

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

Jack Van Impe Presents

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On the front pages of a Greek newspaper Orthodox nuns are demonstrating against the new ID cards their government has introduced, and Rexella is disturbed. Her reading of the daily newspaper often leaves her in this state, and she appeals to her husband for explanation and reassurance.

“Jack, they claim it’s Satanic!”

Jack tilts back in his chair and appears far from disturbed. For Jack knows about ID cards. Patiently he explains to Rexella—and to us—why Satanic ID cards are not only unsurprising in a Greek context, but actually to be expected. It’s amazing how much more this man knows than we do. His extraordinary explanation takes in Antiochus Epiphanes, the European Community, and a large and confusing array of biblical verses from the prophecy of Daniel and the book of Revelation. Somehow or other, everything is connected with a mysterious set of toes and horns. It all makes perfect sense to Jack, and Rexella is reassured.

“Nothing is just happenstance with God, is it, Jack? It’s all planned out!”

But Rexella’s relief is only temporary. For soon another newspaper clip grabs her attention, and she’s troubled once again, this time by a story about Jacques Delors, President of the Commission of the European Community. Apparently he’s been calling for a spiritual awakening in Europe.

“This surprised me, Jack, that he would do this!”

This time even Jack seems perturbed, and a cloud passes over his genial countenance. For Jack knows about the European Community. Indeed, he considers himself to be an expert on the subject, and it looms large in his thinking about the future.

“It’s shocking, Rexella, because there’s to be a political head and a religious head, and here is the political figure calling for help from a religious leader to restore some kind of spiritual life to Europe.”

It’s all there in scripture, apparently: out of the reconstituted Roman Empire (the EC) will arise the Antichrist who will make use of the ecumenical movement to dominate the world politically and spiritually. Like Rambo with his first machine gun, Jack rattles off a list of supporting texts—Rev.13:1; 2 Thess.2:4; Rev.17:12; Matt.24:6—firing indiscriminately in all directions.

“We’re alive to see it happening,” says Jack with great excitement. “It’s all coming together in an unbelievable way... Jesus is coming!”

“Oh, I should say!” exclaims Rexella.

Jack and Rexella Van Impe were made for television. Indeed, it’s hard to believe that they exist outside of it. Their remarkable hairstyles defy all known laws of gravity and physics; their teeth are unreasonably numerous and white; and they know and love us all individually. They would make a perfect team for a local news show—*gravitas* and good looks, serious comment and sex appeal. As it is, they have their own weekly show, *Jack Van Impe Presents*, broadcast coast-to-coast. The opening announcement lets us know that this is a show with serious intent:

“*Jack Van Impe Presents*--a news team analyzing and presenting world events.

Having interviewed people in more than 150 nations, this team is qualified to report and interpret International News.”

Capital I, Capital N.

It's clear who the real star of the show is, of course. Rexella defers to Jack in all things, and regularly reminds us that her husband is an expert biblical interpreter who has memorized over 14,000 verses. Rexella knows her place. By the magic of television she appears to come to us direct from the 1950s without passing through any of the troublesome intervening decades.

Nevertheless, they do work well together as a team, she playing the part of the simple Christian perplexed by the turn of world events, he providing authoritative comment and interpretation of those events straight from Holy Scripture. It's a potent and attractive combination—the newspaper and the Bible, the world and the Word. Not exactly what Karl Barth may have had in mind in his celebrated description of the task of Christian preaching, perhaps, but then maybe even Jack and Rexella have a thing or two to teach us about Christian communication in the latter years of the twentieth century.

Many “mainline” Christians are tempted to dismiss the Van Impes, along with other television evangelists whose message they find distasteful, as money-grubbing charlatans who prey on the gullibility of their audience. Jack has been an evangelist since the late 1940s, but in recent years he has abandoned the itinerant life to focus completely on his TV ministry. Every program has either a direct plea for money or a plug for some kind of merchandise—a video outlining “Russia's coming invasion of Israel,” for example, or “the world's first electronic Holy Bible” (KJV) containing the whole of the Old and New Testament with helps. And Jack and Rexella don't look poor.

But this objection doesn't carry a lot of weight. If we were to take it seriously we would have to condemn vast swathes of American culture, and, in all honesty, ourselves along with it. *Everyone* on American TV is trying to sell us something or make a buck or two, and we do not usually protest. From the advertisers on the major networks, to the smooth salespeople on the shopping channels, to the generous, altruistic, corporate sponsors of worthy documentaries on PBS, money and influence is the name of the game. Nor is there any reason to suppose that Jack Van Impe's interest in money is any greater than that of the average church pastor trying to encourage “responsible Christian stewardship,” or of the denominational seminary attempting to fund its activities!

