

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. XI, No. 3

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1987

May/June, 1987

CHRISTIANITY AND PROGRESS

by Gary North

The origin of the idea of progress was exclusively Western; in fact, it was originally a Christian idea. Only with the widespread acceptance of the biblical concept of linear time did men begin to believe that there could be earthly progress. They began to act in terms of a view of life that says that whatever a man does lives after him, and that future generations will be different to some degree because he lived, worked, and died exactly when he did.

Nevertheless, linear history is not, in and of itself, progressive history. Something more was needed: the idea of compound growth, or **positive feedback**. It is not simply that history is linear; it is that it is also **progressive**. Such a view of history rests squarely on Deuteronomy 28:1-14. It also rests on the notion of **covenantal reinforcement**, as described in Deuteronomy 8:18:

But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day.

This is positive feedback: covenantal faithfulness brings external blessings from God, which in turn are supposed to reinforce people's confidence in the covenant, leading them to greater faithfulness, bringing them added blessings, and so forth. It was the postmillennial optimism of early Calvinism and Puritanism that first introduced this worldview of culture-wide, compounding, covenantal growth to Western civilization.¹ The vision of Deuteronomy 28:1-14 captivated the Puritans: the external cultural blessings that accompany covenantal faithfulness.

The development of the Calvinistic and Puritan doctrine of both spiritual and cultural progress reshaped the West. For the first time in human history, men were given a full-blown idea of progress, which was above all a doctrine of ethical progress. This vision was secularized by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, but that secularized version of progress is rapidly fading from the humanist West.² Belief in the universality of entropy (meaning inevitable decay) is only one of the causes of this growing pessimism, but it is a powerful one.

In the twentieth century, "pessimillennialism"—premillennialism and amillennialism—have been the dominant eschatologies. Those who hold such views have self-consciously rejected the idea of visible, institutional, social progress. They insist that the Bible does not teach such a hope with respect to the world prior to Christ's personal, physical return in judgment.

"The Church Cannot Change the World!"

I realize that there are premillennialists who will take offense at this statement. They will cite their obligations under Luke 19:13: "Occupy till I come." But the leaders of the **traditional** premillennial movement are quite self-conscious about their eschatology, and we need to take them seriously as spokesmen. For example, John Walvoord, author of many books on eschatology, and the long-time president of Dallas Theological Seminary, the premier dispensational institution, has not minced any words in this regard. In an interview with *Christianity Today* (Feb. 6, 1987), Kenneth Kantzer asked:

Kantzer: For all of you who are not postmils, is it worth your efforts to improve the physical, social, and political situation on earth?

Walvoord: The answer is yes and no. We know that our efforts to make society Christianized is futile because the Bible doesn't teach it. On the other hand, the Bible certainly doesn't teach that we should be indifferent to injustice and famine and to all sorts of things that are wrong in our current civilization. Even though we know our efforts aren't going to bring a utopia, we should do what we can to have honest government and moral laws. It's very difficult from Scripture to advocate massive social improvement efforts, because certainly Paul didn't start any, and neither did Peter. They assumed that civilization as a whole is hopeless and subject to God's judgment (p. 6-1).

Who said anything about a utopia? Only the pessimists, who use the word in order to ridicule people who preach that Christians are not foreordained to be losers in history. Why is civilization more hopeless than the soul of any sinner? The gospel saves sinners, after all. Why should we expect no major social improvements in society? Jesus said, "All power is given unto me in heaven **and in earth**" (Matt. 28:18). When He delegated power to His church—power manifested in miraculous healings and the casting out of demons—Christ transferred power to His followers. Why shouldn't we expect widespread social and institutional healing in history?

The Power of Christ in History

Where is the earthly manifestation of this power? Dispensationalist Dave Hunt is adamant: only in the hearts of believers and (maybe) inside the walls of a local church or local rescue mission. As he says, in response to an advertisement for my Biblical Blueprints Series: "The Bible doesn't teach us to build society but instructs us to preach the gospel, for one's citizenship is in heaven (Col. 3:2)."³ (It seems

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

2. Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), ch. 9.

