

Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time

3rd Annual Conference of the Center for Millennial Studies
 Boston, December 6-8, 1998
 Conference Proceedings

The “Watched-Pot” and the End of the World: Shaping an American Eschatology

Robert K. Whalen

Some years past we sent our six-year old to Vacation Bible School. Our motivation was less faith than Mom’s desire for a quiet house during July and August. The children held a recital when VBS ended and sang this little ditty:

*Somewhere in Outer Space
 God has prepared a place
 For those who love him and obey.
 Jesus will come again,
 Even though we don’t know when,
 THE COUNTDOWN’S GETTING SHORTER EVERY DAY!*

“The countdown’s getting shorter every day!” With those few words a harmless children’s hymn explodes into warning. What child has not heard the countdown litany of “Ten, nine, eight, seven?” He can finish the sequence for himself. Something is almost here. Almost upon him. Not quite yet, perhaps . . . but, almost.

It is this psychic tension, telling even in a child’s rhyme, which enables eschatology to survive in evangelical American Protestant thought. Such tension is absent in American Catholicism or liberal Protestant thought. Although neither of those traditions explicitly repudiate the Second Advent, they relegate it to a sort of geological time and treat it as they might the Psalmist’s prediction that “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain made low.” True enough -- but one needn’t time the process with a stopwatch. The “countdown” thus becomes so extended as to be meaningless in the faith-life of the laity.

Conversely, there is the eschatological equivalent of Dr. Johnson’s famous remark about how the prospect of hanging in the morning wonderfully concentrates the mind. Apocalyptic date-setting *does* produce results in the faith life of the believer. The Millerites are the best known such example in American history. But, the humiliating failure of such eschatologies usually eliminates them as options for succeeding generations.

So, we can say that an infinitely distant apocalypse means little to most Christians and a luridly imminent one lacks staying power. How is it, then, that millenarianism¹ is such a robust belief in American religious life, sustaining itself at a high level of voltage for nearly two

¹ By millenarianism, I mean the expectation of a literal return of Christ in judgement prior to an earthly millennium. This eschatology is also called chiliasm or premillennialism and these terms are used here synonymously.

centuries? That it *has* so sustained itself is undeniable. On a recent episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer was startled awake at night and in his panic cried out, “It’s the Rapture! Quick, get Bart out of the house before God comes!” For countless American families, as normal as the Simpsons are dysfunctional, concepts such as the Rapture, the Anti-Christ, and the millennium, along with such prophetic totems as the number “666,” are part of the familiar furniture of faith.

“*The countdown’s getting shorter every day!*” Here is the pith and marrow of American eschatology: enthusiastic embrace of the big ceremony just ahead – but with just a soupcon of coquettishness about naming a date. It is a suppleness which permits one to at once nearly set the date but still just avoid the pratfall of being left at the altar, should the groom fail to show. And, it works wonderfully! Prophetic commentators find signs and portents that the Day of the Lord is just around the corner – but don’t go too far out on a limb. In 1960, for example, Billy Graham told Richard Nixon that “some of the things that are now happening in the Middle East are highly significant from the Bible point of view.” In a follow-up letter he told the then-Vice-President “it is amazing how these scriptures are being fulfilled before our very eyes.”² Whatever that cynical politician thought of Graham’s prophetic ability, the observations were entirely typical of a ceaseless vigilance for eschatological clues.

This is what I call “Watched-Pot” eschatology and it is the marker of most evangelical apocalyptic thought. You remember, of course, the old adage that “A watched pot never boils.” Still, that it *will* boil – eventually -- seems certain. The irresistible temptation is to search the pot for signs of a boil. The tension lies in anticipation. It is this pleasant psychic tension which marks evangelical eschatology in America, not the lurid date-setting of the Millerites nor the denatured and defanged apocalypse of Mainline Protestantism. To realize this, however, just means confronting larger questions.

First, why is such an eschatology so enduring? Few things are as wearisome, after all, as constantly looking out the front-door for someone who never seems to come up the walk.

Secondly, why is eschatology so important in the first place? What caused it, rather than something else, to be so prominent in evangelical thought?

Finally, why did evangelical eschatology trend so early to millenarianism in the first place? Why not “realized eschatology,” or some other, less dramatic variant on the End Time?

There is a common answer to all these questions and it is this: *Eschatology is the vehicle selected out of our religious past to carry forward one of the profound intellectual adventures of western thought – Calvinism.*

Elsewhere I have identified a correspondence early in American history between membership in the more rigorous Calvinist denominations and authorship of millenarian works.³ This is, as the Marxists say, “no accident.” Psychiatrists are familiar with “transference,” a mechanism through which an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and wishes shift from one object or person to another. This, I maintain, happens on a social as well as individual level. It happened in our past when clergy and laity loyal to Calvinist theology transferred its key elements into eschatology. John Calvin’s system was able, as a result, to maintain a vigorous posthumous

² Quoted in William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991), p. 210.

