

Post-Rapture Radio

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- About the Book

POST-RAPTURE RADIO:

Lost Writings from a Failed Revolution

by Russell Rathbun

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"Hilarious, passionate, infuriating, revealing, alarming, perplexing, illuminating. In short, apocalyptic. And definitely required reading for anyone seeking a faithful Christianity in the heart of the American Empire."

-- Andy Crouch, columnist, Christianity Today

"Once in a while a book reaches out from the page, grabs me by the scruff of the neck, and says something so pithy, so smart, and irreverently funny that I almost bust a gut laughing. That's what Post-Rapture Radio did to me on several occasions. The fact is, sometimes satire is the best way for us to see our own foibles, and this book is a wonderful antidote to much that ails the church. It's A Confederacy of Dunces for Christians."

-- Tony Jones, author, The Sacred Way

"Soren Kierkegaard said that people held in the grip of an illusion cannot be directly reasoned with. One must assault them with appealing but apparently absurd stories and even contradictions in the desperate hope that indirect communication can accomplish what direct communication cannot. Russell Rathbun may be Kierkegaard's great-grandson or something. If you have no illusions, you don't need to read this. Otherwise..."

-- Brian McLaren, pastor, author, A New Kind of Christian.

"Funny and thought-provoking. It challenges the way one thinks about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the church in his name."

-- Gordon Cano, singer and songwriter, Violent Femmes

"There are times when the tongue-in-cheek can become a light in the mind -- when 'off the wall' becomes the plank of reality. Richard Lamblove was a driven crusader in his last-ditch stand against the shallowly fervent. I feel the fury of his fugitively scribbling his final battle plan on the remnants of cereal boxes and scraps of cardboard. Alas, were it not for Russell Rathbun, we would not know of these lost writings nor feel the loss of great truth to the forces of evangelical glitz."

-- Calvin Miller, author, Hunger for the Holy and Loving God Closeup; professor, Beeson Divinity School

In Post-Rapture Radio, our faithful narrator finds a mysterious box containing the sermons

and journal entries of a genuine, unvarnished American character the Reverend Richard Lamblove. The little-known Lamblove tried and failed to revolutionize contemporary Christian culture. As his journal entries, cereal box scribbles, and random notes written on paper scraps reveal, Lamblove sees contemporary culture as shallow, overly individualistic, and consumed with the kind of status measured by money, power, and celebrity. And American Evangelicalism -- which has been integrated into the culture as a whole -- has similar failings. Reverend Lamblove vanished without a trace, but Russell Rathbun has "compiled" his papers into a compelling critique of contemporary faith; an antidote to faith-as-usual and a wakeup call for Christians to genuinely respond to the gospel.

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- Excerpt

Mercy Machine

an excerpt from the new book
POST-RAPTURE RADIO:

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INTRODUCTION

Russell Rathbun is an emergent church preacher from Saint Paul, Minnesota. Post-Rapture Radio is a hilarious account of one man's quest to change the face of christianity, masquerading as a collection of sermons and journal entries by the fictional Rev. Richard Lamblove.

Post-Rapture Radio is

a scathing indictment of contemporary Christian culture, "a fascist state [where] everyone says they're really glad to see you." It includes rants such as Jesus in a Suitcase, Rotarian Zombies, eschatology vs. scatology, spiritual shopping, among others. This is the book that dares to ask: If the world comes to an end and you're still here, were you spared or left behind? The excerpt below is called "Mercy Machine," about an "automated individual liturgical device" capable of dispensing both mercy and judgment. The excerpt challenges the Christian belief in a God who is both forgiver and punisher.

More information about the new book, Post-Rapture Radio, and author Russell Rathbun follows the excerpt. Enjoy!

Mercy Machine

from the notebooks

of Rev. Lamblove

as revealed by Russell Rathbun

I am not going to tell

you who this happened to. I am just going to tell you that it happened and I am going to tell what happened.

I can tell you what happened because I saw some of it, and I heard about all of it. Just for the purposes of telling you this story -- because it is easier to tell and listen to a story when the main person in the story has a name -- just because of that, I am going to tell you that his name was Mortimer Quindelson. No, that is a dumb name. Nicholas, yeah, Nick. Pastor Nick. He is a pastor.