3. Dave Hunt, *CIB Bulletin* (Feb. 1987), fourth page.

to me that he could have strengthened his case that we are citizens of only one "country" by citing a modern translation of Philippians 3:20.) His gospel is a gospel of the heart **only**. Jesus saves hearts **only**; somehow, His gospel is not powerful enough to restore to biblical standards the institutions that He designed for mankind's benefit, but which have been corrupted by sin. Hunt's view of the gospel is that Jesus can somehow save sinners without having their salvation affect the world around them. This, in fact, is the heart, mind, and soul of the pessimillennialists' "gospel": "Heal souls, not institutions."

Hunt separates the preaching of the gospel from society. He separates heavenly citizenship from earthly citizenship. In short, he would rewrite the Great Commission: "All power is given unto me in heaven and none in earth." (So, for that matter, would the amillennialist.) Christ's earthly power can only be manifested when He returns physically to set up a top-down bureaucratic kingdom in which Christians will be responsible for following the direct orders of Christ, issued to meet specific historical circumstances. The premillennialist has so little faith in the power of the Bible's perfect revelation, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to shape the thoughts and actions of Christians, that Jesus must return and personally issue millions of orders per day telling everyone what to do, case by case, crisis by crisis.

Thus, premillennialists deny the progressive maturation of Christians and Christianity in history. The millennium ruled by Christ, Hunt says, will be a world in which "Justice will be meted out swiftly."⁴ Jesus will treat men as fathers treat five-year-old children: instant punishment, no time for reflection and repentance. Christians today are given time to think through their actions, to reflect upon their past sins, and to make restitution before God judges them. Today, they are treated by God as responsible adults. Not in the millennium! The church will go from maturity to immaturity when Christ returns in power. And even with the testimony of the perfect visible rule of Jesus on earth for a thousand years, Satan will still thwart Christ and Christ's church, for at Satan's release, he will deceive almost the whole world, leading them to rebel against "Christ and all the saints in Jerusalem."⁵

The Failure of the Gospel in History?

In short, the plan of God points only to the defeat of his church in history. Satan got the upper hand in Eden, and only the raw power of God in final judgment at the end of history can wipe out the kingdom of Satan and restore the creation to wholeness. **The gospel in history is doomed to failure.** In premillennialism and amillennialism, we see the underlying theology of the power religion: the issues of history will be settled in Christ's favor only through a final **physical** confrontation between God and Satan. The history of the church is therefore irrelevant: the conflict of the ages will be settled apart from the gospel, ethics, and the dominion covenant issued to Adam (Gen. 1:26-28), Noah (Gen. 9:1-17), and the church (Matt. 28:18-20). The conflict of the ages will be settled in a kind of cosmic arm wrestling match between God and Satan. The church is nothing more than a vulnerable bystander.

But we all know who will win in a war based on power. We know that God has more power than Satan. Satan knows, too. What Christians need to believe, now and throughout eternity, is that the authority which comes to Christians as God's reward to His people in response to their righteousness under Christ and biblical law is greater than the power granted by Satan to his followers for their rebellion against God. Yet premillennialism and amillennialism deny this fun-

damental truth. They preach that the power granted to Satan's human followers in history is greater than the power granted by God to His people in history. They preach **historic defeat for the church of Jesus Christ**.

Institutional Defeat?

The social and intellectual problem for the consistent premillennialist or amillennialist is **motivation**. He has raised the institutional white flag to the devil. He has already mentally surrendered this world to Satan. Walvoord, as a consistent premillennial dispensationalist, assures us: "We know that our efforts to make society Christianized is futile because the Bible doesn't teach it." He deliberately ignores the Old Testament prophets. He does not want Christians to preach prophetically, for the prophets called Israel back to obedience to biblical law, and **dispensationalism rejects biblical law**. Walvoord calls only for a vague, undefined "moral law" to promote an equally vague "honest government." Without specifics, this is meaningless rhetoric. It is the theology of the rescue mission: sober them up, and then send them to church until they die or Jesus comes again. This is the "Christian as a nice neighbor" version of what should be "salt and light" theology: "Save individuals, but not societies."

Kantzer: Are we saying here that the Christian community, whether premil, postmil, or amil, must work both with individuals as well as seek to improve the structures of society? In other words, is there nothing within the millennial views that would prevent a believer from trying to improve society?

