

**Episode 2,413: Bad Theology: Israel, the “Rapture”, and the End Times**

**Guest: Brent McGuire**

**WOODS:**  I know everybody wants to hear what we have to say on this subject, but you're going to have to endure one college story. And then at the end I'm going to share another college story.

But the first one is Brent – who actually was a year younger than I was, that's why he was a year behind me. But Brent actually delivered the Latin oration at the Harvard commencement exercises when he was graduating. And that is a tradition. And it's a long story how it is that you come to do that.

But Brent had to write this thing up and submit it. And it was decided that he would deliver the Latin oration. Now, all the students are given an English translation, so they know the moments when they should laugh.

And so, it looks like all the Harvard students are fluent in Latin, because none of the parents or dignitaries are given this copy. So, it preserves the illusion that we all have this classical education. So, anyway, Brent, being kind of like me in his opinions, was not, let's say, the world's most popular member of his graduating class.

And as a matter of fact, there was a small group of people who were horrified to learn that Brent was going to deliver the Latin oration. They were planning to stand up and turn their backs on him during it.

But when they saw it, it was so brilliant and wonderful that they couldn't bring themselves to do it. He had charmed them into acting like civilized people during the commencement. That's my story, Brent.

**McGUIRE:** That's very flattering. I think the mimosas that morning had a lot to do with it too.

**WOODS:** That may also have had a little something to do with it. Okay, so before we get started, obviously we're talking about a subject that has contemporary relevance, to put it mildly. Some questions of theology might seem remote to people in their daily lives, but this one is not.

And I did say – I made a remark on Twitter, which is not a place where you go to for nuance, in which I spoke of evangelicals. And I had people saying: *Now hold on one cotton picking minute. Not all evangelicals are dispensationalists.*

Okay, fair enough. But if you had to define the term "evangelical" in the sense in which people understand it, let's say in American politics, what does that word mean? Just start there.

**McGUIRE:** Well, I think evangelicalism in America shares in common – and again, there are exceptions. But you're really, really big churches. John Hagee's in San Antonio, or – I'm at a loss. I try not to think of them too much.

**WOODS:** [laughing] I understand.

**McGUIRE:** But you're non-denominational Protestant churches in America tend to share more or less a Baptist theology. Which is to say, a belief in the Bible as God's inspired word. Jesus Christ, of course, as the world's Savior who has come to atone for the sins of the world.

And when we place our trust in him, we're saved by some kind of Romans Road to Salvation, or praying the Sinner's prayer and deciding to follow him. Something like that. It's a strange mix of Arminianism and Calvinism, if those terms mean anything to your audience.

But they also share (relevant to this discussion) a common understanding of the End Times.

And so, again, not all, but I would say the vast majority of your large non-denominational evangelical churches in America subscribe to a view of the End Times that involves a Rapture and a period of tribulation, and a lot of things having to do with Israel and the State of Israel and so forth, before, finally, Christ's return and the new heavens and the new earth.

So, I don't know if that helps.

**WOODS:** Yeah. I think that's good. Can you explain what the significance of the so-called Scofield Bible is in all this?

**McGUIRE:** Oh, sure. So, going back about 200 years, you had a group of dissenting Anglicans known as the Plymouth Brethren. And the big name there is a guy named John Nelson Darby. And he was very much a proponent of this so-called "dispensational premillennialism".

And I'm happy to unpack those big words a little bit. But needless to say, just a very specific and strange, very complicated actually, understanding of the future and the way the end of the world is going to play out.

That became popularized down the road by a guy named Cyrus Scofield, who spent some of his years here in Dallas, actually. But Scofield was a big advocate of this understanding of the End Times that entailed these so-called dispensations, different eras or ages in which God dealt with people in slightly different ways.

Beginning with Adam and Eve and the so-called Age of Innocence, but up till the present time, the so-called Sixth Age, this age of the church, or the age of grace, until the final age and the consummation.

But Scofield divides all of history into these different eras, and then understands certain things said in the Bible as fulfilling these various ages.

And what was kind of a coup (and a bit of a fluke) but he befriended the man that was the publisher for *Oxford University Press*, who took Scofield's Bible study notes and made them the notes, the cross-references, and the footnotes for the publication of the King James Bible that Oxford came out with at the time.

