

Protagonist Corner

Elizabeth McGregor Simmons
University Presbyterian Church, San Antonio, Texas

Ever quoted Walter Brueggemann in a sermon? Of course.
Kathleen Norris? Yes.
Anne Lamott? Sure.
John Hagee? Who's he?

John Hagee is the pastor of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, where I live. To be honest, in the 14 years that San Antonio has been my home, I may have spent a grand total of 10 minutes thinking about him. Recently, however, I was contacted for an interview by a British academic who is writing a book on Christian Zionism, the movement which focuses on “end times” scenarios that involve “ingathering” all the world’s Jews in Israel against the backdrop of major international warfare.¹ The author was interested in a mainline Protestant pastor’s perspective on Hagee. When I told him that John Hagee is pretty much off the radar screen of my daily existence, he was incredulous. He told me that in his view Hagee’s apocalyptic script is a major export from the U.S. to the rest of the world, and furthermore, it is what many Europeans now regard as American Christianity.

It was my turn to be incredulous, and my incredulity ratcheted upward when I learned of a 2002 *Time/CNN* poll which reported that 59% of Americans say that they believe the events in Revelation are going to come true, that nearly one-quarter think that the Bible predicted the September 11 attacks, and that 36% of those polled who support Israel “say they do so because they believe in biblical prophecies that Jews must control Israel before Christ will come again.”²

It would be false to impute responsibility for these statistical results to John Hagee alone, but, make no mistake about it, he is enormously influential. He claims that 99 million households tune in to his weekly radio and television broadcasts. He is the founder of the organization Christians United for Israel which bases its political agenda on a dispensationalist reading of the Bible. CUFI is no fringe group; at its July 2007 gathering in Washington, D.C., President Bush sent his good wishes by letter, and John McCain, Newt Gingrich, and House Minority Whip Roy Blunt were featured speakers. In a speech delivered before the group, Senator Joseph Lieberman said, “Of describing Pastor Hagee in the words that the Torah uses to describe Moses, he is an *Ish Elokim*, a man of God and those words really do fit him; and, I’d add something else, like Moses he’s become the leader of a mighty multitude, even greater than the multitude that Moses led from Egypt to the Promised Land.”³

John Hagee is no longer off my radar screen. The apocalyptic imagery used by him and by the popular *Left Behind* series of novels is the subject of many a conversation between me and the members of the church which I serve. I have been listening more closely when they tell me of the hesitation and the intimidation which they feel when their neighbors, their classmates, their co-workers, even members of their own families start quoting Bible verses as if they were lines in a divinely penned screenplay of specific current events. “We want to speak confident good news to counter violent,

absolutist, bad news,” they say, “but we find ourselves speechless.”

I doubt that conversations such as these are unique to me and the congregation at University Presbyterian. I have a hunch that many long for their pastors to do more to equip them to be *evangelists* in the true sense of the word, that is, bearers of *good news*.

Talk to someone who has been rendered speechless by a Bible-quoting end-timer, and five minutes into the conversation, you will find yourself bumping up against “The Rapture.” Might a sermon on the subject of the Rapture be a good starting point in equipping your congregation to speak good news? Many will be open-mouthed at learning that what they have heard of the Rapture or even read of it themselves in the first volume of the *Left Behind* series is never mentioned in the book of Revelation. The closest the Bible gets to describing something that sounds a bit like a Rapture is in I Thessalonians 4:17, “then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.” One must be careful to note, however, that when the line is read in context, Paul is writing in this earliest of his letters to reassure those early Christians about what would happen to their loved ones who had died. The line isn’t emphasizing that some will be left behind, but rather that all will be together with their loved ones when Christ comes again.

