

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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THE ATTACK ON THE "NEW" PENTECOSTALS

by Gary North

Two books appeared in 1985 that are attacks on what is sometimes called the "positive confession" movement. This movement is charismatic in background. It teaches that God does not intend **obedient** Christians to suffer sickness and poverty. Because they seldom if ever add the word "normally," they have built a trap for themselves. Are all sick or poor Christians disobedient? Three of Job's four comforters argued along these lines, and God then answered them (and Job) with a ringing defense of His absolute sovereignty. It was the Book of Job, R. J. Rushdoony says, which made him a Calvinist.

This movement has now come under attack in two recent paperback books. One is by David Wilkerson, a premillennial, and apparently post-tribulational dispensationalist Pentecostal. The other is by Dave Hunt, a non-Pentecostal dispensationalist.

David Wilkerson's Doomsday Warning

David Wilkerson, author of *The Cross and the Switchblade* in the 1960's, and *The Vision* in the early 1970's, has now written a book against earthly optimism which prophesies God's imminent sweeping judgment of the United States, *Set the Trumpet to Thy Mouth*. The first chapter is entitled, "The Destruction of America." It even contains a prophetic subsection: "America Will Not Repent."

To put it rather bluntly, how does *he* know? Repentance is always offered to any society, but especially to a **covenanted** society, and the United States has been a covenanted nation under God since its beginnings in the early seventeenth century. He correctly identifies many evils in the land, but he does not admit that this nation can be salvaged ("salve"=healing ointment) by means of external judgment and subsequent repentance. He is bringing the familiar traditional dispensational old-fashioned message of fire and brimstone. He calls those preachers who preach peace and prosperity for Christians the "pillow preachers."

He attacks preachers who preach the possibility of personal prosperity through faith and self-discipline under God. He calls them "pillow prophets" (chapter 6). He has not acknowledged that God can call an externally successful yet rebellious nation to repentance. This was Jonah's experience with Nineveh. He also does not understand that there are two kinds of judgment: judgment unto restoration and judgment unto destruction and historic oblivion. God **never** judges His covenanted people in the second manner. He **always** judges them in preparation for a return to authority under Him. This is what premillennial dispensationalists never admit. (It is also what amillennialists neglect to discuss.)

Think of the prison experiences of God's people: Joseph in Egypt, the three Hebrew young men in the court of Nebuchadnezzar (and his fiery furnace), Daniel in the lion's den,

Jesus in the court of the Pharisees, Paul before Felix. In each case, the prison experience led directly to a victory of God's people. **Prison led to "resurrection."** The prison experience marks the beginning of restoration for Christians. It is judgment unto restoration.

His message is the Christian church's psychological need for fearlessness in the face of inescapable defeat and the threat of death. "No hiding! No mountain cabins of escape! No caves or shelters! No stockpiles of food or weapons or water. God's holy remnant can look death right in the face and say, 'I fear you not. There is no more sting, no more terror. I am ready to be offered!'"¹ (I gather that he is post-tribulational.)

Well, I'm not planning to be offered! I am ready to have **them** offered. God is the consuming fire, not Satan. Even in an interim period of judgment, God spares His remnant. Obadiah, the high official of evil king Ahab, kept fifty prophets hidden in a caves and fed them and fifty more with bread and water (I Kings 18:4). Obadiah was gracious, and the prophets were wise to avoid a suicidal, premature, head-on confrontation with the king. **Spiritual maturity involves a proper perception of the times.** There are times when hiding in caves is an appropriate Christian tactic.² Elijah did. It is only when men believe that they have no earthly hope, no more time, and no responsibilities to the earthly future, that they devise suicidal frontal assaults. Wiser men bide their time and plan to steadily replace the tyrants. They plan to rule the affairs of men after God graciously releases them from bondage or prison.

