

What Can We Learn From End-Time Predictions That Failed to Come to Pass?

Over the last season I've been pressing into worship and enjoying more of the presence of the Lord. I've also been having wonderful outings with my beautiful wife and children. I keep thinking, how can I bring more encouragement and assist in the expansion of the kingdom of God in this hour?

Yet, every time things begin to advance, feet start dragging and someone "slams on the brakes." Bible-believing Christians are supposed to be talking about "doing life together" and growing in the purposes of God. Yet most are continually distracted by politics, fear and apocalyptic end-time scenarios.

I sincerely desire to laugh, love and leave a legacy, but it can be extremely difficult. Many so-called "prophets" are talking about societal breakdown and catastrophe. In their sensationalist best-sellers, they claim to have witnessed the "signs of the times."

This is so prominent that a message of "good news" and hope is extremely difficult to find these days (and sometimes it's even rejected).

You probably already know this, but this isn't the only generation that has made these claims. In fact, over the last century there have been countless assertions about "harbingers" and "signs of the apocalypse." Leaders in previous eras also insisted they deciphered the book of Revelation and understood the alarming headlines.

So, the pessimistic, cataclysmic claims aren't new. They're actually part of the lengthy tradition of anxiety and failed

prognostications. In fact, speculative predictions about the end have characterized American Christianity for at least three generations. One would like to think that this madness would ultimately cease, but it never really does. I've found that people keep making these kinds of end-time assertions. Yet, an honest analysis would show the "track record" isn't good. Thousands of "undeniable" claims in previous decades were proven to be wrong. Let me remind you of some of the things affirmed in the past.

A Century of Failed Predictions

At the start of the First World War, the *Weekly Evangel*, a wide-reaching fundamentalist publication, boldly affirmed that, "The war preliminary to Armageddon, it seems, has commenced."¹ Less than two years later, S.D. Gordon, a popular devotional writer, insisted that the "end of the world" would "occur in our generation. That is to say that the man of average age now living, and all younger, barring the usual accidents of sickness and death, will witness the tremendous climax and transition." [2]

These mistaken beliefs weren't exclusive to the early 20th century. There were many similar claims made during World War II. In fact, it got even worse in the midst of the Cold War paranoia that erupted during the Eisenhower administration. In 1958, one of the more noted of the Salvation-Healing evangelists proclaimed,

*"Jesus is coming soon ... John the Baptist is preaching again! Have you heard John preach lately? I have. You are hearing one of them now."*³

Apocalyptic predictions expanded significantly during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in 1970, Hal Lindsey, made a nuanced prediction that the rapture would take place in 1981—seven years prior to Israel's 40th anniversary (*leaving seven years for the "Great Tribulation"*). Explaining his

outlook Lindsey wrote:

*"A generation in the Bible is something like 40 years. If this is a correct deduction, then **within 40 years or so of 1948, all these things could take place.** Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so. ... The most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. Even the figure of speech 'fig tree' has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the 'fig tree' put forth its first leaves. Jesus said that this would indicate that He was 'at the door,' ready to return. Then He said, 'Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place' (Matt. 24:34, NASB). What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs-chief among them the rebirth of Israel."*⁴

Obviously nothing of any biblical significance happened in 1981—and for that matter nothing noteworthy occurred seven years later. It was presumed that in 1988, during the 40th anniversary of Israel's re-establishment, strategic end-time events would transpire. Countless futurists were predicting the rapture or other apocalyptic scenarios, but they were greatly mistaken. In his hastily written book entitled, *88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be In 1988*, Edgar C. Whisenant argued that the rapture of the Christian church would occur between Sept. 11-13, 1988. He noted,

*"Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong, and I say unequivocally. There is no way biblically that I can be wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town"*⁵ ... *if there were a king in this country and I could gamble with my life, I would stake my life on Rosh Hashana 1988."*⁶

After his September prediction failed to materialize, Whisenant changed his termination date to Rosh Hashanah 1989—publishing *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*. This is a pattern that Whisenant would later repeat in 1993 and 1994. Despite his impassioned pleas, the rapture and his cataclysmic understanding of the end times never manifested. As the year 1988 (as well as 1989, 1993 and 1994) passed without major incident, apocalyptic teachers looked ahead to 2007—the 40th anniversary of Israel reclaiming Jerusalem (1967). With this pivotal date in the cross-hairs, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins noted the following:

