

Tender Warriors: Muscular Christians, Promise Keepers, and the Crisis of Masculinity in Left Behind

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Abstract

The Left Behind series of “rapture” novels is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing, indeed perplexing, popular cultural phenomena to emerge from America in recent years. This essay seeks to analyze the problem of masculinity in the novels. A close textual examination reveals a masculinity that is far from monolithic and, at times, deeply troubled. Rather than offering consistent and convincing performances of hegemonic masculinity, the male protagonists vacillate between spectacular displays of heroic machismo, and affective acts of feminine submission. I will argue that the paradoxical representation of masculinity in Left Behind can be located in the ambivalent notions of gender that are evident in both the prophetic hermeneutic of dispensationalism, and the broader culture of conservative evangelicalism.

[1] The Left Behind series of apocalyptic “rapture” novels is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing, indeed perplexing, popular cultural phenomena to emerge from America in recent years. The series, consisting of sixteen books in total, was conceived by Christian Right activist Tim LaHaye, and penned by fellow evangelical Jerry Jenkins.¹ Launched in 1995 to a comparatively quiet reception, it has since proved phenomenally popular, and not just among conservative evangelicals—some 65 million copies have now been sold, and the last six novels all attained the number one position on best-seller lists, including those of the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.² To offer a very brief synopsis, the novels take place at the end of history, and chart the changing fortunes of a group of former spiritual doubters who see the error of their ways and convert to Christianity following the “rapture” of their devout friends and relatives. Dubbing themselves the “Tribulation Force,” the new believers battle to win souls for Christ and thwart the efforts of the Antichrist before Jesus returns to inaugurate his millennial kingdom.

[2] If LaHaye and Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels are the most successful "rapture fictions" of all time, they are also the most castigated. There are now few offences of which they have not been accused. The media have anxiously noted their cultural and religious intolerance, their triumphalist worldview, and their appetite for violence.³ Commentators such as Paul Boyer have suggested that *Left Behind*'s apocalypticism has fomented fears about Islamic terrorism and helped justify the USA's punitive actions in the Middle East.⁴ Others still contend that the series is deeply anti-Semitic—Sherryl Mleynek, for example, argues that *Left Behind* constitutes an insidious form of Holocaust denial.⁵ Perhaps the strongest critiques of the novels, however, emanate from the Christian community itself. Anti-*Left Behind* literature is a growing sub-genre: Christian writers from various denominations, including Barbara Rossing, Carl Olson, Paul Thigpen, Steve Wohlberg and Gary DeMar, charge that the books are unscriptural and misleading, based on a fanciful biblical eisegesis that is not only faulty but lacking in pedigree—the dispensationalism on which the books are based was unheard of among American Protestants until the late nineteenth century.⁶

[3] Issues of gender have contributed to this burgeoning critique, and understandably so—the particular brand of apocalyptic conservative evangelicalism propounded in the novels is not known for its liberal attitudes in this respect.⁷ *Left Behind*'s problematic construction of gender roles has been duly noted by scholars of the texts: Amy Johnson Frykholm is troubled by their "hostile antifeminist perspective," while Darryl Jones criticizes their "insistence on traditional gender relations."⁸ Such evaluations are undoubtedly valid—the books *do* engage in sneering homophobia, they *do* diminish their female characters, and they *do* propagate totalizing notions of gender essentialism. However, by adopting the paranoid reading lens through which it is so tempting to read

these novels, we fail to acknowledge just how contradictory and unstable their representation of gender—particularly masculinity—actually is.⁹ A close textual examination of *Left Behind* reveals a masculinity that is far from monolithic and, at times, deeply troubled. Rather than offering consistent and convincing performances of hegemonic masculinity, the male protagonists vacillate between spectacular displays of heroic machismo, and affective acts of feminine submission. In *Left Behind*, masculinity appears divided against itself.

[4] This confusion over gender roles and the nature of masculinity can be located in both the broader discourse of conservative evangelicalism, and the more specific system of dispensationalism that informs the *Left Behind* novels. The history of attitudes concerning gender roles and relations among conservative evangelicals can best be characterized as paradoxical. While stressing the rightness of traditional gender roles underpinned by male headship, the evangelical faith conversely requires submissiveness before God which would conventionally be characterized as feminine. In an excellent account of fundamentalism and gender, historian Margaret Bendroth writes that “[t]he stereotypical language of penitence and surrender in [evangelical] conversion narratives drew heavily from female vocabulary and experience.”¹⁰ Mark Muesse elaborates that evangelical men who worship a God that is rendered almost exclusively as male must necessarily perceive themselves on some level as female, and consequently adopt the passive and disempowered characteristics typically associated with femininity. By way of illustration, he quotes author and Anglican convert C. S. Lewis: “God is so masculine that in relation to Him we are all feminine.”¹¹

[5] There are other aspects of evangelicalism which also tend to inadvertently undermine the assumed propriety of male primacy. Assertions of male power and privilege in conservative evangelicalism are neither monolithic or unassailable, but rather run parallel

to a more latent anxiety about the essential inadequacy of men, both in the eyes of God and of society. The fundamentalist principle of inherent sinfulness, for example, has often been more readily applied to men than women. Among early twentieth century fundamentalists, males were often perceived as the more depraved of the two sexes, sullied by their worldly involvement in business and politics: women, in contrast, were exalted as the guardians of morality and spirituality.¹² Conservative evangelical men may thus insist upon their own God-given authority while simultaneously humbling themselves before God, and doubting the currency of their dominant social position given their apparent propensity for sin and spiritual poverty.