³ Robert K. Whalen, “Calvinism and Chiliasm: The Sociology of Nineteenth Century American Millenarianism,” *American Presbyterians* 70 (Fall 1992): 163-172. In this article I relied heavily on the work of Timothy L. Smith in calculating antebellum religious populations. See his classic *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 20-24.

existence through reincarnation via millenarianism in a rare, documented, instance of the transmigration of souls!

For the first two centuries of American history, Calvinism undergirt both popular and scholarly religiosity in America. Early in the nineteenth-century, though, it began to falter.⁴ Such a rigorous belief lay a heavy burden on the faithful, after all. How many, we might well question, could live happily under the constant suspense of an uncertain election, in agonized anticipation over when, if ever, God's irresistible grace might arrive? In fact, the answer is (perhaps surprisingly) "A great many indeed!"

For generations of Calvinists the question of salvation before an awful God was like a decayed tooth in the mouth over which one could not – metaphorically speaking – resist moving the tongue, try as one might. It was torment – but too delicious, too fascinating, to be resisted. Endless watching for signs of grace kept the believer in a constant and excruciating, but endlessly beguiling, agony. Resolution of that agony of anticipation depended entirely on when, and if, an utterly sovereign God intervened to select one out of the world of sin. It is at this nexus of watchful anticipation that "watched-pot" eschatology blended almost seamlessly with Augustinian religion. How did this come about? Not through the blind collision of social forces or some vague *zeitgeist*. It happened because an identifiable group of men in a particular time and place caused it to happen. The balance of this paper is dedicated to demonstrating this.

Every city editor tells his novice journalists to get certain things right and frequently uses the classical pithy exhortation of "What?" "Who?" "How?" "When?" "Where?" and "Why?" It is excellent advice for the scholar also, and so here is the equivalent of the opening paragraphs in a lead story on American religious history.

"What?" The formation of an evangelical Protestant Christianity across broad denominational lines which restored eschatology to something akin to the urgency felt within the first century church. Theology and social belief were reinterpreted in the light of a "literal" reading of prophecy and an imminent apocalypse. Jewish-Christian relations were radically rethought.

"When?" The formative period of "watched-pot" eschatology lies between the Peace of Ghent and the outbreak of the Civil War. Especially, it encompasses the years 1830 to 1860. Its ultimate intellectual roots are directly traceable to the English Reformation, especially the re-discovery of Sacred Languages, but it began to flourish in the United States during the Jacksonian Period.

"Who?" Evangelical eschatology was shaped primarily by an influential coterie of clergy and laity of considerable professional and public repute. These men (and a few women) were prominent educators, theologians, clerics, and businessmen of the Jacksonian Era. They included one of the great early industrialists of the Jacksonian years, a merchant-prince of that era, a thrice-mayor of Philadelphia, a moderator of the Presbyterian Church (N.S.), the president of Dartmouth College, Episcopal bishops and other church worthies of that denomination.⁵

⁴ An old account of this breakdown – and still the best – is Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970.)

⁵ Eleazar Lord was president and founder of the Erie Railroad. His brother, David Nevins Lord, was a prominent drygoods merchant in Jacksonian Manhattan. Together, they funded a myriad of eschatological activities. Joel Jones was mayor of Philadelphia, but also helped David Nevins Lord edit a millenarian journal. George Duffied, Jr., was also based, for a time, in Manhattan and wrote for the Lord's publications. He was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church referred to. J.P.K. Henshaw was one of several Episcopal bishops who formed a millenarian coterie within that church, along with The Rev. Stephen H. Tyng, the rector of Manhattan's prestigious St. George's Church and a colleague of the Lords brothers and others who organized to restore the Jews to Israel. See Robert K. Whalen,

“How?” These individuals made their influence felt in several ways. The most identifiable is their copious writings -- books, pamphlets, and published sermons -- especially a series of widely-read journals. In addition to the published word there were organized clubs and societies with regular meetings and influential memberships dedicated to the propagation of millenarianism. This was all combined with organized effort toward the reestablishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

“Where?” In the Northeast, primarily, and especially around Manhattan. This was largely an urban phenomenon and occurred among men deeply immersed in the new urban and commercial society of the Jacksonian Period. As much as there was an epicenter to this movement, it lay not on farms, in villages, or at the frontier but, instead, around the area of Pearl and Nassau Streets in what is now Lower Manhattan.

“Why?” “Watched pot” eschatology, along with its attendant theological speculation, was a creative and successful attempt to keep Christianity connected to the vast structure of thought erected in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I especially wish to stress the word “successful” in this definition. What was set in motion throughout these years was not marginal to subsequent Protestant thought. Nor was it merely an abiding solace for the socially dispossessed and intellectually defeated. In large part, these men *won* their contest -- if not within each of their denominations, then within the larger context of evangelical belief. They did not do so immediately, nor even soon thereafter. But, the foundations of their eventual victory within conservative Protestant thought were well and truly laid.

