end times with technological advancement allows Lindsey some convenient malleability. Humans continually create new technology to streamline business transactions and consolidate payment processes. Hitching a belief system to technological advance is ingeniously pragmatic; if technological advance is a sign of the end times, then there will be a steady stream of evidence that the end is indeed nigh.

⁶³ Lindsey, *New World* (1973), 194-95.

⁶⁴ Boyer, *When Time*, 277.

Further, it is inherently malleable as well, as changing technology allows for constant reinterpretation and adjustment. In the early 1970s, computers were the way of the future, and Lindsey correctly connected them with the globalizing economy. While this may seem obvious in hindsight, consciously coupling technology and prophecy fulfillment provided an effective method for ensuring validation of his claims.

Lindsey again relies on Revelation to exhort true followers of Christ to resist this “mark of the beast.” Revelation 14:9-10 states, “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury” and will be tormented with “burning sulphur.” Lindsey nonchalantly claims that the number 666 “is really no big mystery.” He argues that it represents the human attempt to replicate the perfect holy trinity. Worshipping this imitation of the true trinity separates one from God for eternity.⁶⁵ Lindsey apparently believes that accepting any kind of mark that could be considered the mark of the beast should be avoided, but he offers no advice on how to determine if a mark comes from the Antichrist or not. The vagueness of his warning again illustrates the adaptability of his views.

The fear and wariness of technology persisted among popular premillennialists in the years after the publication of *LGPE*. In the mid-1980s, televangelist Oral Roberts delivered a sermon in which he proclaimed to have proof that the beast was alive in the world. He then reached into his pocket and displayed a credit card bill from a department store. Next, he pointed to a row of numbers at the bottom of the bill; it included “666” in the string of numerals. Roberts had supposedly solved a riddle: Satan was using credit cards and computers to do his work and pave the way for the Beast. He also encouraged his listeners to check their own receipts, bills, and documents when they returned to their

⁶⁵ Lindsey, *New World*, 195.

homes.⁶⁶ Just as Lindsey saw Revelation's demonic locusts as army helicopters and a burning mountain as a gigantic nuclear bomb, Roberts saw computer technology as a tool of Satan to implement the dreaded mark.

Lindsey also lamented the rise of drug culture and its challenge to Christianity in the United States during the 1960s. He accused intellectuals of attempting to damage Christianity by labeling it as a "crutch for the weak" and viewing it as a mere "rigid set of rules." Lindsey then notes the propensity for many "scoffers" against Christianity to involve themselves in "astrology, spiritualism, and even drugs." He points to this "rejuvenation of star-worship, mind-expansion, and witchcraft," along with the growing ecumenical movement of the time, as the harbingers of the global religious system that will pave the way for the coming Antichrist. According to Lindsey, astrology played a huge role in ancient Babylonian society. He chronicles Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, and various Roman Caesars' reliance on their magicians, conjurers, sorcerers and astrologers for guidance and insight. In late 1960s and early 1970s culture, Lindsey saw a return to the "black arts." In a strange passage, Lindsey writes that "clairvoyants today, without knowledge of Bible prophecy, are saying the same things that the Scriptures tell us." However, references to data documenting this escalation are lacking in *LGPE*.⁶⁷

Instead, Lindsey connects the term "sorcery" in Revelation with the use of drugs. He argues that the Greek word *pharmakeia* is the root for the English word pharmacy, but also refers to the use of potions and concoctions in the dark arts. Lindsey chronicles the tale of a young fraternity member who approached him seeking to know more about Christ. He says that he met with him for several weeks before the young man stated, "I

⁶⁶ Christopher Helland, "The Big Bang and the Big Bomb: Examining the Role of Science and Technology in Apocalyptic Belief Systems," *Journal of Millennial Studies* (Winter 2000): 1.

⁶⁷ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 114-116.

believe it, but I just don't want to commit my life to Christ." Lindsey states that he later saw the same young man, but with a much different demeanor. "I've been taking trips and I've really seen God," said the young fraternity member. "Only this God is the King of Darkness—this is the one we worship." Lindsey declares that, "This man had blown his mind," on hallucinatory drugs. According to Lindsey, many long-time drug users indicate that they see the Devil. Lindsey believes that drug use "reduces a man's thinking and mentality to a point where he is easily demon-possessed." For Lindsey, the increase in drug use during the 1960's had opened the door for Satan's influence through demonic possession. So, while he documents no data regarding demon-possession, he interprets drug use and its accompanying problems (i.e., opening the door for demon-possession) as evidence of increased demonic activity. This, for Lindsey, is further evidence that "the End" is near and provides his readers with an explanation for some of society's spiral downward. The good news for them is that they can avoid this worst of it by following Christ and therefore have hope in the coming Rapture.⁶⁸

In addition to these wider social concerns, there was a shift toward conservatism in American Christianity, especially in the Southern Baptist Convention. This shift brought with it a theological and cultural grid not unlike Lindsey's. While Lindsey was not a Southern Baptist, many conservative Baptists' eschatological views closely aligned with his. As *LGPE* sales rose, so did the influence of conservatives in the SBC.

In 1978, eminent church historian Martin Marty summarized the immense influence and comfort of the Southern Baptist Convention in southern culture by referring

⁶⁸ Ibid, 124-126.

to the SBC as the “Catholic Church of the South.”⁶⁹ Given the SBC’s ever-expanding footprint, his descriptor is even more accurate today than thirty-plus years ago as the SBC is America’s largest Protestant denomination. A decade prior to Marty’s claim, historian Rufus Spain had written *At Ease in Babylon* that documented the stability of Southern Baptists in a culture they had largely constructed. In the decades preceding the SBC Controversy, most organizational leaders fit into a mostly non-threatening “moderate” category, theologically speaking. Conservatives and Progressives existed on either side of the theological continuum, but the SBC seemed to have found its niche with moderates at the helm.

The ink had not dried on Marty’s analysis, however, before the SBC was rocked in 1979 by what became known as the “SBC Controversy” or the “conservative takeover.” The growing secularism and religious plurality in American culture that so worried Lindsey also stirred the hearts of many conservative Southern Baptist leaders to drastic action. Through careful politicking and placement of candidates for election and appointment, the conservatives successfully ousted the moderates from power beginning with the 1979 SBC Presidential election. The conservatives offered up Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, as their candidate, and busloads of conservatives arrived on Election Day to register and cast their votes in support of him. Rogers received 51.4 percent of the vote among six candidates with assorted theological leanings. The election crackled with controversy, as accusations of voter fraud and a “hostile takeover” emerged. The SBC Controversy had begun in

⁶⁹ Quoted in Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 3.

earnest.⁷⁰ While Lindsey cannot be directly connected with the SBC, the fact that the takeover coincided with Lindsey's *LGPE* warrants consideration because their theological systems were largely congruent.