This is in the early 1900s now. And so, that version of the Bible in English speaking countries was a massive bestseller, and became the Bible for so many Christians.

And here's your, how do I understand this obscure verse in Daniel? Oh, well, here's Scofield explaining it to me as a prediction of the return of the State of Israel and the rebuilding of the temple, et cetera.

And so, yeah, Scofield was a pioneer and one of the trailblazers for the popularity, certainly, of this dispensational premillennial view.

**WOODS:** Well, since you invited me to ask you this question, I will, at least with premillennial. Can you explain what pre- and post-millennialism mean? And how would you say a Lutheran looks at that question? Is a Lutheran "pre" or "post" or "a" millennial?

**McGUIRE:** Sure. So, that "millennial" business comes from one verse in the Book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 20, that speaks of a thousand-year period. And so, how these different millennial groups divide up is where they understand Christ's coming again in relation to that 1000-year period.

And so, premillennialists understand Christ is coming again before that 1,000 year begins. Postmillennialists understand him as coming after that thousand years. And we Lutherans, along with most of Christendom today and certainly most of Christendom in history, subscribe to an amillennial view.

Which is to say, we don't take that thousand years, first of all, literally. It belongs to revelation. Almost all of revelation is apocalyptic and figurative language. And so, that is especially the case with the numbers in Revelation.

But we also understand that 1,000 years to refer to the period that really began with Christ's ascension and will last until his second coming. So, we would understand the thousand years to be the period that we're in even now.

And instead of dividing history into seven dispensations or seven ages, we with the author of Hebrews say: *Look, there's really two ages, the former times, and these latter times. The former times being the time from Adam to Christ, and these, the latter days, the latter times, being the time since then.*

So, it certainly makes for a much simpler understanding of how all this is going to be brought to an end, ultimately. But it also, I would argue, and would be happy to take you through the controverted texts, is the understanding that makes the most sense out of scripture, out of the biblical data.

**WOODS:** Well, let me take a minute to ask you about one particular, big, big portion of this issue, which is – I think the term has sometimes been used, "the great parenthesis".

**McGUIRE:** Yes.

**WOODS:** That, in this understanding, the church was not actually anticipated by the prophets. They could not have seen that there would be a church, because the primary drama is between God and the Jewish people, and God did not anticipate the Jews rejecting Christ.

And so, we get the church, which is the great parenthesis. but the real story is God's drama with the Jews, which resumes in 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel. Am I caricaturing the position when I say that?

**McGUIRE:** No. They themselves use that word "parenthesis" to describe the age we're in now. That when Christ came, he came to restore Israel to its earthly glory. And when the Israelites rejected him, that set in motion a kind of plan B, in which the gospel went out to the Gentiles, and now we have a church.

And this is only to last until Israel gets its act together again. And then all these Old Testament promises, which are read literally and not seen as being ultimately fulfilled in Christ and in the church, but rather as promises that remain unfulfilled until Israel literally gets its land back, and Israel literally has its monarchy restored, et cetera.

And so, yeah, it treats the cross, even, when you think about it, as sort of the backup plan. I grew up with the Scofield Bible, but I also, when I was older, used a Bible by another premillennial dispensationalist, edited by a man by the name of Dr. Charles Ryrie.

And Ryrie in his notes will say that kind of the goal of biblical history is to reveal the glory of God as seen in his salvation and other things. So, it's not just that Christ redeemed the world by his atoning death and resurrection, but he is glorified also in restoring Israel to its pride of place in an earthly sense.

So, I think that gives it away. That, if it's a caricature, it's only slightly. Because there's Ryrie admitting, yes, the glory is to be found in the salvation story, but apparently not only in that, also in what God plans to work out in terms of Israel's political futures.

**WOODS:**  Well, can you then walk us through exactly how they expect the End Times to go, including the so-called Rapture?

**McGUIRE:** Yeah. Okay, so I don't want to bore your listeners and get too in the weeds.

**WOODS:** No, they want to hear this, because the world needs to know what's going on with all this.

**McGUIRE:** So, it's really this horrible copy and paste job that they do with a verse here or a verse there. And they say: Ah, see, this place in Daniel that refers to a 70th week in which a covenant will be made regarding the temple. That's yet to be fulfilled.