Nick is a bit off. OK, maybe not off. Maybe eccentric is a better word. Maybe I should just say that he has ideas about the world -- about the church mostly, but I guess they are about the world, too.

So Nick is a bit eccentric. OK, really he is crazy, but in a good way. The first time I saw the machine, it wasn't finished. It was just barely started, but he showed me the drawings and told me how all the pieces would go together. He told me how it would work.

He showed it to me as the result of a conversation

we had at this coffee shop where I work part time. And when I am not working there I hang out there a lot. (All the people who go there seem to hang out there a lot.) Nick was sitting at a table near mine, and he had his notebook out. (He always had his notebook out. So do most of the people there. I guess I do, too. That is the kind of place it is.) Because our tables are so close, I can hear him whisper in a sort of under-the-breath, coffee-breath tone, "John's got the water; Jesus has got the fire. John's got the water; Jesus has got the fire. John's got the water; Jesus has got the fire." So I look up and look over at Pastor Nick, and Pastor Nick looks up and looks over at me and then smiles, like he just realized that he was saying that out loud and not in his head. He makes an apologetic move of his head and gestures with one hand, first slightly to his notebook and then slightly to me by way of explanation and starts to say something but then stops and just smiles. To indicate that I understand, I say, "John's got the water; Jesus has got the fire?" Nick nods his head and says, "Yeah," and stifles a giggle.

I put down my pen and say, "What are you working on, Reverend?" I call him reverend in a kind of joking way, but also to show him a little respect, even though I know he doesn't work at a church anymore. And because I do respect him.

Nick says, "Oh you know, I'm just trying to figure some things out." I say, "Oh I know. We all are." I say that because this is how we talk at the coffee shop. Make contact but don't really get into someone else's business, especially the business in somebody's notebook. Then Nick darts his head forward and toward me and says, "I'm making something, building something, and I'm trying to figure out how to build it. I've never built anything before so it is kind of hard." He pauses. "Do you want to know what I'm building."

"Yeah, oh yeah, sure," I say, because if someone does want to tell you about the business in their notebook, it is only polite to listen -- and then hope it isn't poetry.

"Come here," he says. I get up and sit down at his table; he turns his open notebook around to face me and pushes it across the table. I squint and look, and while intriguing, it's not obvious what the contraption is. Pastor Nick knows this so he tells me, "It's a mercy machine."

"A mercy machine?"

"Yeah," he says, "exactly. It is an automated individual liturgical device."

Now, I need to tell you so you know, when I said Nick was crazy, I didn't really mean he was crazy -- not clinically, anyway -- and when I said he was a pastor but isn't anymore, I didn't mean it in the sense that he used to be a pastor back in the sixties on a hippie commune and too much of the Timothy Leary got to him so he is not a pastor anymore. What I mean is that until very recently, he was one of the up-and-coming new

church leaders at a multi-staff church in the western suburbs, but he quit -- or was fired or let go. I don't know, but whatever it was, I think it was the result of Pastor Nick being crazy in a good way.

Nick starts to tell me about the mercy machine

and then he stops. His eyes tell me he has left, and when he comes back he says, "Do you want to see it?"

I say, "Yeah," because it seems like the kind of crazy I like.

"Come on." He grabs his notebook and shoves it in his bag.

"Now?" I say.

"Yeah, now." So I gather up my stuff and say, "Let's go." Because people who spend a lot of time in coffee shops are people that don't have a lot else going on and can run off in the middle of the afternoon to see a partially finished automated individual liturgical device.

"I'll drive," Pastor Nick says. We get in his

nineties-era, brown minivan. I buckle up and look over my shoulder. The back seats have been removed; the space is filled with wood and scrap metal and jugs of purified water and cans of gas. The minivan smells a little like gas.

"Nick, what's the gas for?"

"The fire."

I tell him it seems more like he is building

a judgment machine, not a mercy machine. He says, "The more I read the book, the less I can tell them apart." He starts the engine and drives. He starts telling me the answer to a question that for some reason hadn't entered my mind: Why is Pastor Nick making a mercy machine?

