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We will soon experience the historic change from the 1900s to the 2000s. Whatever may be said about the precise timing of the new millennium, we are able to mark a significant milestone—two thousand years of the Christian era, and use this event to reflect on our journey so far, and to prepare for the future.

It is ironic that the short cuts and amazing lack of foresight in the computer industry, which have resulted in the infamous ‘millennium bug’ threatening business and other activity around the world, have focused so much attention on a particular date, even where the Christian calendar is not the standard. It is even more scandalous that this problem has been the catalyst for so much fear and uncertainty, often generated artificially to serve vested interests.

Given the complexity of the evolution of the Christian calendar, it may be arbitrary to select one date rather than another for celebration, but the approach of the ‘year of our Lord’ (AD) 2000 has served a useful purpose in motivating the church for mission, worship and renewal.

But more important than dates on a calendar, the Christian faith itself is intimately bound up with the ongoing story of God’s creative, providential and redemptive work. Therefore, instead of being paralyzed by sensationalism about the new millennium, or being confused by unwarranted apocalyptic speculation, Christians have every reason to be interested in the future. They can look confidently to the further unveiling of God’s purposes as ‘Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’ leads us on.

The opening article in this issue by historian Richard V. Pierard gives an informative overview of the millennial interests throughout the long pilgrimage of the church. (Also reviewed is a book on the same subject to which he is a major contributor.) Papers by Professor John Macquarrie and James Veitch survey developments in mainstream theology and the church during this century and consider prospects for the future. Missiologist Stephen T. Hoke examines prominent trends in the global church and their consequences for mission, particularly the paradigm shifts needed in training church leaders for the new era.

Narrowing the focus to one of many church initiatives for the year 2000, Leonardo de Chirico provides an illuminating study of the biblical concept of Jubilee. Finally, Brian Edgar turns to the ‘brave new world’ of bio-technology and develops theological understandings of the person and of time in the light of remarkable developments in the scientific understanding and potential manipulation of the process of human aging.

**David Parker, Editor.**

## **The Coming of the New Millennium: A Study in Evangelical Misunderstanding**

**Richard V. Pierard**

**Keywords:** Millennialism, calendar, prophecy, apocalypticism, history, Sabbath, adventists

Millennial madness is sweeping the face of the earth. 'TEOTWAWKI' —it's the end of the world as we know it, so the prophets of the end times are telling us. Particularly in North America, forecasts of doom and despair fill the airwaves as Christian radio and television preachers work overtime to warn people of the wrath of God about to be poured out on our hapless planet. Best-selling books and videos, both Christian and secular, and Hollywood movies herald the impending catastrophe. In fact, several evangelical authors have become millionaires by publishing sensationalist accounts of what they claim lies ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Public attention is riveted on the anticipated Y2K computer meltdown, and survivalists are urging people to stockpile food, water, generators, money (gold), and weapons in preparation for the imminent collapse of technological civilization. Advertisements crowd the pages of religious magazines and commercials spew forth from Christian radio offering all sorts of Y2K survival gear and provisions that will enable simple believers to prepare adequately for what lies ahead. The 'Chicken Littles' of the Y2K cataclysm laugh all the way to the bank with the profits they are gaining from the sale of lurid books and unneeded merchandise to anxious Christians.

What really is nothing more than an artificial calendar change—from 1999 to 2000 in the western or Christian calendar—has been transformed by media hype into an apocalyptic event of unprecedented proportions. It is easy to dismiss this millennial madness as simply another contemporary fad. However, thoughtful Christians have every reason to be concerned about what is happening. The untrammelled apocalypticism of our times is exercising a perverse influence on the interpretation of eschatology or 'the last things' and subverting the real meaning of this teaching for the church. Although the return of Christ has been the 'blessed hope' ([Tit. 2:13](#)) for believers in all places and times, the unfortunate linkage of the Second Coming with the millennial fever of our day is causing many to question its validity and relevance for their lives.

## THE INSIGNIFICANCE OF THE YEAR 2000

The transition to a new millennium has caught the fancy of many because it seems to have capped a thousand years of material progress that resulted in the spread of Christianity throughout the entire world and the development of a global society. Although people now are placing such great emphasis on the specific year 2000, it is well to remember that throughout most of Christian history the concept of time was viewed differently from the way it is now. The date of an event was of far less importance than its theological significance. The writing of history and precision of dating took on importance first at the time of the Renaissance and Reformation when papal tradition was under attack. The papacy attempted to bolster its image by stressing an unbroken line of continuity in papal succession beginning with the Apostle Peter.

Nevertheless, historians still tended to stress the ongoing work of divine providence more than actual objective events. Only in the nineteenth century did people come to recognize the fundamental significance of historical perspective. When they became conscious of the reality and inevitability of change, they saw a need to trace its progress.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. One of the most egregious examples of this are the 'Left Behind' novels, co-authored by political activist and evangelist Tim LaHaye and veteran writer Jerry Jenkins, that focus on the lives of people left behind on earth after the 'rapture' of the church. This is the idea that prior to the Second Coming, Christ will take all believers to heaven to be with him. Tyndale House, Wheaton, Illinois, has already published four titles (*Left Behind*, *Tribulation Force*, *Nicolae*, and *Soul Harvest*) in what is projected to be a seven-volume series, and the three million copies sold to date have made it one of the most successful Christian fiction sequences in history.

