

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Never Ending Presence of Prophetic Lunacy

Some of you will remember that I did an extended series back in 2002 on *Left Behind: Fact or Fiction*. I have also addressed the aberrant views of the late Harold Camping.¹ Going back to the early 70's and the phenomenal success of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (which went on to sell millions of copies) there has been a never-ending flood of books on end-time themes. Lindsey predicted that Christ would return within forty years ("a generation") of the re-establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948. Heading an Arab-African alliance, Egypt was supposed to attack Israel, with the Soviet Union subsequently entering the fray. His predictions caused enough hoopla that even *Time* magazine covered it (Jan. 8, 1973: "Is the End Near?"). Lindsey later wrote: "unmistakably... this generation is the one that will see the end of the present world and the return of Christ" (*The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*, 1981). In 1981 Bill Maupin, leader of the Lighthouse Gospel Tract Foundation (Tucson, AZ), declared that "there isn't any chance" that the rapture would not take place on June 28 of that year. His followers quit their jobs and gave away their cars. Six weeks later he had revised his calculations, and his followers again gathered at his house, waiting to be lifted off the face of the earth. But his was a small flock. Not so for Chuck Smith, founder of the Calvary Chapel network of huge worship centers (first in Costa Mesa, CA). In "Future Survival" (1978) he said: "From my understanding of biblical prophecies, I'm convinced that the Lord is coming for His Church before the end of 1981."² In 1986 Charles Taylor (Anaheim, CA), the editor of *Bible Prophecy News* published the startling calculation (about which he claimed to be "89 percent sure"!) that Jesus Christ would return on September 24, 1987. "All signs point to it," he assured readers, based on a complex formula he extrapolated from Leviticus and Daniel. "The majority of Christians," according to him, knew that the rapture would take place within the next couple of years. Perhaps the most egregious was Edgar C. Whisenant. He claimed he could prove it with mathematical precision; he was, after all, a rocket scientist. So he set out to demonstrate how "all the 886 end-time Bible prophecies" coalesced to make Rosh Hashanah of 1988 the exact date of Christ's return to rapture the saints. He published *88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988*. Whisenant was anything but humble: "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong, and I say that unequivocally. There is no way Biblically that I can be wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town." When the author's intricate system of predicting the end failed, he went on undaunted with a new book called *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*. It seems that he had made a critical error because he was following the wrong calendar: "My mistake was that my mathematical calculations were off by one year... Since all centuries should begin with a zero year (for instance, the year 1900 started this century), the first century A.D. was a year short, consisting of only 99 years. This was the one-year error in my calculations last year (1988). The Gregorian calendar (the calendar used today) is always one year in advance of the true year. Numbered correctly from the beginning, i.e., 1 A.D., 1989 Gregorian would be only one thousand nine hundred eighty eight years of 365.2422 days each."³ Whisenant was not alone in making 1988 the termination point of the last days. Many others succumbed to last days madness. Clifford Hill writes that "two young men from Denmark announced that they were the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3 sent by God to prepare the way for Messiah. Two years earlier I had met two young Americans camping on the Mount of Olives also claiming to be the two witnesses." On the heels of Whisenant came Grant R. Jeffrey's *Armageddon: Appointment with Destiny*. Jeffrey, who has gained quite a reputation for finding

“secret codes” in the Bible, writes that through his own research into biblical prophecies he has discovered a number of indications “which suggest that the year A.D. 2000 is a probable termination date for the ‘last days.’” Over the last decade or so both the Christian Broadcasting Network (*The 700 Club* with Pat Robertson) and the Trinity Broadcasting Network (*Praise the Lord* with Paul and Jan Crouch) have had numerous self-proclaimed prophets and prophetesses declare their visions and revelations about such things – all of them without exception have been 100% wrong.⁴

Tim LaHaye, in an interview on *Larry King Live* (CNN, June 19, 2000) could proudly proclaim that the *Left Behind* series constitutes “the first fictional portrayal of prophetic events that is true to the *literal* interpretation of Bible prophecy.” Noted dispensational theologian Charles Ryrie (who produced *The Ryrie Study Bible*) boasts that, “Dispensationalism is the only system that practices the *literal* principle of interpretation consistently. Other systems practice literalism, but not in every area of theology or on all parts of the Bible.”⁵ This hermeneutical shibboleth is designed to cast doubt or suspicion on those who do not subscribe to a pretrib-premillennial position. John Walvoord, for example, does not hesitate to imply that the a-mill and post-mill positions are usually associated with a low view of Scripture and are commonly the positions embraced by theological Liberals.⁶ The late Reformed theologian Philip E. Hughes rightly protests: “The device of guilt by association proves nothing and can readily become a boomerang, since it is easy to retort that the premillennial position has also been that of heretics and deviant sects, from Cerinthus in the time of the apostles to the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses in our day. But this is the ways of pride and triumphalism, and it ill-becomes those who ought humbly to be seeking an understanding of the sacred text.”⁷ The most recent example of this prophetic craze is John Hagee’s *Four Blood Moons: Something is About to Change*. Hagee, a regular on the charismatic TBN, has appeared on FOX News and other media outlets, hyping his book.

