Violence for a Peaceful End: Rhetorical Violence, Fundamentalist Eschatology, and the Interpretive Tradition of Revelation

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VIOLENCE FOR A PEACEFUL END: RHETORICAL VIOLENCE, FUNDAMENTALIST ESCHATOLOGY, AND THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION OF REVELATION

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By
Tommi Karin Waters

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VIOLENCE FOR A PEACEFUL END: RHETORICAL VIOLENCE, 
FUNDAMENTALIST ESCHATOLOGY, AND THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION 
OF REVELATION

Date Recommended April 10, 2015

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To my family, for the inspiration

To my professors, for the guidance

To Amy, for the constant support, encouragement, and friendship
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I first became interested in the topic of my thesis when studying religion and violence with Dr. Nahed Zehr. When reading for that class about groups who committed violent acts because of their religious convictions as well as groups who took a non-violent stance based on the same beliefs, I realized there were many Christian groups and individuals who were seemingly in a “middle-ground.” While they did not commit violent acts, they were also not preaching non-violence. Much of their discussions would be violent in rhetoric, such as targeting political figures as the Antichrist (and thus implying the figure’s eventual destruction) or creating insider/outsider relationships between “believers” and “non-believers.” These actions are not just problematic for cohesion in communities, but for the possible ends these might lead to.

With more preliminary research, I found that many of these beliefs were a direct result of reading the Book of Revelation in a literal way—reading the Bible as the inerrant, unchanging, and direct word of God. I began to study how scholars traditionally interpret Revelation, as well as to explore when a “violent” reading of the text began arising. I was also given the opportunity in Dr. Jeffrey Samuels’ ethnography class to study two Baptist Bible study groups who were reading Revelation to see if they were teaching Revelation in a way that could lead to violent actions. Based on this, I became interested in studying how this interpretation began, and thus explored the beginnings and development of the interpretive tradition of Revelation and how it leads to what I have called “rhetorical violence” by groups and individuals in some Christian fundamentalist communities.
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With the rise of extremist fundamentalist groups, such as ISIS, it is important to note similar happenings in other traditions. This thesis traces the interpretive tradition of the Book of Revelation, from its composition in 90 C.E. through the dispensationalist usage of it by John Nelson Darby in the 19th century, and how its modern use by American Christian fundamentalist groups leads to rhetorical violence, including feelings of marginalization and societal targeting, and creation of insider/outside dynamics with those outside the tradition. While rhetorical violence—language and behaviors that harm others and that occur so regularly that they often become routinized and habitual—does not directly involve killing and enacting of physical violence, it can lead to it. This thesis concludes that the instances of rhetorical violence occurring in mainstream American Christian fundamentalism, such as in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ *Left Behind* series and the author’s ethnographic case study of a church in Bowling Green, Kentucky, are problematic because of the possibility for physical violence.
Introduction

The end is near. Or, at least, that is a common conception among mainstream American Christian fundamentalists. Fundamentalist groups often promote their eschatological ideas about when the “end times” is/will be, who the Antichrist is/will be, and frequently discuss who will be taken up in the Rapture. As seen from these ideas, the end times could be now, impending, or in a distant future. Whenever this may occur, a consensus among many fundamentalists is that the Book of Revelation predicts what events will occur at the end times. However, Revelation not only provides eschatological ideas for the tradition (many of which are inconsistent with a historical reading of the text), but often also fodder for legitimation of rhetorical violence. This thesis will argue that some fundamentalist groups—including a specific Baptist community in the Bowling Green, KY area—rely on an interpretive tradition of Revelation for their eschatological views, many of which are inconsistent with a scholarly and historical reading of the text, and that these ideas are often used as a basis for rhetorical violence and may even lead into physical violence.

Background and Terms

The Book of Revelation is uncontestably violent in its imagery, from scenes of God “reaping” the earth and blood accumulating “up to the horses’ bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles” (Rev. 14:20) to the rider “Death” slaughtering “over a fourth of the earth” (6:7). However, a contextual analysis of the book reveals that the imagery is merely that—images. Many advocate for what they call a “literal” reading of the text,

including the belief that prophecy and prophetic texts are a prediction of future events. However, reading Revelation through a historical lens causes the reader to recognize that it is a text that, as the author of Revelation states in the first chapter, is written about a revelation received by the author from God in response to a certain situation at the time. Thus, while Revelation is often misunderstood as a text that depicts God’s final—and violent—judgment, a symbolic and historical reading of it shows that it is not necessarily about future judgment, but a symbolic account of first century events, such as the persecution of Christians. For example, the rider on the white horse who “is called Faithful and True….From [whose] mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it he may strike down the nations…” (Rev. 19:11,15), when read “literally,” is seen as a violent warrior who will slay people with a sword. Reading the verses symbolically, while still producing a picture of a judge, shows the rider will “strike down the nations” with words of judgment (thus the sword from the mouth) rather than literally slaying people. The passage also indicates that this rider “wages war” (19:11). This passage is merely “a picture of judgment, not of a literal war.”2 In the first century, this passage would likely convey to Christians that God was on their side and would judge or condemn those who persecuted them. In this instance, as well as throughout the rest of the book, the “literal” meaning as opposed to the symbolic meaning is a cause for these notions of violence.

Moving from the text into the development of the Christian tradition, it is obvious that various interpretations of Revelation begin to arise that depart from the text itself and lead into many modern day assumptions of the book. One of the major components of this is the idea of an “Antichrist.” While the word “antichrist” is mentioned in the New

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Testament, it is found only in 1 and 2 John—and even in those books, a plural form is used once rather than pointing to a specific person. The mutual authorship of 1-3 John and of Revelation is rejected by most scholars, therefore no link between the mention of “antichrist” in John’s letters and Revelation exists. Victorinus of Petovium, a late 3rd century Church historian, brings the idea of the Antichrist into his theology, claiming the devil being “cast out of heaven” will be “the beginning of the coming of the antichrist.”

Some references in early church history are made to the Antichrist and many attempted identifications of the figure are made, such as by equating “666” with the name of a particular person, as will be seen in Chapter Two when discussing Irenaeus’ work with this number as possibly meaning “Lateinos.” While these instances are interpretations and applications of the text itself, they provide good insight into how this tradition of an Antichrist began to develop, even as early as decades after the composition of Johannine literature.

While this understanding of Revelation, arising from the text and turning into Christian tradition, continued to develop, new ideas influenced the conception of the book—namely, ideas of a “Rapture” when Jesus would come back and take up all believers to heaven. After nearly two millennia of the development of interpretations of Revelation, 19th century Englishman John Nelson Darby wrote a commentary on the biblical text, discussing a rapture in which believers would suddenly be taken up to meet Jesus in the air and pioneering the idea of dispensationalism—the idea that Christian, and thus world, history is broken up into periods, or dispensations. Dispensationalists promote “the belief that the final dispensation is the millennium, a literal thousand-year

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reign of Christ that will occur after his Second Coming.”

This notion is a component of the broader idea of premillennialism—the idea that the second coming of Christ will bring about a literal thousand year peace on earth that would extend until the final judgment. A second position in mainstream Christian eschatology is the amillennial approach. According to the *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, “The essence of this view is that Christ’s millennial reign has already been inaugurated through his death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.” Thus the thousand year period is not to be taken literally, but as a symbolic amount of time before Christ’s second coming.

Finally, the postmillennialist belief is that “the millennium will come as a result of the progressive growth of the kingdom, culminating in the entire world being converted to Christ, after which he will visibly return.”

While these “end times” beliefs vary, the common thread is that they assume that Revelation is a book that predicts something about the future—a text that ought not be conceived symbolically, but more literally. The variety of views is further broken down into positions on specific events (Armageddon, Rapture, Millennial reign, etc.). These views began departing from the actual text of Revelation, rather relying on others’ interpretations. This string of interpretations thus began building on one another and began developing into a traceable tradition.

In contemporary America, the evolution of these ideas based on Revelation is exemplified in evangelical traditions. The focus of this research will show that the

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 A portion of this thesis will focus on explaining what “prophecy” is in its 1st century context—i.e. a message from God rather than a prediction of the future. While some Christians who read Revelation symbolically still believe it is about future events, this thesis will be focusing solely on Christians who read the text in a literal way.
fundamentalist tradition has adopted these ideas into their theology. The tradition often has no definite notion of how the ideas developed, and its adherents overlook how these ideas have departed from the text. George M. Marsden defines a “fundamentalist” as “an evangelical who is angry about something….who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores…. [and who] are not just religious conservatives, [but] conservatives who are willing to take a stand and to fight.” 9 While this definition is seemingly harsh, there is much truth to it and some of it will be used for my own definition of fundamentalists (and “fundamentalism” as the belief system): Christian evangelicals who read the Bible literally, and believe they are reading and living out the Bible in the correct way, causing them to want to convert others to their truth and often willing to fight for this truth. Marsden’s definition of evangelicalism should be considered a part of this definition. He argues that evangelicalism includes belief in: “(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelicalism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life.”

The textual ideology of fundamentalists strongly influences how the Book of Revelation is viewed and read. 10 First, the tradition focuses on a “literal” reading of the Bible. This consists of reading the text as inspired by God, inerrant, and relevant to a modern audience—and generally void of symbolic meaning, at least not as the primary

10 James S. Bielo, Words Upon the Word (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 70, defines textual ideology as “presuppositions held about scripture.”
meaning of the text. This proves difficult with Revelation due to its highly symbolic nature, thus promulgating non-contextual analyses of the text and its prediction of the future. Second, the tradition strongly emphasizes a coming Antichrist who will be highly favored by the public, but will be the antithesis of Christ. This idea is suggested by Tim LaHaye’s Left Behind series which many adherents of the tradition take to be a fictional representation of what Revelation truly means. Third, the idea of a war or Armageddon revolving around the events of the Antichrist’s arrival is a major part of the tradition’s eschatological ideology. Finally, the Rapture is frequently mentioned in connection to what adherents ought to look forward to during Christ’s return.

Within this framework, the capacity for rhetorical violence—intended or not—arises. Rhetorical violence can be defined as language and behaviors that harm others, and that occur so regularly that they are often not noticeable. Rhetorical violence, as I am conceiving it, is a similar concept to Pierre Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence,” which he defines as “violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it.” However, while Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence” focuses on how this is used by economy and political authority, rhetorical violence will focus more on how this is used by communities and individuals not necessarily having economic or political power. In addition to rhetorical violence, fundamentalists create an insider/outsider relationship, promoting ideas of rapture and eschatological warfare which this dichotomy—those who will be “raptured

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up” with Jesus as the insiders and those who will remain on earth during the seven-year “Tribulation” as the outsiders—leading to tensions between the two.

While physical violence is generally not included in these tensions, the possibility for and enacting of rhetorical violence is extensive and may lead to physical violence. Bourdieu does not explicitly make the claim that “symbolic violence” can lead to “overt violence,” but he does see the two as interconnected, writing, “The harder it is to exercise direct domination, and the more it is disapproved of, the more likely it is that gentle, disguised forms of domination will be seen as the only possible was of exercising domination and exploitation.” Thus overt violence, or what I call “physical violence,” is not carried out primarily because it is “disapproved of”; therefore, symbolic violence—and in this thesis rhetorical violence—becomes the accepted alternative because it is “gentle.”

Methodology

It is apparent that the Book of Revelation gives rise to religious legitimations for rhetorical violence from adherents to the Christian fundamentalist tradition. To further support the collection of data of Christian fundamentalists, I spent a month observing two Bible study groups at a Baptist church in Bowling Green, KY to use as a case study. In my ethnographic fieldwork for this thesis, I utilized several methodological approaches. First, I acted as participant observer every Sunday morning in two Bible study groups. In my first meeting with the Bible study leader, I informed him I would not truly be “participating” in the Bible study, but merely listening, audio recording, and taking notes. This was respected during my time with the groups—I was given a chair behind those of

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the attendees and I spent the periods listening and watching the lecture and discussion and taking notes when necessary. The leader faced the attendees; therefore I was within his line of sight at almost all time, making it difficult to take copious notes. Thus an audio recording device set beside me was a tremendous asset in my research in trying to be as discreet as possible.

The only times the attendees interacted with me was before and after the meeting was over (and not every time) and when passing out handouts. My participation was at a minimum—I never commented, asked questions, or left my chair while the Bible study was meeting; I only bowed my head silently during the opening and closing prayer to respect the groups’ beliefs. However, several occasions required me to be aware of my facial expressions and actions since Steve was able to see me, such as joining in laughter at a political remark and being sure to look upset and sympathetic when the group was talking about how government institutions were anti-Christian.

The second method I used for this part of my project was interviews and discussion. Unfortunately, despite my efforts, I was unable to formally interview any of the attendees in the groups. However, before and after the meetings, I was able to talk to several of them and participate in their conversations which gave me an insight into their concerns. I formally interviewed the leader after attending several Sundays of the Bible studies in order to ask follow-up questions and others I had prepared prior to observing the groups. I transcribed notes and audio recordings from my observations and interviews. This transcription not only allowed me to have hard copies of my research, but required me to see the connections in my material and the major concerns and thoughts the group had. This made it possible for me to organize my research into the
three major themes this section of my thesis will cover: literal interpretation, violent rhetoric, and societal targeting.

For the chapters of the thesis leading up to the presentation of the mainstream fundamentalist thought and the ethnographic material in the case study, I traced the interpretive tradition of the Book of Revelation. I began by translating the text of Revelation from Greek to English as well as other relevant New Testament verses and passages from Hippolytus. I then worked with primary texts from Irenaeus, Cyprian, and other early Church fathers to continue the narrative of this interpretive tradition to show how it led to John Nelson Darby’s interpretation of Revelation. Finally, after researching the modern fundamentalist interpretations and eschatology, I explored the similarities in their interpretation and reading of the Bible—particularly Revelation—to groups who used their theological and eschatological beliefs to perform violent acts to show the hazard of this belief system.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter One discusses the traditional scholarly interpretation of the Book of Revelation. This chapter explores the Greek text and what it contains about the following topics: the Temple, the Battle of Armageddon, the Tribulation, the Antichrist, and the Millennial Reign of Christ. This chapter also discusses the setting of the book, showing that it is a response to events occurring during the lifetime of the author, as well as the genre of apocalyptic literature and the notion of prophecy.

Chapter Two shows how interpretations of Revelation that were written as early as the second century C.E. by early Church fathers began connecting Revelation with
other books of the Bible to create concepts of the Antichrist, as well as to define some notion of a rapture. Chapter Three then shows how John Nelson Darby takes these ideas and creates the idea of dispensationalism and its related eschatological components of the Rapture and the Millennium. This brief chapter shows how these ideas formed to show that fundamentalists are usually relying on this tradition and not always reading the text of Revelation for themselves.