And of course, we've got to understand the "70th week" as seven days, but "days" understood as representing seven years. And so, where else do we have seven years somewhere in the Bible? That kind of thing.

And so, by kind of skipping to Ezekiel and then skipping over to Revelation, they put together this scheme where the expectation is that at some point in the future, someone is going to come along and allow not only Israel to be a nation state again – which we have had since 1948.

And obviously that was a huge "I told you so" from these premillennial dispensationalists, and only increased the enthusiasm for this particular way of seeing things. But that someone's going to come along and is actually going to make possible the rebuilding of the temple.

And we've got to have the rebuilding of the temple, because this verse in Daniel (which they interpret as meaning some future covenant) has to happen as a last domino to fall. But that then in the middle of this period, there's going to be this period of terrible tribulation.

And again, not because it says so in Daniel, but because in verses in Revelation that they assume (vaguely) are incorporating the verse from Daniel, speaks of a tribulation. And so, we've got this seven years of tribulation, the first three and a half of which we have temple sacrifices going on again in the temple.

And then we have three and a half years of that ending and terrible things happening, to Israel especially, but to the world. And then finally the inauguration of this thousand year reign on earth by Jesus. Now, all that I said was in place 200 years ago or so, that view of things.

But an added piece came in the early 19th century, going back to that Darby fellow and the Plymouth Brethren. And they were having this kind of revival meeting when this young girl – I'm not quite sure what her age was supposed to be. 11, 12, 13?

Her name was Margaret MacDonald. She receives this vision, this dream, in which God tells her that before that period of tribulation starts, the church, believers in Christ, are going to be raptured. They're going to be rescued in this kind of secret resurrection.

Those living at the time will be beamed up to heaven and spared the horrible things that are going to go on during that seven-year tribulation period. And so, there's the beginning of your Rapture idea. I mean, it would have been unrecognizable to a Christian living in the first 1,800 years of the Christian Church's history.

That's how relatively recent an idea this is, and what a distortion of the biblical passages it ends up being. Because the Plymouth Brethren and premillennial dispensationalists afterwards say: *Aha! Here's where the Bible has told us this all along, and we just don't see it.*

You have this passage in First Thessalonians where Paul is addressing Christians there who are concerned about their loved ones who have already died. They've died believing, but Christ hasn't come yet. What does this mean for them?

And Paul says: *Ah, here's what you have to understand. When Jesus does come, first, those who have already died in Christ will rise first. They will rise to meet him. Their earthly bodies will be resurrected, and they will rise to meet the Lord. And then we who are alive at that time will also go to meet him in the air, and altogether we will be with the Lord*.

Now here's the problem. There's a verb in Greek. It gets translated in Latin as "rapiamor". "We will be caught up", right? There's your rapture word, right? But we'll be caught up in the air to meet the Lord. And that "meeting" word – "apantesis" in the Greek – that meeting word you find in two other places in the New Testament.

And outside of the New Testament it's used in this technical way to refer to the meeting of an embassy, or an embassy meeting a dignitary who comes to visit a town or a city. And so, what happens, the dignitary, let's say the king or the prince or the ambassador representing the king is just outside the city gates.

And now ambassadors from the city, they come out and escort him in. This is described in a very down to earth way in one of Paul's visits to a city at the end of the book of Acts. Where they come out, and again, that "apantesis" word is used of these fellows from the city, and they meet Paul, and then they accompany him as he comes into the town.

And then it's also used in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, where the wise virgins meet the bridegroom as he approaches the wedding hall. Now here's the thing. In all three circumstances – think about it.

When the meeting occurs with the dignitary, with Paul, with the bridegroom in the parable, with Jesus in the air in First Thessalonians, what do you expect to happen after the meeting? There's not a reversal of direction.

The bridegroom continues in the same direction to enter the wedding hall. Paul keeps going in the same direction he was going and enters the city. And so likewise, why would we expect anything other than, once Jesus has been met by believers (both dead, now raised, and those living at the time) to continue to descend, corresponding to the heavenly Jerusalem, coming down, new heavens and new earth.

