

Like a thief in the night

Introduction

From time to time, with boring regularity, someone comes along claiming that they know the time of the end; the date when Christ will return and bring the earth to conclusion. Every time it is based on some supposed new claim of hidden knowledge, something that Bible scholars have missed for two thousand years but which they have discovered. Often it is an interpretation of OT prophecy but sometimes it is a new exegesis of a NT verse.

Occasionally an individual will manage to capture a bunch of people and start a new movement, the Jehovah's Witnesses¹ being just one obvious example. Charles Taze Russell [1852-1916] led a millennialist group that first declared the return of Christ would come in 1873-74. When nothing happened Russell claimed that Christ had in fact come spiritually-contradicting multiple NT verses that speak of a glorious loud, earth-shaking return. Notwithstanding this obvious fudge, thousands of people joined the new movement, which continues today as a major cult.

Such is the way of claims about knowing when the end will come. Many have gone through this process, both individuals and churches (e.g. the Adventists and many Pentecostal churches).

Now this is clear disobedience to the words of the Lord not to try to fathom the date of the end, which he said that only the Father knows. Yet still today individuals come along claiming that they have a translation of the Greek or an exegesis which turns this on its head.

Don't be fooled; such are always talking hogwash. In fact it is brazen hubris for anyone to think that they know better than the great minds of the historic church who never claimed such lofty knowledge.

The simple fact is that Jesus said, and the apostles repeated, that his return would come like a thief in the night. Now the symbolism of this figure is obvious; no one knows when a thief will break into their house; that's the whole point of burglary – secrecy and surprise. This does not need complicated exegesis or interpretation and the translation is simple and clear. The end is unexpected; though the elect may have a sense about the period of the end, but not the detail.

In this paper I will simply lay out some passages which speak about this to prove that the position of the whole church on this throughout all history is accurate – we do not know the details of the time of the end, neither the date nor the time.

Analogy 1: Like a thief

For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

1 Thess 5:2

¹ The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

This is a very clear statement. The Lord comes by surprise like a thief in the night. This is referring to the last day, the Day of the Lord, not some other event such as the Fall of Jerusalem.

The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. 2 Pt 3:10

The coming of the Lord like a thief in the night is accompanied by the destruction of the Earth and the atmosphere; everything of man is burned up. Thus there is no possibility of a secret coming or a spiritual coming.

The coming of the Lord like a thief is directly connected to the end of the world. It is impossible to connect this coming with a secret coming, or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. Rev 3:3

Some may claim that this reference is only to a disciplinary act to the church of Sardis and does not regard the end. However, it is much more likely to refer to the end. The phrase clearly connects to other Biblical mentions of the end and church discipline is never elsewhere spoken of as a coming of the Lord like a thief.

Behold, I am coming as a thief. Rev 16:14

This is clearly a reference to the end as it is in context with the great day of God (v14) and Armageddon (v16). The characteristic of Jesus' coming is by surprise like a thief.

Analogy 2: Like the days of Noah

As the days of Noah *were*, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Matt 24:37

Again the consistent theme of surprise. No one alive at the time of Noah expected a global flood that would bring destruction. The flood came as a surprise. Indeed, this was the first recorded mention of rain. It seems that the ante-deluvians had not experienced rain because the earth was watered by a vapour canopy.²

While the clear point here is that the return of the Lord will be a surprise, one could claim that at the time of the flood one man (Noah) did know the time of the event. If one was proud enough I suppose he could claim similarly to be the only person on Earth that knows the time of the Second Coming, and some characters have indeed done this. However, that

² Gen 2:5, 'For the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the earth'. Gen 2:6, 'a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground'.

takes a spectacular amount of hubris and no proud person is of the Lord. Consequently, all those individuals in history that made this claim were all proved to be liars. Apart from that, it is contradictory to Biblical statements.

As the time of Noah and the flood were connected to global destruction in judgment, so the coming of the Lord is directly connected with the judgment of the world at the end. This coming is not a secret coming or regarding the destruction of Jerusalem.

Analogy 3: Like a snare

For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Lk 21:35

The point of a snare is its hiddenness and secrecy. Being caught in a snare is being taken by surprise. This is just another figure of speech to emphasise that the end of the world is sudden and unexpected.