"The church is bankrupt," he begins. "The church

is bankrupt, shallow, hollow, dead, with no truth in it. The leaders who control the church are treacherous, shallow, hollow, dead. Dead with no life left in them. They are commodifiers of the gospel, distorting it to make it a product that is palpable to a shallow, hollow, dead culture with no truth left in it. They are incapable of administering the sacraments of the church because they don't even remember what they are really about. For example, at my former place of employment, when I taught the Baptism Preparation classes, I got in a lot of trouble for refusing to include the final session -- the one where you helped the Baptism Candidates decide on the best package.

"The standard package came free of charge and

included a baptism certificate and a candle to commemorate the event. We were to offer the standard package but to point out that it didn't provide much in the way of 'artifacting' the event. In order to make the event more real for the candidates, it was recommended that they at least choose the 'Ethiopian' package, named for the Ethiopian eunuch that Phillip baptized on the side of the road. This package included a frame for the certificate and the candidate's name in gold on the candle. Hardly anyone chooses this one, and I always suspected it was purposefully named to discourage people, because nobody really wants to associate their baptism with a eunuch.

"The 'Cornelius' was the right choice. Named

for the wealthy centurion of the Italian cohort that Peter baptized, this package cost quite a bit more, but after all, you are only baptized once (or more if you feel like it's necessary). The 'Cornelius' included the certificate with a frame upgrade, the candle with name in gold and a candle holder, plus a videotape of the baptism and an Egyptian cotton bath towel embroidered with the words 'Remember your baptism' on it.

"You see what I mean?"

I did but I was a little distracted because as Pastor Nick talked, he kept looking over at me and not at the traffic, which was considerable.

Also whenever he became excited about a point, he would push on the accelerator.

"You see what I mean?" he says, and the minivan lurches forward. "They don't even know what it is about. They forget the judgment."

"The judgment?" I say. "In baptism?"

"Yeah, read Luke. In the beginning of Luke, right before baptizing people, John says, 'I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit.' Where is the fire in baptism? Everybody does the water but where is the fire?"

I tell him I have never really heard of the fire part of the baptism.

"Exactly," he says, punching the accelerator. "You see John's baptism -- water baptism -- is a baptism of repentance. It is the act of an individual. It is the starting point. But Jesus' baptism -- fire baptism -- is a baptism of judgment. It is the refiner's fire that burns away the shell and the lies, the vacuous detritus. John says this fire is unquenchable."

"That fire baptism doesn't seem like a very good thing." He looks at me like I have just said the dumbest thing in the world.

"What do you mean, not a good thing?"

I say, "You know, the judgment."

"The judgment is the very best thing. It comes with the mercy. Malachai says, 'For he is like a refiner's fire. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord that are righteous.' You see. It's all over the book -- the mercy and the judgment. But you know what haunts me?"

At this point I'm not sure I want to know what haunts him. He doesn't wait for me to answer.

"12:49. 12:49 haunts me. I can't quite figure it out."

"Oh yeah, 12:49," I say, pretending to know what he is talking about.

"Luke 12:49," he says. "It is the only other place in Luke that talks about Jesus' baptism. I found it because I was looking up fire passages. It says, 'I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish that it was already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I am under until it is completed.' It kind of sounds like Jesus is going to be the one baptized with fire, like he receives the judgment but that doesn't make sense."

We pull into his driveway. He turns off the engine, hits the garage door-opener button, and jumps out.

"Come on," he is practically running. I follow him. The garage door opens, slowly revealing a mess that must, I think, mirror his mind. More wood scraps and metal, more jugs of purified water, big water-cooler-type bottles, and more gas cans. The garage really smells like gas. There are all sorts of drawings tacked up on the wall and spread over the workbench, and the scripture verses he was quoting me are blown up to yard-sign size and tacked to the wall. He has circled and highlighted certain words ("fire" most frequently). On the wall I see spray-painted: "12:49?" In the middle of the garage is the mercy machine.

It is a wooden box the size of a phone booth or a coffin standing on end. There is a handle on the side like a slot machine but bigger and made of wood. The backside is removed, and I can see the inner workings -- a mess of metal springs and copper pipes. There are two tanks fastened to the inner sides. One says "water"; the other says "gas." I moved around to the front. That's when I saw, mounted on top of the mercy machine on a short pole, a metal crucifix about six inches tall. Coming out of the front is what looks like a showerhead. Big gold letters above it spell "mercy"; further down is a sort of metal nozzle sticking out. The word above it is "judgment."