“If we use the 1948 or the 1967 date, apply the span of a person’s lifetime (give or take 10 years for the person to ‘see’ and comprehend the events), then subtract seven or more years for the Tribulation and an interim period between the Rapture and the signing of the covenant with Israel, we come to the same time period for the return of the Lord that many others have suggested ... our generation.”⁷

Nevertheless, to the dismay of Dispensational Premillennialists, 2007 also passed without incident. Despite their feverish insistence, the apocalypse clearly didn’t transpire within a “generation” of 1948 or 1967. Because of this, many who held a cataclysmic view were forced to rethink what a “generation” really was. Some now suggesting that it is a 70- or 100-year span. They’re open to most any adaption, with the single exception of rethinking their erroneous end-time worldview.

What Do We Make Of This?

Failed end-time predictions were undoubtedly widespread over the last century. As these prognostications didn’t pan out, the proponents simply made readjustments and looked for new historical developments. Ongoing catastrophes and civil unrest were exploited to distract from previous errors in

calculations. Just as soon as one termination date passed, another conveniently came into view.

I believe those who have made failed end-time predictions must be accountable to the body of Christ for their mistakes. They should be held responsible for their wrong interpretations and the disruptions caused. Yet this is rather difficult to do.

In early 1977, when Hal Lindsey was asked by a journalist from *Christianity Today* what he would do if he was wrong about his end-time predictions, he responded with the following:

“There is a split second’s difference between a hero and a bum. I didn’t ask to be a hero, but I guess I have become one in the Christian community. So I accept it. But if I am wrong about this, I guess I’ll become a bum.”⁸

Though undeniably wrong about his end-time predictions over the last 46 years, Lindsey still hasn’t referred to himself as a “bum.” It’s not necessary for this to happen, yet a simple apology might be nice. So in light of all this, what should be the response? Some would say the only problem was the setting of a particular day and time. After all, Jesus affirmed, “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt. 24:36). Yet is it possible that Lindsey and his fellow Dispensationalists have been wrong in more than just “date-setting?” Could the Bible actually be affirming something different than what has been promulgated through evangelical radio and newsprint over the last 100 years? Could a fresh reading of Scripture affirm that God is up to something more than just darkness and catastrophe? I sincerely think so.

I honestly don’t know if North American Christians will ever change our darkened outlook. In the meantime we must be extremely careful. Whether it be blood moons, the Shemitah, or widespread social duress, we need to be cautious about what we’re proclaiming. Like many others, I’d hate to see additional failed predictions. The apostle Paul said it the following way: “not paying attention to Jewish myths and

commandments of men who reject the truth" (Titus 1:14).

Fear, sensationalism, and esoteric readings of Scripture aren't going to propel global missions or the expansion of the Church. I hope that we can finally learn the unpleasant lesson of previous generations. A fresh understanding of the "good news" could change and receive this blog through email

[1]. Editor. *Weekly Evangel* 10 (April 1917): 3.

[2]. S.D. Gordon. *Quiet Talks on the Deeper Meaning of War and Its Relation to the Lord's Return*. (New York: Revell, 1919): 69.

[3]. Oral Roberts. "Why I Believe Jesus Is Coming Soon and What His Coming Will Mean to You and Me," *The Oral Roberts Reader* (Rockville Center, New York: Zenith Books, 1958): 76-79.

[4]. Hal Lindsey. *The Late Great Planet Earth*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1970): 53-54.

[5]. Edgar C. Whisenant quoted in Ralph Lyman. *A Critique on the 1988 Rapture Theory*. (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Southwest Radio Church, 1988): 2.

[6]. Edgar C. Whisenant quoted in Jason Boyett "The Apocalypse of My Youth." *Washington Post* (May 12, 2011).

[7]. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. *Are We Living In the End-Times?* Chapter 5, 1999.

[8]. Hal Lindsey quoted in "Future Fact? Future Fiction?" *Christianity Today* (April 1977): 40.

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