AMERICAN APOCALYPSE

A History of Modern Evangelicalism

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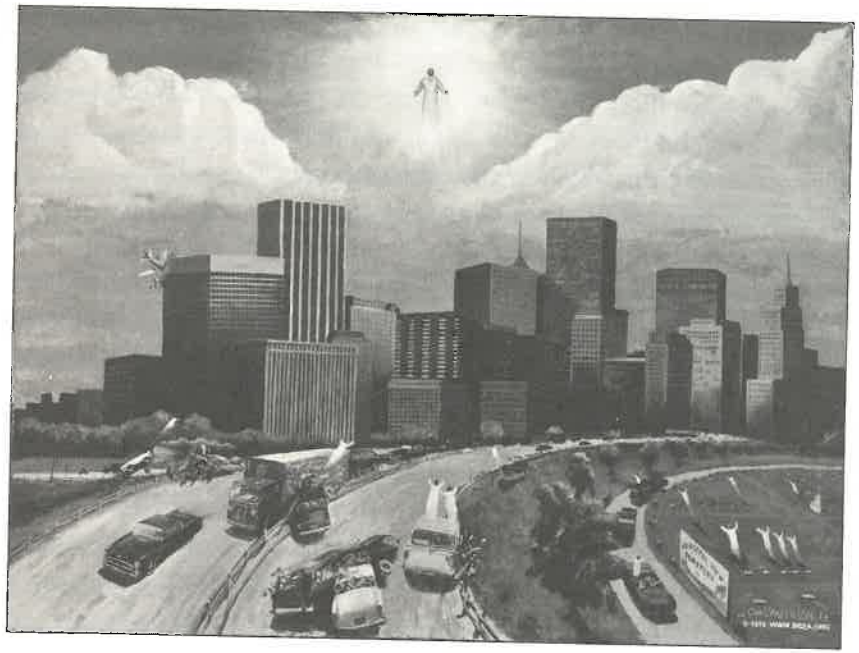
EPILOGUE

AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM IS THRIVING in the twenty-first century. While nineteenth-century premillennialists would most likely fail to recognize their spiritual great-grandchildren, white evangelicals have achieved much of what they set out to do since World War II. While they still claim at times to be a persecuted minority, in reorienting their movement and linking their faith with the major social and political issues of the era, they have accomplished more than most ever dreamed possible. Evangelicals have helped to make and break presidential candidates, influenced US foreign policy, and shaped the debates on the most important social and cultural issues of our time. In terms of religion, they have moved from provocative outsiders to consummate insiders. They play important roles in party politics and through their various advocacy groups they have acquired tremendous power at all levels of government. Liberal Christians now often fret about their declining influence while evangelicals see a bright future ahead in both the religious sphere and in every other facet of civic life, in the United States and around the globe. In the last century evangelicals' relentless sense of apocalyptic urgency helped create a movement that now claims almost 30 percent of the US population (Catholics represent about 23 percent and liberal Protestants about 14 percent of

the population). Fundamentalists began on the margins of American religious life, where they represented a schismatic alternative to mainstream Christianity; their evangelical descendants now oversee what is arguably the most powerful religious movement in the United States and one of the most powerful around the globe.[1]

As evangelical influence and power has skyrocketed, the faithful have invested more and more time in working toward achieving the kingdom of God in this world rather than in preparing humanity for the next. The result has been a waning emphasis on the imminent second coming of Christ. Some of the most famous evangelical preachers in the nation no longer talk about a soon-coming apocalypse. Despite their premillennial roots, suburban megachurch gurus and best-selling authors such as Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, and T. D. Jakes, to name but three examples, offer therapeutic solutions to life's mundane problems; they do not spend time exploring doomsday scenarios. The evangelical left has also continued to grow since the 1970s. Its leaders encourage followers to engage responsibly with this world rather than to obsess over when (or if) they will be raptured into the next. New movements have emerged out of evangelicalism as well, including the postmodernish, postevangelical "emerging church," which rejects premillennialism, and a revived, staunchly conservative version of postmillennialism called Christian Reconstruction. Nevertheless, apocalyptic premillennialism has succumbed neither to the Antichrist nor to competing theologies. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, premillennialism reappears whenever tragedy strikes.[2]

No event illustrates this better than the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001. As Americans struggled to make sense of the horrific tragedy, some elite evangelical leaders preached caution. *Christianity Today* editors, for example, made few explicit links between the attacks and doomsday beliefs. "I try to avoid end-times prophecy," Watergate felon and popular Christian leader Chuck Colson wrote in his regular *Christianity Today* column after 9/11, "that makes Christians appear irrelevant to the world." In fact, premillennialism rarely appears on the pages of this magazine anymore. But *Christianity Today*'s was not the only response to the tragedy. Chuck Smith, leader of the highly successful Calvary Chapel movement, warned his parishioners that they had better repent before time ran out. Bishop G. E. Patterson of the Church of God in Christ admonished his flock that this "could very well be the beginning of the countdown that will



This 1974 painting of Christians being raptured to heaven was used to illustrate a tract intended to explain to those who would be left behind what had happened. Evangelicals found new relevance in this illustration in the wake of the World Trade Center tragedy of September 11, 2001, since the painting features a plane crashing into a city office building.

