

Modern-day prophecies require no acts of magic

Pat Robertson is an idiot.

What else can you say about a man who, just a few days ago, hinted at apocalyptic events for a small town in Pennsylvania when an election didn't go his way?

Robertson's statement, quoted extensively in the media and available in a video clip on the Internet, tells Dover residents not to turn to God if disaster strikes. Their crime? Voting out their anti-evolution school board. Pat's starting lineup went 0-for-8 on Election Day. He is not a happy camper.

Robertson's semi-prophetic statement is exactly the kind of equivocating, weaseling gibberish that con men and hustlers have employed since time immemorial. Being a modern-day prophet is no big trick. It just takes an understanding of people. That, and a total lack of conscience.

The trick to predicting the future is to say something attention-getting but vague, something you couldn't possibly be held accountable for. If the event you predicted doesn't come to pass, nobody will remember. It's human nature to forget the unremarkable.

But if you get it right (and eventually you will), tell everyone how you hit it on the nose. Does anyone believe if, heaven forbid, a tornado hits Dover, Robertson will say, "It's just a coincidence"? Of course not. He's going to shout the truth of his prophetic vision from the rooftops. Or at least from his TV studio.

To show you how this scam works, I hereby proclaim that I have the gift of prophecy. At the very least, I have a stronger claim than Robertson. That's because I made a clear, verifiable and testable prediction well before the event occurred, something that Reverend Robertson has never done. On these very pages two weeks ago, I predicted the total and complete failure of Robertson's cause. That's right: I called the Dover school board election. Look it up if you want to.

Of course, if I had got it wrong, I wouldn't be mentioning that right now, and you would never have noticed. Human nature, remember? Hype your hits, mute your misses. That's the name of the prediction game.

Still, let's humor Robertson a little and see where his ideas lead. I have to wonder what kind of natural disaster Robertson is expecting. After all, plenty of people in Dover voted the way he wanted them to.



OPINION
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Will the town be hit by a flood that only drowns voters against incumbent school boards? A tornado that limits its carnage to schools with evolution-only classrooms? An earthquake that destroys atheist-owned businesses but spares 700 Club backers? The mind boggles.

And in the aftermath of such a disaster, how will Robertson tell his organizations to respond? "Operation Blessing" is Robertson's charity for disaster relief. From what I can tell, it does good work. Here's a quote from its Web site:

"When disaster strikes, Operation Blessing is there. With emergency relief supplies, water, food and medical care, Operation Blessing teams meet urgent needs worldwide and remain alongside disaster victims as they recovery (sic)." Maybe the grammar is a little iffy, but they're obviously committed to doing the right thing.

But here's the \$700 question: What if a disaster hits Dover? Will Operation Blessing help? How can it be there, when Pat says God won't be?

The truly sad idea behind natural disasters as the wrath of God is that it's defeatist. It's a slap in the face of the human spirit. With something more idealistic in mind, I want to use my crystal ball once more. These predictions will be harder to test, because I won't live to see them. But perhaps this column will live on in a Google-retrievable data store in the 22nd century, running Windows 2105. Maybe someone in the future will read these words and hold me accountable:

I predict within the next 50 years, we'll be able to forecast earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes.

I predict within the next century, we'll be able to control them.

I predict we will do so with the very same science that Robertson so heatedly condemns.

I predict people will come to understand prophecies of disaster not as inevitable and preordained, but as something avoidable through the exercise of free will. Provided we have the wisdom and courage to act.

Hmm. That last one sounds oddly familiar. I think I learned it in Sunday School.

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