Southern Baptists' love of scripture undoubtedly predisposed the denomination to heated arguments over an issue as explosive as the literal truth of the Bible. The conservatives defined inerrancy on their terms, and as Christian writer Kenneth Chafin points out, "those who study the art of persuasion have agreed that those who are allowed to define the issue win the war." Like Lindsey, SBC conservatives took the position that the Bible is literally true and contains no errors in any instance. Few Southern Baptists would argue with that statement, but conservatives proved quite adept at fashioning the meaning of "inerrancy" into conservative Southern Baptists' *interpretation* of "inerrancy." Anyone disagreeing with the conservatives' definition of inerrancy was labeled an "infidel," a "nonbeliever," or worse yet, a "liberal."⁷¹ However, there were exceptions in larger Baptist circles outside of the SBC. George A. Buttrick, pastor of New York City's Madison Avenue Baptist Church, once stated that "biblical literalism is blasphemy against God. It is blasphemy because it leaves the Holy Spirit with no work to do." He further criticized literalism by adding, "Biblical literalism accuses God of using men as tape recorders, a notion that dishonors God and destroys men. Literalism barter inspiration for mechanics... Which of the 3,000 manuscripts shall we call infallible and which translation? Does the sky rest on pillars set on a flat earth? The literalist squirms

⁷⁰ Leonard, 135-137.

⁷¹ See Bill J. Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) and Carl Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999: xi-xii). for more on the defining of "literal" in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s.

and dodges. Then he ends in blind assertion.”⁷² While a real shift toward literalism and conservatism occurred in the SBC during the 1970s, not all of those under the Baptist banner went with the SBC. This was a part of a conservative power play that moved the term “conservative” farther to the right both politically and theologically and premillennial theology was part of that conservative grid.

In 1986-1987, Helen Lee Turner, an Assistant Professor of Religion at Furman University, conducted a survey of Southern Baptist clergy to determine their eschatological views. She found that in the 1986 SBC presidential election, 90 percent of dispensationalists voted for the conservative candidate Adrian Rogers. Those voting for Rogers also indicated strong belief in the “Rapture,” believed that the doctrine of the second coming of Christ was important, believed that God will spare the church from the Tribulation, and believed that Israel’s statehood fulfilled prophecy. These factors are woven tightly into the fabric of dispensational premillennialism as well as Lindsey’s theology, and the distribution of these ideas through popular books like *LGPE* and, more recently, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins *Left Behind* series, have made a traditional Southern Baptist idea into an American mainstream phenomenon.⁷³

The conservative shift was palpable in other church doctrine as well. Historically, Southern Baptists have staunchly supported the separation of church and state. In 1923, George Truett, famous Southern Baptist leader stated, “Never, anywhere, in any clime, has a true Southern Baptist been willing, for a minute, for the union of church and state, never for a moment.” He continued, “That utterance of Jesus ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s’ ...that utterance once and

⁷² “‘Biblical Literalism Is Blasphemy’—Buttrick,” *Western Recorder* (22 March 1975): 14.

⁷³ www.leftbehind.com reports that the popular series sold its 50 millionth copy in 2002. Current sales are over 65 million, making it the most popular Christian fiction series in history.

for all, marked the divorcement of church and state.”⁷⁴ In 1972, Billy Graham, one of the most famous and well-respected Christians in the world, concurred with Truett, stating that “I share with Baptists a strong belief in the separation of church and state.”⁷⁵ In 1908, E.Y. Mullins, a former president of Southern Seminary, stated that “The Church is a voluntary organization, the State compels obedience.” He opposed reading the Bible in public schools, stating that Baptists generally oppose the practice “because they respect the consciences of all others.”⁷⁶

As late as 1975, Southern Baptists affirmed political action by Christians, but refrained from promoting or even suggesting any connection between church and state. After the takeover in 1979, the tenor of the language changed considerably. A similar resolution in 1980 claimed that three institutions made up the foundation of American society: “the home, the church, and the government, all of which are to be God centered and established upon biblical principles.” It exhorted Christians to elect leaders who exhibited biblical morality, and noted that separation of church and state “should not mean, however, the separation of God from government.”⁷⁷ The conservative takeover of the SBC marked the beginning of a clear departure from historic Baptist belief on the separation of church and state.

How did the conservatives manage to gain such incredible control of the SBC?

Bill Leonard suggests that poor responses by the moderates greatly contributed to their

⁷⁴ George Truett, *God's Call to America*, ed. J. B. Cranfill (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1923), 43, quoted in Ronnie Prevost, “SBC Resolutions Regarding Religious Liberty and the Separation of Church and State (1940-1997): A Fundamental Shift,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 34 (Spring 1999): 73.

⁷⁵ Billy Graham, “Why I Am A Baptist,” in *Why I Am A Baptist*, compiled by Joe T. Odle (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 18, quoted in Prevost, 74.

⁷⁶ Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, (Philadelphia American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 197, quoted in Prevost, 78.

⁷⁷ Resolution No. 19, *Annual*, Southern Baptist Convention, 1980, 52, quoted in Prevost, 80.

success. First, the moderates failed to create a viable coalition to combat the conservative takeover. They had a common antagonist, but no common plan. Second, moderates chose the old Southern Baptist strategy of pacifism, hoping to let the controversy run its course. This method had worked in the past, but they underestimated the fortitude of the conservatives. Third, they ignored the theological debate and they allowed the conservatives to define “inerrancy” on their own terms. Once this had occurred and lay people had heard the conservative definition of inerrancy from the pulpit, the moderates were severely handicapped for the conservatives came to be seen as the group acting according to God’s Word. Their championing of inerrancy leant huge credibility to their stances on women, premillennialism, separation of church and state, prayer in schools, and other issues. Fourth, the moderates lost the rhetorical battle. They failed to adequately communicate their vision for the SBC. Finally, many moderates simply failed to commit to their cause. They hoped to wait out the storm without making too many enemies, assuming that the SBC would correct itself before the conservatives completely took over. They did not realize the reality of the controversy.⁷⁸

In summation, the conservatives showed incredible resolve in their mission. Many diverse groups exist within the SBC, but the conservatives constructed a unified movement that was large enough to gain control of the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. This unity gave conservatives the SBC presidency in 1979, and careful committee appointments along with prudent nominations for high-ranking offices kept them in control. However, the real support came at the grass roots level, and that was achieved through the rhetoric of inerrancy and conservatives' literal interpretation of scripture. They defined what “inerrancy” and “literal” meant and most Southern Baptists

⁷⁸ Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 180-182.

agreed with the ideas. After establishing their brand of inerrancy, they attacked liberalism through stances against women's leadership, advocating premillennial eschatology much like Lindsey's, and injecting God into politics, schools, and courts. Southern Baptist lay people viewed the leaders of the SBC as men of God who took His word seriously. Many had to ask the question, "These men were ordained by God, so how could their politics be wrong?" That this conservative takeover occurred while Lindsey's *LGPE* was flying off the bookshelves was no coincidence. While Lindsey cannot be directly linked to the takeover, his theology and the new conservative theology of the SBC were not that far apart and in some cases were completely congruent. Both can be seen as reactions to the rise of feminism as well as placing a stronger emphasis on eschatological views framed as part of a commitment to "literal" interpretation and "Biblical inerrancy." While Southern Baptist seminaries have not made dispensational premillennial dispensationalism part of their statement of faith, it has become the preferred view in most circles.