[6] The subtext of emasculation is therefore evident in the beliefs which underpin conservative evangelicalism. In the case of *Left Behind*, this dynamic is exacerbated even further by the prophetic worldview engendered by dispensationalism, which provides the hermeneutic rationale for the novels. Dispensationalism was developed by a dissenting Irish clergyman named John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), and later popularized in America through the *Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909. The system proposes distinctive, and sometimes contentious, interpretations of ecclesiology, Christology and, most importantly for this essay, eschatology. Its best known—and most controversial— theological contribution, however, is the doctrine of the “rapture,” a belief underpinned by a reading of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 in which the true church is expected to be “caught up in the air” to meet Jesus and the saints in heaven. According to Darby and his proponents, Christ will effectively return twice: first, secretly, to rapture the church, removing true believers from earth while the rest of humanity suffers the tribulation; and again, publicly, at the end of the tribulation, after which he will set up his thousand-year millennial kingdom on earth. Between these events, a seven year period of

suffering known as the “tribulation” will take place, in which God will unleash his wrath upon those who have failed to accept Jesus as their personal saviour.¹³

[7] Dispensationalism is a premillennial eschatology: it holds that the tribulation will take place *before* the Second Coming, in contrast to postmillennialism which expects Christ to return *during* or *after* the establishment of the millennial kingdom. The premillennial nature of dispensationalism—and, concomitantly, Left Behind—has important implications for personal agency, and by extension, traditional masculinity. As Christ is expected to return to a deteriorating and anarchic world in order to restore peace and order, premillennialists assume that prior to the Second Coming, humans will be largely incapable of doing anything to improve their own degenerate condition. Reform efforts, political interventions and social change are viewed as futile, if not thoroughly diabolical. Human subjects are not so much autonomous actors in history, as more or less inert objects who are *acted upon* by the will of an all-powerful God. In this respect, the correlations between emasculation and dispensationalism are clear. The enervating logic of dispensationalism ultimately forecloses the possibility of that very masculine notion, “possessive individualism”—the ability to act on one’s own volition and command one’s own destiny.¹⁴

[8] Yet the rhetoric of dispensationalism where gender is concerned does not fully cohere with the gendered behaviour it generates. Dispensationalism is characteristically conservative, vigorously advocating traditional gender roles that are perceived not only as natural and inherent, but also divinely ordained. To break them would constitute an offence against God, and ultimately lead to a catastrophic collapse of the social order. Bendroth suggests that by emphasizing the primacy of order—on which salvation history itself is precariously positioned—“dispensational premillennialism ... offered an air-tight argument for feminine subordination.”¹⁵ On the other hand, however, as Bendroth goes

on to note, the centrality of the “bride of Christ” motif in dispensationalist theology feminizes men by casting them, as members of the true church, as Christ’s expectant bride.¹⁶ There are thus two competing narratives through which the nature of conservative evangelical/dispensational masculinity is contested. Discursively, proponents often stress the rightness—indeed, the sacredness—of traditional gender roles that produce masterful men and obedient women. Yet, through the *practice* of their faith, evangelical dispensationalist men are required to adopt a more expansive model of subjectivity that includes engagement with typically feminine traits such as obedience and submission. In a faith system which places much import upon certitude and order, this ambivalent and indeterminate structure initiates a “crisis of masculinity,” whereby faithful men experience cognitive dissonance as a result of the tensions concerning gender that are inherent in evangelical dispensationalism.¹⁷

[9] In *Left Behind*, we can identify a three-stage process at work in the novels’ crisis of masculinity. First, the characters experience emasculation as a result of their conversions to evangelical dispensationalism. The male characters in *Left Behind* are positively reluctant to embrace an attenuated form of masculinity. Instead, the new converts’ respond by engaging in performances of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, in the second stage of the novels’ crisis of masculinity, the newly converted males anxiously seek to rehabilitate their former masculine selves through extravagant (bordering on parodic) displays of machismo, typically involving high risk situations, brushes with death, violent confrontations and—inevitably—phallic symbolism in the form of cars, guns and planes. By conspicuously asserting in this way their “inherent” manliness, the protagonists hope that the nullifying effects of evangelical faith upon their masculinity might be countermanded. Thirdly and finally, however, their efforts to rescue their masculine identities are again undercut, this time by the imperatives of prophecy, which negate

human agency and thus the foundational principle of traditional manliness. As I will go on to demonstrate, the protagonists' fragile masculine identities are finally undone by the internal logic of dispensationalism itself, even as this doctrine stresses the essential nature of gender characteristics and the naturalness of male dominance. This pattern, though approximate, can help us decipher the apparently arbitrary contradictions that permeate masculinity in *Left Behind*.