Chapter Four discusses mainstream American Christian fundamentalist eschatology, revolving particularly around Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series and a children’s commentary series published by Precept Ministries. The following chapter, Chapter Five, then provides a case study to demonstrate the nuances of this eschatological tradition, and argues that the actions of the adherents to these communities often constitute rhetorical violence. Chapter Six delivers conclusions about the argument of the thesis.
Chapter 1 – Scholarly Analysis of the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is a source of endless interpretations by scholars and confessional Christians alike. The fundamentalists’ interpretations of the Bible, as will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five, often depend upon traditions passed down through generations by churches and families, reading the Bible as self-interpreting, and a popular notion of what the “end times” is. However, these readings usually transpose the text into a modern-day setting, rarely taking into account what scholars of religion focus on in textual criticism: context, authorial intent, and genre. This chapter will briefly explain the general scholarly consensus on passages that many fundamentalists as well as the Baptist community observed as a case study (see Chapter Four) focus on when studying Revelation and forming their view of the “end times.” In addition, this chapter will establish the setting of the passages before explaining in Chapter Two how they are interpreted differently by early Christian writers. This chapter will focus on several major topics that are used extensively in fundamentalist eschatology—the rebuilding of the Temple, the Tribulation, Antichrist, and the Millennium—and discuss the relationship between violence and God in the text of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation: Genre and Setting

Revelation, by general scholarly consensus (as well as by Irenaeus, a second century Christian who was one of the first commentators on Revelation), was composed around 90 C.E.¹ by “John of Patmos,” as the author identifies himself.² This book is in

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¹ However, there is some debate about this late date as some scholars wish to date the book earlier to the late 60s C.E. See Joseph Trafton, Reading Revelation (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2005), 5.
the category of apocalyptic literature and depicts a vision that John says he receives from Jesus. This vision is recounted with extensive references to the language and symbolism in prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, such as Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.

To understand Revelation, one must first understand the apocalyptic genre that it is a part of. John Collins defines this as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”

The word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις, translating to “revelation” or “uncovering, un-concealing” (from the combination of ἀπό and καλύπτω). The modern notion of what “apocalypse” means strays from this idea, taking on the meaning of tremendous and catastrophic events occurring at the end of the world. The apocalyptic literary genre is often misunderstood as a prediction of the “end times” and—though it often consists of this—is better understood as a genre of visions given to humans from God or through a heavenly being. Similarly, the idea of Biblical prophecy being a “prediction” is a misunderstanding of the idea. When introducing the book, John writes, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy (προφητείας)” (Revelation 1:3).

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the New Testament are the author’s own translation from Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

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2 “John” will be used in place of the author for the purposes of this thesis. However, there is disagreement about who this figure was, as some want to say this figure is John the disciple of Jesus and author of Johannine literature in the New Testament. There are many reasons to contest that view, such as the difference in writing style and the evidence showing he may have been a Palestinian Jewish Christian. See Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “The Revelation to John,” in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 4th ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2153.


4 See Trafton, 2-3.

5 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the New Testament are the author’s own translation from Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).
common understanding of what prophecy is may lead many to think that the book is about events in the “end times” and is a guide or warning for those people. However, the idea of prophecy comes from the Hebrew tradition where prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel were thought to have received messages from God and relayed them to humanity; thus a prophet is “one who speaks for a god and interprets his will.”\(^6\) Michael J. Gorman writes, “Understanding the book of Revelation as apocalyptic literature will encourage us to try to understand the real-world situations, depicted in cosmic terms, that it reflects and addresses. It will also encourage us not to take the symbolism ‘literally,’ that is, to think of actual pale-green horses or multi-headed beasts or thousand-year periods.”\(^7\) By understanding the genre of Revelation as a message from God rather than a prediction of the future, one comes to a more nuanced understanding of John’s writing and how the book responds to events occurring during John’s lifetime.

There are two very important factors in the setting of Revelation that should be established before breaking down the details of the text. First, the Jewish context is important to take note of, particularly for the reason of warfare imagery. Within the Jewish tradition, warfare is often associated with God as a form of judgment.\(^8\) Thus understanding the warfare and violent imagery in the text properly would mean understanding it as God judging the world. Second, emperor worship was a widespread problem for Christians during this time. While there would be outbreaks of persecution, the larger problem was Christians being forced to engage in worshipping the emperor,

\(^7\) Gorman, 21.
\(^8\) See Trafton, 180.
who was thought of as—at least—a semi-deity. However, this would stand in contradiction to Christians, especially Jewish Christians, worshipping only the God of the Hebrew Bible. Because of this and other corruptions within Roman society (from the Christian perspective), it can be easily seen that John’s vision—whether an actual experience of the sacred, a fictional story, or something in between—was a response to these problems that Christians faced living in a Roman governed society.

**Summary of Revelation**

Before discussing the details of Revelation, I will provide a brief summary of the book for readers unfamiliar with the biblical text. The book begins with the author introducing himself as John and claiming he is on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). John sees “one like a son of man” (1:13) at the beginning of his vision—and this “one” has odd characteristics, such as feet like bronze and a double-edged sword coming from his mouth. This person claims he is “the first and the last, and the living one” who “was dead, and behold [he] is alive forevermore” (1:18) and instructs John to write down his vision. Chapters Two and Three contain the letters to the seven churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—that the “son of man” figure instructs John to write. These letters seem to address specific issues within the communities, such as the false teachings of a woman called Jezebel at the Thyatiran church (2:20). After the letters, the narrative turns to the visions that John sees in heaven when “in the spirit” (4:2), first of which is of the heavenly throne room, including “one sitting on the throne” and twenty-

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9 Trafton, 6-7.
four elders on thrones around the main throne (4:3-4). John also sees the “four living creatures”—with many eyes and mixed characteristics of humans and animals—around the throne (4:6) and witnesses everyone in heaven worshiping the one on the throne.

Chapter Five shows the giving of a scroll with seven seals to the “son of man,” who is the only one able to open it.

The sixth chapter depicts the opening of these seals (except the seventh seal) and the events that accompany them: the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” (seals one through four—the conquering rider on the white horse, the rider on the red horse who would cause war, the rider on the black horse that brings famine, and the rider on the pale green horse whose name is Death); the giving of white robes to the martyrs and promise that their deaths will be avenged; and the earthquake, solar eclipse, falling stars, and other natural disasters that follow the opening of the sixth seal. Chapter Seven provides an interlude before the opening of the seventh seal and depicts the sealing of the 144,000—12,000 from each tribe of Israel. When the seventh seal is opened in the following chapter, there are seven trumpets that seven angels sound (again, the seventh is postponed until Chapter Eleven), causing catastrophic events—such as the burning up of a third of the trees, grass, and earth—as well as the torture by locusts that have “hair like the hair of women” and lion-like teeth (9:8). Chapter Ten shows John eating a “little scroll” that “was sweet as honey [in his mouth]” but “[his] stomach was made bitter” (10:10). Chapter Eleven depicts the measuring of the temple, then the violent murder of the two witnesses by the beast from the abyss. Chapter Twelve narrates the story of the woman in labor whose son is pursued by a seven-headed and ten-horned dragon with seven diadems. There is also a scene of a “war in heaven” (12:7) between the angels and the
dragon. Chapter Thirteen tells of the emergence of the beasts—one from the sea and one from the earth—who have authority on behalf of the dragon. “One like a son of man” who is on a cloud then comes and “reaps” the earth, then an angel treads the wine-press which produces blood (14:14). Seven bowls of wrath are poured out onto the earth by angels, each bringing terrible events with it (Chapter Sixteen). Chapter Seventeen shows “a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns” (17:3). This woman is called, “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and the Abominations of the Earth” (18:5). Chapters Nineteen and Twenty show the conquering of the beasts and Satan by a rider on a white horse (presumably Jesus), the wedding ceremony of the Lamb, and the judgment of humanity. Finally, John sees “a new heaven and a new earth” as well as the New Jerusalem and the tree of life before his vision is concluded with Jesus saying, “‘Yes, I am coming quickly’” (22:20).

Rebuilding the Temple?

In Revelation, there is a discussion of John measuring a temple. This act of measuring is often believed to be measuring of the Temple of Jerusalem, and this indicates to many fundamentalists that the Temple must be rebuilt before Jesus’ second coming. However, the text of Revelation only mentions the temple twice—and clearly indicates that this is not an earthly temple in Jerusalem, but a heavenly one in the New Jerusalem.

In Revelation 11, John is given instruction to measure the temple. A voice\textsuperscript{11} says, “‘Get up and measure the temple of God and the altar and the ones worshipping in it (κοσμοῦ

\textsuperscript{11} Presumably, the speaker is the voice from heaven, though the grammatical construction suggests that the “measuring rod like a staff” spoke to John.
τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας ἐν αὐτῷ). And the courtyard outside the temple, leave [it] out, and do not measure it, because it was given to the Gentiles and they will trample the holy city for forty two months” (11:2-3). According to David E. Aune, “Similarly, in Rev 21:9-10, John describes how an angel transported him to a high mountain where, after seeing the New Jerusalem, the angel proceeds to measure parts of it (21:15-17)…. The act of measuring (which is never actually performed in the narrative) can be considered a symbolic prophetic action.” It is important to note here the ambiguity of the referent of aujtov. This declension is a dative masculine singular form of αὑτὸς—meaning either “τὸν ναὸν (the temple)” or “τὸ θεοστήριον (the altar)” could be the referent. While it might be a bit of a stretch ideologically, it is grammatically probable that the referent—based on proximity—indicates that “the ones worshipping in it” are worshipping in the altar. The grammar here shows that there are a variety of ways to understand this text—but all seem to indicate that the “ones worshipping” are in heaven.

During the scene in heaven with the seven seals, John sees “the souls under the altar of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and because of the testimony that they were holding onto” (6:9). The verse in chapter eleven could be a possible reference to these “souls under the altar,” indicating this temple being measured by John is in heaven—not earth. To further the claim that this temple is not on earth, John records later in the chapter that “the temple of God which is in heaven was opened…” (11:19). The use of the articular prepositional phrase to substantialize it, “ό ἐν τῷ ουρανῷ,” seems to indicate there was a previous mention of this heavenly temple because the author makes an effort to emphasize that this is that “temple of God which is

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in heaven.”13 While these verses are used later in the tradition to claim the Temple must be rebuilt, the text seems to discuss a heavenly temple, undermining this need to rebuild the earthly Temple, even if the text is read literally.

Trials, Tribulation, and Warfare: The Battle of Armageddon and the Great Tribulation

Armageddon is mentioned only once in the New Testament, though it recalls several passages in the Hebrew Bible that mention a place called הָרָּגְגִי (har meggido).14 After mentioning the “war of the great day of God the Almighty” (16:14), John writes, “Then he15 gathered them into the place, the one called, in Hebrew, Armageddon” (16:16). Aune claims, “The place name ‘Armageddon’ occurs only here, where it represents the mythical apocalyptic-world mountain where the forces hostile to God, assembled by demonic spirits, will gather for final battle against God and his people.…”16 This “final battle,” however, is better understood in the context of the book as a metaphorical battle between the “good”—Christians—and “bad”—Roman culture. This is further seen by the idea of the “great tribulation” in 7:14: “And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who are coming from the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’” This verse indicates that this is not meant to be read as a “literal” tribulation: the washing of white robes in the blood of Jesus suggests not only purification through Christ’s atonement, but also the possibility that these people are martyrs from the persecution. Aune argues, “It appears that while ‘the great tribulation’ belonged to a discrete series of events in Jewish eschatological

13 Against Aune, 605, which claims this phrase is “to distinguish it from the earthly temple of God in Jerusalem referred to here.”
14 Har means “mountain” and meggido means “place of crowds.”
15 The referent here is unclear.
16 Aune, 898.
expectation, early Christians regarded their frequent experience of persecution and opposition…as part of this eschatological period of tribulation presaging the end.”17

During the first century C.E., Christians were subject to bouts of persecution by the Romans—this tribulation occurring in Revelation merely reflects this situation, showing that it is not one specific, catastrophic event, as many fundamentalists argue.

**Personifying Evil: The Antichrist and the Beasts**

The Book of Revelation never mentions ἀντίχριστος (antichrist). However, early Christian exegesis of Revelation, often in conjunction with cross-referencing prophetic and apocalyptic literature of the Hebrew Bible, discusses the Antichrist—a specific figure appearing in the “last days” as a vehicle of Satan. While the Johannine epistles mention “antichrist(s),” a discussion of the idea of an actual figure who is the Antichrist does not appear in Christian literature until Irenaeus in the second century. Early Christian theologians, as will be discussed in the next chapter, relied heavily on John’s use of the Hebrew Bible to make their cases about the Antichrist and, unbeknownst to many fundamentalists, their conception of the Antichrist comes out of this line of thinking rather than a reading of Revelation. Revelation not only never mentions the word “antichrist,” but also never clearly shows one figure as an enemy of God. Rather, there are several figures—the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, the false prophet, Satan, etc.—that are enemies of God. In the imagery John uses, the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth/false prophet become essential to later understandings and interpretations of the book in discussion of the Antichrist.

17 Aune, 474.
Revelation 12 discusses “a great fiery-red dragon” as one of the many “sign[s]...seen in heaven”\(^\text{18}\) (12:3). John writes, “And he was thrown—the great dragon, the ancient serpent, the one called ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan,’ the one misleading the whole world—he was thrown into the earth, and his angels were thrown with him” (12:9). This dragon, identified as Satan, then gives “his power and his throne and his great ruling power” to the “beast coming up from the sea” (13:2, 1) who in turn gives authority and power to “another beast coming up from the earth” (13:11). The beast from the earth—also identified as the “false prophet” in 19:19-20—funnels worship from the image (ἐἰκών) “those dwelling on the earth” make and he “give[s] breath to” the beast from the sea, and from this beast to the dragon/Satan. Thus, there is an integral link between Satan and the beasts. The beast/false prophet later “makes everyone...put a mark on their right hand or on their forehead” which is “the name of the beast or the number of his name” (13:16-17).

John expounds upon this number, saying, “Wisdom is thus: let the one who has understanding count the number of the beast, for [it is] a number of a man; and his number is six hundred sixty-six” (13:18).\(^\text{19}\) Revelation establishes that these beasts are not only linked with and commanded by Satan, who is the enemy of Christ throughout the New Testament, but also are trying to lead humanity astray. In giving the beast “a number of a man,” John presumably was pointing to a political figure of the time whom he could not directly name; however, this mystery in combination with the symbolic and

\(^{18}\) “σήμερον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ” could also be read as “sign in the sky,” but translating the phrase as “in heaven” captures the apocalyptic language here.

\(^{19}\) Most manuscripts say the number is “ἐξακόσιοι ἐκατόν ἕξ” (666); however, there are some variant manuscripts that have the number “ἐξακόσιοι δέκα ἕξ” (616).
apocalyptic language of the book lends itself to early Christian exegesis of it and connecting the beast with the Antichrist figure.

The actual word “antichrist” is mentioned only five times in the New Testament and these all occur in 1 and 2 John. While most of these are articular (ὁ ἀντίχριστος), they obviously do not reference a particular figure. The author writes, “Because many deceivers went out into the world, those disagreeing with Christ coming in flesh; this is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7). Whereas John, the author of Revelation, was giving “wisdom” about the beast/false prophet figure, the author of 2 John seems to be warning against false teachings, presumably Docetism. Docetism was a heretical movement beginning in the first century that taught that Jesus’ first-coming was not bodily, i.e. Jesus appeared to be human but did not have a flesh and bone substance. The author of 1 John similarly seems to be speaking against those denying something essential about the nature of Jesus, such as saying that he “is not from God” (1 John 4:3). He says, “So this is the [spirit] of the antichrist” and prior to this writes about the “last hour,” saying “...and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come,20 by which we know that it is the last hour” (2:18). These few verses that actually mention an “antichrist” do not connect with a “Satanic” figure, as the Antichrist is later depicted as, but possibly a group of heretics.

