End Time Anxieties

End Time Concerns

This past January, the *Wall Street Journal* published a special edition that at first glance anticipated the arrival of the next millennium. However, on closer inspection it quickly became apparent that this edition was a spoof– the year on the masthead was the year *1000.* Still, what was interesting was how similar many stories were to their modern counterparts–there was even an account of a sex scandal in high political circles. The underlying message from the *Journal* would appear to be that just as the transition to the year 1000 went off without a hitch, so too life will go on as we enter a new millennium.

However, it would be naïve to ignore the many threats that currently exist to civilization. Recent news reports indicate that North Korea has the capability to hit any part of the United States with nuclear warheads. China too has become increasingly aggressive militarily and has seriously eroded American technical superiority through espionage. And Russia appears headed to a return to totalitarian government; recently, the lower house of the Russian Duma voted to resurrect the forty-foot statue of the founder of the Soviet Secret Police which had been toppled by pro-democracy marchers in 1991. Two years ago, the same house of the Duma had voted to resurrect the Soviet Union itself! On top of all this, there is an increasing awareness that the Y2K computer crisis may be much more problematic than anticipated; even the entire National Guard was mobilized for exercises in May 1999 to prepare for any disruptions the millennial bug may cause. Some fear a declaration of martial law should the problem get out of hand. Perhaps the advent of the 21st century will not be as painless as that of the 11th century after all.

Questions concerning the future are of special relevance to Christians. Contrary to other worldviews that see history as cyclical, the Bible teaches that history as we know it will come to an end with the dramatic return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since the Bible has much to say of the end times, Christians have been exposed to a variety of end time scenarios which spell out in exacting detail the chronology of the last days. In this respect, we share much in common with those who faced the transition to the year 1000. The anxiety that many westerners experienced as the year 1000 approached was due in part to a theological concept popularized by the great Christian thinker, Augustine. According to Augustine, the millennial reign of Christ began at His first coming. Since the book of Revelation teaches of a 1000 year period in which Christ reigns over all the earth, Augustine allegorized this concept by teaching that Christ had bound Satan through His earthly ministry. This made complete sense to Augustine, since it would account for the tremendous growth of the church from a tiny band of first century Jews to the favored religion of the empire in Augustine's day. But when Christ did not return anytime in the 11th century, this interpretation was significantly altered.{1} History triumphed over exegesis.

As we approach the year 2000, some Christians are proclaiming that Christ's return is sure to occur within a few short years. One well-known Christian leader recently suggested that the Antichrist is probably living today and that the second coming of Christ should occur in the next ten years.{2} In the current climate, it is necessary that we examine the end time anxieties that are prevalent today.

Adventism Old and New

With the approach of the third millennium, there has been a noticeable increase of fervor among many sincere believers that Christ's return should be expected in the near future. As an example of this expectation, consider the success of the

Left Behind book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This series, detailing the coming rapture of the saints, the horrible tribulation period, and other aspects of biblical eschatology, has sold over 3.5 million copies since 1995.{3} While it is possible that such a work would find a ready audience at any other time, it is probably not coincidental that such success would be attained as the new millennium approaches.

The increased emphasis by many Christians on the probability that the return of Christ is imminent can be attributed to an understanding of prophecy that has become especially popular in the last 160 years. This form of interpretation, which had been sporadically utilized throughout church history, is known as Adventism, the belief that Christ's second coming could happen at any moment and will inaugurate the millennial kingdom and the end of the age.{4} The early church lived in high expectation of Christ's imminent return, but by the third century that view became a minority. Throughout history, Adventism has appealed to religious bodies with highly rigorous ethical codes, since an "any moment" return would easily distinguish the lukewarm Christian from the true Christian. Adventists in history comprise a wide spectrum, from the heretical Montanists of the second century, to those groups associated with the Radical Reformation of the 16th century. And although Adventism was considered a minority position throughout most of church history, today it is the predominant position among evangelical Christians, especially in the United States.

This change in interpretation came about though an innovative understanding of Scripture developed by John Darby, a 19th century pastor whose disillusionment with the spiritual condition of most Christians led him to conclude that the contemporary church was in apostasy. He therefore developed a philosophy of history, known as dispensationalism, which attempted to demonstrate how God's plan of redemption has

unfolded under differing circumstances throughout time. It was Darby's interpretation that as the return of Christ draws near, the corruption and apostasy of the church would be increasingly obvious. It is through dispensationalism that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 have been seen as symbolic of different periods of church history.{5}

Especially significant was Darby's idea that Christ's return would occur in two stages. Initially, Christ would secretly come *for* the saints just prior to the great Tribulation, to separate the true believers from the apostates and the unbelievers. Then, at the conclusion of the Tribulation period, Christ will come *with* the saints, in power and great glory, to establish His millennial reign.{6} The concept of a pretribulation rapture has become the dominant position among conservative Christians in the U.S., and at one time was a test of orthodoxy for many. However, this was primarily a reaction against liberalism's denial of Christ's personal return. Today, many Christians have agreed to disagree on this issue, as conservative biblical scholars have shown that both the midtribulation rapture and the posttribulation rapture are viable interpretations. While all three positions agree that Christ will personally return, the quandary is *when*. But as we shall see, attempts to determine the timing of Christ's return have invariably ended in failure.

