CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 61: A History of the Second Coming

A History of the Second Coming: Did You Know? - Hall of Infamy

Hall of Antichrists: Nine (of many) who were thought to be forbearers of the End

Nero (d. 68): "He will descend from his firmament in the form of a man, a king of iniquity, a murderer of his mother—this is the king of this world. ... He will act and speak like the Beloved, and will say, 'I am the Lord, and before me there was no one.' "

—Martyrdom of Isaiah (late first-century apocalyptic text)

Justinian (d. 565): "Many men have been born who ... have shown themselves terrible beings. But to destroy all men and to ruin the whole earth has been granted to none save ... Justinian, Prince of demons."

—Procopius, ***Secret History*** (late 6th-century)

Hitler (d. 1945):"I believe today that I am acting in the sense of the Almighty Creator. By warding off the Jews, I am fighting for the Lord's work."

—Adolf Hitler ***Mein Kampf***

Frederick II (d. 1250): "What other Antichrist should we await, when as is evident in his works, he is already come in the person of Frederick? He is the author of every crime, stained by every cruelty, and he has invaded the patrimony of Christ seeking to destroy it with Saracen aid."

—Pope Gregory IX

Napoleon (d. 1821): A friend of Samuel Johnson's " ... was always happy to cite evidence of [the French Revolution's] Antichrist-like character, culminating in Napoleon, whose name she believed meant 'the Destroyer.' "

—historian Bernard McGinn, ***Antichrist***

Reagan: "The beast recovers from a mortal wound, which, in the 1980s, caused quite a stir in evangelical circles when Ronald Wilson Reagan—each name having six letters—was shot and yet survived."

—Robert Fuller ***Naming the Antichrist***

Gorbachev:*Gorbachev! Has the Real Antichrist Come?*

—title of a 1988 book by Robert Faird

Luther (d. 1546): "He has rejected the sacraments, repudiated the expunging of sins through fasts, and

rejects the daily celebration of the Mass. ... Does this sound to you like Christ or Antichrist?"

—Pope Hadrian VI

John Paul II:"[This man] will be increasingly called upon to bring peace to a troubled world. His recovery from a deadly wound directed world attention and admiration to his personage, and he, like those before him, would seemingly like to establish authority over the Holy Hill of Zion."

—radio host Noah Hutchings

Resources:
Antichrist by Notre Dame historian Bernard McGinn covers all the major apocalyptic movements and beliefs from the New Testament to today, with special emphasis on the dark side of the world's end.

Naming the Antichrist by cultural historian Robert Fuller examines the subject in a more American context, and while McGinn usually maintains academic distance, Fuller doesn't

(chapter five, for example, on conservative campaigns against socialism, unions, and modernism, is titled "Crusades of Hate"). If you're looking for a scholarly book with an edge, this is it.

Links:
Walter Sundberg, professor of church history at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., reviewed McGinn's ***Antichrist*** in the June/ July 1995 issue of ***First Things***. It's a great review of a good book.

Procopius's Secret History is available online. His identification of Justinian as Antichrist is the first recorded instance of the

character's association with a Christian.

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A History of the Second Coming: From the Editor - Sliver in a Forest

Mark Galli

The kingdom of God is near." These are, according to the Gospel of Mark, the first words from Jesus' mouth as he begins his ministry. His last words to the church, revealed to John in a vision, are no less telling: "Yes, I am coming soon."

If we're wondering why so many Christians obsess about last things, we have Jesus to blame.

And obsessed we've been for 2,000 years. Eschatology (the study of last things) is not so much a slice of church history as it is—much like Jesus' ministry—***the*** theme.

Every era has been alternately haunted and electrified by the thought of Jesus' second coming, and with all manner of consequences, from passive resignation to apocalyptic warfare. But I'll refrain from spoiling the story as told in these pages.

About that story: it is only a sliver from the forest of stories that could be told. We've not only left out key chapters in Western history (for example, the millennial expectations during the English Civil War), but we've completely ignored non-Western millennial movements (like the bloody Taiping Rebellion in 1850s China, a violent movement by a Christian convert who believed he could usher in the Millennium).

Another thing about this story: the cast of characters rivals a Cecil B. DeMille film, and their opinions about last things vary wildly. Though most of Christendom has subscribed to amillennialism, and much of modern evangelicalism to premillennialism, you'll see enough variety to give each of us, no matter our eschatology, pause for thought. Jesus didn't know the hour or the day of the end. We know fewer things still.

But this we do know: to paraphrase Paul, if for this life only we have been saved, we are of all people most to be pitied. We live and strive to do God's will not simply to guarantee our own salvation—that would simply be spiritual selfishness—but in hope that all creation will be transformed into something more glorious.

We noted the last words of Jesus in the Book of Revelation, but we do well also to recall the last words of John, which are really the first and last words of the Christian church: "Come, Lord Jesus."

What do you think? It's been years since we've done an issue like this, in which we take one theme and gallop with it over 2,000 years of church history. The question is, what do you think? Would you like us to do overviews like this more often? If so, what topics would you like to see overviewed?

While we're seeking your input, let me turn your attention to the survey on page 46 (not available online). As our salute to the end of the century, we're thinking about producing an issue, "The Most Influential Christians of the Twentieth Century." What's ***your*** opinion?

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Historic Premillennialism: Taking the Long View

Most early Christian thinkers weren't troubled by the delay of Jesus' return. They were troubled by those who thought he was coming soon.

Dana Netherton

The days will come in which vines shall grow," imagined Papias of Hierapolis, "each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand clusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give two hundred gallons of wine. And when any of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, 'I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me.'" Papias (c.60-120) was perhaps the first post-biblical author to describe the thousand-year visible Kingdom of Christ—the Millennium.

The early Gnostic heretic Cerinthus (c.100) elaborated on the physical pleasures of the Millennium—including "nuptial" pleasures—to a degree that scandalized the orthodox.

Some early orthodox and heretical Christians found the tangible, sensual expectations of the Millennium irresistible. But as Christians gained more experience with these expectations, they found sufficient reason to be wary.

The first premillennialist

As years turned into decades, and decades into centuries, it became clear that, in spite of the hopes of some, the Millennium hadn't started with Jesus' resurrection. Although some modern scholars speculate this might have caused dismay, there is no evidence—either in internal exhortations or in answers to external critics—that it bothered anyone.

Christians routinely prayed that the end of the world be postponed. It appears that the delay was simply not an issue. Those who expected the Millennium were confident that it would come. The question was simply when.

As the years wore on, those who thought about the Millennium began to rethink the event that would initiate it. If the Resurrection had not started the Millennium, perhaps the Second Coming would.

Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165) shared Papias's millennial expectation. In his ***Dialogue with Trypho***, Justin affirmed his expectation that the faithful departed would rise from the dead and reign with Christ for a thousand years in a rebuilt Jerusalem. Still, he differed from Papias in two interesting ways.

First, Justin said openly that not all Christians shared his expectation: "I and many others are of this opinion, and believe that such will take place ... but, on the other hand, many who belong to the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise." Such tolerance was not given for other doctrines, such as the resurrection of the dead. "Some who are called Christians ... say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians" Second, Justin linked the beginning of the Millennium he expected not to Christ's resurrection, as Papias had done, but to Christ's "second advent." He believed faithful Christians would rise from the dead to live with Christ in the new Jerusalem. After the Millennium had been completed, the rest of

humanity would rise from the dead; then all would receive the Last Judgment. This seems to be the first post-scriptural writing that placed the Millennium after the Second Coming, thus clearly placing the present age before the Millennium. Justin appears to have been the first premillennialist.

Subsequent writers followed his lead. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-c. 200) is best known for his vigorous defense of Christianity against the Gnostics on such points as the bodily resurrection of the dead. In his book ***Against all Heresies***, Irenaeus followed his teacher Papias, maintaining that when the faithful departed are raised, they will reign with Christ for a thousand years of bliss. Jerusalem would be rebuilt, famine would be unknown, and animals would live in harmony with each other and with man. However, like Justin and unlike Papias, Irenaeus expected this to happen after the coming of the Antichrist and the second coming of Christ.

Calming the enthusiasts

Justin and Irenaeus spoke of the Millennium as a far-off event they hoped for someday. Its only importance to Christian living was as a reminder of the hope that should guide a Christian's life. But late in the 100s, some Christians began to see signs that the Millennium was imminent. The most worrisome of these were the Montanists.

Probably in 172, Montanus began to proclaim that Jerusalem would soon descend near Phrygia (west-central Asia Minor). Montanus and his female associates, Prisca and Maximilla, claimed the Millennium had begun and God had given them authority over the Christian church. To reject their pronouncements, they said, was to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit: Luke 12's "unforgivable sin." Montanus was eventually condemned by the church, though not for his eschatology.

In the early 200s, Hippolytus of Rome predicted that Christ would establish the Millennium in 496. He was one of the few early writers to predict the date of the Second Coming, but not for reasons we'd expect. Better known for his ***Apostolic Tradition***, which contains one of the earliest surviving texts of a prayer to consecrate the bread and cup during Communion, Hippolytus worked out this date in his ground breaking study of the book of Daniel—the earliest surviving Christian commentary on a single book of the Bible.

The question of the Second Coming was a lively one at the time. A few chapters before his date prediction, Hippolytus told of a foolish Syrian church leader who had led his people into the desert to await the Second Coming. Another leader, this time in Pontus (northern Asia Minor), had predicted that Christ would come again in a year's time. His people trusted him as they trusted Scripture itself, and when the year ended without the Second Coming, they were devastated. Many despaired of Scripture and of their religion: "The virgins got married; the men withdrew to their farms; and those who had recklessly sold all their possessions were eventually to be found begging."

Millennial expectations were gaining a bad name, so Hippolytus wanted to dampen expectations. He first worked out the date of Christ's birth: 5,500 years after the world was created. He then reckoned that the Millennium would begin 6,000 years after the creation of the world, so that the world would end after 7,000 years—a commonly-held view in those days. Clearly, then, Christ would return 500 years after his birth—and nearly three centuries after Hippolytus's book. Placing Christ's return so far in the future probably helped Hippolytus defuse the expectations of Christians who expected to see the Millennium soon.

Another attempt to dampen millennial expectations was made by the great thinker of the third-century church, Origen (c. 185-c. 254). Origen took delight in allegory and symbolism and felt no need to interpret Daniel or Revelation literally. Yes, the "best" Christians will be princes and rulers, but they will both rule over "the souls of lower condition" and also teach them about higher things, so that they can be fashioned into a "living stone" that can take its place in the spiritual Jerusalem to come.

Origen's allegorical approach also focused on actions performed by faithful souls, rather than on an unfolding millennial chronology. In this way, Origen could contrast the pagan submission to Fate against the Christian sense that one's choices made a difference. An increasing number of Christian thinkers would come to prefer this approach.

The "great Captain" arrives

When the Great Persecution broke upon the church in 303, there was speculation that the dreaded tribulation may have arrived, with the Emperor Diocletian as the first beast of Revelation 13, and his Caesar Galerius as the second beast.