From whence then does this idea of a Rapture come? It comes from a method of reading the Bible called *dispensationalism*. John Hagee’s theology and the theology embedded in the *Left Behind* series rest on this nineteenth century invention by John Nelson Darby who said that there were “dispensations,” intervals of time ordering a grand timetable for world events. According to Darby’s view, God has divided history into seven distinct dispensations or ages. It lays out a rigid master plan for all of human history, and the Rapture is a part of this.⁴

One of the best lines I’ve heard was passed on to me by Douglas Brackenridge, Trinity University professor emeritus of religion, who said, “Saying ‘the Bible says’ is like saying ‘the library says.’” Dispensational theology constructs a master plan for history by taking three verses from the book of Daniel and hooking them onto passages in I Thessalonians, Matthew, John, and Revelation. As Brackenridge’s observation indicates, it would be something like browsing the shelves at the library, selecting Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, a volume of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, and a John Grisham novel, splaying the books open, and with no small degree of effort, pasting a sentence from one, a verse from another, and a paragraph from yet another into a single document.

Still, with all the cutting and pasting in the world, the only way that dispensationalists can make the Bible into a rigid master plan for all of human history is to impart some “gaps,” as it were. Witness John Hagee’s interpretation of Isaiah 9:6. “For unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given” was fulfilled in Jesus’ birth, Hagee says. But the second part was not fulfilled, he says. The part that reads, “the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called ‘Wonderful Counselor’” will only be fulfilled thousands of years after Jesus’ birth, in Jesus’ future millennial kingdom. So a single verse from Isaiah 9:6 actually refers to “two widely separated events in history.”⁵ There is something rational about it. The explanation sounds science-like, appealing, for things to fit together so neatly, for no loose ends to be left dangling. The problem is that there is absolutely nothing in the biblical text which even hints toward

such a reading. It is a complete and utter fabrication.

In a pastor's quest to offer help to those who are speechless in the face of end-times theology, laying out what the Bible *doesn't say* is an important first step. The second step is to proffer a word about what the Bible *does* say.

Barbara Rossing, professor of New Testament at Chicago's Lutheran School of Theology, offers a helpful word about apocalyptic language as visionary language when she likens Revelation to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, a morality play in which the miserly Scrooge is taken on a visionary tour of his life. A hair-raising visit from the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley, gives Scrooge the first warning of what his future will be if he does not change his life. Subsequent visitations by three spirits show Scrooge his painful past and his even more painful future. He also sees a scene that inspires hope—the warmth and love of the Cratchit house. These contrasting visions prove to be a wake-up call for Scrooge.

Scrooge is changed by the final vision when he sees his own lonely grave. He pleads with the Spirit of Christmas Future to let the visions only show what “*may be*,” so he can still hope to change his frightening future. In the terrifying moment when he sees a vision of his own grave, Scrooge alters his life. Assured that what he sees does not have to come to pass, he commits to walking a different path. Scrooge awakes to realize that he is still in bed. He has been on a visionary journey that has changed him forever.⁶

Like *A Christmas Carol*, apocalyptic literature, biblically speaking, contains terrifying scenes, but the scenes are not a literal immutable time line, à la John Hagee, where believers are dealt a get-out-of-Tribulation-free card which entitles them to sit on the heavenly sidelines as voyeuristic spectators. The scenes are a wake-up call to reality—that no empire on earth will last forever, that even those empires with the greatest military and political might are, in the grand scheme of history, ephemeral and short-lived, and that when the way of life on which we rely comes to an end, God provides a new vision to guide us. If we preachers can do our part in equipping the members of our congregations to speak confidently of these things, it will be good news indeed.

Notes

1. Definition of “Christian Zionism” from www.christianzionism.org.
2. Nancy Gibbs, “Apocalypse Now,” *Time*, July 1, 2002. Quoted in Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 72.
3. From the October 7, 2007, PBS broadcast of *Bill Moyers Journal*, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/10052007/profile.html>.
4. A good explanation is provided by Rossing, 23.
5. John Hagee, *From Daniel to Doomsday: The Countdown Has Begun* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 41. Quoted in Rossing, 28.
6. Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 82-84.