Millennial Cautions

Over twenty years ago, as a new Christian, I found myself mesmerized by Christian speakers and books that predicted future social and political events with newspaper-like details. I relished sharing those details with less biblically informed friends. They were amazed and sometimes frightened by what I thought the Bible was predicting about tomorrow's events. But as the years have progressed, I now wonder if that was an appropriate way to introduce my friends to Christianity. Many of the predictions that I shared have not come true. Did I make the claims of Christ more believable by focusing on prophecy or did I place roadblocks in the path of some, actually making their understanding of the gospel more difficult?

People seem to have an innate desire to know the future. Perhaps it is part of our need to be in control, see what's coming, and have time to prepare for it. As Charles Kettering once wrote, "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there." Some people's lives are changed forever by those who claim to know the future. Hitler claimed that he and his followers were establishing a reign that would last a thousand years. A few short years after first making those claims, his nation, and much of the world, lay in ruins as a result of his violent vision. Recent examples of the dangers of unbalanced fascination with prophecy include the odd Heaven's Gate cult, with their predictions of UFOs, death, and resurrection, and the Waco, Texas, sect led by David Koresh. Both groups, led by self-appointed "visionaries," influenced people in dramatically harmful ways.

On the other hand, a single person with vision can be a powerful force for positive change. William Wilberforce, after converting to evangelical Christianity in 1784, had a life-long desire to see an end to the international slave trade and

of slavery itself in England and its colonies. His tenacity and vision had the remarkable impact of rallying both the British people and the powerful British navy toward achieving his goals. Another example of the positive impact that one person with vision can have is seen in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. His prophetic "I have a Dream" speech on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on many people in America and the world regarding racial prejudice. It seems clear that an individual with an exceptionally strong vision for the future can have a great impact on it.

Sharing the truth of Christ's return can no doubt have a positive impact on people. Our Lord's return is a reality that all Christians claim as part of the hope mentioned in 1 Peter 3:15. Unfortunately, I have encountered Christians who spend too much time trying to determine when Christ will return. In fact, some prophecy experts have fallen into the trap of the early heretic Montanus who claimed prophetic powers and claimed to know the time of our Lord's return even though Jesus himself said that no one knows when He will return but the Father (Matt. 24:36).(1)

As we approach the year 2000, prophets and prophecies are expected to multiply in both the secular world and the Church. In this discussion, I will look at examples of prophecy experts who claimed to know more than they could deliver. My purpose is not to endorse one end-times system over another. However, my hope is that Christians will be discouraged from claiming knowledge they do not possess and encouraged to keep their focus on the gospel message rather than on highly questionable prophetic schemes.

Christ's Return and the Church

A quick scan of the Internet reveals the popularity of prophetic claims. Along with sites on biblical prophecy, there are pages detailing the predictions of Edgar Cayce, the famous

"sleeping prophet," and the fairly well-known Nostradamus. But there are many lesser-known prophetic sources as well, like one site called *Millennium Matters*. It has 583 pages of information on something called the "Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension," which predicts the awakening of a planetary entity on the earth in the near future. We might make fun of these prophecies, but imagine how Christians appear to others when we make false predictions about the return of Christ.

Attempting to predict the future is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Deut. 18; Acts 16) with warnings against divination and interpreting omens. Yet history has recorded the tendency of Christians to predict Christ's coming in every generation. Tertullian, a follower of Montanus in the second century, supported the idea of a near return when he wrote, "What terrible wars, both foreign and domestic! What pestilences, famines . . . and quakings of the earth has history recorded!"(2) He felt that these evidences alone were enough to indicate Christ's return. Novation in the third century and Donatus in the fourth, were both branded as heretics, but gathered a large number of followers by proclaiming the immanent return of Christ. Later, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory was sure that the end of the world was near. He wrote,

> *Of all the signs described by our Lord as presaging the end of the world, some we see already accomplished…. For we now see that nation arises against nation and that they press and weigh upon the land in our own times as never before in the annals of the past. Earthquakes overwhelm countless cities, as we often hear from other parts of the world. Pestilence we endure without interruption. It is true that we do not behold signs in the sun and moon and stars but that these are not far off we may infer from the changes of the atmosphere.(4)*

Pope Gregory's words sound quite contemporary, and remarkably similar to some current thinking on prophecy.

