

Preface

When Tony Jones and Tripp Fuller first sat down with me to ask if I was interested in writing a book for the Homebrewed Guides to Christianity, I was intrigued. I love the Homebrewed podcasts; they explore the most interesting theology today. But the more they talked the more anxious I became:

“We want these books to be written for a general audience, not to academic ones.”

“But, I can have footnotes, right?”

“Well, maybe, but can you keep them to a minimum, and even then can you make them like David Foster Wallace’s, you know, witty and intelligent?”

“Wait, I have to be intelligent?”

“Well, it’s preferable, but can you at least be funny?”

“Funny? I’ve got to be funny?”

“Look dude, we’re going for the Jon Stewart crowd here, the Stephen Colbert demographic. If you could make it a little snarky, that’d be a big plus for us.”

“Okay, so, you want funny, snarky theology that should be intelligent and challenging for your readers? That about cover it?”

“Pretty much . . . oh, one more thing—can you make it short? We want these books to fit in the back pocket of

jeans so people can read them on subways and buses. The good news is that we have a lot of topics still open.”

“Cool, can I have Jesus?”

“No, Tripp took that one already; he got first choice. But we have a long list: evil, sin, church history, holy spirit, end times—”

“Stop! Did you say end times? Cool, I’m in.”

Maybe it was the happy vibes that you get at the AAR/SBL Fortress receptions, but I found myself agreeing to do this book on the spot. However, on the walk back to my hotel room those familiar inner voices of reflection started their clamoring for attention.

“This sounds like it could be fun. Snarky theology. It’s a whole new genre, right up your alley.”

“Really? You think this’ll be fun? People read these books, you know. Don’t trifle with this; you’ll ruin your reputation. Do you really want to be known as the Zach Galifianakis of theology?”

“Seriously? That would be awesome!”

Once the screeching laughter stopped drowning out the calliope music usually playing in my head, I stopped and laughed. I suspect that I wasn’t alone when the other authors were working this through (except for Tripp; I’m pretty sure Tripp’s game for anything). These guides are supposed to be pithy, playful, yet deadly serious about bringing theology to the masses. The more I thought about the mission of Fortress and their Theology for the People initiative, the more excited I was about being able to contribute.

Still, the challenge of writing a book without theory, method, jargon, or any of those other academic tools/crutches was more daunting than I anticipated. Striking

that balance between engaging and informative can be a clumsy dance and many toes can be stepped on by the time it's over. I hope you read something in here that's food for the journey and you can benefit from my mistakes. I made the deliberate choice in dealing with the end times to concentrate on the particular strand of theology that currently holds so much cultural power over our imagination—dispensationalism and Rapture culture. If you don't know what those words mean, then this book's for you. If you do know what those words mean, then this book's still for you, as I break down the biblical, historical, and theological foundations upon which this theological hot mess rests.

As always, a community of people stand behind any book, and I want to thank Tripp Fuller and Tony Jones for their trust in letting me contribute a volume to this series. Tony especially deserves deep gratitude for his suggestions and patience at those times when I didn't take them. The folks at Fortress have been amazing to work with and I am fortunate to have such a fine community guide me through another book. I'm deeply appreciative of my colleagues in the Religious Studies Department at Elon University. L. D. Russell, Brian Pennington, Amy Allocco, Ariela Marcus-Sells, Toddie Peters, and Pamela Winfield have been wonderful conversation partners over the years. Lynn Huber and Geoffrey Claussen, however, deserve special thanks. Professor Claussen read over parts of this manuscript and offered helpful suggestions to keep me from mistakes I would have regretted. Professor Huber was extremely generous with her library and is one of the most insightful and intriguing scholars working on apocalyptic literature today. I have grown enormously because of all these fine people.

I am also grateful for the presence of Jan Rivero in my life. She not only supports the solitary work of a writer, but serves as an astute theological partner who keeps me honest and grounded with the concerns of her parish. Her most important challenge is to continually question whose needs does theology serve? I think that is the same question Fortress asks with their new publishing initiative. So, have fun and keep watching.

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