What these millenarians believed was that Jesus Christ would return bodily during the reasonably near future, perhaps within a generation or two, rescue the saints from persecution, devastate the ungodly, and institute the millennium. The millennium was to be a literal thousand-year period of bliss with the world administered from Jerusalem by the Jews. At its close would come a final surge of evil, to its final defeat, and the end of the world. This is classic premillennialism, or chiliasm, or millenarianism (all these terms are used interchangeably) and it is a very ancient Christian belief indeed.

There was nothing of the fanatic nor the ignoramus about these millenarians. Nor were they as individuals, still less as a group, socially dispossessed or marginalized economically. Rather, they tended to be nearer the top of the social pyramid than its base. In 1853 a leading religious journal, the *Presbyterian Quarterly Review*, warned its readers on this point: “Among the advocates of Millenarianism,” it wrote, “are found some of the soberest, best educated, most evangelical writers and preachers in Christendom.”⁶

They hardly came much more sober for instance, than Eleazar Lord, the Manhattan businessman who founded the Erie Railroad (and was its first president), the Manhattan Fire Insurance Company, and other corporate ventures. He was active in Jacksonian politics, an acquaintance of Clay and Calhoun, and along with Lewis Tappan a leader of the evangelical business community. He built one of the early industrial fortunes of Jacksonian America (his mansion is still a minor tourist stop on the Hudson River) and devoted much of that wealth to millenarianism. He underwrote the thirteen-year run of a prominent eschatological journal, published in both New York and London, and authored numerous scholarly works on the apocalypse, the inspiration of Scripture, and the contest between science and the Biblical myth of

“Genesis, Geology, and Jews: The New York Millenarians of the Antebellum Era,” *American Presbyterians* 73 (Spring 1995):9-22. These men, along with others, formed the core of the millenarian group based in what is today’s Lower Manhattan referred to in this paper.

⁶ “Millenarianism,” *Presbyterian Quarterly Review* 2 (June 1853): 20.

creation. (From time to time, one still sees him cited by Fundamentalist Christian scholars.) On all counts, Lord was a winner in the market-oriented, urban, and industrial America of that era. His fabulously successful life immediately makes suspect the all-too-frequent reflex which accounts for chiliasm as a last-refuge of the dispossessed.⁷ Bone, sinew, and gristle, watched-pot eschatology was a rigorous diet for tough-minded men -- not pabulum for the defeated. To be sure, not every millenarian of the pre-Civil War era founded a great railroad. Yet, Lord's career warns us that if we would understand these men we must understand one great thing. And that thing is that they were not the dispossessed of a new, urban, capitalist America. Rather, they were among its proud new owners.

In 1888 an observer of American millenarianism, which had grown stupendously from its Jacksonian origins, wrote that "Premillennialism logically presupposes an *anthropology* essentially Augustinian. The ordinary Calvinism affirms the absolute helplessness of the individual for self-regeneration and self-redemption."⁸ If we consider the implications of this shrewd observation then we can begin to understand why millenarianism became so popular as a social philosophy among evangelicals and why it assumed its "watched-pot" expression. Again, let us work with a specific example.

In 1855 the president of Dartmouth College, a prominent premillennialist, warned that the world "cannot be governed by one, or a few, or the many. All despotisms, aristocracies, democracies, especially fail."⁹ A few years later he railed before the Dartmouth student body against "the dream of self-government," and damned those who would reform society according to "their own socialistic ideas, which are but ideas, visionary and impracticable in a fallen state."¹⁰ Later, this same man wrote long pamphlets in defense of slavery, attacked the Emancipation Proclamation, and was finally forced from office by the Dartmouth College trustees, who were embarrassed by his social obduracy. Two concepts encompassed his reactionary social views, Calvinism and eschatology -- and they blended seamlessly. Since man is morally powerless social reform is a delusion¹¹ and the creation of a just society must await Christ's return in fire and judgement. The *moral inability* of each man under Calvinism is thus transformed via eschatology into the *social inability of all men*.¹² God's sovereignty is preserved. Man's inability is reaffirmed. Calvinism survives. The status quo continues.

But, *when* would Christ return? Lengthy books, ponderous journals, and abstruse articles were written by millenarians on this momentous theme throughout the antebellum era,

⁷ DAB, s.v. "Lord, Eleazar;" Also, Robert K. Whalen, "Eleazar Lord and the Reformed Tradition: Christian Capitalist in the Age of Jackson," *American Presbyterians* 72 (Winter 1995): 219-28.