Hal Lindsey's Theology: the Appeal of Malleable "Literalism"

Lindsey carefully balances interpreting Biblical prophecy "literally" without sacrificing malleability. For example, in 1970, he proposed that the ten-horned beast of Revelation 13 was the European Union (EU). However, when the EU passed the ten nation membership mark, that explanation simply disappeared from his future writings and was replaced with images more relevant to current events. For example, the "ten horns" might refer to ten alliances consisting of a number of nations. Part of the tremendous appeal of his brand of premillennialism comes from his ability to project

future world events based on Scripture because of its malleability. Furthermore, Lindsey and other like-minded premillennialists have successfully linked their interpretation of the Bible with the phrase “literal interpretation.”⁷⁹

The use of the term “literal” or “plain” interpretation creates much confusion because Lindsey’s “literal” interpretation is not “literal” at all in some cases, nor was he the first to present this type of “literal” interpretation. Cyrus I. Scofield, the writer who popularized the term “literal interpretation” primarily through his *Scofield Reference Bible* first published in 1909, suggested that some of the Old Testament stories are allegorical. However, Scofield also stated seemingly inconsistently that the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy requires a treatment of “absolute literalness.”

Part of the explanation for such inconsistencies is that there are at least four different possibilities for “literal” interpretation: 1) “first thought”, 2) flat interpretation, 3) grammatical-historical, and 4) literal or plain interpretation. In his book *Understanding Dispensationalists*, theologian Vern S. Poythress addresses each of these slippery terms and their importance. The simplest and arguably the most problematic is the “first thought” method of interpretation under which readers or speakers simply interpret words and phrases by what seems most obvious to them upon first thought. For example, if someone reads the word “burn,” first thought would interpret that word as “to consume by fire” as opposed to possible figurative definitions such as “to strongly desire” or “to be subject to misfortune.” Poythress uses the phrase, “Would that I had thorns and briers to battle!”, as an example of how this method works with sentences. Using first thought

⁷⁹ See Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) and Carl Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999) for more on the defining of “literal” in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s.

interpretation, this would mean that the author desires a fight against an army of prickly plants. Of course, the context surrounding the phrase completely changes the meaning of the words.⁸⁰ Hence, first thought interpretation can quickly lead to absurdity in some cases.⁸¹

To combat the inherent absurdity in first thought interpretation, “flat interpretation” allows for obvious figures of speech to be interpreted figuratively, but holds true to first thought whenever possible. This is a “literal by degrees” approach to biblical interpretation and opens the door to differing interpretations. To use Poythress’s example, a phrase like, “Would that I had thorns and briars to battle!,” would be interpreted as an obvious metaphor and would not compromise the larger method of interpretation.⁸²

A third interpretive option is the “grammatical-historical” approach. This refers to interpreting scripture within its historical context. This type of literalness seeks to determine what was meant at the time the Bible was written. In the case of the New Testament and, more specifically, the Book of Revelation, the “grammatical-historical” approach values the meaning of these passages for first century Christians. This style can be similar to flat interpretation, but certainly will not always line up with it. Wordplays, poetic language, and other more subtle methods of communication are an important part of the grammatical-historical approach.⁸³ This approach is “literal” in the sense that the readers strives to understand what the text meant in its original context.

⁸⁰ In its entirety, Isaiah 27:2-4 reads, “In that day—‘Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the Lord, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry. If only there were briars and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire.’”

⁸¹ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 1994), 82-83.

⁸² *Ibid*, 83.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 83-84.

This variety of “literal” reading can make the already confusing prophetic books of the Bible even more perplexing.⁸⁴ For example, is the Beast described in Revelation 13 an actual, physical beast (first thought interpretation)? Is it perhaps allegorical (flat)? Would first century Christians have understood exactly what John meant by using this imagery, but have little relevance for 21st century Christians (perhaps grammatical historical)? In an attempt to sidestep the semantic difficulties inherent in such interpretations, Lindsey and others use a fourth method: “plain” interpretation of the Bible. “Plain” interpretation interprets the Bible in the context of the readers own modern worldview. By largely ignoring the historical context, the meaning becomes “plain” to modern readers. This type of interpretation makes biblical prophecy much more malleable.⁸⁵ Of course, it also makes all past “plain” interpretations wrong in that these explanations become obsolete. For instance, Adolf Hitler, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Saddam Hussein have all been tabbed with the “Antichrist” label by interpreting Revelation “plainly.” But, as time passed and none of these tyrants turned out to be the Antichrist, their viability waned. At various points in history, the “plain” view of the Antichrist pointed to a current malevolent dictator. None of these tyrants turned out to be the “Antichrist.”

Poythress suggests that dispensationalists drop the term “literal” from their vocabulary to reduce confusion and clarify the method of interpretation to which they adhere. However, the word “literal” represents much more than a style of biblical interpretation. It has become a banner under which dispensationalists unite, much like the term “biblical inerrancy.” Because, first thought, flat, or grammatical-historical

⁸⁴ Ibid, 78-79.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 84-86.

interpretation could all be said to be “literal” interpretations of Scripture, the broad concept of “literal” allows for malleability when explaining the meaning of text and for easy shifting from first thought to flat to plain interpretation in order to shape the text to fit a given position.⁸⁶

Lindsey’s approach goes even further in its claim that scripture is the literal word of God. He suggests that his ideas are not an interpretation at all, but a presentation of God’s views. Lindsey contends that he is “attempting to step aside and let the prophets speak.”⁸⁷ He also believes that people seeking answers cannot ultimately find them in science, education, or philosophy. While Lindsey admits that all of these fields are good and valuable, he offers that “if we are to use our intellectual integrity, let’s give God a chance to present His views.” He argues that he is merely “getting out of the way,” shedding all interpretative biases, and letting God speak. He does mention that his views on Revelation stem from a strong set of convictions and acknowledges that many will disagree with his viewpoints, but he maintains that the information in his commentary on Revelation “is more up to date than tomorrow’s newspaper.”⁸⁸

Lindsey draws a clear line between his views and what he characterizes as “blind” literalism. He notes that some Christians see the demonic locusts of Revelation with human faces, lions’ teeth, iron breastplates, stinging tails, and loud wings as special, physical creations of God that will plague the earth during the last days. Yet Lindsey asserts that these characters might be not physical creatures with these specific characteristics, but instead a future technological creation beyond John’s descriptive vocabulary at the time of his vision. He suggests that “the locusts might symbolize an

⁸⁶ Ibid, 86.

