

Four Views of Revelation

Dr. Patrick Zukeran presents a summary of four of the major approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation and its meaning for the end times: the idealist, the preterist, the historicist, and the futurist views. For each, he presents the basic approach, strengths of the approach and weaknesses of the approach. Recognizing that God is the central mover in all of these, he encourages us to keep these questions from dividing Christians in our mission of sharing Christ with the world.

The Debate

One of the most intriguing books of the Bible is the book of Revelation. The imagery of the cosmic battle in heaven and on earth makes it a fascinating book to study. However, much debate surrounds the proper interpretation of this apocalyptic work. Is this book a prophecy of future events yet to take place, or have the prophecies of this book been fulfilled?



Two popular authors highlight the debate that continues in our present time. In his hit series *Left Behind*, Tim LaHaye writes a fictional account based on his theological position that the events of Revelation will occur in the future. Popular radio talk show host Hank Hanegraaff responded by attacking the theology of LaHaye. In his book *The Apocalypse Code*, Hanegraaff asserts that the events of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. He criticizes theologians like LaHaye for taking a hyper-literal approach to Revelation.^{1} The debate has raised some confusion among Christians as to why there is such a debate and how we should interpret the book of Revelation.

The issues at the core of the debate between Hanegraaff and

LaHaye are not new. Throughout church history, there have been four different views regarding the book of Revelation: idealist, preterist, historicist, and futurist. The idealist view teaches that Revelation describes in symbolic language the battle throughout the ages between God and Satan and good against evil. The preterist view teaches that the events recorded in the book of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. The historicist view teaches that the book of Revelation is a symbolic presentation of church history beginning in the first century AD through the end of age. The prophecies of Revelation are fulfilled in various historic events such as the fall of the Roman Empire, the Protestant Reformation, and the French Revolution. The futurist view teaches that Revelation prophesies events that will take place in the future. These events include the rapture of the church, seven years of tribulation, and a millennial rule of Christ upon the earth.

Each view attempts to interpret Revelation according to the laws of hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation. This is central to the debate about how we should approach and interpret Revelation. The idealist approach believes that apocalyptic literature like Revelation should be interpreted allegorically. The preterist and historicist views are similar in some ways to the allegorical method, but it is more accurate to say preterists and historicists view Revelation as symbolic history. The preterist views Revelation as a symbolic presentation of events that occurred in AD 70, while the historicist school views the events as symbolic of all Western church history. The futurist school believes Revelation should be interpreted literally. In other words, the events of Revelation are to occur at a future time.

The goal of this work is to present a brief overview of the four views of Revelation and present the strengths of each view as well as its weaknesses. It is my hope that the reader will gain a basic understanding and be able to understand the

debate among theologians today.

The Idealist View

The first view of Revelation is the idealist view, or the spiritual view. This view uses the allegorical method to interpret the Book of Revelation. The allegorical approach to Revelation was introduced by ancient church father Origen (AD 185-254) and made prominent by Augustine (AD 354-420). According to this view, the events of Revelation are not tied to specific historical events. The imagery of the book symbolically presents the ongoing struggle throughout the ages of God against Satan and good against evil. In this struggle, the saints are persecuted and martyred by the forces of evil but will one day receive their vindication. In the end, God is victorious, and His sovereignty is displayed throughout ages. Robert Mounce summarizes the idealist view stating, "Revelation is a theological poem presenting the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It is a philosophy of history wherein Christian forces are continuously meeting and conquering the demonic forces of evil."[\[2\]](#)

In his commentary on Revelation, late nineteenth century scholar William Milligan stated, "While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents; we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, both for the exhibition of the principles which govern the history of both the world and the Church."[\[3\]](#)

The symbols in Revelation are not tied to specific events but point to themes throughout church history. The battles in Revelation are viewed as spiritual warfare manifested in the persecution of Christians or wars in general that have occurred in history. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically-inspired political opposition to the church

in any age. The beast from the land represents pagan, or corrupt, religion to Christianity. The harlot represents the compromised church, or the seduction of the world in general. Each seal, trumpet, or bowl represents natural disasters, wars, famines, and the like which occur as God works out His plan in history. Catastrophes represent God's displeasure with sinful man; however, sinful mankind goes through these catastrophes while still refusing to turn and repent. God ultimately triumphs in the end.

The strength of this view is that it avoids the problem of harmonizing passages with events in history. It also makes the book of Revelation applicable and relevant for all periods of church history.[{4}](#)

However, there are several weaknesses of this view. First, this view denies the book of Revelation any specific historical fulfillment. The symbols portray the ever-present conflict but no necessary consummation of the historical process.[{5}](#) Rev.1:1 states that the events will come to pass shortly, giving the impression that John is prophesying future historical events.