The reconstruction of the past required the ready availability of historical data, thus resulting in the collection and publication of medieval documents and the search for new information about classical antiquity through archaeology.

At the same time, most of the world's peoples continued to use calendars of their own for religious and ceremonial reasons.<sup>2</sup> Many of these exist, but probably the most noteworthy are the Hebrew, Islamic, and Chinese calendars. The Hebrew or Jewish calendar is a lunar-solar one that is based on the phases of the moon. In ancient times each month began when the moon's slim crescent was visible in the evening twilight, and the festival of the new moon was celebrated with solemnity. Nowadays the calculation of months and years is done with astronomical regularity. The civil year begins at the autumnal equinox (Rosh Hashanah) and the religious year at the vernal equinox. The civil year consists of twelve lunar months—Tishri, Cheshvan, Kislev, Tebet, Shebat, Adar, Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Ab, and Elul—which are alternately twenty-nine and thirty days in length. To prevent this lunar calendar from deviating too far from the solar cycle, a thirteen month, Veadar (second Adar), is added seven times during each nineteen year cycle. The weeks, however, run in a continuous seven-day cycle, with the Sabbath, which begins at sundown Friday, ending the week.

The numbering of years begins with the creation (*anno mundi* or A.M.—'in the year of the world'), which Jews believe occurred 3,760 years before the birth of Christ. This means that the year 2000 in the western calendar will be A.M. 5760/5761 in the Hebrew one. The Jewish calendar is used today in Israel for all civil and religious purposes, and by Jews everywhere for religious purposes. Some Jews utilize the Christian calendar but replace the terms B.C. and A.D. with B.C.E. (before the common era) and C.E. (common era), a practice which in recent years has gained some acceptance in secular and liberal Christian circles.

The Islamic calendar is a purely lunar one. The year 1 began on the day and year (sunset, July 16, 622, as reckoned by the Christian calendar) when the Prophet Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina. Known as the Hijra or Hegira, this is the defining event in Muslim history. Each year, which is labelled A.H. (*anno Hegirae*), has twelve lunar months, which alternate between thirty and twenty-nine days, thus making it 354 days in length. Because the Qur'an specifies that a year has only twelve months, there is no thirteenth month. This means that the months move backward through all the seasons and complete a full cycle every 32½ years. The year 2000 in the Islamic calendar is A.H. 1420/1421. A new month does not begin until the new moon has been sighted and the announcement made by some prominent figure in the Muslim community. The days run from sunset to sunset, and Friday, the day of worship ('day of gathering'), marks the beginning of the new week. Some of the more westernized Muslim countries use the Christian calendar alongside the Islamic one.

The Chinese calendar is quite regular and is based on the motion of the sun, moon, and planets. Its use can be traced back to 2953 BC, the mythical founding of the empire. It developed two systems of numbering, both of which covered a sixty-year cycle. One linked the twelve animals of the zodiac (rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig) with ten celestial signs of the Chinese constellations. The other used the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water). The date of the Chinese New Year

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<sup>2</sup> 2. There is an extensive literature on the question of calendars. Sources used to construct the following discussion include David Ewing Duncan, *Calendar: Humanity's Epic Struggle to Determine a True and Accurate Year* (New York: Avon Books, 1998); L. E. Doggett, 'Calendars', in *Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac*, ed. P. Kenneth Seidelmann (Mill Valley, Calif.: University Science Books, 1992); Anthony F. Aveni, *Empires of Time: Calendars, Clocks, and Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); and Frank Parise, ed., *The Book of Calendars* (New York: Facts on File, 1982).

varies within a thirty-day period from mid-January to mid-February. The New Year in 2000 will fall on February 4 and mark the beginning of the Year of the Dragon.

A variety of other calendars are in use in other countries, such as the Coptic calendar in Ethiopia, the Saka calendar in India, and various Buddhist ones in Southeast Asia. One thing is clear. The date 2000, which is so meaningful to us in the West, is an arbitrary milestone and of little importance to people in many parts of the world.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

The Christian or western calendar has its roots in the Roman world. The earliest Roman calendar was based on observation of the phases of the moon along with the solar cycle. However, by the late Republic the lunar calendar had deviated almost eighty days from the normal solar calendar. Thus, in 46 BC, Julius Caesar, with the aid of a Greek astronomer, developed a new calendar that was based completely on the movements of the sun without reference to the moon. The so-called Julian Calendar defined a year of 365¼ days, with an extra day added every four years as February 29. The new year now would begin on January 1 instead of March 1 as was the situation before, a fact which can be seen in the names of the months from September to December (seventh to tenth month), and the years were grouped and counted by the reigns of the consuls. Some modifications were made in the length of the months to make them fit into the yearly cycle, and two of them were subsequently named after Julius and the first emperor, Augustus.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian church readily adopted the Julian calendar, but over the passage of time the practice of numbering the years from reigns of consuls or emperors became increasingly unsatisfactory. Around AD 525 a Roman monk named Dionysius Exiguus, while in the process of developing a table for setting the date of Easter, came up with the idea of a Christian era beginning with the nativity of Jesus. This would be the year AD 1 (*anno Domini*—in the year of our Lord). The concept of zero was unknown at the time and thus was not used in Roman numerals. The practice of numbering backwards (BC—before Christ) apparently was not introduced until the seventeenth century.