Courtesy of the Bible Believers' Evangelistic Association.

lead to the final world conflict." John Hagee, a Texas minister who in recent years has authored numerous best-selling apocalyptic screeds, interpreted the 9/11 attacks as the opening of World War III and the beginning of the end. In the days immediately following the attack, laypeople turned to books in search of answers, emptying stores of their stocks of evangelical prophecy manuals and apocalyptic novels. A few weeks later Americans made the new Left Behind novel—*Desecration: Antichrist Takes the Throne,* which hit store shelves that October—the best-selling hardcover novel of the year.[3]

While many evangelicals wondered what the rising threat of Islamic radicalism forebode, the reactions of two of the nation's most famous evangelical leaders stoked even more controversy. Jerry Falwell appeared on Pat Robertson's television show just after 9/11. The Lynchburg minister told his *700 Club* host that the United States' "sins" had

so angered God that he had withdrawn his protection from the country, creating the opening that Osama Bin Laden exploited. "I really believe," Falwell told Robertson, "that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" As modern-day evangelicals looked to the story of ancient Israel for patterns and precedents for God's dealings with the United States, it is no surprise that some would respond to events like 9/11 with such harsh language. For the faithful, to remove God from schools, churches, and homes was to provoke his fury. Falwell and Robertson simply tapped into a long evangelical tradition built on the model of Old Testament prophets, revived by American Puritans, and developed throughout the twentieth century. The faithful had regularly interpreted national calamities, from the sinking of the Lusitania to the stock market crash to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, as expressions of the judgments of God. What made Falwell's actions different was the advent of cable news, which guaranteed that his comments would be played over and over again. Chastened by the national outcry he provoked, Falwell apologized. Nevertheless, his words fit well within mainstream evangelical orthodoxy and the culture wars mentality that had characterized American evangelicalism for over a century.[4]

Evangelical apocalypticism once again gave Americans a language with which to make sense of the tragedy. George W. Bush's rhetoric of an axis of evil, his black-and-white, good and bad, you-are-for-us-or-against-us ultimatums and his vision for transforming the Middle East reflected the ideals of modern evangelicalism. Bush may have even invoked Ezekiel's prophecy to French president Jacques Chirac to justify the invasion of Iraq. "Gog and Magog are at work in the Middle East," the American president apparently explained. "Biblical prophecies are being fulfilled." "This confrontation," he continued, "is willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase His people's enemies before a new age begins." Like Reagan, Bush was not making decisions on the basis of premillennial convictions. Nevertheless, he well understood that the neoconservative ideals that shaped his foreign policy meshed almost perfectly with the ideas of evangelical apocalypticism.[5]

The 9/11 tragedies, the opening of the "war on terror," and the commencement of military action in Iraq inspired the publication of a new deluge of premillennial books. Hagee rushed into print *Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days* (2001), which interpreted 9/11 as a sign that Armageddon was just around the corner. Hal Lindsey responded to 9/11 with *The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Jihad* (2002), a distorted, fear-mongering recap of the history of Islam and Islam's relationship with Jews. Just a few years later his anti-Muslim bigotry drove executives at the Trinity Broadcasting Network to cancel his weekly prophecy show, *International Intelligence Briefing*. They feared that Lindsey had gone too negative and his work was hurting the network's ministry in Arab countries. But he was soon back on the air. John Walvoord's publisher also looked to cash in on the renewed interest in prophecy with an updated, retitled edition of the deceased Dallas theologian's classic text: *Armageddon, Oil, and Terror: What the Bible Says about the Future of America, the Middle East, and the End of Western Civilization* (2007); and LaHaye and Jenkins continued to dominate best-seller lists with new Left Behind books. Meanwhile, all around the country various ministers broadcast their own low-budget local and regional prophecy shows. Others still made the most of the Internet, including the founders of the popular website raptureready.com, which tracks how close we are to Armageddon (we're really close).[6]