In other words, First Thessalonians does not describe some secret rapture event, but the one and only second coming. This is the end of the world. It's not some second coming before the second, second coming or the third coming or whatever. It's the one and only second coming.

And so, there's that. And then, of course, they read back into Jesus's famous End Times discourse. You find it in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but especially in Matthew and Luke's version, where Jesus says: *No one knows concerning the day or the hour, not even the son of man.*

So, that right there should tell you to treat with a grain of salt any premillennial dispensationalist telling you: *Aha! Well, we at least have an idea of the season in which this is going to happen, if we don't know the exact time.*

That's their way out of that. But in that context, Jesus is emphasizing the suddenness of the event, that he could come at any time. And therefore, to watch, and to be vigilant, and to be ready, and to be found in the faith when he does return. He uses examples.

So, for example, as in the days of Noah, where people are marrying and being given into marriage, and then all of a sudden the flood comes. Or he uses the example of a householder, and that if the householder knew when a burglar would break in, he would have taken greater steps to protect his goods.

And it's in that same context that Jesus talks about how in the day of his return, there will be two in the field, and one will be taken and one will be left behind, that kind of thing. Two will be working, and one's taken and one's left behind.

Now, you know from the highly popular, amazingly bestselling series of novels Left Behind, that they understand the person that's left behind as the person that is found unbelieving when Jesus returns and therefore is left out, does not benefit from that rapture event.

And that the one raptured is the one taken. Well, I argue – and, lo, and behold, I'm not the only one to see this. The great Anglican biblical scholar NT Wright has said the same thing. That while Jesus doesn't say which is which, the whole point is the suddenness of the event.

But it's fairly clear from the surrounding examples, Noah and the flood, the guy who gets burgled, that to be taken is the bad thing. To be left is the good thing. In other words, who is left after the flood? Noah and his family. To be taken is the event to be avoided.

Likewise, with the house owner, to have your goods taken is the bad thing. That's judgment. To have your goods left is the positive. And so, it's as if the Left Behind guys, they have it exactly backwards. To be left behind is the good thing.

Moreover, the verbs in the Greek, "to be left behind", that verb for "left" is, in one of the two versions of the Lord's Prayer, the word for "forgive". And the word for "taken" is elsewhere in the Gospels the very word used to describe what happened to Jesus when he was arrested.

So, again, to be taken is bad. To be left is good. And yet we have millions of evangelicals in this world who are fearful of being left behind on the day of the so-called Rapture. Anyway, that's probably too much.

**WOODS:** No, no, no. It's perfectly good. I was thinking, as I was doing a little reading for today, about what seems to me to be the insuperable obstacle here, that nobody had ever heard of any of this until about 200 years ago.

**McGUIRE:** Right.

**WOODS:** Whereas in the early church, people were very, very alert to novelties being introduced. If it's a novelty, then it doesn't come from God. We've already been told what we need to know, so we don't need any novelties. But this is an extraordinary novelty.

And again, if you think of all the major figures of Christendom whose intellectual contributions are significant, going from Augustine all the way through Thomas Aquinas, and indeed from the reformers, from Luther, Calvin, and on and on down the road. None of them would have been aware of this.

So, I thought, they can't possibly have a reply to that. But the reply is that: Well, God reveals things in his own time. But it just seems astonishing that his own time is 1,800 years, and that the manner of it is a series of notes and cross-references in a text. And it just seems odd.

But then the other thing is, they will also say – they don't just sit back and take it when people like you and me have things to say to them. What they say is: *Somebody like Brent McGuire believes in so-called "replacement theology", and that this is bad. That you're saying that the Jews in the grand drama of salvation have been replaced by the church.*

Whereas, they would say: *My copy of the Old Testament certainly looks like God is saying, "I'm giving you this particular land. I'm not spiritualizing it. I'm not anticipating that sometime in the future it'll have some other meaning." He's saying, "This is for you." And you replacement theologians, most of you are probably anti-Semites.*

You think I'm joking about that? That is what a lot of them say, that: *You’re anti-Semites, you hate the Jews. That's why you want to "replace them" with the church.*

How do you answer that?

