

# Christians Who Obsess About the

# End of the World

by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz

**F**or thousands of years some people have claimed to have an inside track on how the world is going to end because God has somehow chosen them and given them exclusive information.

The classic example of this kind of special soothsayer is the weird-looking guy walking the street with a sandwich board that proclaims, "Repent! The end is near!"

I don't mind this guy. He's colorful. Besides, his message is pretty much on target. It's the other extremists that get my attention, the ones who get into all kinds of details and set specific dates for the end. Here's a select "rogues gallery" of doomsayers throughout history who were convinced they were hearing directly from God:

- In the third century AD, a Roman priest and theologian named Hippolytus calculated that creation had occurred 5,500 years before the birth of Christ. He predicted that the end of the world would take place in AD 500, or 6,000 years from the date of creation.

- In 950 a monk named Adso stirred up everyone when he speculated that the Antichrist would soon make an appearance. He didn't set a date for the end of the world, but his detailed description of the enemy of Christ set a remarkable precedent.

Since that time, people in virtually every generation have looked for the appearance of the Antichrist (current contenders are the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the king of New York, Donald Trump).

- On December 31, 999, thousands of people packed St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to witness the end of the world.
- When the Black Death killed a quarter of the people in Europe in 1347, many figured the end had come.
- Many soothsayers predicted that the world would end in 1666, which was the sum of 1,000 plus 666, the number of the Antichrist.
- The Shakers, who came to America from England in 1774, believed that the end was at

hand. The Shakers were antisex (no wonder they made such great furniture—all that creative energy had to go somewhere).

They couldn't even marry, so if their ideas had prevailed, the human race would have ended. That was okay with the Shakers. The end of the world was at hand anyway, so the human race had no reason to procreate.

- The great American preacher Jonathan Edwards believed the Great Awakening was a sign of the coming millennium. Date setting is evidently not strictly the domain of kooks and frauds because this brilliant man actually predicted that the end of the world would occur in 1866.

- Hitler and Stalin were just two of a long list of twentieth-century villains who led many people to believe that the world was about to end. Also, the advent of the nuclear age in 1945 conjured up all sorts of apocalyptic images (not to mention hundreds of really bad science-fiction movies).

- Israel became a nation once again in 1948, prompting more than one prophecy watcher to predict that Jesus would return and the world would end within 40 years—or one generation—after 1948.

- In the 1970s, cult leader Jim Jones led hundreds of people from his California church, known as the People's Temple, to Guyana in South America. They established a settlement known as Jonestown to wait for the end of the world. In 1978 Jones ordered the members of his cult to commit suicide because "it was time." More than 900 people died.



• In 1988 (40 years after 1948) hundreds of thousands of people bought a booklet entitled *88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988*. The book went out of print on January 1, 1989, and the author hasn't been seen or heard from since.

• And who can forget the millennium fever that swept the world in the year 2000? Those who predicted that the end of the world would occur at this time are too numerous to mention.

### **The Bible's Cryptic References to the End of the World**

In the fall of 1970, I was a freshman in college. That's also the year when Hal Lindsey's landmark book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, first arrived in bookstores. I can clearly recall how that little paperback, which went on to become the bestselling book of the decade,

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changed my expectations about the future. Lindsey, a writer and Bible teacher, made a powerful case for believing that the end of the world was near and that Jesus was returning to earth at any time.

Prior to *The Late Great Planet Earth*, I hadn't thought much about the future. After reading the book, I thought about it a lot. Of course, being a college freshman, my thoughts weren't all that sophisticated. Rather than thinking about the implications of an imminent end-of-the-world scenario for the world at large, I thought only of myself. I wondered if the Lord would return before I had a chance to get married

and...you know, enjoy the benefits therein. I wondered if the Lord would return before all kinds of bad stuff would happen in the world, such as nuclear war, the proliferation of Barry Manilow music and the threat of even more Barry Manilow music.

Make no mistake about it. Like now, a lot of bad stuff and potentially bad stuff was happening in the world in the 1970s. See if this doesn't sound familiar:

- We were heavily involved



in a war that didn't seem to have a purpose,

- violence was escalating between Jews and Palestinians,
- we experienced terrible natural disasters and feared more would come, and
- countries were threatening to use nuclear weapons.

With all this stuff in place, Hal Lindsey convinced me (and millions of others, evidently) that world conditions and events were lining up in perfect order and setting the stage for Jesus to return to earth. Lindsey's prophetic clock was set minutes before midnight, when the world as we knew it would end. Early in my

freshman year, I remember attending a church service where Lindsey was the guest speaker. His message was so enthralling and seemed so accurate that on the drive back to my dorm, I actually wondered if I should finish a paper I was working on. After all, if the Lord was going to return as soon as Lindsey said he was, why would I waste time on something as mundane as writing a paper?

Well, as exciting as it all seemed at the time, and as certain as I was that Jesus was coming back that year, he didn't. For the record, I finished the paper, graduated, got married and the world didn't end. Now, nearly four decades later, I'm still here. Even Barry Manilow is still around. Which brings me to my current point.

The reason I can't stand people who claim to have the Bible's prophetic references figured out (including all the symbolism in Revelation) is that no one has gotten it right yet. And guess what—they never will because God hasn't given us enough information. Jesus said that nobody knows the day or the hour when these things will take place (except for God), so we need to take him at his word and stop misleading people with messages and timetables that serve no useful purpose except to sell a whole bunch of books. □

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