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THE PERILS OF NEWSPAPER ESCHATOLOGY

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I've been a Christian for close to 32 years. When I was a new believer both the Christian and publishing worlds were being shaken by Hal Lindsey's runaway bestseller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Its sensational message that current world events were fulfilling ancient prophecies and setting the stage for the return of Christ left a pervading sense in many Christian circles that the Rapture (snatching of Christians off the earth to be with Christ) would occur long before the turn of the millennium. We were told that the generation that saw the nation of Israel reestablished in 1948 would also see "all these things" come to pass (Matt. 24:33-34), and a generation (so they said) is 40 years. That left 1988 as the latest possible date for the Second Coming, and, if one subtracted seven years for the pretribulation Rapture that Lindsey and others taught, the latest Christians could expect to live life as they knew it was 1981. "Jesus is coming soon" was thus preached with urgency, often as though it were a part of the gospel message itself, and many people accepted Christ on the premise that this was true.

Operating under this assumption, much of the evangelical community was apolitical. Why try to influence a world destined to embrace the Antichrist within a few years? Along with this attitude, sensational "newspaper eschatology"¹ – in which world events were read into Bible prophecy – often substituted for serious pursuits of biblical and theological study as well as Christian sanctification and discipleship.

The failure of the Rapture and the Second Coming to occur by the 1980s did not result in a "Great Disappointment" of the magnitude experienced by the Millerite movement when Christ failed to return in 1844, as their leader William Miller had predicted. Many "Jesus movement" converts from the 1970s did fall away, however, when they found life continuing as usual longer than expected. Lindsey and other prophecy teachers revised their scenarios and managed to retain large followings, but, increasingly, Christians began to listen to the likes of Francis Schaeffer, who brought correction to the social indifference the end-time teachings spawned.

More Christians pursued advanced degrees and positions of influence in society; Christian charities thrived; and grassroots citizen movements, such as the 1980s Moral Majority and the 1990s Christian Coalition (however you view their politics), outnumbered and outmobilized their opposition and profoundly affected the outcome of American elections. For all this, America may still seem like a godless society. In many respects it is; but its laws and policies on religious rights, right-to-life, family, criminal justice, and sexual morality issues compare favorably with those of Western European nations where no comparable Christian movements are attempting to turn back the advances of secularization and moral relativism.

This brief review of recent history demonstrates the sobering fact that ideas have consequences. It is important to recall these events at this time, because it has now been long enough that people can forget them – and repeat the same mistakes.

Thirty years ago the idea that the end was in sight was fueled by such seemingly apocalyptic global and national developments as the Cold War and the attendant nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War and the related upheaval and rebellion among American youth, the rise of the European Common Market, the proliferation of new cults with their false Christs and false prophets, and the Yom Kippur War and

general turmoil in the Middle East. Today the same notion is fed by events such as the ongoing and escalating turmoil in the Middle East, the September 11 attack on America and the resultant War on Terrorism, the emergence of the European Community with its common currency and the larger push toward a unified global community, and the increasing depravity of Western civilization, including examples of parents' and children's "love growing cold" (Matt. 24:12).

Just as the rapid change, instability, and downright scariness of the global and national situation 30 years ago helped make Lindsey's Planet Earth a publishing phenomenon, so, I suggest, comparable conditions today have paved the way for the unprecedented success of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's Left Behind series. Yes, the latter works are fiction, but I believe they owe much of their success to their ability to devise plausible scenarios that show how the conditions and challenges of our real world could lead in our own time to the fulfillment of end-time prophecy and the return of Christ.

There is nothing wrong with such story telling, per se. In fact, it is healthy to realize that the return of Christ could happen in one's own lifetime. It is not healthy, however, to leap from that possibility to the conclusion that the end must be right around the corner. We must be careful not to allow the Left Behind books to lead us into the same fatalistic mindset as did Planet Earth, namely, to conclude it is pointless to try to influence the course of world and national events. This issue's cover article by Gene Edward Veith elaborates not only this concern but also several additional problems with the books, both theological and literary, while also recognizing that they do have commendable features and make certain positive contributions.