What I am warning against is not the preaching of Christ's return. Virtually all Christians believe that He will return physically and that a final judgment will follow. How then, do we respond to this truth? Christ uses the parables of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) to teach His followers to be constantly ready for His return. We are to be ambassadors for Christ and the Kingdom of God, sharing the message of reconciliation that is found only in Him (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

One potentially damaging aspect of some prophecy teaching is the tendency to look for and find conspiracies that foretell Christ's return. Whether it be a renewed Roman Empire or a one-world government, Christians seem to relish a world of secret connections and commitments. We already know that the world system is hostile to the gospel, Jesus told us as much and warned of persecution. When we tend to see people through the lens of grand conspiracies, the natural response is to fight the conspiracy rather that share the gospel with the individual. The New Testament calls us to build God's Kingdom one heart at a time. We accomplish this not with legal or political power, but by sharing the good news revealed by God in a culturally relevant way.

The First Millennium

Predictions for the end of the world were prolific at the close of the first millennium after Christ. Now we will look at some of these predictions and consider their impact on the Church.

In A.D. 950 Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote a "Treatise on the Antichrist" which was a response to a number of mid-century crises that had provoked widespread alarm and fear of an end-time apocalypse.(5) Five years later, Abbo of Fleury heard a preacher in Paris who announced that the Antichrist would be unleashed in the year 1000 and that the Last Judgment would soon follow.(6) At about the same time a panic occurred in the

German army of Emperor Otto I because of a solar eclipse that the soldiers mistook as a sign of the end of the world.(7) And when the last Carolingian dynasty fell with the death of King Louis V in 987, many saw this event as a precursor to the arrival of the Antichrist. King Otto II of Germany had Charlemagne's body exhumed on Pentecost in the year 1000 supposedly in order to forestall the apocalypse. Both Halley's comet in A.D. 989 and a super nova in A.D. 1006 were interpreted as signs of the end. About the same time, the Moslem caliph, Al Hakim, destroyed the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem prompting apocalyptic fear in the west as well as violent anti-Jewish outbursts.(8)

The Calabrian monk, Joachim of Fiore (ca. A.D. 1135 1202) stands out as a key figure in medieval apocalypticism. On Easter Sunday in 1183 he was inspired to write his massive Exposition on Revelation. Later near the end of his life, he summarized his prophetic knowledge in the Book of Figures. His writings influenced a wide range of medieval events. The Franciscan order was founded on the basis that they would be the spiritual elite described in Joachim's "Age of the Spirit," a future time when God would send revelation directly to believers. Using Joachim's hints, writers concluded that the "Age of Grace" would end and the "Age of the Spirit" would begin in A.D. 1260. This prophecy, mixed with German social unrest, created a myth surrounding Frederick II. Having ruled from 1220 to 1250, many believed that Frederick was the "Emperor of the Last Days" who would usher in the new Millennium.(9) The myth gained force when Frederick seized Jerusalem in 1229. When he died in 1250, a new myth started that Frederick would return from the dead. Two pseudo-Fredericks were burned at the stake by his successor to the throne. The Book of a Hundred Chapters stated that the returned Frederick would lead a fight against corruption in the state and the church, and that he will instruct his followers to "Go on hitting them" (referring to the Pope and his students) and to "Kill every one of them!"(10)

The Taborites, founded in A.D. 1415, also looked back to Joachim for their prophetic beliefs. They believed that once their persecutors were defeated, Christ would return and rule the world from Mount Tabor, a mountain they had renamed south of Prague. Their communal activities eventually turned bloody, prompted by tracts with lines like, "Accursed be the man who withholds his sword from shedding the blood of the enemies of Christ."(11) After a crushing defeat at the hands of the German army, the group quickly disbanded.

Although all of these prophecies were misguided, it would be a mistake to doubt the sincerity of the individuals. However, the events surrounding the end of the first millennium should temper our desire to make predictions about the coming new millennium. Next, we will look at more recent predictions that have been just as wrong.

Recent Predictions

People want to know the future and are eager to follow those who claim to predict it. When a Jehovah's Witness knocks on your door, prophecy is used as a hook to gain entrance. A recent best-selling book *The Bible Code* claims to have uncovered a hidden code in the Old Testament that predicts many modern-day events as well as a nuclear holocaust in the year 2000 or 2006. Many New Age books are sold on the claim that channelers have access to future events when connected to those on another spiritual plane. Because of the emotional power of prophecy, the temptation for Christians to make dramatic claims about future events is great. Discernment and care must be used so that the integrity of the gospel message is not compromised. There is no doubt that Scripture teaches a Second Coming of Christ and that a final judgment will follow. However, there is considerable disagreement among Bible-believing Christians regarding the signs that foretell these events and our ability to predict when Christ will return.

One of the favorite past-times of date setters is to attempt

to identify the Antichrist, a powerful figure who will appear immediately prior to Christ's return. This guessing game has a long tradition, going back to the time right after Jesus' death. The early church fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine all believed that this person would be present immediately prior to Christ's return. During the Middle Ages, some churchmen identified the Antichrist as a Moslem, such as Saladin, but others pointed to a Jew, and some even pointed to the Pope. During the American Revolution it was popular to cast King George III in the role of Antichrist, but the Earl of Bute and British general John Burgoyne also got nominations.

