

Flaws and Fallacies of

Plugging Headlines into the Bible

BY GREG ALBRECHT

Ideas have consequences, but it's usually much easier to see the consequences of someone else's wrong-headed thinking than our own. While it is comparatively easy for Christians to identify myths and superstitions in world religions, when preposterous ideas invade Christendom we often fail to recognize their pernicious implications.

The harmonious relationship between the nation of Israel and evangelical Christians remains one of the most bewildering of all religious mysteries. Jews obviously

welcome evangelical, political and economic support for Israel. Yet Jews remain both puzzled and offended by the fact that the same people who relentlessly support them are convicted that the people of God of the Old Testament are going to hell for eternity.

These same Christians who pour money into Israel and unequivocally support Zionism are absolutely confident that the Holy Land will soon turn into a bloodbath, with rivers of blood flowing to the depth of a horse's bridle in one valley (the result of a literal reading of

Revelation 14:20). Playing an endless game of retrofitting newspaper headlines into Scripture, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have no question that apocalyptic carnage will happen before the Second Coming. Ideas have consequences, and religious convictions have practical implications; in this case it logically follows that anyone who accepts such presuppositions must build and support the nation of Israel today so that it can be destroyed tomorrow.

How could Christians, who take their name and theological conviction

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tions from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, have such rabid views of the fate of the Jews? How can Christians embrace a message that is essentially anti-Christian, a message that can overwhelm and even contradict the fundamental virtues of the teachings of Jesus, all the while becoming a passionate force for war and bloodshed, all in the name of Christ?

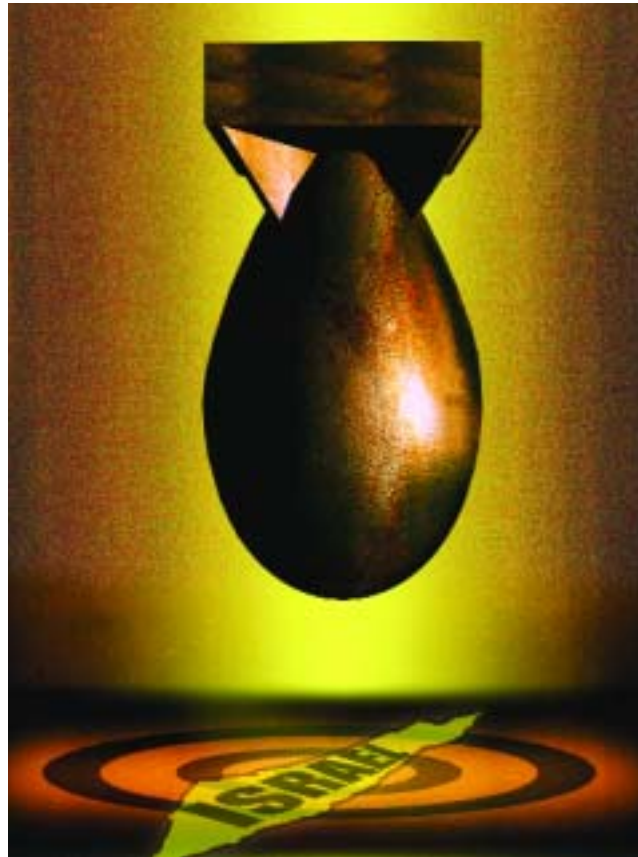
There is no doubt that unending group tours arriving in Israel, filling buses that wind their way throughout Israel, are a bonanza for the Israeli economy. It makes sense that the Jewish economy welcomes tourist dollars/pounds/Euros. But it is a mystery why Jews continue to roll out the welcome mat for such tourists when one considers what the average Christian on those buses believes.

Evangelical Christian tours make their way to Megiddo so that Christians may view a valley they are persuaded will one day soon host the war to end all wars, dwarfing the horror of the Holocaust. One contemporary advocate of dispensationalism is quoted as saying that Armageddon would be “the mother of all Holocausts.” Most of those same not so accidental tourists firmly believe that Jews will suffer eternal torture in hell. These are friends of Israel?