More recently, scholars discovered that Dionysius had erred in his calculations. Jesus must have been born around five or six years 'BC', since Herod the Great died in 4 BC. He was the one who ordered the 'slaughter of the innocents' in a desperate attempt to eliminate the potential rival king whom the Magi had come from the east to find.

Actually, at least 200 years passed before Christians began using the new dating system with any regularity. Historians credit the English monk and scholar Bede (c. 673–735) with institutionalizing the practice, but in some parts of Europe several hundred years passed before it was accepted.

After a few centuries people began to notice a significant discrepancy between the actual solar time and the Christian calendar. The reason for this was that the solar year is slightly shorter than Julius Caesar had calculated, namely, 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 46 seconds. Although various individuals called for calendar reform, it was not until the late sixteenth century that Pope Gregory XIII took action. He sought the help of an astronomer to correct the calendar and in 1582 announced his famous reform. It involved dropping the leap year in every century year (those ending in 00) except the ones divisible by four (like 1600 and 2000), and advancing the calendar ten days to catch up with solar time. This reduced the discrepancy from 11 minutes and 14 seconds per year to 26

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<sup>3</sup> 3. See Agnes Kirsopp Michels, *The Calendar of the Roman Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

seconds per year, and 3000 years will pass before it is a full day off. On the night of October 4, 1582 people in Italy went to bed as usual, but they awoke the next morning to find that it was now October 15—eleven days later!<sup>4</sup>

The new Gregorian calendar was quickly accepted by Catholic countries, gradually over the next two centuries by Protestant ones, and only in the twentieth century by those where Eastern Orthodoxy prevailed. By then, the calendar in Russia and other Orthodox lands was thirteen days behind that in the West. This is now the standard civil calendar used throughout the world.

Because there was no year 0, the first Christian millennium started with the year 1. The world went from 1 BC right into AD 1. Although that means the third millennium technically begins in 2001, there are no signs that people will be deterred from celebrating its beginning in the year 2000. After all, MCMXCIX will become MM with the tick of a clock.

## END OF THE CENTURY, END OF THE MILLENNIUM

While the word *millennium* carries with it significant religious and historical baggage, the term century is a modern notion in measuring time that differs from the season, reign, or era.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed such a great outpouring of literary and artistic material in Europe that contemporaries gave the period a name — *fin de siècle* (French for ‘end of the century’)—to acknowledge its influence in time. Intellectuals looked upon the last years of their century as an era of cultural decadence and despair, an age of anxiety. European bourgeois or middle-class society seemed to have lost its way. Unable to influence political developments in an age of mass society and faced with the mounting crises of imperialistic expansion in Europe and overseas, industrial growth and economic depression, and the worsening armaments race, intellectuals and artists retreated into aesthetic or psychological pursuits. The most radical among them welcomed the imminent collapse of a ‘botched civilization’, as poet Ezra Pound put it.

The prophets of the new age about to dawn were Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud. It was a world of chaos. Neither God nor human reason counted. Impersonal forces determined human existence, both within the psyche and society at large. Christianity was a ‘slave morality’ that softened the resolve of humankind to deal with the demands of the age. Survival of the fittest was the law not only of the jungle but also of the realm of business and the competition among the nations and races for mastery of the world. The easy optimism of the Victorian Era and the Gilded Age was fading. An age of accelerating growth and change lay ahead, but many feared it would be one of conflict— between labour and capital, rich and poor, and the nations themselves.

Perhaps the ennui of the late nineteenth century was connected to the expectations that the age created. Never before had history come under such scrutiny. The modern era was not living up to the hopes of its prophets nor its participants. Such expectations were not a problem in previous centuries because people looked at time differently. In fact, the first instance we have of a new century being celebrated in the Christian calendar was the

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<sup>4</sup> 4. This is described in detail in G. V. Coyne, et. al., eds., *Gregorian Reform of the Calendar: Proceedings of the Vatican Conference to Commemorate Its 400th Anniversary, 1582–1982* (Vatican City: Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, Specola Vaticana, 1983); and Peter Archer, *The Christian Calendar and the Gregorian Reform* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1941).

<sup>5</sup> 5. Asa Briggs and Daniel Snowman, *Fins de Siècle: How Centuries End 1400–2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 1.