Then Constantine won the empire in battle in 312 and immediately called a halt to the persecution. He promised to restore the church's property and offered to act as its sponsor and patron. The surviving Christians were ecstatic. "The Angel of the mighty council, the great Captain and Leader of the armies of God ... suddenly appeared," wrote Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-340) referring to Constantine.

In the face of such joyous circumstances, who needed to hope for a Millennium in the indefinite future? It was easy to conclude the Millennium had indeed arrived, and that Christ's second coming would occur at some date after the Millennium was complete—a postmillennial view.

Dana Netherton is a freelance writer with a Ph.D. in church history from the University of London.

Resources:
If you're interested in the early church, be sure to read the interesting and well-written The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded.

Links:
The works of the early church fathers can be found at Wheaton College's Christian Classics Ethereal Library or Evansville's Ecole Initiative.

A lengthy

treatment of the early church fathers' eschatology from a dispensationalist perspective, titled "Theology Adrift," is interesting reading.

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Amillennialism: Millennium Today

Augustine changed his mind—and that of the church in the West for the Next 1,500 years.

David Wright

One of the interesting things about Augustine of Hippo, the famous North African who converted in A.D. 386, is how and why he changed his views during his 45-year writing career as a Christian. Perhaps his most influential change is found in ***City of God***, Augustine's greatest work. Its massive length (about a thousand pages in modern translations) took him a dozen years to complete.

There, in book 22, Augustine sets out his mature understanding of the "thousand years" of Revelation 20:3-6. His new position—which is often called ***amillennial***—became the view of most Christians in the West, including the Reformers, for almost a millennium and a half.

Millennium now

Augustine had previously followed the view of most earlier Christians, which was known as ***chiliasm*** (from the Greek word for a thousand years). He translated this into Latin as ***millenarianism***.

Now, in ***City of God***, Augustine viewed the thousand years of Revelation 20 not as some special future time but "the period beginning with Christ's first coming," that is, the age of the Christian church. Throughout this age, the saints reign with Christ—not in the fullness of the coming kingdom prepared for those blessed by God the Father, but "in some other and far inferior way."

In fact, if God's people did not now reign with Christ, Augustine said, the church would not now be the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of heaven (though he does distinguish different meanings of ***kingdom*** in Scripture).

So what about the evil that people experience in Christ's kingdom? Augustine said, "The devil is bound throughout the whole period, from the first coming of Christ to the end of the world, which will be Christ's second coming." This does not mean the devil is incapable of enticing Christians away from Christ, but rather that "he is not permitted to exert his whole power of temptation, either by force or by guile to seduce people. ..."

Even when the devil is unloosed for "a little while" at the end of the church millennium, his assault will reveal not only the depth of "his malign power" but also the marvelous endurance of Christian people: "The Omnipotent will unloose him, so that the City of God may behold how powerful a foe it has overcome, to the immense glory of its Redeemer, its Helper, its Deliverer."

Augustine said the "first resurrection" of which John speaks is a spiritual resurrection, and it takes place throughout the church's history as the spiritually dead "hear the voice of the Son of God and pass from death to life." They continue hereafter "in this condition of new life." Those who have not come to new life in this era will, at the second resurrection, pass into the second death with their bodies.

Augustine never left a problem unsolved if he could help it. He took the thrones of Revelation 20:4 as "the seats of the authorities by whom the church is now governed." The judgment they exercise is what Jesus spoke of when he said, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."

This interpretation, coupled with his emphasis on the church as the kingdom, led to notions that Augustine could not have envisaged: in the Middle Ages, the church was viewed as the place where God's rule was exercised on earth through a papal monarch.

Heaven's the thing

This was a new way of understanding last things, and the question naturally arises: Why would Augustine abandon the dominant interpretation of Christians, many of whom he deeply respected?

First, Augustine owed a lot to a remarkable African Christian writer named Tyconius, who died around A. D. 400. We know too little about him, but enough to be sure that his writings shaped Augustine's beliefs.

Second, Augustine increasingly focused on the life of heaven, both now and hereafter. Earthly and historical realities were less and less important to him. True fulfillment lay beyond this world. The idea of a literal Millennium on earth after Christ's return was, to him, too crass.

Third, Augustine was wrestling with reactions to the sack of the "eternal city" of Rome by the Goths in 410. Too many Christians, in his view, had invested too much spiritual capital in the permanence of the Roman Empire—and hence had been distraught when the city fell. Augustine wanted to cut all secular history down to size. All that mattered was the story of the City of God.

Fourth, Augustine had come to see the whole period between the first coming of Christ and his second coming as a single era—uniform and uninterrupted by any special events initiating new eras in salvation-history. Thus, he showed remarkably little interest in "the Constantinian revolution."

Augustine believed God's purposes were always being fulfilled, the gospel was always advancing into "the nations at the four corners of the earth." The saints who had been spiritually raised to life were always reigning with Christ—and always suffering from demonic hostility.

The decisive historical events had happened at Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem, and these would reach fulfillment only when Christ came again. Christ's first coming had begun "the last times" of earthly history. The consummation lay beyond this world, when Christ will fully reign in the midst of his restored people, when the struggles and ambiguities of this age are past.

David Wright is professor of church history at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He is also an adviser for Christian History.

Resources: Both the 1985 and the 1958 translations of Augustine's ***City of God*** are still in print.

Broadman and Holman

recently published an excellent reader's guide to ***City of God*** for Christians.

Links:
City of God is also online at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Augustine's many other works are online, too, and there's a great Augustine home page. There are also loads of Augustine images online.

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Medieval Apocalypticism: Looking for the Last Emperor

The late Middle Ages was no tranquil era of religious harmony, but a hotbed of dissent and extreme speculation.

E. Randolph Daniel

Because anno Domini dating (setting the annual calendar from the birth of Christ) was still relatively new in A.D. 1000, historians doubt the year had much apocalyptic significance for medieval men and women. A Burgundian monk named Raoul Glaber spoke a few years later of "numerous signs and prodigies that had occurred before, after, and around the year 1000" and more around 1033 (the millennium of Christ's death and resurrection), but that's about the only evidence for first-millennium fever. That's not to say, however, that the turn of the first millennium was quiet, or that late medieval Christianity was little interested in end-times speculation. Quite the contrary.

Surrender at Golgotha

Around 950, a monk named Adso wrote the most complete treatise on the Antichrist to date. The Antichrist would come from the Jewish tribe of Dan, he argued, and would be raised in the East.

Before he could come, however, a Frankish king must reign. This king would triumph over all the enemies of Christendom and rule a peaceful, Christian world. He would then go to Golgotha to surrender his crown, and this would signal the coming of the Antichrist.

Adso's notion of "The Last World Emperor" became widespread, and soon became the ideal for temporal power. The ***Chanson de Roland***, written about 1095, depicted Charlemagne (d. 814) as a messianic ruler who triumphed over all Muslims and pagans. Count Emich of Leisingen, a leader of the First Crusade, massacred Jews who refused to convert because he was convinced God had summoned him to be a Last World Emperor. At the same time, tensions between national and church rulers were waxing, and kings and emperors used Adso's messianism in their defense.

A.D. 1183 Joachim of Fiore begins having apocalyptic visions.

Church corruption (greed, sexual license, and power grabbing) and the inability of ecclesiastic leaders to reform the church energized apocalypticism.

As a result, people like the German Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) predicted that lay princes would forcibly take away land and riches clergy had amassed, and Christendom would enter an era of millennial prosperity and peace. Though disarmament would entice pagans to attack Christian nations, she believed Christians would eventually win. Ultimately, the Roman emperor would lose almost all authority, and the pope would only rule Rome.

Christian Babylon

One of the more well-known proponents of church reform was Abbot Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202). Joachim constructed two schemes for understanding the past and the future. One divided history into two times, that of the Jews and that of the Gentiles, culminating after 1200. The other scheme divided history into three ***status***, paralleling the Trinity and the three orders (laity, clergy, and monks).

Joachim compared Christendom to Babylon because everyone wanted money, power, and worldly fame. Shortly after 1200, he speculated, two anti-Christian forces, possibly Muslims and heretics, would attack, defeat, and severely persecute Christians. Thus purified, a reforming pope and monastic orders would create a holier world in which people would attain unsurpassed understanding of the hidden meaning of the Scriptures. For an indeterminate period, Christians would dominate the world in peace.

The rivalry between the popes and the emperors culminated in the 1240s when Pope Innocent IV waged "total war"—a war of both swords and words—against emperor Frederick II.

Messianic Antichrist

Frederick's supporters hailed him as a messiah, wonder of the world (***stupor mundi***). But Innocent and his supporters branded Frederick the Antichrist. Even after the Holy Roman Emperor died in 1250, at least one Innocent supporter refused to believe it—the emperor had not accomplished all the evil that was expected of him as Antichrist. This conflict reverberated in apocalyptic texts well into the 1300s.

Furthermore, church reform continued to prove elusive. Even mendicants—Franciscan and Dominican orders who were founded as reform movements—were caught up in amassing wealth. Boniface VIII (c.1234-1303) was a canon lawyer who combined rampant nepotism with extreme claims for papal power. French pope Clement V (1264-1314) moved the Curia to Avignon, which upset everybody but the French, who dominated the papacy for the next 70 years.

A spate of texts interpreted these and other events apocalyptically. Benedictine monk Henry of Kirkstede, a librarian who collected prophetic texts from Hildegard, Joachim, and others, was perplexed. Authorities gave radically different meanings about the same events. The bubonic plague had swept across Europe between 1347 and 1350, killing perhaps 40 percent of the population.

The Great Schism in 1378 divided the church between popes in Avignon and Rome. Henry wondered if such events portended the coming of the Antichrist and the end of history, or the beginning of true church reform.

In either case, eschatological enthusiasm boiled, spilling over into the great literature of the day. Virgil told Dante in the first canto of the Divine Comedy that no one could ascend the hill past the beast until a hound came "who would eat wisdom, love, and virtue, not land and money." William Langland, the author of ***Piers Plowman***, envisioned a new David, whose reign would be marked by total peace, honesty, and justice. All weapons would be forcibly destroyed, and non-Christians would stand in awe of Christian goodness.

Scarcely a ruler ascended a throne without someone calling him a messiah. If English, he would seize the sword Excalibur and be a new Arthur. French kings would be Charlemagnes. German ones were all Fredericks.

But though the kings of England and France took control of the church, they didn't reform it as expected. Disappointment led to apocalyptic visions against the rulers. Jean de Roquetaillade, a pro-French Franciscan, wrote from prison that a true millennium would begin about 1370, when "popular justice" would overturn the corrupt social order. Itinerant English cleric John Ball preached Edenic equity, and prophesied that God was ready to overthrow inequality and private property. Peasants who joined Ball in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 were responding to such millennial dreams.

In another corner of Europe, the burning of Czech reformer Jan Hus led to widespread and apocalyptic rebellion. The most radical Hussites, called Taborites, seized a mountain and tried to begin a revolution in which both worldly ranks and private property would be abolished. Moderate Hussites eventually repressed the radicals, but similar rebels appeared in Germany in 1525 and radical millennialists took

over Münster in the 1530s.