Many evangelical Christians offer unquestioning support of the nation of Israel, even at the expense of Palestinian Christians who share this land of the Bible with Jews. Based on Old Testament passages, fundamentalist Christians presume, along with conservative Israelis, that Israel has a divine right to all the land from Egypt to Iraq.

The primary rationale for the contradictory beliefs that Christians hold about their faith and

about Israel is found in a particular methodology that holds sway over conservative evangelical Christians



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—a methodology that causes them to understand biblical prophecy in one, and only one, way.

Defects and Deceptions of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism—A method of biblical interpretation that divides history into different periods (dispensations), insists on an overly literal method of reading the Bible, and a belief that Jesus’ Second Coming will occur before his 1,000-year millennial rule. Many dispensationalists believe that Jesus will return after 6,000 years of human history, assuming that each

day of creation equates to 1,000 years. The presumption is that six days (6,000 years) of mankind’s “week” is followed by the seventh day, a 1,000 year rest, the rule of Christ. Classic dispensationalism includes a “fear factor”—the big stick motivational tool of an any-moment Rapture, whisking true believers away from other, not so favored, mortals.

I grew up in a prophecy-saturated religious culture. I lived in constant apprehension and fear of an impending doomsday. The “end times” biblical interpretation I was taught exercised incredible power over me—influencing my view of the future as well as my geo-political perspectives.

I was into my fourth decade on planet earth before I started to question my prophetic presuppositions. After all, they came directly from the Bible—they were the literal Word of God, why should I question them? I discovered that what I had been taught about eschatology (the study of last things) came directly from a interpretative method of understanding the Bible called dispensationalism.

It was a dark journey, but I finally had to admit that what I had accepted without question was

fatally flawed. I discovered that this methodology that had so ordered my life and contributed to my values and beliefs primarily came from the United Kingdom, specifically through the writings and teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).

By the 1870’s, Darby’s teachings became known as dispensationalism, and as the 19th century came to a close, prophecy conferences became a feature of Protestant fundamentalist churches in North America. Cyrus Ingerson (C.I.) Scofield (1843-1921) emerged

Bush says he doesn't consider war prophetic

President Bush, responding to a question after a speech on the war on terror, said he doesn't view the rise of terrorism as the fulfillment of Bible prophecy. "Members of your administration have reached out to prophetic Christians who see the war in Iraq and the rise of terrorism as signs of the apocalypse," a woman who listened to his speech told Bush. "Do you believe this, that the war in Iraq and the rise of terrorism are signs of the apocalypse?" Bush replied that he'd not thought of the war in that light. "I guess I'm more of a practical fellow," he said. "My most important job is to protect you, to protect the American people. Therefore, when we see threats, given the lessons of September 11, we've got to deal with them." The question was motivated in part by a new book called *American Theocracy* by former Republican strategist Kevin Phillips which claims that Bush's foreign policy is driven by the so-called "post-millennial" eschatological views of some evangelical Christians.

—EP News

as a leading advocate and spokesman for dispensationalism, eventually publishing his *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. Scofield's Bible was what we would today call a study Bible, a Bible that featured a running dispensational commentary printed alongside biblical passages. At times it was hard to distinguish the notes from the text, so that many who used this Bible, throughout the 20th century, accepted dispensationalism as Holy Writ.

The practical implications of dispensationalism in the Christian world view includes the idea that Jesus cannot and will not return to our world unless and until certain events occur. Dispensationalism is not only popular within fundamentalist and evangelical Christian churches that believe in historic Christian doctrine, but enjoys a strong following within cults that consider themselves Christian.

While there are many versions of dispensationalism, the most popular view offers common denominators found elsewhere. Dispensationalism ignores sound, tried and tested principles of understanding the Bible (see for example, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, Zondervan Publishing). Dispensationalism is based on overly literal interpretations of prophetic passages, which may at times involve some twisting and manipulating to make passages fit its conclusions. Such biblical gerrymandering produces a prophetic "outline" or "timetable." Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series, admitted to be fiction by its co-authors, illustrates this cobbled together end time scenario. Here is a one-size-fits-all dispensational summary of what will happen "at the end."

