

A Friendly Response to Hank Hanegraaff's Book, *The Last Disciple*

by Dr. Norman L. Geisler

Introduction

There are many reasons I am writing this congenial response to Hank's recent views expressed in *The Last Disciple*. First of all, Hank and I are long time friends and have discussed this topic many times. Second, we both agree that the issue here is not one of orthodoxy vs. unorthodoxy since no great fundamental of the Faith is being denied on either side. We are both fighting in the same orthodox trench against the same unorthodox enemies of the Faith. Third, I have been a faithful defender of Hank against the many false charges leveled against him and have thereby earned the right to offer some friendly criticism of his view. Fourth, Hank knows I have a strong commitment to the premillennial futurist view opposed in *The Last Disciple*. Indeed, the imminent premillennial view has been a treasured part of Southern Evangelical Seminary's doctrinal statement from the very beginning. As president, I have been asked by numerous constituents whether I agree with Hank's position. In brief, my answer is that we agree on all the essentials of the Faith, but on the question of the last days Hank knows I do not agree with his opposition to the futurist view. Hence, as long-time friends, we just agree to disagree agreeably. It is in this spirit that I offer a friendly response to his book *The Last Disciple* (hereafter "LD") and statements on it taken primarily from the interview (hereafter designated "I") printed on the CRI web site (<http://www.equip.org/about/hank/tyndale.pdf> accessed on 1/20/05). In all fairness, Hank promises a fuller expression of his position in a forthcoming book. But based on what he has written, my comments will be listed after the citations from Hank Hanegraaff's statements.

A. LD claims to be "an alternative to the *Left Behind* view of Tim LaHaye" (LD, 393).

Comments: It is that, but it is also much more. It is in fact a strong rejection of the futurist view of the Tribulation as well as premillennialism. And like the preterist view, LD holds that the texts in the Mt. Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24-25) and in the Book of Revelation refer to Nero and the 1st century (see point "I" below) and not to any future seven year period dominated by the Antichrist and preceding the literal Second Coming of Christ to earth to reign. In short, LD is a critique of the basic futurist view held by Dallas Seminary, Grace Seminary, the Master's Seminary, Southern Evangelical Seminary, Moody Bible Institute, Philadelphia Biblical University, most Bible Colleges in the country, and numerous Christian leaders who support the ministry of CRI. These include Dr. Wayne House, Dr. Ron Rhodes, Dr. J. P. Moreland, Dr. Barry Leventhal, Dr. Thomas Howe, and many of the faculty of the above institutions. In view of this, it is understandable that we offered here a brief response in support of the widely held futurist view.

B. LD claims not to be committed to "any particular model of eschatology" (LD, 393).

Comments: This statement can easily be misinterpreted. Everyone has an eschatology, formal or informal, including the authors of LD. The question is whether or not it is Bible-based, fits all the data consistently, and corresponds to the facts. Further, everyone is committed to their view in varying degrees. The authors of *The Last Disciple* claim to be "deeply committed to a proper method of biblical interpretation" (303). But methodology determines theology. Indeed, they speak of "remarkable evidence" for their view (I, #3) and of "no biblical warrant" for the opposing view (I, #6). They speak also of their interpretation of certain disputed terms which allegedly "demonstrate conclusively" that their view is right (I, #7). Clearly, they are committed to the view which opposes the standard futurist interpretation to which a great number of evangelical scholars, including myself, are firmly committed.

C. LD does not "call into question the orthodoxy of the *Left Behind* authors"(395) and, thereby, the futurist view.

Comment: This is an important point. There is no charge of heresy here on either side, and there should not be (see "F" below). Certainly, the traditional futurist view has a strong basis in the early Church (see "P" below) and the above listed faculty and schools have provided biblical support for it. Indeed, the classic, exhaustive, and seldom read three volume set of George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, offers biblical support for the imminent premillennial view. The common orthodox belief of all premillennial and amillennial views is a literal return of Christ and a physical resurrection of the dead. On this part of the future, there is basic agreement.

D. The authors of LD wish to "demonstrate the dangers inherent in the interpretive method . . . dispensationalists employ" (LD, 395).