With an evangelical president at the helm, however, the faithful felt confident that although the world might be spiraling toward the apocalypse, the United States was in the best hands possible. Evangelicals generally supported George W. Bush, who often championed their policy priorities and who rewarded them by appointing evangelicals to important positions in his administration. Bush's rhetoric, convictions, and vision of and for the world matched their own. But the election of Barack Obama in 2008 raised new questions for the faithful. The specious theories about his place of birth, his internationalist tendencies, his measured support for Israel, and his Nobel Peace Prize echoed their long-held expectations about the coming world dictator. While a few evangelicals saw Obama as a type of the Antichrist, and the most radical evangelical critics even questioned his religious convictions and accused him of secretly practicing Islam, most of those still committed to premillennialism simply saw him as another FDR, a naive dupe of

Satan inadvertently preparing the nation to ally with the devil in the last days.[7]

Although historians, sociologists, and journalists continue to debate the future of American evangelicalism, recent surveys have reaffirmed the success and influence of evangelicals' efforts to spread their faith. Millions of Americans now believe that the time is nigh. A 2006 Pew poll revealed that 79 percent of US Christians believed in the second coming, and 20 percent expected it to happen in their lifetime. A 2010 Pew poll revealed that 41 percent of all Americans (well over one hundred million people) and 58 percent of white evangelicals believed that Jesus is "definitely" or "probably" going to return by 2050. Perhaps most illuminating, according to a 2014 survey, of the 50 percent of all Americans who have read any of the Bible in the previous year, over one-third claimed that they did so "to learn about the future." While the vast majority of the people questioned in these polls probably have little to no understanding of the complex theology undergirding their opinions, their faith in the Bible as a guidebook for the future reveals how widespread Christian apocalyptic ideas are and how thoroughly evangelical premillennialism has saturated American culture over the last 150 years. Evangelicals' conviction that Jesus is coming has become such a standard part of evangelical rhetoric that few believers ever question it. Their confidence that the time is short and God is going to hold his people accountable for their work has driven generations of believers to reclaim the seemingly secular American culture. The urgency, the absolute morals, the passion to right the world's wrongs, and the refusal to compromise, negotiate, or mediate, now defines much of American evangelicalism and a significant part of right-wing politics. We now live in a world shaped by evangelicals' apocalyptic hopes, dreams, and nightmares.[8]

As Billy Graham neared the end of his life, he both tapped into and continued to fuel modern American apocalyptic beliefs. In 2010, the elderly evangelist updated and reiterated his premillennial convictions in a new edition of *Storm Warning*. "Now at ninety-one years old," Graham explained to readers, "I believe the storm clouds are darker than they have ever been. . . . Benevolent hands reach down from heaven to offer us the most hopeful warning and remedy: 'Prepare to meet your God.' . . . The signs of His imminent return have never been greater than now." Graham's signs included the 9/11 attacks, the

global economic recession, the ever-growing power of the state, the environmental crisis, the influence of godless popular culture on American society, secular school curricula, and the rise of multiculturalism. Despite his claims that he was above partisanship, he also took a swipe at Barack Obama in *Storm Warning*. In a section on the "worldly church" he wrote, "we are called to distinguish ourselves as Christ followers, not community organizers," riffing off the right-wing criticisms of the president's work as a young man in Chicago. Although Graham told *Christianity Today* that he regretted the way his political involvement had compromised his ministry, that did not stop him from taking out national newspaper ads during the 2012 campaign counseling Americans to vote for candidates "who will support the biblical definition of marriage, protect the sanctity of life and defend our religious freedoms." While he didn't explicitly say "vote Republican," his message was clear.[9]

Graham's work illustrates how premillennialists-turned-fundamentalists-turned-evangelicals since William Blackstone's *Jesus Is Coming* have masterfully linked the major issues of every generation to their reading of the coming apocalypse with the goal of transforming their culture. While the signs of the apocalypse have changed over time, they have never stopped appearing for evangelicals. Discerning their meaning has given the faithful a powerful sense of urgency, a confidence that they alone understand the world in which they are living, and a hope for a future in which they will reign supreme. They also know that their critics will soon face the wrath of the Almighty and the torments of hell. The anticipation of Armageddon has been good to Billy Graham and good to American evangelicals as a whole.

In *Storm Warning* Graham perfectly encapsulated 150 years of evangelical apocalypticism, with its blend of despair and activism. "Listen!" he preached. "The distant sounds" of the four horsemen of the apocalypse "can be heard closing in on the place you now sit reading. Above the clatter of the horses' hooves arise other sounds—the metallic thud of machine guns, the whistle of flamethrowers and mortar rounds, the crackle of burning schools, homes, and churches, the high-pitched shriek of missiles zeroing in with their nuclear warheads, the explosion of megaton bombs over our cities." But there was always room for hope. "If the human race would turn from its evil ways and return to

God," he promised, "putting behind its sins of disobedience, idolatry, pride, greed, and belligerence, and all the various aberrations that lead to war, the possibility of peace exists. But when we see society as it is, with anger and violence around us, who can anticipate such a transformation?" Who indeed.[10]