⁸⁷ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 8.

⁸⁸ Lindsey, *New World* (1973), 15-16.

advanced kind of helicopter.”⁸⁹ This type of symbolic interpretation illustrates the malleability of Lindsey’s premillennialism. He graciously offers his readers answers regarding the future. He also seems to choose which passages are “literal” and which are “symbolic.” How he decides which passages fit into which category is a bit more difficult to determine, which is important in maintaining the malleability of his theology. It also allows Lindsey to constantly shift his interpretation of biblical prophecy to fit current world events and changing technology.

Looking at the New Testament book of Revelation through the lens of an historian helps shed light on the origins of Lindsey’s imagery. Critics of Lindsey argue that his application of Revelation places too much emphasis on the future and not enough on the past. They offer an alternative to Lindsey’s interpretation of Revelation by focusing on the fact that Revelation is a letter written to Christians in the first century. This undercuts the hyper-futuristic tendencies of Lindsey and other popular premillennialists. The words “prophecy” and “prediction” are somewhat interchangeable in many premillennialist circles and even in the modern English language.⁹⁰ Therefore, readers tend to equate Revelation, a prophecy (as Rev 1:3 claims), with the prediction of future events. But, the Old Testament historically portrays prophets as mouthpieces for God. Prophets spoke on God’s behalf, communicating a divine message to humans. The term “revelation” meant to reveal that which is hidden. For example, John, the author of Revelation, wrote a letter to first century Christians that claims to communicate a message from Jesus Christ. In the first century, John’s “prophecy” would have been understood as a message from God that may or may not have contained exact predictions

⁸⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁰ Definitions for the word “prophecy” from www.m-w.com (Merriam-Webster’s) include: 1) an inspired utterance of a prophet; 2) the function or vocation of a prophet; and 3) a prediction of something to come.

about the future. Many biblical scholars criticize popular premillennialism for assuming that John transcribed a list of future events that would not transpire for two thousand years. These scholars argue that interpreting Revelation in this way negates the intended purpose of the book for first century Christians.⁹¹

Approaching Revelation in its historical context, as a letter written for first-century Christians, does not focus on tying future world events to “predictions in Scripture” as popular premillennialism does. As a contrast to Lindsey’s reading of Revelation, professor of Religious Studies Joseph Trafton suggests that modern readers cannot hope to clearly understand all of John’s images because they were meant for first-century Christians. Trafton argues that Revelation creates its own “story world” in which the book lives and interacts. Its images weave a tapestry that composes an entire picture, and the individual images do not necessarily represent future events. To understand Revelation, Trafton contends that the reader must check all preconceived ideas about future predictions, “literal” interpretation, chronology of the book’s events, or the musings of self-proclaimed “prophecy experts.” He argues that, like most books, Revelation speaks for itself.⁹²

Lindsey’s brand of premillennialism, like his predecessors and those who have followed in his footsteps, takes a contrary approach to Revelation and views the book precisely in the way that Trafton advises against. Lindsey’s approach does claim “literal” interpretation and believes that, in many cases, Revelation contains predictions about a distant future far away from the first century. From Darby to Scofield, through Lindsey

⁹¹ Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 2-3. Trafton’s book provides commentary on both the scriptural and literary aspects of Revelation. He smartly focuses on the actual text of Revelation without labeling his ideas as amillennial, postmillennial, or premillennial.

⁹² Trafton, *Reading Revelation*, 12-14.

into the present, popular premillennialists have tended to read Revelation as the primary source for mining predictions about the future and providing answers to questions regarding Christ's return, how the world will end, and how current events fit into the prophetic scheme. Reading the Book of Revelation as an historical text written primarily for first-century Christians seems dry compared to Lindsey's proclamations of doom in the modern world and the promise of the salvation of believers from impending annihilation. The fact that his explanation is not dry and does not get bogged down in theological jargon was part of Lindsey's appeal to 1970s America. He explained the future end of the world with bombastic imagery and promises of safety to believing Christians. Interpretation of biblical prophecy in its historical context would not be nearly as sensational or immediately relevant to most readers of popular prophecy.

One of the primary criticisms of Lindsey's dispensationalism was that this type of theology misunderstood Revelation's purpose and message and therefore misapplied Biblical prophecy. Much of this criticism stemmed from the fact that the book of Revelation is likely the most well-known and oft-quoted book of prophecy in the Christian Bible. Revelation is often called the "Apocalypse" of John. The word "apocalypse," like "prophecy," is a slippery term to define. In modern American culture, the term conjures Lindsey's images: war, nuclear holocaust, the Antichrist, the end of time. The English word "apocalypse" comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning "revelation." Apocalyptic literature therefore can apply to any divine message given to a human through a supernatural intermediary. In John's case, he claims to have received this revelation of Jesus Christ through "one like a son of man (1:13)." Apocalyptic works also usually relate to historical events, but they are camouflaged through dreams, voices,

visions, or, in John's case, a sort of "spiritual travel" to physically inaccessible places.⁹³

Yale University professor Adela Yarbro Collins argues that true apocalypses also contain vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical dimension relates to the "heavenly" place of reward and punishment whereas the horizontal dimension relates to the last judgment on earth, the end of the world, and the resurrection of the dead.⁹⁴

John wrote Revelation as a letter to be read aloud at community gatherings. David Barr, a professor of religious studies, notes that "the orality of the Apocalypse (Revelation) is an essential element of its hermeneutic." He adds, "the audience encountered it as an auditory experience" and that Revelation is structured according to this principle. Hence, the book's literary structure plays an important role in its interpretation. Revelation is a letter addressed "to the seven churches in the province of Asia (1:4),"⁹⁵ and this letter was likely meant to be sent to Ephesus, the first church addressed, and circulated among churches in the region. It would be read aloud at communal meetings of Christians in each city or area, and would challenge listeners with its veiled messages and cloudy imagery. But, the book can be read aloud at a reasonable pace in just over an hour, and skilled reciters could remember and repeat lengthy poems of hundreds of lines after hearing them just once. An hour may seem like a terribly long time to listen and attempt to understand what is happening in a story like Revelation, but

⁹³ Adela Yarbro Collins, "Reading the Book Revelation in the Twentieth Century," *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 235-7. See also Collins, "Apocalyptic Themes in Biblical Literature," *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 117-118.