Walvoord: Well, the Bible says explicitly to do good to all men, especially those of faith. In other words, the Bible does give us broad commands to do good to the general public.

Broad commands are worthless without specifics. A call to "do good" is meaningless without Bible-based standards of good. A Communist or a New Age evolutionist could agree with Walvoord's statement, since it contains no specifics. In response, Prof. John J. Davis of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, a postmillennialist, replied:

But generally speaking, the premillennialist is more oriented toward helping those who have been hurt by the system than by addressing the systematic evil, while the postmillennialist believes the system can be sanctified. That's the basic difference with regard to our relationship to society.

The Ultimate Form of Pessimism

When dispensationalists are called pessimists by postmillennialists—as we postmillennialists unquestionably do call them—they react negatively. This is evidence of my contention that **everyone recognizes the inhibiting effects of pessimism**. People do not like being called pessimists. Walvoord is no exception. But his defense is most revealing:

Walvoord: Well, I personally object to the idea that premillennialism is pessimistic. We are simply realistic in believing that man cannot change the world. Only God can (11-1).

Man cannot change the world? What in the world does this mean? That man is a robot? That God does everything, for good and evil? Walvoord obviously does not mean this. So what does he mean? That men collectively can do evil but not good? Then what effect does the gospel have in history? If he does not want to make this preposterous conclu-

4. Dave Hunt, *Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1987), p. 250.

5. *Idem*.

sion, then he must mean that men acting apart from God's will and God's law cannot improve the world long-term. If God is willing to put up with the victory of evil, then there is nothing that Christians can do about it except try to get out of the way of victorious sinners if they possibly can, while handing out gospel tracts on street corners and running rescue missions. The question is: Is God really willing to put up with the triumph of sinners over His church in history? Yes, say premillennialists and amillennialists. No, say postmillennialists.

What Walvoord is **implying but not saying** is that the postmillennialists' doctrine of the **historical** power of regeneration, the **historical** power of the Holy Spirit, the **historical** power of biblical law, and the **continuing validity** of God's dominion covenant with man (Gen. 1:26-28) is theologically erroneous, and perhaps even borderline heretical. But this, of course, is precisely the reason we postmillennialists refer to premillennialists as pessimistic. They implicitly hold the reverse doctrinal viewpoints: the historical **lack** of power of regeneration, the historical **lack** of power of the Holy Spirit, the historical **lack** of power of biblical law, and the **present suspension** of God's dominion covenant with man. (Carl McIntyre's premillennial Bible Presbyterian Church in 1970 went on record officially as condemning the doctrine of the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28.)⁶

He says that only God can change the world. My, what an insight! **Who does he think postmillennialists believe will change the world for the better?** Of course God must change the world. Given the depravity of man, He is the only One who can. But how does He do this? Through demons? No. Through fallen men who are on the side of demons in their rebellion against God? No. So what is God's historic means of making the world better? **Through the preaching of the gospel.** This is what postmillennialists have always taught. **And the success of the gospel in history is what premillennialists have always denied.** They categorically deny that the gospel of Christ will ever change most men's hearts at any future point in history. The gospel in this view is a means primarily of **condemning gospel-rejecting people to hell**, not a program leading to the victory of the church in history. The gospel cannot transform the world, they insist. Yet they resent being called pessimists.

Pessimism regarding the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ in history is what **defines** pessimism. There is no pessimism in the history of man that is more pessimistic than this eschatological pessimism regarding the power of the gospel in history. The universal destruction of man by nuclear war—a myth, by the way⁷—is downright optimistic compared to pessimism with regard to the power of the gospel in history. It testifies that the incorrigible human heart is more powerful than God in history, that Satan's defeat of Adam in the garden is more powerful in history than Christ's defeat of Satan at Calvary. There is no pessimism greater than Dave Hunt's statement, which is representative of all premillennialism (and amillennialism, for that matter): Even the millennial reign of Christ physically on earth will end when the vast majority of people will rebel against Him, converge upon Jerusalem, and try to destroy the faithful people inside the city: "Converging from all over the world to war against Christ and the saints at Jerusalem, these rebels will finally have to be banished from God's presence forever (Revelation 20:7-10). The millennial reign of Christ upon earth, rather than being the kingdom of God, will in fact be the final proof of the incorrigible nature of the human heart."⁸ (Why these rebellious human idiots will

bother to attack Jerusalem, a city filled with millions of resurrected, death-proof Christians who returned with Christ at the beginning of the millennium, is beyond me. I will let premillennialists worry about this, however. I have already provided a postmillennial answer as to what Revelation 20:7-10 means, including who rebels and why, in my book, *Dominion and Common Grace*, which was written specifically to deal with this exegetical problem.)