[10] This troubled perception of gender roles is not an idiosyncratic feature of *Left Behind*. A number of studies of conservative evangelicalism in America demonstrate that the problem is endemic to this faith culture, and provide a useful context in which to read the problem of masculinity in *Left Behind*.¹⁸ As we have seen, there are significant tensions concerning gender operating within the internal logic of dispensationalist doctrine, as well as the broader evangelical culture. However, it is crucial that we remain alert to the fact that these religious forms did not develop in a vacuum; for all their professions of other-worldliness and rejections of society, they remain profoundly and intrinsically cultural, developing in response to the social and political milieu in which they are necessarily located. An analysis of the way in which gender issues came to the fore in both secular "mainstream" culture and Protestant Christianity in twentieth century America helps illuminate the relations between the discourses of gender in American culture at large, and the dispensationalism that inspires the *Left Behind* novels.

[11] The early twentieth century is a significant period for this study: it is the era when fundamentalism began to gain national prominence, and dispensationalism drew popular support from ordinary evangelicals, primarily thanks to the success of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Simultaneously, the phenomenon we might now call "gender trouble" was set in motion.¹⁹ The campaign for women's suffrage was, at this stage, already established in America. Moreover, increasing numbers of women were now leaving

home and hearth to become wage earners in their own right—albeit within a limited range of “suitable” careers such as teaching and nursing—undermining further the enshrined principle of separate spheres for the sexes.

[12] At the same time, changes in the American economy culminated in a proliferation of sedentary white-collar jobs for (white middle-class) men, which failed to affirm traditional ideals of vigorous, physical masculinity in the way that agrarian work and other forms of manual labour did. This is not to say that masculinity could not be conferred by and affirmed within the world of business; indeed, owning a business, and thus taking charge of one’s own economic destiny, was viewed as an intrinsically manly activity by white middle-class males. Yet the idea of achieving masculinity through economic and professional autonomy also faced challenges in the early twentieth century as giant conglomerates, or “trusts,” sought to consolidate smaller businesses under their own auspices, turning previously self-employed men into salaried men. In a thought-provoking study, Robyn Muncy suggests that Progressive-era “trustbusting,” in which white middle-class males engaged in a political struggle to secure either the destruction or regulation of trusts, was less concerned with economics than the cultural meaning of manhood.²⁰

[13] The debate over trusts was an important terrain upon which issues of gender—specifically, white masculinity—were played out. At this particular historical juncture, ideas of white masculinity were tightly interwoven with notions of *independence*, which, so the argument went, would be undermined if not obliterated by a salaried existence. Anti-trust campaigners were thus able to invoke gendered rhetoric in their condemnations of big business, arguing that corporations such as the Standard Oil Company, American Tobacco and the U.S Steel Corporation not only threatened the economic security of millions of small businessmen, but had devastating potential to disrupt possessive

American masculinity. It is worth noting how pervasive this particular articulation of masculinity has been—as we shall see, the central principle of independence is critical to the gendered discourse played out in *Left Behind*.

[14] Interestingly, while some trustbusting Progressives insisted that American manhood could only be preserved if the emasculating activities of corporations were curtailed—in other words, that the realm of business must remain a principal site of masculine affirmation—others suggested that men look elsewhere for guarantees of their manliness. Muncy offers the example of the Rev. Henry A. Stimson, who argued in 1901 that, as manliness could no longer be found in the realm of the workplace, men should instead turn to the church as an alternative source of masculinity. In fact, Stimson asserted, the church was the *only* institution remaining in America which could provide such assurances. Thus, in America's Protestant churches as well as at union meetings and political rallies, debates about gender were vigorously rehearsed. Some commentators, alarmed at the gender imbalance represented in the pews, claimed that the church had been overtaken by women; consequently, Christianity was in danger of becoming sentimental, effeminate, weak and ineffectual. In response emerged Muscular Christianity, a movement which sought to reassert traditional manly values as bulwarks against this creeping feminization. Though Muscular Christianity initially took hold in liberal churches, Margaret Bendroth and Clifford Putney both conclude that, in terms of the masculine typology it promoted, it had a much more enduring influence upon dispensationalists and other fundamentalists.²¹ Indeed, as Bendroth notes, “[f]undamentalism was born in an era of anxiety over gender roles,”²² and was thus historically well placed to respond to such conditions and provide coping strategies to deal with them.

[15] Muscular Christianity thus sought to reassert those traditional masculine values and characteristics that seemed increasingly precarious during this period of transition. By emphasizing the biblical ordination of male leadership, endorsing action over contemplation, encouraging sports and athletic pursuits, and promoting fellowship between Christian men, the movement provided a counter to the Victorian cult of domesticity. Through social organizations such as the YMCA and Men and Religion Forward, it attempted to give Christianity a change of image which would render it acceptable to men, turning attention away from the homely, loving, peaceful aspects of Christianity, and towards its aggressive, militant, warlike attributes. Even Jesus himself was given a makeover to make him more amenable to this masculine rearticulation of Christianity—one of the most famous proponents of Muscular Christianity, the evangelical preacher Billy Sunday, was especially fond of portraying Jesus as a typical “man’s man.” For Sunday, Jesus was “no lick-spittle proposition,” but was in fact “one of the greatest scrappers that ever lived.”²³ This image of Christ as barroom brawler presumably had considerable appeal for some American men, disenchanted not only with the apparently effete disposition of mainline Protestantism, but also their own place in an economic and social climate which seemed to devalue men and manhood.