⁹⁴ Editors' interview of Adela Yarbro Collins, "Apocalypse Now," *U.S. Catholic* 60 (January 1995).

⁹⁵ The "province of Asia" in the first century is modern day Turkey. Revelation is addressed to seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. John meant for this letter to circulate in the entire region. These seven were obviously not the only seven churches in the region (Colossae, Hieropolis, and Troas were all established churches in the area). See Trafton 5-6 and Harrington 45-46 for more on the seven churches.

the first century was not an age of thirty second commercials. Barr notes that the ancients had far better trained memories than most modern folks do.⁹⁶

The numbering and organization of events in Revelation lends credence to the idea that the letter was written with memorization in mind. Even in a cursory reading, one cannot help but notice the inordinate number of “sevens” employed in the letter. Lindsey and other popular premillennialists suggest that the numbers of Revelation are often literal. For example, they connect the seven churches of Revelation with seven dispensational time periods. Lindsey also points to a “literal” ten-nation confederacy under the Antichrist due to the ten-horned beast of Revelation 13. He also argues that there will be exactly 144,000 Jews who are converted in the end times (Rev 7).⁹⁷ But, three septets take the reader about halfway through the book. Seven letters to churches are followed by seven seals which are followed by seven trumpets. Upon closer reading, or listening as the case may be, one notices that each of the septets consist of two subunits of four and three. The writer does not organize the book so neatly throughout, but the sequences do help the listeners stay oriented during this vivid, imaginative journey. This suggests that all of the sevens, threes, and fours are not necessarily literal numbers of bowls, trumpets, and seals, but devices used to give a repetitive structure to the wild imagery of the book. Further, opponents of dispensationalism point out that Revelation is its own story world and it communicates an imaginative message about the world at large and its need for Christ. They suggest that a literal analysis of the written text that combs for hints of twentieth century geopolitics misses the point of Revelation. However, it does make for entertaining writing, wild book sales, and provides a lens

⁹⁶ David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 243-244.

⁹⁷ See Lindsey, *LGPE*, 105-112 for his ideas on the ten-nation confederacy, the literal 144,000 Jewish priests, and assorted other “literal” interpretations of end times events.

through which dispensationalists like Lindsey can explain world events. It also provides answers to difficult theological questions which includes a “rescuing” of true believers before the world completely self-destructs. This combination of the destruction of evil (from which believers are immune), the exiting of this world for a better one, and the eternal reward for true believers composes a powerful religious potion. And, at the heart of it, is the Lindsey’s interpretation of Revelation.⁹⁸

The book of Revelation also effectively uses great stylistic drama. Images of fear and oppression are overlaid with positive images of hope and salvation. First century Christians experienced similar dissonance in their fledgling faith. They believed that they had been chosen by God, yet they were suffering under sometimes brutal treatment by the Roman government. This troubling contrast between their spiritual hope of salvation and their human experience of oppression created an intense mental conflict.⁹⁹ First century Christians did not endure widespread, methodical persecution, but they were a reviled minority. Individual Christians did suffer intense persecution under the Roman emperor Nero from 64-68 AD and in varying degrees in the following decades. Revelation was written for people dealing with these issues. Hostile Gentile neighbors, conflict with Jewish Roman citizens, financial issues with the government, and unsure relations with Rome were all perceived issues for first century Christians. Many of them had lived

⁹⁸ Barr, 244-246. John uses other memory-triggering devices throughout Revelation. Barr notes that those familiar with the geography of Asia Minor would have little difficulty remembering the churches addressed by John. The letter starts with Ephesus, the city closest to Patmos, and the following cities appear in order along the circular Roman postal road. Furthermore, the message to each church addresses issues related to that particular city’s personality. For example, Sardis, a remarkably fortified city, nearly fell during unsuspected nighttime attacks. Sardis is warned that Christ “comes like a thief.” Laodicea, a city known for its tepid water, gets lambasted for being lukewarm. The city was also known for the production of beautiful black wool, and Laodiceans are offered white robes. Finally, Laodicea produced a potent eye salve for export, and John points out their blindness and their need to purchase eye salve. Clearly, oratorical devices are at work here.

⁹⁹ Collins, “Reading,” 240-241. See also Stephen O’Leary, “A Dramatistic Theory of Apocalyptic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 387.

through Nero's persecution of Christians in the 70s A.D. They lived in a culture that viewed the Roman emperor as a deity, creating major conflict for those worshiping Christ as the Messiah. This view opposes Lindsey in that it puts Revelation's focus on issues of its origin and not on those of the current day.

Through imagery portraying the tension of the hope of salvation versus earthly struggle, Revelation's plot takes the readers and listeners on a dramatic journey that ultimately ends with a glorious resolution for believers: struggle ends with victory. The weak overcome the strong. A lamb that was slain conquers the world. Negative emotions are stirred, followed by a counterbalance of positive emotions. Through this wild, confusing, and conflicting imagery that puzzles many modern readers, Revelation addresses the concerns of first century Christians in Asia Minor. Lindsey's interpretation addresses the concerns of modern Christians living in the "end times." For those reading Revelation in the first century, Revelation successfully communicated the harsh realities of first century Christianity while simultaneously providing the hope of the future vindication of believers.¹⁰⁰ Critics charge that Lindsey's literalism reads Revelation through the lens of current world events often misses the foundational points of the book and leads to a misunderstanding of John's imagery.

Of course, Lindsey is far from the first popular premillennialist to bounce back and forth between literal and symbolic interpretations. Many have exhibited terrific adeptness at defining words like "literal" and "inerrant" on their own terms. Paige Patterson was a major player in the conservative takeover of the SBC in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Later, while serving as President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina in the early 1990's, Patterson noted that

¹⁰⁰ Collins, "Reading," 240-242.

Christians must listen “where the Bible speaks clearly.” He admitted that some poetic language exists in the Bible, but declined to explain how one can determine “literal” language from “poetic” language.¹⁰¹ Conservative Christians, especially the Southern Baptist Convention, have been adept at defining the terms on their grounds. Popular premillennialists adroitly oscillate between championing literal interpretation and using Biblical imagery to predict the future without a hint of cognitive dissonance. Some opponents argue that a truly literal interpretation involves the evaluation of Revelation based on its historical and social context in its “literal” time period. For most Christians in America, literal interpretation means the conservative, Southern Baptist-approved interpretation. As a product of Dallas Theological Seminary, a bulwark of dispensational thought, this fits with Lindsey’s views in almost every instance.