700 years of millennial fever

Hope for Adso's "Last World Emperor" continued to the Reformation era. In 1494, French king Charles VIII led an army into Italy to take up French claims to the south. His appearance at Florence smashed the citizens' apocalyptic illusions that they were a match for the powerful kingdoms of the north.

Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola stepped into the spotlight, preached powerful sermons against wealth and luxuries, and predicted that the French army was only a prelude to the coming of a holy, pure, millennial world. Charles just might be the true Last World Emperor. When Charles was defeated, Savonarola was burned at the stake.

As the 1500s opened and the Renaissance spread, apocalypticism was still ubiquitous. University scholars eagerly collected new prophecies and commented anew on older ones. Churchmen dreamed of the long-awaited clerical reform. Townsmen and peasants sought social justice through millennial movements.

Only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the rise of the Enlightenment, were church authorities, both Protestant and Catholic, able to push underground the apocalyptic enthusiasm that had so characterized European Christianity for seven centuries.

Randolph Daniel is professor of history at the University of Kentucky and editor of Joachim of Fiore's* Liber De Concordia Novi Ac Veteris Testament *(American Philosophical Society, 1983).

Resources:
Liber De Concordia Novi Ac Veteris Testament is available through Amazon.com.

Bernard McGinn, who specializes in medieval apocalypticism, recently published Visions of the End. It's a necessary volume for any study on the subject, not only for his comments, but for its translations of primary

source documents.

Links:
The Fourth Lateran Council's condemnation of Joachim is available online.

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Columbus's Millennial Voyage

The famous explorer was driven across the Atlantic by more than a quest for gold and glory.

What could Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) have to do with a study of millennialism? When we think of the great explorer, we remember him for anything but eschatology. His Spanish royal sponsors, Ferdinand and Isabella, were indeed stirred by the prospect of wealth beyond their dreams. So was Columbus. But all three had something else on their minds.

Ferdinand and Isabella combined political ambition with spiritual desire, nurturing the hope of a final crusade to liberate Jerusalem. Deterred by a lack of funds, they were attracted by Columbus's proposal that finding a shorter route to the fabled wealth of the East would give them up front financing against the infidel—and prepare for Christ's coming at Jerusalem.

Columbus had another reason to undertake this journey. He held a millennialist faith derived from an assiduous study of Scripture and a familiarity with the eschatology of Joachim of Fiore. If there were a shortcut to the East by sea, missionaries could be sent there faster. Thus Christians could meet the provision for world evangelization before the Lord could return. Like John the Baptist at the first coming, he had helped prepare the way for the second.

"God made me the messenger of the New Heaven and the New Earth," he wrote.

The conviction grew with the years, especially after his famous voyage. Columbus devoted himself to gathering what he called the ***Book of Prophecies***. More than a collection of biblical and classical predictions of the end and the return of Christ, this volume showed how Columbus believed his explorations had served a divine plan. He quoted ancient writers like Augustine and Stoic philosopher Seneca to show how the discovery of the Western islands had been the foretold prelude to God's final victory. He drew on Old Testament references to islands as support for his conviction that his voyages had been part of God's strategy.

Like others, Columbus believed the world would come to its terminus 7,000 years after the creation. The world was thought to be 5,343 years, 318 days old when Jesus was born. Since then, another 1501 years had gone by, leaving only 155. By that reckoning, the end would be the year 1656. Clearly there was no time for the believers to waste. Jesus had promised that all prophecies would be fulfilled before the end, and his followers should dedicate themselves to accomplishing their part in that fulfillment.

One requirement of the Lord's return was preaching the gospel "in all the world." Such a task was now possible because Columbus had shown Christians how they could finally reach the entire globe. Another was recovering the Holy Land for Christ, so that all the world's peoples could be gathered at Zion to witness the Lord's return.

Reginald Stackhouse is principal emeritus and research professor at University of Toronto's Wycliffe College. This article is adapted from his book* The End of the World? *(Paulist Press, 1997). Used by permission.

Resources:

This article is adapted from Stackhouse's The End of the World?

Christian History has published an entire issue on Christopher Columbus, available for purchase in our back issues area.

Links:
For a scholarly treatment of Columbus's eschatology, check out "Wallowing in a Theological Stupor or a Steadfast and Consuming Faith: Scholarly Encounters with Columbus' 'Libro de las profecias'"

The Library of Congress created an online Columbus exhibit, 1492: An Ongoing Voyage, for the voyage's quincentenary.

Other Columbus sites abound

on the web.

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Reformation Amillennialism: Salvation Now, Salvation Forever

Luther and Calvin challenged the Catholic church on many key teachings—but not on the doctrine of last things.

John R. Franke

Though radical apocalyptic movements arose in the late Middle Ages, they were rare exceptions. Since Augustine, most theologians believed the Millennium of Revelation 20 referred to the present age of the church. The focal point of eschatology was not the consummation of history but the future status of individuals before God.

Beginning with Martin Luther's 95 Theses, the major Reformers challenged many medieval church doctrines, but with eschatology, they seemed mostly satisfied with this traditional emphasis and teaching.

Hidden future

Martin Luther taught that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. Thus individual salvation is a present reality.

However, Christians will continue to struggle with a contradiction: "We do not wait for forgiveness and all graces as though we would not receive them until the life to come; rather, they are now present for us in faith—even though they are hidden and will be revealed only in the life to come." To be a Christian involves living out the tension between the already and the not yet.

A.D. 1520 Martin Luther intensifies his attacks on the papacy, calling it the Antichrist.

"In the life to come, we shall no more have need of faith," he wrote. "For then we shall not see dark through a glass (as we do now) but we shall see face to face." For Luther this hope is a fundamental and indispensable component of the Christian life.

Luther applies this individual eschatology also to the church. Like the medieval church before him, Luther rejected a future millennial reign and interpreted Revelation 20 as a description of the historical church rather than the end of history. In the present age, the church must continue to endure the hostility of both the world and Satan until the lordship of Christ is made clear at the end.

Still, Luther departed from aspects of medieval amillennialism. While Catholic theologians emphasized the glory of the historical church, Luther didn't: "It is not possible that there should be greater falsehood, more heinous error, more dreadful blindness, and more obdurate blasphemy than have ruled in the church."

In fact, Luther believed the Anti-christ had emerged within the church through the office of the papacy: "The pope is the real Anti-christ who has raised himself over and set himself against Christ, for the pope will not permit Christians to be saved except by his own power. ... This is actually what St. Paul calls exalting oneself over and against God."

Consequently, as there is a hidden side to individual salvation, there is also a hidden side to the church, a side that will be revealed at the end of the age. In fact, the corruption of the church and presence of

the Antichrist within it emboldened Luther. He believed it signaled the nearness of the end: "The pomp of the papacy is falling away and the world is cracking on all sides almost as if it would break and fall apart entirely."

Unlike those in the medieval church who tended to fear the Lord's coming as a day of wrath, Luther desired it. He called it "the most happy Last Day" in which God's glorious intentions for both individual human beings and all of creation will be realized: "God has reserved unto the last day the displaying of his greatness and majesty, his glory and effulgence."

For Luther, both individuals and the church will be transformed from their sorrowful and wretched condition into their final form by God. But as to the precise nature of this renewed existence, Luther is reported to have said: "We know no more about eternal life than children in the womb of their mother know about the world they are about to enter."

Don't limit Christ

Like Luther, John Calvin rejected the position of millennialists: "Their fiction is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation. And the Apocalypse [Revelation], from which they undoubtedly drew pretext for their error, does not support them. For the number 'one thousand' [Rev. 20:4] does not apply to the eternal blessedness of the church but only to the various disturbances that awaited the church while toiling on earth."

Calvin believed the idea of the Millennium imposes a limit on the reign of Christ. Those who "assign the children of God a thousand years in which to enjoy the inheritance of the life to come do not realize how much reproach they are casting upon Christ and his kingdom. For if they do not put on immortality, then Christ himself, to whose glory they shall be transformed, has not been received into undying glory."

For the most part, Calvin's eschatology also focused on the future of individuals. For example, in his ***Institutes of the Christian Religion***, he discusses the "final resurrection" in the context of a larger section on how individuals receive the grace of Christ. He did this, he said, "that my readers may learn, when they have received Christ, the Author of perfect salvation, to rise up higher, and may know that he is clothed in heavenly immortality and glory so that the whole body may be conformed to the Head." Thus, those who have received Christ in the present age will share in his life in the age to come.

Calvin admitted it is "difficult to believe that bodies, when consumed with rottenness, will at length be raised up in their season." But Calvin points his readers to Scripture, which he argued provides two helps. In it we look to the example of Christ, "who so completed the course of the mortal life that now, having obtained immortality, he is the pledge of our coming resurrection"; and to the power of God: "No one is truly persuaded of the coming resurrection unless he is seized with wonder, and ascribes to the power of God its due glory."

Practical eschatology

For Calvin, eschatology had practical significance. Indeed, he regarded meditation on the future life as an essential element of the Christian life. In the midst of all life's difficulties, Calvin reminded his readers, "We must ever look to this end: to accustom ourselves to contempt for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life."

In this life, God permits his people to be "troubled and plagued either with wars or tumults, or robberies, or other injuries" and sets before them "how unstable and fleeting are all the goods that are subject to mortality."Only then, he argues, will we be prepared to properly contemplate life in the age to come. Such contemplation transforms us and helps God's people live according to the teachings of Christ —as strangers and pilgrims on earth who seek the joy and peace of God's future Kingdom. In turn,

contemplation of the Kingdom provides comfort in the midst of the trials, which must be endured for the sake of the Gospel.

Concerning the exact nature of future life, Calvin, like Luther, exercised caution and restraint, attempting not to exceed the statements of Scripture: "Though we very truly hear that the Kingdom of God will be filled with splendor, joy, happiness, and glory, yet when these things are spoken of, they remain utterly remote from our perception, and, as it were, wrapped in obscurities, until that day comes when he will reveal to us his glory, that we may behold it face to face."

John Franke is professor of historical and systematic theology at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania. He is editor of* Old Testament (vol. 4) *in the forthcoming* Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture *(InterVarsity).

Resources:
John Franke will be editing the forthcoming volume 4 in Intervarsity Press's Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture.

Links:
Calvin's Institutes are available several places online, including Wheaton College's Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

An article in the University of Virginia's ***Essays in History***, "Luther and English Apocalypticism," examines both the reformer's view of the apocalypse and his role in later

interpretations of apocalyptic writing.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Reformation Apocalypticism: Münster's Monster

What began as prophetic fervor ended in dictatorship and blood.

Robert L. Wise

The year is 1530. Protestant thought sweeps like a tornado across a European terrain that has altered little for a thousand years. Caught in the storm, the influential town of Strasbourg (now in France) is gripped by the same fears rampaging through Germany and the Netherlands. The stage is set for revolution. Melchoir Hoffman, a furrier, mounts the pulpit to preach another of his fiery apocalyptic sermons. The New Revelation is about to be unleashed.