Comments: We agree that the method of interpretation is crucial to one's conclusions on last things. We also agree that the literal (historical-grammatical) method of interpretation is the correct one. We do not agree, however, as to who is more consistent in their use of this method. Dispensationalists see an inconsistency in the anti-futurist method since many predictions in Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6-18 were not fulfilled in A.D. 70 - at least not literally. For example, the stars did not fall from heaven (Mt. 24:29), nor were one-third of humans killed (Rev. 9:18), and neither did all the creatures in the sea die (Rev. 16:3) in A.D. 70.

E. LD opposes "Placing the Beast [of Rev. 13] in the twenty-first instead of the first century" (LD, 395).

Comments: Although LD disavows the label of "partial preterism" as well as "post-millennialism," this conclusion is in agreement with preterism. And if LD is right, then the rest of the Tribulation (Rev. 6-18) must be placed there too. But if it is taken literally, then it cannot be placed there since Jesus did not visibly return to earth in A.D. 70 (Mt.

24:30 cf. Rev. 1:7 and Acts 1:10-11). Nor did Christ literally execute all the judgments listed in Revelation 9 and 16 at that time. And since LD claims to hold a literal method of interpretation, then its consistency can be seriously challenged at this point.

F. LD affirms that "John was told not to seal up the prophecy because its fulfillment was [in the] fore future," not in the "far future" as Daniel was told his was (Dan. 8:26; 12:4) (LD, 395).

Comments: Here again, this agrees with the partial preterist view that John is speaking about the first century, whatever applications it may have to later generations. But if Revelation 6-18 refers to the first century, then why not the whole book since John was told, according to LD, that all of Revelation was to be unveiled for the near future? And if this refers to the first century, then one is driven to full preterism which both sides admit is a heresy since it says the resurrection is past (2 Tim. 2:18). There is no consistent hermeneutical way to separate Rev. 19-22 from 6-18 on preterist grounds. Indeed, the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:15) which is during the Tribulation announces the coming of Christ. And the verses speaking of a "soon" coming, as LD interprets them, refer to the whole book of Revelation from beginning to end (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:10).

G. LD asserts that "John's repeated use of such words and phrases as *soon* and *the time is near* demonstrate conclusively that John could not have had the twenty-first century in mind" (LD, 395; I, #3).

Comments: If so, then on this premise the whole book of Revelation (including the Second Coming and Resurrection - Chapters 19-20) must refer to the first century since the word "soon" applies to the whole book of Revelation (1:1; 22:10). In this case, full preterism follows which is heretical. So, while the conclusions of LD are not unorthodox, if this understanding is applied consistently to other texts, then the logical implications will lead to unorthodox conclusions. Hence, while **doctrinally** this is an intramural orthodox discussion, nevertheless, **methodologically** this is a very important issue.

Further, these words do not refer to a **soon** event but a **swift** event. This is borne out by the Greek lexicons and dictionaries. The Greek word for "quickly" is *tachu* which occurs thirteen times in the New Testament (Mt. 5:25; 28:7, 8; Mk. 9:39; 16:8; Jn. 11:29; Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7, 12, 20). Arndt and Gingrich (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 814) say it means "quick, swift, speedy." It is what happens "quickly, at a rapid rate." Thayer (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 616) agrees, saying, it means "quickly, speedily." Likewise, Vine (*Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 913) concurs that it means "swift, quick . . . , quickly." Hence, this term need not, as LD argues, refer to a first-century event but to the imminent coming of Christ whenever it occurs.

H. The LD view affirms that "Unlike the *Left Behind* authors, we believe that when John in Revelation says ten or more times that the events about which he is writing 'must soon take place,' or for which 'the time is near,' that is precisely what he means" (I, #4).

Comments: First, if this is precisely what he means in the whole book, then, as already noted, the heretical view of full preterism follows. Second, these may be interpreted, as the futurist holds, as indicating the imminence of Christ's coming, namely, that it may happen at any time (see 1 Cor. 4:5; 15:51-52; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thess. 1:10; James 5:7-9; 1 John 2:28). The great Greek scholar A. T. Robertson said that by "quickly" in Revelation "I am coming (imminent) . . . is meant to be understood." He adds, "we do not know how soon 'quickly' is meant to be understood. But it is a real threat" (Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6.306). Noted New Testament scholar Leon Morris commented: "The imminence of the coming is repeated" (Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, 258). In his classic commentary on Revelation, J. A. Seiss affirmed: "Everywhere the promised Apocalypse of the Lord Jesus is represented as close at hand, **liable to occur at any moment**" (Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 523, emphasis added). The word translated "shortly" (Rev. 1:1; 22:6) is *tachei* which is from the same root as *tachu* (see above) and, like it, means swiftly or speedily. As such it does not necessarily refer to a **soon** but a **sudden** event. Further, as hermeneutical expert, Dr. Thomas Howe, has pointed out, John was not told to "unseal the revelation he received." Rather, he was told, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near." This does not mean the prophecy was fulfilled in John's day but that *the words* of the prophecy could be understood by those who read them in his day.

