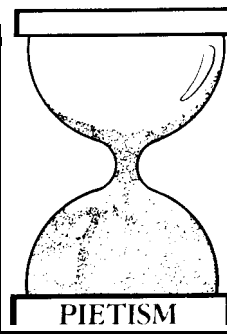


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## THE GLOOM AND DOOM BOOM

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Th.D.

The closer we get to the year 2000, the farther we get from the events of Revelation.

If you want to be the life of a dispensational party, try those words on for size. Yet as strange as these words may sound to the average dispensationalist's ear, I am convinced the Scriptures teach just that, and I will briefly demonstrate how this is so in next month's newsletter. And though still a minority position in evangelical prophetic studies, a growing number of Christians are becoming convinced by the evidence, I receive a steady flow of mail from burned-out dispensationalists who have been persuaded by the evidence.

### 2001: An Eschatological Odyssey

Unfortunately though, with the intriguing year 2000 fast approaching, we are witnessing an ever-increasing flow of apocalyptic books focusing on the future, books generally holding to a revised dispensational perspective. *Christianity Today* magazine notes that "on the eve of the third millennium of the Christian era, the church is again beset by apocalyptic speculators."<sup>1</sup> As historian Paul Boyer observes "prophecy remains of absorbing interest to millions of Americans."<sup>2</sup> His historical-sociological research shows that this dispensationally dominated apocalypticism is nurtured by the dense network of colleges, seminaries, Bible schools, publication houses, Christian bookstores, radio and television programs, and churches by the tens of thousands that sustain the vast subculture of late-twentieth century U.S. evangelicalism, the conviction that God's plan for human history lies encrypted in ancient biblical texts remains very much alive as the century draws to its close. From pulpits, cassette tapes, orbiting communications satellites, and the pages of millions of paperbacks, the ancient cry rings out as it has for hundreds of years: "He Is Coming Soon."<sup>3</sup>

### Dispensational Profiteers

Because of this, both secular and religious bookstores are awash with a flood of books on the prospects for the approaching days. During the Gulf War, the prophecy market exploded (pardon the pun). Regarding this phenomenon *Christianity Today* published a news article entitled: "Prophecy Books Become Best-sellers."<sup>4</sup> The article noted that John Walvoord's, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis: What the Bible Says About the Future of the Middle East* sold 1.5 million copies. Charles Dyer's, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times* sold 500,000 copies.

Those books were not the only prophetic works published during that political crisis. The interest in the war was not only due to its eruption in the Middle East, a region of undying

prophetic interest, but it did so in the decade serving as the eve of a new millennium (although few people understand that the next millennium does not start until its first year: 2001). Theologian Timothy George bemoans: "we are awash in a sea of apocalypticism. End-times hysteria rules the airwaves."<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, within the past two decades a whole new secular academic profession has arisen, known as futurology. Two important recent studies touching on this phenomenon among Christians are: Harvard University's Studies in Cultural History publication by Paul Boyer: *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (1992). And, to a lesser extent, the Fundamentalism Project by The American Academy of Arts and Sciences by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby: *Fundamentalism's Observed* (1991).<sup>6</sup>

Immensely popular evangelical works on prophecy are anticipating momentous events associated with the year 2000. The number of these books is legion. A mere sampling of currently available titles indicates the apprehension. I found all of these books in one Christian bookstore:

- Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth -2000: Will Mankind Survive?*
- Lester Sumrall 1, *I Predict 2000*
- David Allen Lewis, *Prophecy 2000: Rushing to Armageddon*
- Steve Terrell, *The 90's: Decade of the Apocalypse*
- Dave Hunt, *How Close Are We?: Compelling Evidence for the Soon Return of Christ*
- Billy Graham, *Storm Warning*
- Charles C. Ryrie, *The Fins/ Countdown*
- Grant R. Jeffries, *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny*
- James McKeever, *The Rapture Book: Victory in the End Times*
- Don McAlvany, et al., *Earth's Final Days*
- Texe Marrs, *Storming Toward Armageddon: Essays in Apocalypse*
- Robert Liarson, *Final Approach: The Opportunity and Adventure of End-Times Living*
- David Webber and Noah Hutchins, *Is This the Last Century?*

I even saw a book by the "walking Bible" Jack Van Impe who confidently declared the church was premillennial until Augustine began writing in A.D. 190. (He missed Augustine's date by enough centuries that I now doubt whether he is a patristics scholar at all. (In fact, he is a typical televangelist, as his ads in *Christianity Today* indicate.)