Rev. Wilkerson has adopted a pessimistic eschatology, and he has applied it inaccurately to our day, chastising by implication his fellow charismatic preachers who are at last rallying their followers to a vision of **personal** victory and external success. Rev. Wilkerson, as a self-proclaimed prophet, tells us that nuclear holocaust is inevitable. Nonsense. Nuclear holocaust is unlikely, though of course possible. Nuclear **blackmail** by the Soviet Union is increasingly likely, if God's people do not change their ways, change their minds, and stop preaching inevitable earthly defeat. **What is inevitable, prior to Christ's physical return, is the earthly defeat of Christ's enemies.**

A Question of Time

What is his book really all about? First, it is a shrill defense of the older "Armageddon Now" type of dispensationalism.³ Second, Rev. Wilkerson has taken a growing dispute

1. David Wilkerson, *Set the Trumpet to Thy Lips* (Lindale, Texas: World Challenge, 1985), p. 27.

2. Gary North, "Confirmation, Confrontation, and Caves," *Christianity and Civilization*, 2 (1983).

3. Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977).

among charismatic Christians (he himself is a charismatic) over the question of whether God wants to bless His people with health and wealth, and has elevated this debate into some sort of prelude to Armageddon. He is really trying to embarrass the "positive confession" charismatics with his book. He resents their theological message and their recommended program for self-improvement, both of which are based on optimism. (More on this below.)

He is clinging to a worn-out view of what the gospel is all about, a view which did not become widespread in American Protestant circles until the turn of this century. By shortening their view of the time Jesus supposedly has given to His people to accomplish their comprehensive assignment, fundamentalists after 1900 chose to focus their concerns on preaching and tract-passing. These are necessary minimal activities, but they are only the beginning in God's program of comprehensive redemption.⁴ The dominion covenant requires men to subdue the earth to the glory of God (Gen. 1:28; 9:1-17). His people still must accomplish this task before He comes again to judge their success. They have been given **sufficient time**; they must redeem it.

"Sufficient time": it really **does** matter what eschatology a person holds. It colors what a man believes that God has called His people to do. Eventually, the question of eschatology makes itself felt, for better or worse. Though many Christians think the subject can be safely ignored, it cannot be. There is never a choice of "eschatology vs. no eschatology"; it is always a question of **which** eschatology.

Rev. Wilkerson is still proclaiming the older fundamentalist paradigm of the external historical defeat of Christians, a view which has hamstrung efforts at Christian dominion in the United States for almost a century. It is now being replaced by a new paradigm, the paradigm of dominion. The escapist religion is going down with the power religion's sinking ship. The dominion religion is in the early stages of replacing both.

Dave Hunt's Coming Holocaust

A far more well-read critic is Dave Hunt. He is not charismatic, but he is a traditional pretribulational dispensationalist. His earlier book, *Peace, Prosperity, and the Coming Holocaust* (1983) is a ringing defense of the inevitable rise of Antichrist. He, however, argues along a different line: yes, we will get prosperity, but it will be an illusion of the devil, the manipulation of the Antichrist. Mr. Hunt's latest book, *The Seduction of Christianity* (1985), is an attack on the "power of positive thinking-possibility thinking" school of theology. He includes under this classification the "positive confession" charismatics.

Dave Hunt is a careful student of the cults and the occult. He understands the very real threat which New Age philosophy poses. He also recognizes the extent to which Christian leaders have unthinkingly adopted New Age "possibility thinking" and "think and grow rich" techniques. But his analysis is colored from start to finish by his belief that we are nearing the end of the so-called "Church Age," that Jesus is about to call His people into heaven at the Rapture, and that today's visible apostasy is a nearly inescapable one-way street to judgment. He holds the premillennial-dispensational belief that the church of Jesus Christ will lose in its confrontation with Satan, until Jesus returns physically to run the whole show.