Another real temptation - a temptation to which, perhaps, this article has already succumbed—is to ridicule this emphasis on the end times and to write off the fundamentalists as fanatics and nut cases, who are not worth engaging in theological discussion. But that is far too easy. The uncomfortable fact is that the Jack Van Impes of this world—with their expectations of the imminent return of Christ and the dawn of the millennium—are, in many ways, more in tune with the ancient traditions of the church than we in the so-called “mainline” churches are.

Belief in the imminent return of Christ is nothing new. Throughout the history of the church there have always been groups who have been interested in the advent of the millennium and who have been characterized by eschatological urgency. Early Christian thinkers like Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Lactantius expected the premillennial advent of Christ followed by his glorious earthly reign with the saints prior to the final consummation.¹ Irenaeus compiled an anthology of messianic prophecies from the Old and New Testaments as proof of his position which he

included in his treatise *Against Heresies*. The later Constantinian church was embarrassed by this eschatological fervour and saw it, correctly, as a threat to social order. It adopted a spiritualized interpretation based largely on Augustine's hugely influential work, *The City of God*, which taught that the binding of Satan, and the thousand-year reign of the saints on earth was already a fact of history.² The church successfully suppressed the millennial sections of Irenaeus' book, and they were not rediscovered until 1575.³

But as Norman Cohn has shown in his fascinating book *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, despite the official position of the church, popular interest in millennial prophecy remained high throughout the Middle Ages and sometimes erupted in dramatic ways as in the flagellant movement and the Crusades. The prophetic interpretation of history put forward by Joachim of Fiore (1145-1202)—"the most influential one known to Europe until the appearance of Marxism," in Cohn's opinion—had a revolutionary impact on many groups through to the time of the Reformation and beyond.⁴

It is hardly necessary to add that throughout Europe the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were times of great apocalyptic and millennial expectation. People felt that the events unfolding before them - the religious and political upheavals associated with the Reformation - were clear signs that history was moving rapidly to its climax. In mid-seventeenth century England these ideas were far from being the domain of the lunatic fringe. By now, as one scholar has put it, "eschatological expectation belonged more to orthodoxy than it did to heterodoxy."⁵

The Dispensationalist school of biblical interpretation, to which Jack Van Impe belongs, clearly draws on many of the same ideas and rules of interpretation employed by the groups alluded to above. But the modern movement known as Dispensationalism, with its very detailed and precise end-times scenarios, traces its roots back to the mid-nineteenth century and to the Englishman J.N. Darby. Darby has had a massive influence on the development of North American theology, firstly through his own preaching tours, but eventually, and far more importantly, through the popularization of his ideas in the study notes of the *Scofield Reference Bible* of 1909. His legacy continues in the works of best-selling authors Hal Lindsey, John Walvoord,⁶ and, of course, of Van Impe himself.

Dispensationalist ideas continue to dominate the imagination of millions of Americans today. But what is the appeal of this kind of biblical interpretation? There is, I believe, an interesting and important relationship between the growth of Dispensationalism and the rise of the modern media. It's no coincidence that Jack and Rexella are good on TV. In a sense, their eschatology and the technology they are employing were made for each other.

J.N. Darby (1800-1882) began his successful preaching ministry during the 1830s, the decade that also saw the dawn of the mass circulation newspaper. Dispensationalist ideas grew in popularity in America at the same time that the telegraph, invented in 1844 by Samuel Morse (1791-1872), was revolutionizing the way that Americans viewed the world.

The telegraph led to a massive growth in the amount of information available to citizens—information that, for the first time in history, seemed to be freed from the confines of time and space. Instead of being limited by the speed a human being could travel—in practice, at that stage, the speed of a train - information was now instantly available from a seemingly infinite number of places. It became a commodity, capable of being bought and sold much like anything else, and without any requirement that

it be relevant or coherent. “Telegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information; that is, to the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision making and action, but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity.”⁷

Cynics like Henry David Thoreau thought that this would have a trivializing effect on public discourse: “We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.”⁸ How right he was, in so many ways! A century and a half later through the children of the telegraph—newspapers, radio and television—Americans are still busy feeding their obsession with Chuck and Di, and all the other erring children of British royalty.

But, in my opinion, trivialization is not the most disturbing aspect of the telegraph and its legacy. More troubling still is the meaninglessness, the incoherence, the fragmented consciousness encouraged and engendered by this avalanche of information. What do we do with all this disconnected, context-free information? Neil Postman has suggested that we turn it into a diversion, an amusement, a form of entertainment.⁹ But if that is so, then behind the smiling mask is a hideous countenance. Because our overload of information can also be the root cause of nihilism, futility, and despair. This was not what Samuel Morse had in mind.