It may seem that I am bashing the entire theological framework in which Lindsey and LaHaye-Jenkins operate; that is, premillennialism,² dispensationalism,³ pretribulationism,⁴ and futurism.⁵ That is not the case; although Veith endorses an amillennial⁶ view of eschatology over both premillennialism and postmillennialism,⁷ CRI takes no official position on the millennium issue and has had advocates of all the above views on staff. No, our concern about the Left Behind books is their potential to promote newspaper eschatology, along with any assumption that the end will, or probably will, come to pass within a limited number of years. CRI does officially reject this approach to eschatology, and Veith's article makes an especially valuable contribution in this regard.

First, as Veith rightly argues, in the Bible the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. This means that both the pessimistic view that the church has no constructive role on the earth other than saving souls and the optimistic view that the fullness of the Kingdom of God can come about apart from the physical return of Christ are equally false. We are to be concerned about redeeming culture and thus extending the Kingdom into every area of human endeavor, but, at the same time, we should have no illusions that the world only will get better through our efforts. Satan and the sin nature are still very much at work, and who can fathom the depths of their capacities for evil? It will take nothing short of the Second Coming to fully rein them in (Rev. 19:1—20:3).

Furthermore, the purpose of end-time prophecy is to give us the larger picture of the inevitable trial but ultimate victory that lie ahead of the people of God, not detailed knowledge of the future. It is foolhardy constantly to devise and revise scenarios to fit current events into biblical prophecy. Apocalyptic writings by their very nature often are difficult to interpret: references frequently can be obscure and visions are highly symbolic. It is often not clear what the symbols represent or whether a reference should be taken symbolically or literally. If God wanted us to construct detailed scenarios of prophetic fulfillment, He would have made the prophecies more clear!

Finally, it is evident from Scripture that the Father does not want us to know the time of Christ's return (see, e.g., Acts 1:6-7). There is value in conducting our lives as though He might return at any moment; there is also value in planning and working as though He will not be returning for a thousand years (see, e.g., Matt. 24:36—25:30). Those who think it is possible to know for certain that the end is at hand because of the occurrence of some sign often fail to realize that this very principle would mean that people living prior to that sign would likewise know for certain that the end is not at hand, which is clearly unbiblical.

It was not Jesus' prayer that His Father take His disciples out of the world, but that He would keep them from the Evil One (John 17:15). "In the world you have tribulation," He told them, "but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33; NASB). Confident of Jesus' victory and the Father's protection, we can escape the temptation of escapism and leave behind "left behind" thinking as we obey the Lord's command to engage profitably in the business of His kingdom until He comes (Luke 19:11-27).

— *Elliot Miller*

NOTES

1. Eschatology is the study of the "last things" — things such as life after death, the return of Christ, the end of this world, and the world to come.
2. Premillennialism is the belief that there will be a literal millennial reign of Christ on the earth (Rev. 20:1-6) after the Second Coming (Rev. 19:11-21) and before the final judgment (Rev. 20:11-15) and the establishment of the new heaven and new earth where the redeemed will dwell forever (Rev. 21-22).
3. Dispensationalism is a theological and hermeneutical (Bible interpretation) system that holds, among other things, that the church and Israel comprise two eternally distinct people of God.
4. Pretribulationism is the belief that the Rapture occurs prior to the seven-year tribulation period that precedes the return of Christ to reign on the earth.
5. Futurism is the belief that the events described in Revelation from chapter 4 on, Matthew 24, and related prophetic passages largely remain to be fulfilled.
6. Amillennialism holds that the thousand-year reign of Christ spoken of in Revelation 20 is — like so much else in the book — symbolic, referring to the spread of the gospel during the New Testament era.
7. Postmillennialism sees the Second Coming occurring after a golden "millennial" period in which the gospel has been accepted by the entire world.