Jubilee of 1300, proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII. The celebration was facilitated by invention of the mechanical, weight-driven clock in the previous century that was used in the monasteries to determine the times for worship and prayer during each day. As a result of the clock's influence, a 'time consciousness' gradually developed that simply was not known before.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent popes declared Jubilees in each century year. Known as a 'Holy Year', the faithful who made a pilgrimage to Rome during this time received a generous indulgence (reduction of the amount of time one would have to spend in purgatory before he or she went to heaven) for visiting various churches. Also a special 'Holy Door' in St. Peter's Basilica was opened for pilgrims to pass through, and after the conclusion of the year it was sealed once again.

By the 1600s centuries were taking on a identity of their own. They had their own personalities and life courses (beginning, first half, middle, second half, end) and names, such as the Reformation Century or Century of Louis the Great (Louis XIV of France). Until this time, birthdays were not recorded with any particular precision except for rulers and very important people, and they were usually not observed. However, the increasing use of exact calendar dates in business affairs and private life and the recording of births, marriages, and deaths in church registers caused people to become more aware of their birth dates and ages. Nevertheless, the century years were not occasions for major observances until the end of the eighteenth century. Then the French Revolution, the rise of Napoleon, and prophetic speculation made people much more conscious of the year 1800–1801, and considerable attention was paid to the passing of the old century and advent of the new—in both Christian and secular circles.

Thus, when the nineteenth century arrived, it had a distinctive identity, and even magazines and journals took its name, something which had not occurred in the previous century. The most prestigious of the many periodicals that did so was *The Nineteenth Century*, founded in London in 1877. At midnight on December 31, 1900 it was renamed *The Nineteenth Century and After*.

As the twentieth century neared, people were quite aware of the new era coming and keenly anticipated it. From this time forward, consciousness of the coming of the next century was an integral part of western thinking about time and dates. Moreover, as the years passed, people increasingly discussed the prospects which the next millennium might hold for humanity and society. At the same time, it was a period of intense and even anxious eschatological speculation as many eagerly looked for the return of Christ at the end of this millennial century.

## **THE MYTH OF THE TERRORS OF THE YEAR 1000**

Some have argued that the century preceding the arrival of the second millennium of the Christian era also was marked by a time of anxiety. As the year 1000 approached, many in Europe were gripped by what one contemporary writer labelled as 'terrors'. The primary source for this characterization of the times was the monk Radulphus (or Raoul) Graber, whose *Five Books of Histories* chronicled events during the period 900–1044. Born around 985 in Burgundy, he entered a monastery at the age of twelve and lived into the 1040s. He was quite well-read but not a skilful writer, and he must have had problems with interpersonal relations as he was forced to spend his life travelling from abbey to abbey without finding a permanent home. However, historians have vigorously debated just how true this characterization was, and the most recent commentators maintain that

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<sup>6</sup> 6. Ibid., p. 3.

rumours of tenth-century apprehension did not circulate in Europe until the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

While the millennial speculation which had characterized the early church receded after the time of Augustine, it did not die out. After all, Augustine in his *City of God* suggested that the thousand-year period since the birth of Jesus was the millennium mentioned in [Revelation 20](#), and thus 1000 or 1033 (the anniversary of the death of Christ) could be seen as a time for expecting the Antichrist and the Last Judgment.

In the tenth century this resulted in a groundswell of speculation that the world was drawing to a close. Various monastic writers predicted the imminent coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world, and this led to heightened tensions and fears as the year 1000 approached. Both in the years immediately preceding and following that fateful date, various signs such as a comet, meteors, and famines were seen as indications of the approaching apocalypse.

However, the documentary record is unclear as to how widespread the alleged 'terrors of the year 1000' actually were. Papal statements between 970 and 1000 and the principal monastic documents (annals as well as biographies) make no mention of such a happening. One writer, Thietmar of Merseburg, referred to 1000 not as year of horror but as the comforting anniversary of Christ's birth: 'When the thousandth year since the salvific birth of the Immaculate Virgin had come, a radiant dawn rose over the world.'<sup>8</sup> Another problem was the imprecision of dating. At least one important monastic writer at the time maintained the AD calculation currently in use was twenty-one years off. Most modern-day scholars agree that the 'terrors' of 1000 have been overstated and that anxieties about the end of the world prevailed throughout the eleventh century. What should have been the decisive year turned out to be just one more year in a lengthy period of fear and anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

## APOCALYPTIC AND MILLENARIAN SPECULATION

While the extent of apocalyptic speculation a thousand years ago is debatable, there is no question that it is widely prevalent today. Not only do we have the secular apocalypticism like that found among adherents to New Age, Third Wave, and catastrophe theories, but it is also prevalent among such pseudo-Christians cults as the Branch Davidians and Christian Identity movement. Much more remarkable is the hold it has in conservative evangelical circles. The strong fascination with eschatological matters and the events surrounding the return of Christ has led to all sorts of rash speculation about the future and bitter polemics about events that have not yet even come to pass.