1. Jesus will return to Rapture millions of Christians, who will suddenly disappear from this earth. They will be saved from

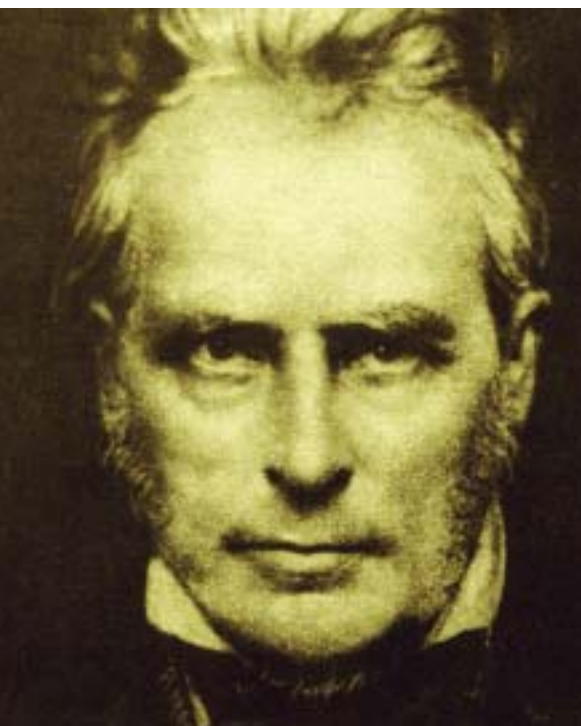
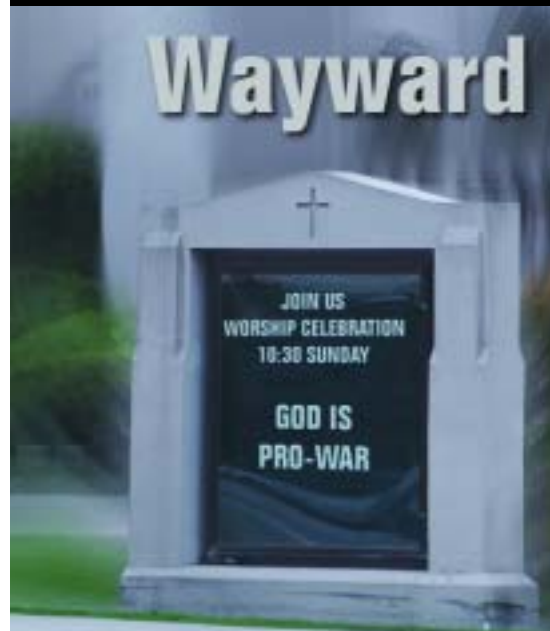
the physical suffering others will endure in the Great Tribulation.

2. Led by the Antichrist who bears the apocalyptic number of 666 (Revelation 13:18) and his false-prophet sidekick—a political and religious combination gains worldwide power. The exact identity of this combination morphs as our own history unfolds, with each new political reality reported in daily newspapers said to then be clearly identified in "Bible prophecy."

3. The Antichrist terrorizes the world, causing the world to worship Satan and bear his mark of 666 on their hands or forehead (Revelation 13:16-17).

4. The Antichrist moves to Jerusalem, having previously resided (at least in most versions of classic dispensationalism) in Rome. Dispensationalism is a fringe Protestant Christian innovation that identifies the Antichrist as having connections and affiliations with Rome. The Antichrist either builds a temple or appropriates one that has been recently constructed, and at that time all hell breaks loose. Natural disasters, like those metaphorically described in Revelation, abound.

5. As human history comes to a close, one last huge battle takes place in the valley of Armageddon with two vast coalitions of forces facing each other (Revelation 16:14,16).



John Nelson Darby, (1800 – 1882) an Anglo-Irish evangelist, considered the father of Dispensationalism. Beliefs about the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Israel put dispensationalists at the forefront of Christian Zionism.

Christian Soldiers?

In the past several years, American evangelicals, and I am one of them, have amassed greater political power than at any time in our history. But at what cost to our witness and the integrity of our message?

Recently, I took a few days to reread the war sermons delivered by influential evangelical ministers during the lead up to the Iraq war. That period, from the fall of 2002 through the spring of 2003, is not one I will remember fondly. Many of the most respected voices in American evangelical circles blessed the president's war plans, even when doing so required them to recast Christian doctrine.

Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, whose weekly sermons are seen by millions of television viewers, led the charge with particular fervor. "We should offer to serve the war effort in any way possible," said Mr. Stanley, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. "God battles with people who oppose him, who fight against him and his followers." In an article carried by the convention's Baptist Press news service, a missionary wrote that "American foreign policy and military might have opened an opportunity for the Gospel in the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

As if working from a slate of evangelical talking points, both Franklin Graham, the evangelist and son of Billy Graham, and Marvin Olasky, the editor of the conservative *World* magazine and a former advisor to President Bush on faith-based policy, echoed these sentiments, claiming that the American invasion of Iraq would create exciting new prospects for proselytizing Muslims. Tim LaHaye, the co-author of the hugely popular *Left Behind* series, spoke of Iraq as "a focal point of end-time events," whose special role in the earth's final days will become clear

after invasion, conquest and reconstruction.

For his part, Jerry Falwell boasted that "God is pro-war" in the title of an essay he wrote in 2004.

The war sermons rallied the evangelical congregations behind the invasion of Iraq. An astonishing 87 percent of all white evangelical Christians in the United States supported the president's decision in April 2003. Recent polls indicate that 68 percent of white evangelicals continue to support the war. But what surprised me, looking at these sermons nearly three years later, was how little attention they paid to actual Christian moral doctrine. Some tried to square the American invasion with Christian "just war" theory, but such efforts could never quite reckon with the criterion that force must only be used as a last resort. As a result, many ministers dismissed the theory as no longer relevant.

Some preachers tried to link Saddam Hussein with wicked King Nebuchadnezzar of Biblical fame, but these arguments depended on esoteric interpretations of the Old Testament book of II Kings and could not easily be reduced to the kinds of catchy phrases that are projected onto video screens in vast evangelical churches. The single common theme among the war sermons appeared to be this: Our president is a real brother in Christ, and because he has discerned that God's will is for our nation to be at war against Iraq, we shall gloriously comply.

Such sentiments are a far cry from those expressed in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974. More than 2,300 evangelical leaders from 150 countries signed that statement, the most significant milestone in the movement's history. Convened by Billy Graham and led by John Stott, the revered Anglican evangelical priest and writer, the signatories affirmed the global character of the church of Jesus Christ and the belief that "the church is the community of God's people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system, or human ideology."

David Brooks has correctly noted that if evangelicals elected a pope, it

would most likely be Mr. Stott, who is the author of more than 40 books on evangelical theology and Christian devotion. Unlike Pope John Paul II, who said that invading Iraq would violate Catholic moral teaching and threaten "the fate of humanity," or even Pope Benedict XVI, who has said there were "not sufficient reasons to unleash a war against Iraq," Mr. Stott did not speak publicly on the war. But in a recent interview, he shared with me his abiding concerns.

"Privately, in the days preceding the invasion, I had hoped that no action would be taken without United Nations authorization," he told me. "I believed then and now that the American and British governments erred in proceeding without United Nations approval." Reverend Stott referred me to "War and Rumors of War," a chapter from his 1999 book, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, as the best account of his position. In that essay he wrote that the Christian community's primary mission must be "to hunger for righteousness, to pursue peace, to forbear revenge, to love enemies, in other words, to be marked by the cross."

What will it take for evangelicals in the United States to recognize our mistaken loyalty? We have increasingly isolated ourselves from the shared faith of the global Church, and there is no denying that our Faustian bargain for access and power has undermined the credibility of our moral and evangelical witness in the world. The Hebrew prophets might call us to repentance, but repentance is a tough demand for a people utterly convinced of their righteousness.

