

Adherents believe that the end of time is near

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1988, MCD is spreading the word about when members believe the rapture will take place.

In addition to distributing pamphlets, approximately 12 local MCD members pooled their resources to rent the Rochester billboard.

Joseph said members calculated the time and date of the rapture based upon careful study of Scriptures, corroborating visions from people around the world, and interpretations of various "signs of the times."

He acknowledged that the group's calculations could be wrong, but said such an error would be unimportant if MCD's efforts succeeded in bringing people to Christ.

"This date is a human calculation; humans are fallible," Joseph said. "But even if it doesn't happen, you haven't lost anything. We are trying to let people know that Jesus is coming back."

Bestrewn with dates on which various individuals predicted Christ would return to Earth, church history readily points out the fallibility of efforts to determine when the world will end. Making such predictions, in fact, violates Jesus's own instruction that his followers not try to discover when the end would come.

Further, the Catholic Church and most mainstream Protestant denominations have not only discouraged such attempts, but have even labeled some — including Montanism in the second century — as heresy.

Nevertheless, people have repeatedly used scriptural texts — especially the books of Revelation and Daniel — in efforts to pinpoint the date of Christ's return.

In his essay "The World's Last Night," British writer and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis observed:

We must admit at once that this doctrine (of the second coming) has in the past led Christians into very great follies. Apparently many people find it difficult to believe in this great event without trying to guess its date, or even without accepting as a certainty the date that any quack or hysteric offers them. To write a history of all these exploded predictions would need a book, and a sad, sordid, tragi-comical book it would be.

The most famous modern prophet of the end times was William Miller, a farmer from Low Hampton, N.Y., who, after careful study of the Bible, predicted that the rapture would take place on Oct. 22, 1844.

About 50,000 people were caught up in the movement Miller began, according to Robert Baldwin's 1984 book, *The End of the World: A Catholic View*.

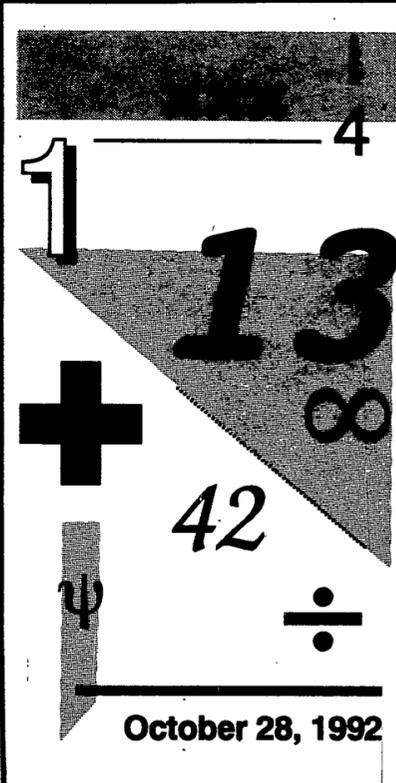
When the predicted day came and went, many of Miller's followers returned to their former churches. Some, however, formed new churches, the largest of which is the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

But Miller was not alone among Christians in his concern with the end times, Baldwin noted. Early Christians adopted this apocalyptic tradition from Judaism.

Baldwin explained that apocalyptic writings were not as concerned with predicting exact events as was the prophetic tradition. Rather, these writings concentrated in a more general way on battles between God and Satan.

"Apocalyptic literature was the literature of oppressed people," Baldwin observed. "It was a literature designed to bolster faith during times of great trial, and in some cases, to encourage resistance to oppressors."

The literature is full of symbolism designed to prevent the enemy — or current oppressor — from understanding what is being said, Baldwin argued.



Calculations led group to Oct. 28

The following outlines some of the calculations the Mission of the Coming Days has used to determine that the rapture will occur Oct. 28, 1992.

MCD members assert that Jesus predicted the rapture in Matthew 24:32-34 when he said the "fig tree" (Israel) would "put forth leaves" (return as a nation), and that the end would come within one generation of that event.

MCD leaders determined that one biblical generation is 51.57 years. This figure was arrived at by dividing the 2166 years between Abraham to Jesus (derived by studying the Bible) by 42, the number of generations this span covered.

Dividing 2166 by 42 equals 51.571428.

Multiplying the decimal portion of the figure by the number of days in the Jewish year (360), and then multiplying the decimal portion of the product by the number of hours

in the day, one arrives at a figure of 51 years, 205 days and 18 hours.

Israel became a nation again May 14, 1948. Moving forward 51 years, 205 days and 18 hours from that point in time would indicate that the millennium would begin at 6 p.m. (Israel time) on Dec. 6, 1999. The time in Rochester would be 10 a.m.

Based on Daniel 12:11-12, however, rapture adherents believe Jesus actually will return to Earth 75 days earlier to wage the Battle of Armageddon and gather the nations. Thus they peg the date of Jesus' return as Sept. 22, 1999.