While these are the only mentions of the word “antichrist,” 2 Thessalonians contains a brief discussion about “ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, ὁ ὑιὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας.” or

20 "γεγονόσιν" from “γίνομαι” is used here to mean “have come” rather than “ἐρχόμενον” as used previously when referring to the singular “antichrist” in the verse. This word choice is intriguing because “γίνομαι” has not just a meaning of “coming,” but a sense of something “happening” or “being born”—so this could possibly imply that these “antichrists” are somehow still in formation.
“the man of lawlessness [and] son of destruction” (2:3). The author of this book, who claims to be the apostle Paul, tells his readers that this man “is exalting himself...so as to set himself in the temple of God, proclaiming that he himself is God” (2:4) and he “will be revealed, whom the Lord will destroy with the breath of his mouth” (2:8). There are clear parallels between the idea of this figure being killed by something proceeding from the mouth of the Lord and the false prophet being killed by the rider on the white horse in Revelation, who has a “sharp sword [that] comes out from his mouth” (19:15). In addition, the figure in Paul’s book portrays himself as God in some way, whereas the beast and false prophet in John’s book exercises great authority and seems to deceive humanity. As will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter, Irenaeus explores this connection even further as he references 2 Thessalonians when discussing the Antichrist.

**Hellfire and Brimstone: Violence and God**

As will be explored in further detail in Chapters Four and Five, the idea of a destructive God, or at least one who allows or compels others to be destructive, is problematic for many Christian fundamentalists’ relationships to society and the world. If God is destructive and violent, what is there preventing Christians from being violent as well? The Book of Revelation becomes particularly problematic at this point because of the numerous passages that are rife with violent imagery, and the violence is viewed as

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21 Allen Brent claims that this language actually references Judas Iscariot. He writes, “In the context of the Johannine literature...the Antichrist was fulfilled in Judas Iscariot, ὁ γιὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας, ἵνα η γραφή πληρωθῇ. (Jn. 17,12)...” in Allen Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1995), 340. The author of the Gospel of John uses the same language the author of 2 Thessalonians uses: “ὁ γιὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας.”

22 Like much of ancient authorship, the authenticity of this book being written by Paul is debated by scholars. It is generally considered to be pseudonymous.
“divine” or even necessary. Perhaps most notable of these is the image of the rider on the white horse who is generally believed to be Christ. John writes:

Then I saw heaven being open, and behold! a white horse, and the one sitting on it [was called] faithful and true and with righteousness he judges and makes war. And his eyes [are like] a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems. He has a name written that no one knows except him. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the word of God. And the armies [that are] in heaven, clothed in white, clean, fine linen, followed him on white horses. A sharp sword comes out from his mouth so that he may strike the nations with it, and he will shepherd them with an iron rod; and he tramples the winepress of the passionate wrath of God the Almighty. And he has a name written on his robe and on his thigh: “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” (19:11-16).

The imagery used here suggests that this figure comes to bring judgment to the nations. Joseph Trafton writes, “Given so many popular interpretations of Revelation as a book that predicts literal wars on earth, most notably Armageddon, the importance of recognizing the use in Judaism of war imagery as a graphic depiction of judgment can scarcely be overstated.”23 Jewish imagery carries over into Revelation greatly with the idea of a God who judges those who do not follow him perfectly. Here we see—presumably—Jesus making war with and judging the nations as well as ruling over them—harkening back to the idea of emperor worship and how here, Jesus would be replacing the emperor as the local deity.

God also allows many “bad things” to happen to those living on the earth in this vision. In chapter nine, God allows the sounding of the trumpets, one of which brings the locusts “out of the smoke [of the pit] into the earth…. And a command was given to them that they might not kill [anyone], but that they will be tormented for five months; and their torment was like the torment of the scorpion, whenever it might sting a man” (9:3-5). Trafton notes that these “locusts are under the ultimate control of God. Their

23 Trafton, 180 (emphasis in original).
commissioning centers on three divine passives.” Divine passives are passive verbs that do not have a referent in the text, thus the agent must be determined from context and are typically attributed to God. Here, then, God is the implied actor of the “commissioning.” These locusts are only sent to attack those without God’s seal on their foreheads. G.K. Beale notes the parallels between the locusts here to Jeremiah 51:27 and argues that “The allusion reinforces the idea that the trumpet woes are directed to a significant degree against idolatrous persecutors outside the church, since Jer. 51:14, 27 is an announcement of coming vindication for Israel against idolatrous Babylon (51:10, 17-18), who has wrongfully come against Israel and its temple (e.g., 51:11).” These parallels indicate that the locusts are being sent to harm those persecuting the Christians.

**Millennial Reign**

The idea of a millennial reign, a thousand-year period in which Christians will reign with Christ, is an essential component of fundamentalist eschatology. This idea comes solely from Revelation 20:1-6, which reads as follows:

> Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power,

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24 Trafton, 96.
they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.26

There is not much to say about this passage in particular, except in the use of “a thousand years” as a literal period. Trafton writes, “…John does not experience—nor is he told about…the 1,000 years.”27 He notes the possibility of John’s source being Psalm 90:4, which says, “For a thousand years in Your sight/ Are like yesterday when it passes by/ Or as a watch in the night.”28 However, the meaning of the thousand year period is inconclusive, except in that the Bible frequently uses numerology to make points symbolically. There is no indication that this period is meant to be a literal future event, though, as will be seen especially in Chapter Three with dispensationalism, there are many interpretations that revolve around this period as a literal thousand years.

Conclusion

Revelation is a text best understood—as established by the contextualization and text critical study of the book—as a response to situations and events around 90 C.E. and in the category of prophecy only in as far as this is believed to be a message or vision from God. Little seems to indicate that the author intended this book to be a prediction of the “end times,” especially not that this eschatos would come in or after the twenty-first century. While this chapter has provided only the briefest of summaries of the scholarly consensus on Revelation, it establishes what the historical context of the book is so that moving forward into Chapter Two, one can see the interpretation and deviation of early Christian thinkers from the text of Revelation.

26 NASB.
27 Trafton, 187.
28 NASB.
Chapter 2 – Patristic Interpretations of Revelation: A Gateway to Dispensationalism

Within a century after the composition of the Book of Revelation, early Christian thinkers were already studying and interpreting the apocalyptic text. These interpretations ranged from commentaries solely on Revelation to commentaries on other apocalyptic literature (such as Daniel) and referenced the correlations to Revelation. Many ideas from Revelation transform radically in these interpretations. To show the beginnings of the development of the interpretive tradition of Revelation, I will focus on the Antichrist and, briefly, the Rapture as they are used extensively in evangelical theology in the twenty-first century.

There is a vast extent of literature from the patristic period about these issues, so several authors’ work will be chosen as data points: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Victorinus, and Cyprian. By discussing these authors’ works on the aforementioned topics, this chapter will act as a bridge between the composition of the text and its interpretive tradition in the 1800s and fodder for dispensationalism. In addition, this will describe the beginnings of the loose and nuanced interpretation of the text and show how this begins a long line of interpretations that lead to current Baptist doctrine about the “end times.”

The Antichrist: Irenaeus, Against Heresies

Irenaeus is the first Christian author to conflate the idea of a deceiver and antithesis to Christ with the beast and false prophet found in Revelation to produce one apocalyptic figure: the Antichrist. Irenaeus lived from 130-202 C.E., though little more is known of him. It is believed that he was bishop of Lyons and Vienne during his
lifetime, had some connection with Polycarp, and died in Gaul. Though Irenaeus wrote several works, his *Adversus Haereses* or *Against Heresies* is where he discusses his eschatology and Book Five includes his detailed argument about the Antichrist, including references to the “number of the beast.”

As indicated by the title, Irenaeus wrote the book to argue against prominent heresies of the time, including Gnosticism, Marcionism, and the Ebionites. He writes, “I shall endeavour, in this the fifth book of the entire work which treats of the exposure and refutation of knowledge falsely so called, to exhibit proofs from the rest of the Lord's doctrine and the apostolical epistles… to furnish thee with large assistance against the contradictions of the heretics, as also to reclaim the wanderers and convert them to the Church of God…” In defending against these heresies and “reclaim[ing] the wanderers,” Irenaeus brings up several points that add to this evolving conception of the Antichrist: first, he discusses the “number of the beast” and advice on evaluating it; second, he uses extensive references from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to aid his argument; and third, he briefly connects the Antichrist with the tribe of Dan, which will be important in Hippolytus’ later work.

To some extent, Book Five of *Against Heresies* serves as Irenaeus’ commentary on Revelation. Rather than merely defending against heresies, he mentions and quotes large parts of passages from Revelation and discusses their significance. He especially

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3 Minns, 19-20.
5 Irenaeus’ use of New Testament references only means that he references books that are in the canonical New Testament in the 21st century—discussion of when an extant New Testament canon in the mid-second century is outside the scope of this thesis and Irenaeus’ knowledge of this canon is not implied.
does this with Revelation 13 and John’s discussion of the “number of the beast.” After quoting the Revelation passage that depicts the sealing of the mark, Irenaeus writes, “[He gives this] as a summing up of the whole of that apostasy which has taken place during six thousand years” (5.28.2), indicating that human history is to last only 6,000 years and the Antichrist will come toward the end of this period.

In the next verse, he explains the correlation of the 6,000 years with the 6 days of creation as seen in Genesis and writes, “For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year” (5.28.3). In the next chapter, Irenaeus presents what Bernard McGinn calls the “linchpin of Irenaeus’ Antichristology: Antichrist must recapitulate evil, just as Christ recapitulates all good.”6 Irenaeus seemingly takes “ἀντί” in every sense of the word: not just as “against, opposed to” but also as “instead of, in place of.”7 He argues, “And there is therefore in this beast, when he comes, a recapitulation made of all sorts of iniquity and of every deceit, in order that all apostate power, flowing into and being shut up in him, may be sent into the furnace of fire” (5.29.2). He writes,

Fittingly, therefore, shall his name possess the number six hundred and sixty-six, since he sums up in his own person all the commixture of wickedness which took place previous to the deluge, due to the apostasy of the angels. For Noah was six hundred years old when the deluge came upon the earth, sweeping away the rebellious world, for the sake of that most infamous generation which lived in the times of Noah. And [Antichrist] also sums up every error of devised idols since the flood, together with the slaying of the prophets and the cutting off of the just (5.29.2).

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6 McGinn, 59.
In addition to this example, he also discusses the idol created by Nebuchadnezzar—both of which correspond to numbers that include six.

Through this discussion, it is readily apparent that Irenaeus sees the Antichrist as the beast/false prophet found in Revelation whose number is “666” and seals his mark on his followers. For the purposes of this thesis, the “beast/false prophet” and the “Antichrist” will be synonymous in discussion of Irenaeus’ work. While Irenaeus addresses why the Antichrist has this number, he also deals with the manuscript variants that have it written as “616,” which would not fit as nicely into Irenaeus’ argument. He writes, “I do not know how it is that some have erred following the ordinary mode of speech, and have vitiated the middle number in the name, deducting the amount of fifty from it, so that instead of six decads they will have it that there is but one” (5.30.1). He then shows how the correct number could be applied to several names—Evanthas, Lateinos, and Teitan/Titan—but says, that he will make no definitive claim about this “not through a want of names containing the number of that name that I say this, but on account of the fear of God, and zeal for the truth…” (5.30.3) and additionally discourages others from making claims of who the Antichrist is so as not to lead others astray.

Irenaeus also addresses why John did not give the name of the Antichrist in Revelation but rather a number; he says, “…the name, however, is suppressed, because it is not worthy of being proclaimed by the Holy Spirit” (5.30.4). If John’s reason for being on the island of Patmos was exile, there would then be other reasons he would not want to write the name of the beast—such as if he were writing the beast as a symbolic representation of a political figure. However, Irenaeus focuses on the spiritual aspect of

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8 Most manuscripts say the number is “ἐξακόσιοι ἐξήκοντα ἕξ” (666); however, there are some variant manuscripts that have the number “ἐξακόσιοι δέκα ἕξ” (616).
this exclusion, arguing the name of the Antichrist is not holy enough to be mentioned by God.

Another major feature of Irenaeus’ work is his comparison of references from the Hebrew Bible—specifically focusing on Daniel—to the Book of Revelation as well as citing New Testament epistles in making his argument. It is commonly agreed by scholars that Daniel provides extensive references to John, and Irenaeus noticed many of these similarities as well and especially talked at length about the “little horn” from the beast. He writes that Daniel “declares that ten horns shall spring from the beast, and that another little horn shall arise in the midst of them, and that three of the former shall be rooted up before his face,” (5.25.3) then quotes from Daniel 7, and equates this with what he calls the “Tyrannical Kingdom of the Antichrist.” Irenaeus also cites and discusses 2 Thessalonians and its relation to this verse in Daniel, saying that the Antichrist will challenge God “for three years and six months, during which time, when he comes, he shall reign over the earth” (5.25.3). Irenaeus’ citation of scripture would presumably have carried a great deal of weight in supporting his argument about the Antichrist, though he extensively references it throughout on other points.

Finally, Irenaeus contemplates the origin of the Antichrist as being from the tribe of Dan. He writes,

And Jeremiah does not merely point out his sudden coming, but he even indicates the tribe from which he shall come, where he says, "We shall hear the voice of his swift horses from Dan; the whole earth shall be moved by the voice of the neighing of his galloping horses: he shall also come and devour the earth, and the fulness thereof, the city also, and they that dwell therein." This, too, is the reason that this tribe is not reckoned in the Apocalypse along with those which are saved (5.30.2).
While the reference to the idea that the Antichrist will be from this tribe is brief, Hippolytus will discuss this in more detail. The notion of not only an Antichrist from the tribe of Dan, but even more generally a Jewish Antichrist, began evolving, causing strife between Christians and Jews.

Irenaeus shows the beginnings of an exegetical look at Revelation and particularly the development of the conception of the Antichrist. Rather than focusing only on Paul’s “man of lawlessness” or “the beast,” Irenaeus develops these ideas into one figure who becomes the embodiment of Satan, the enemy of Christ, and one of the signs of the “last days.”

The Antichrist: Hippolytus, Treatise on Christ and Antichrist

Hippolytus lived from 170-235 and was a follower of Irenaeus. For about the last thirty years of his life, he was a Roman presbyter and in 235 was martyred. He composed several works about eschatology and apocalyptic literature, including his Commentary on Daniel and his Treatise on Christ and Antichrist. While the former discusses the Antichrist some, the latter will be the only work of Hippolytus’ used for the purposes of this thesis. McGinn writes, “[Hippolytus’] account of Antichrist is based not on his master’s insight about opposing recapitulations, but rather on a more symbolic view of the necessity for fundamental opposition between Christ and the Final Enemy on every level.”

He lists six ways that Hippolytus makes this comparison in his treatise, which are as follows: “(1) Jewish origin; (2) the sending out of apostles; (3) bringing together people scattered abroad; (4) sealing of his followers; (5) appearance in the form

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9 McGinn, 60.
10 Ibid., 61.
of a man; and (6) the building of a temple (…in Antichrist’s [case], the raising of a new stone temple in Jerusalem).”

As seen in the text of the *Treatise*, there are three major themes that drive Hippolytus’ writing on the Antichrist: first, the “fundamental opposition” that McGinn explains; second, the use of biblical prophets—especially Daniel—in making his case; and third, his implication of Dan and Judaism for the production of the Antichrist intermixed with his accusation of Rome as well. While the key idea driving the writing of Irenaeus and Hippolytus differs (recapitulation versus “fundamental opposition”), much of the rest of their language, references, and implications stay the same.