Words of Caution

In January 1999 a cult group from Denver was expelled from Israel after Israeli authorities determined that they had gone to Israel in the hope that their radical activities would actually provoke the second coming of Christ. Their leader had predicted that he was to die on the streets of Jerusalem, only to be resurrected three days later.{7} Of course, Revelation chapter 11 speaks of a similar occurrence when the Beast will kill God's two witnesses in Jerusalem. And although this cult

group was certainly not composed of orthodox Christians, it is becoming increasingly evident that even many Christians are attaching special significance to the third millennium for the end times. Is there a biblical basis for doing so? Let's examine that question.

While the church has always looked for the second coming of Christ, it was the dispensational theology of the modern period that seemed to unlock many difficulties associated with prophetic fulfillment. Dispensationalism makes a distinction between Israel and the church, and anticipates the imminent return of Christ after Isreal's restoration as a nation. Consequently with the re- establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many biblical interpreters became convinced that the end was drawing near. Still, it was not until the 1970's, with the publication of Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth,* that an easy to understand approach to biblical prophecy became available. This book seemed to unlock the many mysteries of the book of Revelation, and went on to sell millions of copies. Lindsey's work has remained popular, perhaps due to his attempt to show how the events in the book of Revelation are consistent with the contemporary world. For instance, the Kings of the East with the army of 200 million is said to be Communist China, while the King of the North is Soviet Russia. Written like a Tom Clancy novel, it convinced many Christians that we were truly living in the "last days." This type of interpretation led many to believe that the peace negotiations which began in 1975 between Israel and Egypt was the very same peace agreement that the Antichrist is said to break in Daniel 9:27. But once again, history has disproved that theory as well.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from this is that precise interpretation of biblical prophecy is risky business. Just as those who advocate a hidden code in the Bible only discover "predicted" events after the fact, so too Christians need to demonstrate humility when attempting to

interpret apocalyptic images. A key to interpreting the book of Revelation is understanding the purpose of the book. The apostle John was writing to Christians who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wanted Christians to understand that severe persecution could not prevent God's victory over satanic forces. The Revelation was not written to satisfy our curiosity about future events, but to assure believers that God's redemptive program will go forward.

Numerous times throughout church history, sincere people have attempted to discern the details of prophetic Scripture only to have their interpretation disproved by historical events. This often brings discredit to the cause of Christ. Even Augustine, perhaps the greatest theologian in the history of the church, misunderstood the details of biblical prophecy. Like countless others, he failed to acknowledge the difference between the clear teaching of Scripture and end time speculations. Consequently, when interpreting prophetic Scripture we should acknowledge the distinction between the text and our own inferences, remembering to place primary emphasis on the *general* aspects of the text.{8}

Signs of the Times?

As we are considering the possibility that the personal return of Jesus Christ is somehow connected to the year 2000, it is important to recognize that in fact many attempts have been made to determine the approximate date of the Lord's return throughout church history. Jonathan Edwards, considered by many to be the most eminent American theologian, believed the 1,260 days of Revelation chapter 12 were actually years. Assuming that the start of the 1,260 years began in 606 a.d., Edwards concluded that Christ would return in 1866. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that the Pope was the Antichrist and would be overthrown in 1836.{9} This goes to show once again that even the most brilliant minds have

been unable to correctly predict the chronology of the end times.

One of the main problems when making predictions of Christ's return has been the emphasis placed on signs of the times. Typically, predictions are based on signs that are assumed to reflect events predicted in Scripture. But when the disciples asked Jesus for the sign of His coming and of the end of the age, Jesus replied in very general terms. He spoke of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, apostasy, and the preaching of the gospel in all the world. Scholars still debate whether Jesus is speaking of the Tribulation period here, or of the years leading up to the Tribulation. But it would appear that these signs that Jesus gave are fairly common events throughout church history. Only the proclamation of the gospel in all the world remains to be fulfilled.