[16] In many ways, Muscular Christianity can be seen as a prototype of the Christian men’s groups that emerged towards the end of the century, another period of economic and cultural upheaval which impacted heavily upon gender roles in America. According to John Bartkowski, “the chaos and confusion faced by men in the early twentieth century paralleled that confronting men at the century’s end,” an idea explored further in Susan Faludi’s popular exploration of masculinity-in-crisis, *Stiffed*.²⁴ By the century’s end, Faludi argues, men were experiencing an intolerable disparity between the demands made by “a nation that *expected* them to dominate,” and their “everyday experience ... of

feeling controlled.”²⁵ Thus the pursuit of American manhood is essentially a struggle for autonomy. The true—though surely non-existent—exemplar of American masculinity is self-possessed, individualistic, culturally powerful, economically independent and socially useful—qualities which resonate with the manly ideal proposed (though not always fulfilled) in LaHaye and Jenkins’ novels.

[17] One of Faludi’s chapters considers men’s search for an adequate model of manliness within the context of evangelical Christianity, specifically via the popular religious phenomenon of the 1990s known as Promise Keepers, an all-male Christian organization which Bartkowski reads as “a sort of nouveau muscular Christianity.”²⁶ Like its predecessor, it asserted the notion of male headship as the keystone to right Christian living. It espoused antifeminist and homophobic statements that angered women’s and gay rights groups alike. It celebrated sporting and athletic achievement, and promoted a “body-as-temple” theology that gloried in the strength and virility of the healthy male physique. In many ways, Promise Keepers seemed to accept wholesale the most reactionary principles of conservative evangelicalism, which seek to subjugate women and privilege men under the rubric of biblical ordination.

[18] A closer look at Promise Keepers teachings, however, reveals other imperatives where masculinity is concerned, and it is here that the connections between Promise Keepers and Left Behind become apparent. Faludi notes the myriad contradictions that infect Promise Keepers discourse. “For every “We got the power!” chant, there was an allegory delivered about the solace of relinquishing power.”²⁷ Against the grain of the hypermasculinity Promise Keepers promotes is an insistence on submission and contrition before Christ. Moreover, Promise Keepers members—like their fundamentalist forebears—are apt to view men and manliness with acute negativity: men have “failed” as a gender, meekly conceding power to others, faltering in their roles as fathers,

husbands and leaders, and wavering in matters of spirituality and morality. In *Promise Keepers* discourse, men are not masterful, righteous and preeminent, but errant, vulnerable and deficient. As in *Left Behind*, the contradictory rhetoric of *Promise Keepers* means that its adherents are unable to assert with any conviction the rightness of male headship and female obedience, precisely because these concepts are undermined by the organization's own precepts.

[19] The issue of male friendship is also relevant to an analysis of "gender trouble" in *Promise Keepers* and *Left Behind*. *Promise Keepers* men are expected to cultivate deep and intimate homosocial relationships, which not only exclude women *per se*, but which may even surpass the bonds men have with their own wives and families. Accountability groups foster a confessional culture between men, often resulting in tearful emotional outbursts, admissions of vulnerability and even pronouncements of love for other men in the group. Similar dynamics can be discerned in the *Left Behind* narratives. In particular, the novels' protagonist, Rayford Steele, develops close bonds with a number of male characters. These relationships are ostensibly characterized by typically manly behaviour: locker-room humour, verbal sparring, and stoic camaraderie in the face of danger. However, this masculine bluster is underpinned by a deep and genuine affection. Rayford is distraught when his buddy Ken Ritz is killed, perhaps even more so than when his wife, Amanda, dies. It seems that relationships between men fulfil certain *emotional* needs that cannot be met by women. While it is tempting—and not unproductive—to read these relationships as a queering of the *Left Behind* texts, we should also bear in mind how these relationships operate in the service of heterosexist male power, excluding women and non-heterosexual men, and affirming the primacy of "real" men and their needs. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick's literary study of homosocial desire, the author suggests that in such an economy women function primarily as "traffic," conduits for the

transmission of patriarchal power.²⁸ She also notes that homosocial bonding is often characterized in Western society by a virulent hatred for gay men.²⁹ Concomitantly, we should remain cognizant of the overt homophobia that surfaces in LaHaye and Jenkins' novels.³⁰

[20] Movements such as Promise Keepers, and novels such as *Left Behind*, invoke homophobic rhetoric, promote aggressive, authoritarian male leadership, utilize militaristic language, and endorse ultra-masculine ideologies of self-possession and self-sufficiency. Simultaneously, however, they inspire emotional outpourings and expressions of love between Christian men, encourage feminine surrender before God, and harbour a profound fear that men are weaklings and failures. The following analysis of *Left Behind* is alert to these paradoxes as it seeks to illuminate the profoundly conflicted portrait of evangelical masculinity presented in the texts.