Earlier that year, the popular preacher had spontaneously started rebaptizing adults. His independent thinking had gone far beyond anything Martin Luther envisioned, but it quickly gathered a large following in the low countries.

While historians have difficulty pinpointing the origins of the Anabaptist movement because of its simultaneous emergence in several places, most agree Melchoir Hoffman's preaching was the most significant factor in launching the radical wing of the Reformation. His emphasis on a literal millennial reign of Jesus Christ on earth gripped the imagination of the Anabaptist movement.

Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglican Reformers rejected millennialism as "ignorant" and "malicious" speculation. The Thirty Nine Articles, the Augsburg Confession, and the Westminster Confession avoided any notion of a literal, thousand-year reign of Christ. However, such was not the case in Strasbourg, where Hoffman's imagination had been taken captive by Revelation's twentieth chapter and the expectation of a literal, imminent coming of the physical Kingdom of God.

A.D. 1530 Anabaptist Melchoir Hoffman begins preaching the immanent return of Christ.

With all the fire and fury of a frontier revival preacher, Hoffman proclaimed his inspired images and visions. The congregation already knew ***an*** age was ending; he convinced them ***The*** End was at hand. Hoffman's personal charismatic aura made him an indomitable force. The apex of his innovative claims was that God had chosen Strasbourg as the "New Jerusalem."

After three years of apocalyptic messages pouring forth weekly from Hoffman's church, local authorities had enough. Perceiving him a social threat even though he never advocated violence in establishing the new order, they imprisoned Hoffman. The town jail could hold the man, but not his ideas. Melchiorites were springing up everywhere.

The New Revelation soon echoed down the Dutch streets of Haarlem and found a welcome in the bakery of Jan Matthys. Matthys was undistinguished by training, but Luther had taught that with Scripture alone, his conscience and insights were as good as anyone's. Having digested Hoffman's sermons, the baker believed himself to be supremely qualified to preach. Perceiving himself to be especially endowed with the Holy Spirit, he was now the heir to all Melchoir Hoffman promised.

Matthys proclaimed he was none other than Enoch, the second witness of the Book of Revelation. With a flowing black beard, the tall, gaunt figure was now the bearer of prophetic authority. Doubters were confronted with threats and intimidation. Those failing to embrace the second Enoch would be cast

into hell with the devil and his angels. The baker knew how to turn up the heat.

Matthys's band of followers fanned out in pairs across the low countries, just as Christ dispatched his disciples. Two of them, Jan van Leyden and Gerard Boekbinder, went to Münster, Germany. There they discovered the town's leading preacher, Bernhard Rothman, preaching similar Anabaptist ideas (like re-baptism) to large crowds.

Hearing this report, Matthys abruptly had a new vision. Hoffman's eschatological dreams for Strasbourg had not been quite on target. Münster was to be the true site of the New Jerusalem. The baker and his brood migrated south, sealing Münster's tragic destiny.

By February 1534, influence of the newly arrived Anabaptists permeated the town. Guild leader Bernard Knipperdolling joined Jan van Leyden in street preaching, screaming for citizens to repent. Waves of hysteria followed: people fell in the streets, some foaming at the mouth. Claims of sensational "end-time" visions gripped the populace.

The message of Matthys's minions was clear: while destruction descended on the rest of the world, Anabaptists would survive behind the walls of Münster, the "city of refuge."

Migration began immediately in both directions. Münster's Lutheran population started to flee. Control of the city shifted into the hands of the visionary from Haarlem.

Matthys mounted a makeshift pulpit near a fish market to proclaim the next inspired installment of the New Revelation: for Münster to be prepared for its role in divine history, it must be thoroughly purified. If the reign of Christ was to begin, spiritual corruption from Roman Catholics and Lutherans (and all others failing to embrace Anabaptist doctrine) must be purged from the city. Dissenters should be executed.

Knipperdolling objected to violence on the grounds that bloodshed would invite the wrath and intervention of outside groups. While his warning was to prove genuinely prophetic, he proposed a compromise that the opposition only be expelled. Matthys reluctantly agreed with the caveat that any of Münster's remaining ungodly citizens must be re-baptized. As violence began to seize the city, baptisms continued nonstop for the next three days.

The Final Battle Begins

Meanwhile, Franz van Waldeck, the Roman Catholic bishop of Münster, prepared a barricade outside the city and started the siege.

Although the Anabaptists were confused by the attack, none other than the previously cautious Knipperdolling assured the town's citizens they would prevail. He then began preparing the Münsterites to defend themselves.

Matthys used the opportunity to consolidate his power. Insisting he had a divine mandate, Matthys seized the goods of the recent exiles. Furniture, clothing, food, and personal effects were consolidated and distributed to the Anabaptist faithful by seven deacons.

Matthys and the town preachers next demanded that all property be held in common. "It is completely God's will that we bring money, silver, and gold together," preached Rothman. "One person should have just as much as another." The New Jerusalem required institutionalized communism.

Opposition was significant, particularly among those recently re-baptized. But the reluctant were quickly assembled, told to relinquish their money or die, and locked inside a church. Hours later Matthys and his

armed men explained that compliance was the only means of reentry into the community. The captives had no realistic alternative but acquiescence.

Matthys also pronounced an unconvinced blacksmith as possessed by the devil and threw him into the town's tower prison. Assembling the citizenry, the preacher publicly denounced the blacksmith for defiling a pure town and sentenced him to death. The blacksmith was lined up against the town wall. Matthys himself shot the man in the stomach before exhorting the assembled crowd. A hymn was sung, and everyone went home to meditate on any possible error in their ways.

Matthys now had the city in his grasp, controlling even the flow of information. All books except the Scriptures were burned in the cathedral square. Then Matthys reported a divine directive to take a few men and assault the bishop's positions outside the city. He assured his followers that God had endowed him with special powers of such magnitude that he could even catch the enemy's cannon balls in the pockets of his cloak. The baker and his boys marched out to dispatch the bishop just as he had the blacksmith.

On Easter Sunday 1534, Matthys descended on Bishop Waldeck like one of the apocalyptic four horsemen but the ride was short. The bishop's armed guards came to his defense. Matthys was stabbed with a pike, then decapitated. His head was hoisted on a pole for the citizens lining the city walls to observe.

Obbe Philips, a follower of Hoffman who rejected Matthys's violence, wrote of Matthys, "He was so violent that even his enemies ❱ were terrified of him, and finally in a tumult, they became too powerful for him, they were so incensed that they did not just kill him ❱ but hacked and chopped him into little pieces."

The faithful remnant was undeterred. Jan van Leyden picked up the mantle, anointed himself king, and began his messianic reign by running naked through Münster in wild religious ecstasy. He appointed 12 men in charge of the affairs of the city, instigating a reign of terror and wild innovations including polygamy. He indulged himself in excesses while subjecting the citizens to austerity. The new millennial kingdom was to be short lived.

The Weight of History

On May 25, 1535, the bishop's army broke into Münster and quickly captured the city. Killing lasted for two days. When the bodies were finally piled in the cathedral square, the stench was overwhelming. Bernhard Rothman probably perished in the assault, and van Leyden and Knipperdolling were captured, tortured and put to death. The hopes for a New Jerusalem ended in a debacle. Lutheran and Calvinist pessimism about human attempts to establish a Kingdom of God was reinforced. Even today they generally continue their suspicion of all forms of both pre- and postmillennialism. The events in Münster had simply been too monstrous.

Robert Wise, missionary bishop for The Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches, has written more than 20 books, including a series of apocalyptic novels.

Resources: Wise coauthored a series of apocalyptic novels with Paul Meier: The Third

Millennium, The Fourth Millennium, Beyond the Millennium, and, most recently, The Secret Code.

Links:
So how did Anabaptism come from its violent Münsterite reputation to its modern pacifism? ***Christianity Today***'s "The Mennonites' Dirty Little Secret" answers the question.

Read about Anabaptist history from an Anabaptist perspective at Anabaptists.org.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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American Postmillennialism: Seeing the Glory

American Christians like Jonathan Edwards were optimistic about the end.

Steven R. Pointer

During most of the nineteenth century, American Protestants believed they were living in special times, that current events were hastening the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. Hymns like the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" became popular because they so well expressed this hope: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, / He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored / He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword, / His truth is marching on."

Undergirding this optimism was the doctrine of postmillennialism—the belief that the Second Coming will take place after the millennium of blissful peace and prosperity for the church, which will be ushered in by the divinely aided efforts of the church.

It comes as a surprise to many that for most of the nineteenth century, postmillennialism was "the commonly received doctrine" among American Protestants, as one minister put it in 1859. Postmillennialism dominated the religious press, the leading seminaries, and most of the Protestant clergy, and it was ingrained in the popular mind.

Pace-setting Puritan

Postmillennialism was first clearly articulated in America by a man many consider the greatest theologian in American history, New England Congregational pastor Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758).

A.D. 1739 Jonathan Edwards preaches a sermon series later published as *A History of the Work of Redemption.*

Edwards was a devoted student of Scripture, including the Book of Revelation. He also entertained fervent hopes that God might do something special among the people of New England. He was circumspect when revival broke out in his own congregation in the 1730s, but when all of New England was convulsed by spiritual awakening in the early 1740s, he could not hold back: " 'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture. ... And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America."

After the Great Awakening, Edwards became more cautious and dated the Millennium (a term he used rarely) somewhere around the year 2000. He believed, with many others, that this date would mark the beginning of the seventh and final millennium of world history. In the interim, much remained to be done: the fall of Satan's kingdoms (that is, the papacy and the Ottoman Turkish empire), the conversion of the Jews, and the spread of true Christianity "through the vast regions of the earth."

Edwards envisioned the Millennium as the church's "triumphant state," a time of Sabbath rest and peace. He expected it to be a time of great advance in knowledge "when neither divine nor human learning shall be confined and imprisoned within only two or three nations of Europe, but shall be diffused all over the world." He looked forward to a time of great holiness when "visible wickedness shall be suppressed everywhere, and true holiness shall become general, though not universal," and a time of great prosperity. He regarded Constantine's era a type of the greater reality to come, so he also

expected the Millennium to be a time when true religion would be held in great esteem and saints would rule on all fronts.

How will this all come to be? Here was Edwards's greatest contribution: "This is a work that will be accomplished by means, by the preaching of the gospel, and the use of the ordinary means of grace, and so shall be gradually brought to pass." Yet Edwards also expected that God's Spirit "shall be gloriously poured out for the wonderful revival and propagation of religion."

The combination of the "extraordinary" blessing of the Spirit and the "ordinary means of grace" entrusted to the church convinced him that "this great work of God will be gradually wrought, though very swiftly, yet gradually."

Furthermore, he was adamant that this postmillennial vision was a necessary incentive to sustain the best efforts of the church: "Indeed, the keeping alive such hopes in the church has a tendency to enliven all piety and religion in the general amongst God's people, that it should be carried on with greater earnestness and cheerfulness and faith."

After the American Revolution, in the 1790s, there was a renewed interest in biblical eschatology. Jonathan Edwards's 1739 sermon series, published posthumously in 1774 as ***A History of the Work of Redemption***, was reissued in the 1790s and many times thereafter. Through the nineteenth century, Edwards's work had enormous influence on popular culture, and among theologians it set the terms for discussions.