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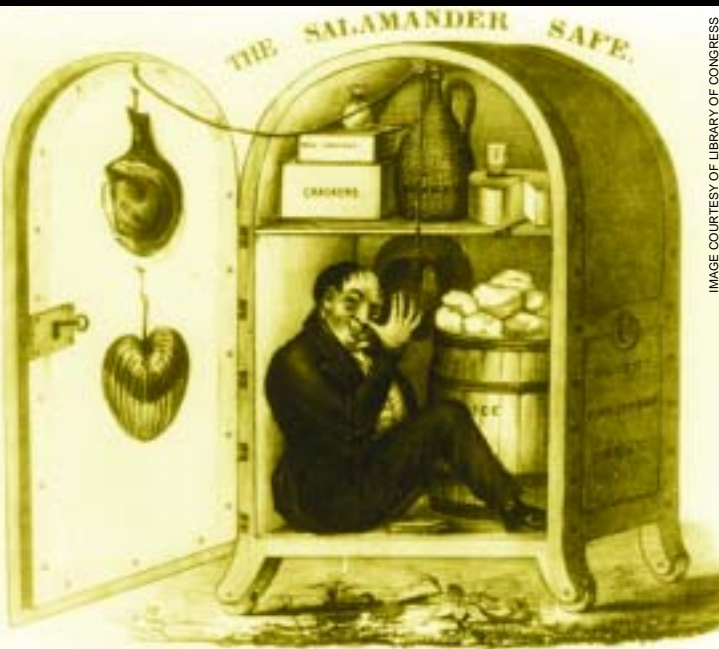


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As he thumbs his nose, he says "Now let it come! I'm ready." A playful period cartoon of a Millerite, an adherent of the Adventist preacher William Miller who predicted that the world would end on April 23, 1844.

6. Jesus returns (again, a second Second Coming!) with his Raptured, safe and sound saints, defeats the armies of the earth gathered in Armageddon, and the thousand-year utopia begins.

The fruits of dispensationalism strongly suggest that it is at best a fringe teaching. Many evangelical Christians would be surprised, perhaps even disappointed, to discover that Christianity existed for some 1,800 years before dispensationalism came on the scene. Further, the central features of dispensationalism are embraced by many authoritarian and charismatic cultic groups and leaders for it offers many opportunities to manipulate and control.

20th Century Dispensationalism—A Dizzying Daze

Dispensationalism and the 20th century? A tragic tale of flawed and bogus predictions, all based on the same broken-beyond-repair dispensational presuppositions. The predictions of evangelist after evangelist failed, with perhaps the best known in the latter half of the century being Hal Lindsey of several decades ago (*The Late Great Planet*

Earth) and the contemporary writings of Tim LaHaye, with his *Left Behind* series.

Seemingly learning from the mistakes of his dispensational forefathers, but still riding the cash cow of fortune-telling-in-the-name-of-Jesus, LaHaye distanced himself by writing fictional horror stories of what would happen to those who were not Raptured (another dispensational creative innovation). But many of LaHaye's readers are not adequately prepared to discriminate between fiction and non-fiction, with many swallowing

LaHaye's fiction as gospel truth.

The Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (www.religioustolerance.org) lists 64 failed end-of-the-world predictions that were specifically forecast to take place before 1990. This comprehensive list does offer a disclaimer: "We offer no guarantees that the prophets listed below actually made these predictions. We have described their alleged predictions as they were reported on the Web, in newspapers, books, etc. We do not have the resources to track down original source material."

That being said, many of the events this list documents are well known and highly publicized predictions, and while redactions and explanations by those who continue to support these personalities and movements rise almost to the depth of a horse's bridle themselves, original source documents for these embarrassing gaffes are generally available.

While blame for all these disconcerting blunders cannot be placed at the door of dispensationalism, it appears that the following are but a few of the failed prophecies that

can be traced to some version of dispensationalism.

- William Miller, one of many involved in "millennial fever" in the 19th century—a rash of date setting for the Second Coming—predicted that Jesus would return in 1843.

- When Jesus failed to respond to Miller's pronouncement, Miller set a new date, 1844. When Jesus again did not come, this event became known as the "Great Disappointment" and is generally credited with the eventual birth of the Adventist movement.

- Ellen G. White, founder of the Seventh Day Adventists, made many predictions about the "advent"—all failed. The most specific prediction she is said to have made about the Second Coming was her interpretation of a vision she claimed to have had. She told a 1856 conference that some present would be alive "at the coming of Jesus."

- The Jehovah's Witnesses arrived at 1914 for the Second Coming, from a dispensationally inspired study of the book of Daniel. When 1914 passed, the prediction was changed—with 1915, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941, 1975 and 1994 being other dates that failed.

