

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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A FULLY ACCREDITED GOSPEL

by Gary North

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence (Luke 16:23-26).

This great gulf is more than a gulf separating supernatural places; it is a gulf between worldviews and civilizations. The biblical doctrine of the final judgment is the doctrine that separates the saved from the lost in this world, just as the gulf separates them in the next world. The covenant-breaker hates this biblical doctrine more than any other biblical doctrine. He recognizes clearly that this doctrine teaches that in the eternal world, covenant-keepers win and covenant-breakers lose.

But who wins in this world? More to the point, who will gain and retain the authority in this world to declare the winners and impose negative sanctions against the losers? Covenant-breakers say that they will win, and millions of Christians agree with them. Therefore, Christians today voluntarily submit to the humanists. "It's God's plan for the Church Age," they insist. Ideas do have consequences.

Authority and Certification

Today, Christian theologians embrace eschatological systems that declare the inevitability of the Christian community's progressive cultural impotence during the "Church Age." We are assured that the soul-saving gospel of Jesus Christ will fail to persuade most men until Jesus comes again to bust heads. These theologians even try to promote these eschatologies in the name of spiritual victory — "victory properly understood." Having our backsides kicked by humanists until Jesus comes again is their idea of victory. As time goes on, these kicks will get harder. This is supposedly a **great** victory.

Christians quite properly define themselves in terms of the gospel, so their pessimism regarding the gospel's cultural effects is easily transferred to themselves and to their work. Christian leaders today suffer from a gigantic cultural inferiority complex, and so do most laymen. Theologians and Christian educators eat the academic scraps that appear to have fallen from the humanists' table — as if humanism were not dependent entirely on God's common grace¹ — and they call these scraps feasts. For example, they cheer, "Our college has been fully accredited!" By

whom? By God-hating secular humanists, of course. "We have met their rigorous standards," the Christian college president gloats. This is a great victory.

It is considered impolite to ask the obvious questions. Who accredited the secular humanist accrediting agencies? Who put them in charge? Why do Christian educators crawl on their bellies to gain the approval of covenant-breakers? The answer is too embarrassing: a systematic, well-developed intellectual inferiority complex on the part of Christian leaders, and also on the part of Christian parents, whose second question is, "Is your college accredited?" (The first question is, "Is scholarship money available?")

Christians today correctly sense that Christ's gospel makes them third-class citizens in a world run by humanists, but their self-conscious rejection of biblical law has stripped them of any workable alternative to humanist culture. They understand only too well that you can't beat something with nothing. They much prefer nothing to something, if that "something" is biblical law. **The fundamental issue today is ethics, not eschatology.** Christians prefer to remain historical losers rather than obey God's law. They have adopted pessimistic eschatologies in order to justify their visible defeat, so that they can deny that God has placed them under a curse because of their disobedience.

Theologians have told laymen that external defeat in history is inevitable for the Church and Christian institutions, and then they say they are perplexed by the fact that most Christians prefer not to "get involved." This wilful retreat from life's social and cultural battlefields is not simply the theological legacy of dispensationalism.² It is also the legacy of neo-evangelicalism. But there is this important difference: the fundamentalists until about 1980 retreated from the public arena; the neo-evangelicals by 1956 had made a series of formal cease-fires with the humanist enemy, and then they criticized the fundamentalists for having fled from the battlefield. They agreed to baptize the humanists' warmed-over stale agendas, and then accused the fundamentalists of cowardice.

Neo-Evangelicalism's Drift Toward Humanism

Neo-evangelicals think of themselves as scholarly people, as well as Socially Concerned People. They went to graduate school and imbibed deeply on the presuppositions of their instructors. From its beginning in the mid-1940's, neo-evangelicalism has depended on a previously rejected weapon in the Christians' arsenal of social relevance: **liberalism**.³ In 1950, this was a cloud no bigger

1. Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

2. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

3. I wrote a piece on this in 1970, published in 1975: "Drifting Along with Christianity Today," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, II (Winter 1975-76).

than a man's hand; today, it is a downpour.⁴ This liberalism – initially limited to politics, but increasingly theological today – has become obvious to everyone except the editors of *Christianity Today*. (I might also have mentioned *Eternity*, but temporal reality caught up with *Eternity*; it folded in 1988. It had played “Me, too” to *Christianity Today* for a generation. It was neo-evangelicalism for those who had decided to pass up grad school.)

Neo-evangelicals have adopted what they believe is a “shared universe of academic discourse” with their covenant-breaking peers in secular universities, in the vain hope that this will impress them. (This lure of intellectual respectability – the wisdom of Greece – has afflicted scholars and apologists within the Church ever since the days of Justin Martyr.)⁵ What this “shared universe of discourse” in fact does, decade after decade, is to disarm the faithful morally and intellectually. The humanists remain humanists, while the neo-evangelicals become progressively humanistic in their outlook. Richard Quebedeaux has named them well: **the worldly evangelicals**.⁶ They themselves have become a field for evangelism, and a stony field it is.⁷

Reactionary Liberals

Neo-evangelicalism was from the beginning and still is the product of a self-conscious reaction against the lack of social and political involvement by antinomian, pietistic fundamentalists.⁸ But neo-evangelicals are not significantly different from fundamentalists with respect to their attitude toward biblical civil law and the historic Church creeds. In fact, the neo-evangelicals want even less Bible in their politics and creeds. They drink only “Fundamentalism Lite.”