Lindsey’s theology has sustained itself largely through its ability to make itself relevant to current world events. Looking at some of the major components of premillennial theology and how Lindsey changed and shifted his prophetic interpretation of world events over time lays the foundation for understanding its widespread appeal. A closer examination of his interpretations of the Rapture, the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, Armageddon, the Millennium, and the final judgment reveals the importance of malleability in Lindsey’s prophetic interpretation. While other premillennialists before Lindsey had malleable theologies, Lindsey laid out his ideas in a supremely accessible way that spoke to current events in language that mainstream American understood.

¹⁰¹ *Battle for the Minds*, (video) produced and directed by Steven Lipscomb, 52 min., 1997. This documentary examines the ousting of female faculty and other aspects of the “conservative takeover” at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

A major part of Lindsey's appeal was his use of modern, "Sixties lingo" and lay language to convey his message and paint mental images of Armageddon, the Antichrist, and other components of his theology. For example, Lindsey portends that

Someday, a day that God only knows, Jesus Christ is coming to take away all those who believe in Him. He is coming to meet all true believers in the air. Without the benefit of science, space suits, or interplanetary rockets, there will be those who will be transported into a glorious place more beautiful, more awesome, than we can comprehend...It will be the living end. The ultimate trip.¹⁰²

This "ultimate trip" occurs before the Great Tribulation (a series of terrible and cataclysmic events) that will plague the Earth during the final years of its existence. This rapturing of the true believers will act as the beginning of the final chapter of human history. Lindsey uses New Testament passages I Corinthians 5:1-10 and I Thessalonians 4:13-18 to support his claims of a literal time of "meeting the Lord in the air." In a passage connecting drug abuse and demon possession referenced earlier in this paper Lindsey tells the story of a man broken by drugs and summarizes with, "This man had completely blown his mind." He uses other catchy phrases, like "Future Fuehrer" in regards to the Antichrist, which helped his ideas connect with a mass audience. Lindsey's readable style made his complex theological system and fantastical imagery more accessible to the average American reader.

Although Lindsey takes care to avoid blatant date-setting, he does make claims about the general timing of end-time events. Clearly, he was heavily influenced by Dallas Theological Seminary professor John Walvoord. In 1962, Walvoord wrote, "In the present world scene there are many indications pointing to the conclusion that the end of

¹⁰² Lindsey, *LGPE*, 137.

the age may soon be upon us...in this generation.” Then, at the end of the 1970s, and again in 1994, Lindsey claimed,

“We are the generation he [Jesus] was talking about. I say this because, unmistakably, for the first time in history, all the signs are coming together at an accelerating rate...never before in the history of the planet have events and conditions so coincided as to set the stage for this history-stopping event. Never before in the history of the world has there been a confluence of major evidences of preparation for the end.¹⁰³

This willingness to move the goal posts further and further into the future allows Lindsey to continually repackage his arguments and reframe biblical prophecy in light of new world events and new technology. Since there are always new world events and new technologies continually emerge, he has a never-ending spring of new material with which he can work.

This malleability is evident in his revision of his 1970 *LGPE* as 1996’s *Planet Earth 2000 A.D.* Compare the two passages below, noting the italicized portion (italics are mine) that are missing from his revised version. First, here is the excerpt from 1970’s *LGPE*:

The United States will not hold its present position of leadership in the western world; *financially, the future leader will be Western Europe. Internal political chaos caused by student rebellion and Communist subversion will begin to erode the economy of our nation.* Lack of moral principle by citizens and leaders will so weaken law and order that a state of anarchy will finally result. The military capability of the United States, though it is at present the most powerful in the world, has already been neutralized because no one has the courage to use it decisively. When the economy collapses so will the military.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Stephen Sizer, “Hal Lindsey (b. 1929): The Father of Apocalyptic Christian Zionism.” <http://www.cc-vw.org/articles/hallindsey.htm#FOOTNOTE%20306>. The Reverend Dr. Sizer is an Anglican incumbent at Christ Church, Virginia Water, in Surrey, England. Both Walvoord and Lindsey are quoted in Sizer’s article. This article is a theological treatment of Lindsey’s works and contains an extensive critique of Lindsey’s adaptations over time beginning from *LGPE* up through the early 2000s.

¹⁰⁴ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 184.

In 1996, he noted the accuracy of these predictions in *Planet Earth*:

The United States will not hold its present position of leadership in the western world," I wrote in *The Late Great Planet Earth*. "Lack of moral principle by citizens and leaders will so weaken law and order that a state of anarchy will finally result. The military capability of the United States, though it is at present the most powerful in the world, has already been neutralized because no one has the courage to use it decisively. When the economy collapses so will the military." Remember folks, these words were written in 1969, not the 1990's!¹⁰⁵

Lindsey conveniently edits out his predicted cause of America's downfall. He had argued in *LGPE* that Communist influence through college student rebellion would be the vehicle of doom for America. Coming out of the tumultuous 1960s and with the Cold War still lingering, that was a likely explanation for those who adhered to Lindsey's ideology. However, the events of the 1980s and early 1990s made the threat of Communist subversion in America seemed much less likely. Hence, Lindsey keeps the vaguer parts of his explanation of America's fall intact while simply ignoring the sections that were inaccurate.

Lindsey also claims that, "when Christ comes at the second coming" it will be "at the height of a global war."¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the Rapture must occur before this war occurs and Lindsey asserts that "we believe that according to all the signs, we are in the general time of His coming."¹⁰⁷ In 1991, in a forward for a book entitled *The Coming Russian Invasion of Israel* (by Thomas McCall and Zola Levitt), Lindsey says, "I feel this book is a must for everyone who wants to know where we are on God's time-table."¹⁰⁸ This prompts many questions. What are the parameters of this "general time" of which

¹⁰⁵ Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth—2000 A.D.* Rev. Edn. (Palos Verdes, California, Western Front, 1996): 15-6. Sizer notes these passages in his article cited above.

¹⁰⁶ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 143.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in C. Van der Waal, *Hal Lindsey and Biblical Prophecy* (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada, Inheritance Publications, 1991), 14.

Lindsey speaks? Is there a definite window? Can the “general time” be stretched to mean decades, centuries, or millennia? Lindsey’s malleable brand of premillennial theology leaves such questions open.