As McGinn notes, Hippolytus discusses Christ and the Antichrist using the same terms and ideas, just with a negative spin on discussion of the latter. He writes, “…the deceiver wishes to imitate the Son of God. Christ is, indeed, a lion, so the antichrist is indeed a lion” (6). While Christ “was represented as a lamb,” the Antichrist “likewise, will appear as a lamb, though being internally a wolf” (6). Hippolytus refers to these activities and characteristics that he sets in opposition to Christ’s as “the art of [the Antichrist’s] deceit” (6). Similar to Irenaeus’ recapitulation theory that places the Antichrist as an equal, though negative, counterpart to Christ, Hippolytus shows how similar—and thus disruptive and harmful—the Antichrist will be to Christ.

Throughout the treatise, Hippolytus relies heavily on Jewish prophetic tradition. In section 57, he discusses “a widow who was in the city, [by which] he means Jerusalem herself.…[Because] Having named this one [Christ] her opponent and not her savior, not recognizing the truth of Jeremiah the prophet, ‘…therefore a spirit of error will speak to

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11 Ibid.
12 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* are the author’s own translation.
this people and to Jerusalem.’” He then references Isaiah and says the prophet, in discussing the king of the Assyrians, “calls [him] symbolically the antichrist, just as another prophet said…” which he follows with an uncited quote from Micah. Hippolytus depends even more on references to the prophets than Irenaeus does in his Against Heresies. He presumably does so to establish his points in the prophetic tradition before proceeding, as will be seen, to declare the Antichrist as a Jew from the tribe of Dan. In addition to this, he uses the passage from Daniel about the beast to explain the Antichrist and how he is tied in with the Jews. He writes,

He made known the toes of the feet, mystically, the ten kings raised up from her, which Daniel says, “I observed the beast and behold! [there were] ten horns behind it, among which a small horn will have gone up like an offshoot and will root out the three of those before it,” which will not be revealed as a horn but as the Antichrist, the one being raised up, who also himself will raise up the kingdom of the Jews (25).

Daniel is interpreted here to be talking about a future Jewish kingdom that, as will be seen with Victorinus, is integrally tied with the Antichrist.

The identification of the Antichrist as a Jew from the tribe of Dan is one of the culminating points of Hippolytus’ argument. As he set up the opposition between Christ and Antichrist before, so he writes, “Since the scriptures declared a long time ago that Christ was a lion and lions’ whelp, the same was said about the antichrist” (14). He establishes the fact that the Antichrist is also a “lion and lions’ whelp” so that he can use further evidence to establish that what “Moses says”—“Dan is a lion’s whelp and will leap out of Bashan”’—is about the Antichrist. He even takes care to state that these things should not be thought about Christ, so he clarifies it “[I]est one be misled” by the similarities in description (14). To Hippolytus then, the combination of Revelation with Daniel and other prophetic texts warns Christians that the Antichrist will be a Jew. This
caused increasing tensions between Christians and Jews in the 2nd century, and some Christians today still maintain the idea of a Jewish Antichrist.

**Victorinus: Commentary on Apocalypse**

All that is known about Victorinus is from the writings of church historian Jerome, who calls Victorinus one of the “‘pillars of the church.’” Victorinus wrote from probably around 250-300 C.E. and his *Commentary on Apocalypse* is the earliest commentary on the Book of Revelation in existence. Weinrich claims, “Victorinus quotes no previous authorities, although Irenaeus and Hippolytus are in the background….” Similar to the two earlier writers, Victorinus frequently cites prophetic books from the Hebrew Bible, mostly appealing to Daniel. An important idea of Victorinus’ to the overall interpretive tradition of Revelation is that of chiliasm, or millennialism, that Jerome edited out, “removing the offending chiliastic interpretations.” In Victorinus’ *Commentary on Apocalypse*, he proceeds chapter by chapter through the entirety of Revelation and commenting on something in nearly every chapter that he believes regards the Antichrist. As will be seen, three of the key concepts of Victorinus’ work to the development of the conception of the Antichrist are his explanation of 666, his appeals to scripture—both prophetic scripture of the Hebrew Bible and Paul’s epistle—and his reading-in of the Antichrist to extensive passages in Revelation.

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15 Ibid., xxii.
16 Ibid., xx.
While Hippolytus does not speculate on the “number of the beast,” Victorinus follows Irenaeus in applying gematria to words and names to explain who the Antichrist is. While Irenaeus shows how several names could be the Antichrist and warns against deciding on one, Victorinus only discusses how the Greek word “τειταν” and the Latin “DICLUX” can both be calculated as 666 (13:18). He shows how “if you wish to turn into Latin, it is understood by the antiphrase DICLUX, which letters are reckoned in this manner: since D figures five hundred, I one, C a hundred, L fifty, V five, X ten,—which by the reckoning up of the letters makes similarly six hundred and sixty-six” (13:18). He also explains how this works in Greek as well, writing, “it is reckoned in Greek thus: τ three hundred, ε five, ι ten, τ three hundred, α one, ν fifty,—which taken together become six hundred and sixty-six” (13:18), even continuing with highlighting differences in various codices and how these all come out to 666. He argues that these words—DICLUX and τειταν—“by which name, expressed by antiphrases, we understand Antichrist, who, although he be cut off from the supernatural light, and deprived there of, yet transforms himself into an angel of light, daring to call himself light” (13:18). This echoes the Gospel of John when Jesus refers to himself as the “light of the world” (see John 8:12, 9:5) and could point to Victorinus adopting Hippolytus’ “fundamental opposition” theory by describing the Antichrist in the same terms as Christ. While Victorinus does not explain his theory extensively, he continues the tradition of assigning

18 Victorinus’ argument could possibly point to an early interpretation of Isaiah 14 which translates the Hebrew lì4yìh (usually translated into English as “morning-star”) to the Latin “lucifer,” then represents this as a proper noun and claiming it is Satan. While this is outside the scope of this thesis, this possibility—especially since Victorinus wrote in Latin—would be an interesting study in when Lucifer/Satan was identified with Isaiah 14.
number values to letters in various languages to arrive at a conclusion of who the Antichrist is.

Like most other commentators—both confessional and non-confessional—Victorinus looks at the similarities between Revelation and prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible, but highlights these texts in such a way to explain his idea that they are talking about the Antichrist. Victorinus especially appeals to Daniel, here in the case of the fourth beast and its ten horns. He writes,

For that ten kings received royal power when he shall move from the east, he says. He shall be sent from the city of Rome with his armies. And Daniel sets forth the ten horns and the ten diadems. And that these are eradicated from the former ones,—that is, that three of the principal leaders are killed by Antichrist: that the other seven give him honour and wisdom and power…” (17:11).

He claims that “if you compare what is said against Sodom [in Ezekiel], and what Isaiah says against Babylon, and what the Apocalypse says, you will find that they are all one,” then goes on to discuss the Daniel passage (17:3). Victorinus, then, can claim the connection between all of these passages. Asserting the unity of scripture in a common meaning, he can justify using a variety of books to make his point. He also cites Micah, writing, “For, moreover, He previously says by the prophet: ‘Then shall there be peace for our land, when there shall arise in it seven shepherds and eight attacks of men; and they shall encircle Assur,’ that is, Antichrist, ‘in the trench of Nimrod,’ that is, in the nation of the devil, by the spirit of the church” (7:2). Victorinus provides these

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19 However, he does not cite Micah entirely accurately, which could be the result of manuscript varieties or that he is citing some kind of oral tradition of Micah. Micah 5:4-6, which he seems to be referencing, says, “…and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers. They shall rule the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod with the drawn sword; they shall rescue us from the Assyrians if they come into our land or tread within our border.”

20 There seems to be a lack of recognition of authorship, perhaps, of the book of Micah as both Hippolytus and Victorinus only refer to him as “the prophet.” However, their citation of the book shows that they found it authoritative.
interjections to explain how the biblical prophets somehow predict the Antichrist and the reign of the devil. Like Irenaeus, Victorinus also references 2 Thessalonians to support his idea of the Antichrist. He conflates this with Isaiah, writing, “And Paul, speaking of Antichrist to the Thessalonians, says: ‘Whom the Lord Jesus will slay by the breath of his mouth.’ And Isaiah says: ‘By the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked.’ This therefore, is the two-edged sword issuing out of His mouth” (1:16). By interpreting Revelation alongside and through other books, Victorinus arrives at the conclusion that these passages are about the Antichrist.

As previously established, the idea of Antichrist is never discussed in the Bible in the form it takes in the writings of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Victorinus, but is a result of comparative exegetical work. However, Victorinus also comes to many of his conclusions about this figure by reading into the text. As with the Micah passage, he brings the idea of the Antichrist to the text and tries to situate and explain it within that context. One of the prominent examples of this is when he comments on Revelation 10:11, which originally says, “And they say to me, ‘It is necessary for you again to prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.’” However, Victorinus cites this and reads the Antichrist into it, writing, “This, therefore, is what He says: ‘Thou must again prophesy to all nations, because thou seest the crowds of Antichrist rise up; and against them other crowds shall stand, and they shall fall by the sword on one side and on the other’” (Victorinus 10:11). He not only changes some of the wording

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21 The referent to the “they” subject of “λέγονταί” is unclear. The last plural noun is “thunders”/“βρονταὶ” who “spoke,” but it is a possible grammatical error on the part of John and could be referring to a singular subject, such as the angel who tells John to “Take and eat [the little book]…” (10:9).

22 Interestingly, Victorinus seems to take the referent of “λέγονταί” not only as singular, but as Jesus or God who are not discussed in the chapter, except in the genitive phrase “τοῦ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ” or “the mystery of God” in v. 7.
here, but makes the addition of “Antichrist” to prove his point. He discusses Revelation 11:4 in a similar manner, claiming that “‘in the presence of the Lord of the earth’ [means], they are in paradise. Also, in another sense, standing in the presence of the Antichrist. Therefore they must be slain by Antichrist” (11:4). In these cases, Victorinus is not actually commenting on the text, but tying it into a prior tradition that had been established by Irenaeus and Hippolytus—understanding the text of Revelation to be predictive and explanatory of the figure of the Antichrist.

While Victorinus seems to develop this loose interpretation of the text and use of gematria more than Irenaeus and Hippolytus did previously, he also continues some of the ideas of the earlier writers, such as interpreting the dragon as related to Satan and the Antichrist. Victorinus discusses the battle in heaven between Michael and the dragon, where the latter is “thrown into the earth” (Rev. 12:9). He writes, “This is the beginning of the Antichrist; …he also must be cast down from heaven, where up till that time he had had the power of ascending; and all the apostate angels as well as Antichrist must be raised up from hell” (Victorinus 12:7-9). Victorinus not only shows how the Antichrist has his origin with the casting down of the dragon (who is identified, as aforementioned, with Satan), he claims that “with all his power the devil will avenge himself under Antichrist against the church” (20:1-3). Thus Victorinus also establishes this figure as an extension and, to some extent, puppet of Satan and even suggests that the heads of the dragon represent the Antichrist (12:3).

While his incrimination of the Jews in this commentary is not as severe as the earlier writers—such as Hippolytus explicitly claiming that the figure of the Antichrist will come from among them—he does suggest that the Jews are somehow guilty of an
alliance with the devil. He writes, “[The false prophet] shall cause also that a golden image of Antichrist shall be placed in the temple at Jerusalem, and that the apostate angel should enter, and thence utter voices and oracles” (13:13). While the text of Revelation indicates that the false prophet makes an image of the beast, Victorinus interprets not only the beast as the Antichrist, but claims that this idol will be in the Temple. This example—combined with the golden calf scene in Exodus that Victorinus’ readers would recall—seems to implicate the Jews as aiding the Antichrist, if not as the Antichrist as Hippolytus suggests. Victorinus also comments on the letters to the seven churches in the beginning of Revelation, chapters that are typically not used in interpretive discussions of future events. He writes, “I know thy tribulation and thy poverty, but thou art rich.’ For He knows that with such men there are riches hidden with Him, and that they deny the blasphemy of the Jews, who say that they are Jews and are not; but, they are the synagogue of Satan, since they are gathered together by Antichrist…” (2:9). Victorinus claims that these Jews are not only blasphemous, but are a synagogue—in Greek a “συναγωγή” or “assembly, gathering”—of Satan because they are brought together by the Antichrist, Satan’s “puppet.” Though he does not appeal to prophetic tradition to claim that the Antichrist himself is a Jew, Victorinus suggests that the Jews either have some role in the Antichrist’s coming or are somehow gathered by him and perhaps taught by him.
Conclusions on the Antichrist

As seen in the previous chapter, there is no indication that New Testament writers had a conception of the Antichrist, let alone would have conceived of him in this way.

However, Bernard McGinn writes,

Identification of Jesus with the returning messiah was the basis for the creation of the Antichrist legend. Antichrist was not an accident or a superfluous addition to the Christian faith. It resulted logically from the opposition between good and evil implied in the acceptance of Jesus as divine Son of Man, Christ, and later, Word of God. Early Christians needed the legend of Antichrist.\(^{23}\)

While the idea of the Antichrist did not originate from the Book of Revelation itself or elsewhere in the New Testament, McGinn suggests that this is a logical interpretation in terms of cosmic war. McGinn claims that the conception of the Antichrist was “needed.” However, this same “needed” idea was problematic to early Christian society then and American society today. In the 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) and 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) centuries, there was tension between Jews and Christians, and claiming the Antichrist would arise from amongst the Jews would only have increased these tensions. The ideas of modern fundamentalists often echo those of the early church thinkers, such as Hippolytus’ “fundamental opposition” theory, showing that their ideas have been carried into contemporary interpretations of Christianity. This conception of the Antichrist as seen in dispensationalist and modern fundamentalist theologies will be discussed further in the following chapters.

The Rapture?

The word “rapture” never appears in Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. The origin of this word in the New Testament is from the Latin Vulgate, a Church-commissioned Latin translation of the Bible in the fourth century. The author of 1

\(^{23}\) McGinn, 33.
Thessalonians writes, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (4:16-17). The idea of the Rapture comes from this passage (in combination from other mentions of the second coming of Jesus) and the idea of being “caught up.” The word here, “ἁρπαγήσωμεθα,” lexically means “caught up” in the sense of being “snatched” or “seized.” However, the Latin Vulgate translates this as “rapturo” which eventually leads to the designating of “Rapture” for the idea that this “be[ing] caught up…in the clouds” is a specific future event. N.T. Wright notes, “Paul’s mixed metaphors of trumpets blowing and the living being snatched into heaven to meet the Lord are not to be understood as literal truth, as the Left Behind series suggests, but as a vivid and biblically allusive description of the great transformation of the present world of which he speaks elsewhere.” The only reference to this idea of “rapture” in Revelation—and here only slightly—is the idea that Jesus is “coming with the clouds” (1:7). Despite this, many people connect the idea of the Rapture with Revelation, possibly because they join them under the umbrella of eschatology, so early Christian interpretations of this topic must be explored before delving into eschatological beliefs of dispensationalists. For the purposes of this chapter, the works of Irenaeus and Cyprian will provide a sampling of how this idea formed within the first few centuries of Christianity and provided a basis for later Christian interpretation.