At an unexpected time

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Matt 24:42-44

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. Matt 25:13

Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming -- in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning. Mk 13:35

But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Lk 12:39-40

Repeated statements in the Gospels point to an important feature. Here the statement is very clear, we do not know when the Lord is coming. Though the phrase 'thief in the night' is not mentioned, it clearly refers to the same point as the Lord emphasises the quality of surprise similar to a thief breaking into a house.

We do not know the time

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. Matt 24:42

Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. *It is* like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming -- in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning -- lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch! Mk 13:33-37

It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. Acts 1:7

Jesus warns the disciples twice in one passage that they do not know when the time is. Can anything be clearer? The apostles repeated this statement.

Only the Father knows

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.
Matt 24:36 [Alexandrian texts add 'nor the Son' as in Mark.]

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Mk 13:32³

These quotes reveal an astonishing emphasis about the secrecy of the time of the end. It says clearly that

- No man knows the time; neither the day nor the hour.
- No angel knows the time.
- The Son in his human nature did not know the time.

This is absolute proof that no human being knows the time of the end.

However, some claim that this refers not to the end but to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is an odd thing to say because the destruction of Jerusalem was warned (Matt 24:15-20) and indeed Christians escaped the terrors of the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans by fleeing to Pella when they perceived what was going on, having heeded Jesus' warning.

The discourse of Jesus in Matt 24 (Lk 21 & Mk 13) poses difficulties of interpretation because two themes are intertwined: the end of the world and the destruction of Jerusalem (which typified the end of the world). One has to carefully separate what refers to Jerusalem and what directly refers to the end and what typically refers to the end. I have explained this in other papers.

Scholarly comments

It is equally clear that in this verse Jesus has in mind the time of his second coming. He had plainly stated in verse 34 that those events (destruction of Jerusalem) would take place in that generation. He now as pointedly states that no one but the Father knows the day or the hour when these things (the second coming and the end of the world) will come to pass.

Robertson's Word Pictures, on Matt 24:36. Robertson was an eminent NT Greek scholar.

Of the precise time of the fulfilment. The "general signs" of its approach have been given, as the budding of the fig-tree is a certain indication that summer is near; but "the precise time" is not indicated by these things. One part of their inquiry was Mat 24:3 when those things should be. He now replies to them by saying that the precise time would not be foretold.

Albert Barnes, Notes on the NT, on Matt 24:36.

³ The fact that the Son in his human nature did not know the time is not a difficulty, yet it has spurred many debates. The son grew in knowledge from a baby (Lk 1:80, 2:40); his human life was restricted by its nature (e.g. he got tired and hungry). Some interpret it as something the Son was not allowed to disclose at that time (Luther, Melancthon, many Lutherans, Bengel, Lange, Webster, Wilkinson). The majority understand it as the fact that Jesus was ignorant of this information in his human nature (Chrysostom, Calvin, Grotius, de Wette, Meyer, Stier, Alford, Alexander). Jesus spoke what his Father told him to speak and at that time the Father had not enlightened him of the date.