[21] Even before we think about content, the generic preoccupations of the novels have profound implications for the way in which they conceive masculinity. Stylistically, *Left Behind* emulates the thriller genre that emerged in the mid-twentieth century: fast-paced action sequences, hi-tech gadgetry, intrigue and espionage all figure in abundance, and the characters are depicted as shrewd, self-reliant, resourceful heroes, battling and overcoming the odds against them. Jerry Palmer's seminal study of the genre helps elucidate the correlations between the ultra-masculine thrillers of Mickey Spillane, Ian Fleming and Raymond Chandler, and the Christian apocalyptic narratives of LaHaye and Jenkins. Palmer suggests that the most crucial element of the thriller, along with the presence of conspiracy, is the "competitive individualism" of the (uniformly male) hero. Thrillers operate in the service of a particular strain of conservatism by invoking radical autonomy as desirable, and concomitantly rendering social ties as debilitating: "[t]he hero is alone in the sense that, in the ultimate analysis, there is only one person he can trust:

himself. The others are either treacherous or incompetent.”³¹ Thrillers, then, recommend a highly orthodox conceptualization of agency, in which subjects are fully autonomous entities who rely solely on themselves and eschew the bonds of society, lest their autonomy is threatened as a consequence. This particular notion of agency strikes one as peculiarly masculine—indeed, Timothy Melley has noted that the “masculine associations” bound up with such forms of individualism help to “explain why so many postwar texts understand social communications as a feminizing force.”³²

[22] Certainly, in *Left Behind*, this distrust of social institutions—coupled with a radically individualistic worldview—is a central feature of the narrative. Multilateral organizations such as the UN are figured as tools of the devil: the novels’ Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, seizes an ineffectual, effeminate United Nations and uses its infrastructure as the basis of his own diabolical dictatorship. At the same time, masculine militia groups resisting Carpathia’s regime are portrayed sympathetically: Rayford “recalled not liking the militias, not understanding them, assuming them criminals. . . . Now they were allies.”³³ Furthermore, the Tribulation Force becomes more socially isolated as the narrative progresses, first moving into an underground bunker beneath the church, then to a safe house in a deserted suburb, then another safe house in Chicago (which the rest of the world has abandoned, believing it to be contaminated by radioactive fallout) and finally to the fortified city of Petra, a figure of the “true church,” impenetrable to those who oppose the Christian faith. The novels generate a textual milieu which privileges beliefs, behaviours and values which have masculine connotations, while devaluing those which carry traditionally feminine associations, especially those pertaining to communality.

[23] *Left Behind* also utilizes the action thriller typology to dramatize a fantasy of virile, active, heroic masculinity. The male characters embark upon daring deeds with

monotonous regularity, risking their lives and drawing on apparently limitless reserves of technical skill, resourceful creativity and gut instinct in order to secure temporary victories against the Antichrist and his despotic regime, known as the Global Community. The novels also share the thriller's predilection for male characters who are exceptionally quick-witted and enterprising. Without exception, the Tribulation Force men possess the expertise to respond flexibly to unexpected situations, which, in the fast-paced world of LaHaye and Jenkins' post-apocalypse, come thick and fast. Such improvisations inevitably allow the protagonists to demonstrate their innate, superlative masculinity. The fourth novel, *Soul Harvest*, is almost entirely dedicated to the macho posturings of Buck and Rayford as they embark on epic searches to rescue their wives—their “damsels in distress.” These quests resonate strongly with the kind of rugged masculinity extolled by Muscular Christianity and Promise Keepers. We see the character Buck Williams (Rayford's sidekick and son-in-law) using sheer physical brawn to dig through rubble left by a divinely inspired earthquake, in an attempt to find his wife—Rayford's daughter—Chloe. The imagery used by Jenkins vividly invokes the frontier myth of self-reliance: “All he had were the filthy, flimsy clothes on his back, normal shoes, and his bare hands.”³⁴ We are treated to similar depictions of Rayford, who valiantly breaks off from his own rescue mission to save a plane-load of passengers trapped in wreckage left by the quake.

[24] The characters' purpose in these overtly macho sequences is to efface the feminine submission and passivity engendered by devout evangelical belief. Before the rapture, Buck, an award-winning journalist, and Rayford, a successful commercial pilot, are paragons of hegemonic masculinity. They are successful, respected, authoritative and masterful, though occasionally enticed by worldly (read manly) vices, alcohol and infidelity being prime temptations. Prior to their conversions, Rayford, Buck, and their

fellow Tribulation Force men are masters of their own destiny, rational, sceptical men who are unimpressed by the emotional, intuitive (read effeminate) world of their wives' churches. Indeed, the self-possessed masculinity of the protagonists is constantly reiterated throughout the narrative, as the following quotes exemplify: "Rayford hated helplessness and immobility more than anything"; "Nobody wants to just sit here in safety while the world goes to hell"; "I just hate sitting here, waiting for stuff to happen. We need to make something happen"; "[t]here was more on Rayford's mind than just surviving. He was beginning to believe that he—and all of them—would have to take action, perhaps at the risk of their very lives."³⁵ Through spectacular displays of rugged individualism, the male characters are able to rescue, albeit momentarily, the type of masculine agency they enjoyed before the rapture and their consequent conversions.

[25] The Tribulation Force men find their masculine agency undermined by their conversion to dispensational evangelicalism. Rather than providing the characters with an opportunity to negotiate a more expansive model of male subjectivity, however, the texts instead offer a coping strategy in the form of the militaristic Tribulation Force. This network (which looks very much like a militia) allows the characters to disavow the feminine elements of their faith and reassert the masculine characteristics that were integral to their pre-rapture identities. The group's pastor, Bruce Barnes, employs the language of war as he attempts to persuade Rayford to join the Tribulation Force: "I've been praying about sort of an inner circle of people who want to do more than just survive ... doesn't part of you want to jump into the battle?"³⁶ Buck has similarly grandiose visions of life as a Christian in the last days: "He would stay up all hours of the night, plotting with his colleagues how they would have the courage and the audacity to stand up to oppression, to big government, to bigotry."³⁷ The Tribulation Force offers

evangelical men an outlet for their pent-up machismo, an opportunity to play the hero while simultaneously affirming (and policing) their new faithful identities.