Mr. Hunt is not so outspoken as Rev. Wilkerson. He does not categorically announce as some sort of Spirit-filled prophet that America will not repent. He writes concerning his message of the coming Armageddon: "If the world would take these warnings seriously and repent, God might withhold His judgment. He has done so in the past, as in the case of Nineveh, which repented when Jonah warned of coming

destruction." But he reminds us that "Armageddon isn't going to go away just because we all determine to think positively."⁵

"Positive Confession" and Eschatology

He then attacks Rev. Robert Tilton, whose satellite television network is gaining the support of thousands of charismatic Christians. About 2,000 churches receive Rev. Tilton's broadcasts, and the number is growing rapidly. He started it in late 1982. As a member of the charismatic "positive confession" movement—sometimes called "name it and claim it"—Tilton's message is optimistic. God does not intend for His people to be poor and sick. (Rev. Tilton has therefore adopted the principle underlying one of the aphorisms that has governed my own life: "It is better to be rich and healthy than it is to be poor and sick.") He points out that the language used by other "positive confession" ministers is similar to the man-delfying language of the New Age "positive thinking" theology. There is no doubt that his accusation can be documented, and that some of these leaders need to get clear the crucial distinction between the imputed **human** perfection of Jesus Christ and the non-communicable divinity of Jesus Christ. This Creator-creature distinction is the most important doctrine separating the New Agers and orthodox Christianity.

But then Mr. Hunt makes a very revealing statement. He implicitly associates New Age optimism with an optimistic eschatology. He recognizes (as few of the "positive confession" leaders have recognized) that they have become operational postmillennialists. They have abandoned the mind-set of premillennial, pre-tribulational dispensationalism, even though they have not made this shift known to their followers, who still profess faith in dispensationalism. He sees clearly that a new eschatology is involved in "positive confession," a **dominion eschatology**. He includes a subsection, "An Emerging Eschatology," in his final chapter. He does not like what is emerging, but at least he recognizes it.

Mr. Hunt misleads his readers: first, by failing to mention the long tradition of postmillennial optimism in the history of Protestant orthodoxy, and second, by equating the optimism of historic postmillennialism with New Age optimism. How does he accomplish this? By placing the following paragraph immediately after his paragraph criticizing the humanistic gospel of self-esteem:

There are many groups representing seemingly widely divergent points of view about whether the world can be saved, and if so, how. There is one point, however, upon which even those who seem to be opposed to each other find agreement. This otherwise-surprising unity is expressed in the growing opposition from many quarters to the traditional fundamentalist view that the **only** hope for this world to be saved from destruction is miraculous intervention by Jesus Christ. Increasing numbers of Christian leaders and their followers are rejecting this view, and at the same time they are also rejecting the idea that Christians are really citizens of heaven, not of this world, and that Christ is going to "rapture" His church out of this world. The whole idea of the rise of the Antichrist to rule the world during a tribulation period, and the rapture of the church, whether pre-, mid-, or post-trib is falling into disfavor. The views of many Christians concerning the future of the world are beginning to have more and more in common with the humanistic hope that mankind can really "find itself" and on the basis of a com-

4. Gary North, "Comprehensive Redemption: A Theology for Social Action," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, VIII (Summer 1981).

5. Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1985), p. 216.

mon brotherhood begin to love one another and live up to our potential of humanness and authentic personhood.⁶

Why can't Christians have legitimate earthly hope regarding the effects of their work on earth? Why should all the efforts of Christians come to nothing, culturally speaking? After all, wasn't all power given to Jesus Christ after His resurrection (Matt. 28:18)? Furthermore, why can't Christians be ethical citizens of heaven while simultaneously working to establish a program of parallel standards for earthly citizenship that are ethically comparable to heaven's standards? After all, we pray the Lord's prayer, which includes the request: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Actually, there are many dispensational churches that refuse to pray the Lord's prayer, since it was supposedly part of the "Jewish dispensation" of the ministry of Jesus, not part of the "Church Age.") Why must we draw an absolute ethical distinction between heavenly citizenship and earthly citizenship? The pagan is subject to this distinction, but why must Christians be subject to it?

