

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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HUMANISM'S ACCOMPLICES

by Gary North

What general would attempt to lead his forces into battle without a specific battle plan? What military commander would be content with nothing more than verbal exhortations to his troops to "be victorious" or "win one for the folks back home"? Such noble exhortations, apart from a battle plan, equipment, and explicit instructions to subordinates, would be about as likely to produce victory as the endless repetition of "Have a nice day."

When we sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers," do we expect to lose on every battlefield? Do we expect constant defeat to be God's training ground for total victory? "Victory through defeat" may be the chosen strategy of those who organize American foreign policy, yet among the most vocal critics of America's foreign policy "experts" are concerned conservative fundamentalists who simultaneously hold a theological version of this same "victory through endless defeats" strategy. What is seen as a disaster for American foreign policy is promoted as the very heart of God's plan for the ages.

What we need, therefore, is a two-pronged program. First, we need a strategy of victory — a general plan, including confidence of ultimate success. Second, we need concrete tactics, including an integrated, well-understood program for every sphere of human life. In short, we need a positive eschatology and a developed program of biblical tsw. Confidence without distinctive and explicit programs is foolishness. A distinctive program, apart from confidence in the competence of one's commander, is unlikely to defeat a dedicated, optimistic enemy who has his own integrated strategy of subversion.

An Excuse for No Program

The various eschatologies of shipwreck in this century became popular when it became clear that Christians had no alternatives to the secular programs of a steadily sinking humanism. Since the politics of humanism was leading to visible disaster, it became imperative for Christians to devise a biblical set of alternative programs. Failing this, they were culturally doomed, since they would go down on secularism's sinking ship.

Secularism, however, had already eroded the epistemological foundations of Christian colleges, textbooks, and

businesses. Christians had adopted the secular "climate of opinion" through a dead-end mixture of Christian revelation and secular philosophy. Men had long since decided to defend Christian truths by means of an appeal to secular logic. The famous apologetic approach of the professors at Princeton Theological Seminary is a classic example of this kind of intellectual syncretism. When Cornelius Van Til's apologetic reconstruction smashed the intellectual foundations of the old Princeton apologetics, bringing men back to *sola scriptura* as the only valid principle for constructing an intellectual defense of the faith, twentieth-century Christians were presented with a great cultural burden. They can no longer escape their responsibility for the creation of a de-secularized program of Christian alternatives. They can no longer be content to sink with the ship of secularism. They must rebuild Christian culture.

This responsibility has nevertheless been ignored. While the recent Dutch Reformed conservative tradition has been willing to deny the validity of secularism in apologetics, it has also refused to present concrete, specific programs that are explicitly based on the categories of biblical law. Simultaneously, amillennial pessimism has eroded the hope of the Dutch in the possibility of comprehensive success for Christian institutions, in time and on earth. Thus, they have contented themselves with forming Christian schools (closely linked to Dutch churches), Christian labor unions (which have no distinctly Christian economic approach to the analysis of wage rates), and Christian political parties (which are a political impossibility in twentieth-century America — another program of built-in failures.) There is nothing wrong with these activities, but they are "holding actions" — the products of a "holding action" eschatology. They are not programs of victory, but programs of cultural isolation — testimonies to a fallen world which cannot, by definition, respond to the presentation of a Christian witness.

American fundamentalism, to the extent that it has an approach to apologetics, is mired deep in the old Roman Catholic-Princeton methodology of intellectual syncretism. Furthermore, American fundamentalists generally have adopted a premillennial, dispensational eschatology. Like amillennialism, premillennialism denies the possibility of cultural victory on earth prior to the physical, bodily return of Christ to set up a universal earthly kingdom. Again, it does

little good, in the eyes of the consistent fundamentalist, to construct Christian cultural alternatives, except as a witness — a witness inevitably doomed to failure.

Pessimism erodes the incentives to create detailed alternatives to collapsing secularism. Men can make a witness far more readily to Christ's offer of salvation for souls than they can to Christ's offered healing of human institutions. "Witnessing" for the fundamentalist means calling attention to the rot of secularism and then offering a personal life preserver to the listener. Fundamentalism offers a personal escape hatch to those trapped on secularism's sinking ship, and with so many trapped people, who has time to begin construction of another ship, especially when we know that all such construction projects are doomed in advance by premillennial timetables? There is nothing that automatically prohibits fundamentalists from working in the "construction plants" of social theory, but a cost-benefit analysis based on premillennialism's shortened timetables will almost always come out negative: too much cost, not enough benefits. Tracts are cheaper and quicker to write and print than multiple treatises dealing with Christian social theory. You don't have to begin from scratch when you write a tract, or even a book critical of humanism's rot. You usually do have to begin from scratch when you start devising an explicitly Christian psychology, economics, politics, sociology, or whatever. There are a lot of "instant witnessing mixes" available to fundamentalists: just add holy water and stir. Baking from scratch is increasingly a lost art, not just in the kitchen, but also in the sanctuary, classroom, and boardroom.