Second, reading spiritual meanings into the text could lead to arbitrary interpretations. Followers of this approach have often allowed the cultural and socio-political factors of their time to influence their interpretation rather than seeking the author's intended meaning.[{6}](#) Merrill Tenney states,

The idealist view . . . assumes a "spiritual" interpretation, and allows no concrete significance whatever to figures that it employs. According to this viewpoint they are not merely symbolic of events and persons, as the historicist view contends; they are only abstract symbols of good and evil. They may be attached to any time or place, but like the characters of Pilgrim's Progress, represent qualities or trends. In interpretation, the Apocalypse may thus mean

anything or nothing according to the whim of the interpreter. {7}

Unless interpreters are grounded in the grammatical, historical, and contextual method of hermeneutics, they leave themselves open to alternate interpretations that may even contradict the author's intended meaning.

The Preterist View

The second view is called the [preterist](#) view. *Preter*, which means "past," is derived from the Latin. There are two major views among preterists: full preterism and partial preterism. Both views believe that the prophecies of the Olivet discourse of Matthew 24 and Revelation were fulfilled in the first century with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Chapters 1-3 describe the conditions in the seven churches of Asia Minor prior to the Jewish war (AD 66-70). The remaining chapters of Revelation and Jesus' Olivet Discourse describe the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans.

Full preterists believe that all the prophecies found in Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70 and that we are now living in the eternal state, or the new heavens and the new earth. Partial preterists believe that most of the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem but that chapters 20-22 point to future events such as a future resurrection of believers and return of Christ to the earth. Partial preterists view full preterism as heretical since it denies the second coming of Christ and teaches an unorthodox view of the resurrection.

Church historians trace the roots of preterism to Jesuit priest Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613). {8} Alcazar's interpretation is considered a response to the Protestant historicist interpretation of Revelation that identified the Pope as the Anti-Christ. However, some preterists contend that

preterist teachings are found in the writings of the early church as early as the fourth century AD.[{9}](#)

Crucial to the preterist view is the date of Revelation. Since it is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, preterists hold to a pre-AD 70 date of writing. According to this view, John was writing specifically to the church of his day and had only its situation in mind. This letter was written to encourage the saints to persevere under the persecution of the Roman Empire.

Preterists point to several reasons to support their view. First, Jesus stated at the end of the Olivet Discourse, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34). A generation usually refers to forty years. The fall of Jerusalem would then fit the time Jesus predicted. Second, Josephus' detailed record of the fall of Jerusalem appears in several ways to match the symbolism of Revelation. Finally, this view would be directly relevant to John's readers of his day.

There are several criticisms of this view. First, the events described in Jesus' Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 4-19 differ in several ways from the fall of Jerusalem.

One example is that Christ described his return to Jerusalem this way: "[A]s lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Mt. 24:27). Preterists believe this refers to the Roman army's advance on Jerusalem. However, the Roman army advanced on Jerusalem from west to east, and their assault was not as a quick lightning strike. The Jewish war lasted for several years before Jerusalem was besieged, and the city fell after a lengthy siege.[{10}](#) Second, General Titus did not set up an "abomination of desolation" (Mt. 24:15) in the Jerusalem Temple. Rather, he destroyed the Temple and burned it to the ground. Thus, it appears the preterist is required to allegorize or stretch the metaphors and symbols in order to

find fulfillment of the prophecies in the fall of Jerusalem.

Another example of allegorical interpretation by preterists is their interpretation of Revelation 7:4. John identifies a special group of prophets: the 144,000 from the “tribes of Israel.” Preterist Hanegraaff states that this group represents the true bride of Christ and is referred to in Rev. 7:9 as the “great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language.” In other words, the 144,000 in verse 4, and the great multitude in verse 9 are the same people.[{11}](#) This appears to go against the context of the chapter for several reasons. First, throughout the Bible the phrase “tribes of Israel” refers to literal Jews. Second, John says there are 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a strange way to describe the multitude of believers from all nations. Finally, the context shows John is speaking of two different groups: one on the earth (the 144,000 referenced in 7:1-3), and the great multitude in heaven before the throne (7:9). Here Hanegraaff appears to be allegorizing the text.

Robert Mounce states,

The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign on God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message or his work was so helplessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray.[{12}](#)

Mounce and other New Testament scholars believe the preterists' interpretations are not consistent and utilize allegorical interpretations to make passages fit their theological view.

Second, the preterist position rests on a pre-AD 70 date of writing. However, most New Testament scholars date the writing of the book to AD 95. If John had written Revelation after AD 70, the book could not have been a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem. This presents a significant argument against the preterist position.