For example, Samuel Hopkins was an Edwards disciple and Congregational minister in Newport, Rhode Island, who produced his own ***Treatise on the Millennium*** in 1793. Hopkins's views anticipated tendencies that would flower in the next century.

First, he was compelled to a social activism unknown to Edwards. Since Newport was at the center of the triangular trade, involving the exchange of rum for African slaves, Hopkins launched a crusade against the trade, advocated complete emancipation, ministered to more blacks than any other New England minister, and predicted God's judgment on the nation as long as it denied freedom to Africans.

Second, Hopkins believed that ultimately the vast majority of human beings would be saved, with the saved outnumbering the unsaved 1,000:1.

Even as Hopkins speculated about ratios, revival surged again. This wave—the Second Great Awakening in the first half of the nineteenth century—swelled the tide of millennial anticipation. So numerous and regular were the awakenings that it raised the possibility of a "perpetual revival of religion—a revival without a consequent decline."

By studying the laws underlying that spiritual renaissance, people could use—indeed, God expected them to use—means that could produce revivals at will. Similarly, the Millennium would not come without the systematic labors of the saints. On both fronts, then, evangelicals emphasized that God worked through means.

No one articulated this theme better than revivalist Charles Finney (1792-1875). Passionately committed to promoting revival after his own dramatic conversion in 1821, his postmillennial views induced maximum evangelical exertion, as well as repentance and belief.

He did not believe, for instance, that revivals were the result of miracles but "the right use of appropriate means." Thus he instituted "new measures," new techniques for instigating revivals: the anxious bench (where sinners were singled out for exhortation), informal public praying, and protracted meetings.

Never one to mince words, Finney allegedly asserted that "if the church will do her duty, the Millennium may come in this country in three years." This led in the years before the Civil War to unprecedented evangelical social and religious reform: temperance, antislavery, peace, women's rights, education, as well as dramatic expansion in home and foreign mission work.

All of this would be jeopardized, Finney believed, if Christians succumbed to a belief in premillennialism. Thus when William Miller began to stir up excitement about an imminent return of Christ in the early 1840s, Finney thought the movement "wild and irrational," and he confronted the fervent adventist face-to-face, trying to set him straight about the Book of Daniel.

As it turned out, Miller's failed crusade only accelerated acceptance of the postmillennial faith in an America that was increasingly optimistic about its future. Pastor Lyman Beecher believed "the Millennium would commence in America."

The editors of ***The Independent*** exulted in 1851 that "a grand feature of our times is that all is Progress." Christianity and culture seemed to be marching together "onward and upward" toward the "grand consummation of prophecy."

The revival of 1858 quickened such hopes, such that Joseph Berg, Dutch Reformed pastor in Philadelphia, could exclaim: "Who does not see that, with the termination of injustice and oppression, ... with the establishment of righteousness in every statute book ... with art and science sanctified by the truth of God, and holiness to the Lord graven upon the walls of our high places, and the whole earth drinking in the rain of righteousness ... oh! This is the reign of Jesus."

Bursting the balloon

The American Civil War was the first event to burst the postmillennial balloon for many believers, both in the North and South. Over the next few decades, immigration, urbanization, and industrialization created new, complex, and seemingly intractable problems for the nation—and for postmillennialists. The world was simply not getting better. The last vestiges of postmillennialism merged with the social gospel movement, which jettisoned notions of a transcendent Second Coming but still called for "conversion of the industrial, commercial, political, educational, and social interests of the world to Christ."

The twentieth century has not been any kinder to postmillennialism. It has seemed increasingly implausible because events have stubbornly refused to conform to its inherent hope about the future. Still a remnant remains—mostly in the Reformed camp or its Reconstructionist/theonomist variant—though their postmillennialism has been sustained in spite of experience, not because of it.

Steven Pointer is professor of history at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, and author of **Joseph Clark: Boston Lecturer and Evangelical Apologist** ***(Mellen, 1991).***

Resources:
Steven Pointer is the author of Joseph Cook, Boston Lecturer and Evangelical Apologist: A Bridge Between Popular Culture and Academia

in Late Nineteenth-Century America

Links:
Contrary to what you may have heard, there are still postmillennialists around. Here's one postmillennialist site.

Jonathan Edwards's works are available at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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American Adventism: The Great Disappointment

When a New York farmer announced the date of Christ's return, thousands believed him.

Bruce Shelley

In recent years, we have almost come to expect the well-publicized reports from Bible-belt Texas and avant-garde California of a self-proclaimed prophet announcing the end of the world. He attracts a large following or triggers a near panic—and ends up wrong. The most famous case on American soil, however, took place in the northeastern United States just before the Civil War.

The prophet of doom was no bug-eyed fanatic. He was a square-jawed, honest, church-going farmer named William Miller.

A former captain in the War of 1812, Miller converted from Deism in 1816. Excited, he began to "search the Scriptures" for the truth. After two years he was convinced he understood them—especially Daniel 8:14: "Unto 2,300 days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed."

The cleansing of the sanctuary, Miller believed, could only mean the purging of the earth by fire—in short, the end of the world.

By interpreting these prophetic days as years and beginning from the date of the prophecy (placed by James Ussher at 457 b.c.), Miller concluded that the end of the 2,300 "days" would fall in 1843: "I was thus brought to the solemn conclusion that in about 25 years from that time all the affairs of our present state would be wound up."

The millennial frontier

Miller had grown up in Low Hampton, New York, near the Vermont border. He married in 1803 and moved to Poultney, Vermont, where he farmed and served as a sheriff and justice of the peace.

The area, filled with homesteading farmers, was on one of the main routes from New England to the Midwest. From the settled towns of the East, thousands of adventuresome Yankees were streaming toward the new lands beyond the horizon.

A.D. 1843 William Miller predicts the Second Coming within the year.

Optimism filled the air. One anthem in the 1840s announced, "We are living, we are dwelling / In a grand and awful time / In an age on ages telling. / To be living is sublime."

Millennial dreams flourished throughout the region. At Oneida, New York, a strange perfectionist named John Humphrey Noyes founded a community on the assumption that the Second Coming had taken place in A.D. 70 and the arrival of the kingdom hinged on the willingness of believers to live out the demands of Christian love in community.

Another New Yorker named Joseph Smith believed that God had restored the true gospel to him in anticipation of the Second Coming. This grand event, he said, would be preceded by intense persecution and tribulation for his followers, "the latter-day saints."

Neither of these prophets, however, rallied so many people in so short a time as did Miller when he went public with his precise calculation of Christ's second coming.

Marketing Miller

At first he was reluctant to reveal his secret. But in 1828, he felt an inward "call" to tell the world of his discovery. "I tried to excuse myself," he later wrote, "I told the Lord that I was not used to speaking ... that I was slow of speech and slow of tongue. But I could get no relief."

By 1831 he found the courage to share his discovery with neighbors and friends. When asked to discuss his views in a nearby church, he suddenly discovered that on this one subject he could be eloquent.

Invitations multiplied, and Miller gained a bit of local notoriety. Though never ordained, his status was regularized in 1833 with a license to preach.

Then two events combined to give Miller a much larger audience. First, in 1838 he published his ***Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843***. Next, he made an excursion to the large cities in New England for a series of lectures. At Exeter, New Hampshire, he met Joshua V. Himes, pastor of the Chardon Street Baptist Chapel in Boston. Himes loved crowds, especially camp meetings, and he sensed immediately the power in the message of the quiet, middle-aged farmer. So he eagerly joined Miller as his manager and publicity agent.

Himes equipped Miller with a great chart displaying the millennial calculations in graphic form, purchased the biggest tent in the country for his meetings, and edited two journals—New York's ***Midnight Cry*** and Boston's ***Signs of the Times***.

Miller the man was transformed overnight into the Millerite Movement. Himes and his associates recruited other evangelists and sent them on speaking tours; organized camp meetings; and published tracts, books, and pamphlets.

As the dreaded year approached, Miller's preaching drew larger crowds. In six months, he delivered more than 300 lectures with the constant theme: Are you ready to meet your Savior?

Mobs of angry citizens tried to break up some of the meetings. Miller himself was pelted with eggs and decaying vegetables. But the crowds grew larger and the number of converts mounted. More than 50,000 believed Miller, and as many as a million others were curious and expectant.

Setting a date

With excitement rising, people began to demand a definite day for the Lord's appearance. Miller was reluctant to be more specific, but in January 1843, he announced that this Hebrew year—March 21, 1843, to March 21, 1844—must see the end of time. But, he pleaded, if the estimate should prove slightly inaccurate, his followers should have faith that their deliverance would come soon, in God's appointed time.

As the year progressed, tension mounted, especially when a comet suddenly appeared in the heavens. There were huge meetings in New York and Philadelphia, but dates for future gatherings were announced with the proviso "if time continues."

Miller was ill through most of 1843, and his lieutenants, many far less cautious than the old soldier, carried on the fight. Their radicalism added to the weary prophet's pain.

The opening days of 1844 found Miller, then 62, at home resting from a strenuous speaking tour—85 lectures in eight weeks. But he believed firmly that the end was near. Aware of the scoffers, he thought it time to write" to second advent believers" a few words of encouragement:

"We have passed what the world calls the last round of 1843. ... Does your heart begin to quail? Or are you waiting for your blessed hope in the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ? Let me say to you in the language of the blessed Book of God, 'Although it tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not tarry.' Never has my faith been stronger than at this very moment."

Then March 21, 1844, came—and nothing happened. After a month, Miller confessed his error and acknowledged his disappointment. But one of his followers pointed to other verses (Hab. 2:3, Lev. 25:9) and explained there must be a "tarrying time" of seven months and ten days.

So October 22, 1844, became the new day of Christ's return, and people were rallied again with the slogan: "The Tenth Day of the Seventh Month." Miller was finally converted to the new date. "I see a glory in the seventh month," he said. "Thank the Lord, O my soul! ... I am almost home." The excitement revived, and the number living on the edge of eternity seemed to be greater than ever.

When the second date came and went, just as the first one, most of Miller's followers were completely disillusioned. Many became bitter toward Miller, who lived until 1849, and died a discredited, almost forgotten man.

After the disappointment

In spite of the "great disappointment," as it came to be called, some adventists remained steadfast. One small group in New England was persuaded that Miller was right on the time of the "purging" but wrong on the place. On October 22, 1844, Christ did purge the sanctuary according to Daniel's prophecy—but the sanctuary was in heaven, not on earth. Christ's failure to appear on earth was due to the church's failure to observe the Sabbath. This tiny group led by James White and his wife, Ellen Gould White, became the Seventh-Day Adventist Church we know today.

Other adventists met in Albany in 1845 to form a conference that later splintered into three groups. One of these is today called Second Advent Christians. They believe Miller was wrong on the time, but this was a minor matter. He was right on the essential: Christ is coming soon.

And on that truth, at least, many other Christians still agree.

Bruce Shelley is senior professor of church history at Denver Seminary, author of* Church History in Plain Language *(Word), and a* Christian History *adviser.

