

# A Prophetic Shift on the Horizon

by Gary DeMar

Reviving a biblical view of the future in the long-term growth of God's Kingdom.

**T**HE "GREAT PROPHETIC disappointment" of 1988 and the fizzle of the Left Behind franchise doesn't mean formerly "rapture-ready" Christians have abandoned a belief in the return of Christ, but it has led to a fundamental reassessment of the interpretive methodology that has been used to make repeated dogmatic arguments for an imminent end-time event. Many Bible-believing Christians, who cut their teeth on the works of notable prophecy prognosticators, have questioned the popular end-time paradigm to such an extent that they "are not awaiting [Jesus'] return at the Rapture"<sup>1</sup> but instead are focusing on John Winthrop's "city upon the hill" metaphor adopted from his "Model of Christian Charity" (1630). They have come to realize that the version of the end times that defined the twentieth century and continues to hold sway in this new century is a prophetic anomaly that had no history prior to 1830:

Pre-Civil War Evangelical eschatology was largely *postmillennial*, expecting Christ to return in judgment after a millennial reign of one thousand years. Post-Civil War Evangelical eschatology was dominated by a new doctrine of *premillennialism*. This view expected Christ to return before the millennium to take the saints out this world in an event called the "rapture."<sup>2</sup>

After the Civil War, the optimistic worldview espoused by the earlier civilization builders "was replaced by an eschatology that looked for the return of Christ to rescue the 'saints' out of this world. Premillennial teaching implied that the world

was in such bad shape that it would only get worse until the return of Christ. Some even argued that efforts to ameliorate social conditions would merely postpone the 'blessed hope' of Christ's return by delaying the process of degeneration."<sup>3</sup> Christians who are rethinking the sensationalism of contemporary apocalyptic rhetoric have come to realize that America would never have been founded if today's rapture version of eschatology had been prevalent in the seventeenth century. Where there had been an emphasis on "the propagation and advance of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ,"

[t]he vision was now one of rescue from a fallen world. Just as Jesus was expected momentarily on the clouds to rapture his saints, so the slum worker established missions to rescue sinners out of the world to be among those to meet the Lord in the air. Evangelical effort that had once provided the impulse and troops for reform rallies was rechanneled into exegetical speculation about the timing of Christ's return and into maintenance of the expanding prophecy conferences.

The extent to which this shift in eschatology was felt throughout Evangelical life and thought is difficult to overestimate. One of the most striking contrasts between pre-Civil War revivalists and those after the war is that the former founded liberal arts colleges while the latter established Bible schools. To the post-war premillennialist the liberal arts college involved too much affirmation of the cultural values of this world and took time away from

the crucial task of getting minimal knowledge of the Bible before rushing into the inner cities or the mission fields to father as many souls as possible before the imminent return of Christ. In the late nineteenth century the Bible school movement picked up the message of the prophecy conferences and trained a whole generation of Evangelicals in the new doctrines.<sup>4</sup>

Os Guinness writes that "dispensational premillennialism . . . has had unfortunate consequences on the Christian mind," including reinforcing an already developing "anti-intellectualism" and a "general indifference to serious engagement with culture."<sup>5</sup>

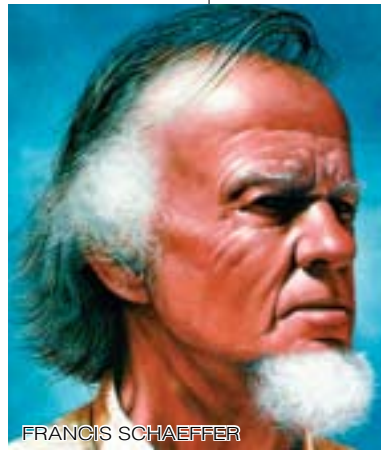
The implications of a world-be-damned biblical hermeneutic that leads to an "alarmist" worldview means that every negative newspaper headline is another support beam in an inevitable end-time constructed theology. The twentieth century is filled with such examples. William Edgar, a professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, recounts the time he spent studying in L'Abri, Switzerland, in the 1960s under the tutelage of Francis A. Schaeffer (1912–1984):