But of that day and hour. By this sentence, Christ intended to hold the minds of believers in suspense that they might not, by a false imagination, fix any time for the final redemption. We know how fickle our minds are, and how much we are tickled by a vain curiosity to know more than is proper. Christ likewise perceived that the disciples were pushing forward with excessive haste to enjoy a triumph. He therefore wishes the day of his coming to be the object of such expectation and desire, that none shall dare to inquire when it will happen. In short, he wishes his disciples so to walk in the light of faith, that while they are uncertain as to the time, they may patiently wait for the revelation of him. We ought therefore to be on our guard, lest our anxiety about the time be carried farther than the Lord allows; for the chief part of our wisdom lies in confining ourselves soberly within the limits of God's word. That men may not feel uneasy at *not knowing that day*, Christ represents *angels* as their associates in this matter; for it would be a proof of excessive pride and wicked covetousness, to desire that we who creep on the earth should know more than is permitted to the *angels* in heaven. Mark adds, *nor the Son himself*. And surely that man must be singularly mad, who would hesitate to submit to the ignorance which even *the Son of God himself* did not hesitate to endure on our account. But many persons, thinking that this was unworthy of Christ, have endeavoured to mitigate the harshness of this opinion by a contrivance of their own; and perhaps they were driven to employ a subterfuge by the malice of the Arians, who attempted to prove from it that Christ is not the true and only God. So then, according to those men, Christ did not know the last day, because he did not choose to reveal it to men. But since it is manifest that the same kind of ignorance is ascribed to Christ as is ascribed to *the angels*, we must endeavour to find some other meaning which is more suitable. Before stating it, however, I shall briefly dispose of the objections of those who think that it is an insult offered to the Son of God, if it be said that any kind of ignorance can properly apply to him. As to the first objection, that nothing is unknown to God, the answer is easy. For we know that in Christ the two natures were united into one person in such a manner that each retained its own properties; and more especially the Divine nature was in a state of repose, and did not at all exert itself, whenever it was necessary that the human nature should act separately, according to what was peculiar to itself, in discharging the office of Mediator. There would be no impropriety, therefor in saying that Christ, who *knew all things*, (John 21:17) was ignorant of something in respect of his perception as a man; for otherwise he could not have been liable to grief and anxiety, and could not have been *like us*, (Hebrews 2:17.) Again, the objection urged by some—that ignorance cannot apply to Christ, because it is the punishment of sin—is beyond measure ridiculous. For, first, it is prodigious folly to assert that the ignorance which is ascribed to angels proceeds from sin; but they discover themselves to be equally foolish on another ground, by not perceiving that Christ clothed himself with our flesh, for the purpose of enduring the punishment due to our sins. And if Christ, as man, did not know the last day, that does not any more derogate from his Divine nature than to have been mortal. I have no doubt that he refers to the office appointed to him by the Father as in a former instance, when he said that *it did not belong to him* to place this or that person *at his right or left hand*, (Matthew 20:23; Mark 5:40.) For (as I explained under that passage) he did not absolutely say that this was not in his power, but the meaning was, that he had not been sent by the Father with this commission, so long as he lived among mortals. So now I understand that, so far as he had come down to us to be Mediator, until he had fully discharged his office that information was not given to him which he received after his resurrection; for then he expressly declared that power over all things had been given to him, (Matthew 28:18.)

John Calvin, Commentary on Matthew, Lark, Luke, volume 3, p116-118.

John Gill, exceptionally, refers this to the destruction of Jerusalem

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, Which is to be understood, not of the second coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the last judgment; but of the coming of the son of man, to take vengeance on the Jews.

John Gill, Commentary on the Bible, on Matt 24:36. [Adam Clarke follows this line also.]

He here instructs us as to the time of them, Mat 24:34, Mat 24:36. As to this, it is well observed by the learned Grotius, that there is a manifest distinction made between the *tauta* (Mat 24:34), and the *ekeine* (Mat 24:36), *these things*, and *that day and hour*; which will help to clear this prophecy.

(1.) As to *these things*, the wars, seductions, and persecutions, here foretold, and especially the ruin of the Jewish nation; "*This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be fulfilled* (Mat 24:34); there are those now alive, that shall see Jerusalem destroyed, and the Jewish church brought to an end." Because it might seem strange, he backs it with a solemn asseveration; "*Verily, I say unto you. You may take my word for it, these things are at the door.*" Christ often speaks of the nearness of that desolation, the more to affect people, and quicken them to prepare for it. Note, There may be greater trials and troubles yet before us, in our own day, than we are aware of. They that are old, know not what sons of Anak may be reserved for their last encounters.

(2.) But as to *that day and hour* which will put a period to time, *that knoweth no man*, Mat 24:36. Therefore take heed of confounding these two, as *they* did, who, from the words of Christ and the apostles; letters, inferred that *the day of Christ was at hand*, 2Th 2:2. No, it was not; *this generation*, and many another, *shall pass*, before *that day and hour* come. Note, [1.] There is a certain day and hour fixed for the judgment to come; it is called *the day of the Lord*, because so unalterably fixed. None of God's judgments are adjourned *sine die* - *without the appointment of a certain day*. [2.] That day and hour are a great secret. ...

No man knows it; not the wisest by their sagacity, not the best by any divine discovery. We all know that there shall be such a day; but none knows when it shall be, no, not the angels; though their capacities for knowledge are great, and their opportunities of knowing this advantageous (they dwell at the fountain-head of light), and though they are to be employed in the solemnity of that day, yet they are not told when it shall be: *none knows but my Father only*. This is one of those *secret things* which *belong to the Lord our God*. The uncertainty of the time of Christ's coming, is, to those who are watchful, *a savour of life unto life*, and makes them more watchful; but to those who are careless, it is *a savour of death unto death*, and makes them more careless.