Resources:
Bruce Shelley is the author of Church History in Plain Language.

Links:

Adventist Heritage Ministry runs a site about William Miller, his family, his farm, and his beliefs. There's also a mineral called millerite, but it has nothing to do with the millennial movement.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Dispensational Premillennialism: The Dispensationalist Era

How a once-mocked idea began its domination of the evangelical world.

Timothy Weber

Belief in Christ's personal return to set up his earthly kingdom—premillennialism—has always claimed adherents, but few people in the mid-1800s imagined it would attract more than a handful.

Yet by 1875 a new kind of premillennialism called ***dispensationalism*** began to spread. Given the embarrassing recent history of premillennialism in the United States (see the story of the Millerites, page 31), its revival was nothing less than amazing.

The new premillennialism came to the United States following the Civil War, after flourishing in Britain among the Plymouth Brethren. One of the Brethren's most gifted teachers was John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), a former priest in the Anglican Church of Ireland, who developed a new variety of futurist premillennialism. He called it ***dispensationalism***, after the division of history into dispensations or eras.

"These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God's method of dealing with mankind, in respect to two questions: of sin, and of man's responsibility," explained C. I. Scofield, who popularized Darby's system in America. "Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure in every dispensation."

Dispensationalists quibbled over the number and names of the dispensations, but most American dispensationalists followed Scofield's seven-fold scheme: Innocency (before the Fall), Conscience (Fall to the Flood), Human Government, Promise (Abraham to Moses), Law (Moses to Christ), Grace (the church age), and Kingdom (the millennium).

A.D. 1878
Fundamentalists sign the "Niagra Creed," which includes premillennial teachings.

There was nothing especially radical about dividing history into periods. What separated dispensationalists from everybody else was their novel method of biblical interpretation. Everything in the dispensationalist system seemed to rest on the conviction that God had two completely different plans operating in history: one for an earthly people, Israel, and the other for a heavenly people, the church.

To Darby, the plan for God's earthly people had been revealed through a series of covenants with Israel: the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant, the law-oriented Mosaic Covenant, the royal Davidic Covenant, and a new Messianic Covenant.

Until Messiah's coming, however, God's earthly people must suffer Gentile domination, prophesied by Daniel. This Gentile hegemony would end at the coming of Messiah, 70 weeks after one of the Gentile rulers issues a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to repair its broken walls. But when the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God suspended the prophetic timetable at the end of Daniel's sixty-ninth week and began building a new and heavenly people—the church.

Enrapturing doctrine

Dispensationalists were convinced that God would not deal with the two peoples concurrently. Consequently, it seemed necessary that God remove the church before proceeding with the final plans for Israel.

This led to dispensationalism's most controversial and distinctive doctrine—the secret, any-moment, pre-tribulational Rapture ("catching away") of the church. Earlier premillennialists believed the Rapture would occur at the end of the tribulation, at Christ's second advent. But dispensationalists separated the Rapture (when Christ will come ***for*** his saints) from the Second Coming (when he will come ***with*** his saints).

Once the heavenly people of God have been raptured, Darby believed, the divine script can be played out to the end. The Antichrist will rise, Christ and his saints will break through the clouds and destroy him and his followers in battle (the Second Coming), the nations of the world will be judged, and Satan will be thrown into a bottomless pit. Then, with the conclusion of Daniel's seventieth week, the victorious Messiah will restore the throne of David, and the millennial kingdom will begin, followed by the Last Judgment and a new heaven and earth. The seven dispensations then over, time shall be no more.

United front

Dispensationalism's first adherents had to overcome some serious public relations problems, especially in establishing their evangelical credentials. For decades most evangelicals did not consider dispensationalism orthodox. Eventually, however, the rise of theological liberalism forced many conservative evangelicals into a close, defensive alliance.

A key example is the Bible conference movement. While Darby was planting his seeds in American soil, a group of conservatives (including premillennialists) founded the Believers' Meeting for Bible Study. Eventually headquartered at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, and renamed the Niagara Bible Conference, it met for two weeks each summer, aware that it was standing firm for beliefs others were starting to deny.

Premillennialists quickly assumed leadership of the Niagara Conferences. James Brookes presided for more than 20 years and was primarily responsible for drawing up the 1878 "Niagara Creed." In addition to its plank on premillennialism (which gave many Niagara supporters pause), the "creed" affirmed traditional evangelical distinctives such as the authority of the Bible and the absolute necessity of personal conversion to Christ.

Meanwhile, some dispensationalists wanted to focus attention on prophetic themes. Thus the First American Bible and Prophetic Conference was held in New York City in 1878, and was so successful that six more followed. Those convening the conferences noted that "when from any cause some vital doctrine of God's Word has fallen into neglect or suffered contradiction and reproach, it becomes the serious duty of those who hold it ... to bring back the Lord's people to its apprehension and acceptance."

Liberalism's "solitary antidote"

Growing more daring because of their increasing visibility and respectability in evangelical circles, dispensationalists frequently made rather extraordinary claims for their distinctive doctrines. Reuben A. Torrey, successor to D. L. Moody on the revival circuit, claimed that premillennial belief in the Second Coming was the ultimate cure for theological infidelity and an impregnable bulwark against liberalism and false cults:

"In the truth concerning our Lord's return is the safeguard against all current heresies, errors, and falsehoods. ... It is remarkable how all forms of error touch the doctrine of Christ's second coming, and are shattered by the truth revealed about it in the Scriptures."

William Bell Riley, who eventually led the fundamentalist movement in Minnesota, called pre- millennialism

"the sufficient if not solitary antidote to the present apostasy." To arrive at a premillennial position, one had to interpret the Bible literally, thus ensuring that one grasped the other essential doctrines of the faith as well.

Naturally, when premillennialists said such things, they annoyed many of their conservative evangelical allies who thought they could get along just fine without dispensationalism. A. A. Hodge, the Princeton Seminary professor whose doctrine of biblical inerrancy most premillennialists espoused, called the pretribulational rapture of the church "an unscriptural and unprofitable theory."

J. Gresham Machen, the leader of conservative Presbyterians during the 1920s, demonstrated the ambivalent attitude of many evangelicals: He wrote that the rebirth of "***premillennialism*** in the modern church causes us serious concern; it is coupled, we think, with a false method in interpreting Scripture which in the long run will be productive of harm. Yet how great is our agreement with those who hold the premillennial view."

Such criticism always stung premillennialists, who prided themselves on a straightforward, common-sense reading of the Bible. Though they participated in the conservative evangelical alliance, at times premillennialists felt lonely, isolated, and unappreciated. Like it or not, in an age when the truth of a doctrine was often judged by the company it kept, dispensationalists had to defend their doctrine by showing who believed in it.

Leaders found and created

Premillennialists could point to a number of respected and prominent evangelical leaders within their movement. Revivalist D. L. Moody, "Mr. Evangelical" to nearly everyone at the end of the century, was an early convert to premillennialism (though not a very doctrinaire dispensationalist). Nearly every major revivalist from his time to World War I adopted his eschatology.

Premillennialists could also point to a few leaders in the evangelical world missions movement. But by far the most important symbols of dispensationalist respectability were the prominent pastors who gave their congregations steady doses of the new premillennialism.

Early on, dispensationalists devised a way to produce a steady stream of new leadership through the Bible institute movement, which they helped to establish at the end of the nineteenth century as a hedge against liberal theology.

Almost without exception, the scores of Bible institutes founded between 1880 and 1940 taught the new premillennialism. Through the ministries of these schools' graduates—pastors, evangelists, Bible teachers, missionaries, youth workers—dispensationalism spread.

Traditionalists, with a twist

Dispensationalism spread also because its advocates were able to demonstrate some clear continuities with traditional evangelical beliefs and practices.

First was their commitment to biblicism. At a time when conservatives were increasingly concerned about higher criticism of the Bible, premillennialists stood firmly for inerrancy and biblical authority.

Furthermore, premillennialists maintained that anyone could read the Bible and understand it. Dispensationalist teachers agreed that the biblical text was best studied inductively, eliminating the personal bias and pitfalls of subjective interpretations of which the liberals were guilty.

Still, premillennialist Bible teachers insisted one could not do justice to either the Bible's big picture or its smaller parts without a firm grasp of dispensational truth. Ironically, over their inductive method they placed an enormously complex dispensational system and forced the Bible's content to pass through its interpretive grids.

Second, premillennialism was loyal to apostolic doctrine. For the evangelical rank and file, the faith was "once for all delivered to the saints" during the times of the Apostles. Thus the church's task in every age is simply to restate what the Apostles taught, and their words were found in the Bible alone.

Since the Bible clearly contained passages on the apocalyptic return of Jesus, it should be good enough for Christians in modern times.

Third, premillennialism also followed the overt supernaturalism of the evangelical tradition. While liberals were uneasy about such a supernatural worldview, dispensationalism's affirmation of the supernatural was just the thing many Protestants were looking for. Instead of placing God within the historical or evolutionary process, premillennialists still believed in a God who stood outside history and intended to intervene in it—soon.

For better or worse?

By the end of the nineteenth century, premillennialism looked much more believable than postmillennialism. In the eyes of most people, recent events signaled worse times—not better.

Howard Pope, the superintendent of men at Moody Bible Institute, was trained as a postmillennialist at Yale. But his study of missions and world population growth convinced him that the world was not being converted to Christ, as he had been taught to expect. So he "converted to the premillennial view as quickly as Saul was converted to Christ," he said.

Other former postmillennialists said the same thing. It was becoming harder and harder to read the morning newspaper and believe that the Millennium was right around the corner. What looked inevitable in the 1830s—the Christianization of the nation and the world through the success of revivals and reform—no longer seemed possible, short of some miraculous intervention of Jesus himself.

Premillennialists made much of the current problems of society and interpreted them as "signs of the times." Political corruption, pornography, alcohol abuse, the rise of monopolies, labor unrest, the desecration of the Lord's Day by immigrants, worldliness in the church, liberal theology, international conflicts, forest fires, earthquakes, revivals, the rise of cults like Christian Science and Millennial Dawnism (Jehovah's Witnesses), polio and influenza epidemics, changing weather patterns, the rise of Zionism, the sinking of the Titanic, the partitioning of Europe after World War I, radio—these and countless other events and trends were seen as proof that premillennialism was correct and the end of the age was rapidly approaching. Eventually, even its detractors realized that premillennialism seemed plausible.

Still, premillennialism's rise cannot be explained on merely "environmental" grounds. There can be no adequate explanation that does not take into account how the movement sought to maintain important elements from the earlier evangelical tradition.

Timothy Weber is dean of Northern Baptist Seminary in Lombard, Illinois. He is author of **Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1982** ***(University of Chicago, 1999).***

Resources:
Timothy Weber is the author of

Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming, soon to be reissued and updated by University of Chicago Press.

Links:
Weber recently wrote an article on dispensationalism for the October 5, 1998, issue of ***Christianity Today*** titled "How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend."

Here's a very sympathetic view of John Nelson Darby, written by a member of his Exclusive Brethren Church.