Preterists point to several lines of evidence for a pre-AD 70 date of writing. First, John does not mention the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. If he had been writing two decades after the event, it seems strange that he never mentioned this catastrophic event. Second, John does not refer to either Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (Mt. 24, Mk. 13, Lk. 21) or the fulfillment of this prophecy. Third, in Revelation 11:1, John is told to "measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there." Preterists argue that this indicates that the Temple is still standing during the writing of Revelation.[\[13\]](#)

The preterist view, particularly the partial preterist view, is a prominent position held by such notable scholars as R. C. Sproul, Hank Hanegraaff, Kenneth Gentry, and the late David Chilton (who later converted to full preterism after the publishing of his books).

The Historicist View

The third view is called the historicist approach. This view teaches that Revelation is a symbolic representation that presents the course of history from the apostle's life through the end of the age. The symbols in the apocalypse correspond to events in the history of Western Europe, including various popes, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and rulers such as Charlemagne. Most interpreters place the events of their day in the later chapters of Revelation.

Many adherents of this position view chapters 1-3 as seven

periods in church history. The breaking of the seals in chapters 4-7 symbolizes the fall of the Roman Empire. The Trumpet judgments in chapters 8-10 represent the invasions of the Roman Empire by the Vandals, Huns, Saracens, and Turks. Among Protestant historicists of the Reformation, the antichrist in Revelation was believed to be the papacy. Chapters 11-13 in Revelation represent the true church in its struggle against Roman Catholicism. The bowl judgments of Revelation 14-16 represent God's judgment on the Catholic Church, culminating in the future overthrow of Catholicism depicted in chapters 17-19.[\[14\]](#)

There are several criticisms of this approach. First, this approach allows for a wide variety of interpretations. Adherents have a tendency to interpret the text through the context of their period. Thus, many saw the climax of the book happening in their generation. John Walvoord points out the lack of agreement among historicists. He states, "As many as fifty different interpretations of the book of Revelation therefore evolve, depending on the time and circumstances of the expositor."[\[15\]](#) Moses Stuart echoed the same concern in his writings over a century ago. He wrote, "Hitherto, scarcely any two original and independent expositors have agreed, in respect to some points very important in their bearing upon the interpretation of the book."[\[16\]](#)

Second, this view focuses mostly on the events of the church in Western Europe and says very little about the church in the East. Thus, its narrow scope fails to account for God's activity throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Finally, this view would have little significance for the church of the first century whom John was addressing. It is unlikely they would have been able to interpret Revelation as the historical approach suggests.

Prominent scholars who held this view include John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield,

Charles Finney, C. H. Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry. This view rose to popularity during the Protestant Reformation because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has declined in popularity and influence.

The Futurist View

The fourth view is the futurist view. This view teaches that the events of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation chapters 4-22 will occur in the future. Futurists divide the book of Revelation into three sections as indicated in 1:19: "what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." Chapter 1 describes the past ("what you have seen"), chapters 2-3 describe the present ("what is now"), and the rest of the book describes future events ("what will take place later").

Futurists apply a literal approach to interpreting Revelation. Chapters 4-19 refer to a period known as the seven-year tribulation (Dan. 9:27). During this time, God's judgments are actually poured out upon mankind as they are revealed in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Chapter 13 describes a literal future world empire headed by a political and religious leader represented by the two beasts. Chapter 17 pictures a harlot who represents the church in apostasy. Chapter 19 refers to Christ's second coming and the battle of Armageddon followed by a literal thousand-year rule of Christ upon the earth in chapter 20. Chapters 21-22 are events that follow the millennium: the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and the arrival of the heavenly city upon the earth.

Futurists argue that a consistently literal or plain interpretation is to be applied in understanding the book of Revelation. Literal interpretation of the Bible means to explain the original sense, or meaning, of the Bible according to the normal customary usage of its language. This means

applying the rules of grammar, staying consistent with the historical framework, and the context of the writing. Literal interpretation does not discount figurative or symbolic language. Futurists teach that prophecies using symbolic language are also to be normally interpreted according to the laws of language. J. P. Lange stated,

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted – that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.[{17}](#)

Charles Ryrie also states,

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.[{18}](#)

Futurists acknowledge the use of figures and symbols. When figurative language is used, one must look at the context to find the meaning. However, figurative language does not justify allegorical interpretation.

Futurists contend that the literal interpretation of Revelation finds its roots in the ancient church fathers. Elements of this teaching, such as a future millennial kingdom, are found in the writings of Clement of Rome (AD 96), Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), Irenaeus (AD 115-202), Tertullian (AD 150-225) and others. Futurists hold that the church fathers taught a literal interpretation of Revelation until

Origen (AD 185-254) introduced allegorical interpretation. This then became the popular form of interpretation when taught by Augustine (AD 354-430).[\[19\]](#) Literal interpretation of Revelation remained throughout the history of the church and rose again to prominence in the modern era.