Mathew Henry's Commentary, on Matt 24:36.

It is sufficient for us to know that God has appointed a latter day for the restoring of all things; but when it will be is hidden from us all for our sake.

Geneva Bible notes on Matt 24:36.

Of that day and hour knoweth no one. How foolish then to be figuring out the time of the Lord's coming.

The People's New Testament (1891) on Matt 24:36.

The passage from Matt 24:26 onwards is still quite applicable to the near event, the destruction of Jerusalem, but the language used is evidently such as to carry the mind onward to the more distant event which had been brought prominently forward in the latter part of the prophecy (Matt 24:36-44). In these verses, again, not only is no date given, but we are expressly told that it is deliberately withheld.

Expositor's Bible Commentary (old version), on Matt 24:36.

An exhortation to vigilance precisely because, the day and the hour being unknown to humanity. ... If the Son himself does not know the time of the Parousia, 'how cheerfully should we his followers rest in ignorance that cannot be removed, trusting in all things to our Heavenly father's wisdom and goodness'.⁴

Donald A Carson, Expositor's Bible Commentary (modern version), Matthew, Matt 24:36.

⁴ The quote is from Broadus.

The peremptory time of the day of judgment God keeps to himself secret, and will not have it particularly known, and therefore it should not be narrowly pried into.

David Dickson, Geneva Commentary, Matthew, on Matt 24:36.

The precise moment of that great event has however not been indicated. Neither could it have been, for that moment is known to the Father alone, and it has not pleased him to reveal it. ... [Angels don't know] Nor, in fact, does the Son himself, viewed from the aspect of his human nature. The Father, he alone knows. This proves the futility and sinfulness of every attempt on man's part to predict the date when Jesus will return.

William Hendriksen, NT Commentary, Matthew, on Matt 24:36.

The time he will not more exactly state for indeed the precise time no one knows but the Father only. ... So remarkable a statement seems much more natural if it relates not simply to the destruction of Jerusalem, but also, and mainly, to the second coming of which our Lord goes on to speak in the immediately succeeding verses. ... Many have been eagerly seeking to determine, and some fancying they have ascertained it, only to be disappointed; but he expressly warned against this from the outset, and impliedly bade us be reconciled to an ignorance shared by the high angels, and by the Son himself.

John A Broadus, Commentary on Matthew, on Matt 24:36.

Jesus nevertheless also warns his disciples to remember that 'no one knows about that day or hour'. ... That no one knows about it means that the exact date and the precise moment ('hour') are a mystery.

H N Ridderbos, Bible Students Commentary, Matthew, on Matt 24:36.

The Parousia will be unexpected, therefore vigilance is required.

David Hill, The New Century Bible Commentary, The Gospel of Matthew, on Matt 24:37.

It is a piece of knowledge which the Father has reserved in his own power, and his own pleasure. ... This gives a great check to the curiosity of men's inquiries after the particular time or year when the world shall have an end.

Matthew Poole's Commentary on the Holy Bible, Matt 24:36.

This matter was hidden from Him; and as I have already remarked, this is carefully to be borne in mind, in explaining the prophecy before us.

Henry Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol 1, The Four Gospels, on Matt 24:36.

What time he will come is to us most uncertain. ... So great hath been the folly and the sin of many learned men, who have childishly set their wits to play in so serious a business, as one well censureth it.

John Trapp, A Commentary of the NT, on Matt 24:26.

The Lord shows the time of the temple and the city in ver. 32-34; He denies in this verse that the day and the hour of the world are known.

John Albert Bengel, Gnomon of the NT, Vol 1, on Matt 24:36.

In mercy we are left without knowledge which we could not use. Faith for the future is better than foresight, and hope than knowledge. Even the Son of man, in his earthly lowliness, was content to be without this knowledge of the day of final judgment. No day is named, that every day may be hallowed by the sense of the possibility of its being the day of His advent.

Richard Glover, The Gospel of Matthew, on Matt 24:36.

Such quotes could be multiplied ad infinitum. The vast, overwhelming, majority of sound commentators insist that no man can know the time of the end and affirm that seeking it is a serious sin.