I can remember coming down the mountain from L'Abri and expecting the stock market to cave in, a priestly elite to take over American government, and enemies to poison the drinking water. I was almost disappointed when these things did not happen.<sup>6</sup>

Edgar speculates with good reason that it was Schaeffer's "premillenarian eschatology" that negatively affected the way he saw and interpreted world events. One of Schaeffer's last books, *A Christian Manifesto*, did not call for cultural transformation but civil disobedience as a stopgap measure to postpone an inevitable societal decline. "The fact remains that *Dr. Schaeffer's manifesto offers no prescriptions for a Christian society*... The same comment applies to all of Dr. Schaeffer's writings: he does not spell out the Christian alternative. He knows that you 'can't fight something with nothing,' but as a

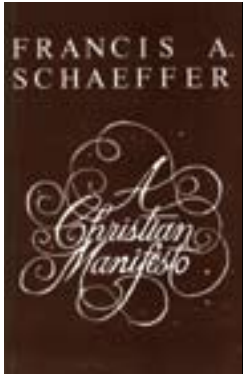


JOHN WINTHROP



FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

## A Prophetic Shift on the Horizon... continued




premillennialist, he does not expect to win the fight prior to the visible, bodily return of Jesus Christ to earth to establish His millennial kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> Tom Sine offers a startling example of the effect “prophetic inevitability” can have on some people:

“Do you realize if we start feeding hungry people things won’t get worse, and if things don’t get worse, Jesus won’t come?” interrupted a

coed during a Futures Inter-term I recently conducted at a north-west Christian college. Her tone of voice and her serious expression revealed she was utterly sincere. And unfortunately I have discovered the coed’s question doesn’t reflect an isolated viewpoint. Rather, it betrays a widespread misunderstanding of biblical eschatology... that seems to permeate much contemporary Christian consciousness. I believe this misunderstanding of God’s intentions for the human future is seriously undermining the effectiveness of the people of God in carrying out

his mission in a world of need... The response of the (student)... reflects what I call the Great Escape View of the future. So much of the popular prophetic literature has focused our attention morbidly on the dire, the dreadful, and the destruction of all that is.<sup>8</sup>

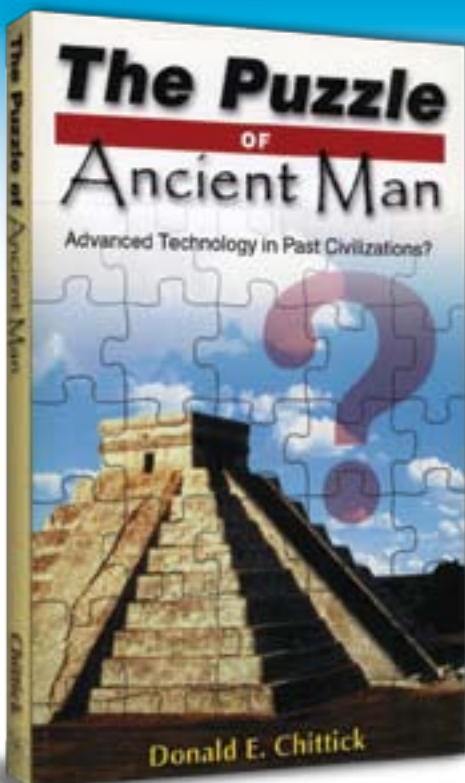
We’re not seeing the creation of a new approach to Bible prophecy but a revival of a version of biblical Christianity that has a long history of civilization building. 

### Notes

1. Jeff Sharlet, “God Blessed America: How the Christian Right is Reinventing U.S. History,” *Harper’s Magazine* (December 2006), 14.
2. Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 125.
3. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 126.
4. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, 127–28.
5. Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don’t Think and What to do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 63–65.
6. William Edgar, “Francis Schaeffer and the Public Square” in J. Budziszewski, *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 174.
7. Gary North and David Chilton, “Apologetics and Strategy,” in *Tactics of Christian*

*Resistance: A Symposium*, ed. Gary North (Tyler Texas: Geneva Divinity School, 1983), 127–128. Emphasis in original.

8. Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy: You Can Make a Difference in Tomorrow’s Troubled World* (Waco, TX: Word, 1981), 69.



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