Why must we adopt a theology which leads to a psychological "otherworldliness" in terms of our work on earth, and pessimism concerning our work's earthly results—the theology I call pietism? **It is this radical distinction between heaven and earth in the theology of dispensationalism which has played into the hands of the humanists.** Fundamentalists have been content to let evil men run the world, since the Christian's citizenship supposedly is exclusively in heaven. This is theological basis of the alliance between the escapist religion and the power religion.

A Paradigm Shift

He is quite correct on one point, however. Dispensational eschatology is increasingly falling into disfavor. This is why he is worried, not just because a few charismatic preachers who are sloppy in their wording **appear** to have adopted New Age theology, lock, stock, and barrel. They have no more self-consciously adopted New Age theology than they have self-consciously adopted historic postmillennialism. It is not that they are drifting toward New Age religion; they are drifting instead toward historic postmillennialism. But he is correct about the emerging paradigm shift from dispensationalism to postmillennialism, even if he is not correct about the coming holocaust:

Two factions are now emerging within the church. One side adheres to the belief that an apostasy is coming for the church in the last days, and with it a great tribulation and God's judgment for the world. We are to rescue as many as we can before it is too late, calling them to citizenship in heaven. On the other side are those, equally sincere, who see the primary call of the church as solving social, economic, and political problems. Although they are also concerned to see souls saved, the conversion of the masses provides the means for taking over the world for Christ, taking dominion back from Satan, and thereby establishing the kingdom in order that Christ might return as king to reign at last. . . . There is a growing rejection within the church of this fundamentalist scenario as negative, "gloom-and-doom" eschatology.⁷

This paragraph is accurate and very important. Mr. Hunt sees what all but one or two "positive confession" preachers have not even recognized in their own preaching and ministries: **they have become operational postmillennial-**

ists. They have unquestionably broken **psychologically** with the older fundamentalism. They are returning, in short, to a historic Protestant eschatology and are abandoning the Margaret Macdonald-John Nelson Darby-C. I. Scofield innovation of the nineteenth century.

Is he correct in his assessment that this shift represents a new commonality with New Agers who believe in "a common brotherhood" or the achievement of "authentic personhood"? I do not think so. If some "positive confession" preachers do pursue this New Age line, then they will eventually separate themselves from their former theological colleagues. They will begin to align themselves with Robert Schuller and Norman Vincent Peale. There is no doubt that some of them have not come to grips with the Bible's teaching on Christology: that Jesus Christ in His incarnation was alone fully God and perfectly human.⁸ Some of them have verbally equated Christian conversion with becoming divine. This is unquestionably incorrect. At conversion, the Christian **definitively** has imputed to him Christ's **perfect humanity** (not His divinity), which he then **progressively** manifests through his earthly lifetime by means of his progressive ethical sanctification. But their confusion of language is a testimony to their lack of theological understanding; they **mean** "Christ's perfect humanity" when they say "Christ's divinity." Those who don't mean this will eventually drift away from the orthodox faith.

Unquestionably, getting one's doctrine of Christology straight ("ortho") is more important than getting the doctrine of eschatology straight. Postmillennialism with a false Christology is as perverse as dispensationalism with a false Christology. But a false Christology is independent of eschatology. Mr. Hunt implies that the poor wording of the "positive confession" charismatics' Christology reflects their eschatology. It doesn't. It simply reflects their sloppy wording and their lack of systematic study of theology and its implications, at least at this relatively early point in the development of the "positive confession" movement's history.

Mr. Hunt is well-read. He understands theology. This is why I find it very difficult to believe that Mr. Hunt really believes that a Robert Schuller-Robert Tilton sort of alliance is likely. Mr. Hunt understands far better than most observers what is **really** taking place. Indeed, it has already begun: bringing together the postmillennial Christian reconstructionists and the "positive confession" charismatics, with the former providing the footnotes, theology, and political action skills, and the latter providing the money, the audience, and the satellite technology.⁹ Mr. Hunt sees that if this fusion of theological interests takes place, then the day of unchallenged dominance by the old-time dispensational eschatology is about to come to an end. A new fundamentalism is appearing.¹⁰ If the New Agers and New Dealers also recognized what Mr. Hunt has seen, they would be even more concerned than he is. The implicit and 60-year-old alliance between fundamentalism's escapist religion and the humanists' power religion is about to break up. The dominion religion of orthodox Christianity is going to challenge both of them. The false peace of this collapsing alliance, whose cornerstone has been the public school system, is being shattered by hard-core Christian activists who are tired of sitting in the back of humanism's bus.