[26] Despite this apparent textual endorsement of hegemonic masculinity, the novels' exploration of what it means to be an evangelical man at times appears thoroughly contradictory, particularly in the earlier books of the series. For example, in the opening sequence of the third novel, Buck inwardly laments the change of identity and the loss of control the events of the end-times have generated:

Resourcefulness had been the trademark of his career. Regardless of the obstacle, he had somehow made do in every imaginable situation or venue in the world at one time or another. Now...he was at a loss.³⁸

This quotation would seem to suggest that, for all his previous experience, Buck lacks the skills to deal with the aftermath of the rapture, and is experiencing an acute loss of power as a result. However, this meditative sensibility is not borne out by his actions only a page later. Driving through gridlocked Chicago in a large, powerful car, Buck takes matters into his own hands and swerves off the road, speeding past the waiting line of traffic. In reply to Chloe's protestations, Buck proclaims, "I know one thing I'm not doing: I'm not poking along in a traffic jam while the world goes to hell."

[27] The exhibition of power that motivates Buck's road-rage fantasy is accentuated by the virile, even phallic imagery used to describe the vehicle he is driving. "The late-model car was a smooth ride, but inching along in near gridlock made the huge automotive power plant feel like a stallion that wanted to run free."³⁹ A comparable passage appears in *The Mark*, in which a gleeful Buck gets his hands on another fast motor:

Buck found a deserted area where he was sure no one could see him and tried a couple of fast turns even on inclines. The Hummer seemed to ask

for more. With its superwide stance, its weight, and its power, it had unmatched maneuverability. Buck felt as if he were starring in a commercial.⁴⁰

Such overtly masculine symbolism does not sit well with the evangelical exhortation to surrender one's will and autonomy. The texts do gesture toward a more feminine, submissive paradigm of evangelical masculinity, but such moments are at odds with the repeated insistence upon traditional, active masculinity. I would suggest that the intensity of this insistence is itself revealing. The apparent need on the part of the authors to constantly, hyperbolically, proclaim the manliness of their heroes might be read as a tacit acknowledgement of the insufficiency and fragility of traditional gender categories. Such assertions strike the reader as over-compensatory, excessive, and thus suspect. Far from being inviolate, hegemonic masculinity is exposed as thoroughly unstable, troubled both from within and without.

[28] The language of hegemonic masculinity does pervade much of the narrative. Yet it should be noted that this discursive form never quite achieves a monopoly in the texts. Though the novels endorse hegemonic masculinity in principle, the characters' *performances* of this paradigm are inconsistent. Indeed, the protagonists sometimes seem to adopt very *unmasculine* qualities, enthusiastically relinquishing their will to God and glorying in the powerlessness that accompanies dispensational belief. During one particularly fervent prayer session in the second novel, *Tribulation Force*, Rayford engages in what can only be described as an ecstatic, and highly physical, act of surrender:

As Rayford knelt there, he realized he needed to surrender his will to God ... Rayford felt so small, so inadequate before God, that he could not seem to get low enough ... The overwhelming sense of unworthiness seemed to

crush him ... He had never felt so vividly the presence of God ... Rayford wished he could sink lower into the carpet, could cut a hole in the floor and hide from the purity and infinite power of God.⁴¹

Though this consummate act of submission is at odds with many other examples of Rayford's behaviour, it is not a total anomaly. Similar instances occur with some frequency throughout the novels: for example, when Rayford is called upon to serve as Carpathia's pilot, he relinquishes his masculine autonomy and defers to God: "Rayford felt compelled to sublimate his wishes, his desires, his will and his logic."⁴² Elsewhere, Buck is overcome by an experience not unlike Rayford's, as he prays with the converted rabbi Tsion Ben-Judah and other holy men: "Hearing the fervency of these witness-evangelists made him fall prostrate. He felt the cold mud on the back of his hands and buried his face in his palms."⁴³

[29] The texts' representation of masculinity is thus disposed to vacillate between autonomy and passivity, leadership and submission, as the authors struggle to accommodate their commitment to traditional notions of manliness within a faith culture which often privileges values associated with femininity. It is nonetheless apparent that subversions of normative gender categories which trouble orthodox notions of manliness are apt to produce deep anxieties in the male characters, which they must then performatively resolve. It comes as no surprise that, a few pages after Rayford's moment of ecstatic contrition, he finds himself at the centre of a mysterious plot involving his daughter, Chloe, and a secret admirer, which only he has the wherewithal, insider knowledge and courage to resolve. Similarly, shortly after Buck falls prostrate in the presence of God, he becomes consumed with murderous intent towards a Global Community guard searching for the fugitive Tribulation Force pastor, Tsion Ben-Judah. "For the first time in his life, Buck was tempted to kill a man."⁴⁴ Rather than accepting

the expanded, pluralistic model of masculinity that evangelicalism might afford, the characters are more disposed to cling tenaciously to a more rigid and conservative conception of manliness, despite the fact that this model proves increasingly quixotic as the narrative progresses. Moments of submission experienced by the male protagonists are swiftly attenuated by assertions of rugged—and sometimes violent—individualism; though they might humble themselves before God, no doubt can be permitted that our heroes are, thoroughly and essentially, “real men.” The text thus works in diverse ways to “make safe” the evangelical imperative of feminine submission.