24 NASB.
25 N.T. Wright, “Farewell to the Rapture,” http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_BR_Farewell_Rapture.htm. Note also that the Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians is debated and the text is generally thought to be pseudo-Pauline.
The Rapture in Patristic Writings

Irenaeus, again, is one of the first Christian thinkers to piece together Revelation with other New Testament texts and the Hebrew Bible to explain things that will happen in the “end times.” In Against Heresies, Irenaeus writes, “And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, ‘There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be’” (5.29.1). While not specifically mentioning what today would popularly be considered the Rapture, Irenaeus hints at the idea that at some future moment in “the end,” all Christians will be somehow taken up swiftly before a period of tribulation. Irenaeus shows that, in some way, the Church will be here then immediately will be gone. Similarly, Hippolytus also appeals to this same imagery in Treatise on Christ and Antichrist. He writes, “For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice and trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive (and) remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (66).26

Cyprian was a native and bishop of Carthage who lived from about 200-258 C.E., when he was martyred for refusing to engage in emperor worship.27 In his Treatises, Cyprian addresses a variety of issues, one of which is what happens to the righteous and unrighteous after death. In this section, he discusses the destruction and trials that

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26 Quoted from http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/hippolytus-christ.html. The variety of views of eschatological timeline will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, but it is interesting to note here that Irenaeus seems to indicate a belief in a pre-tribulation Rapture while Hippolytus implies the Rapture will occur post-tribulation, based on his statement of, “…we which are alive.”

27 Allen Brent, Cyprian and Roman Carthage, 10.
humanity will endure and mentions how Christians will not be on earth during that period. He writes,

If, when you were on a voyage, an angry and raging tempest, by the waves violently aroused, foretold the coming shipwreck, would you not quickly seek the harbour? Lo, the world is changing and passing away, and witnesses to its ruin not now by its age, but by the end of things. And do you not give God thanks, do you not congratulate yourself, that by an earlier departure you are taken away, and delivered from the shipwrecks and disasters that are imminent? We should consider, dearly beloved brethren— we should now and always reflect that we have renounced the world, and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the kingdom (7.25-26).\footnote{Cyprian, *Treatises*, NewAdvent.org, accessed 2 April, 2015, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050707.htm.}

Cyprian indicates, metaphorically, that some kind of “shipwreck” will occur and encourages Christians to see their “earlier departure” by being “snatch[e]d…hence.”

Here again, the imagery of “snatching” or “seizing” is used in correlation with Christians being taken up from the earth so they will not endure what will happen.

**Bridging the Gap**

The creation and development of the notion of the Antichrist by the third century allowed for a variety of identifications of who the Antichrist is after that point. During the Middle Ages, Gregory the Great continued this tradition of an apocalyptic Antichrist, despite Augustine’s anti-apocalyptic theology.\footnote{McGinn, 80.} McGinn writes, “Gregory used Antichrist primarily as a tool for reform. Though he believed in a real Final Enemy to come, he provided only sparse information about the details of his career, being far more interested in the moral meaning of Antichrist….”\footnote{Ibid.} While Gregory and others interpreted
the Antichrist as being about morality, the advent of Islam “cried out for an apocalyptic interpretation.”  

It was common in the following centuries—as can also be seen today—that the Antichrist was believed to come out of the Islamic tradition. Pope Innocent III continue this, “encourag[ing] support of a new Crusade through denunciation of Muhammad as the ‘Son of Perdition’ whose reign had been prophesied to last only 666 years, ‘of which almost six hundred are now complete.’”

During the years surrounding the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants—or their predecessors—would target individuals from the other’s tradition as the Antichrist and during World War II, many claimed Hitler was the Antichrist and used gematria-like methods to show how his name would indicate this. The tradition, then, did not end with Victorinus, but flourished even more afterward and became a major component of societal interactions with some sort of Christian background.

Conclusion

By the time of Irenaeus’ writing in the second century on through the patristic period, the notion of the Antichrist was established and continued growing. Additionally, the works of early Church thinkers begin to have hints of what becomes known as the Rapture. While the latter is not fully established by this point, it is important to note that these varied interpretations of the text of Revelation in conjunction with 1 Thessalonians here set the framework for the eschatological beliefs to come. The groundwork of these ideas of the Antichrist and the Rapture had been set by thinkers such as Irenaeus and Cyprian, and began developing gradually up to the 1800s. In the 1800s, as the following

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31 Ibid., 88.
32 Ibid., 150.
chapter will briefly discuss, these ideas culminate in John Nelson Darby’s work on Revelation, such as his ideas about a pre-tribulation Rapture.
Chapter 3 – Pathway to Christian Fundamentalism: Darby and Dispensationalism

One of the greatest impacts on modern American Christian fundamentalism is the theology of John Nelson Darby. Darby was born in London, England in 1800 to Irish parents.\(^1\) He attended Trinity College when he was fifteen and, though intending to pursue a career in law, joined the ministry eight years later.\(^2\) According to Paul Boyer, “Ordained in the (Protestant) Church of Ireland 1825, Darby soon withdrew in opposition to its hierarchism and its links to the Crown. He joined a new sect, the Brethren, that rejected state ties and all organizational structure beyond the congregational level.”\(^3\) Darby preached throughout England and America during his ministry. However, the most influential period for his theology was that following his riding accident. During the years he spent recovering, he read and studied the Bible more and discovered what would become the core concepts of dispensationalism.\(^4\) This chapter will briefly discuss Darby’s ideas of dispensationalism and the Rapture and show how his beliefs have lead into the formation of modern fundamentalist theology.

Dispensationalism

George Marsden claims, “‘Dispensationalism’ refers to the sharp separations of the various historical eras, or dispensations, recounted or predicted in the Bible.

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\(^2\) Ibid.
Dispensational interpreters, who divided history back to the beginning, usually found seven distinct eras.  Although Darby’s conception of dispensationalism was not the first idea of history being split up into different periods with one being in the future, he was the first to truly systematize it. Timothy Weber notes, “What separated dispensationalists from their fellow futurists was their strict literalism when interpreting biblical prophecy, their absolute separation of Israel and the church as the two distinct peoples of God, and some conclusions which grew out of these two presuppositions.” While there are, as Darby asserts, seven dispensations, the dispensations can be broken down into three broad categories: 1) the dispensation of the Old Testament, including the pre-Fall period and the giving of the Law; 2) the dispensation of the New Testament, including the advent of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven; and 3) the millennial kingdom and eternity in heaven or hell. During the events leading up to the last dispensation, dispensationalists believe that the events of Revelation will happen (such as the Tribulation, Battle of Armageddon, etc.).

The Rapture

While dispensationalism is not a revolutionary idea, the formulation of the concept of the Rapture was. Though, as seen in the previous chapter, there were hints at some idea of Christians being “caught up” during Jesus’ return, there was no systematized idea of what this was. Weber argues that there was a difficulty in the dispensationalist theology: both Israelites and Christians would inhabit the earth at the

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time of the Tribulation, but “dispensationalists believed that God was unwilling or unable to deal with his two peoples or operate his two plans at the same time.”

He claims that “Consequently, it seemed necessary to remove the church before God could proceed with his final plans for Israel.” The resolution to this issue, then, was what Weber calls “dispensationalism’s most controversial and distinctive doctrine—the secret, pretribulational rapture of the church.” This Rapture would provide a way for Christians to be transported off the earth during the time of the terrible events of the Tribulation as well as a way for Jesus to only return once—there is no “third coming” of Christ. In this schema, Jesus meets or “catches up” Christians in the air—but he never returns to the earth. This meeting waits until after the Tribulation when Jesus can return to the earth with his saints—including those “caught up”—to establish his millennial kingdom.

Ronald M. Henzel writes,

…the traditional Dispensationalist scenario of end-time events….is a broad outline includ[ing] the imminent Rapture of the Church, followed by the seven-year Great Tribulation, which witnesses the career of the Antichrist and reaches its climax in the Battle of Armageddon, where it’s cut short by the visible Second Coming of Christ.

Weber notes that “The pretribulation rapture was a neat solution to a thorny problem, and historians are still trying to determine how or where Darby got it.”

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7 Ibid., 20
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 21.
Moving Forward

Whatever the motivations behind Darby’s theology, dispensationalism “began gaining acceptance in the evangelical denominations after 1875.”\(^\text{12}\) Its influence was particularly great on Cyrus Scofield, a Confederate soldier in the American Civil War who, during his time in prison for forgery, converted to Christianity.\(^\text{13}\) He was strongly impacted by dispensationalism and began researching the Bible for himself, leading to his publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909.\(^\text{14}\) Boyer argues that this work “more than any other single work solidified the premillennial movement.”\(^\text{15}\) The *Scofield Bible* combined the text of the King James Version of the Bible with “the Darbyite dispensational scenario.”\(^\text{16}\) Even today, this text is still widely influential.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief, but sufficient for the purposes of this thesis, overview of John Darby and dispensationalism. The impact of Darby’s theology has been incredibly widespread, especially in the United States with the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. The emphases of this tradition—on literal interpretation of the Bible, the splitting of history into periods or dispensations, and the future occurrence of the events mentioned in Revelation—are important to note when moving forward to discuss mainstream American Christian fundamentalism in the twenty-first century. While some fundamentalists, no doubt, know of or can reference Darby for their theology, many believe they are involved in interpreting the text of Revelation for

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 24.
\(^{13}\) Boyer, 97.
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) Ibid.
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
themselves. As will be seen in the following chapters, most fundamentalists are uncomfortable with saying they are following anyone’s doctrine but Jesus’. Interestingly, the first proponents of dispensationalism had the same discomfort—they did not want to think of it as a “novelty.”  

Henzel notes that “[t]his problem stems from a common attitude in conservative evangelical Christian circles associating innovation with divergence from biblical truth, rather than convergence with it.” This attitude is perhaps one of the most influential factors in a literal reading of the Bible—a reading which, as will be seen, can lead to problematic consequences.

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17 Henzel., 21.
18 Ibid., 21-22.
There are several paths that the interpretation of the Book of Revelation can take—from an allegorical interpretation, such as that promoted by Origen, to a preterist approach that argues the events Revelation discussed already occurred. However, the trajectory of the interpretive tradition through John Darby almost necessitates a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and Christianity. This chapter shows the modern product of this trajectory in mainstream American Christian fundamentalism. In discussing “mainstream American Christian fundamentalism,” I do not intend to over-generalize, but merely to create a category for the purposes of this thesis in which these individuals and groups discussed in the following examples can be contained. While there are obviously variations within this category, there—at least as understood here—is a line of common beliefs in this tradition: biblical literalism (including belief in the inerrancy and divine dictation of the Bible), proselytizing, a belief in an apocalyptic “end times,” and feeling marginalized by secular society. The individuals and groups in the examples I use feel marginalized within American society and Christianity as a whole (including Catholicism and progressive Protestantism), but do not seem to feel marginalized—at least, as found in my research—within a fundamentalist tradition. The ideas that are prominent in the eschatological beliefs of this tradition are of the Antichrist and a premillennial Rapture. But the language used and beliefs held by many of these communities lead to religiously motivated rhetorical violence, estrangement from society, and establishment of insider/outsider dynamics with other individuals and communities outside the tradition. This chapter first will define and explain Christian fundamentalism and its ideas. It will then show how these ideas are exemplified by looking at Tim
LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series, a children’s commentary series on Revelation, and some various individuals and organizations—such as Marc Driscoll—from the tradition to establish this mainstream idea before exploring how these ideas are also seen in the case study provided in the following chapter.

**American Christian Fundamentalism and Rhetorical Violence**

Before discussing particular examples from the tradition, Christian fundamentalism, as I am conceiving of it, and rhetorical violence must be defined. As I write in the introduction, fundamentalists are Christian evangelicals who read the Bible literally, and believe they alone are reading and living out the Bible in the correct way, causing them to want to convert others to their truth and often making them willing to fight for this truth. The fundamentalist movement is “a distinct version of evangelical Christianity uniquely shaped by the circumstances of America in the early twentieth century.”¹ Marsden notes that this movement was heavily influenced by the disdain for the modernization of Christianity in America.² The movement desired to return to the basics or “fundamentals” of Christianity, thus focusing on a literal reading of the Bible and applying it to their lives in an increasingly modernized society. Today, many Christians can be identified as fundamentalists—whether they embrace the term or not. This group primarily consists of Protestant evangelicals, particularly from the Baptist denomination, though some other denominations—some branches of Presbyterianism and Methodism—identify as fundamentalist. Many fundamentalist groups in the twenty-first century still reject much of what they consider modernization, including the teaching of

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² Ibid., 4.
evolution in science classes, the efforts to legalize gay marriage, and sometimes even religious pluralism on the basis of their belief that America is a “Christian nation.”

These fundamentalist groups frequently engage in rhetorical violence in their discussions and writings. Rhetorical violence has several facets, but can be defined as language and behaviors that harm others and that occur so regularly that they often become routinized and habitual. This happens when someone targets a political figure—such as President Obama, as the last decade has seen—as the Antichrist. This labels not only that figure as, to some extent, aligned with the forces of “evil” (according to fundamentalist theology), but also effectually deems his/her supporters as such. This reflects the notion of cosmic war that many fundamentalists subscribe to.\(^3\) According to Juergensmeyer, the ideas involved in cosmic war “evoke great battles of the legendary past, and they relate to metaphysical conflicts between good and evil.”\(^4\) Fundamentalists, then, recall not only the pre-historic battle between Lucifer and God, but also look to the future battle between Satan and Jesus.\(^5\) In addition to this, many fundamentalists accept the idea that God’s holiness and righteousness necessitate his/her judgment of humanity—and this judgment is often violent. The importance of this belief in cosmic battles and divine violence is how it translates to society. Juergensmeyer writes, “What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle—cosmic war—in the service of worldly

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\(^3\) This labeling of a figure as the Antichrist is not a new occurrence in the history of Christianity. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and Pope Leo X both targeted the other as the Antichrist and, in doing so—though there were countless other reasons as well—denounced the opposing Roman Catholic or Protestant groups.


\(^5\) Neither of these cosmic battles is supported by the biblical text. The idea of a battle between Lucifer and God in heaven, leading to God casting Lucifer into hell with his army of “fallen angels,” is generally supported in fundamentalist interpretation by reading Isaiah 14:12. For the disputation of the idea that the events in Revelation predict a future battle, see Chapter One.
Because this strain of Christianity believes God is on their side and he/she is justified in using violence to judge, there is little, if anything, to prevent fundamentalists from enacting physical violence if they understand themselves as part of a cosmic war.

Fundamentalists overwhelmingly express feelings of marginalization and societal targeting, which is, perhaps, a cause for rhetorical violence. They frequently feel under attack by the government and society as a whole, typically because of the previously mentioned movement towards supporting LGBTQ rights and the allowance for religious pluralism. Fundamentalists often cite the founding of the United States of America, claiming it was based on Christian ideals.

These feelings of marginalization lead to an integral component of rhetorical violence: the formation of insider/outsider dynamics. This dynamic is often formed because the individual or group feels like an outsider; thus, to be an insider, they join or create a group in which they feel included. For fundamentalists, this is sometimes a church community, but goes further into the community of Christ—those who will be raptured or saved when Christ returns. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby claim, The religious ideologues [of fundamentalists] established new boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and imposed a strict discipline on their followers; in many if not all cases, they were able to elevate their mission to a spiritual plane in which eschatological expectation and apocalyptic urgency informed even the most mundane world-building tasks of the group.

This insider status, then, affects how fundamentalists live their everyday lives, such as using daily conversion tactics to help others join the “inside” and avoid eternal damnation. However, this dynamic that fundamentalists create frequently becomes

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6 Juergensmeyer, 150.
Schwartz claims that “through the dissemination of the Bible in Western culture, its narratives have become the foundation of a prevailing understanding of ethnic, religious, and national identity as defined negatively, over against others. We are ‘us’ because we are not ‘them.’” By creating identity as “not ‘them,’” these groups are indirectly labeling “them” as foreign, or “the Other.” Schwartz summarizes the intent of her book, providing an excellent description of rhetorical violence and its components, writing,

It locates the origins of violence in identity formation, arguing that imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and line drawing, is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit. Violence is not only what we do to the Other. It is prior to that. Violence is the very construction of the Other. This process is tricky: on the one hand, the activity of people defining themselves as a group is negative, they are by virtue of who they are not. On the other hand, those outsiders—so needed for the very self-definition of those inside the group—are also regarded as a threat to them…. This book argues that acts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence.