Nothing upsets neo-evangelical scholars more than an Old Testament proof text. Fundamentalists shrug off such proof texts with a condescending smirk and the traditional refrain: “We’re under grace, not law.” Neo-evangelicals, however, get testy. Unlike traditional fundamentalists, they want to Do Something. They want to Do Something **Liberal**. They want to Be Compassionate with someone else’s tax money. The Old Testament is therefore a real threat to them, since it drastically limits the State. In contrast, fundamentalists want to Do Nothing, meaning Do Nothing Risky or Controversial. The Old Testament, however, is prophetic, reformist, and highly controversial. Thus, the Old Testament annoys both groups, but fundamentalists at least have a well-developed and widely shared antinomian dispensational theology that justifies Doing Nothing politically. Neo-evangelicals cannot easily adopt it and still remain Socially Concerned People. Old Testament proof texts therefore upset them a great deal.

The exegetical skim milk of modern fundamentalism is far too rich for neo-evangelicals. They have spent four decades pouring more water into the fundamentalists’ milk bucket. Whenever they can persuade their followers that this

bucket of watered-down skim milk is tasteless, they finally get to their hidden agenda, which is to sell Christians a discarded ten-year-old box of powdered humanist milk, “ready for mixing.” Just pour in the package’s contents – various humanist political fads that were abandoned a decade ago by their original promoters as either unworkable or unsalable to the voters – into fundamentalism’s watered-down social ethics, stir, and serve to your whole family!⁹

A God Without Permanent Sanctions?

A recent example of this 40-year drift away from the Bible took place in May, 1989, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, near Chicago, Illinois. Trinity, with assistance from the National Association of Evangelicals, held a conference of 385 theologians, Christian leaders, and laymen: “Evangelical Affirmations/89.” The goal of conference organizers Carl F. H. Henry and Kenneth Kantzer was to develop a document defining the word “evangelical.” (Better four decades late than never!) Henry’s 1947 book, *The Troubled Conscience of Fundamentalism*, is accurately described as one of the founding documents of neo-evangelicalism. That he later wrote *Evangelicals in Search of Identity* (Word, 1976) is also worth mentioning. They are still searching. The dilemma of neo-evangelicalism today is acute; its advocates do not know what they believe in, except for their single creedal formulation: “Fundamentalism is too restricting on our career goals.”

At the Trinity conference, a debate broke out over the doctrine of “annihilationism,” also known as “conditionalism,” a doctrine held by Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians, etc. It teaches that there is only annihilation for unregenerate sinners in eternity – no hell or lake of fire. Theologian J. I. Packer adamantly pressed the assembly to adopt a statement affirming the traditional creedal position of eternal punishment, but to no avail. The vote was split, but the chairman declared that those refusing to include a positive statement on such a negative idea had been in the majority.¹⁰ Neo-evangelicalism, like the cults, is now prepared to shrug its collective shoulders to the question of God’s sanctions with a non-committal “What the hell?” Lacking fire in its eschatology, it lacks fire in its belly. Short on **ortho** in its **doxy**, neo-evangelicalism is increasingly bent out of shape.

Conclusion

The only acceptable gospel today in the world of Christian academia is a gospel baptized by humanist accrediting agencies. The result is predictable. Take a look at the assigned textbooks in the “Christian” counselling and psychology departments. Compare what you find with *The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way* by Martin and Deidre Bobgan (Bethany House, 1979). The enemy is inside the fully accredited gates!

Does this bother fundamentalists? Not many of them. They see it as more evidence confirming the truth of their pessimillennial eschatology. “You see? We really are helpless. We can’t even police our own ranks!” And then they write another check to their Alma Mater. Who knows? Jesus may come again before it clears! Praise God!

9. A number of successful firms compete in this growing market: Stott International, Sider Farms, Compollo Dairy, Sine Qua Non Diet for the Nations, Koop’s Ko-operative Enterprises, Hatfield’s Real McCoy Products, Yancey Unspecific, Inc., and Wallis Markets, Ltd. Warning: several prominent firms have gone broke in this highly competitive field, most notably the Canadian-Dutch joint venture, Toronto Cosmonomic.

10. *World* (June 3, 1989), p. 9.

4. Some day, I may write a book on this. I intend to call it, *Philip Yancey Needs a Haircut, and Other Observations*.

5. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969).

6. Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

7. Herbert Schlossberg has made it his task in life to bring the Wheaton College faculty back to the Bible. His book, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), is a worthy intellectual effort, but it failed miserably in its primary task. So has everything else. This problem is an old one; see Wilhelm Ernst Schmitt, *Steps Toward Apostasy at Wheaton College* (Wheaton, Illinois: By the Author, 1965).

8. Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986).

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