

# HEART-TO-HEART

November, 1995

*A Pastoral Letter From Richard J. Foster*



Dear Friends,

I write to you today out of pastoral concern. As the year 2000 draws near, we are seeing more and more end-time scenarios as apocalyptic zeal rises to fever pitch. There were early-bird predictions: Edgar C. Whisenant's 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be In 1988 and a follow-up book The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993 . . . sold several million copies; South Korean Lee Jang Rim convinced followers around the globe that Christ would return in October, 1992; and on the air and in his book, 1994, the popular American radio Bible teacher Harold Camping targeted September 6 as the date for the final trump.

But the year 2000\* is right now favored by most prophesy preachers—though it isn't clear whose calendar we are supposed to follow or why God favors round numbers! (Two heavy hitters on the apocalyptic scene have recently weighed in with their contributions to the subject: Hal Lindsey with Planet Earth—2000 A.D. and Pat Robertson with The End of the Age, a novel which is conveniently set in the year 2000.)

All of this is big business today in Christian book stores and at the Christian Booksellers Convention. And in the general public, a recent prime-time series on ancient prophecies warned that futurists from Nostradamus to Edgar Cayce have targeted the year 2000 for the end of the world.

We are today awash in a sea of apocalyptic tabloid books. Not since the Millerite movement a century and a half ago has there been such a feeding frenzy over the end of the world. We can only expect it to increase.

We could let all this pass without comment expect for two important factors:

**One, apocalyptic speculation demeans the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ.** The church is constantly doing damage control as the predictions of these self-appointed prophets fall into public ridicule.

**Two, it is confusing to many sincere people who want to be faithful disciples of Christ.** Good people become sidetracked from the substantive issue of continuing to grow in grace into foolish conjectures about when the Rapture will occur, where the Antichrist will be born, and the like.

## GAINING PERSPECTIVE

End-times speculations are nothing new. A little historical perspective may be helpful. Consider the following sampling:

- ◆ In the second and third centuries Chiliasm (a name based on the Greek word in Rev. 20:3 which denotes the number 1000) predicted an early return of Christ and a millennial reign in

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\*With these comments I am not referring to legitimate organizations that use the year 2000 as a target goal for their endeavors. The "AD2000 and Beyond Movement" is one such group that uses this date to stimulate their evangelistic efforts. I applaud their work and that of other similar groups.

Jerusalem. One leader in Pontius declared that the last judgement would come in two years, and his followers ceased to cultivate their fields and got rid of houses and goods. Another leader in Syria led his flock out into the wilderness to meet Christ.

- ◆ Second-century Montanists prophesied that there would be an early end to the world, that the New Jerusalem would "come down out of heaven from God," and that Jesus' Second Coming would occur at Pepuza, a village in the Phrygian region of Asia Minor.
- ◆ Doomsday hysteria erupted around the year 1000 as wandering hermit messiahs fanned into flame the hopes of marginalized peoples. When Jesus did not return, the people's expectations were dashed, and they were left in even greater misery and despair.
- ◆ Gerard of Poehlede was convinced that the 1000-year reign of Christ had begun with the ascent of Constantine to power, and so in 1147 he predicted that Satan would be released soon from bondage and would conquer the Church.
- ◆ The radical reformer Hans Hut predicted the return of Christ at Pentecost, 1528, and set about gathering 144,000 elect saints to prepare for this event. Another self-styled prophet, Melchior Hoffmann, set 1534 as the date and Stasbourg as the place for Christ's return. Both of these men died in prison with their prophecies unfulfilled and their disciples disillusioned.
- ◆ Apocalyptic passion fueled the Crusades, leaving a legacy of hate and suspicion that has lasted well into the twentieth century.
- ◆ In 1661 "The Fifth Monarchy Men" tried to hasten Jesus' Second Coming by attacking the restored Stuart monarchy. This they felt would prove to God that "there was faith on the earth" and so Christ would return and establish his millennial reign in London. The sorry affair failed, and with the perpetrators jailed or beheaded, the movement fizzled.
- ◆ Postmillennial schemes were advanced by eighteenth-century American colonial leaders like Jonathan Edwards and Timothy Dwight. In the nineteenth century Charles Finney was convinced that if people were "united all over the world, the millennium might be brought about in three months."
- ◆ William Miller, founder of the Seventh-Day Adventists, following a painstaking study of Bible prophecies, declared that Christ would return in 1843. When that date passed without the expected Second Advent, he recalculated his data and set the date in 1844. Followers sold goods and properties and sat on a hill, waiting for an event that never occurred. You can imagine the resulting disillusionment.

