

CHAPTER 1

MILLENNIUM MANIA AND FAILED

As the world approaches the year 2000, many Christians believe it will mark the end of six thousand years since Creation and usher in the seventh millennium - the thousand years of Revelation 20. Seventh-day Adventists believe that Christ's coming is near, but we set no dates - or at least we shouldn't. We believe that when Christ comes, He will resurrect the righteous dead, change the righteous living, and take His people to heaven where they will spend the next thousand years. At the Second Advent the living wicked will be destroyed by the brightness of Christ's coming and the desolated earth will become Satan's prison for a thousand years.

Evangelicals have a totally different concept of the millennium. Most believe that the beginning of the thousand years of Revelation 20 will see "God's wrath on the earth," climaxing "at the Battle of Armageddon" and "followed by the millennial reign of Christ" on this earth.

Regardless of differing concepts, as we approach the year 2000, most Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, feel that this world is on the verge of profound changes. This is not the first time Christians have approached a millennial year expecting great changes to occur. A similar air of expectancy spread throughout Christendom as the year 1000 approached.

More than five hundred years before that memorable year, Augustine, the influential bishop of Hippo, wrote a book, *De Civitas Dei* (On the City of God), in which he set forth a new theory of the millennium. According to this view, the thousand years of Revelation 20 began at Christ's first advent and would end at His second coming a thousand years later, in other words, in the year 1000. Augustine's book exerted a profound influence on Christians of the early Middle Ages. They believed that Christ would return in glory, accompanied by cataclysmic

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events, and that the Battle of Armageddon would then be fought.

In his book, *Science, Prophecy and Prediction*, Richard Lewinsohn describes the millennial fever that possessed Christendom at the approach of the year 1000:

The number 1000 oppressed Europe like a nightmare. A wave of fatalism seized the people: the great cataclysm was about to engulf the world.... Whole towns repaired to church as one man, or assembled round crucifixes under the open sky, there to await God's judgment on corporately bended knees.

As the world approaches the year 2000, millennium mania and Armageddon anxiety seem to be affecting many Christians.

Unfulfilled Predictions

Ever since Jesus ascended to heaven and promised His disciples He would return, His followers have had a tendency to set dates for His coming. They have done this despite His admonition that, while His followers would know by the signs He gave when His coming was near, they would not know the "day and hour," or the exact "times and the seasons" (Matt. 24:26; Mark 13:32; Acts 1; 6; 7; 1 Thess. 4:46-5:1).

Because Seventh-day Adventists emphasize the doctrine of the Second Advent, some of us have had an inclination to predict when the Second Coming will occur or when certain eschatological events will happen. This has been characteristic of individuals as well as groups of Adventists ever since the 2,300 prophetic days, or literal years, of Dan. 8:14 ended in 1844. However, this tendency seems to have become more pronounced during the past fifty or sixty years. Here are some examples:

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, while World War II was being fought, some Adventists thought that 1944 - the hundredth year since the Great Disappointment of 1844 - might be the year of Christ's return. That year, of course, came and went and nothing happened.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s a man in northern California predicted that Christ would come in 1953 - or

before. Asked how he arrived at this date, he replied that the book, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 632, 633, says that.

At the close of the great papal persecution, Christ declared, the sun should be darkened, and the moon should not give her light Next, the stars should fall from heaven.... He [Christ] says of those who see these signs, "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." These signs have appeared. Now we know of a surety that the Lord's coming is at hand....

Christ continues, pointing out the condition of the world at His coming:

"As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be...."

Our brother reasoned thus: The last of these celestial signs was the meteoric shower of 1833. The days during which Noah preached that a flood was coming were 120 years, therefore as the days of Noah were 120 years, so it would be 120 years until the Second Coming. In other words, Christ would come in 1953 - or before. Before, because Romans 9:29 says that God will cut short His work in righteousness. However, 1953 passed long ago and now no one hears about this prediction anymore. Some forecasts have not had even as much logic as this one.

A few years after 1953, some thought that Noah's 120 years began in 1844 and would end in 1964 - just over one hundred years since the General Conference was organized. But that year, too, came and went and nothing happened.

A couple of decades ago, some Adventists believed that 1987 was a jubilee year and that it would mark the beginning of certain eschatological events connected with the national Sunday law. But that year passed and the proponents of this view have had nothing more to say about their predictions.

Beginning in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, some assumed that 1844 must have been a jubilee year, and because 1994 would be the third jubilee since 1844, certain end-time events were sure to occur that year. After that year passed, one proponent of this theory was asked what happened in 1994 that fulfilled his predictions. At least he was honest enough to acknowledge that nothing had happened - that you could see.