Another aspect of interpreting biblical prophecy is maintaining the balance between the imminence and the delay of Christ's return. While many interpreters emphasize the "any moment" return of Christ, especially those who hold to a pretribulation rapture, it is clear that Christ warned His followers not to be disappointed if He failed to come when they expected Him. The Parable of the Ten Maidens (Matt. 25:1-13) and the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servant (Matt. 24:45-51) both emphasize the importance of remaining faithful, since the bridegroom and the master might not come when expected. Along with Christ's warning that only His Heavenly Father knows the time of His return, it should be obvious why it is impossible to come up with a date for Christ's return.

Also, when we consider the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies, we see that their fulfillment is not what many of us would call literal interpretation. For instance, the prophecy of Malachi 4:5 that Elijah would return was fulfilled in John the Baptist. In Acts 15:16-18, James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to conclude that the Old Testament prophecy of David's

restored tabernacle was fulfilled by the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel. And who would have ever thought that Hosea 11:1, which refers in the original context to God bringing Israel out of their Egyptian captivity, would by applied by Matthew to refer to Jesus' brief sojourn in Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod (Matt. 2:14-15)?

While this is not to suggest that we shouldn't diligently search the Scriptures for understanding God's plan for history, it is at the same time a reminder that the details of biblical prophecy are often difficult to ascertain. Acts 1:11 is one of many verses that affirms that Jesus Christ will personally return, but in Acts 1:7 Jesus Himself tells the disciples that instead of focusing on times and dates, they were to focus on the proclamation of the gospel. Those are good words for us today as well.

Our Prophetic Ministry

As we conclude this discussion on the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures, perhaps it would be valuable to consider the *purpose* of prophecy. We frequently assume that prophecy is only concerned with the distant future when in fact many Old Testament prophecies were warnings by the prophet to his own contemporaries about the consequences of disobedience. Similarly, the prophet was often called upon to deliver words of comfort from the Lord. Ultimately, it was the responsibility of the prophet to proclaim the Word of the Lord. Today, the primary responsibility of the church is to proclaim God's Word, the Scriptures. What we have attempted to show in this discussion is that, when interpreting prophecy, we must make a distinction between the explicit teaching of Scripture and inferences based on signs or current events.

Some teachers today seem to be suggesting that the Y2K computer bug will act as a trigger for a worldwide catastrophe that will signal the end times. While we do not want to suggest that any difficulties predicted for the Y2K computer

bug should be easily dismissed, we would do well to place Y2K in proper perspective. Due to the prosperity enjoyed in much of the Western world, it is easy to forget the horrific suffering that Christians in other countries have experienced this century. It has been stated that more Christians have been martyred for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. It would be myopic for Western Christians to interpret a downturn in the economy as a signal for the second coming when our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries have been experiencing the type of oppression and suffering most of us cannot even imagine.

However, this is not to discount the possibility that the year 2000 may bring with it a period of relative discomfort. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Y2K computer bug will probably have a significant impact. Some news reports indicate that many smaller nations have failed to even begin addressing the problem. And the United States is certainly not immune from any computer failures either. When we consider how important international trade has become to our economy, there is probably going to be some kind of disruption in our lifestyles; many say we should prepare for the worst.

While this may sound frightening to some, it also points to a tremendous opportunity for the Christian to demonstrate the love of Christ to the world. There will be many people who will be caught unprepared for any disruption in society. Even now there are ministries like Joseph Project 2000 that are gearing up to meet the needs of Christians and non-Christians alike should the situation arise. It is unfortunately true that personal prosperity can often lead to a rejection of God’s provision. Christians need to be willing to share their resources and God’s love with others if in fact there is a breakdown in society. It would appear that the Christian church has a golden opportunity right now to exercise its prophetic ministry of proclaiming God’s Word for this generation. All too often we seem to be waiting for a future

cataclysm where God Himself will act in a most direct way, rather than acknowledging our responsibility to act as His ambassadors to our contemporaries. This is why we must keep in perspective both the imminence *and* the delay of Christ's return. Any delay in the Lord's return is a reminder of God's great mercy and patience, who desires that none should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1206-07.

2. CNN.com, "Falwell says Antichrist probably is on Earth now," January 15, 1999.

3. Steve Rabey, "Apocalyptic Sales Out of This World." *Christianity Today* (March 1, 1999), 19.

4. M. E. Dieter, "Adventism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 15-16.

5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 150-153.

6. W. A. Hoffecker, "Darby, John Nelson," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 292-293.

7. *The Go2Net Network*, January 9, 1999.

8. Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1982), 211 (See the entire chapter on 'The Revelation' for very helpful guidelines for the interpretation of apocalyptic literature.)

9. G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 33-34.

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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 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.
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19. Ibid., p. 226.
20. Ibid., p. 227.
21. Ibid., p. 228.

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