The word "near" (Rev. 1:3) is the Greek word *eggus* which means "near" or "at hand." But this is a relative term like "short" and "long," of which one can ask how near? And as measured by whom? What is long to us is short for God. Peter said, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet. 3:8). Further, there are clear biblical examples where a "short" time was really a long time for us. Hebrews 10:37 says Jesus would come in just "a little while" and it is nearly 2000 years since then, and He has not come yet. Haggai 2:6-7 says the time from his day (c. 500 B.C.) to the glorious temple to be rebuilt at Christ's coming was only a "little while." Even to Christ's first coming this was 500 years, and the prophecy will not be completely fulfilled until His second coming which is over 2500 years already.

I. LD contends that "The Great Tribulation instigated by Nero is the antitype for every type and tribulation that follows before we experience the reality of our own resurrection at the Second Coming" (LD, 395).

Comments: It is understandable how a literal first century Tribulation could be an encouragement to later sufferers, but where in Scripture does it say it is an antitype for all future tribulations? Further, if LD takes this to refer to Nero and the first century, as it says repeatedly, then that is the meaning of the text. And that is what partial preterism means. So, in spite of any disavowal of the term, this is an anti-futurist view of these texts common to preterism.

J. "The Last Disciple series places the Great Tribulation precisely where it belongs, in a first-century milieu in which 'the last disciple' comforts believers in the throes of the mother of all persecutions" (LD, 395).

Comments: If the "Great Tribulation" meant by John in Revelation was "precisely" a first century event, then this is indistinguishable from preterism, no matter how many later applications are made of the text for future sufferers. If this is so, then there is no future "Great Tribulation" as futurists claim and the LD view is a form of preterism, despite any protests by LD authors to the contrary.

K. "The Last Disciple, then, will develop the necessary skills for reading Scripture - particularly the book of Revelation-for all its worth" (I, # 1).

Comments: In all candor, this is a bit of an over claim. I wish it were that simple, and given that the method used in LD deviates from the literal interpretation of many events in Revelation mentioned above, I don't think the book accomplishes this goal. This is so especially in view of the fact that the authors admit the Old Testament background for the language and images of these New testament predictions. But if Revelation is patterned after the deliverance of His people through tribulation in the Old Testament, then why reject the view that the plagues of Revelation are as literal as those executed on Pharaoh in the Exodus after which Revelation is modeled? Further, if other parts of the prophecy Jesus gave in Matthew 24-25 are taken literally by LD and fulfilled literally, then how can it consistently deny a literal fulfillment of the others in the same text?

L. "There is also remarkable evidence for Nero as the Beast and his persecutions as the great tribulation" (I, #3).

Comments: Actually, the opposite is true. There is strong evidence that Revelation was written in the 90s well after Nero was dead during Domitian's reign. If so, this would make the LD false. Briefly stated the evidence for dating Revelation in the 90s A.D. is as follows: First, this futurist view of the Tribulation, Antichrist, and/or even Millennium was held by many of the earliest Fathers including Irenaeus (2nd century) who said "It was seen not very long ago, almost in our own generation, at the close of the reign of Domitian" (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3). This was confirmed by Victorinus (3rd century) who wrote: "When John said these things, he was in the island of Patmos, condemned to the mines by Caesar Domitian" (*Commentary of Revelation* 10:11). Likewise, Eusebius (4th century) confirmed the Domitian date (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.18). Second, other early Fathers after A.D. 70 refer to the Tribulation or Antichrist spoken of in Revelation as yet future (see Commodianus [3rd century], *Instructions* 44, and Ephraem of Syria [4th century], *On the Last Times*, 2). Third, the conditions of the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) fit this later period rather than that reflected in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Timothy which were written in the 60s. For example, the church at Ephesus in Revelation had lost its first love (Rev. 2:4) and others like Laodicea (Rev. 3:14f.) had fallen from the Faith. Fourth, it was not until the reign of Domitian that emperor worship as reflected in Revelation was instituted. Fifth, Laodicea appears as a prosperous city in Revelation 3:17, yet it was destroyed by an earthquake in c. A.D. 61, during Nero's reign, and would not have recovered so quickly in a couple of years. Sixth, John's exile on the island of Patmos implies a later date when persecution was more rampant (1:9). Seventh, the references to persecution and Martyrdom in the churches reflect a later date (cf. Rev. 2:10, 13 cf.). Eighth, Polycarp's reference to the church at Smyrna (*to the Philippians*