Likewise, the vast majority does not take this to refer to the Fall of Jerusalem but to the end of the world. Gill is highly exceptional amongst Calvinists in taking the minority view.

Christians should know the lead-up period of the Lord's Coming

So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near -- at the doors! Matt 24:33

So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.
Lk 21:31

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. Lk 21:34

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.
1 Thess 5:4

Both Jesus and the apostles gave us a list of signs that would take place at the end which serve as a warning to those who are watching. There was no point in Jesus emphasising the commands to watch and pray (Mk 13:33, 35, 37) if there was not going to be any purpose in the watching.

The key signs to be fulfilled are 1) the Gospel being proclaimed to the whole world; 2) a great apostasy in the church and the world falling under deception, 3) a global attack on the church. Other signs usually mentioned (astronomical events, tribulation, earthquakes, famines, betrayals etc) are variously interpreted and are more difficult to measure.

There have always been earthquakes, and some of gigantic proportions darkening the earth for a year, but they did not indicate the end. There are many astronomical events, some very spectacular, but these also have not marked the end. As for tribulation, persecution of the church has existed for centuries from the beginning. There are always areas in the world where terrible tribulation is occurring but this has not marked the end either.

However, at the end there will be a growing intensity of the various factors marking the end, such as apostasy in the church. Regarding the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world, that is more measurable and has not yet occurred. There are still a few languages that the Bible needs to be translated into. When that occurs, it will be a significant indicator.

The social factors, such as degeneracy, brother hating brother, selfishness etc. can be seen to be increasing. But they don't mark a specific time, we just see all these things getting worse.

We can observe certain factors, such as the 20th century seeing scores of millions of people die in conflict and war within 40 years⁵ as an indicator that things are getting closer to the end, but they give no details of the time.

⁵ WWI, WWII, Bolshevik Red Terror, Mao's purges etc.

As well as certain factors coalescing to give an indicator of the end being near, I believe that the Holy Spirit will bring an inner enlightenment to obedient disciples near the end to encourage them in persecution.

Some folk who claimed to know the time of the end

Montanists

After Montanus died his women prophetesses continued the late 2nd century movement, prophesying in a pagan ecstatic (uncontrolled, hypnotic) manner. Asceticism grew so that fasting was protracted and intensified while marriages were disrupted. In time the movement died when their prophecies of the Second Coming failed to materialise.

Abbas

Joachimus Abbas set the date for the end of the world at 1258.

Joachim of Fiore

Joachim of Fiore (Gioacchino de Fiore) set the date of the end between 1200 and 1260.

Arnoldus

Arnoldus de Villa Nova, set the date of the end at 1345.

Thomas Müntzer

Thomas Muntzer was influenced by the radical Zwickau Prophets who caused trouble for Luther. He announced that the millennium would begin in 1525. He was eventually tortured and beheaded by the government for sedition after a battle.

Hans Hut

Hans Hut was an Anabaptist in Germany who predicted the date of 27 May 1528 for the end.

Hoffman

Melchior Hoffman was an Anabaptist who stated that the Second Coming would occur in 1533.

Stiphelius

Michael Stiphelius set the date for St Luke's Day 1533.

The Munster Tragedy

Munster was a town in Westphalia during the Reformation. There, in 1534, extremists, under Jan Matthijs, preached millennialism and prophetic change, similar doctrines to those propounded by Thomas Müntzer earlier. The radical Anabaptists poured into the city and forcibly gained control in elections, making all those unwilling to be baptised to leave. The city was then declared the 'New Jerusalem' and the church became identified with society (a deviation from normal Anabaptist principles).

The surrounding Catholic rulers did not accept this subversion and besieged the city. Matthijs was killed in battle and Jan van Leyden took over, a man who considered himself to be the third 'David' and ruler of the world. His emblem was inscribed 'king of righteousness'. Polygamy and forced communism was introduced in the midst of social chaos. There were many prophecies about the imminent end of the world; Matthijs said that it would occur in 1534. The actual end of this religious fervour came in 1534 when government besieging forces took the city and restored the legitimate authorities.

Leonitius

Cyprianus Leonitius set the date in 1583.

Servetus

The famous Michael Servetus, who was executed in Geneva for heresy, had also claimed that the end would come in 1585.

Regiomontanus

Jaonnes Regiomontanus was an astronomer who set the date as 1588.

Thermopedius

Adelbertus Thermopedius set the date on 3 April 1599.