Hunt goes on (and on, and on): "A perfect Edenic environment where all ecological, economic, sociological, and political problems are solved fails to perfect mankind. So much for the theories of psychology and sociology and utopian dreams."⁹ Here is the key word used again and again by premillennialists to dismiss postmillennialism: **utopia**. ("Utopia": *ou* = no, *topos* = place.) In short, they regard as totally mythological the idea that God's word, God's Spirit, and God's church can change the hearts of **most** people sometime in the future. They **assume** (without any clear biblical support) that Revelation 20:7-10 describes a final rebellion in which **most people on earth rebel**, despite the fact that only one-third of the angels ("stars") rebelled with Satan, and only one-third of the earth is symbolically brought under God's wrath in the Book of Revelation's judgment passages (Rev. 8:7-12; 9:15, 18).

Over and over, premillennialists accuse postmillennialists of having too much confidence in man. This is really astounding, when you think about it, because all the primary defenders of modern postmillennialism have been Calvinists, and usually followers of Van Til. Normally, nobody accuses Calvinists of having too elevated a view of man, what with the Calvinists' doctrine of man's total depravity and fallen man's inability to respond in faith to the gospel without God's predestinating irresistible grace to force conversions. Postmillennialists are not arguing for confidence in "mankind as such." They are only arguing for the increasing long-term influence in history of **regenerate, covenantally faithful people** compared to **unregenerate, covenantally rebellious people**. What the amillennialists and premillennialists argue is the opposite: the steadily increasing long-term authority in history of unregenerate, covenantally rebellious people compared to regenerate, covenantally faithful people. It is not "confidence in man" that is the basis of postmillennial optimism; it is **confidence in the covenantal faithfulness of God** in rewarding covenant-keepers (Deut. 28:1-14) and punishing covenant-breakers (Deut. 28:15-68).¹⁰

Scofield and Evolutionism

It is annoying, to say the least, to read Walvoord's attack on postmillennialism as an ally of evolutionary liberalism:

During the last part of the nineteenth century, evolution emerged as an explanation for why things were getting better. In those days, prophecy conferences included postmils, amils, and premils, but it became a battle between the premil view and the evolutionary view that seemed to fit postmillennialism. So premillennialism became a battle between fundamentalism and liberalism. I'm afraid the postmillennial position is still closely associated with evolution and liberalism (8-1).

Here is the man who was president for thirty years of a seminary that has never offered a course defending the six-literal-day creation. He says that postmillennialism favors evolutionism, yet it was R. J. Rushdoony, a postmillennialist, who got Morris and Whitcomb's *Genesis Flood* into print with Presbyterian & Reformed Publishers after dispensationalist

6. Resolution No. 13, reprinted in R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1973), pp. 723-24.

7. Arthur Robinson and Gary North, *Fighting Chance: Ten Feet to Survival* (Ft. Worth, Texas: American Bureau of Economic Research, 1986).

8. Dave Hunt, *Beyond Seduction*, p. 250.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

10. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion by Covenant* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), ch. 4.

Moody Press made it clear to the authors that Moody Press rejected their literal day view of the Genesis week.¹¹ The intellectual leaders of postmillennialism in the United States are all six-literal-day creationists.