11.3) reveals that it did not exist in Paul's day (by A.D. 64) as it did when John wrote Revelation 2:8. Ninth, the Nicolaitans (of Rev. 2:6, 11) were not firmly established until nearer the end of the century. Tenth, there is not sufficient time on the early date for John's arrival in Asia (late 60s) and replacement of Paul as the respected leader of the Asian Church (see discussion in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, vol. 2, chapter 7).

M. LD objects to "The pretribulational rapture model featured in the *Left Behind* series [that] interprets Revelation 13, for example, in a strictly literal fashion" (I, #3).

Comments: It all depends on what is meant by "strictly literal." If "strictly literal" means the unique interpretation of Tim LaHaye that the Antichrist resurrects himself, then we agree with LD that this is wrong. However, we must be careful not to paint all futurists with the same broad brush. There are a lot of them who do not agree with LaHaye here, including the commentary produced by the Dallas Seminary faculty (see Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 960). And it would not be fair to leave the impression that LaHaye's interpretation of Revelation 13 is essential to, or even characteristic of, the futurist view of Revelation. After all, if we take the text literally, it does not say the Beast was "resurrected" from the dead. It says that his deadly "wound" was "healed" (Rev. 13:12).

N. LD affirms that "As the characters in the novel deal with tribulation, they are sustained by the hope of resurrection that Jesus gives all of us, not with a belief that they are meant to be taken away from trouble by a rapture" (I, #4 cf. I, #5).

Comments: This is a false either/or when it is a both/and situation. The resurrection and the rapture take place at the same time, whenever that time is (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Even those who are raptured will receive their permanent glorified body at that time (1 Cor. 15:50-56). Of course, they are distinct events in the sense that the dead are raised "first" and those alive are "caught up" with them to "meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:17). But these events happen at the same time, and they both receive their permanent immortal, imperishable body at that moment (1 Cor. 15:50-56). So, the two hopes cannot be separated.

O. LD declares that "Prior to the nineteenth century all Christians-including all premillennialists-believed the rapture or the resurrection of believers and the second coming of Christ were simultaneous events and not two distinct happenings separated by at least seven years" (I, #6).

Comments: This is plainly and simply false. The early Ephraem manuscript (see Thomas Ice, *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 110-111) reveals the pretrib view was held as early as the 300s A.D. And even if the first known reference is later, truth is not determined by time. This is the fallacy of "Chronological Snobbery." The amillennial view itself (with which this point in LD accords) is "late" since most of the early Fathers were premillennial including Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and the early Augustine.

Other futurists (whose view is opposed by LD) include even earlier subapostolic writings like Irenaeus, Ignatius, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, Papias, Clement of Rome, Lactantius, Methodius, Epiphanius, and others (see George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1, pp. 304, 324, 451) .

P. "First, there is not a single passage in Scripture that teaches a pretribulational rapture" (I, #6).

Comment: In one sense this is true, but it is very misleading. For in the strict sense, there is not a single passage of Scripture that teaches the Trinity either, but that does not mean it is not biblically based. And in this broader sense of biblically based, which must be allowed for the doctrines of the Trinity and inerrancy, the pretrib view is biblical as well (see Renald Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord Comes*). For in the broader sense, these doctrines are not based on a single text but on all the data of Scripture on the topic put in a consistent systematic whole that best explains them with whatever varying degree of certitude (see Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, chap. 12).

