

Tim LaHaye, Religious Right leader and ‘Left Behind’ author, dead at 90

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Tim LaHaye, the evangelical minister known for both his conservative politics and the best-selling *Left Behind* series of novels, died July 25 at age 90, after recently suffering a stroke.

“Thrilled as I am that he is where he has always wanted to be, his departure leaves a void in my soul I don’t expect to fill until I see him again,” said Jerry B. Jenkins in a statement on the death of his co-author of the apocalyptic *Left Behind* series.

Half of evangelical power couple

LaHaye and Beverly, his wife of 69 years, were an evangelical power couple, with him serving as a pastor, religious broadcaster and the founder of Christian high schools and her founding Concerned Women for America, a prominent conservative organization.

“Between his theology and his co-writer Jerry Jenkins’ writing ability, the two of them really managed to capture the popular imagination,” said Marcia Z. Nelson, contributing editor and former religion book reviews editor at *Publishers Weekly*.

End-times novels captured imagination

The *Left Behind* series, a modern-day morality tale, told how an airline captain tried to find his family—and struggled with his own failings—after believers were suddenly “raptured” into heaven and nonbelievers were left

to face tribulations on earth.

The series was first published in 1995, in the run-up to the new millennium, which prompted anxiety among end-times believers as well as others. LaHaye's contributions to those books made his apocalyptic theology more engaging and approachable to a more general readership.

In 1999, *Apollyon* was the first Christian fiction title to cross over from Christian best-seller lists to general ones, spending multiple weeks on both *The New York Times* and *USA Today* best-seller lists.

LaHaye had long been a proponent of relying on the Bible for prophetic messages.

"Everyone wants to know about the future, and there's a lot of discussion, but only the Bible gives concrete answers," LaHaye said in a 2005 story published by Religion News Service. "What people don't realize is that 28 percent of the Bible was prophetic at the time it was written. There are over 1,000 prophecies in the Bible, half of which have already been fulfilled."

Early architect of Religious Right

One of his key roles in U.S. politics was to encourage the late Jerry Falwell Sr. to start the Moral Majority, urging previously reticent conservative Christians to speak out about their values and views. LaHaye had gathered Southern California pastors to counter progressives but thought a national organization should be formed.

More recently, he helped garner evangelical support for former President George W. Bush and was known as a spiritual adviser to former GOP presidential candidate Mike Huckabee.

Beyond the 16-book *Left Behind* series, LaHaye wrote dozens of other

books on topics such as family life, Bible prophecy and critiques of secular humanism that sold millions of copies.

'Politics of fear'

In 2001, the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals named him "the most influential American evangelical of the last 25 years." It cited the string of 1970s and 1980s books he had written about "battles" for evangelicals—*The Battle for the Mind*, *The Battle for the Family* and *The Battle for the Public Schools*.

Christian author Tom Sine—a critic of LaHaye's role with the Religious Right—agreed with the finding of the institute, saying LaHaye was influential in fostering the "politics of fear."

"Tim LaHaye has become such a dominant influence in American Christian culture because he has defined the terms of America's culture war," wrote Sine, author of *Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America's Culture War*, in a 2001 article in *Sojourners*.

Megachurch pastor

The son of a Detroit autoworker, LaHaye was an Air Force veteran and a graduate of Bob Jones University. He was pastor of churches in South Carolina and Minnesota before moving to California.

He led the Scott Memorial Baptist Church in San Diego County for 25 years, expanding it to three locations, including Shadow Mountain Community Church, an evangelical megachurch in the San Diego suburb of El Cajon.

"Tim was one of the most godly men I have ever known," said David Jeremiah, the current senior pastor of the El Cajon church. "Almost every conversation I had with him ended with his praying with me and for me."

Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, praised LaHaye for the range of his contributions.

"Dr. LaHaye has blessed the church in America with a legacy that will far outlast his time on this earth," he said. "The principled stand he took on countless issues has impacted the social, cultural and political landscape for generations. He was a once-in-a-millennium type of leader who paved the way for future generations."

The last tweets before the announcement of his death on LaHaye's Twitter account were two quoting the Gospel of Matthew about focusing on heaven rather than earth.

"Don't store up treasures here on earth where they can erode away or may be stolen," they read. "Store them in heaven where they will never lose their value and are safe from thieves. If your profits are in heaven, your heart will be there too."