Schwartz explains here—as I show later through examples—how rhetorical violence and identity formation are, in themselves, inherently violent and provide a possibility for enacting physical violence. The following sections of this chapter show how fundamentalist interpretations of Revelation, whether narrative or commentary, use rhetorical violence and identity formation in their eschatological beliefs.

*Left Behind*

In 1995, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins published the first installment of the sixteen novel *Left Behind* series. This series of novels, written by Jenkins based on

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9 Ibid., 5.
LaHaye’s notes and theology,\textsuperscript{10} is an imaginative, narrative telling of the Book of Revelation—at least as LaHaye understands the biblical text as a prediction of future events. Each novel in the series deals with specific events in Revelation. For example, the first novel, \textit{Left Behind}, depicts the event of the Rapture; \textit{Nicolae} is about the coming of the Antichrist; and \textit{Desecration} discusses the Antichrist’s reign. For the purposes of this thesis, an in-depth study of these books is impossible, so several passages will be quoted and discussed to show how the series exemplifies the use of violence and creation of insider/outsider dynamics in the fundamentalist tradition.

The series is rife with violent passages. Some of this violence is caused by the Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia. But more interestingly, Jesus is a major actor in much of the violence, especially with his “Second Coming” in \textit{Glorious Appearing}. Lisa Lampert-Weissig’s description of the series sets the scene for the following passages:

At the center of the thrillers is the ‘Tribulation Force,’ composed of three characters who are ‘left behind’ by the Rapture: Rayford Steele, a top pilot; his daughter, Chloe Steele, a former Stanford student; and Buck Williams, a renowned young journalist who eventually marries Chloe. After they learn that the mass disappearances of the Rapture are divinely caused, Rayford, Chloe, and Buck quickly come to the faith. They join together to fight the forces of the Antichrist, attempting to convert as many as they can before what they know will be Jesus’ absolute triumph.\textsuperscript{11}

As the series moves through the apocalyptic events, the group tries to convert others to Christianity so they might be spared from the coming judgment of Christ. However, the group is also trying to fight against Carpathia’s forces. LaHaye writes, “[Rayford] didn’t consider himself a lunatic, despite his own admittedly unrealistic wishes to be God’s hit

\textsuperscript{10} As LaHaye’s theology is what is being examined here, for simplicity, only his name will be mentioned when discussing the \textit{Left Behind} series.

The group fights—and desires to fight—for God, but Jesus especially performs most of the killing. Before the establishment of his kingdom, Jesus must first destroy unbelievers. He does this using the sword from his mouth, which is symbolic here, but still causes the same devastating effects:

With every word, more and more enemies of God dropped dead, torn to pieces. Horses panicked and bolted. The living screamed in terror and ran about like madmen—some escaping for a time, others falling at the words of the Lord Christ.  

After this, LaHaye writes,

As Rayford slowly made his way down to the desert plains, though he had to concentrate on missing craters and keeping from hitting splayed and filleted bodies of men and women and horses, Jesus still appeared before his eyes—shining, magnificent, powerful, victorious. And that sword from His mouth, the powerful Word of God itself, continued to slice through the air, reaping the wrath of God's final judgement. The enemy had been given chance after chance, judgement after judgement to convince and persuade them. To this very minute, God had offered forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, salvation. But except for that now-tiny remnant of Israel that was seeing for the first time the One they had pierced, it was too late.  

Nonbelievers had second chances to believe in Christ, but chose not to. Therefore, Christ, because of his holiness, must single-handedly slaughter them. An exhaustive list of similar passages would be lengthy, but the previous excerpts show how this series, read and referenced frequently by fundamentalists, depicts and embraces divine violence.

Another major component of rhetorical violence seen in the series is the establishment of insider/outsider dynamics. This is especially notable with the relationship between Christians and Jews in the books. Though the “Tribulation Force” eventually joins forces with Jews in the series, Lampert-Weissig notes that the Jews seem

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14 Ibid., 208.
to be used to serve a purpose. She writes, “In this scheme, Jews exist only for the benefit of Christians; they are scattered across the earth as punishment for their mistreatment of Christ.” Jews are merely “catalysts to Christian conversion or aids to Christians” in the series. There is no accounting for religious pluralism here: Jews who remain alive until Jesus’ return—there will be 144,000—will convert to Christianity. The series, as Lampert-Weissig notes, depicts the “inversion of the Jew from perpetrator to victim [which] reveals the novels’ philosemitism to be simply the reverse face of the anti-Semitic coin.” While the series is clearly violent, intolerant, and anti-pluralistic—characteristics which can often be applied to fundamentalism as a whole—the characters seem to think that their actions are helping others.

Precept Ministries

Precept Ministries International is a Christian fundamentalist publishing company who affirms the inerrancy of the Bible. With extensive publications, their commentaries and study guides are popular choices in fundamentalist churches and Sunday schools. Of particular note for this thesis is their two-book commentary on Revelation for children. The books are part of their “Inductive Bible Studies” which teach the Bible using “observation, interpretation, and application.” This children’s series is published for upper-grade elementary school students and has children read the text of Revelation while highlighting key terms in different shapes/colors (such as a black

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15 Lampert-Weissig, 499.
16 Ibid., 506.
17 Ibid., 498.
cloud filled with brown every time the word “woe” appears), doing some arts and crafts, doing the worksheets in the commentary, and reading through the commentary. The commentary takes a narrative approach, following two kids, Max and Molly, through their study of Revelation and their trip through the Discovery Bible Museum, a fictional museum that brings the events of Revelation to life through interactive exhibits and IMAX movies. This commentary not only contains much of the same ideas as seen previously in the fundamentalist tradition, but makes them accessible for children. The books use scare tactics to encourage belief in Jesus and to encourage them to bring their friends to church.

As seen in Chapter One, Revelation abounds in violent imagery. This commentary does not leave out any of that imagery. Common to the fundamentalist tradition, the commentary encourages “cross-referencing,” saying, “When we compare Scripture with other Scripture, that’s called cross-referencing. Always remember that Scripture never contradicts Scripture.”20 The commentary notes and even embraces the idea that God is responsible for the apocalyptic destruction. Arthur writes,

…the fourth of the people of the earth who are killed are not saved and will go to Hades, where the lake of fire is. How awful! Did you notice something very important in this verse? How about the fact that this rider is given authority to kill? This means the rider is not the one in control. God allows the rider to kill. God is in control.21

This idea that God gives authority to kill can be uncomfortable, so Arthur discusses this. She writes, “Did you know that the breaking of these seals is the beginning of God’s judgment on the earth? Yes, God is a God of salvation. He is loving, forgiving, and merciful. But He is also a holy God who must judge sin. These judgments are coming to

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21 Ibid., 116, (italics in original).
put an end to sin.”22 Despite these horrors, the author encourages the children, appealing to the sense that they are the insiders, so they will not be enduring these terrible eschatological events.23 She also assures the readers that God is merciful and gives second chances—implying that everyone has had multiple chances to accept Christ, so it is not God’s fault if they do not and are eternally punished.24 The image of the rider on the white horse is discussed and Arthur asks, “WHERE is Jesus’ sword? It will come out of His mouth. Isn’t that awesome?”25 There is no apparent discomfort with the warrior-like Jesus who slaughters unbelievers. The commentary also explains how the only way to heaven is by believing in Jesus—even though some people might be “nice,” that does not ensure their entrance into heaven, just a lesser degree of torture in hell.26

This commentary does not refrain from discussing and explaining the violent imagery in Revelation to children. Rather, it makes it easy to understand and even to interact with. The following images, respectively, show a cartoon drawing of the birds gorging themselves on human flesh and blood up to the horses’ bridles, a puzzle to solve Revelation 14:11 (“And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”27), and a maze through the events of Revelation—with the possibility to arrive in either heaven or hell. Whatever devastating events may occur in this eschatological future, the author reassures the children, saying, “…He is coming very soon! Be ready. And don’t ever forget this: WE WIN!”28

22 Ibid., 117.
24 Ibid., 68.
25 Ibid., 112.
26 Ibid., 123.
28 Arthur, Sneak Peek, 143.
29 Ibid., 59.
"And the _______ of their _________ goes up mokse ortmetn
_________ and _______; they have no _______
orefvr vere estr
_______ and ________, those who ________
ady ignth orwhisp
the _________ and his _________, and whoever
esabt migae
____________ the _________ of his _________.”
ectieves armk amne

Revelation 14: _______

30 Ibid., 115.
31 Ibid., 140.
Other Sources

The previous two examples demonstrate how rhetorical violence is used by mainstream fundamentalists, but the examples are just a small sampling of that kind of ideology in the tradition. This section will briefly discuss three more cases where fundamentalists use rhetorical violence: Marc Driscoll, Dove World Outreach Center, and RaptureReady.com.

Mark Driscoll was the pastor of Mars Hill Church, a non-denominational fundamentalist mega-church in Seattle, Washington, for nearly twenty years before his resignation due to controversy over allegations of plagiarism and vulgarity. During his time at the church, Driscoll made numerous, violently-charged comments about the nature of God and Jesus. He commented on Jesus, saying,

There is a strong drift toward the hard theological left. Some emergent types [want] to recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with a lot of product in His hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes. In Revelation, Jesus is a pride fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up. I fear some are becoming more cultural than Christian, and without a big Jesus who has authority and hates sin as revealed in the Bible, we will have less and less Christians, and more and more confused, spiritually self-righteous blogger critics of Christianity.

Driscoll not only makes this negative statement towards the portrayal of Jesus as a “hippie” or a pacifist, but also writes on whether or not God is a pacifist. He claims that those who believe God is a pacifist base their beliefs on the sixth commandment from Exodus. He argues that the translation of Ex. 20:13 in the King James Version as “Thou

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32 “Pride fighting” is a type of martial arts, generally competed in by strong, “macho” men. This would be the image that Driscoll is looking to here.
34 The entirety of Driscoll’s argument discussed here is from Mark Driscoll, “Is God a pacifist?” MarkDriscoll.org, 21 October, 2013, http://markdriscoll.org/is-god-a-pacifist/.
“shalt not kill” is actually a mistranslation of the Hebrew “ratsah”; he believes that this should be translated—as the English Standard Bible does—as “You shall not murder.”

Driscoll asserts that while “Murder is a sin against a person and the God who made them….there are situations in which, sadly, the death of a person is both justified and necessary.” He appeals to the idea of the holiness and righteousness of God to show how he/she is justified in killing—and he extends this justification to humanity, writing, “[E]ngaging evil in order to protect others is not evil. That’s holy and just.” The only way that God can establish a perfect, sinless kingdom in the future, Driscoll argues, is by “vanquish[ing] his enemies” now. Looking toward the idea of the divinely-ruled eschatological kingdom, Driscoll writes, “Once the wick is burned up, [Jesus] is saddling up on a white horse and coming to slaughter his enemies and usher in his kingdom. Blood will flow…. Jesus is no one to mess with.” Driscoll’s view of Jesus extends to his view of the role of humanity: it is not only allowed and justified, but necessary that violence is used against evil, and that evil can be anyone who opposes Christianity.

Terry Jones, pastor of Dove World Outreach Center in Florida, is another major American fundamentalist figure whose ideas are not just fraught with violent tones, as Driscoll’s are, but move into performing quasi-violent actions that target non-Christian groups. While Jones is at the forefront of most of the quasi-violent actions of the church, the co-pastor, Wayne Sapp, and congregation are involved in the events as well. Dove World Outreach Center has focused primarily on two “anti-Christian” groups in their attacks: homosexuals and Muslims. They specifically targeted Mayor Craig Lowe, who is openly homosexual, during his campaign for office by “post[ing] a sign reading ‘No
homo mayor’ outside its church during the mayoral election campaign.”

While the church is openly anti-homosexuality, its primary target is Islam. Terry Jones organized a public burning of the Qur’an on the ninth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001 to “‘send a clear message to the radical element of Islam: We will no longer be controlled and dominated by their fears and threats.’” The event was canceled because of the pleading of the American government—including President Obama. Jones claimed that his purpose, “‘expose that there is an element of Islam that is very dangerous and very radical.’” was fulfilled even without the Qur’an burning. However, in the following March, “Wayne Sapp, set a Koran on fire after a mock trial, in which Mr [sic] Jones presided and a ‘jury’ found the book ‘guilty’ of crimes against humanity.” Though Dove World Outreach Center has not engaged in physical violence against humans, their beliefs have taken them beyond just rhetorical violence into taking action against non-Christian groups in the form of protests.

RaptureReady.com is a biblical prophecy website that was created for Christians and non-Christians to learn more about the “end times” that the site’s authors, Todd Strandberg and Terry James, believe is coming soon. The site contains a page of frequently asked questions, ranging from questions about the authorship of the Bible to whether Alcoholics Anonymous is an acceptable organization for Christians to be a part of; a photorama, including pictures and descriptions of “what type mansion you should expect to be given [in heaven]” as well as “The Mr. Antichrist Evil Pageant”; a list of various timelines, such as one of events in the history of Christianity and one with events

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in the history of homosexuality; and a glossary of terms like “dispensationalism.” The authors’ beliefs are similar to LaHaye’s eschatology, and their site explores ideas of the Rapture and the Antichrist. Prior to President Obama’s election in 2008, Strandberg explored the possibility that Obama was the Antichrist he believed Revelation predicted: “one of the winning lottery numbers in the president-elect’s home state was 666—which, as everyone knows, is the sign of the Beast (also known as the Antichrist).”

RaptureReady.com contains a “Rapture Index” that is essentially, according to Strandberg, a “Dow Jones Industrial Average of end time activity, but I think it would be better if you viewed it as prophetic speedometer. The higher the number, the faster we're moving towards the occurrence of pre-tribulation rapture.” This index has different levels, based on the “prophetic activity.” A “Rapture Index above 160” means “Fasten your seat belts.” Newsweek notes that “Obama’s win pushed the index to 161,” and as of March 30, 2015, it is at 181. The site traces particular issues that could increase this index, such as “anti-Christianity” in the United States. Strandberg responds to a question about whether or not “Christian youth programs [are] being discriminated against in the U.S.”

Yes. A Christian nonprofit, Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF), is facing opposition in Portland Oregon as it seeks to bring youth to Christ. The group’s “Good News Club” is being called “psychologically harmful to children” by a newly formed coalition [sic] “Protect Portland Children…. Critics of CEF and the Good News Club say the program teaches fundamentalist beliefs to children, and encourages fear, judgment, and divisiveness in youth.

41 Ibid.
Despite the fact that this group may be teaching material similar to that in the Precept Ministries’ commentary, Strandberg thinks the opposition is because of anti-Christian sentiments. He writes, “These godless liberals seem to have no problem with a six-year-old being forced to learn about sexual matters at such a young age but when it comes to the Lord Jesus Christ they want to deny a child from biblical truths.”

Strandberg’s timeline of homosexuality that includes the history of events related to homosexuality also indicates that, in his beliefs, the acceptance of homosexuality in the United States is targeting Christianity—and Strandberg frequently mentions President Obama’s support of gay marriage to show how it marginalizes Christianity.

The site has exhaustive discussions of current events, such as happenings in the Middle East and actions of the American government, to explore their relevance to the end times, and they embrace the idea that God must kill and allow killing to purify the world.