Using the same passage of Daniel, MCD members calculated that the rapture would take place 2,520 days before Jesus' return to Earth.

They calculate, therefore, that the date and time the rapture will occur is 10 a.m. Eastern Standard Time Oct. 28, 1992.

Consequently, such apocalyptic books as Daniel and Revelation are about situations that were current at the time of their writing, and are not meant to be taken as literal predictions of future events.

Yet some Christians clearly reject this understanding of Scripture.

Indeed, literal interpretation of apocalyptic Scriptures received a contemporary twist in 1970 when Hal Lindsey published his best-selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

One of Lindsey's key predictions was that the rapture would take place within one generation of the restoration of the Jewish State in 1948. Based on biblical predictions of Israel's rebirth, Lindsey interpreted Jesus's remarks in Matthew 24:34 to mean that the generation that witnesses Israel's rebirth "will not pass away" until the end times come.

Calculating that a biblical generation was 40 years long, Lindsey suggested that the rapture could occur in 1988.

Many other groups and individuals picked up on this 1988 date. One of the most influential supporters of this date was Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA engineer who explained his reasoning in the 1988 book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. He used a variety of mathematical calculations — similar to those used by MCD — to determine the approximate day of the rapture, settling on Sept. 29-30 of that year.

In 1989 — after the rapture failed to occur — Whisenant published *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989* to explain that he had made a mathematical error in his calculations. He then suggested 1989 or 1992 as more likely dates.

Joseph acknowledged Whisenant's efforts and the fact that MCD's methods of determining the rapture's date are similar to those employed by the former NASA engineer.

But Whisenant, Joseph explained, "was just one man working on his own." By contrast, he noted that MCD's calculations were developed by a number of people working together and, thus, are more accurate. He added that the calculations are supported by numerous visions experienced by people around the world.

The MCD prediction is a version of premillennialism, a belief that the rapture and the tribulations will occur prior to the millennium — the

thousand-year reign cited in Revelation 20:4:

I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image nor had accepted its mark on their foreheads or hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over these; they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for the thousand years.

Postmillennialists, on the other hand, claim that Christ will return after the millennium.

Meanwhile, various groups debate whether the rapture will take place before, midway or after the tribulation.

And the Catholic position — enunciated by St. Augustine — is that the millennium is not a literal 1,000 years, but a symbolic reference to the time between Christ's ministry on Earth and the Second Coming, at which point the Last Judgment will take place.

Many of the individuals who are concerned about the millennium are fundamentalists. In fact, Emory University theologian Nancy Ammerman has identified premillennialism as one of the central features of fundamentalism in North America.

In "North American Protestant Fundamentalism" — her contribution to *Fundamentalisms Observed*, the first volume of study results from the Fundamentalism Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences — Ammerman connected concern with the end times with the fundamentalist view of the Bible.

"Fundamentalists do not simply read the Bible to learn history or moral principles," Ammerman wrote in the 1991 book. "They also expect to find in Scripture clues to the future destiny of this world, what will happen in the end times."

"From the very beginning of the fundamentalist movement," she continued, "traditionalists who were concerned about Scripture and doctrine were closely linked with people who were concerned about interpreting the Bible's prophecies."

In his 1990 book *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*, Father Thomas O'Meara, OP, speculated that indivi-

duals' emphasis on the end times betrays an unhappiness over their own lives, and a nervousness about diversity in the world.

"If you are angry at your world and ignorant of how the world of grace works, you desire the end of the cosmos," Father O'Meara wrote.

In addition, those who advocate the use of Scriptures to predict the future often are ignorant of what Scripture scholarship reveals, Baldwin noted.

For example, he observed, the Book of Daniel is a frequent source of predictions because of its seemingly accurate prophecies about the Babylonians, Medes, Persians and Greeks who conquered Palestine.

But Scripture scholars now agree that Daniel was written approximately 400 years after the Babylonian captivity and following the fall of the three other empires "prophesied" in the book, Baldwin continued. Rather than being prophetic, the author was actually recording history, he asserted.

The book's purpose, Baldwin wrote, was to inspire second-century Jews to be true to their faith during the period of persecution they were experiencing at the time of the book's writing.

Similarly, Baldwin said, rather than predicting the future, the Book of Revelation is connected to the sufferings Christians experienced in the first and second centuries.

"More specifically," Baldwin said, "the Book of Revelation gave the early Christian Church an assurance that their struggle against Rome and its blasphemous emperor worship was actually a struggle between God and Satan. The reassuring message of the book was that God is always the winner."

The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus will indeed come in glory, Baldwin observed, but does not accept such concepts as the rapture, the tribulation or the millennium as proclaimed by some groups.

"When mature Christians see such signs of upheaval and calamity in society and nature, they may take hope that Jesus will come soon," Baldwin wrote. "But they need not rush to their calendars to mark the date of His return. The mature Christian tries to live in such a way that he or she is ready to meet Jesus at any time."