Pastor Nick is watching me look everything over. He is grinning and bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet, his arms hugging himself. When I look at him, he starts in again with the frantic talking, moving around the mercy machine, showing me how it is supposed to work.

"You see," he says, "the Baptism Candidate stands in front like this and grabs the handle on the side and pumps it a bunch of times. This simultaneously builds up pressure in the tanks and winds up a spring. Then you step on this pedal and it releases the water, showering the person with water, really drenching them. Then the spring unwinds and the steel strikes this flint and lights

the pilot and it goes around once more and opens the gas valve and it shoots fire out here.

"What do you think?" he says.

I say, "It, uh, seems like it would burn the Baptism Candidate."

He rubs his forehead, "Yeah," he says. "That's the part I can't figure out. I wish there was some way I could symbolically burn them, or have the fire just shoot out briefly, so it wouldn't burn them too bad. I thought about having the fire shoot out first, followed immediately by the water to put out the fire or cool off any burn, but I think theologically it wouldn't be correct. I think it will be ready to test next week."

He was quiet on the ride back to the coffee shop, but from the way his eyes were darting around and the occasional punching of the accelerator, I don't think it was quiet in his head.

I thought about calling him that next week, but I didn't have his phone number and realized I didn't even know his last name. The only time I had ever seen him outside the coffee shop was on that trip to his house.

On Thursday Pastor Nick walked into the coffee shop. I looked at him. He smiled his smile, but it was a bigger grin than I'd seen before. He had tested the mercy machine. He sat down at my table. From the looks of him, apparently what was untrue, shallow, and contained no life was his hair. The refiner's fire had also burned a good portion of his left arm. It was covered in a bandage up to his elbow. I also saw a bit of a gauze bandage sticking out of the collar of his shirt. "Tell me," I said.

"Well," he said, "I stood in position and I pumped the handle. I pumped it up pretty good until I could feel the pressure building up. Then I stepped on the pedal and nothing happened. I could hear the spring unwinding and then a little trickle of water came out. Then I heard a whoosh followed by the crackle of fire. It was burning inside the machine. I could see flames flickering out from under the bottom base and through all the seams on the sides. Then there was another whoosh, and fire was shooting out of the top, completely engulfing the crucifix. I should have run right then, but the crucifix started to turn a dull red; it was so hot that the crucifix went from red to orange to bright yellow before my eyes. It was amazing."

Pastor Nick continued: "I heard this loud crack and saw that the fire had burned through the front of the base, and the whole thing fell forward. I tried to jump back, but I wasn't fast enough. The showerhead came down on my arm and hand, and it was so hot that it burned me pretty good. The whole machine just collapsed on top of me. And the crucifix," he winced with pain, "the crucifix." He unbuttoned his shirt halfway and peeled off the big bandage on the left side of his chest to reveal a nearly perfect image of the Son of God branded deep in his skin.

"Man," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm lucky to be alive. My clothes were on fire. I ran out of the garage and did the stop, drop, and roll on the lawn. The garage -- totally gone. The house -- completely gutted. Everything in it gone -- everything."

"Man," I said again. "The mercy machine."

"Yeah," he said. "It worked perfectly"

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About the Author

Russell Rathbun is one of the preachers at House of Mercy Church (HOM) in St. Paul, Minnesota. A member of the American Baptist Association, Russell has been involved with HOM since its inception in 1996.

Frustrated with the shallowness of the American

Evangelical Movement of the past few decades, and seeing that many of his friends wanted to have nothing to do with Christianity, Russell (along with the two other pastors at HOM -- Debbie Blue and Mark Stenberg) decided to create a church that his friends would want to come to.

Desiring to create a community that was Christ-centered, but not religiously generic; intellectually honest and rigorous; open to "liturgical eclecticism" (drawing from the wide expanse of historic church traditions); grounded in the good news of God's grace, and not the bad news of shame and religious manipulation; and centered on social justice and mercy, House of Mercy was formed.

"We are an ecumenical fellowship in the true sense of the word, celebrating the best of what the church has to offer." House of Mercy exists to create community. Russell believes that the church needs to be found more in the midst of culture; not to be there judging it, but rather pointing people to where they can find God at work in it.

Russell is married with two children and the family dog, KoKo.

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