[30] I have so far attempted to demonstrate the deeply conflicted attitude toward gender and masculinity proffered in *Left Behind*. The most compelling illustration of the novels’ crisis of masculinity, however, is its exposition of Rayford’s murderous desire to become an instrument of prophecy and assassinate Nicolae Carpathia, global dictator and biblical Antichrist. This plot guides much of the action in book six, appropriately entitled *Assassins*, and raises important issues concerning agency, predetermination and personal autonomy, all of which, I would argue, are closely bound up with gender.

[31] At the start of this instalment, we note that Rayford is suffering from a sense of impotence. He feels his role in the Tribulation Force, in which he has assumed the position of leader, is no longer as important or empowering as it once was: “he was out of the loop now, away from the action”; “it wasn’t the same. He didn’t feel as necessary to the cause.”⁴⁵ Even worse, he is now “in essence working for his own daughter.”⁴⁶

Rayford’s self-image is thus deeply disturbed by emasculating feelings of redundancy and subordination. The thriller typology again becomes useful here in delineating the logic of Rayford’s responses. Palmer recalls Hegel’s *The Philosophy of Right* in his analysis of thriller heroes, in particular, their profound need to be *useful*. Thriller heroes encounter a deep malaise when confronted with the prospect of redundancy. They are ill-

equipped to cope with the quotidian, humdrum experiences that characterize the lives of their non-heroic peers:

The hero must be prepared to disregard the majority. His job is, essentially, to carve civilization out of the wilderness, to act in an emergency solely on the strength of his own intentions, to *create* a society that can develop the rule of law; but, as Hegel saw, once he has performed his task, and the rule of law is established, he no longer has a function.⁴⁷

[32] The hero's identity is thus only secure when he is at the centre of the action. When there are no problems, no crises that require his unique capacities to resolve, he is not only bored and dissatisfied, his very subjectivity is disrupted and fragmented. One might argue, then, that Rayford's near-pathological fantasies about Carpathia's murder are a gesture of compensation, an imaginary resolution to the sense of redundancy that afflicts him. To murder the most powerful man in the world is surely an act of masculine agency *par excellence*.

[33] The most pressing problem concerning Rayford's violent fantasy is its violation of the laws of prophecy, and thus the omnipotent will of God. For LaHaye and Jenkins, the assassination of the Antichrist has been divinely ordained and recorded in an inerrant Bible. Not only has the murderer been chosen in advance, but his or her identity is ultimately of little consequence, for the assassin is essentially only a pawn in God's overarching plan. Here, we see the final stage of the novels' crisis of masculinity played out. Rayford has attempted to overcome the problem of evangelical submission by performatively engaging in certain actions and behaviours which he believes will reaffirm his sense of masculine subjectivity, the apogee of these actions being the murder of Carpathia.

[34] Such efforts are futile, however, in the dispensationalist schema of predetermination. Rayford soon learns that, however audacious his deeds, however authoritative his leadership, he is ultimately powerless. He is not an autonomous actor but is merely acted upon, by divine forces beyond his understanding and control. This is impressed upon the reader via the outcome of Rayford's homicidal aspirations: though he meticulously plans the Antichrist's demise, even pulling the trigger at the critical moment, the death blow is dealt by someone else—Rayford is not responsible. God had not chosen him to complete the task, and no amount of human will can overcome the divine will. Moreover, even if Rayford *had* carried out the murder, the sense of purpose and self-aggrandizement he would have attained would be illusory and insubstantial. He would only be fleshing out God's design, acting as a vehicle for a divinely ordained event rather than acting as an agent in his own right. Rayford's attempt to rescue a sense of agency and masculine power is thus highly ironic, a compensatory gesture which is, ultimately, an empty gesture. Through this example, we can see how the logic of dispensationalism undermines the masculine agency that the Left Behind males crave. Dispensationalism advocates male leadership, but this goal is undermined by its own rationale. Despite their strenuous attempts to keep intact their fragile masculine identities, Buck, Rayford and their Tribulation Force peers are ultimately undone by a religious ideology that leaves human agency obliterated.

[35] The problem of masculinity in Left Behind can be connected in part to larger debates about the nature of gender in secular discourses, and a growing sense of unease in secular culture about the validity and viability of traditional forms of masculinity. But, as I hope this essay has demonstrated, these external circumstances cannot explain fully the crisis of masculinity in Left Behind, which is rather informed by a unique set of problems arising from the dynamics of evangelicalism and dispensationalism themselves.

[36] While some commentators have interpreted the representations of gender in *Left Behind* and dispensationalism more generally as monolithically rigid, reactionary and oppressive, I prefer to read them as deeply (though inadvertently) ironic.⁴⁸ Though *Left Behind* seeks to present hegemonic masculinity as *the* normative mode of male subjectivity, its tendency towards over-compensation serves to depict that same masculinity as threatened and vulnerable. Furthermore, the spectacular nature of the male characters' macho behaviour reveals the *performative* aspect of gendered subjectivity. The novels unintentionally expose the constructed nature of a masculinity which is neither natural nor inviolate, despite their resolute attempts to present it as such. The model of masculinity the authors would like to propagate is always already undermined, firstly by the evangelical imperative of surrender before God, and secondly by the enervating effects of prophecy belief. Godless modernity and "secular humanism" are often cited as fomenters of the gender "confusion" that many dispensationalists (including LaHaye and Jenkins) believe will usher in the end times. It is ironic, then, that the crisis of masculinity played out in LaHaye and Jenkins' apocalyptic novels emanates not from the chaotic secular world of gender trouble, but rather from the troublesome paradoxes of their own faith culture.

