

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. IV No. 3

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1981

January/February 1981

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CRISIS OF THE MORAL MAJORITY

by Gary North

Last summer, I had the opportunity of speaking at the National Affairs Briefing Conference, sponsored by the Religious Roundtable, and held in Dallas. It was a truly remarkable event. Over 15,000 people attended the final evening meeting, which gave them an opportunity to hear James Robison, the Fort Worth evangelist (and, in my view, the most effective large audience preacher in the English-speaking world), and R. W. Reagan, a political candidate. (Yes, I know. His name is Ronald Wilson Reagan. Each name contains six letters. The three names make 666. And we all know what 666 means! Or do we?)

The conference brought many of the nation's leading Protestant evangelists to the podium, along with senior retired military men and Christian political leaders, to speak to thousands of (mostly) Protestant laymen and ministers. The message was straightforward: it is the Christian's responsibility to vote, to vote in terms of biblical principle, and to get other Christians to vote. There can be no legal system that is not at bottom a system of morality, the speakers repeated again and again. Furthermore, every system of morality is at bottom a religion. It says "no" to some actions, while allowing others. It has a concept of right and wrong. Therefore, everyone concluded, it is proper for Christians to get active in politics. It is our legal right and our moral, meaning religious, duty.

You would think that this was conventional enough, but it is not conventional at all in the Christian world of the twentieth century. So thoroughly secularized has Christian thinking become, that the majority of Christians in the United States still appear to believe that there is neutrality in the universe, a kind of cultural and social "no man's land" between God and Satan, and that the various law structures of this neutral world of discourse are all acceptable to God. All except one, of course: Old Testament law. That is unthinkable, says the modern Christian. God will accept any legal framework except Old Testament law. Apparently He got sick of it 2000 years ago.

So when the crowd heard what the preachers and electronic media leaders were saying, they must have booed, or groaned, or walked out, right? After all, here were these men, abandoning the political and intellectual premises of three generations of Protestant pietism, right before the eyes of the faithful. So what did they do? They clapped. They shouted "Amen!" They stood up and cheered.

These men are master orators. They can move a crowd of faithful laymen. They can even move a crowd of preachers. Was it simply technique that drew the responses of the faithful? Didn't the listeners understand what was being said? The magnitude of the response, after two days of speeches, indicates that the listeners liked what they were hearing. The crowds kept getting larger. The cheering kept getting louder. The attendees kept loading their arms with activist materials. What was going on?

Victory

They were, for the first time in their lives, smelling polit-

ical blood. For people who have smelled nothing except political droppings all their lives, it was an exhilarating scent. Maybe some of them thought they smelled something sweet back in 1976, but now they were smelling blood, not the victory of a safe, "born again" candidate like Jimmy Carter once convinced Christians that he was. They were smelling a "throw the SOB's out" victory, and they loved it. Only Reagan showed up. Carter and Anderson decided the fundamentalists wouldn't be too receptive to them. How correct they were.

But it was not simply politics that motivated the listeners. It was everything. Here were the nation's fundamentalist religious leaders, with the conspicuous exception of the fading Billy Graham, telling the crowd that the election of 1980 is only the beginning, that the principles of the Bible can become the law of the land, that the secular humanists who have dominated American political life for a hundred years can be tossed out and replaced with God-fearing men. Every area of life is open to Christian victory: education, family, economics, politics, law enforcement, and so forth. Speaker after speaker announced this goal to the audience. The audience went wild.

Here was a startling sight to see: thousands of Christians, including pastors, who had believed all their lives in the imminent return of Christ, the rise of Satan's forces, and the inevitable failure of the church too convert the world, now standing up to cheer other pastors, who also have believed this doctrine of earthly defeat all their lives, but who were proclaiming victory, in time and on earth. Never have I personally witnessed such enthusiastic schizophrenia in my life. Thousands of people were cheering for all they were worth — cheering away the eschatological doctrines of a lifetime, cheering away the theological pessimism of a lifetime.

Did they understand what they were doing? How can anyone be sure? But this much was clear: the term "rapture" was not prominent at the National Affairs Briefing Conference of 1980. Almost nobody was talking about the imminent return of Christ. The one glaring exception was Bailey Smith, President of the Southern Baptist Convention, who later told reporters that he really was not favorable to the political thrust of the meeting, and that he came to speak only because some of his friends in the evangelical movement asked him. (It was Smith, by the way, who made the oft-quoted statement that "God doesn't hear the prayer of a Jew." Ironically, the Moral Majority got tarred with that statement by the secular press, when the man who made it had publicly disassociated himself from the Moral Majority. He has since disavowed the statement, but he certainly said it with enthusiasm at the time. I was seated on the podium behind him when he said it. It is not the kind of statement that a wise man makes without a lot of theological qualification and explanation.)

In checking with someone who had attended a similar conference in California a few weeks previously, I was told that the same neglect of the rapture doctrine had been noticeable. All of a sudden, the word has dropped out of the vocabulary

of politically oriented fundamentalist leaders. Perhaps they still use it in their pulpits back home, but on the activist circuit, you seldom hear the term. More people are talking about the sovereignty of God than about the rapture. This is extremely significant.

How can you motivate people to get out and work for a political cause if you also tell them that they cannot be successful in their efforts? How can you expect to win if you don't expect to win? How can you get men elected if you tell the voters that their votes cannot possibly reverse society's downward drift into Satan's kingdom? What successful political movement was ever based on expectations of inevitable external defeat?