### To Commit, or Not Commit: That is the Question

Some of the writers are more dogmatic than others. Hal

Lindsey writer effuses: "This is the most exciting time to be alive in all of human history. We are about to witness the climax of God's dealing with man." <sup>7</sup>

Most apocalypticists, however, guard against charges of date-setting by avoiding overly dogmatic assertions (since Lindsey's *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* he is immune to such criticism). Generally they qualify their predictions somewhat: "We are not saying that Jesus will come back at the year 2000. We are saying if this parallel continues to hold, it is possible that Jesus will come back around the year 2000, plus or minus thirty years."<sup>8</sup> "When these events are placed in their proper order, the result is a prophetic calendar of what may soon happen in the world. An understanding of biblical prophecy has led many intelligent students of the Bible to believe that the world has already begun the countdown leading to Armageddon."<sup>9</sup>

Their prognostications are merely suggestions: Grant Jeffries' prophetic research leads him to '(suggest that the year A.D. 2000 is a probable termination date for the 'last days. "<sup>10</sup> "What does all this mean? It suggests that God's prophetic clock is beginning to move again. Doubtless the closer we get to the year 2000, the more people will begin to expect the Lord's return. We have far more evidence today that Christ could come in our lifetime than there was in the A.D. 992."<sup>11</sup>

They are based on sanctified feelings: "One cannot know these prophecies and live in the world of the 20th century without feeling keenly that these events will begin to happen shortly."<sup>12</sup>

#### The Secularist Data Stream

What is remarkable about this dispensational future consciousness is that in an important sense the popular Christian expectation is not very different from the secularist. Both the Christian community and the larger secular world anticipate a future of chaos and despair. Christopher Lasch observes: "As the twentieth century approaches its end, the conviction grows that many other things are ending too. The 'sense of ending,' which has given shape to so much of the twentieth century literature, now pervades the popular imagination."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, "the present period is witnessing an especially acute epidemic of future consciousness."<sup>14</sup>

In documenting the inevitability of a gloomy future, most popular Christian prophecy writers employ the data derived from secular analyses. Historical despair is rampant. The secular analyses, picked up by dispensational populists passing themselves off as scholars, are pessimistic to the bone. Notice the following lamentations:

"This present world is rapidly coming to an end. It is on an irreversible collision course with destiny."<sup>15</sup>

"The world will progressively devour its heart against the Gospel and plunge itself into destruction."<sup>16</sup> Regarding celebrations of the year 2000, Lindsey comments: "Just for the record: I'm not planning to attend, in fact, looking at the state of the world today, I wouldn't make any long-term earthly plans."

"One thing is crystal clear in Jesus' answer: This world is not going to get any easier to live in. Almost unbelievably hard times lie ahead."

"The biblical point of view is pessimistic, that is, the world

as it is now constituted will not be revived and improved, but instead, will be destroyed and replaced."<sup>19</sup>

Such gloom and doom talk creates a vicious cycle of despair. They are convincing each other that things are worse day by day. Next month we will briefly show how they don't know what they are talking about.

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<sup>7</sup>Timothy George, *Apocalyptic Fever*, *Christianity Today*, 14 December 1992, 12.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1992), 79.

<sup>9</sup>1 *bid.*, 339.

<sup>10</sup>Joe Maxwell, 'Prophecy Books Become Big Sellers,' *Christianity Today*, 11 March 1991, 60.

<sup>11</sup>Timothy George, "The Lure of the Apocalypse," *Christianity Today*, 19 June 1995, 16. I used to play table tennis with this fellow when we were both students at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. He is now a Calvinistic Baptist theologian of note.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1992); Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), vol. 1, *fundamentalism's Observed*, ch. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Hal Lindsey, *The Rise of Babylon and the Persian Gulf Crisis* (Pales Verdes, Calif.: Lindsey Ministries, 1991), 51.

<sup>14</sup>James McKeever, *The Rapture Book: Victory in the End Times* (Medford, Ore.: Omega, 1987), 22.

<sup>15</sup>Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*, 13.

<sup>16</sup>Grant R. Jeffries, *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny* (Toronto: Frontier Research, 1988), 193.

"Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm: Why Christians Will Escape All of the Tribulation* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>17</sup>Ryrie, *The Final Countdown*, 120.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978), 3.

"Tad Peters, *Futures: Human and Divine* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 11.

"Jack Van Impe, "There Is Hope!" (Troy, Mich.: Jack Van Impe Ministries International, December, 1991), 1.

<sup>19</sup>Hal Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 36.

"Lindsey, *Planet Earth --2000 AD.*, 305.

"Charles C. Ryrie, *The Living End* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976), 21.

<sup>20</sup>John F. Walvoord, Review of Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of John's Apocalypse in Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:586 (April-June, 1990): 251.

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