**McGUIRE:** Well, the problem is the New Testament. And you have Christ himself, and Saint Paul and others, telling us that Israel was all along a prefigurement of a much larger fulfillment, that finds its fulfillment ultimately in all believers, not just Jewish ones.

But Jew and Gentile both make up the Israel of God, as Paul refers to it in in Galatians, that the children of Abraham are not children of Abraham by descent or by bloodline, but by faith.

That where children of the promise as Abraham believed in the promise, and it was credited to him as righteousness, that the dispensationalists are guilty of the very problem Paul is taking the Galatian Christians to task for.

Which is to have them brought to faith in Christ, but then fall back on a way of reading the Old Testament that treats it as a closed book, as though Christ doesn't change things. And so, it's not that we replace the Jews with Gentile believers, but now the church includes both.

I mean, how many times does Paul talk about, first to the Gentiles, that: Don't get haughty because all of a sudden you seem to be in greater numbers coming to salvation than Jews. Because remember, you're being grafted on to the tree that is naturally theirs.

In Romans you have that analogy of the olive tree. And the natural branches are the Jews who had this promise from the beginning, and Gentiles only now are being grafted in. And that will always be the case, that there is kind of an order of salvation to the Jew first, and also to the Greek, or also to the Gentile.

So, we're not saying – the Jews are still those for whom Christ died, but so are the Gentiles. And so, the church is to be made up of both groups. But this idea that salvation for them is limited to this patch of land that's no bigger than new Jersey?

Over and again in the New Testament, you see these promises in the Old broadened, made cosmic in scope. It's not just "the meek shall inherit the land", or "the meek shall inherit Palestine". "The meek shall inherit the earth."

And it's striking – granted, it's an argument from silence. But if this is so important, the restoration of the land to Israel, the restoration of the monarchy, the rebuilding of the temple, why do none of the apostolic writers talk about that?

The whole argument of the book of Hebrews is that you Jewish Christians who are tempted in the face of the ostracism of your family, being kicked out of the synagogue, to go back to the old ways – and the whole rest of Hebrews is to say: *The temple ain't it anymore. Christ is the temple. His body is the temple. He himself said so.*

And so, for all those reasons, it strikes me as a very unChristian view of things to sort of set up this kind of second track. That there's, for the Jews, some other way then by faith in Christ to become part of the true spiritual Israel

**WOODS:**  What then, would somebody in, as you say, most of Christendom, have said about the role of the Jews in the End Times? Is there one? If so, what is it?

**McGUIRE:** Well, we know that between now and our Lord's second coming – one of the reasons that coming is delayed (as far as our perspective is concerned) is that there's someone else out there God wants to bring into his kingdom.

And when Paul talks about – he refers to it as a mystery. That in the Jews of his day, by and large, rejecting the offer of salvation that came by way of Christ, the gospel then spread to the Gentiles as a kind of way to incite their jealousy.

That the Jews, seeing the Gentiles come to faith in their Messiah, would, by that circumstance, be led to investigate the promises of the gospel, and some, in that way, be brought to faith. So, that in this way, as he says in Romans 11, "All Israel might be saved."

And so, when he says "all Israel", it only makes sense given the context in which he's already said: Now, not all Israel are Israel. That is to say, not all who are descendants of Abraham actually belong to what counts as "spiritual Israel" in God's eyes.

That when he says, "all Israel" there at the end of his discussion, he means the whole church, Jew and Gentile, all believers in Christ.

And so, that obviously includes the Jews, that there are among the Jewish people, many that God still wants to see saved, brought to a knowledge of their sin, and the forgiveness of sins won for them in Christ, and to be incorporated into the church.

But now this church that has been broadened to include those who were not part of Israel before Christ came.

**WOODS:** Well, can I put you on the spot, then, with the toughest question – I haven't really asked tough ones. This is a tough one.

Would you say, therefore, that a Christian could have his own secular reasons for supporting the State of Israel versus its enemies, but is not under any theological obligation to side with it in all circumstances, or assume that it is always righteously upholding the side of God in whatever contest it finds itself in?

**McGUIRE:** That's exactly right. And when I teach these things in my Bible classes or preach on them – I'm in very much an evangelical area of the country. We are surrounded by mega-denominational churches and Bible churches that teach this very understanding of the modern state of Israel.