## COUNSELS FOR TODAY

In light of history and the contemporary apocalyptic fervor, I offer these counsels.

1. **Hold high "the blessed hope" of Jesus' return.** It is too precious a doctrine to be co-opted by self-proclaimed prophets who lack training in historical theology and biblical interpretation. Christ's parousia has always been and will always be the expectant hope of the people of God. Jesus' words are clear, "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3).
2. **Reject the fallacy of date setting and place setting.** Friends, there simply is no "countdown to Armageddon." The future is contingent upon the give-and-take of God's initiative and our response. Faith, not some artificial calendar scheme, is the catalyst for Divine providence. God is patient, "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). Jesus was clear

that before his return the gospel must go forth into every ethnic group, and we can never know what is fully implied by "the completion of the Great Commission." Who knows but that God is holding back the parousia in order to bring in peoples you and I know nothing about. Maybe he is waiting for you or one you love to come into faith!

3. **Get some solid education in eschatological language.** For example, many today use the phrase "the last days" as if this period started a week from last Friday and will end within a few short years. In biblical usage the term "the last days" refers to the period from the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to the Second Coming of Christ. At Pentecost when Peter quoted the prophet Joel, "In the last days . . .", we see phenomena that covers both what happened at Pentecost—"I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh"—and what will occur at the end of the age—"the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood" (Acts 2:17-21). It is all "the last days." We have been in the last days for nearly 2000 years now, and none of us knows whether it will continue on for two years or two thousand years or two million years. Some basic education in apocalyptic literature will go a long way in helping you distinguish good interpretation of the text of Scripture from "holy baloney."
4. **Avoid mixing nationalistic myths with the everlasting gospel of the Kingdom.** Have you noticed how many end-time scenarios give favored status to the United States? Or demonize enemy nations? With the fall of communism the well-worn association of Gog with Russia is no longer viable and so prophesy preachers are scrambling to find alternatives. Islamic countries are favorite targets. "Is Saddam Hussein the Antichrist?" is the sort of popular sermon title that is used today. Who will it be tomorrow? I plead with you, do not be a part of this misguided nationalistic fervor.
5. My final counsel is especially directed toward Christian leaders. **Please, for God's sake, refuse to exploit the hopes and fears of your people with speculative prophecy preaching.** Don't weaken the gospel by tickling the ears of your people with the latest apocalyptic scheme. Reckless end-times scenarios have always been counterproductive. They only lead to disillusionment and cynicism. And they discredit the gospel of Jesus Christ. Others may exploit this hot topic for their own gain, but don't you do it. Stay faithful to your calling. Preach Christ risen

## **OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES**

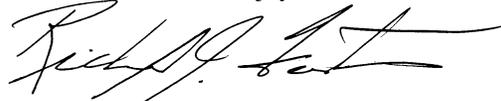
- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, tapes, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a voluntary organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

and present among his people. Preach the kingdom of God here, now, and coming. Make eschatological hope a foundation for faithful living and growing conformity to Christ, not an escape from discipleship. Stoutly refuse to demean the gospel by mixing hope of the Second Coming with reckless speculation.

**A TRUSTWORTHY MODEL**

In the fourth century St. Augustine opposed the prophetic literalism of Chiliasm. Instead of the imminent, material, millennial kingdom of Chiliasm, he helped his people see "the City of God." Out of pastoral concern he taught them that the kingdom of God was already a present reality among them in the community of faith and that its full consummation will come in God's time and in God's way in "the blessed hope" of Christ's return. Augustine's wise, sensible, biblical vision won the day and influenced the Church for centuries to come. May something of that same faith-filled sensibility arise today.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.S. We deeply appreciate your generous financial support of this ministry. As always there are the ongoing financial needs of office and staff, postage and printing. A pressing need right now is to find ways to help those in Australia and England who want to receive our mailings. Because of preaching missions in these countries, many are involved in Spiritual Formation groups and want to stay connected with us. We have explored establishing separate organizations in these countries and have decided that, for now, the timing is not right. But we would like to send them our quarterly Perspective and semi-annual pastoral letter—adapted to their situation, of course. Mailing costs are rather steep since we cannot use our U.S. bulk mailing permit. We estimate that to do these mailings for the first year will cost \$6,000.00 for Australia and \$1,500.00 for England. (We are looking into sending RENOVARÉ teams to these countries in the years ahead for extensive ministry, and keeping in touch with friends we already have made will aid us immensely in this eventuality.)

P.P.S. We try to send materials only to those who desire them, and so once a year we give opportunity for people to request that their name be removed from our mailing list. If that is your wish, feel free to check the appropriate box on the attached form and return it to us.

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