Other familiar names to be included in this long list of suspected Antichrists are Napoleon, the British Parliament, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin. Since World War II, the Pope still makes the list as does Jewish leader Moshe Dayan, the assassinated Egyptian leader Anwar el-Sadat, Spain's King Juan Carlos, and Korean cult leader Sun Myung Moon. For some, Mikhail Gorbachev and Saddam Hussein are naturals for the job.

The mark of the Beast, the number 666, has been used in very creative ways to support many different Antichrist theories. Although many conservative theologians have seen the number 666 from Revelation 13 as symbolic of all that is evil and a blasphemous parody of the perfection that the Bible attributes to the number 7, others attempt to use the number to identify an individual.(12) The advent of the computer has caused some to see it as the Beast. One writer noted that if the letter "A"=6 and "B"=12 and "C"=18, and so on, the word computer adds up to 666. The same writer also observed that the words "New York" added up to 666.(13) Some pointed to John Kennedy because he had received 666 votes for the vice-presidency in 1956.(14) Others pointed to Henry Kissinger because his name in Hebrew added up to 111 or 666 divided by 6.(15) Even Ronald Reagan was considered because his first, middle, and last

names all had six letters.(16)

The striking number of attempts to identify the Antichrist and the significance of the number 666 should at least give us a sense of humility before adding another name to the list. Perhaps we should follow the example of Irenaus in the second century. Seeing the many efforts to identify the Antichrist in his day, he cautioned against the practice and believed that the name was deliberately concealed until it would be obvious in the day of the Antichrist's arrival.

The U.S. in Prophecy

As the year 2000 gets closer, prophets and their prophecies will explode in number. A popular topic for prophecy experts is the future of the United States. Although prophecy expert John Walvoord has written, "No specific mention of the United States or any other country in North America or South America can be found in the Bible,"(17) this has not, and probably will not, stop others from seeing detailed references to the U.S. and its future in Scripture.

The depiction of the United States in end-times scenarios has varied over the years. There is a long tradition of seeing the U.S. as the New Israel. Near the end of his life, Christopher Columbus wrote, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which He spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it."(18) In 1653 the New England historian Edward Johnson wrote that the U.S. "is the place where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth," a theme that Jonathan Edwards picked up nearly a hundred years later.(19)

This notion that the colonies held a special place in God's redemption plan continued to spread as the colonies grew. By the time of the War for Independence, this conception changed from a primarily religious or spiritual role to a civic one as well. In 1808 Elias Smith, a New England evangelist, argued

that the Great Awakening in America, as well as the American and French revolutions, had set the foundation for the end-time age described in the Bible.(20) In his book *White Jacket* in 1850, Herman Melville writes, "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls."(20)

This ardent belief in America's millennial role reached its peak during the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" all contained allusions to Scripture and apocalyptic themes. Although this trend did not disappear, the twentieth century found Christian thinkers beginning to see the U.S. in another light. In 1937 Arno Gaebelein wrote that the U.S. had been overrun by the powers of darkness(21) and in 1949 Wilbur Smith saw American society described in the list of end time evils of 2 Timothy.(22) More and more, America was being identified with Babylon rather than with the New Israel.

Since the 1960s, prophecy writers have pointed out America's long list of moral failures as evidence that God will soon focus His wrath on us. Many of them hold that the increase in abortion, homosexuality, godless education, divorce, crime, and pornography in our nation will soon seal our fate and lead to our downfall as a nation.

This may be the case, but the many different interpretations of America's future role in God's end-times plan should cause a great deal of humility and prudence concerning our own ability to know what God has in mind for this nation. Once one goes beyond the general principal that God blesses those who conform to His moral guidelines, we are on shaky ground. Perhaps we would be far better off seeking a pure heart rather than trying to discern what role America will play in the millennium or who the Antichrist might be. Jesus is coming

again. Worrying about the details or the exact time of His return is pointless if it does not turn us toward a holy life. As Jesus said, “Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Matt. 6:27).

Notes

1. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Harvard University, 1992), p. 46.
2. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. http://www.mille.org/1000-dos.htm, p.1.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 6.
9. *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 53.
10. Ibid., p. 54.
11. Ibid., p. 55.
12. Alan F. Johnson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1981), p. 535.
13. *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 283.
14. Ibid., p. 275.
15. Ibid., p. 276.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 247.
18. Ibid., p. 225.
19. Ibid., p. 226.
20. Ibid., p. 227.
21. Ibid., p. 228.
22. Ibid., p. 231.

©1998 Probe Ministries.