Once the rapture of true believers occurs, according to Lindsey, nothing will stand in the way of an evil takeover by the Antichrist and his followers. This malevolent environment will welcome the rise of the Antichrist, a character primarily associated with the beast in Revelation 13. Lindsey paints the Antichrist, or the “Future Fuehrer” as Lindsey labels him in *LGPE*, as a terrifying figure, stating that, “Adolf Hitler was but a ‘choir boy’ when compared with the dictator that will take over the world during the Tribulation.”¹⁰⁹ The Antichrist, he states, will be European and will assume power of a ten-nation confederacy of European nations (the Beast has ten horns and Lindsey argues that each horn represents a nation in this evil confederacy). He will also repress those who convert to Christianity after the Rapture through his secular humanist views labeling Christians as “non-progressives” and will undermine the Bible in every way possible.¹¹⁰

According to Lindsey, this charismatic Antichrist will accelerate the movement toward one world government and one world religion, while undermining democracy and monotheistic Christianity. Based on his reading of Revelation 13 that states that the beast

¹⁰⁹ Hal Lindsey, *There’s A New World Coming*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1984), 171. This book was originally published by Vision House in 1973. References to these two versions will be denoted by the publication year.

¹¹⁰ Lindsey, *New World* (1984), 171-5. The ten nation confederacy comes from Revelation 13 imagery which includes a ten-headed beast. Lindsey argues that the “beast out of the sea” refers to an evil leader (the beast) coming out of chaos (the sea). Lindsey explains that each of the heads represents a nation. Of course, the modern European Union currently consists of far more than ten nations and several other candidate nations will likely join in the near future. Hence, in recent years, Lindsey has had to adapt this view. Some popular premillennialists have suggested that current European nations will consolidate into ten blocks or ten loosely organized territories or that ten nations will become clear cut leaders of the EU at some point in the near future. See <http://www.eurunion.org> for more on the modern European Union.

will force all to be marked on their forehead or on their hand in order to buy or sell,¹¹¹ he observes that, “There’s no way to lose your number or have your identification subverted if it’s tattooed on you!”¹¹² The number 666, another popular component of the popular premillennialism, also stems from the beast passage of Revelation. Revelation 13 ends with this riddle: “This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.” Lindsey does not attempt any numerology acrobatics here, but explains that “6” represents the number of man. He says, “Six is said to be the number of man in Scripture and a triad or three is the number for God. Consequently, when you triple “six” it is the symbol of man making himself God.” Therefore, tripling it serves as an attempt to imitate the holy trinity in an imperfect, human way.¹¹³ This approach preserves malleability since the concept of “imitating the holy trinity” can be applied to any world dictator or generally “evil” person. Popular premillennialists have tagged various world leaders from Mussolini to Hitler to Ronald Wilson Reagan (6 letters in each of his names) to Mikhail Gorbachev (red birthmark on his head might be the Beast’s “mortal head wound) to Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden as viable Antichrist candidates.

Instead of setting an exact date of Christ’s return, Lindsey keeps his readers on guard for the coming Antichrist by suggesting that the end will happen “soon.” In a section of his updated 1984 edition of *There’s A New World Coming* entitled “Is the Antichrist near?” he states, “I believe that the present worldwide economic, political, and

¹¹¹ *NIV*. Revelation 13:16-17 reads, “¹⁶He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, ¹⁷so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.” For a scholarly presentation of an amillennial view of the beast in Revelation, see Wilfred J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina Series: Revelation*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 137-145.

¹¹² Lindsey, *New World* (1984), 183.

¹¹³ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 113.

social disturbances will boil over into an unmanageable mess which will culminate during the rapidly approaching Tribulation period.”¹¹⁴ Fourteen years earlier in *LGPE*, Lindsey stated that “the dramatic elements which are occurring in the world today” appeared to prepare the way for the “diabolical Future Fuehrer to make his entrance.”¹¹⁵ Lindsey’s adept avoidance of concrete date-setting hints that impending doom lurks just around the corner.

However, Lindsey does not shy away from predicting America’s ultimate demise. He avoids committing to the timing of this demise while speaking of untold future horrors for the United States serves as an effective and malleable method of prophecy interpretation. This allows him to speak convincingly of future events and their connection to the Bible while preserving his credibility as a “prophecy expert.” Further, Lindsey usually opts for phrases that leave the exact timing of his predictions quite flexible. For example, regarding the reestablishment of Israel, Lindsey ends the section by saying, “It is like the key piece of a jigsaw puzzle being found and having the many adjacent pieces rapidly fall into place.” In regards to the coming Russian Confederate Army, he states, “Watch the actions of Iran in relation to Russia and the United Arab Republic. This writer believes that significant things will be soon be happening there.” After a lengthy section on the rise of China as a communist power, Lindsey sums up this way: “History seems to be headed for its climactic hour.” His message is clear: the world is in its last days. However, Lindsey has been writing that the earth has been in the “last days” for nearly forty years. The world is now far past 1988 (the forty years and “last generation” after Israel’s restoration) and Russia’s high point as a world power. His style

¹¹⁴ Lindsey, *New World* (1984), 172.

¹¹⁵ Lindsey, *LGPE*, 113.

requires malleability, and Lindsey has exercised it in nearly all of his post-*LGPE* writings.

Conclusion

Lindsey's popularity has waned in recent years, but the malleability of the genre has given birth to new stars. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins brilliantly couch their dispensational theology in the fictional *Left Behind* series. If predicted events do not happen as planned, the authors can rightly claim that their books are fiction. However, when current events can be bent to their theology, they can claim sharp Biblical insight and accurate prophetic interpretation. This has allowed LaHaye and dispensationalism to thrive even in a world that has left many of Lindsey's predictions by the wayside.

No analysis of contemporary "end times prophecy" can be complete without at least a brief treatment of this wildly popular *Left Behind* series. What Lindsey did for premillennialism in the "non-fiction" world, evangelist Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry B. Jenkins did for premillennialism in fiction. The *Left Behind* series took America by storm in the late 1990s leading up to the turn of the Millennium, capturing audiences with its fictional account of how premillennial theology might play out on the world stage. The *New York Times* described the books as "Tom Clancy-like suspense with touches of romance, high-tech flash and Biblical references."¹¹⁶ Lahaye and Jenkins' collaboration quickly became one of the most successful and lucrative fictional series of all time. Upon its release in 1998, the first four installments of the 12-book series held the top four slots

¹¹⁶ Laurie Goodstein, "Fast-Selling Thrillers Depict Prophetic View of Final Days," *New York Times* (4 October 1998).

on the *New York Times* bestseller list and, according to a piece by Jenkins in the *Washington Post*, book sales in the series have exceeded 65 million copies.¹¹⁷

The *Left Behind* series takes Lindsey's penchant for malleability one step further in that it is marketed as fiction. This allows the authors to deflect criticism of their theology by explaining that this is merely a fictional story not to be taken entirely seriously. However, the authors routinely connect the events in the book to the Bible. The FAQ section of www.leftbehind.com includes this snippet:

Q: Is the Left Behind series based on the Bible?