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New Agers, many of whom make no profession of being Bible students, claim that the world has entered the Age of Aquarius and predict great changes based on astrology. Some of these believe that the rapid changes taking place in the world are signs that the world stands on the verge of a new world order.

As the year 2000 approaches, the voices of some Christians are heard suggesting that Jesus may come or even will come in that year. They base their belief on the assumption that the year 2000 will mark the end of the sixth millennium and that the world will see the nations fight the Battle of Armageddon.

SDAs Not the Only Newspaper Prophets

Adventists are not the only Christians in recent years who have made predictions that have not come to pass. In his book, *Chariots of Salvation*, Hans K. La Rondelle calls attention to the fact that

Popular religious writers point especially to the Armageddon prophecy of the last Bible book (Rev. 16:16). They argue that this prophecy refers to the territory of the Megiddo Valley, near Mount Carmel in northern Palestine, as the battleground for the final war....

The literalists, who refer to themselves as dispensationalists, consider the year 1948 as the beginning of the final generation of the Israel of God. They appeal to Christ's statement to His disciples, "This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Mark 13:30). Taking the duration of a "generation" as 40 years, many concluded that the year 1988 would be the year of "Armageddon." Hal Lindsey wrote in his best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973):

What generation? Obviously, in the context, the generation that would see the signs - chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so from 1948, all these things could take place (p. 54).

We are the generation He was talking about! (The 1980s Countdown to Armageddon [New York: Bantam Books, 1982], p. 162).

In keeping with this calculation, some reckoned that their rapture to heaven would take place seven years before 1988 and actually prepared for their liftoff from earth in 1981.

An attack on Israel by the Soviet Union or Russia figured prominently in the initial stages of Lindsey's countdown. Unfortunately, he didn't foresee that just a year after Christ's supposed return in 1988, the Soviet Union would begin to collapse and the chances that it, or Russia, would invade Israel would become quite remote.

Other Evangelicals have been even more positive in their predictions. Robert P. Lightner points out that Edgar C. Whisenant in his book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988* claimed "with considerable boasting that he had incontrovertible proof that his date for Christ's return in 1988 was correct and, only if the Bible was wrong, could he be wrong. When it became obvious he was wrong, he changed the date to January 1989 and later updated it again to September 1989."

Such prognosticating is reminiscent of the fabled shepherd who cried, "Wolf! Wolf!" too many times and lost his credibility.

SDAs, Not Prophets, but Proclaimers of the Sure Word of Prophecy

All predictions that Christ will return in a certain year or that certain eschatological events will take place on certain dates are not the sure word of prophecy. The writings of Ellen White repeatedly caution Seventh-day Adventists against making such predictions. In 1892 she wrote:

Again and again I have been warned in regard to time-setting. There will never again [since October 22, 1844] be a message for the people of God that will be based on time.

Numerous other statements could be cited to the same effect. Adventists were not raised up to be prophets. We have

been called, we believe, to be proclaimers of the “sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:19) - and there is a distinct difference between the two. When a Bible writer or the Spirit of Prophecy clearly predict that a certain apocalyptic event will occur, we can rest assured that the event will take place as predicted, but we are to set no dates for it to happen, nor should we go any further than the sure word of prophecy warrants. The Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy writings give us many cause-and-effect links between events that are to occur in the future, but how much time elapses between the present and those events, or between one future event and the next, is not revealed. (See the author’s *The Shape of the Coming Crisis*, published by Pacific Press® Publishing Association, Copyright © 1998, and available in your ABC.) Because this is true, we are encouraged to carefully and prayerfully keep our spiritual ears to the ground, catching what Ellen White calls “the steady tread of events,” all the while guarding against the temptation to be prophets.

Because “the final movements will be rapid ones,” all of us may be taken by surprise by the rapidity with which events foretold will unfold, hence the need to be vigilant at all times. Christ could come before the year 2000, for “the end will come more quickly than men expect.” On the other hand, Christ may “tarry” (Matt. 25:5) beyond 2000. The important thing is to be ready and realize that the signs of His coming indicate He “is near, even at the doors” (Matt. 24:33).

Why God Predicts the Future

God’s primary purpose in foretelling the future and giving signs of the nearness of the coming of Christ is not that we might know the “day and hour” of Jesus’ coming (Matt 24:36; 25:13; Acts 1:6,7) or the specific time when some eschatological event will occur (1 Thess. 5:1,2) but that when the “sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet 1:19), as revealed by the signs given by the inspired writers, comes to pass, we “may believe” (John 13:19). In other words, the purpose of prophecy is not to make us

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prophets but to strengthen our faith when we see the things predicted happening.