

Left Behind Can't Get Off the Ground

The new movie leaves viewers with lots of questions

How do you describe both a beginning and an end?

That's the suspenseful question viewers are asked at the beginning of *Left Behind: The Movie*, the apocalyptic prophecy movie by Christian filmmakers Peter and Paul LaLonde. This bit of narration is supposed to set the stage for a movie that dramatizes the disappearance of all true Christians—and the ensuing disasters that occur when a manipulative antichrist figure assumes leadership of the United Nations.

But the question at the beginning of *Left Behind* also underscores a major weakness in the film's plot. The story is too thin to support what is trying to be a disaster movie, a conspiracy-theory thriller and a biblical prophecy seminar all rolled into one.

In *Left Behind*, viewers witness the "rapture," the Great Tribulation and the rise of the Antichrist through the eyes of a celebrity journalist, an airline pilot and his rebellious teen-age daughter, a backslidden pastor, and a naive flight attendant. But the 95-minute story just can't supply the depth needed to explain serious theological themes adequately. Often it leaves audiences with more questions than answers.

Kirk Cameron, former star of the sitcom *Growing Pains*, plays seeker-sensitive reporter Buck Williams. When the world is thrown into chaos after an attack on Israel and the sudden disappearance of millions of people (who leave all their clothes, jewelry and eyeglasses behind), Buck tries to make sense of it all.

He discovers that international bankers have conspired to take

over the world's food supply, strong-arm the United Nations and create a global currency all in one swoop. As Buck pursues clues to the mystery (dodging bullets and explosions along the way), he is drawn unwittingly into the lair of the Antichrist—who, predictably, speaks with a Russian accent and has the power to manipulate people's thoughts.

The plot grows less and less credible as the film progresses. It is unfortunate that at times this biblically based story feels too much like man-made make-believe. And with *Left Behind's* combined promotional and production budget of about \$17 million, it can't compete with the visual excitement of a major Hollywood production. So it ends up feeling more like a low-budget made-for-TV movie.

The film does have its poignant moments. The pilot and his daughter (played by Brad Johnson and Janaya Stephens) provide warm, believable portrayals of struggling unbelievers who don't understand why their loved ones vanished. Their desperate search for answers leads them to faith in Christ after they watch a sermon drawn from the two books of Thessalonians videotaped three years before by a prominent preacher (played by Dallas pastor T.D. Jakes).

But too much of the plot is confusing. If all children are raptured, what is the cut-off age? If a huge segment of the population vanished, why is there a food shortage? Also, the closing scene of the Antichrist using mind control on U.N. delegates is ludicrous. Do we honestly think the apostle John had this guy in mind when he wrote the book of Revelation?

Left Behind is certainly not Oscar material. It's no *Jesus* film either. But with all its flaws, it easily could cause non-Christians to ask questions about the second coming of Christ. And if people find God after watching this movie, then we figure the \$17 million was worth the investment.