Yes. The framework for the entire series is based on the theology found primarily in the book of Revelation.

Critics abound, including end-times prophecy historian Paul Boyer, who stated, "They're cashing in on the public preoccupation with the year 2000," adding, "The message is that you can't do anything about what's happening in the world. The larger pattern of prophecy is unfolding, but you can save yourself, so accept Christ today, and you will be among those who are Raptured. You will be saved."¹¹⁸ Much like readers of Lindsey in the 1970s, several testimonials from readers indicated that they were "scared straight" by the *Left Behind* series.

The post-rapture events, including the movement toward one world government, the apostasy of supposed believers, the rise of the Antichrist, the persecution of Christians, the mark of the beast, 666, and assorted other apocalyptic events, can all be

¹¹⁷ Jerry B. Jenkins wrote as a "Guest Voice" in the On Faith section of the 5 February 2009 *Washington Post*. See http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2009/02/from_left_behind_back_to_jesus.html

¹¹⁸ Boyer quoted in Laurie Goodstein, "Fast-Selling Thrillers Depict Prophetic View of Final Days," *New York Times* (4 October 1998).

considered part of the “Great Tribulation.” This term is often used by premillennialists in reference to the period between the rapture and Christ’s return to defeat the Antichrist and his followers. Most believe that the earth will nearly self-destruct during this time. However, some people will convert to Christianity during this period and attempt to thwart the Antichrist. The beast’s ultimate demise, they believe, comes at the end of the Great Tribulation when Christ returns as not only a spiritual savior, but as a military conqueror.

The idea of a Battle of Armageddon has crossed over from premillennialism to mainstream popular culture much like notions of the Antichrist or the millennium. Lindsey supports the idea that an imminent World War III lurks on the horizon and that the decisive battle will occur at a place called Armageddon. The name in Hebrew translates as “the mountain of Megiddo” and it is located on a plain a few miles southwest of Mount Carmel in modern day Israel.¹¹⁹ Lindsey portends that Christ initially came to earth to save mankind from sin, but his purpose in returning a second time is to judge those who rejected his free offering of salvation. According to Lindsey, the ensuing carnage will be unparalleled. He estimates that 300 million soldiers from a variety of nations will engage in the destruction of one another while mysterious “earthquakes,” possibly the result of nuclear weapons, level all of the major cities of the earth. Just before utter annihilation occurs, Christ will stop the melee and bring forth a new world.¹²⁰

The setting up of this new world plays a large role in premillennial theology. Lindsey claims that, “The real issue between the amillennial and the premillennial viewpoints is whether prophecy should be interpreted literally or allegorically.” He

¹¹⁹ Harrington, *Revelation*, 167. Megiddo’s strategic location made it the site of many battles. After the death of the biblical leader Josiah on this very ground, it became a symbol of disaster.

¹²⁰ Lindsey, *New World*, 212-214.

argues that his work in *LGPE* shows that “all prophecy about past events has been fulfilled literally.” He even speaks for his detractors by stating that “opponents of the premillennial view all agree grudgingly that if you interpret prophecy literally it does teach that Christ will set up a literal kingdom” that will last for one thousand years and be followed by an “eternal form” of this world that will exist for eternity.

Lindsey has continued to write and speak to large numbers of Christians since the meteoric publication of *LGPE*. His follow-up to *LGPE* was a commentary on the book of Revelation entitled *There's A New World Coming* (1973) which has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. He continues to write fiction and non-fiction books, including one near the turn of the millennium entitled *Planet Earth: 2000* which recapitulated much of the original *LGPE*. Lindsey has been affiliated with Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) since its inception in the 1970s, but his show was pulled from the airwaves in December 2005 amidst accusations of being “too pro-Israel and too anti-Muslim.” Paul Crouch, TBN founder and president, took issue with Lindsey’s harsh rhetoric, stating that “I am not aware of a single instance where making inflammatory, derogatory anti-Muslim statements has led a single follower of Islam to Christ.” However, time and technology healed the rift, and TBN welcomed Lindsey back onto the air in January 2007 after obtaining the ability to block Lindsey’s program from reaching the Muslim countries in the Middle East. This technology allows Lindsey to warn the world about the Muslim threat without offending actual Muslims abroad. He also now labels himself as “politically incorrect, prophetically correct,” which is ironic given that nearly 40 years have passed since *LGPE* was first published in all of its dooms-saying glory.¹²¹

¹²¹ Roy Rivenburg, “Author Lindsey, Christian Network Reconcile,” *Los Angeles Times* (02/10/2007).

In addition to his work on TBN and his continued writing, Lindsey's television shows are available on his website. Interestingly, his web page contains no personal biography or other information about his past books and there is no easily recognizable link with TBN. What is conspicuous are Lindsey's linked videos clips, and links for support and feedback, including his site's telephone number: 1-888-RAPTURE. The site primarily consists of news stories and recent videos of the *Hal Lindsey Report* along with shorter videos called "Watchman Warnings" that usually pertain to recent workings in the Middle East. Lindsey has repackaged himself as a "watchman on the wall" who will monitor world events and alert his viewers to happenings germane to Biblical prophecy. These videos possess a certain "fireside chat" feel, complete with Lindsey behind a homey desk wearing casual clothes.¹²²

This use of new media and new approaches comes as no surprise given that Lindsey's long-term success has hinged on his ability to adapt to change over his career. Dispensationalism itself constantly interprets changing geopolitical and economic situations in order to find connections with scripture, and Lindsey happens to be one of the best at placing world events on "God's timetable." For Christians adhering to dispensational theology, Lindsey acts as an interpreter of a world seemingly slogging toward its inexorable doom. Most importantly, he reassures his followers that while these events are terrible and tragic for the world, they are good and necessary for true believers. He reassures like-minded Christians that the world is getting worse, that the world is ripe for an Antichrist, that the destruction of evildoers is at hand, and that true believers will be Raptured and saved from the carnage to live in eternal glory with God. For complex humans in a confusing world, Lindsey makes the unknown known.

¹²² See <http://www.hallindsey.com>

Popular prophecy supplies answers to some of humanity's biggest questions: what does the future hold? How will the world end? Will I go to heaven? What will happen when I die? While the details and theology are complicated and difficult to understand, Lindsey's *LGPE* and his subsequent work attempts to answer some of life's greatest unknowns through a systematic, intentional reading of Biblical prophecy. He does this while maintaining malleability and adaptability in his interpretation of world events. While the immediate references to political events and social trends have changed from the 1970s to the present day, there is still much comfort in a theology and world view like Lindsey's and his claims to be able to "get out of the way and let God speak" by relating Biblical prophecy to current and future events.

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