Notes

¹ Originally, the series consisted of twelve novels, published between 1995 and 2004; three prequels and a sequel have since been published.

² Bruce David Forbes, "How Popular are the *Left Behind* Books ... and Why? A Discussion of Popular Culture," in Bruce David Forbes and Jean Halgren Kilde, eds., *Rapture, Revelation and the Left Behind Series* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 5-33, 8.

³ See, for example, Nicholas D. Kristof, "Apocalypse (Almost) Now," *New York Times*, Editorial (November 24, 2004), A23, page accessed March 14, 2007; Michelle Goldberg, "Fundamentally Unsound," *Salon* (July 29, 2002), http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2002/07/29/left_behind/index.html, page accessed June 4, 2007.

⁴ Paul Boyer, "When U.S. Foreign Policy Meets Biblical Prophecy," *AlterNet* (posted February 20, 2003), <http://www.alternet.org/story/15221/>, page accessed February 25, 2007.

⁵ Sherryll Mleynek, "The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the *Left Behind* Novels," *Literature and Theology* 19:4 (November 2005): 367-83.

⁶ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 71-80.

⁷ I refer here specifically to conservative evangelicals who are likely to be sympathetic to dispensationalism, and am well aware that the beliefs, values and behaviours described in this essay may not apply to more liberal Christians who nonetheless designate themselves as evangelical. Evangelicalism is, of course, a notoriously broad and slippery term which encompasses a range of theological and cultural positions. I recognize that many evangelicals will not identify with the particular articulation of the faith I focus upon here.

⁸ Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 89. It should be noted that while Frykholm is critical of the novels' representation of gender, she nonetheless recognizes that it is more complex and ambiguous than our first impressions might suggest; Darryl Jones, "The Liberal Antichrist—*Left Behind* in America," in Kenneth G. C. Newport and Crawford Gribben, eds., *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 97-112, 105.

⁹ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151. Amy Frykholm notes the tendency to adopt such a reading style in *Rapture Culture*, 89-90.

¹⁰ Margaret Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 22.

¹¹ Mark W. Muesse, "Religious Machismo: Masculinity and Fundamentalism," in Stephen B. Boyd, W. Merle Longwood and Mark W. Muesse, eds., *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 89-102, 99.

¹² Amy Johnson Frykholm, "What Social and Political Messages Appear in the *Left Behind* Books? A Literary Discussion of Millenarian Fiction," in Bruce David Forbes and Jean Halgren Kilde, eds., *Rapture, Revelation and the Left Behind Series* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 167-195, 178.

¹³ For a more thorough exposition of dispensationalism, see Jonathan D. Burnham, *A Story of Conflict: The Controversial Relationship Between Benjamin Wills Newton and John Nelson Darby* (Bletchley and Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2004); Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

¹⁴ As with evangelicalism, it should be noted that not all dispensationalists take such a rigid view of history, or such a Calvinistic view of the human condition. Like most religious doctrines, there is considerable diversity of opinion among adherents concerning such matters.

¹⁵ Margaret Bendroth, 41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48-9.

¹⁷ For a more comprehensive exploration of this dynamic, see Muesse, “Religious Machismo.”

¹⁸ See, for example, John Bartkowski (2004); Margaret Bendroth (1993); Stephen Boyd et. al (1996); Brenda Brasher and Lee Quinby (2006); Clifford Putney (2001).

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁰ Robyn Muncy, “Trustbusting and White Manhood in America, 1898-1914,” *American Studies*, 38 (Fall 1997), 21-37.

²¹ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10.

²² Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 6.

²³ Quoted in David S. Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 63.

²⁴ John Bartkowski, *Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers and Godly Men* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 33; Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of American Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶ Bartkowski, *Promise Keepers*, 19.

²⁷ Faludi, *Stiffed*, 230.

²⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.

³⁰ For an example of overt homophobia in *Left Behind*, see the depiction of the obviously (and stereotypically) gay character Guy Blod, in the seventh novel *The Indwelling: The Beast Takes Possession* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2000), 43-46, 60-66, 260-266.

³¹ Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 83.

³² Timothy Melley, “Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy,” in Peter Knight, ed., *Conspiracy Nation: the Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 57-81, 64.

³³ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Nicolae: The Rise of the Antichrist* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1997), 20.

³⁴ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Soul Harvest: The World Takes Sides* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998), 27.

³⁵ Ibid., 349; Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Armageddon: The Cosmic Battle of the Ages* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2003), 305; *ibid.*, 370; *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1996), 23.

³⁶ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995), 303.

³⁷ Ibid., 310.

³⁸ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Nicolae*, 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2000), 107.

⁴¹ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Tribulation Force*, 240-241.

⁴² Ibid., 356.

⁴³ LaHaye and Jenkins, *Nicolae*, 208.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁵ Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Assassins: Assignment: Jerusalem, Target: Antichrist* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1999), 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁷ Palmer, *Thrillers*, 84.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Lee Quinby, *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).