Zevi

Sabbatai Zevi, the Jewish Talmudist and Kabbala preacher claimed that the end would be in 1648.

French Prophets

The French Prophets (AKA Camisards or Cevenols) emerged after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 which had tolerated Protestants in France. These people were mostly situated in southern France where churchgoers were without pastors.

Many, mostly young illiterate women, began to prophesy as a spiritual power came upon them, giving messages to the people. Most had no knowledge of the Bible at all. These prophecies would follow trembling, crying, visions or falling over in ecstasy. One woman, Marie Boîteuse, was supposed to have wept tears of blood. They also claimed to speak in tongues during trances.

By 1700 the numbers of these prophets had swelled into thousands. When the messages encouraged violence, war developed where the Protestants were defeated. As well as Charismatic occult mystical phenomena (falling over, ecstasies, tongues, visions, trembling etc.) there were many prophecies about imminent end of the world. Gradually the movement died out.

Cusanus

Nicolaus Cusanus set the date in 1700.

Methodists

George Bell, was a Methodist leader endorsed by John Wesley who was involved in the healing of a woman from lumps in the breast in 1761. However, Wesley later disowned Bell when he predicted the end of the world would occur in 1763. However, Wesley himself predicted the date of the end as occurring in 1836.

Cardanus

Cardanus set the date in 1800.

Irvingism

Edward Irving was a popular Scottish preacher who came to London, where tongues and prophecies were experienced in his Regents Square Presbyterian Church in 1831 along with the development of Dispensational premillennial teaching.

Irving was expelled from the Presbyterian Church for heresy.⁶ A sect emerged from his teachings ('The Catholic Apostolic Church') which became scandalised in London for its extravagant behaviour and erroneous teaching plus tongues, prophecy, wild behaviour and occultism. It finally collapsed in scandal after multiple abuses and the authoritarianism of apostles and prophets, of which Irving himself was a victim, though a small sect continued.

Prophecies ensued that contained revelations which contradicted scripture and predictions that went unfulfilled, many about the end of the world. One claim was that the world would end when the last of its 12 founding apostles died (which occurred in 1901). Healings were also followed by the death of the individuals concerned. Despite its heresy, many Pentecostals point to Irving and this church as a forerunner to Pentecostalism. Pentecostal pioneer John Alexander Dowie considered Irving to be the most influential man in his life.

Shakers

The Shakers were greatly influenced by the French Prophets and further developed their occultism into complete apostasy under Ann Lee [1736-1781], who claimed to be the Messiah ('Ann the Word'). It was established in England c.1750 and was so named from the wild, ecstatic movements engaged in during worship to shake off sin (originally the 'Shaking Quakers').

In 1774 the group emigrated to America becoming a religious sect, the 'United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming', and living simply in celibate mixed communities. They became more and more occult, even copying Native American Indian animism and practising spiritualism. They made many predictions of the end of the world, e.g. 1782 and 1794. Many American Charismatics have been greatly influenced by the Shakers.

Mormons

The 'Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints' was founded in the US in 1830 by Joseph Smith Jr. Smith claimed to have found and translated *The Book of Mormon* by divine revelation. This is the source of their unorthodox doctrines. They moved their headquarters from Illinois to Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1847 under Smith's successor, Brigham Young.

It is very millennialist religion, in fact it is focused on the Second Coming. As such it was prone in the early days to predictions of the end of the world.

William Miller [1762-1849]

A New York farmer who predicted the date of the Second Coming. He made precise calculations and managed to gain a following. His claims were based on interpretations of OT prophecy. He was vague enough to claim it would be between 21 March 1843 - 21 March 1844. When this failed he instituted a 'tarrying time' of seven months and ten days (Hab 2:3). He recalculated that 22 October would actually be the end. When this failed many left him and the movement was taken over and reorganised by Ellen G White [1827-1918] as the Seventh Day Adventists.

George Rapp

George Rapp founded the Harmony Society, a 'Christian' theosophy society founded in Germany by former Pietists and afterwards in America. He predicted that Jesus would return in his lifetime. He died in 1847.

⁶ Irving taught false ideas about the nature of Christ's humanity, viz. he had a proclivity to the world and Satan and was no different to our nature. These ideas were supported by tongues and false prophecies.

