

Can Prophecy Be Saved?

Most young believers no longer uphold Bible prophecy and eschatology as key components of the faith, opting to focus more on feeding the poor and ending human trafficking. But where does that leave Bible prophecy and teaching in today's church?

He looked like the kind of guy Jerry Falwell might have warned you about: tattoos, "holy jeans" and a hairstyle that would make the cut for geometry class show-and-tell.

"Do you mind if I ask you," I began tentatively, "what your thoughts are about Bible prophecy? Do you have thoughts about it?"

"Man, I try not to think about it!" the Haircut replied good-naturedly. "There are too many things left to do, like feed the hungry and clothe the naked!"

My interview subject had a point, and his view fit in well at the Catalyst East conference last fall in Atlanta, where more than 13,000 pastors and church leaders gathered to hear the latest trends and leadership advice from cutting-edge innovators. Catalyst is the new wave of leadership in the American church, and those in attendance have other things on their minds than prophecy, such as stopping human trafficking and making sure people have clean water.

It's important stuff, to be sure, but it seems to leave little room for more traditional evangelical topics, like eschatology and prophecy. This isn't your grandparents' evangelical community—when Hal Lindsey first lamented the late, great planet earth, and teachers such as Assemblies of God evangelist David Allen Lewis were building huge prophecy ministries and training others up to do the same.

That power bloc is fading.

The scene at Catalyst, from the aesthetics to the topics to the hallway conversations, stand in stark contrast to a major Bible prophecy conference I attended a few weeks later. This second conference will remain nameless, since its paltry crowd only served to substantiate this claim of a trend that's been a decade or more in the making—and which, frankly, depresses many in the Bible prophecy community.

"It's always troubling to see that the average age for the attendee [at prophecy conferences] is 60-plus," laments Jan Markell, founder of Olive Tree Ministries. "They make up the gray-haired regiment. A Joel Rosenberg will bring some out who are in their 40s or 50s, but few others can do that. And Joel will talk about blatant Bible prophecy unashamedly. Perhaps because of the success of his novels and other products, he does get away with it.

"Young people not only don't care about our topics, they are somewhat offended by them. Dealing with current events in a truthful manner suggests the world may end soon and they won't have a chance to live their full life. Or if they are parents of small children, they want to hear *nothing* about things that could harm their children."

Drew Sumrall, whose grandfather, Lester Sumrall, built a worldwide evangelistic ministry, seems to understand the nuance of these generational shifts better than some.

"Eschatology is as relevant today as it's ever been," he says. "Christianity is eschatological or it is not Christianity. However, we are facing many new questions—fundamental questions—of what it actually means to participate in the kingdom of God in the 21st century. I believe the impasse is where escapism collides with participation."

Sumrall, who now hosts *The Harvest Show* from the LeSEA Broadcasting studios in South Bend, Ind., is a bridge of sorts between traditional evangelicalism and the more progressive

elements gaining popularity. Sumrall recently hosted controversial author Brian McLaren on his show.

McLaren, a former Maryland pastor and now much-sought-after speaker around the globe, is a leading light in the so-called Emergent community. He holds progressive views on subjects, including eschatology, and recognized perhaps before many others that young people view the subject differently than previous generations.

"I think a lot of people—those my age along with younger people—have been turned off by the 'cry wolf' scenario," McLaren says. "We heard Hal Lindsay and others sound repeated alarms in the 1970s that turned out to be false. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, Chuck Smith Sr. of the Calvary Chapels and Harold Camping of Family Radio set off new rounds of false alarms. Then in the later 1990s, it was Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in the spotlight, with the *Left Behind* novels raising new waves of end-times hysteria. More recently, Harold Camping was back in the news in 2011. Each time, we've heard a lot of confident Bible-quoting mixed with attention-grabbing claims. And each time we've proven that this kind of end-times teaching sells books but also dashes hopes. The future defies prediction equally well for Christians and the Mayans."

Unfortunately, McLaren's bias sometimes leads him and his followers to affix hurtful labels to the people with whom they disagree. His charge that Bible prophecy teachers and students follow an "eschatology of abandonment," for example, is not only pejorative, it is often simply wrong. (David Allen Lewis, for example, also emphasized the need to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, and he was a pioneer in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue at a time when it wasn't fashionable.)

McLaren rightly points out the excesses of the Bible prophecy community of the last few decades, though prophecy teachers would cry foul at his linkage of Camping with credible teachers, and the fact remains that false predictions by

men—and media-hyped stories like that of the Mayan calendar—have nothing to do with biblical prophecy. Still, McLaren expertly zeroes in on the rub for many regarding Bible prophecy: Regrettably, some have cried wolf so long they appear to be hoarse!