I. THE LATEST CRAZE: BLOOD MOONS

Over the next two years there will be four *Blood Moons* (sometimes called Hunter Moons): April 15, 2014; Oct. 8, 2014; April 4, 2015 and Sept. 28, 2015. When four consecutive lunar eclipses like this occur it is called a *tetrad*. “What are blood moons and what do they have to do with Bible prophecy? The appearance of the reddish color of the moon takes place during a lunar eclipse when the earth aligns between the sun and the moon at the proper angle and the earth’s shadow falls on the moon. Of course, the moon does not actually turn red. ‘During a lunar eclipse, the Moon passes behind the Earth’s shadow, which darkens it. If you could take a look at the Earth from inside its shadow, you would see that the atmosphere around the edge of the entire planet glows red. Once again, this is because large amounts of atmosphere will scatter away the blue/green light and let the red light go straight through. During a lunar eclipse, the Moon passes fully into the shadow of the Earth and it’s no longer being illuminated by the Sun; however, this red light passing through the Earth’s atmosphere does reach the Moon, and shines on it.’

“Blood moons are not unusual. There have been many of them. There have even been tetrads. The question is, are these total lunar eclipses prophetically significant?

“Those who point to ‘signs in the heavens’ are often very selective. They only see significance when they can find events they claim are prophetically noteworthy and ignore those that aren’t. For a sign to be a sign it must be unusual, and people have to have some idea why it’s a sign at the time it appears.”⁸

II. WHAT IS “LITERAL”?

C.I. Scofield, (and the *Scofield Reference Bible*) has served as the guiding light for dispensationalists like Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye. Scofield insisted on *absolute* literalism when interpreting prophecy. These are his words: “We reach the ground of *absolute literalness*. Figures are often found in the prophecies, but the figure invariably has a literal fulfillment. Not one instance exists of a ‘spiritual’ or figurative fulfillment of prophecy... Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel always Israel, Zion always Zion... Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal.”⁹ The dispensational axiom is that the Scriptures must be read in the most literal way possible even

when poetic and figurative language is employed, this is especially the case when interpreting the prophetic Scriptures.

III. LITERAL... BUT NOT LITERAL

Mark Strom has recently made this telling observation: “No *one* consistently interprets the book literally. For example, many people insist on a literal mark of ‘666’ and on a literal 1000 year imprisonment of Satan following Jesus’ return (Revelation 13:18; 20:1-3). Yet these same people never think of literal locusts or beasts. How about the moon literally turning to blood or an actual star falling on earth? They do not think of bizarre animals having the bodily features of different creatures (9:7-11; 13:1-2, 11). But who decides which bits are literal and which are not? We will get much further if we accept that the book is highly symbolic, and then research the possible Old Testament and Roman/Greek backgrounds to its symbols.”¹⁰ The expression “literal sense” is taken from the Latin *SENSUS LITERALIS*, which means “the sense of, according to the letter.”¹¹ What this actually means is that the text is to be read normally, i.e., according to the appropriate rules of language and its usage and forms. “This means,” says Venema, “that if the text is poetry, it should be read, according to the letter, as poetry. If the text is historical narrative, recounting events that occurred in a particular time and place, it is to be read as historical narrative. If the text uses forms of speech – symbols, figures, metaphor, simile, comparison, hyperbole, etc. – it is to be read according to the letter, treating such forms in the appropriate manner. The basic idea is that when the biblical texts are read in terms of their literal meaning, they are to be read in accordance with all of the appropriate rules and norms. For Dispensationalism to begin with a commitment to the ‘literal, plain or normal reading of a text’ entirely begs the question as to what that sense is. To say that the literal meaning of biblical prophecy and promises must always be the most plain, concrete and obvious meaning, is to prejudge the meaning of these texts before actually reading them ‘according to the letter,’ that is, according to the rules that obtain for the kind of language being used. It has been common since the time of the Protestant Reformation to speak of a grammatical-historical reading of the biblical texts. This is one that takes the words, phrases, syntax, and context of the biblical texts seriously – hence, grammatical – and also takes the historical settings and timing of the texts into careful consideration – hence, historical. This approach was set over against the common Medieval approach to the biblical texts that distinguished, in addition to the literal or historical meaning of a text, three further levels of meaning: the tropological (moral), the allegorical, and the anagogical (ultimate or eschatological) sense. Against the Medieval fourfold sense of the biblical texts, the Reformers spoke of the *sensus literalis*, the literal sense of the text. This means that a text is to be read according to the rules of language and grammar, and pertinent historical circumstances, in order to discover its literal (and only) meaning.”¹²

CONCLUSION: I close by citing once again Gary DeMar: “Fixating on the upcoming blood moons and their supposed relation to Jewish feast days misses the importance of the redemptive work of Jesus. He was crucified as ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29; see Isa. 53:7; John 1:36; Acts 8:32; I Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:6, 8, 12-14; 6:1). Jesus was crucified on Passover.