An important element in eschatological thinking is the messianic kingdom, commonly referred to as the 'millennial' kingdom because of the six references in [Revelation 20:1-10](#) to the thousand-year reign of Christ. As the end of the second millennium of the Christian era neared, theorizing on this matter increased at an exponential rate. According to the writer of Revelation, the kingdom is established immediately after the victorious return of Christ, the event dramatically described in chapter [19](#). The narrator relates in chapter [20](#) that an angel came down from heaven holding the key to the 'bottomless pit' (the Abyss) and a large chain. The angel seized the dragon or serpent that is called the devil or Satan, bound him and threw him into the pit, and shut and sealed it, so that he

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Focillon, *The Year 1000* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1969), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> James Reston, Jr., *The Last Apocalypse: Europe at the Year 1000 A.D.* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

could not deceive the nations. Those who had given their lives because of their witness to Jesus and for the Word of God and who had not worshipped the Beast (Antichrist) and had not received its mark, were resurrected and reigned with Christ for a thousand years on thrones set up for that purpose. By sharing in this 'first resurrection', they were 'blessed and holy' and would never again be subject to death (the 'second death'). Instead they would be priests of God and of Christ and reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years came to an end, Satan escaped and tried to deceive the nations again, but he and his minions were destroyed and thrown into the 'lake of fire and brimstone' where they would suffer eternal torment. Then God created a new heaven and earth, and those who were Christ's entered into the New Jerusalem to enjoy the eternal state of happiness and bliss.

Although these statements seem clear enough, throughout the history of the church they have been interpreted in different ways. The *premillennialists* hold that Jesus will personally and physically return to earth and immediately establish the millennial kingdom. The reign will be inaugurated in a cataclysmic way and Jesus will personally exercise control over all the earth and its inhabitants. The Second Coming will be preceded by a series of dramatic signs—wars, famines, and earthquakes, the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great spiritual apostasy culminating in the appearance of the Antichrist, and an intense persecution of the church. Just when all seems to be lost, Christ gloriously descends from the sky, smites his foes and places Satan under lock and key, and takes charge of the world which is rightfully his. This ushers in a period of peace and righteousness under his firm but benevolent direction.

*Postmillennialists* believe that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals. The world will eventually be Christianized, a golden age of spiritual prosperity brought in, and then the return of Christ will occur. The kingdom will not be essentially different from our own time, as far as the basic facts of existence are concerned. The present age gradually merges into the millennial age as an increasing proportion of the world's inhabitants turn to the Christian faith. Even now Christians function as the outward and visible manifestation of the kingdom of God, and over the course of time they will produce a transformed political and social order whose values are those of Christ.

Not only will Christ's reign over the earth be the result of forces now active in the world, but also it will last an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal thousand years, the symbolic number in [Revelation 20](#). The millennium's length will be difficult to determine because it has no clear point of beginning. The kingdom will arrive by degrees, not instantaneously. Eventually the era of peace and harmony will conclude with the personal and visible return of Christ, just as the Scripture had foretold. This will be followed by the resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous and the last judgment. All will be judged and consigned to one of two permanent states—eternal punishment or eternal happiness.

Adherents of the third position, *amillennialism*, believe there will be no literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. The second coming of Christ will be a dramatic, visible occurrence that will be followed immediately by a general resurrection of all the dead, both believers and unbelievers. Meanwhile, the Lord Jesus will instantaneously transform and glorify the living believers. Then the last judgment will take place, and all men and women will be consigned to their eternal rewards.

Amillennialists regard the first coming of Christ as the more important event. When the Son of God came to earth, he died on the cross as the atonement for our sins and rose triumphantly from the grave. In the process, he overcame sin, the Devil, and death itself,

and his victory decided the ultimate issues of history. The kingdom of God is both present and future, and in fact during his earthly ministry Jesus taught that the kingdom was already present. Christians embrace the present by following Jesus and the future by expecting his return. The bridge between the present and future is faith in Christ. What we do today anticipates what will occur in the future.

The variation on premillennialism that claims the support of a large segment of British and North American evangelicals is *dispensationalism*. This view actually originated in the early nineteenth century, especially as a result of the teachings of John Nelson Darby and the 'Plymouth' Brethren, and was spread through interdenominational Bible and prophecy conferences and the famous *Scofield Reference Bible*. It holds that God has dealt with people in various ways during the course of history, and each of these is called a 'dispensation'. We are currently living in the period of grace or the church age; the final dispensation will be that of the kingdom.

Dispensationalism places great emphasis on the separate existence of Israel and its restoration at the time of Christ's return. In an event called the rapture of the church, Christ will come in the air prior to his second advent. He will resurrect all the dead believers and take up the living ones, and they will join him in heaven. At this point the Holy Spirit's restraining hand is removed from the world, and all hell literally breaks loose on earth in what is known as the Great Tribulation. The Antichrist will establish his totalitarian rule, vigorously persecute those who come to Christ during the period, and attempt to destroy Israel (who have returned to their homeland in unbelief) at the climactic Battle of Armageddon. Then, just in the nick of time, Christ comes down from the sky accompanied by the raptured believers and the armies of heaven, crushes his foes in the greatest bloodbath of all times, and sets up the millennial kingdom with its seat in Jerusalem.