Dispensational premillennialists are hardly consistent defenders of this literal view of Genesis 1, given the fact that C. I. Scofield taught the "gap theory" in the notes of his famous reference Bible. This theory proposes two separate creations by God, the one described in Genesis 1:1, and then another preceding Genesis 1:2. (The "gap" refers to the supposed time gap between the two creations, although the word is more properly applied to the **gap of revelation** that this hypothesis inserts in between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.) In between the two creations, there was enough time to absorb all the geological ages that the humanists can throw at us. (How the formless and void re-created world of Genesis 1:2 left geological traces of countless ages, with all those detailed fossil forms embedded in the rocks, is a bit of a problem, of course.) Scofield speaks of the "dateless past" as holding enough time to allow all geological eras.¹²

This "gap theory" had been developed in the early nineteenth century as a way to enable Bible-believing Christians to accept the findings of uniformitarian geology without giving up their faith in a literal Bible. Henry Morris, Duane Gish, and most other Scientific Creationists have long recognized the deadly threat that this compromising theory poses to biblical creationism.¹³ It had been the acceptance by Christians of the ages-long time scheme of the pre-Darwin geologists that led to Darwinism in the first place, and made it far easier for Darwinism to be accepted by Christians.¹⁴

A Stolen Worldview

Christianity is the source of the idea of progress in the history of mankind. Other groups have stolen this vision and have reworked it along anti-Christian lines, from the Enlightenment¹⁵ to the Social Gospel movement, but this does not mean that postmillennial optimism is the cause of the thefts. And it surely does not mean that eschatological pessimism is in any way an effective shield against humanism, New Age philosophy, or socialism.

What is even more galling is that dispensationalist author Dave Hunt has tried to link the Christian Reconstruc-

tion movement with the New Age movement, simply because Christian Reconstructionists, as dominion theologians, proclaim the legitimacy of social action along biblical lines. He writes: "Closely related in belief are several other groups: the Reconstructionists such as Gary North et al, as well as Christian socialists such as Jim Wallis (of *Sojourners*), Tom Sine et al whose major focus is upon cleaning up the earth ecologically, politically, economically, sociologically etc. They imagine that the main function of the Church is to restore the Edenic state—hardly helpful, since Eden is where sin began. Many groups are beginning to work together who disagree on some points but share with the New Agers a desire to clean up the earth and establish the kingdom."¹⁶

Christian Reconstructionists actually teach that there will be a future era in which the gospel heals the souls of men, and these healed people will then work to subdue the earth to the glory of God. This optimism about visible manifestations of God's kingdom on earth, he says, is what the New Age movement is all about.

On the contrary, what the New Age movement is all about is the **defeat of Christianity in history**. The key New Age doctrines are these: 1) the self-transcendence of man into a higher being (through "higher consciousness" techniques, or drugs, or power), and 2) the law of reincarnation (karma). Christian Reconstruction reaffirms the doctrine of the absolute Creator-creature distinction, following the lead of Cornelius Van Til. Christian Reconstruction also preaches the doctrine of final judgment. What Christian Reconstruction denies is what Hunt affirms and the New Agers hope for above all: the defeat of the church in history.

Conclusion

Christianity is the religion of historic optimism. The power of Christ in history is made manifest through the preaching of the gospel of redemption. As the gospel takes root in society after society, the covenantal blessings of God will begin to transform the earth. This is a long-term process. It has already taken almost 2,000 years, and it may take a thousand more. It may take even longer. But the progressive sanctification of Christians leads to the progressive sanctification of the institutional church. The "salt and light" gospel of comprehensive redemption eventually serves as the leaven of righteousness that increasingly limits the power of Satan's human disciples. We never will see perfection, for sin will be in the world until the final judgment, but we will not see the earthly triumph of Satan. His victory over Adam was overcome by Christ's victory at Calvary. The resurrection is our model, not the Fall of man in Eden.

11. Henry M. Morris, *History of Modern Creationism* (San Diego, California: Master Book Pubs., 1984), p. 154.

12. C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1909] 1917), p. 3n.

13. Morris, *History of Modern Creation*, pp. 41, 58-61, 92.

14. Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982), Appendix C: "Cosmologies in Conflict: Creation vs. Evolution."

15. Robert A. Nisbet, "The Year 2000 and All That," *Commentary* (June 1968).

16. Dave Hunt, *CIB Bulletin* (Feb. 1987), front page.

Christian Reconstruction is published six times a year, alternating with **Biblical Economics Today**. It is published by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. A free six-month subscription is sent to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. **Subscriptions:** P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. Donations are fully tax deductible. Checks should be made out to **Institute for Christian Economics**.