In the first telegraphic message Morse declared that the purpose of his invention was not to spread the price of pork but to ask the question “What hath God wrought?”¹⁰ The telegraph was seen by him, and many others, as having spiritual and theological significance: it was viewed in almost messianic terms. James Carey observes that “this new technology entered American discussions not as a mundane fact but as divinely inspired for the purposes of spreading the Christian message farther and faster, eclipsing time and transcending space, saving the heathen, bringing closer and making more probable the day of salvation.”¹¹

But I believe that, from the beginning, it had reflective, theological significance as well as activist, evangelistic potential. By bringing ordinary people into daily contact with great political events on the national and international scene, the new communication technology also opened up extraordinary interpretive possibilities. What were Christians to do with all this mass of seemingly unrelated, incoherent information? One powerful suggestion put forward by the end-time preachers was that they should use it to read “the signs of the times.” For them there was--and still is--no such thing as unrelated, incoherent information! “*Nothing is just happenstance with God, is it Jack? It’s all planned out!*”

The complex scenarios of the Dispensationalist preachers require at least a nodding acquaintance with the news stories of the day. Indeed, they are premised upon such knowledge. We know a little about events in Russia, the fluctuations in the money market, the growth of the European community, developments in the West Bank, Saddam Hussein’s attitude to Israel, the instability in the Middle East. All this is part and parcel of our daily intake of information. The whole point of end-time preaching is to draw attention to the activity of God in the world in bringing prophecies to fulfilment, manifesting Satan’s final defeat, and paving the way for the return of Jesus Christ. Dispensationalism weaves the bits and pieces of telegraphic communication—the fragments of a day lived in the media culture—into a theological narrative. It gives an answer to the question, “What hath God wrought?” Jack and Rexella are presenting a weekly theology of history.

There are big problems with it, of course. Much of the speculation is ridiculous. The Antichrist is Adolf Hitler. No, it's Henry Kissinger. It could be Anwar Sadat. No, it's Saddam Hussein. Currently, Jack is suggesting, for some extremely obscure reason, that it's King Carlos of Spain. Watch this space. And this highly speculative theology is literally a theology of spectacle. It's interesting to note that in none of the Dispensationalist scenarios does America have any role to play. Apparently the action, the devastation, the carnage, takes place elsewhere. What is America doing while prophecy is being fulfilled? Watching it happen on TV.

But it is a theology of history, nevertheless, in which world events are seen as the unfolding of a divine drama. For the Van Impes, as for the early Christians, Revelation is a book in which they're involved. It is not a record of the eschatological fantasies of a persecuted community, nor a disguised political critique of the Roman Empire. It is a story that is only now reaching its conclusion. It is their story. It may be full of evil characters and foretell horrific events. But these are all a mere prelude to the great and unsurpassable joy of Christ's coming. Jack and Rexella are excited and they share that excitement with Christians down through the ages.

But not, it would seem, with us in "the mainline." We tend to see history more as a tragic mess. We have our theologies of hope, of course. But in reality, we've lost a sense of the drama - of the divine purpose in history. All we are left with is a hand-wringing pessimism about the state of the world. In other words, we share the nihilism that seems so deeply ingrained in our culture. Doom and judgement confront us - there is no hope. Have we been abandoned by God? Jack and Rexella and those other crazy fundamentalists answer, "Of course not! Just look! Can't you read the signs?" We, for our part, are more likely to respond, "It certainly looks like it."

The question is often asked as to why the fundamentalists are so much better than "the mainline" at using the new technologies and getting their message out on the airwaves. The answer, I believe, has to do with all of the above. It's difficult to make a mark in the communications business when you don't have anything much to say. The time for us sensible, "mainline" folk to make a serious move into the world of television will be when we can pray with Jack and Rexella "Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus." And mean it.

NOTES

¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1968), 468-469.

² Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 20, chaps. 8 & 9.

³ N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Oxford 1970), 27-29.

⁴ Cohn, p. 108 ff. See also M. Reeve, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1969), 82, 83, 248-250; G. Leff, *Herese in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester 1967), 71-82.

⁵ Bryan Ball, *A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden 1975), 233. See also R. Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Appleford 1978); P. Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon* (Toronto 1978); K.R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645* (London 1979).

⁶ Hal Lindsey's *The Great Planet Earth* (1970) was the best selling nonfiction book of the 1970's. Walvoord's book, *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis* (1974) sold more than a million copies. For an overview of the impact of these and other end-time prophets, see Russell Chandler, *Doomsday: The End of the World—A View Through Time* (Michigan, 1993).

⁷ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York 1985), 66.

⁸ Quoted in Postman, 66.

⁹ Postman, 77.

¹⁰ Quoted in James Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16, 17.