## MILLENNIALISM AND DATE-SETTING

These positions are familiar and require no further exposition. The early church fathers were largely premillennial in their eschatology,<sup>10</sup> but a shift to amillennialism had set in by the time of Augustine. Although there were dissenting voices in the medieval church advocating a form of popular millennialism, such as Joachim of Fiore, the Spiritual Franciscans, and the Taborite faction of the Hussites, Augustinian amillennialism held sway in both Catholic and Protestant circles until the seventeenth century. Then a revival of premillennialism in the Protestant world occurred and along with it the appearance of postmillennialism, especially in works of Jonathan Edwards. Before long, some of these writers began to fall prey to the temptation to identify the Antichrist and set a date for the coming of Christ and the end of the world.

L. R. Froom, in his massive compilation *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, identifies a wide variety of seventeenth and eighteenth century date-setters. According to which particular author one read, the end of the 1,260 day tribulation period and the return of Christ would be 1694 (Johann Heinrich Alsted), 1697 (Thomas Beverly), 1714 (Pierre Jurieu), 1762, (Richard Clarke), 1798 (Edward King and Richard Valpy), 1830 (J. A. Bengel), 1847 (J. P. Petri), or 1866 (Joseph Lathrop, John Gill, and Samuel Hopkins). And these are only selected examples; Froom cites numerous others.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, like their

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<sup>10</sup> 10. D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> 11. LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1948), charts on II, pp. 786–87; III, pp. 252–53.

predecessors in the preceding two centuries, preachers in nineteenth-century America often made rash statements about the imminent return of Christ. For example, the renowned evangelist Charles Finney told a gathering in New York City in March 1835 that if the church would do all her duty, the millennium might come in the United States in three years.<sup>12</sup> But the most noteworthy of all the date-setters were the Adventists.<sup>13</sup>

The principal twentieth-century survivals of this millennial tradition are the *Seventh-day Adventists* and Jehovah's Witnesses. The story of William Miller, a self-educated Baptist preacher in New York State who predicted from the 2,300 days mentioned in [Daniel 8:14](#) and the seventy weeks in [Daniel 9:24–27](#) that Christ would return on October 22, 1844, is so well-known as not to require recounting. After the disaster of the 'Great Disappointment', as this event was labelled in Adventist circles, Hiram Edson claimed that he had a vision of Jesus the High Priest on that date moving from one place to another in heaven in order to carry out a new stage of his work in cleansing the heavenly sanctuary. This would be the task of making the atonement which would at last blot out the sins of the believers; the cleansing from sin would be accomplished by Christ's own blood. Ellen White and a band of followers picked up on this, added the idea of honouring the Sabbath, and promoted the view that Jesus was continuing his efficacious task in the sanctuary in heaven while they were to be busy spreading his gospel on the earth. Their message included warning the world of the coming judgment and calling individuals to repentance and righteous living, which included keeping God's commandments.

Charles Taze Russell, a men's clothing merchant in Pennsylvania, was won over to the Adventist beliefs about the divine inspiration of the Bible and the last days. This included the idea that the world would soon be consumed by fire and only Adventists would survive this judgment. Within a short time, he began setting dates for the second advent and calculated that Christ would return, first in 1873 or 1874 and then 1878. When this failed, Russell announced that Christ had made a spiritual return to the 'upper air' and said he would set up the millennial kingdom in 1914. Before then would be a forty-year time of preparation which would herald the 'day' of the millennium, a period he called the 'millennial dawn'.

Russell linked biblical prophecies to events in his own day in a complex and creative fashion by locating the beginning of Christ's invisible presence in 1874 and the onset of the 'harvest', a forty-year process of winning believers to Christ. In 1881 the fall of Babylon the Great occurred (the end of false religious influence over the church), and the end of the general call to join the special flock of 144,000 saints, mentioned in [Revelation 7:1–8](#) and [14:1](#), who would reign with him during the millennium. The rest of humanity would be resurrected during the thousand years, allowed to learn God's will, and given the opportunity to accept God's teachings. Those who did would pass through the final Battle of Armageddon and live on the new earth, a restored Garden of Eden.

Although Christ did not appear in 1914, Russell's successor, Joseph F. Rutherford, readjusted the eschatology, developed a new organizational structure, and provided it with more practical methods for propagating the faith. He argued that Christ actually was enthroned and the kingdom had begun, but in heaven. After a transitional period the full millennial reign would begin on earth. His faithful people were to continue witnessing and

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<sup>12</sup> 12. Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> 13. Of the vast literature on Adventism, the most helpful are Edwin Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World* (Boise, Ida.: Pacific Press, 1993); and Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

bringing as many people to a knowledge of God as possible. Renamed the *Jehovah's Witnesses* in 1931, the movement grew rapidly, set new dates for Christ's return, and continued redefining its worldview as time passed.<sup>14</sup>

The Jehovah's Witnesses may have been the most forthright in making statements about the immediate future, but as millennial trends shifted in the early twentieth century, some evangelical preachers went out a long way out on the limb of their own prophetic speculation. Revival preachers increasingly espoused pretribulational premillennialism, as it proved to be a powerful evangelistic weapon. They equated being left behind at the Rapture and having to go through the horrors of the Great Tribulation with dying without Christ and going to hell.