Darby's Synopsis to the Books of the Bible is available at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

House Church Central has a sympathetic, but ultimately critical history of Darby, Scofield, and dispensationalism.

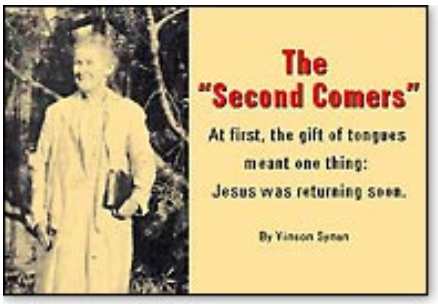
CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 61: A History of the Second Coming

Pentecostal Millennialism: The Second Comers

At first, the gift of tongues meant one thing: Jesus was returning soon.

Vinson Synan

The Second Comers



On the very first day of the twentieth century, a group of Kansas Bible school students laid hands on Agnes Ozman, praying that she would be baptized in the Holy Spirit with the expected sign of speaking in tongues. In what was later called "the touch felt around the world," the 30-year-old, while "a halo surrounded her head and face," began to "speak the Chinese language."

With that, the Pentecostal movement, which now numbers over a half-billion adherents, was born. But despite the movement's association with tongues ever since that centennial prayer meeting, early Pentecostalism was less a tongues movement and more a Jesus-is-coming movement.

Topeka's missionary tongues

The Topeka Pentecost occurred in an atmosphere of millennial expectations. After Ozman spoke in tongues, her teacher, Charles Fox Parham, and most of the other students also experienced tongues. In short order, Parham formulated the doctrine that tongues was the "Bible evidence" of baptism in the Holy Spirit. He also believed tongues were known earthly languages any missionary could instantly use to reap the final harvest of souls before the imminent, premillennial rapture of the church.

"I had felt for years that any missionary going to the foreign field should preach in the language of the natives," he wrote. "Anyone today ought to be able to speak any language of the world if they had horse sense enough to let God use their tongue and throat."

Parham was not the first to identify tongues as the sign of Spirit baptism. As early as 1830, Scottish Presbyterian minister Edward Irving and a group of English evangelicals had predicted the restoration of tongues (as well as the other gifts of the Spirit) as signs of the end of the age.

A.D. 1901 Agnes Ozman is said to miraculously speak in Chinese.

On April 20, 1830, in the first recorded instance in modern times, James McDonald spoke in tongues, and his twin, George, interpreted: "Behold He cometh—Jesus cometh— a weeping Jesus." In fact, almost all the subsequent interpretations in England centered on the theme "the Lord is coming soon; get ready to meet him."

John Nelson Darby, who developed the dispensational eschatology emphasizing the Rapture, was Irving's friend, and his ideas were ardently supported by many Holiness leaders. "Every fully-developed Pentecostal experience includes this Pentecostal expecting of the coming of the King," said one.

It was not long before Parham's followers prepared to use their ***xenoglossolalia*** in the mission fields. "We have several missionaries in the field who have the gift of tongues, who not only speak the language

and understand the natives, but can use the language intelligently," Parham claimed. "It has become a gift to them."

Enraptured Azusa Street

In 1906 the center of the Pentecostal revival shifted from Parham to one of his students, William J. Seymour, a black Holiness preacher from Texas who came to Los Angeles to spread the Pentecostal fire. In a rundown mission on Azusa Street, manifestations of tongues and healing drew thousands of visitors from around the world. As in Topeka, the understanding was that Jesus was soon to return and that tongues was a harbinger of his coming.

The manifestations of tongues and interpretations at Azusa Street were unanimous in their emphasis concerning the Rapture. In September 1906, for example, Anna Hall prophesied, "I have come to tell you that Jesus is coming. Go forward in my name. ... My people have only time to get on the beautiful garments and prepare for the wedding supper in the heavens."

Seymour himself joined the eschatological excitement, writing in his ***Apostolic Faith*** paper in January 1907, "We are listening now for the sound of his chariot wheels. ... We are now living in the eventide of this dispensation, when the Holy Spirit is leading us, Christ's Bride, to meet him in the clouds."

Rapture's entry ticket

In these early days, Pentecostals commonly believed tongues was evidence of the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit, qualifying believers for the "bridehood saints." Many appeals were made to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in the Matthew 25 parable. For decades Pentecostal preachers warned their congregations of the perils of not speaking in tongues—the necessary experience to go up in the Rapture.

One of these preachers was George Floyd Taylor, who wrote in his 1907 book, ***The Spirit and the Bride***, that the "sealed ones" would be the "triumphant missionaries of humanity's last generation."

In his closing appeal, Taylor criticized "scholarly clergymen and high steeple officials with tall plug hats, sleek coats, toothpick shoes, and golden-headed canes, with long faces and lugubrious countenances and deep sighs, consulting with one another, 'How to reach the masses?' ... They are nineteen centuries behind the times. That problem was solved at Pentecost."

After a few missionary fiascoes, fewer claims were made for missionary tongues. But many were still reached, and around the world the message shouted from the housetops was "Jesus is coming." Listeners were warned to be sure they were among the bridehood saints who were sanctified and filled with the Holy Spirit.

After 1910, when it became increasingly clear that, in fact, missionaries weren't miraculously given abilities in new earthly tongues, Pentecostals began to increasingly see tongues more as "evidence" of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and as a devotional "prayer language."

Vinson Synan is dean of the School of Divinity at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and author of **The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition** ***(Eerdmans, 1997).***

Resources:
Vinson Synan is the author of The

Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century.

Links:

Synan also wrote an online history of early Pentecostalism for Oral Roberts University.

Image: Agnes Ozman was the first to speak in tongues at Charles Parham's Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. This year was taken 36 years later, in 1937, shortly before her death. Photo from ***Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*** (Zondervan).

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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Judgment Day on the Big Screen

The end of the world according to filmmakers.

Peter T. Chattaway

Sandwiched exactly between the lives of John Nelson Darby and Steven Spielberg, Abel Gance directed ***La fin du monde*** (1931), France's first feature-length talking picture. In it, a comet threatening the earth divides humanity between those who spend their last days indulging in wanton orgies, and those who unite in the name of peace, following a man first seen playing Christ in a passion play.

Apocalyptic themes didn't really take off, however, until the 1970s. Society was in a state of turmoil, exploited by films about conspiracy theories and disasters both natural and supernatural. In both Stephen King's 1978 repackaging of Revelation, ***The Stand***, and in ***The Omen*** (1976), the Antichrist is pop culture's ultimate, serious, bad guy.

That decade also saw the rise of a parallel popular culture, best exemplified by the Jesus music scene. The Rapture and the Second Coming were especially common topics. Larry Norman wrote perhaps the definitive early Christian pop song when he composed "I Wish We'd All Been Ready": "Life was filled with guns and war / And everyone got trampled on the floor ... / There's no time to change your mind / The Son has come and you've been left behind."

The song is played several times in ***A Thief in the Night*** (1972), the first in a four-part film series. It set the mold for Christian apocalyptic fiction: a one-world government, a bar code "mark of the beast," and an evangelistic appeal to become a Christian ***now***.

The end times became both more and less urgent in the 1980s. The fear that gripped popular culture now was not one of political and economic instability but of outright annihilation, usually in nuclear war (***The Day After*** [1983], ***Testament*** [1983]) or afterward (Mad Max trilogy [1979-1985]). ***The Terminator*** (1984) told a modernized nativity story against the backdrop of an impending nuclear holocaust; the apocalyptic overtones were made explicit in the title of its sequel, ***Terminator 2: Judgment Day*** (1991).

To skeptics, it sometimes seemed that Christians who dwelled on the end times were unconcerned with the present world and perhaps all too ready to let it go to hell—as shown in Michael Tolkin's ***The Rapture*** (1991). Mimi Rogers plays a Christian widow who goes to the desert with her daughter to await the Second Coming. When it looks like Jesus might not return, she shoots her daughter and thus sends her to heaven right away. However, when the Rapture ***does*** take place, the Rogers character condemns herself to a lonely eternity rather than committing herself to a God who would allow such suffering.

At the same time, Christian music was establishing itself and toning down its more radical aspects, particularly where the end times was concerned. Popular culture in the 1990s has settled into a sort of ironic nostalgia; to paraphrase the rock group R.E.M., it may be the end of the world as we know it, but we feel fine. Disaster movies and conspiracy theories are in vogue again, but they lack the urgency of their 1970s predecessors. Nuclear bombs have become our saviors, rescuing us from the comets and asteroids of ***Armageddon*** (note the title) and ***Deep Impact*** (in which the spaceship carrying the bombs is dubbed "the Messiah"). The apocalypse will become even more ironic in the upcoming film, ***The End of Days***, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a former cop who has to save the world

when the devil visits New York City.

Peter T. Chattaway is a film critic from British Columbia and an instructor at Trinity Western University.

Links: ***Christian Week***, a Canadian Christian newspaper that Chattaway regularly writes for, has many of his past articles online.

Film sites are among the most abundant on the Web, including those for The Rapture, A Thief in the Night, Armageddon, Deep Impact, and even End of Days.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 61: A History of the Second Coming

Recent Premillennialism: Late Great Predictions

The events of recent decades have fired the imagination of a host of premillennialist, especially Hal Lindsey.

Robert G. Clouse

After World War II, premillennialism reached an eschatological frenzy. Atomic weapons with incomprehensible destructive power and delivery systems left no place safe from the threat of thermonuclear annihilation. Israel was established as a Jewish state and successfully defended its territory during the ensuing decades.

Furthermore, the United States and the Soviet Union entered a Cold War; in evangelical circles, this was portrayed not as a geopolitical conflict but as an ideological struggle —capitalism versus communism, democracy versus dictatorship, freedom versus slavery. And such themes pervaded the prophetic and apocalyptic literature that rolled off the evangelical presses in the 1960s through the 1980s.

Scores of sensationalist prophetic teachers issued these volumes, but none was better known than Hal Lindsey.

Suicide and Second Coming

Born in Houston, Texas, in 1929, Harold L. Lindsey dropped out of the University of Houston to serve in the Korean War, then worked as a Mississippi River tugboat captain. When his first marriage broke up, he contemplated suicide, but instead found a ***Gideon New Testament*** and was converted. Lindsey became an avid reader of Scripture, particularly prophetic sections, which convinced him that the Bible was truly the Word of God.

Though not a college graduate, he entered Dallas Theological Seminary in 1958 (with the help of "Colonel" Robert Thieme, pastor of Berachah Church in Houston, where Lindsey had attended), and graduated with a degree in theology. He also met his second wife, Jan, and they became missionaries for Campus Crusade for Christ, lecturing to college students throughout North America.

In the late 1960s, Lindsey began gathering his lecture notes into a book that would make his name a household word around the world: ***The Late Great Planet Earth***. It quickly became one of the best-selling nonfiction books of the 1970s, and was translated into more than 50 languages with sales of over 35 million copies. Lindsey even made a film version of the book, narrated by Orson Welles.