And so, I want to free the members of my parish of the burden of thinking that somehow God mandates a kind of uncritical stance towards the modern state of Israel. The verses in Genesis 12, for example, come into play a lot in, I think, everyday conversations: *Well, God says there in Genesis 12, "I will bless those who bless you and your descendants."*

Speaking to Abraham: *And I will curse those who curse you.* See there? But again, we know that now that Christ has come to be a true descendant of Abraham is to share Abraham's faith. And so, that promise doesn't apply to the modern state of Israel, which has no theological significance. None.

But that promise applies to his church. That those who bless the church will be blessed, and those who curse the church will be cursed. Anyway, that is so important. Because people are led – at least in their decisions on whom to vote or what policies to support and so forth.

They're led to believe that it's unChristian to criticize anything that the State of Israel does. And that even entail sometimes, it seems to me, support of measures that go way beyond what a Christian would find in keeping with Just War theory and so forth.

We dehumanize the political enemies of Israel this way. And no, there's never been a time in the church's history when it would have been wrong for Christians to think that the Lord's return could be imminent. And that includes the present day.

There's no other domino to fall regarding the political fortunes of Israelites that we have to wait for before we can really think: *Oh well, now Jesus might come back*. No. Jesus says: *No one knows concerning the day or the hour.*

And he speaks of the suddenness of his return. And there's been nothing since his ascension that Christians have to look for before they can take seriously the possibility of the Parousia, or his Second Coming.

So yes, Christians ought to apply their sanctified reason, and apply how they think about the modern state of Israel the way they would any other country, any other ally or neighbor of the United States.

But not to think: *Oh, because they are the chosen people, or they are the Israelites, that somehow different standards apply.*

Again, it's a secular state that has nothing to do with the Israel of the Bible, and certainly not since Christ has come to make all of us who believe in him the true spiritual Israel.

**WOODS:** Well, I'm not going to let you go just yet, but I want to thank you very much for coming on and clarifying what, as you say, are surprisingly complicated things. That we had a rather simple way of thinking of all this, and then this came along.

But before I let you go, I want to keep my promise and tell one more college story. Now, I'm going to make myself a little vulnerable here and say, I still think of you as my best friend from college. And we kind of fell away for a while, and so it's great to have a chance to talk to you again.

But I remember there was a year when our parents had each gotten us the William F Buckley word-a-day calendar. You remember that?

**McGUIRE:** [laughing]Yeah.

**WOODS:** And the thing is a regular word-a-day calendar, okay, it's going to have the odd word you haven't heard before, but you'll know a lot of them. The Buckley calendar were words that no one would ever use.

**McGUIRE:** Right.

**WOODS:** And so, we had this rule that – we didn't stick with it very long. You remember, the first time we would see each other during the day, we had to try to use that word in our first sentence to the other. And one day the word was...

**McGUIRE:** I think I know the one you're going to – well, we'll see. We'll see. I think I know the one you're going to bring up.

**WOODS:** Okay, the word was "hemidemisemiquaver".

**McGUIRE:** Oh, okay. No, that wasn't the one. All right.

**WOODS:** Oh! "Subspecieaeternitatis"?

**McGUIRE:** No.

**WOODS:** It wasn't that? But how do you use these in your first sentence?

**McGUIRE:** It was "usurious". And one of our friends, he had to get superglue for some reason, to fix something that had broken in his dorm room. And he was complaining about how expensive it was, right? And I said: *Oh, usurious glue, you mean.*

**WOODS:**  Perfect. I forgot about that.

**McGUIRE:** What about hemidemisemiquaver?

**WOODS:** Yeah, but how do you use that in a sentence? Especially in your greeting. When you're greeting somebody, there's no way to fit that in. Anyway.

All right, listen, you and I have to exchange old stories at some point, but probably not here on the podcast?

**McGUIRE:** That's right. We lost our listeners a long time ago.

**WOODS:** Long time ago. But but anyway, thanks so much. This was exactly what we needed and I'll be in touch with you soon. But thank you.

**McGUIRE:** And thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

**WOODS:** [laughing] Oh, you even know the closing line.