Q. "There is no biblical warrant for LaHaye's hypothesis that believers will be resurrected some one thousand seven years before the resurrection of unbelievers" (I, #6).

Comments: If this means there is no biblical warrant for believing in the pretrib view, then one must beg to disagree. Detailed reasons are listed in the forthcoming volume four of our *Systematic Theology: The Church and Last Things* (chapter 17). Or, if this means there is no biblical basis for believing there are two resurrections, one before and one after "the thousand years," then one must strongly disagree. Even non-dispensationalists, like George Ladd, agree that a literal (historical-grammatical) interpretation of Revelation 20 demands a premillennial conclusion of a first physical resurrection before the thousand years and a second physical resurrection after it (see Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*). Just the phrase, "and the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished" (Rev. 20:5) makes this view clear. The alternative interpretations must spiritualize (allegorize) this text. Indeed, to deny the premillennial view one must take the first resurrection as spiritual and the second one as literal. Ironically, only the first one is actually called a "resurrection" (Rev. 20:5-6), though "live again" (Gk. *ezasan*) is used of both (vv. 4-5). Nowhere in Scripture is the word "resurrection" ever used in a spiritual sense. So, to spiritualize the "first resurrection" is a gross violation of the literal (historical-grammatical) method of interpretation.

R. "The plain and proper reading of a biblical passage must always take precedence over a particular eschatological presupposition or paradigm" (I, #7).

Comments: We agree. But if this is so, then the plain and proper reading of Revelation 20 will yield a futurist premillennial view contrary to LD. Yet LD opposes this futurist view in favor of a kind of amillennial view.⁽¹⁾ This conclusion is inconsistent with its alleged literal method of interpreting the Bible.

Conclusion

The basic goals of LD are admirable, and its basic doctrines are within orthodoxy. Nonetheless, the dialogue on methodology is important since orthodoxy is dependant on a proper literal (historical-grammatical) interpretation of the Bible. However, LD does not appear to measure up to the standards of its own alleged literal method. In rejecting a futurist⁽²⁾ interpretation of Revelation, LD must reject a literal interpretation of many passages in Revelation and in Matthew 24-25 which they claim were fulfilled in the first century. And if this same non-literal method were applied to other passages like the Gospels, then it would undermine historical Christianity. Hence, the issue is of great importance. So, on this matter we must respectfully disagree agreeably with our good friend Hank Hanegraaff.

Yet I would suggest a more excellent way. LD rightly criticizes excesses in some futurists' interpretation of some texts. But the same could be done for preterists' interpretations which claim these predictions were fulfilled in A.D. 70. Would it not be better for LD to be content to show the inconsistencies of some futurists' interpretations, rather than attacking the whole premillennial futurist scheme which is firmly rooted in the historical-grammatical interpretation of all of Scripture, including prophecy, and amply exhibited in the majority of writers in the earliest centuries of Christianity? For when the literal method is applied to the unconditional Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, it yields a futurist interpretation of Scripture which affirms that Christ will not only physically return to earth but He will also establish a literal kingdom (Mt. 19:28) and reign for a literal thousand years (Rev. 20), restoring the literal Land of Promise to the literal descendants of Abraham from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon, the territory of the Palestinians, and all the way to Egypt (Gen. 13:15-17; 15:7-21) "forever" (Gen 13:15). Likewise, the literal method of interpretation demands that there will be a literal throne of David on which the Messiah will actually reign on a throne in Jerusalem over the restored literal descendants of Abraham "forever" (2 Sam. 7:12-16). But these unconditional promises have never been fulfilled, even though God made them with an "immutable" oath (Heb. 6:17-18 cf. Ps. 89:20-37). However, if the Bible is to be taken literally, then the basic premillennial futurist view which LD critiques must be right. Indeed, if LD wished to take all of Scripture literally and consistently, then it would be better to affirm these unconditional promises which are at the heart of the premillennial futurist view, rather than occupy its time with criticizing excesses in some popular presentations of these views.

Footnotes

1. In personal conversation with Hank, he disavows both the premillennial and the postmillennial views by name, which in terms of the three basic views leaves him in the amillennial camp, though he is reluctant to use this word for his view.

2. Of course even partial preterists are "futurists" regarding the Second Coming and Resurrection. But they reject the futurist understanding of the bulk of Book of Revelation.