Charles Taze Russell

Founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Failure of his prophecy that the end would be in 1873-74. This date was also claimed by some Adventists. After this he claimed that the last battle would be in October 1914.

Wovoka

Wovoka was a very important prophetic leader amongst the North American Native Indian community. He founded the Ghost Dance Movement, the final rebellion of the Indians, teaching that they would be invulnerable to bullets. As part of the hysteria he predicted the end of the world as coming in 1890.

Smith Wigglesworth (Pentecostal)

Predicted Christ's return before 1900 and told people that he would not die but live to be raptured. He died.

Picus Mirandula

Picus Mirandula set the date in 1905.

William Booth-Clibborn (Pentecostals)

Tells of his introduction to Pentecostal meetings in his book, 'The Baptism of the Holy Spirit'. It contains stories of groanings, tongues, weeping for hours on end, falling to the floor, laying on of hands, bodily gyrations, ecstasies, shouting, uncontrollable laughter, meetings lasting all night, being drunk with the 'Spirit', people needing to be carried from meetings, disorderliness in public after the meetings, neglect of studies in youths, and prophecies regarding the imminent end of the world.

Azusa Street (Pentecostals)

There were many false prophecies e.g. that an earthquake was soon to hit Los Angeles, the Second Coming was imminent (in 1906) etc.

Confidence Magazine (Pentecostals)

Continually stated from 1911 to 1917 that the Second Coming was at hand. It was the declaration of Pentecostals that this was not surmised from teaching, but a divine communication via tongues, prophesy and visions. Often the year was precisely stated. G.H. Lang says, '*This false prediction was so constant, so emphatic, so universal as to constitute a major feature of the whole Movement from its start, which forces serious doubt as to the energy animating it.*'⁷

Charles Parham (Pentecostal)

The founder of modern Pentecostalism. He prophesied a global end time revival, which would usher in the Second Coming of Christ to occur in the 1920's.

Armstrong

Herbert W Armstrong founded the Worldwide Church of God and predicted that the end would come in 1936, then 1943, then 1972, then 1975.

Jim Jones

The leader of the suicide death cult ('The People's Temple') in Jonestown predicted the end of the world by nuclear explosion in 1967.

Branham

William Branham, the Pentecostal heretic and prophet, said that the rapture would occur

⁷ Lang, 'The Tongues Movement', p25-26.

in 1977.

Chuck Smith

The founder of the Calvary Chapel denomination predicted that the world would end by 1981.

Pat Robertson

This famous US preacher proclaimed that the world would end in 1982.

David Berg

This leader of the Children of God cult said the world would end on several occasions, including that the Second Coming would occur in 1993.

Jerry Falwell

This famous preacher in America predicted 2000 (along with many others) to be the end of the world.

Harold Camping

The rapture would occur in 1994, 1995, 2011 etc. followed by the end of the world months later.

New Age claims

Various mystics make a claim about the end every time there is a major astronomical event, such as 'blood moons', eclipses and planetary alignments. I have lost count how many times I have heard people claim that the end is nigh due to these.

When the event is connected to another religious festival, such as the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, there is even greater hysteria. Examples include: Benjamin Creme (1982), psychic Sheldan Nidle (1997), Marshall Applewhite (1997; he and 38 followers of the Heaven's Gate cult committed suicide first), Edgar Cayce (2000), and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (2010).

This is only a small sample of the hundreds of predicted end dates. Almost every year some fool predicts the end of the world, whether it is a heretical Christian church, an occult group, a New Age person, a psychic, a Kabbalah teacher, an Alchemist, a scientist, a spiritualist or whatever.

Surely you'd think that people would learn!

Conclusion

Fake prophecies about the end of the world proliferate especially when there is a millennial fervour abroad (often towards the end of centuries, such as the late 1800s and more so at the end of millennia). Religions based on a powerful millennialism, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, always become encumbered with failed prophecies about the end. Amazingly, they usually continue to flourish instead of everyone leaving.

If we don't heed the warning of Christ in the NT to avoid this nonsense, then we should take a sober look at history and see how many times this failed before. This should be enough to dissuade anyone from trying it today. If someone still persists in claiming to be the only person who knows the date of the end, this person is deluded, knows nothing and you should avoid them.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version
© Thomas Nelson 1982

Paul Fahy Copyright © 2019
Understanding Ministries
<http://www.understanding-ministries.com>