“The Old Covenant passed into oblivion with Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension where he sits in heaven at the Father’s right hand (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 26:64; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2): ‘And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split’ (Matt. 27:50-51).

“There are too many Christians today who are trying to resurrect the remnants of the Old Covenant when the entire New Testament is against it: ‘But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing

of the flesh, how much more will be blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:11-15).

“If Christians persist in claiming this sign or that sign is an indication of ‘imminent’ prophetic events related to the ‘last days’ and the supposed ‘rapture’ of the church they will only do damage to the integrity of the Bible and the reliable witness of the Christian witness to world in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“How many more failed predictions do we have to endure before Christians say ‘enough?’”¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ Greg Bahnsen points out “It is unusual to have a date-setter be an amillennialist like Camping; most turn out to hold a premillennial (and dispensationalist) perspective. However, I even know one postmillennialist who predicts the beginning of “the latter day glory” of Christ’s kingdom to be around the year 2000. The infection of a date-setting mentality can afflict adherents of any millennial viewpoint, even though the best representatives of all three (or four) schools vaccinate against it.” *Penpoint*, vol. 5, no. 9, 1994.

² Smith has learned his lesson: “Date Setting is wrong, and I was guilty of coming close to that. I did believe that Hal Lindsey could have been on the track when he talked about the forty-year generation, the fig tree budding being the rebirth of Israel, and I was convinced in my own heart. I never did teach it as a spiritual dogma, but I had a personal conviction that Christ was coming before 1982... I’ve learned that we can not put any parameters on the return – or on the rapture of the church – there are no parameters – it can happen at any time, hopefully within our lifetime but maybe not.” As cited in W.A. Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent* (Revell, 1989), p. 41.

³ In a February, 1989, *Charisma & Christian Life* magazine interview, Whisenant, in highly hubristic fashion, stated his ministry “is the final movement of God,” while relying on subjective – and questionable – visions and revelations that God’s final movement would come from his hometown in Arkansas in the last days. “By the way, God did say His last movement would come out the Little Rock. I live in Little Rock. I believe this is it,” he said. “Corrie ten Boom saw it in a vision. And Kathryn Kuhlman said it would.”

⁴ For further documentations of cf. W.M. Alnor, *Soothsayers of the Second Advent* (Revell, 1989) and G. DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (American Vision, 1999).

⁵ C.C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Revised and expanded edition. Moody, 1995), p. 146.

⁶ Cf. His remarks in the round table discussion. “Our Future Hope: Eschatological and the Role in the Church,” *Christianity Today* (Feb. 6, 1987).

⁷ P.E. Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (Eerdmans, 1980), p. 102.

⁸ Cf. Gary DeMar’s article at <http://americanvision.org/10106/blood-moons-bible-prophecy-integrity-bible/#sthash.LLizrlp9.dpbs>

⁹ As cited by V.S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 24. Here is how Herman Hoyt, another dispensationalist, states the matter: “This principle clearly stated is that of taking the Scriptures in their literal and normal sense, understanding that this applies to the entire Bible. This means that the historical content of the Bible is to be taken literally; the doctrinal material is also to be interpreted in this way; the moral and spiritual information likewise follows this pattern; and the prophetic material is also to be understood in this way. This does not mean that there is not such figurative language used in the Bible. But it does mean that where such language is employed, it is an application of the literal method to interpret the passage in that way. Any other method of interpretation partially, if not completely, robs God’s people of the message which was intended for them.” *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. R.G. Clouse (IVP, 1979), p. 66. The problem with Hoyt (and dispensationalists in general, especially Lindsey, LaHaye and Hagee) is that they read the Bible as if it were written directly to our time and culture as opposed to seeking to understand the language that was written in the time and culture of the original authors. It is the dispensationalists who are “robbing” God’s people by hiding the meaning of the text from them.

¹⁰ M. Strom, *The Symphony of Scripture: Making Sense of the Bible’s Many Themes* (P&R, 2001), p. 266.

¹¹ Richard Muller in his *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985) comments further, “The fundamental literal or grammatical sense of the text of Scripture, distinguished into (1) *sensus literalis simplex*, the simple literal sense, which lies immediately in the grammar and the meaning of the individual words, and (2) *sensus literalis compositus*, the constructed or compounded literal sense, which is inferred from the Scriptures as a whole or from individual clear, and therefore normative, passages of Scripture when the simple literal sense of the text in question seems to violate wither the *articuli fidei* or the *praecepta caritatis*.” (p. 279).

¹² C.P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Banner of Truth, 2000), p. 281.

¹³ DeMar, op. cit.