⁸ Samuel H. Kellogg, "Premillennialism: Its Relation to Doctrine and Practice," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 35 (April 1888): 254.

⁹ Nathan Lord to John Henry Lord, April 7, 1855, Nathan Lord MSS, Dartmouth College.

¹⁰ Nathan Lord, *The Improvement of the Present State of Things: A Discourse to the Students of Dartmouth College* (Hanover: Dartmouth Press, 1859), p. 52.

¹¹ Any number of millenarian attacks on social reform could be cited. To mention just one more instance, in 1856 the Lutheran minister and prominent churchman Joseph A. Seiss lambasted reformers thusly: "What is now the leading watchword that is convulsing the whole earth from the equator to the Poles? *Reform, reform, reform!* The church must be reformed; government must be reformed; everything must be reformed. Nothing is any longer right or adequate for dotard humanity." Joseph Seiss, *The Last Times* (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1856), pp. 296-297.

¹² This eschatological distrust of reform angered non-millenarians, such as the author who wrote of them: "Millenarianism, teaching the inevitable failure of all efforts to reform and renovate society, deadens the interest in human affairs, trains the Christian to disgust with life, and desire to flee the world in order to save himself from its dangers, and trains his own spiritual emotions in retirement rather than to interest in toil for the world's renovation." J. L. Miller, "Practical Objections to Chiliasm," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (April 1882): 268.

afterwards, and down to our own day. The thousands of pages of prophetic analysis which result may be summed up in a single phrase: “*The countdown’s getting shorter every day!*” Signs and portents abound – for those with eyes who will see. And here we see a dramatic instance of the transference of theology into eschatology. Where the Calvinist searched endlessly for signs of grace as an indication of God’s intervention in his life, he now searched the world for signs of God’s intervention in history. Some signs were significant – such as the fall of the French Monarchy. Others were less so -- such as an increase in “the malign biting off of noses,” a portent identified by the *Prophetic Times* (and it alone) in 1866.¹³

Likewise, that dramatic divine breaking into the life of each individual soul known as “conversion” was collectivized as an even more dramatic breaking into history – the Second Advent. The psychological tension felt by the Christian over whether he was predestined for salvation was transferred into a group tension over when the Lord would return. There it has lingered, most successfully, into our own time as “watched-pot” eschatology. Like the Calvinism of old, it provides the believer with a pleasurable psychic tension and delicious anguish of expectation. It is a watched-pot which cannot be made to boil; but the anxiety confirms God’s sovereignty, gives the believer an endless and fulfilling duty to search for signs, and reinforces social quietism.

The creative and renewing feature of watched-pot eschatology is what I most wish to stress. It salvaged Calvinism for American Protestants by reinventing it. It contributed as well to the extraordinary reimagining of the Jews which marked trans-Atlantic evangelical culture. We have time for only one illustrative quote about the Jews, this from 1844: “We discover it to be the purpose of the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob to remember once more his ancient people . . . by the exercise of his almighty and miraculous power.” So far, so good and not untypical of Jewish conversion efforts of that era. But, the writer goes on to predict that the Jews “shall be restored to their own land, converted, and become the center of unity of the visible church of Christ; the *chief* of the nations of the earth, during the millennial reign.”¹⁴

With this last passage – and literally hundreds more like it -- the nexus of Jewish-Christian relations is moved from a great crime – Calvary – to a shared future. It is a future in which Jews reign over Christian nations from Jerusalem and those nations joyfully acknowledge this sovereignty. Time does not permit further exploration here of this remarkable theme; but, what we see here is the genesis of that extraordinary affection felt toward the Jewish people (at least in the abstract) by American evangelicals.¹⁵

American evangelicalism, unlike Mainline Protestant thought, retains eschatology in its core theology. This came to pass as Calvinism survived by migrating into eschatology. The two systems of thought worked together like matched sine waves to amplify and preserve one another.

There is a lesson here for the religious historian and sociologist. It is that apocalyptic thought can be creative and enduring. It can be the property of successful men and can itself succeed in recreating religious sensibility. It is possible that we have become so used to thinking of eschatology in the passive voice – as something which is acted upon by “underlying” or “real”

¹³ “Perils of the Last Days,” *Prophetic Times* 4 (January 1866):15. This journal also maintained a cheerful account of shipwrecks as a portent of Christ’s return.

¹⁴ “The Restoration of the Jews to Their Own Land,” *American Millenarian and Prophetic Review* 2 (January 1, 1844): 121.

¹⁵ For a fuller account of this millenarian philo-Semitism, see Robert K. Whalen, “ ‘Christians Love the Jews!’ The Development of American Philo-Semitism, 1790-1860,” *Religion and American Culture* 6 (Summer 1996): 225-260.

social disturbances – that we fail to acknowledge the active voice with which it sometimes expresses itself. “Watched-pot” eschatology is a religious success story.