

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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The Paralysis of Pessimism

The prophets of Israel came to the people and rulers with a triple message. They first pointed to Israel's **history**. God had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt, thereby fulfilling the promises given to Abraham. It was a strictly historical act, in time and on earth. Second, they warned the people of **impending judgment** if the nation did not change its ways and return to God and God's law. Finally, there was a promise of **full restoration** after a period of judgment. We see this message best in the first two chapters of the Book of Isaiah.

Consider what elements were involved in such a message. There was a **sense of history** present. Apart from an historical reference point, the message of the prophets would have been radically different. They pointed to a personal God who has the power to intervene in the affairs of men. This power had been demonstrated before the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the people of Canaan. There could be no question of the ability of God to bring His will to bear in the affairs of men. Here was a real God acting in historical time to influence recorded events. This God can be trusted to fulfill His words, the prophets announced.

What were His words? God revealed to men the rebellion involved in all lawlessness. This rebellion would not be forever tolerated by the King whose very nature is reflected in the covenantal law structure handed down by Moses. "Thou art good and doest good; teach me thy statutes," the psalmist declares (Ps. 119:68). The rulers in Isaiah's day had become perverse; therefore, God declared, "I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies" (Isa. 1:24b). There can be no long-term defiance of God's statutes apart from judgment. If present sins are dominant, then future judgment can be expected.

Nevertheless, this warning and even promise of inevitable judgment cannot be understood as comprising the whole of God's message. "And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin: And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning; afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city" (Isa. 1:25-26). The message of immediately looming judgment was accompanied by a further promise, that of final restoration. The "gloom and doom" aspect of the prophetic message can hardly be denied or minimized, but it was not the heart of the message. The same God who had allowed the Israelites to go into Egyptian bondage is the One who delivered them and led them to the promised land. **Liberation**, not bondage, is the essence of the biblical social

perspective—liberation in terms of and by means of biblical law and God's special grace (Eph. 2:8-10).

The Death of Optimism

There can be little doubt that World War I and World War II shattered the nineteenth-century optimism of the leading social theorists. There were pessimists before 1914 and optimists after 1945, but the intellectual impetus had swung toward pessimism. There were still leading intellectuals in 1960 who had hopes for the one-world order promised by the United Nations, and others who believed that American foreign aid and military power could maintain some sort of minimal free world "pax Americana," but both dreams died in the jungles of Vietnam. The last remaining strands of political optimism were severed by the Great Society and its two major defeats: the war in Vietnam and the war on poverty. By 1968, when President Johnson was virtually drummed out of the Democratic Party, the optimism of traditional political Liberalism was finished. No one believes in the programs of the New Deal any longer, in the sense of having hope that they will be successful in solving our basic social and economic problems. Liberals cling to them for reasons of tradition and because they see no other alternatives to the religion of salvation by secular legislation. They are like elderly musicians who cannot learn new tunes or read music; they play the music they learned when they were younger, even after the patrons have departed. They keep playing only because they are on some subsidized payroll.

When men's faith in the future departs, their confidence about their past also departs. This was the warning of England's fine historian, J. H. Plumb, well over a decade ago, in the neglected little book edited by Plumb, *Crisis in the Humanities* (Penguin, 1964). He said that historians today have begun to lose their faith in progress—this was prior to the cataclysmic changes of 1965-70—and if they do not regain the old confidence, they will turn the practice of historical writing into mindless antiquarianism. He called for a revival of the older optimism, but he was a John the Baptist with no kingdom in sight: crying in the wilderness to deaf colleagues.

What Plumb predicted can be seen in a revealing essay published in the *New York Times*: Op Ed page, the sounding board for contemporary American Liberalism. Harvard historian David Donald writes about "Our Irrelevant History" (Sept. 8, 1977). He tells of his self-doubts "in deciding what I ought to do in the classroom." He states

categorically and confidently: "Surely my function is not to make certain that the several hundred undergraduates enrolled in my courses absorb additional facts about American history." Why should he bother, despite the woe-ful ignorance of his students—Harvard students? They can look up all the necessary facts in Richard B. Morris' *Encyclopedia of American History*. "And, hard as it is for me to admit, most students probably don't need to know the answers. It is entirely possible to lead a happy and successful life without knowing when the Civil War ended or being certain whether Theodore Roosevelt preceded Franklin D. Roosevelt." Quite true; and it is also possible to lead a happy life without going to Harvard. What, then, is the use of Harvard? Fifteen years ago, every good Liberal could have answered this, for Harvard was the cutting edge of politically optimistic, Establishment Liberalism. Now Establishment Liberalism has no handle—no agreed-upon handle—for directing that cutting edge to the problems of the world.