The Moral Majority is feeling its political strength. These people smell the blood of the political opposition. Who is going to stand up and tell these people the following? "Ladies and Gentlemen, all this talk about overcoming the political, moral, economic, and social evils of our nation is sheer nonsense. The Bible tells us that everything will get steadily worse, until Christ comes to rapture His church out of this miserable world. Nothing we can do will turn this world around. All your enthusiasm is wasted. All your efforts are in vain. All the money and time you devote to this earthly cause will go down the drain. You can't use biblical principles – a code term for biblical Old Testament law – to reconstruct society. Biblical law is not for the church age. Victory is not for the church age. However, get out there and work like crazy. It's your moral duty." Not a very inspiring speech, is it? Not the stuff of political victories, you say. How correct you are!

Ever try to get your listeners to send you money to battle the forces of social evil by using some variation of this sermon? The Moral Majority fundamentalists have smelled the opposition's blood since 1978, and the savory odor has overwhelmed their official theology. So they have stopped talking about the rapture.

But this schizophrenia cannot go on forever. In off-years, in between elections, the enthusiasm may wane. Or the "Christian" political leaders may appoint the same tired faces to the positions of high authority. (I use the word "may" facetiously; the Pied Pipers of politics appoint nobody except secular humanists. Always. It will take a real social and political upheaval to reverse this law of political life. That upheaval is coming.) In any case, the folks in the pews will be tempted to stop sending money to anyone who raises false hopes before them. So the Moral Majority fundamentalist preachers are in a jam. If they preach victory, the old-line pessimists will stop sending in checks. And if they start preaching the old-line dispensational, premillennial, earthly defeatism, their recently motivated audiences may abandon them in order to follow more consistent, more optimistic, more success-oriented pastors.

What's a fellow to do? Answer: give different speeches to different groups. For a while, this tactic may work. But for how long?

Theological Schizophrenia

Eventually, the logic of a man's theology begins to affect his actions and his long-term commitments. We will see some important shifts in theology in the 1980's. We will find out whether fundamentalists are committed to premillennial dispensationalism – pretribulation, midtribulation, or posttribulation – or whether they are committed to the idea of Christian reconstruction. They will begin to divide into separate camps. Some will cling to the traditional Scofieldism. They will enter the political arenas only when they are able to suppress or ignore the implications of their faith. Men are unlikely to remain in the front lines of the political battle

when they themselves believe that the long-term earthly effects of their sacrifice will come to nothing except visible failure. Others will scrap their dispensational eschatology completely and turn to a perspective which offers them hope, in time and on earth. They will be driven by the implications of their religious commitment to the struggles of our day to abandon their traditional premillennialism. Pessimistic pietism and optimistic reconstructionism don't mix.

This is not to say that consistent premillennialist cannot ever become committed to a long-term political fight. It is to say that most premillennialist have not in the past, and are unlikely to do so in the future. If they do, leadership will come from other sources, theologically speaking.

Three basic ideas are crucial for the success of any religious, social, intellectual, and political movement. First, the doctrine of predestination. Second, the doctrine of law. Third, the doctrine of inevitable victory. The fusion of these three ideas has led to the victories of Marxism since 1848. The Communists believe that historical forces are on their side, that Marxism-Leninism provides them with access to the laws of historical change, and that their movement must succeed. Islam has a similar faith. In the early modern Christian West, Calvinists and Puritans had such faith. Social or religious philosophies which lack any one of these elements are seldom able to compete with a system which possesses all three. To a great extent, the cultural successes of modern secular science have been based on a fusion of these three elements: scientific (material) determinism, the scientists' knowledge of natural laws, and the inevitable progress of scientific technique. As faith in all three has waned, the religious lure of science has also faded, especially since about 1965, when the counter-culture began to challenge all three assumptions.

Modern fundamentalism has long since abandoned all three. The fundamentalists are divided on the question of predestination, but the majority are committed to Arminian views of God, man, and law. They believe in man's limited autonomy, or "free will." Furthermore, they have rejected biblical law as a guideline for social order. They argue that there is no explicitly Christian law-order in the era of the church, from Pentecost to the future rapture into heaven of the saints. Finally, they are committed to eschatological pessimism concerning the efforts of the church, in time and on earth. Without a doctrine of the comprehensive sovereignty of God, without a doctrine of a unique biblical law structure which can reconstruct the institutions of society, and without a doctrine of eschatological victory, in time and on earth, the fundamentalists have been unable to exercise effective leadership.

The prospects for effective political action have begun to shake the operational faith of modern fundamentalists – not their official faith, but their operational world-and-life view. This shift of faith will steadily pressure them to rethink their traditional theological beliefs. The leaders of the Moral Majority will come under increasing pressure, both internal and external, to come to grips with the conflicts between their official theology and their operational theology.

It is doubtful that many of the leaders will announce an overnight conversion to the long-dreaded Calvinist faith. It is doubtful that they will spell out the nature of the recently rethought world-and-life view. But younger men will begin to become more consistent with their own theological presuppositions, and those who adopt the three crucial perspectives – predestination, biblical law, and eschatological optimism – will begin to dominate the Moral Majority movement. It will take time, and older, less consistent leaders will probably have to die off first, but the change in perspective is predictable. The taste of victory will be too hard to forget.