Generation is the key

The Late Great Planet Earth and its 12 sequels deal specifically with the "signs of the times" that make up the prophetic "jigsaw puzzle" of end-time events: the creation of the Jewish State of Israel in 1948, the recovery of Jerusalem in 1967, the rise of Russia, an Arab confederation arrayed against Israel, military power in East Asia, European integration, revival of dark occult practices in Babylon, the apostasy of Christian churches, the move toward a one-world religion and government, and the decline of the United States as a world power.

Lindsey prophesied the Antichrist will head up a revived Roman Empire comprised of the European

community, the Jewish Temple will be rebuilt, an Arab-African confederacy will assault Palestine followed by the even larger invasion of the region by Russia. Then the European alliance, after having defeated the Russians, will be attacked by an army of 200 million Asians. In this Armageddon battle, a nuclear exchange will kill a third of the world's population. But just as the battle reaches its peak, Christ will suddenly appear, halting the hostilities and protecting believers from total destruction.

The critical point in this scenario is Lindsey's concept of the "generation" of Matthew 24 ("this generation shall not pass away until all these take place"). He defined a biblical generation as 40 years, and concluded that "all these things" could take place within 40 years of the founding of Israel. Thus he predicted the return of Christ in 1988 and the rapture of the church seven years earlier.

By 1997 Lindsey had changed his prediction of Christ's return, but he still portrayed the writer of Revelation as "an eyewitness to events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries." Lindsey continues to argue that John was shown the future and then brought back to the first century to write an eyewitness account of this terrifying future time. He was to do this in "encoded symbols," and now the time has come for these prophecies to be "un coded." That requires "a Christian guided by the Spirit of God" to be able to interpret them.

The rise of the Illuminati

The decline and fall of communism presented Lindsey and his fellow premillennialists, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, with a monumental problem. Almost without exception they had identified Russia with Gog and Magog, and especially the "Rosh" mentioned in Ezekiel 38. The collapse of the Soviet Union led them to perceive a new conspiracy: the "New World Order."

Pat Robertson, for example, argued that men of goodwill like Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, and George Bush unknowingly and unwittingly carried out the mission "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."

Robertson begins with the small secret society known as the Illuminati, founded in 1776, and shows how these money barons incited the world wars and the Cold War to funnel money from taxpayers to themselves. The United States was pushed into an international confederacy that is in reality a cover for the rise to power of the Antichrist.

The fascination with end times predictions seems to have escalated as the second millennium closes. Two examples: Harold Camping, president of Family Radio, in his book 1994? predicted the world would end in September of that year; and Grant R. Jeffrey, author of Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny, suggests the year 2000 as "the probable termination date for the 'last days' ".

Robert Clouse is professor of history at Indiana State University. This article is adapted from his upcoming book* The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide*, which he authored with historian Richard Pierard and editor Robert Hosack. (Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 1999.) Used by permission.

Resources: The New Millennium Manual is a unique and successful blend of expert

scholarship and occasional playfulness. Richard Pierard, coauthor of the book and Clouse's fellow history professor at Indiana State University, has written for ***Christian History*** in the past.

Clouse is also the editor of The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views, War: Four Christian Views, and Women in Ministry: Four Views, all of which are published by Intervarsity Press.

Links:
Hal Lindsey's radio show, Week in Review, is also broadcast online.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 61: A History of the Second Coming

A History of the Second Coming: Christian History Interview - Hope Beyond the Details

Christians have hardly agreed about how and when Christ will return—only that he will.

interview with Richard Kyle

In this issue we've dipped into every era and shown how Christians have thought and acted about the last days. The variety is surprising and the results are sometimes horrifying.

Many books have tried to put this all into perspective, but one of the better ones is Richard Kyle's The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times ***(Baker, 1998). So*** Christian History ***talked with the author, professor of history and religion at Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas, to find out what we might learn from the history of the end of history.***

What prompted you to write a book about the history of the end times?

I was raised in the Plymouth Brethren church, and I knew of only one view—dispensational premillennialism. I didn't even know there were alternatives. As a teenager, I remember the invasion of Egypt in 1956 with Israeli, British, and French forces fighting together. This stirred up my passions in this area, but I had always been interested in the subject. In my study of church history, I became acquainted with the mainstream Christian views—postmillennialist, amillennialist, and premillennialist.

Then in 1993, I wrote a book on the religious fringe, and I began to see that so many groups had very fascinating views on the end of the world. And as I talked to my environmentalist friends, I began to realize it isn't limited simply to the Christian community. A look at movies and modern literature shows there are all kinds of end-time themes. It's embedded in our cultural psyche.

What was the most surprising thing that you discovered as you researched this topic?

Through much of history, people have been looking more for the Antichrist than for Christ. The Antichrist has to come first, before Christ, in most of these views. Also, there's more interesting speculation about who the Antichrist is.

Also, with my background—I'm still a moderate premillennialist—I associated millennialism with the Christian mainstream. But in most of history, millennialism (in which people expect the world to end soon) has been the view of fringe groups. In the Middle Ages, the mainstream Catholic church held what became known as amillennialism, but the Joachites, Franciscans, and Taborites, for example, were far more millennial. Even when millennialism was popular during the Middle Ages, it wasn't the official view of the church.

In nineteenth-century America, when most of the country was postmillennial, other millennial views were championed by groups like the Mormons, Shakers, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Millennial views are persistent throughout history, but I don't want to exaggerate them. It's like a virus; it may be dormant at times, occasionally situations activate it, and it burns to a fever. And so you have these periods of time when the end-time thinking reaches a much higher pitch.

Since many evangelicals believe in the nearness of the end, has millennialism moved beyond the fringe?

Through much of history, many minority groups who have either been depressed, disenfranchised, or poverty-stricken have held apocalyptic views. But today many millennialists, especially many in the religious right, are wealthy and in seats of power. They almost long for an end because they see the world in such bad shape. According to one theory, they're millennialists because their views are out of sync with the modern world.

Why did evangelicals mock premillennialism in the early nineteenth century yet embrace it today?

Postmillennialism became predominant in the late eighteenth century because the world seemed to be getting better. Progress was being made, especially in the United States. Jonathan Edwards saw the first Great Awakening as the first robin of spring, and figured the millennium to begin around the year 2000. Even in the Second Great Awakening, evangelists thought they were witnessing the opening shots of the Millennium.

After that, we moved into more pessimistic times, and premillennialism, which has a pessimistic view of humanity, took root. In a century like ours, with more to survive than to rejoice in—two world wars, a depression, Hitler, Mussolini, holocausts, nuclear weapons, environmental crises—premillennialism can thrive in a context like this.

Can postmillennialism make a comeback?

If something in the culture changed. For example, between A.D. 300 and 400, a shift took place: Christianity was legalized and became increasingly the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. So eschatology moved from a vague premillennialism to, thanks to Augustine, amillennialism.

One thing that made dispensationalism popular today was that dispensationalists discussed the return of Israel well before it happened. Israel stands at the center of dispensational thinking. If for some reason, the state of Israel ceased to exist, it could cause a major reinterpretation. However, dispensationalists can make adjustments. When the Soviet Union crumbled, they modified their thinking, even though prophecies about the Soviet Union had been a key feature in their views.

There has been a lot of excitement about the end-times prospects for the year 2000. Have Christians invested too much in the turn of the millennium?

In some ways we shot the works in the 1980s. The real catalyst was Hal Lindsey pinning so much on 1948 and implying that the Rapture would occur in 1988. Such hopes for the year 2000 will probably taper off. It won't be like the Millerites, with people throwing up their hands in despair and dissolving in embarrassment.

In spite of the fact that so many Christians in so many eras have been wrong about the details of the Second Coming, we still retain a vibrant hope in it. Why is that?

I think it's inescapably biblical. If you're any kind of a sober, sincere Christian, you have to expect and believe that Jesus Christ is going to return physically at a particular time.

The Bible hasn't given us many details about this, and so, unfortunately, the hope of Christ's return has become the fodder for the curious and for fanatics. But that doesn't change the essential biblical teaching: Christ will come again.

Resources:

Richard Kyle is the author of The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times. It offers a scholar's brief overview of 2,000 years of millennialism, in both Christian and secular circles.

He is also the author of The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternative Religions in America.

Links:
Probe Ministries, an evangelical organization, has an overview of millennial beliefs titled, "Millennial Cautions."

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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A History of the Second Coming: Recommended Resources - The End of the World As We Know It

At a Christian bookstore near the ***Christian History*** offices, the "prophecy" section is more than twice as large as the "history" section, and that doesn't count the apocalyptic fiction books. And even the history section is populated with prophecy; every publishing house, it seems, is publishing at least one history of eschatology. The year 2000 is apparently a boon for historians of millennialism.

Surveys

Richard Kyle's ***The Last Days Are Here Again*** (Baker, 1998) offers a scholar's brief overview of 2,000 years of millennialism, in both Christian and secular circles. Another Baker book, ***The New Millennium Manual*** (1999), by Robert Clouse, Robert Hosack, and Richard Pierard, is a unique and successful blend of playfulness and expert scholarship (Clouse and Pierard are history professors at Indiana State University).

The journalists who have surveyed the history of apocalypticism typically spend most of their time on the "sexier" movements, like the Millerites or Branch Davidians, but they cover more mainstream beliefs too. Richard Abanes's ***End-Time Visions*** (Broadman and Holman, 1998) and Russell Chandler's ***Doomsday*** (Servant, 1993) are two of the better histories (though the latter lacks an index).

The two-part video ***Millennial Madness*** (Plain Truth, 1997) tries to calm those with high end-times expectations. It's especially interesting for its publisher: the Worldwide Church of God, until recently famous for apocalyptic fervor.

While most online searches for apocalyptic studies will turn up some very strange Web sites, there is at least one out there with some scholarly integrity: The Center for Millennial Studies (www.mille.org), directed by Boston University medieval history professor Richard Landes. It is full of useful articles and information on millennial movements past and present.

A more specific overview of end-time thinking is ***Antichrist*** (HarperCollins, 1994) by Bernard McGinn, Notre Dame historian. He covers all the major movements and beliefs from the New Testament to today, with special emphasis on the dark side of the world's end.

Specifics

McGinn's specialty is medieval apocalypticism, and his ***Visions of the End*** (Columbia, 1998) is a necessary volume for any study on the subject, not only for his comments, but for its translations of primary source documents.

Another must-read on this topic is Paul Boyer's ***When Time Shall Be No More*** (Harvard, 1992). It emphasizes the history of prophecy belief in American culture, but there's still valuable information on early Christian, medieval, and renaissance beliefs. Engaging and widely acclaimed, it explains why evangelicalism looks like it does today.

Naming the Antichrist (Oxford, 1995) by cultural historian Robert Fuller examines the same

timeframe and location as Boyer, but where Boyer is sympathetic, Fuller is not (chapter five, for example, on conservative campaigns against socialism, unions, and modernism, is titled "Crusades of Hate"). If you're looking for a scholarly book with an edge, this is it.

Those especially interested in the history of end-time views may want to invest in the three-volume, 1,500-page ***Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*** (Continuum, 1998). Articles cover everything from the ancient world to today's popular culture, and the author list is a who's who of the top scholars in the field.