- Herbert W. Armstrong predicted the Second Coming to occur in 1975. Throughout his ministry he and his ministers, as printed 30-60 years ago in this magazine by its original publisher, consistently warned that Jesus may come in a "few short years."

- In 1948 the state of Israel was founded, encouraging dispensationalists around the world to predict that this was surely the "beginning of the end." Once again ignoring sound and tested methods of biblical interpretation, many dispensationalists decided that the generation Jesus had reference to in Matthew 24:34 started in 1948.

- In 1967 the Israeli army captured all of Jerusalem, leading many to believe that the Rapture would come quickly—it didn't,

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Israelis remain both puzzled and offended by the fact that the same people who relentlessly support them are convicted that the people of God of the Old Testament are going to hell for eternity.

and it's a good thing for those who published and wrote the *Left Behind* series—a generation later there was still money to be made in the business of predicting the end.

- In 1978 Chuck Smith, Pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, predicted that the Rapture would happen in 1981. In his book *The Last Days are Here Again* (Baker Books) Richard Kyle quotes Smith, in his 1978 book *Future Survival*: "...the Lord is coming for his church before the end of 1981."

- Pat Robertson predicted that the world would end in 1982.

- Hal Lindsey predicted that the Rapture would occur in 1988.

- In 1988 Edgar Whienaut sold 4 million copies of *88 Reasons Why the Rapture will Occur in 1988*.

Suffice it to say, the above are only a few of the dispensationally-inspired failures. This list does not include many of the contemporary sensationalists now making headlines with their outrageous claims, not to mention the money they attract from those who come to believe such prognostications.

There are practical implications and consequences of all belief, and dispensationalism is a prime example. For example, about eight years ago many were convinced that the year 2000 would witness a world-wide computer driven meltdown that might very well lead to the

extinction of humanity from planet earth. Y2K was our generation's "Great Disappointment" (the original "Great Disappointment" describing the aftermath of William Miller's failed prophecy of the Second Coming). Preached dogmatically and convincingly from many respected church and electronic pulpits, Y2K spiritually consumed the energy and attention of many within Christendom. Instead of a high tech meltdown, faith was undermined. Rabid teachings about Y2K motivated many to sell properties, move to rural communities, dig wells and buy freeze-dried food in order to survive the coming catastrophe. Ideas have consequences.

The non-event of Y2K was manipulative hype that ultimately caused many to lose faith (see "Y2K—High Tech Apocalypse" *Plain Truth*, May-June 1999). Having believed many of the same tenets and principles that led to failed predictions, and having once taught them and preached them myself, I came to the humiliating conclusion that dispensationalism had led me and countless millions of others down a theological garden path. My research and studies eventually drove me to publish *Revelation Revolution* (to order, see our back cover)—but my interest in millennial madness/prediction addiction/prophetic frenzy contin-

ues, as I believe it is imperative for Christians to be made aware of the harm that can come from dispensationalism. Among its chief flaws, dispensationalism:

- Places an inordinate emphasis on future events, and at the very least distracts from the central message of the Gospel

- Is addictive. It can turn its followers into prophecy addicts, always looking for the next "high" given to them by esoteric speculation and predictions.

- Can cause people of faith to lose faith, and place blame for failed predictions with God rather than the flawed human methodology.

- Appeals to fleshly interests, of assuring that one's personal interests and family will be saved from physical tribulations to be suffered by less fortunate non-believers (and believers) who do not believe cryptic dispensational prophetic insights.

- Is dishonest and dysfunctional, as the same old mistakes continue to be perpetuated and taught to each new generation of dispensational believers.

- Teaches, without qualification or disclaimer, that Christian believers will be Raptured before the world at large goes to "hell in a handbasket." The tribulation and coming horrific sufferings are primarily described from a North American and European perspective.



Thus, dispensationalism holds out a carrot of promise that North American and European Christians will not have to suffer the biblical tribulation, but will instead be whisked away from the trouble others endure. This blatantly manipulative fear religion ignores biblical teaching about redemptive suffering, that Christians are called to pick up their own cross and follow the Lord.

- Promotes a nationalistic and egocentric view of the Bible, for North American Christian dispensational teaching fails to acknowledge the tribulations that much of the world suffered in the 20th century. The implicit idea in such teaching is that the biblical tribulation doesn't happen until North American and European Christians are affected.