Pietism's Economics

In December of 1978, a Midwestern company sponsored a seminar in Christian economics. It was a gracious but depressing attempt to assess the "state of the art" of Christian economics today. Several of the one dozen attendees were theological liberals. Of the theological conservatives, only three had degrees in economics. There was agreement that the civil government is growing too powerful — the screening committee had seen to it that statisticians were not invited — but there was no agreement concerning a proper strategy of reconstruction. In fact, most of the participants thought that the battle had been lost a long time ago.

Two of the economists had Ph. D's. They both taught on state university campuses. The first one admitted that what he was teaching was not Christian economics. His textbooks are traditional secular studies, including those that he has written or co-authored himself. The only Christian aspects of his teaching, he said, were certain limited biblical examples of economic activities, such as Christ driving the moneychangers out of the temple because they were using a temple monopoly to extract higher than market prices from those who bought offerings inside the temple's gates. This is a solid analysis, biblically speaking, but it was not integrated into an overall Christian economics approach to the subject.

The second economist, a converted Unitarian, had been a Christian for about seven years, according to his testimony — and his presentation was a personal testimony, as he admitted, not a lecture on Christian economics. The man is a total pessimist, and almost certainly a dispensationalist. His message was all-too typical. Bear in mind that there are not many Ph. D's in economics in the U.S. who have a strong commitment to biblical revelation — probably under a dozen (1

can name about five) — and Christian colleges seldom can afford to hire them (all but one that I know teach in state colleges, and the one has just been fired from the third-rate Baptist school that hired him).

Here is his testimony, taken verbatim from the tape of his talk. "I'm still confused, somewhat. . . . I have not been able yet to get it sorted out what it means to be an economist and also to be a Christian." Fair enough; then he should have stopped right there. But he didn't. He felt constrained to lay the foundations of defeat. "The world is not going to get better. It is under the domain of Satan. It was never under the domain of the Christian. It's under the domain of Satan. It's coming to an end, maybe quicker than we perceive. 1 with to God it were today. So out of this chaos — and I think it's great; I think our current situation is great — because out of this chaos, there's only one hope, and that's Jesus Christ. And I think every Christian is called to evangelize. . . . I'm preaching to you."

He did not have in mind evangelization through the construction of a biblical view of economics. He meant "tract-passing." He said that the Bible teaches that we cannot please our fellow man, that we can expect persecution (and he expects to be persecuted), and that hope is secured in this world through suffering (Romans 6:18). He said he is certain about the following facts. He is called, first, to exercise the Great Commission to witness to people about Christ. Second, he has a spiritual gift to be exercised in the body of Christ. Third, he is called to exercise spiritual leadership in his family. "Those three things I know for sure. What other things I have to do in this economy [dispensation?] I'm not sure of." In short, he must devote himself to personal evangelism, the institutional church, and his family. The rest of life he is not sure about.

This is the theology of pietism. It is the theology of external defeat. You do not win battles on battlefields where you are not quite sure you ought to be fighting. Yet he concluded his testimony with the statement: "I want to use my economic knowledge to glorify God."

What we can say is that his eschatology, his view of biblical law, and his willingness to de-emphasize his task as an economist, are all of one piece. His outlook is shared by the vast majority of those who call themselves Bible-believing Christians. His outlook is shared by the majority of those who teach in the Christian classrooms at the college level.

When one of the participants at this conference (who has an M.A. in economics) began teaching on a Baptist campus by announcing that he intended to teach an explicitly biblical economics, the students were astounded. Some even transferred to his class who had not originally intended to. They had never heard of such a thing. As far as most Christian campuses are concerned, the theology of retreat has accomplished the goals of the secularists: to snuff out the life-giving, society-reconstructing message of Christ to the whole of man's existence. (Not having a Ph. D., he will not be given tenure in the department; in fact, his temporary position will soon be filled by someone else — hopefully, by the Ph. D. economist who lost his job at his Baptist college.) When secular accrediting agencies can keep the comprehensive gospel out of Christian colleges, it's a testimony to the power of Satan, not of God. Satan wins the compromises. His most valuable accomplices are the Christian compromisers. You don't win confidence or battles when the first piece of equipment ordered by your troop commanders is a white flag.