**Conclusion**

These examples—from the *Left Behind* series to RaptureReady.com—show how mainstream fundamentalist groups in the United States feel targeted and marginalized by American society, leading them to engage in rhetorical violence, such as using negative identity formation. The following chapter demonstrates the same ideas by presenting an ethnographic case study of Bible studies at a Baptist church in the Bowling Green, Kentucky area and how the attendees frequently employ rhetorical violence in their discussions of current events. While the examples in this chapter and the case study in

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42 Ibid.
the next chapter do not show fundamentalists engaging in physical violence, the actions and beliefs of this tradition’s adherents can be problematic.
Chapter 5 – “A God Who Speaks”: A Case Study of Warren County Baptist Church

From April through May 2014, I observed two men’s Bible study groups every Sunday at Warren County Baptist Church, a church affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The attendees’ ages ranged from 30s to late 60s and the groups were entirely composed of Caucasian males. The men were from a variety of occupations and backgrounds, including police officer, truck driver, businessman, chiropractor, and Vietnam veteran. Each meeting had from three to ten participants (including the Bible study leader), with the 11 a.m. meeting always having significantly fewer attendees than the 9:30 a.m. meeting. The meetings began with some small talk, followed by a call for prayer requests, then an opening prayer. Afterwards, Steve Ellis, the Bible study leader, would lead the group through the weekly handout he supplied based on a chapter of Revelation. Steve would lecture for most of the hour, with some questions for and comments from participants during and afterwards. Although he always had a worn Bible sitting on the table next to him, the group rarely used a Bible during the class. Instead, they just read from the verses included on the handouts.

Before my observation of the groups, Steve told me that the two groups had distinctly different dynamics. The 9:30 group was supposedly composed of younger, “family” men who were “white collar” while the 11:00 group was said to be older, “blue collar” men.

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1 All names of persons and places have been changed in the presentation of this data to preserve the privacy of the informants.
Definition of Terms

Before discussing my observations of the groups, it is important to clarify what they mean by terms that are frequently used. Though Steve defined these to me during an interview, they represent the aforementioned dispensational premillennialist thoughts. Steve described the Rapture as a moment when Jesus will call all Christians—living and dead—to “meet him in the clouds.” While many antichrists have come, according to Steve, there will be a figure who is not only the culmination of these antichrists, but the embodiment of Satan—this figure will be the Antichrist and will wreak havoc on the remnants of the earth after the Rapture. After this, a literal seven-year period will occur called the Tribulation during which terrible events will occur and anyone who converts to Christianity will be persecuted. Finally, the Millennium will be a literal thousand year period that will occur after the Second Coming of Christ, during which Jesus will rule the earth with the resurrected, supernatural Christians before ascending to heaven.

“…not 6-6-6!”

When I first met with Steve Ellis at Warren County Baptist Church in Bowling Green, KY, I was greeted by a jovial man in his late 40s who welcomed me into his office and told me a bit about himself. After making small talk about ourselves, our families, and where we are from, I explained my project of studying Baptist views of Revelation to him and why I found the topic interesting:

INTERVIEWER. I wanted to study this because Revelation and the end times are very popular topics today, and some people say Revelation should be read literally while some say it should be read symbolically so—

STEVE [interrupting]. Revelation is definitely not meant symbolically. I mean, maybe there won’t be a literal dragon with seven heads—it might be a person or something. But almost everything else is meant literally.
After our brief but informative meeting, I left his office and thanked him for his time—but had forgotten to ask where the Bible study actually met. Thankfully, he caught this oversight of mine and said, “We’ll see you at 9:30 on Sunday in Room 2-2-2…not 6-6-6!”

While I had anticipated that Steve believed in a “literal” reading of the Bible, I did not anticipate how much the Bible studies on Revelation that he led would emphasize this literal reading. In fact, many of his lessons focused almost entirely on repeating how one thing or another in Revelation should be read literally and that reading it symbolically was not what God had intended. In my observations of the groups and interviews with Steve, I found that this “biblical necessity” for a literal reading was the central focus—which led into violent rhetoric and a feeling of being targeted by society, two other major themes that pervaded group meetings and discussion and components of rhetorical violence.

**Dispensational Premillennialism**

During my observation of the groups and interviews with Steve Ellis, it was apparent that the participants considered themselves to be interpreting the Bible in a historical biblical tradition, i.e. how Jesus meant the Bible to be read. Steve frequently mentioned biblical “scholars” and how he agreed or disagreed with some of them. However, by biblical scholars, he was referring not to academics, but confessional biblical commentators. Therefore, though he and the rest of the group think themselves to be in the line of “correct”/“scholarly” interpretation, their beliefs are rather directly
formed by dispensational premillennialism—starting not in the 1st century C.E., but in the 19th century.

In his own estimation, Steve said Warren County Baptist Church—which he believed was representative for most Baptist congregations—was composed of 70% dispensational premillennialists and about 30% amillennialists. While there is a growing movement towards other eschatological views, the publication of the *Left Behind* series has popularized this premillennial view, causing many to have these beliefs. During an interview with Steve, I asked his opinion on the series. He responded that it was not “100% biblically accurate…but…at the heart of it, there’s a lot of scripture to it,” and expressed his happiness at the accessibility and popularization of “biblical truth.”

While observation of these Bible study groups makes it clear that they follow in the tradition of dispensational premillennialism, they are uncomfortable with saying they are following anyone’s doctrine but Jesus’. Despite the ability to trace these beliefs back to Darby, my informants emphasized their belief that this view was at the heart of Revelation and the Old Testament prophecies. Thus, an understanding of dispensational premillennialism rather than scholarly biblical interpretation is a necessary starting point to understand the beliefs and discussions of the Bible study groups I observed.

When discussing dispensational premillennialism with the groups, Steve claimed that while he believed this view is what is biblically supported, there is a possibility that another eschatological view (e.g. amillennialism, postmillennialism, historical premillennialism) could be correct. He said he has studied the verses that other groups

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2 According to Jerry L. Walls, *Oxford Dictionary of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13, “The essence of [amillennialism] is that Christ’s millennial reign has already been inaugurated through his death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.” Thus the thousand year period is not to be taken literally, but as a symbolic long amount of time before Christ’s second coming.
use to support their views and that, while they do indeed support those views, there is much more evidence supporting dispensational premillennialism. He did not deny that one of the other views may be “biblically true,” but said, “Yes, God can do that, but I just don’t believe that’s the God we serve.” Both in eschatological views and in the following discourse on his reasoning for literal interpretation of the Bible, Steve mainly appeals to the nature of God and claims that having the correct understanding of God leads to the correct understanding of scripture—which is an understanding he claims to have.

The groups I observed strongly believe in most of the doctrine of dispensationalism, but did not seem to know that this view was not established until the 19th century. Steve distributed a handout after discussing the Kingdom of God which outlined the four major views of the millennium. He included six points which he believed encapsulated the beliefs of each view. The following is the excerpt from the dispensational premillennial view:

A. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES…
1. The kingdom: Jesus failed to establish it at His first coming, will succeed at His second
2. The church: views the church and Israel as two distinct identities with two individual redemptive plans
3. The tribulation: a seven-year period (the 70th week of Dan 9:25-27) containing the reign of the Anti-Christ just prior to the millennium; restoration of Jews to Israel, conversion of the remnant of Israel, temple rebuilt, priesthood, sacrifices restored
4. The rapture: the church (living and dead) is raptured to meet the Lord in the air either at the beginning (pre-trib), middle (mid-trib) or end (post-trib) of the seven years of tribulation; tribulation saints and O.T. dead will be raised at the end.
5. The millennium: Christ will return at the end of the tribulation to institute a 1000 year rule from a holy city (the New Jerusalem); those who come to believe in Christ during the tribulation (including the 144,000 Jews) and survive will go on to populate the earth during this time; those who were raptured or raised previous to the tribulation period will reign with Christ over the millennial population
6. Post-millennium: Satan, bound during Christ’s earthly reign, will be loosed to deceive the nations, gather an army of the deceived, and take up to battle against the Lord; the battle will end in the judgment of the wicked and Satan, followed by entrance into the eternal state of glory by the righteous.

These points from Steve Ellis’ handout match up exactly with what John Nelson Darby discovered from his study of the Bible, though the groups seem to believe this view has been around since the composition of the Bible—even before the writing of the New Testament. In addition, the groups take a literal approach to reading Old Testament prophecy, much as early dispensationalists such as Darby did. The idea of reading the Old Testament “through the lens of Revelation” stems directly from this tradition.

**Literal Interpretations**

From my first observation, it became apparent that the major concern of the groups and leader was interpreting the Bible literally, even in a modern world. Despite the acknowledgement of the use of symbology in the Bible, especially in reference to time periods, the groups maintained a literal view of these symbols. After observing several Bible studies and hearing about the same theme repeatedly, I interviewed Steve to ask him why reading the Bible literally was important to him. His answer provided an excellent framework for understanding the rest of his comments and lectures on literalism:

**INTERVIEWER.** You talk a lot about reading the Bible and Revelation literally. So why is that important to you?

**STEVE.** Okay. Well, I really…I go back to Genesis chapter 1. I think that’s very foundational to…um…in my opinion, you have to have a proper view of God in order for you to develop in him, have that proper relationship with him, and walk and follow him. In my opinion, a proper view of God is a God who speaks, and things happen. Not a God who has to wait for things to happen. Not a God who sets things in motion and steps away for it to happen, but he speaks and things happen. So literally, if you read through Genesis chapter 1, you see a
God that speaks and things happen. So that’s why I believe in a literal interpretation of all of scripture because I see it in chapter 1 in Genesis. And I feel it the rest of the way through and it makes a whole lot more sense as you go through scripture when you understand “that’s the kind of God I really have.”

Steve’s answer here, and his lectures throughout the course of my observation, continuously stress literalism by focusing on sensory verbs and verbs that seem to require active participation. He claims here that scripture must be read literally because “God speaks and things happen.” During several class periods, he mentioned how Revelation must also be read literally because “John says he sees things happening.” Because John is actively “seeing,” Steve believes everything the author sees must be physically real.

Another major reason for Steve’s emphasis on literal interpretation can essentially be encapsulated by asking, “Why not?” He believes that the Bible is spiritually important, but claims, “Without it being a literal interpretation, you can say spiritual stuff in a lot less words.” This secondary part of his argument for biblical literalism is that the Bible is a large book with extensive information, so if God did not mean for everything in it to be literal, there was no purpose in writing all of that. While some Christians believe that the reason for this is because the human authors included information that was important to the time and setting, the groups I observed believe that the Bible was “divinely inspired.” While they would use this term, I would further split it into a sub-group: those who believe the Bible was “divinely dictated.” While divine inspiration just suggests that God had a role in the formation of the Bible and ideas that were included in it, divine dictation would be a better term for what these groups believe about the Bible: not only did God have a role in its formation and the ideas behind the books, he gave the actual words of the books to the human authors for them to write down. Because the groups believe in the divine dictation of the Bible, they read the books of the Bible not
only as a singular unit, but as something to compare the rest of the Bible to. Over half of
the meetings I attended involved Steve reading Old Testament prophecy “through the
lens of Revelation” since they can all be compared to each other and used to study and
find the “truth.”

During the first meeting I observed, the groups discussed the wars that would take
place during the tribulation. Referencing the Book of Revelation, the group did not read
the 1st century warfare as something specific to that context or a symbol for
eschatological warfare. Rather, they believe that the reason Revelation uses images of
swords and horses instead of the guns, helicopters, tanks, and nuclear weapons that are
present in the 21st century is because technology will be entirely destroyed during the
tribulation. Because technology will not work, it is necessitated that soldiers use ancient
weaponry and transportation. I found this discussion intriguing because many literalists
read modern weaponry into Revelation instead of finding a way that this literal warfare
will take place.

In observing the Bible studies, I found that the groups’ literal interpretation is
extremely important to their eschatological views and their reading of the entirety of the
Bible. Steve claims, “[God] is literally telling us exactly what is going to happen.” Not
only do they cling to literal readings of the Bible, they interpret 1st century events and
contexts through the lens of a 21st century American. This becomes problematic not only
in terms of how they feel targeted by society, as seen later, but also by how they use
violent rhetoric to describe end-time events and discuss the government and political
figures.
Violence in Rhetoric and Revelation

This type of literal interpretation easily leads to rhetorical violence which, as seen in the introduction and previous chapter, can be defined as language and behaviors that harm others and that occur so regularly that they are often become routinized and habitual. Rhetorical violence is often the product of feelings of marginalization and feeling targeted by society and, in turn, leads to the exclusion of others and creation of insider/outsider dynamics which are harmful to society. This community never targeted a specific figure as the Antichrist, but frequently showed that they viewed themselves as a group interpreting and living out the Bible in the correct way, in opposition to other Christian denominations, religions, and American society. This tension with outsiders will be discussed further in the following section on societal targeting; but this section will focus on how these insider/outsider dynamics lead to rhetorical violence and how the groups handle the violent tones and imagery within the Book of Revelation and the rest of the Bible.

Although I soon discovered that the groups interpreted the Bible literally, I did not understand the extent of this. During the first Bible study I observed, I learned that the groups did not just interpret the eschatological events literally (millennial reign, tribulation, etc.), but the violent acts of the book as well—including those of God and Jesus. Revelation 19 was the subject of this first study and includes not only the destruction of the Whore of Babylon, the beast, the false prophet, and “those who had received the mark of the beast” (19:20), but the picture of a powerful, conquering Jesus:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in
blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.” (19:11-16)

Because the groups’ literal interpretation of the Bible necessitates everything being read as such, they view this passage as what Jesus will actually do when he returns to earth before instating his millennial reign. According to Steve, “Babylon’s destruction is the way God avenges the blood of all the bond-servants, since they died at the hands of Babylon. Remember, Babylon is the name for the Kingdom of Satan on earth.” After this, the wedding ceremony between the bridegroom (Jesus) and the bride (the Church) takes place, followed by Jesus defending the city of Jerusalem:

STEVE. The armies of the Antichrist surround the city and prepare to breach what little defenses remain. Remember that even though Jerusalem is still standing, the destruction of the tribulation has reduced technology to the most rudimentary level. Men are attacking on horses and are using ancient weaponry. So the attack will proceed in a manner similar to ancient warfare. A siege followed by an assault. Then a defense, and ultimately hand-to-hand combat. Can you believe how this turns and the Bible is found to be literally true?

These events were orchestrated by God, according to Steve, so that Jesus could “wipe them out” in one place. The Jesus of Revelation 19, carrying a sword and ready to “strike down the nations,” has two armies with him—one composed of the supernatural humans who have been previously raptured and one composed of angels. However, neither of these groups fight with Jesus—he single-handedly destroys all of the unbelievers who oppose him. Steve notes how some may be uncomfortable with this, saying, “It’s hard to imagine everything is going to come down to bloodshed. We don’t want it to happen because it’s ugly. But it should be ugly because man has sinned against God and doesn’t

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understand righteousness and judgment like God does.” Because there will be sin in the millennial kingdom from those who survived the tribulation, Steve says there will be judgment. Since Jesus will be a perfect king, he must judge everyone according to their actions—therefore, Jesus will execute those who sin against him.