Christian Zionism

Zionism—*A political philosophy that originally supported the return of Jews to the present state of Israel, calling on Old Testament passages in support of their claim to the Holy Land as their homeland. The movement also pledges continuing support for Jewish sovereignty in the land once known as Palestine.*

Christian Zionism—*The political implications of theological belief. Christian support of Zionism is based on overly literal and futurist interpretations of Old Testament prophecies (particularly Ezekiel and Daniel), along with those of the New Testament book of Revelation. This interpretative method, that can lead Christians to give virtually unqualified support of the sovereign state of Israel, is generally known as dispensationalism.*

While the *Plain Truth* rarely reviews books, we make an exception with Stephen Sizer's *Christian Zionism—Road Map to Armageddon?* Here is a comprehensive, readable, yet scholarly source that helps identify the formative causes of dispensationalism, as well as its disastrous effects.

If you, or a loved one, has ever fallen prey to the idea that nations and political leaders are “named” in the Bible, then here is another book that will help you unravel your thinking.

Since it was the U.K. where Darby germinated the potent strain of dispensationalism, with consequences that include British foreign policy and political philoso-

phy of the 19th and early 20th centuries, it is fitting that Sizer, an Englishman, should help North Americans out of the dizzying daze of dispensationalism.

Stephen Sizer is vicar of Christ Church, Virginia Water, Surrey, England—and Chairman of the International Bible Society (UK). In *Christian Zionism*, Sizer traces the emergence of Christian Zionism, what we often see today as unrelenting, unquestioning and unqualified support for the state of Israel. He relates the beginnings of this virulent movement in the United Kingdom, along with its successful export to North America, where it thrives today.

Reading *Christian Zionism* will help you understand how both political and religious authorities have played on the fears of conservative Christians—or rather, how the toxic and heady brew of dispensationalism has infiltrated and subverted both church and state. This is a must read for North American readers—if you appreciated my book, *Revelation Revolution*, then *Christian Zionism* should be high on your reading list. □

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Road Map to Armageddon?

Stephen Sizer claims that elements within the Christian Zionist movement have become the most powerful and destructive force at work in America today.

Influential in shaping Western foreign policy on the Middle East, they are not only inciting hatred between Jews, Christians and Muslims, but have also, in his opinion, become the greatest roadblock to lasting peace in the Middle East.

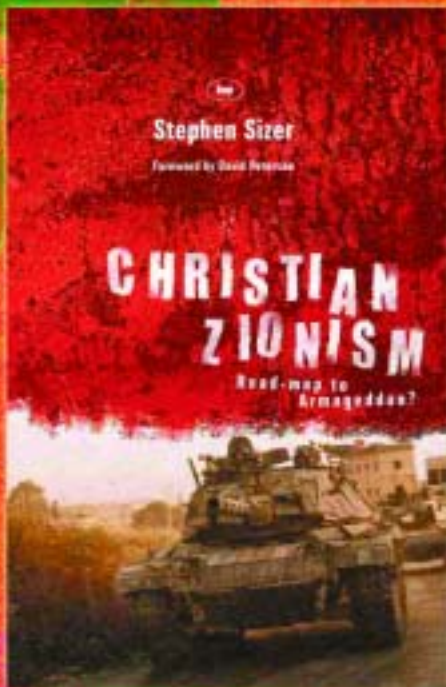
The book provides an examination of the historical involvement of British and American Christians in creating the conditions that led to the Arab-Israeli conflict through to the contemporary struggle for peace in the Middle East.

Sizer also gives an analysis of Christian Zionist theology focusing on the literal interpretation of the Bible, the nature and extent of Israel, the importance of Jerusalem, the expectation of a rebuilt Temple and pessimistic views of the future.

This 280-page definitive critique of Christian Zionism provides the first major evaluation of what is probably the most controversial issue in Christendom today. Available through Plain Truth Ministries for \$22 (includes shipping to addresses within the U.S. and Canada). Supplies are limited—offer good while they last. To order:

- Call toll-free 1-800-309-4466

- order online at www.ptm.org/SIZER



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