The divide between Millennials and older generations, particularly regarding Bible prophecy and classic dispensationalism, is becoming “chippy” to some degree, with each side firing shots.

RELEVANT magazine, the flagship periodical among evangelical Millennials, has taken some shots in recent years at prophecy teaching—or anything associated with it. Earlier this year its editors made fun of the marketing efforts for the new *Left Behind* movie, starring Nicolas Cage. The magazine has also published articles for some time that take a dim view of prophecy teaching.

On the other hand, leading prophecy teachers such as Terry James, co-founder of the world’s largest Bible prophecy website, , who came of age when James Dean was making his iconic movies, are dismayed that so few young people seem to believe in Christ’s Second Coming, and the frustration is palpable.

“It seems—to me, at least—that increasingly, younger people are in process of helping fulfill the prophecy for the very end of the age given through the apostle Peter,” James says, referring to the passage bespeaking the end times in 2 Peter 3.

James’ contention is not without merit, especially given that the apostle predicted a future time when scoffers would not only question the Second Coming but also forget the original Creation story, which suggests a nod to an embrace of Darwinian philosophy. Millennials don’t seem overly concerned with whether the early chapters of Genesis are historical, and

many of their spiritual heroes (e.g., Marcus Borg, McLaren and Tony Campolo) at best marginalize prophetic themes.

An interesting corollary to the downturn in Bible-prophecy emphasis among Millennials is a shifting attitude toward Israel. McLaren, who has been known to criticize Christian Zionists, sees a difference in priorities among younger evangelicals who want to change the world.

“Younger evangelicals and charismatics are attuned to issues of justice and compassion much more than older ones, in my experience,” McLaren says. “I believe the Holy Spirit is guiding them in this focus. As a result, they are suspicious of approaches to the Bible that promote evasion of responsibility. They see in the gospel not an evacuation plan for a doomed earth but an incarnation plan for a transformed earth.”

This shift in priorities tends to garner more sympathy among Millennials for the Palestinian people, who tend not to see modern Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy but rather as an oppressor of the indigenous Arab population. These shifting eschatological views also impact missions efforts, which isn't lost on evangelical leaders.

Ronnie Floyd, a leading figure in the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of the multicampus Cross Church that sits in the wealthy conclave known as “Wal-Mart country” in northwest Arkansas, sees the need to incorporate new elements, such as praise and worship music, into the Southern Baptist scene, which is viewed by some as traditionally stodgy. Further, Floyd's books are endorsed by rising evangelical stars like Steven Furtick and Ed Stetzer, who represent the swath of evangelicals who don't emphasize the teaching of prophecy.

Floyd stands as another bridge between the generations, with his son, Nick—who, at 29, has already earned a Ph.D. from

Liberty University—being thoroughly familiar with Millennials and Floyd himself being one who has not abandoned prophecy.

“One of the great needs in today’s generation of the church is a return to the New Testament and its firm belief in the immediacy of Jesus Christ’s return to this earth,” Floyd says. “This could accelerate our commitment toward world evangelization. Church-planting in the major cities of the world and global evangelization hang on the abiding conviction of the return of our Lord. The Scripture is clear: One day Jesus Christ will return bodily, visibly and suddenly. Today’s church is in great need for a shift toward a deeper conviction on the immediacy of Christ’s return.”

The movement away from prophecy and end-times teaching is so prevalent among young evangelicals that some Bible prophecy experts were stunned when ’s Craig Groeschel recently taught a three-part series titled “The End.” is one of the fastest-growing churches in the U.S., and the Oklahoma-based church—using Groeschel’s pioneering method of satellite campuses—is at the forefront of innovation.

Bible prophecy is usually outside ’s purview. Yet there was Groeschel, pacing the stage in his animated, engaging style, teaching a lesson that sounded like it was lifted from a LaHaye/Jenkins study guide. Groeschel, with roots in the liberal, mainline United Methodist Church, sounded like a dispensationalist when he said, “There have been skeptics who have been transformed by the power of prophecy.”

While introducing one segment of the series, Groeschel cracked that people are often fearful of prophecy teaching, worrying that the world might be “destroyed by evolving cats that get thumbs and take over the world.”

The line got a deserving laugh and illustrates that there might be hope for *rapprochement* between the generations, at least where eschatology is concerned. As T.A. McMahon of

Berean Call has said, "Fulfilled prophecy is the best apologetic for proving that the Word of God is of supernatural origin and that we can turn to it with great assurance."

Many of us who teach Bible prophecy would be heartened to see the biblical conviction of a McMahon combined with the "swag" of a Groeschel. The too-often-ignored apologetic emphasis of Bible prophecy, so often treated shabbily in today's church world, could then gain the attention of the skeptics who so desperately need it.

May it be so!

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