I was struck by this image of a warrior Jesus who slaughters everyone and who immediately enacts judgment through execution as king. I posed the question of how Steve and his Bible study groups cope with the violence in Revelation in order to understand his point of view on this issue. The conversation proceeded as follows:

INTERVIEWER. My last question is just, how do you feel about the violence in Revelation?
STEVE. The violence in Revelation? Well, you have to…the key part of God that people in the 21st century want to ignore is that…he is love, everybody embraces that. They like that part of God. But they forget the part of God that says he’s also holy. And when you’re holy, you have to judge. Okay, you have to bring judgment against those things that aren’t holy. And so in that process, there’s violence. There is an anger that God builds up. God tells you he gets angry. He hates sin; he despises sin. Loves the sinner, but he despises sin. A person who perpetrates him or herself in sin then becomes the enemy of God. And so in all of that there’s ultimately sooner or later going to be judgment. And there’s no way to bring judgment without what we would consider…uh…violence. Now when we look at it from God’s perspective, it is perfectly…I created you, I made you. I have every right to dispose of you as I desire because I am your creator. So he has every right to do that, that’s why we say his judgment is perfect…. So that’s how I justify that…. So it looks pretty ugly in Revelation.

Steve then proceeded to discuss the events of Genesis to show how God gave humans an easy choice between following him and following selfish desires. The way he handles the violence in Revelation, then, is by understanding it as God’s divine mandate. Again, going back to why he interprets the Bible literally, it all stems from understanding God in the “proper way.” When I later observed one of the meetings, he gave a similar metaphor of God having the right to destroy things he created, describing humans as clay pots and God as the potter who can destroy the pots at will. Thus humans may see God and his
actions—especially those in the end times—as violent, but it stems purely from the holiness and justice of God. Violence is a human construct, not a divine one.

Not only is this warfare violent—it is one of the two-fold purposes of Jesus’ second coming. Steve said Jesus’ second coming will “One: bring about the salvation of Israel and two: bring about the defeat of nations and destruction of the Antichrist.” This, then, leads to a God who must be feared—an idea that sits well with most of the attendees of the groups I observed. However, one attendee was uncomfortable with fearing God. Alan Griffith, a man in his 60s who was always comfortable expressing his opinions, said he had a hard time “fearing God” because that meant he had to be obedient to a God who kills people. Bob Martin, a police officer in his 50s, responded that though it might be uncomfortable, that “fear that we have of God is minimized for us because Jesus took the brunt of it all. Apart from that, we should be terrified of the Lord that we know.” This obviously made Alan feel better about this concept, and he expressed his delight that the military would be removed during the tribulation to show that God is in complete control of the outcome. After this discussion, the members seemed to move from an idea of “fearing” God to respecting God. However, this concept of a violent God still remains with the group and they are satisfied with that—as long as it is not directed toward them because they have an intermediary in Jesus.

Perhaps because of the groups’ lack of discomfort with the notion of a violent God who judges and destroys, the groups engage in rhetorical violence and create insider/outsider dynamics which can lead to behavior harmful to others. One of the first ways I observed this over the course of my research was when the group was talking
about superpowers being destroyed during the tribulation. This discussion led into a politically charged conversation, as follows:

STEVE. You know how we have superpower nations today? Now that is now gone. It’s kind of…the playing field’s now equal.
ALAN. So does that mean when the superpowers are destroyed, Obama’s gone?
[laughing by all]
STEVE. …he’s taking a descent in the toilet.
[more laughing].

This conversation was shocking because of the obvious distaste for President Obama from the entire group. While the groups never mentioned their political views straightforwardly, there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with current political leadership. This dynamic in the group led them to view themselves as the insiders to the “correct” view of God, the Bible, and America while the outsiders—consisting, seemingly, of Democrats, non-Christians, and those who support “unbiblical” ideas—were judged and questioned for their motives and ideals. While the groups never specified that they were against Democrats and people supporting “unbiblical” ideas, it was strongly implied in their discussions; instead these groups would be mentioned as “those people who believe x” or “those people who do x.”

Baptists: Targeted by Society

While I anticipated literal interpretation to be a major factor for discussion in the Bible study groups based on my initial meeting with Steve Ellis, I did not realize until about halfway through my observations that a recurring theme of feeling targeted by society was a significant component of the meetings. When transcribing audio recordings and notes and organizing my data, I realized that this theme that had not occurred to me was apparent in every meeting and interview I observed and conducted.
Beginning with the comment about President Obama, I found that they did not like the current political authority not just because of political policy, but because they feel that Obama and other Democrats are taking away their rights to be Christian. This section of the chapter will show that the groups I observed feel targeted by society—by which, I mean their rights to be Christian and fundamentalist are oppressed—by politics and governmental institutions, education, media, and even other Christian organizations.

Following the previous comments about President Obama, the group talked frequently—both in meetings and in private discussions before and after—about how the government has taken away their religious rights. Before one meeting, eight members were already sitting in the circle talking about their weeks, their families, and such, when I overheard two having a conversation about an Oklahoma courthouse that had not only taken out the Ten Commandments, but were considering installing a statue of Satan due to a request by a Satanic group. The entire class, including Steve, engaged in this conversation and discussed the vileness of this action and how it was obviously intended as a “slam against Christianity.” In the final meeting I observed, the group had a similar discussion about prayer in the Supreme Court, as follows:

ANDREW. [unable to understand]…have won the battle to keep having prayer before meeting. It used to be before any board meeting or…congressional, state, what have you, they always have a word of prayer, but the government’s been trying to get rid of it. They [Christians] won the battle and it’s the first one they’ve won in a long time. Well, so….

GEORGE. There’s a courthouse in a small town that before each of their meetings for the past twenty years, all of their opening prayers were Christian. But since this one man worked through the court asking them to open it up, they now let Hindu priests pray and Wiccan leaders.

ANDREW. I’m just surprised this happened in the Sun Belt. I mean, not to say anything negative, but other places are known to be that way. It seems like the Southern…like they have lost their battles.
Not only does this group feel like they are being targeted by the government—which is trying to rid governmental meetings of Christian prayer, according to the group—they feel targeted by other religions being allowed to begin meetings with their prayers, which they view as an attack on their religious freedom.

The education system is another organization that the groups feel threatened by, both at K-12 levels and post-secondary levels. Nearly every meeting, Steve would discuss the teaching of evolution in classrooms, and how this and leaving out teaching creationism was a clear sign that the education system wanted to teach against Christian values. Steve felt that Christians are also targeted by universities and colleges because “they make fun of homeschoolers and don’t let them attend.” While he overstated his case, as he acknowledged that some homeschooled students are accepted into public universities, he did still feel that the majority were not accepted and those who were are treated poorly. He then proceeded to discuss a case in which the father of a teenage student was assaulted and “cussed out” by other parents at a parent-teacher meeting when he said he did not want his daughter reading a book that was required because it contained graphic sexual material. Steve lamented not only the attack against the father, but that schools were teaching students to be “worldly and sexual, so far as forcing them to read books that will encourage them to engage in...sexual behaviors.”

While these were key concerns of the group, the recent draft of Michael Sam to the St. Louis Rams National Football League (NFL) team was the topic of much discussion during the last meeting I observed. This discussion began before the meeting started, but extended fifteen minutes into the time of the meeting itself. Michael Sam was the first openly gay person to be part of an NFL team—an issue that caused much
controversy in the group, especially as many of the men were NFL followers and ESPN watchers.

Steve was particularly outraged about this as he watches ESPN Sports Network frequently and “[is] a huge Pittsburgh Steelers fan. I don’t watch much else on TV, but I love the Steelers and I’m just waiting for my Pirates to win.” Steve could not understand why Sam, the 249th draft pick (“not even high up there—he barely made it”) was the focus of so much media attention. He said he watched the draft and wanted to hear about the rest of the players, but they only focused on Sam. He believed this was to show anyone who does not agree with homosexuality—especially Christians—that this is what is important to America. He said ESPN “celebrated something that did not need to be celebrated. They show him walk out of his house and kiss his girlfriend…uh…I wish it was his girlfriend…but his boyfriend.” The fact that this is what the media publicizes “shows us the end is coming,” he believes, and looks forward to the millennium when “they won’t be showing gay people kissing on TV.” Not only do Steve and the other group members believe that the media portrays Christians in a bad light, they feel that the propagation of “anti-Christian” subjects—such as sex and homosexuality—is a way for America to try to convert Christians out of their beliefs.

The groups feel targeted even by other Christians, though not as much as by the government, education systems, and the media. Other Christians (i.e. non-evangelicals) have “bought into the lies the government teaches…and that homosexuality is okay.” Within their discussion of dispensational premillennialism, they present themselves as the ones who are in the “truth,” while other Christians who do not believe in dispensationalism are trying to convert them to their own beliefs because they have not
read the Bible “correctly.” Steve discussed his distrust of some seminaries because their beliefs are too “liberal,” as well as mentioning the problems he sees with popular Christian writers such as Rob Bell and Brian McLaren. Essentially, the groups see any Christian group that has different beliefs than them to be targeting them and making their beliefs look absurd.

Based on these examples and incidents, the groups see themselves—as Baptists—as being targeted by society and, as a result, believe they are close to the “end times.” Following the discussion about Michael Sam in the last meeting I observed, Steve officially began the meeting with an opening prayer. The following portion of this prayer serves as a strong conclusion to this point of how the groups feel targeted by society and how America is, or is at least becoming, a corrupt country:

STEVE. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time together, Lord. We just give great thanks, Father, and we just pray, Lord, that you continue your work in our church, in our midst, and you just continue to allow us to see you at work and around the world. We pray, Lord, that you might be glorified this day and that your kingdom is expanded because of your great grace and mercy. We pray that you be with this country and the leadership, to give them guidance and allow us to worship freely; that you let our youth grow up in a world where they are accepted and shine your light….

Conclusion: “The End is Near”

From my observation of the Bible study groups led by Steve Ellis at Warren County Baptist Church, I found that they were concerned with “bringing God glory” through literal readings of the Bible which led to them engaging in rhetorical violence and feeling targeted by society. While their discussions may come across as benign, these ideas are similar to those expressed by groups—as will be seen in the following chapter—to justify physically violent actions. During my time with the groups, I felt like
my presence became less noticeable—I was talked to, joked with, and became almost a part of the group, despite being a woman in her mid-twenties. However, my gradual acceptance into the group never merged with my presence becoming that of participant; I was never asked questions during the meeting proper or expected to contribute anything. The more the groups became comfortable with my presence, the more they discussed topics that were important to them, though controversial, such as homosexuality, politics, and the education system. While I learned that the group obviously adhered to dispensational premillennialist doctrine rather than a scholarly reading of the Bible, I still wondered about what seems so prevalent in many fundamentalist Christians’ minds: “the end is near.” This idea came up frequently, but was never specifically addressed; thus, in my final interview with Steve, I asked him the question I had been curious about his answer to for the entirety of my observation: “When do you think the rapture will occur?” To conclude this case study, then, I will end with his response about the end times:

STEVE. I personally believe…within the next fifty years ‘cause of speed of change. I just relate everything to…well, in a section of Daniel we’ll talk about in the end times, people will rush back to and fro, and all these will increase rapidly. Okay. And we see now transportation, high-speed trains, international jets, people hustling so busy to and fro. Sometimes there’s no identifying who they are or what their purpose is. So you see a lot of that going on, but the main thing I see is the increase in knowledge. Now when you consider…um…just what we know about medicine and what we’ve learned in the last ten years about medicine…and this increase of knowledge is exponentially faster than any time in the world. So I believe it’s coming. Within the next fifty years.

Thus, as Tim LaHaye popularly asked, “Are we living in the end times?” Steve might reply, “Yes. It’s coming.”
Mainstream American Christian fundamentalism, as I am categorizing this tradition, relies heavily on an interpretive tradition of the Book of Revelation to arrive at its eschatological beliefs. As seen, this tradition does not interpret the text as a document using symbolic language and imagery to describe the events happening around the time of composition in 90 C.E., but read it as a text predicting future events and describing them in a mostly literal way. By this, I mean the tradition typically reads the Bible as an inerrant and divinely inspired text. Many individuals within this tradition do not feel the need to study the historical context of the Bible because they believe God reveals what they need to know and how it should be read. Because of this, they generally read the Bible literally—until they arrive at passages, such as the parables of Jesus, that do not fit into this schematic. While this type of reading of Revelation is not supported by the biblical text—at least, according to most scholars—interpretations and commentaries of the text as early as the second century C.E. had begun connecting Revelation with other biblical texts to arrive at an interpretation that involved ideas of the Antichrist and millennial reign. From the time of these early commentaries until the nineteenth century, more Christians interpreted the text in this way, but provided few new ideas. In the nineteenth century, however, John Nelson Darby studied the text of Revelation, arriving at and pioneering two influential ideas: dispensationalism and the Rapture. Though there was some discussion of something like dispensationalism and the Rapture earlier in the tradition, Darby was arguably the first to arrive at a conclusive definition and discussion
of these ideas. Though Darby is rarely referenced by fundamentalists, his ideas provide a significant amount of the framework for fundamentalist thought.

While this belief system may not seem problematic on the surface, the tradition’s beliefs—particularly their conception of the holiness and righteousness of God—lead directly into rhetorical violence. Although Revelation is not the only book referenced by the fundamentalist tradition when creating insider/outsider dichotomies, it is paradigmatic of this idea. Rhetorical violence, as I have defined it, is composed of language and behaviors that harm others and that occur so regularly that they often become routinized and habitual. It frequently includes the creation of insider/outsider dynamics, forming an “us” versus “them” relationship. Rhetorical violence is often the product of the individual or group enacting it feeling marginalized and targeted by society. In the case of Christian fundamentalism, as seen in Chapters Four and Five, rhetorical violence has a two-fold cause: feeling victimized by “liberal” American society and viewing God as holy and righteous, and thus compelled to judge and destroy sin. Adherents of this fundamentalist tradition often transform these causes into rhetorical violence, such as intolerance of religious pluralism and declaring homosexuality as “unnatural” and a cause for the coming of the end times.

The rhetorical violence performed by some fundamentalists may seem uncomfortable, but harmless. However, this language and ideology is remarkably similar to that of fundamentalist individuals and groups whose religious ideas motivated them to enact physical violence. Regina Schwartz argues that “[the biblical narrative] interpreters have insisted upon canonizing, codifying, and authorizing, in short, in turning the text, despite itself, into a weapon. And in the violent tactics of identity formation, that weapon
is most often wielded against the Other.”¹ By transforming their feelings of marginalization into creating or joining a community where they are the insider, these groups form their identity and effectively make the outsiders of their community the “Other.” In fundamentalist ideology, this is generally conceived of in terms of cosmic war: we, the insiders, are on God’s side, so you, the outsiders, must be on Satan’s side.

Rhetorical violence may be just rhetoric, but the possible consequences of it are incredibly harmful and destructive to individuals, groups, and societies. While mainstream American Christian fundamentalists discussed in Chapter Four and the Baptist groups observed and discussed in Chapter Five are not enacting violence based on their beliefs, the possibility for this to happen is evident. The Left Behind series and Precept Ministries’ commentary series for children both use violent language in their writing to portray God’s judgment in the “end times,” such as the imagery of the rider on the white horse and the trampling of the winepress. These books not only accept the violent actions of God and Jesus, but even celebrate them. Similarly, the ethnographic case study of Warren Baptist County Church shows that the participants of the Bible studies I observed also believed in the violent, but divine, judgment of God. They believe that God does not have the same conception of violence as humanity has, but is rather acting on behalf of his/her holiness and righteousness. Mark Driscoll uses the imagery of the rider on the white horse to portray Jesus as a “pride fighter” and show that he has a desire to “make someone bleed.” Driscoll’s language often takes the warfare imagery beyond just an apocalyptic event, but to depict the figure of Jesus as a violent, unforgiving savior.

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