Donald also denies that it is his job to train up another generation of historians. Why should he? The teaching job market is glutted, and these students are not interested in becoming historians. "Since my students have no professional interest in the discipline of history, it is not important for me to explain to them the limitations of the Congressional Record as a source or to introduce them to the mysteries of the manuscript census returns." But the problem is more than one of their lack of professional interest in history. It is with history as a secularized discipline.

"What undergraduates want from their history teachers is an understanding of how the American past relates to the present and the future. But if I teach what I believe to be the truth, I can only share with them my sense of the irrelevance of history and of the bleakness of the new era we are entering." Why is the past now unrelated to our present? Because of the narrow economic determinism of U.S. history—a radical environmentalism which Prof. Donald believes in and has always believed in. "For up to the present generation, Americans have been, as David Potter called us, 'The People of Plenty.' From the earliest settlements, our abundance of land of agricultural and mineral wealth, of energy sources, shaped the national character. . . . Abundance led Americans to develop distinctive ways of coping with problems. . . . Now the age of abundance has ended. The people of plenty have become the people of paucity. Our sources of oil and natural gas are rapidly running out, and other natural resources will soon be exhausted. If we save what is left, we choke our economy; if we use it, we impoverish our posterity."

Let us ignore the obvious, namely, that we are not running out of resources faster today than yesterday, when we were the "people of plenty." We use up resources, recycle resources, and develop new resources, today as yesterday. Let us ignore the fact that we are still incredibly wealthy by the standards of all of man's recorded history. Let us ignore the fact that it has been the interventionist economic philosophies and policies of modern Keynesian Liberal-

ism that have created our present shortages of natural resources, with price controls, regulations, and high taxes, not to mention inflation. Let us see this: **environmental determinism is a dead-end intellectual street.** It needed a faith to sustain it, a faith in the ability of autonomous man to bring in paradise. That faith is dead today, and determinism has turned in upon itself, devouring its ideologues.

The pessimism of Donald is overwhelming: "Consequently, the 'lessons' taught by the American past are today not merely irrelevant but dangerous." They give us no solutions, a Christian can conclude, because those Liberals who have interpreted the American past in terms of economic determinism have now lost their faith in economic planning. Their secular view of our past has turned into a nightmare, a "no exit" situation. Now, "as our problems grow constantly larger, the chances of solving them drastically diminish. Unlike every previous American generation, we face impossible choices. . . . What, then, can a historian tell undergraduates that might help them in this new and unprecedented age? Perhaps my most useful function would be to disenthral them from the spell of history, to help them see the irrelevance of the past. . . ." His faith is gone: "Perhaps, too, I can make it easier for some to face a troubled future by reminding them to what a limited extent humans control their own destiny."

This is **intellectual suicide**. It is the prelude to a massive shift in cultural roots. It is the shaking of the foundations of the secular West. The vision of optimism that was fostered by the Puritans of the seventeenth century, as well as the Enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is dead. The Puritan hope has almost been extinguished in the orthodox churches, and the Enlightenment hope has been extinguished in modernist churches, modernist universities, and the Federal bureaucracy. Those holding positions of authority have increasingly become time-servers, in much the same way that jailed criminals are time-servers. They are waiting for retirement, or this weekend's tennis games, or a vacation. They are waiting for the end. It is this overwhelming cultural pessimism, rather than the so-called depletion of our natural resources, which constitutes the crisis of our age. It is this loss of faith in the future which marks our break with American history, not the high price of imported oil.

This is why **eschatological optimism** is a Christian imperative. We must regain our faith in the promise of God's restoration after the period of captivity. If we can shake off the intellectual shackles of our secular captors, and regain hope, then we can begin to recapture the positions of leadership which were once ours as Christians.

For further reading along these lines, see Iain Murray's book, *The Puritan Hope* (Banner of Truth, 1971), \$4.00, and the "Symposium on the Millennium" in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* (Winter, 1976-77), \$4.00. Both may be ordered from Grace Abounding Ministries, Inc. Route 625, Box 25, Sterling, VA 22170. Phone: 430-2813.

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