## MODERN EVENTS

Many who observed the 'signs of the times' began to make rash predictions about the meaning of contemporary happenings. They said World War I was the precursor to the revival of the Roman Empire and the return of Israel; the end of the 'time of the Gentiles' was at hand, and events were rushing toward the climax of history. The formation of the League of Nations was one more step toward the realization of the new Rome and the appearance of the last dictator, the Antichrist. Some preachers, such as Leonard Sale-Harrison, even identified him with Mussolini.<sup>15</sup>

World War II and its effects added fuel to the fires of apocalyptic speculation, as three major developments helped feed the date-setting frenzy. The first was the development of atomic weapons with incomprehensible destructive power together with delivery systems that left no place on earth safe from the threat of thermonuclear annihilation. The second was the creation of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948 and the successful defence of its territory in wars with its neighbours during the ensuing decades. The third was the emergence of the Cold War, the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Particularly in evangelical circles it was portrayed as an ideological struggle—capitalism versus communism, democracy versus dictatorship, freedom versus slavery—rather than a geo-political conflict for hegemony in the areas of the world that the two protagonists regarded as their spheres of interest. These themes pervaded the prophetic and apocalyptic literature that rolled off the evangelical presses.

Perhaps the most dramatic works have been produced by Hal Lindsey, whose scenarios for the future are a creative mixture of dispensational premillennialism and apocalyptic speculation informed by modern technology. His *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), with forty million copies in print, and the dozen or more books and videos recycling the ideas first set forth here, have made him the best-selling prophecy writer of all time. He put together the prophetic jigsaw puzzle of end times events—the creation of the state of Israel in 1948; its recovery of the ancient capital city of Jerusalem in 1967; the rise of Russia as a powerful nation and enemy of Israel; the Arab confederation arrayed against Israel; the rise of a great military power in East Asia that can field untold millions of soldiers; the movement toward European integration; the revival of the dark occultic practices of ancient Babylon; the increase of wars, earthquakes, famines, and pollution;

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<sup>14</sup> 14. Useful treatments of the Jehovah's Witnesses include M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); and Melvin D. Curry, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York: Garland Books, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> 15. Leonard Sale-Harrison, *The Resurrection of the Old Roman Empire* (London: Pickering Inglis, 1939), p. 96.

the apostasy of Christian churches from historic Christianity; the move toward one-world religion and government, and the decline of the United States as a world power.

Other pieces of the puzzle yet to fall into place are the rapture of the church, the seven-year tribulation period following this, and the visible return of Christ. Drawing upon Jesus' statement in [Matthew 24:34](#) (RSV), 'this generation shall not pass away until all these things have taken place', he asserts that a biblical 'generation' is forty years and concludes that 'all these things' could take place within forty years after the founding of Israel.<sup>16</sup> On that basis he predicted the return of Christ in 1988, with the Rapture occurring seven years earlier. Like all other date-setters before him, he had to do some swift back pedalling when Jesus did not show up as expected.

Lindsey is very much in the tradition of evangelical preachers who could not resist the temptation to make specific predictions from the apocalyptic Scriptural passages. The historical record of failure is there for all to see, yet these individuals really believe that they have received some new understanding of Scripture from God that permits them to speak with precision about the future. Since an unsophisticated reading public eagerly snatches up books containing such predictions and some televangelists and publishers alike see an opportunity to get a leg up on the competition, all too much of this sort of naive speculation continues to take place.

Edgar Whisenant created a major prophetic stir with his *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*<sup>17</sup> in which he argued from a complicated use of numerology that Christ would come for his church at Rosh Hashanah in that year. The sensational seer sold some two million books, but then when the Rapture failed to occur, he reconfigured his data in *The Final Shout, Rapture 1989 Report* (same publisher) which moved the event back a year. Since then he seems to have dropped out of sight. Soon afterwards, radio preacher Harold Camping, a Reformed amillennialist, came into the prophetic spotlight with *1994?*<sup>18</sup> which boldly predicted the world would end on September 6, 1994. When that missed the mark, he tried again with other dates, always pleading prophetic miscalculation. Like Whisenant, he used sophisticated a system of dating and biblical numerology, but to no avail.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of communism sent the preachers scurrying for a new conspiracy in which to fit their preconceived prophetic notions, and they found it in the 'New World Order'. The idea of a 'new order' is as old as America itself and is enshrined in the Great Seal of the United States, found on the back side of the one dollar bill, but the new world order as a replacement for the failed communist world conspiracy is of more recent origin. An excellent example of this is televangelist Pat Robertson's best-seller *The New World Order*, which best can be described as post-communist eschatology.

He argues that men of goodwill like Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, and George Bush unknowingly and unwittingly carried out the mission and mouthed the phrases 'of a tightly knit cabal whose goal is nothing less than a new order for the human race under the domination of Lucifer and his followers'.<sup>19</sup> Then in a long, rambling account of two hundred years of conspiracy, Robertson shows how 'monopoly bankers' (many of whom were Jews) controlled the course of history. Along the way he plugs in the Illuminati (a

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<sup>16</sup> 16. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> 17. (Nashville: World Bible Society, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> 18. (New York: Vantage Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> 19. Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), p. 37.

secret society founded in 1776), Freemasons, Karl Marx, the U.S. Federal Reserve System and money barons in Europe, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the Council on Foreign Relations, United Nations, the nuclear arms race, New Age religions, and computer technology.

