

Don't Get Infected With Last Days Fever

Don't let the sensationalism of eschatology distract you from the priority of evangelism.

You might remember Edgar Whisenant. He wrote a best-selling book called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*—and a much less popular sequel, *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*. The second book said Jesus didn't come back in 1988 because the author, who was a former NASA engineer (!), missed his mathematical calculations by a year.

The mood of the 1980s was uneasy. After Ronald Reagan was elected president, some Christians began to surmise that Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was the Antichrist. When he died they gave the title to the next Soviet leader, Yury Andropov, and then to his successor, Konstantin Chernenko. When Chernenko died unexpectedly, people were certain that Mikhail Gorbachev was the Antichrist because he had that awful red birthmark on his forehead.

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But Jesus didn't return during Gorbachev's tenure. In fact the Soviet system crumbled and Christian missionary activity began to blossom all over the cold Russian landscape. The people who expected the sky to fall any minute found someone else to fill the Antichrist's shoes. First it was Bill Gates, then Osama bin Laden. Today it's a toss-up between Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuelan despot Hugo Chávez.

Through the years there have been gloomy rumors about computer chips and global conspiracy. I remember one story warning us that JCPenney credit cards carried the mark of the beast.

Today if you believe everything you read on the Internet, that same evil mark is on President Barack Obama's birth certificate.

All this date-setting and foolish prognostication bothers me because Jesus said it is strictly off-limits. He told His disciples before His ascension, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7, NASB). That means we don't have the right to predict the date of His return or to make guesses about the timeline of final judgment.

The apostle Paul also warned the early church to stay away from date-setting. He told Timothy: "But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels" (2 Tim. 2:23). Paul wanted his followers to keep their focus on the main thing—the spreading of the gospel—so they wouldn't get sidetracked.

Christians hold different views of the last days. Pre-millennialists focus on the imminent rapture of the church—an event that is described in the New Testament. Post-millennialists focus on the triumph of Christ through history—something that is also reinforced in the book of Revelation. Preterists emphasize the ever-increasing government of God—which Isaiah and other prophets spoke of.

I am not writing here to push a particular view of the end times. When people ask me about my eschatological position I tell them I am a "pan-millennialist"—as in: "It will all pan out in the end." I know Jesus will return in triumph. But we can't figure out these things beforehand. Anyone who claims to be an "expert" in the mysteries of Christ's return has forgotten that Jesus Himself said, "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matt. 24:36).

What concerns me most about an unhealthy focus on eschatology

is that it distracts us from the ultimate priority of evangelism.

People who get carried away by rapture fever can become escapists. I've met Christians who want Jesus to come back tomorrow even though they know there are entire tribes and people groups in Asia and Africa that have never heard the gospel. On the other hand, I've known smug post-millennialists who were so happy that God's kingdom is advancing that they felt no personal responsibility to reach the lost. I also know people who are so focused on what God is doing in Israel that they forget He has a plan for Nigeria, Bolivia or Indonesia.

In all these cases a wrong emphasis on eschatology caused Christians to lose sight of the Great Commission.

If you study the great Christian revivals of the past you find that none were triggered by date-setting, rapture fever or Bible prophecy seminars. We must preach the cross. Of course we tell the world that Christ is returning. But we do not have permission to muddle our message with nonsense about dates and global conspiracies.

John Wesley and George Whitefield preached repentance, the atonement of Christ and the reality of hell. William and Catherine Booth wept for souls and preached the message of salvation throughout England. Evan Roberts begged God to close the gates of hell in Wales for a year so that he could preach the simple gospel of a perfect redeemer. In all these cases genuine revival was the result. How I wish we could adopt this passionate focus on what really matters.

British revivalist Charles Spurgeon rebuked the preachers of his day for their eschatological speculations. He wrote in *Lectures to My Students*:

"O that Christ crucified were the universal burden of men of God. Your guess at the number of the beast ... your conjectures concerning a personal Antichrist—forgive me, I count them but

mere bones for dogs; while men are dying, and hell is filling, it seems to me the veriest drivell to be muttering about an Armageddon ... and peeping between the folded leaves of destiny to discover the fate of Germany. I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries."

If only the American church would leave this drivell behind. I pray we will reconsider our priorities and embrace a fresh anointing for evangelism.

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