The futurist view is widely popular among evangelical Christians today. One of the most popular versions on futurist teaching is dispensational theology, promoted by schools such as Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute. Theologians such as Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and Dwight Pentecost are noted scholars of this position. Tim LaHaye made this theology popular in the culture with his end times series of novels.

Unfortunately, there have been and continue to be popular preachers who mistakenly apply the futurist approach to connect current events to the symbols in Revelation. Some have even been involved in setting dates of Christ's return. Although their writings have been popular, they do not represent a Biblical futurist view.

Critics of this view argue that the futurist view renders the book irrelevant to the original readers of the first century. Another criticism is that Revelation is apocalyptic literature and thus meant to be interpreted allegorically or symbolically rather than literally. Hank Hanegraaff states, "Thus, when a Biblical writer uses a symbol or an allegory, we do violence to his intentions if we interpret it in a strictly literal manner."[\[20\]](#)

One of the key elements in the debate, particularly between preterists and futurists, is the date of writing for Revelation. Preterists argue for a pre-AD 70 date while futurists hold to a date of AD 95. There are several reasons for the later date. First, Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, states that John wrote Revelation at the end of Emperor Domitian's reign, which ended in AD 96. Irenaeus was a

disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John. He thus had a connection with a contemporary of the Apostle John.

Second, the conditions of the seven churches in Revelation appear to describe a second-generation church setting rather than that of a first-generation. For example, the Church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7) is charged with abandoning their first love and warned of the Nicolaitan heresy. If John had written Revelation in AD 65, it would have overlapped with Paul's letter to the Ephesians and Timothy. However, Paul makes no mention of either the loss of first love or the threat of the Nicolaitans. Ephesus was Paul's headquarters for three years, and Apollos served there along with Aquila and Priscilla. The church of Smyrna did not exist during Paul's ministry (AD 60-64) as recorded by Polycarp, the first bishop of the city. Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22) is rebuked for being wealthy and lukewarm. However, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul commends the church three times (2:2, 4:13, 16). It would likely take more than three years for the church to decline to the point that chapter 3 would state there to be no commendable aspect about it. Also, an earthquake in AD 61 left the city in ruins for many years. Thus, it is unlikely that in a ruined condition John would describe them as rich.

Preterists who favor the AD 70 date pose the question, "Why doesn't John mention the fall of the Temple which occurred in AD 70?" Futurists respond that John wrote about future events, and the destruction of the temple was twenty-five years in the past. He also wrote to a Gentile audience in Asia Minor which was far removed from Jerusalem. Preterists also point to the fact that the Temple is mentioned in chapter eleven. Futurists respond that although John mentions a temple in Revelation 11:1-2, this does not mean it exists at the time of his writing. In Daniel 9:26-27 and Ezekiel 40-48, both prophets describe the temple, but it was not in existence when they described a future temple in their writings.

What did Jesus mean in Matthew 24:34 when He said, “[T]his generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened”? The common futurist response is that Jesus was stating that the future generation about which he was speaking would not pass away once “these things” had begun. In other words, the generation living amid the time of the events He predicted will not pass away until all is fulfilled.

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is a fascinating book, and the debate regarding its interpretation will continue. Despite our various views, there are some common threads upon which Christians agree.^{21} All views believe that God is sovereign and in charge of all that occurs in history and its ultimate conclusion. Except for full preterism and some forms of idealism, all believe in the physical second coming of Christ. All views believe in the resurrection from the dead. All believe there will be a future judgment. All believe in an eternal state in which believers will be with God, and unbelievers will be separated from Him. All agree upon the importance of the study of prophecy and its edification for the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, the debate among Christians has often been harsh and hostile. It is my hope that the debate would continue in a cordial, respectful manner which will challenge every believer to accurately study and interpret the Word. We all await the return of our Lord and together with the saints of all ages say, “Amen, come Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20)

Notes

1. Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 20.
2. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 43.

3. William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 153-4.
4. Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 20.
5. Robert Mounce, 43.
6. Robert Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 31-2.
7. Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 146.
8. Steven Gregg, 39.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, ed., *The End Times Controversy* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 377.
11. Hanegraaff, 125.
12. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 42.
13. Evidence for the AD 95 date of writing will be presented in the futurist section.
14. Steven Gregg, *Four Views of Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 31, 217, 309, & 399).
15. John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 19.
16. Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart & Co., 1847), 35.
17. J. P. Lange, *Commentary of the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Scribner's, 1872), 98, quoted in Charles Ryrie,

Dispensationalism (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.

18. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.

20. Hanegraaff, 14.

21. Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Conviction Without Compromise* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 333.

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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 than 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.

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