He maintains a 'one-world government' is about to be established that will control the lives of all people, and then a 'demonized madman' will seize power in this worldwide, homogenized political system. He will employ currently existing technology to turn the entire world into a giant prison, thereby becoming what communism had been, and the horrors of the rule of the Beast as portrayed in Revelation will come to pass.<sup>20</sup>

Other eschatological fads competed for evangelical attention as the century neared its end. Canadian evangelist Grant R. Jeffrey made a big splash with several books and videos that used computer technology to uncover revelations allegedly encoded in the Hebrew text of Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Others, arguing from [2 Peter 3:8](#), 'With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day', claim that the world has existed for six thousand years and that the seventh thousand will be the millennial kingdom, the Sabbath day of rest. Thus Jesus will come in 2000 and they expect to be reigning with him. Some have even booked trips to Jerusalem so they will be there to greet him.

As mentioned above, the so-called Y2K computer glitch has created considerable excitement, particularly among the evangelical survivalists, and such enterprising evangelical writers as Michael S. Hyatt and Shaunti Christine Feldhahn have turned a handsome profit alerting people to the dangers ahead.<sup>22</sup> In fact, religious right fear-mongers have exploited the computer problem for political as well as economic gain.<sup>23</sup>

## WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES THE MILLENNIAL IDEA HAVE FOR US?

In some respects the extremism of this madness overshadows the more holistic vision of the Christian faith that is inherent in the millennial vision. The biblical teaching of eschatology, involving a belief in history as directed toward the restoration of Israel, the kingdom of God, and the new earth, gives purpose to the great Christian doctrines of creation, the fall of humanity, the incarnation of Christ, and the mission of the church. There is a purpose behind the great events of the last days, toward which God is moving history, that makes them meaningful at the present time. We rejoice because we have hope that beyond the present age we shall be with Christ, and nothing shall ever separate us from him again.

We know that the agents of Satan and fleshly humans have opposed the gospel in all ages, but God's sure hand of judgment falls on these evildoers. A redemptive history seems to be finding fulfilment in the events of our times, but yet the final peace predicted in Revelation may not come as soon as we expect. We live in a dynamic age and must realize that despite all the upheaval and confusion in life, God is working out his purpose. There is a permanent, enduring dimension to life under God's control that will never pass away.

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<sup>20</sup> 20. Ibid., pp. 215–16, 220, 253–55.

<sup>21</sup> 21. *The Signature of God* (1996), *The Handwriting of God* (1997), *The Mysterious Bible Codes* (1998), all published by his own firm, Frontier Research Publications, Toronto.

<sup>22</sup> 22. Michael S. Hyatt, *The Millennium Bug* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1998), and *Y2K: The Day the World Shut Down* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998); Shaunti Christine Feldhahn, *Y2K: The Millennium Bug, A Balanced Christian Response* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> 23. Rob Boston, '2000: Apocalypse Now?' *Church & State* 52 (March 1999), pp. 56–60.

When the apocalyptic writers of the Bible proclaimed the kingdom's coming, they spoke of its nearness in time. Jesus had the same message of immediacy, but he also emphasized its urgency. The kingdom was not merely a future phenomenon but a dynamic force in the here and now. Thus Christians are called to struggle now for kingdom issues—social and economic justice, world peace, racial and ethnic equality, and stewardship of the environment. We pursue these goals with a certainty born of the conviction that the Christian hope leads somewhere—to the triumph of God. As people who have heard God's loving invitation to share in his victory, we long for the day when the shout will resound throughout the heavens and earth: 'Praise God! For the Lord, almighty is king!' It is this assurance that gives the millennial hope such power.

We look forward to a time when peace and justice will embrace, prevailing on earth as in heaven. The millennial vision reminds believers that no matter how discouraging the situation is today, kingdom glory waits us in the future. One day assuredly believers will rule the world with Christ. All that is broken will be repaired, and the entire earth and its population will be renewed. However, in the meantime we are to continue working faithfully at the tasks to which God has called us. As we enter the new millennium, let us continue to proclaim the good news and perform good works as we confidently await the Lord's promised and sure return.

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## **Ebb and Flow of Hope: Christian Theology at the End of the Second Millennium**

**John Macquarrie**

**Keywords:** Liberalism, revelation, existential, mythology, transcendentalism, anthropology, hope, immanence, church

The earliest endeavours in Christian theology are found in the New Testament, and since then it has developed and diversified in innumerable ways, yet has consciously sought to maintain continuity with its origins. The world of the New Testament was, of course, conceived in ways very different from the world as we conceive it almost two thousand years later. Theology cannot and indeed has not stood still through that long period, but has responded to social and cultural changes and particularly to intellectual changes, in philosophy, the sciences, the understanding of history. When the New Testament was composed, people were still thinking in prescientific and even