It is not that the "positive confession" charismatics may be about to become New Age humanists; it is that they may

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 215.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.

8. For the political implications of this creed, see R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1968] 1978), ch. 7: "The Council of Chalcedon: Foundation of Western Liberty."

9. Gary North, *Backward, Christian Soldiers?* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), ch. 16: "The Three Legs of Christian Reconstruction's Stool."

10. *Ibid.*, ch. 4: "Fundamentalism: Old and New."

be about to become Christian reconstructionists and post-millennialists. It is not simply Robert Tilton who constitutes Mr. Hunt's problem. It is also David Chilton.¹¹

Conclusion

A paradigm shift is in progress inside American Protestant fundamentalism. It is a paradigm shift which above all involves the rethinking of the concept of dominion. Second, it involves a lengthening of the time perspective of Christians. Third, it involves a rethinking of the present-day authority biblical law. This paradigm shift is not yet recognized, except by those who are self-consciously pulling it off (the reconstructionists) and those whose paradigm is being threatened (the older fundamentalists).

The familiar refrain in dispensational circles has always been, "The end draweth nigh." This was as true in the 1830's as it is today. The end has not yet arrived. David Chilton's books make it clear that all the uproar about "the coming Armageddon" is based on a misinterpretation of what the Bible teaches. He revives the older Puritan view of eschatology, the view which was almost universally accepted in the mid-seventeenth century when the North American Protestant colonies were first colonized, and which motivated them in their efforts to turn a howling wilderness into a subdued garden.¹² Chilton shows why the supposed "old-time religion" of fundamentalism is, in fact, a recent theological development, and also why its interpretation of "the last days" is exegetically incorrect.

This gives Christians legitimate biblical reasons for earthly hope. It also gives us biblical reasons to get back in the com-

prehensive battle against the old enemy. Satan has been aided by the "old-time religion" of fundamentalism in his defensive attempts to maintain control of the institutions of power and influence. Fundamentalism's escapist theology was a way to defuse the eschatological time bomb of post-millennial victory. The eschatology of dominion has once again revived, as it has not since the period of the American Revolution. The defenders of the escapist religion do not appreciate what is happening—indeed, they are increasingly outraged—but they will be the beneficiaries anyway. They will lose their followers, but they will become residents of a Christian republic—or their heirs will, if we do not see it in our lifetimes.

This is not the end of the world. The church is not about to be raptured. The humanists, occultists, and New Agers are about to see their world ruptured. This process could be delayed by God's external judgment on the West, but it cannot be delayed until Christ's return in final judgment. It will happen long before Christ returns in glory.

God has regenerated people out of sin and into eternal life (John 3); He has also given these regenerate people the power to become sons of god (John 1:12). To say that He will not give them the ethical authority and ability to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), **in every area of life**, is a counsel of despair, a message of defeat. It is also a message which is fading in popularity among younger Christians who will no longer tolerate the dispensational retreatism of their fathers. Best-selling author Hal Lindsey was wrong in the 1970's. It is not the late, great planet earth where we live; it is the world which we were called upon by God to subdue to His glory. Satan may be alive on planet earth, but he is not well; since Calvary, he has been mortally wounded. Let us suffer no longer the trembling shakes of Rapture fever. Let us get to work.

11. David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Tyler, Texas: Reconstruction Press, 1985); *Days of Vengeance: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1986).

12. *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, VI (Summer 1979): "Symposium on Puritanism and Progress."

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