

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. VI., No. 2

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1982

Mar. /Apr. 1982

OPTIMISTIC CORPSES

by Gary North

Few concepts are more important to a man or a civilization than the idea of time. Much of what men and whole societies do in life is influenced by men's views of how much time they have in life. For apocalyptic thinkers, the very idea of time is called into question: time will run out. Eternity beckons.

Secularists have no ultimate faith in time. Time is man's inevitable victor. Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher and mathematician, has expressed the faith of the evolutionists quite well: "The same laws which produce growth also produce decay. Some day, the sun will grow cold, and life on earth will cease. The whole epoch of animals and plants is only an interlude between ages that were too hot and ages that will be too cold. There is no law of cosmic progress, but only an oscillation upward and downward, with a slow trend downward on balance owing to the diffusion of energy. This, at last, is what science at present regards as most probable, and in our disillusioned generation it is easy to believe. From evolution, so far as our present knowledge shows, no ultimately optimistic philosophy can be validly inferred" (*Religion and Science* [New York: Oxford University Press, (1935) 1972], p. 81). Man and life are defeated by the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy. Our generation may survive man-made thermonuclear holocaust, but only to lose to the ultimate thermonuclear holocaust. The sun will go out,

Obviously, few evolutionists sit around consciously creating their life's work in terms of this philosophy. They know in principle that all meaning will be swallowed up in the meaninglessness of entropy's cold death. Man only can get as much meaning out of life as he puts into it. But from what source does man derive meaning? Only from himself? Then one man's opinion is as good as any other man's opinion. How, then, do we choose between a Hitler and a Gandhi? Relativism can turn into nihilism very fast. So while the specifics of this entropy-based cosmology are not that important, the general attitude of meaninglessness filters down into the outlook of evolutionists,

The evolutionist knows that he must die. All men must die. The whole race, and all traces of it, must die. They can build for the long term, however, and modern, Western, scientific evolutionists do build for the future. Humanist civilization is a testimony to their willingness and ability to build for the future. They have borrowed an ethic more properly described as Christian, a future-oriented philosophy, and they have not faced the reality of cosmic meaninglessness too consistently. As they grow more consistent, their implicit relativism will destroy them. But at last the evolutionist knows he must die. He can defer the implications of meaninglessness until a million or a billion years into the future.

How, then, does he try to escape from death? Many ways. One way is to adopt the attitude which says, "I've got five good years left."

Five Good Years

This is a very common attitude. Men in positions of authority

tion suite frequently. As they grow older, they refuse to consider the future of their little organizations. They say to themselves, "I've got five good years left, maybe even ten. No need to start thinking about a successor. No need to worry about a plan for the future I'll think about all that when I'm at the end of my work But right now, I've got five good years left."

They have another tendency. They equate their little organizations with themselves. They are the organization. Then they equate the organization with civilization's best and most enduring features. But when they die, the organization dies, so civilization will probably die, too. Therefore, in terms of their time perspective, they think they are as immortal as civilization. They take no thought of twenty years from now, for they are convinced that civilization, like themselves, has only about five good years left. After them, the deluge.

Methuselah lived longer than any other man. He died in the year of Noah's flood. (He was 187 years old when he begat Lamech, and 182 years later, Lamech begate Noah [Gen. 5:26-27]. Then, 600 years later, the flood came [Gen. 7:11]. If you add 187, 182, and 600, you get 969 years, which was what Methuselah lived [Gen. 5:27]. He therefore died in the year of the flood.) More than any other man in history, he had the most opportunities to say, accurately, that he had at least five years remaining. Also more than any other man in history, he had the right to say, "After me, the deluge." Yet life went on. A new civilization lay ahead, through the waters of the flood.

Those who assume, as Queen Elizabeth I assumed, that they have five years left, are very short-sighted. Elizabeth refused to name a successor, so her survivors named James I, who turned out to be a disaster for England, as Otto Scott's biography of him demonstrates. Things do go on. They go on with or without any individual. They go on with or without that individual's legacy. The man who continually assumes that five years are ahead of him, so he can safely defer a decision on who or what will survive him, is a short-sighted man. Others will use his legacy to their own advantage, but the less he has left with instructions for the perpetuation of his capital or work, the more will remain for his heirs—spiritual, genetic, ideological, or bureaucratic—to dispose of as they please. The inheritance survives; the question is: What will be done with it? Survivors decide. Try to train and name your survivors.

Christian Immortality: True and False

There are literally millions of Christians who equate biblical immortality with physical survival. This may sound ridiculous. Don't all Christians long for eternal life, the life beyond the grave? Yes. However, the vast majority of those who call themselves Fundamentalists think they can and will avoid the grave. They expect to be raptured into the heavens, without first tasting the sting of death. They think that they are the members of "the terminal generation," as Hal Lindsay, America's most terminal thinker, has put it. They will be the "lucky" people who will pass from corruption to incorruption without dying (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thes. 4:15-17) "God directly to heaven" do not pass "Stop"

What will they leave behind? Pretribulationist premillennialist think that they will leave behind a world of war, famine, and terror. Then, seven years later, they will be returned to Planet Earth as semi-gods, in fully incorruptible bodies, incapable of death or sin, to rule over those people who still live in corruptible flesh. Post-tribulation premillennialists think they will go through the period of terror, but will be raptured out at the end, only to be returned as semi-gods immediately after their transformation into incorruptible, sinless rulers. Amillennialists think that the resurrection takes place at the same time as the rapture, and that the final judgment follows. There will be no era of semi-god status, mixed in with people who had not been raptured as saints. The rapture means the end of time in the amillennialist perspective. No earthly, sin-influenced millennium follows the rapture.

In any case, whatever is left behind is not worth much, compared with whatever follows. It is not worth saving. It is not a down payment on the future era of bliss. It is only the stained rags of life which we are all trying to escape. What we leave behind, in short, is bio-degradable trash. Our legacy will rot.

Christians seek immortality. They want to avoid death. They are generally convinced that the end is in sight, that there is "light at the end of the tunnel." The rapture draws nigh. Escape draws nigh. Immortality draws nigh—an immortality which is not stung first by death. Literally millions of Christians believe that they, as members of the terminal generation, will experience this death-free way to immortality.

Optimistic Future Corpses

Only one tiny group of Christians firmly believes that they will die. In fact, they rejoice in the fact that there are more years ahead for society than there are for themselves. They know they will taste the sting of death. They know their bodies will be lowered into the grave. They know they must plan and build in terms of their own death. They know that someone will read their last wills and testaments, including institutional last wills and testaments. They know that there is no escape, that insofar as life is concerned in our day, nobody gets out of it alive. These people are called postmillennialists.

David Chilton, who wrote *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (Institute for Christian Economics, 1981; \$4.95), once remarked that the day he accepted postmillennialism, he finally realized that he was going to die. He said that this awareness was unique. Nobody had ever told him this before. He and his premillennial peers had always believed that they were going to be raptured. He said that this new perspective on his own personal future changed the way he thought about his life's work. Indeed, it had to. One's time perspective is crucial to one's view of work and work's legacy. The problem today with postmillennialism, perhaps more than anything else, is that it is a philosophy of personal, physical death. That sort of philosophy really has a limited market in our era. Marxists have a secularized version of this faith, which is why they are such potent ideological opponents. Most Christians have no such outlook. They prefer not to think about death. They prefer the rapture.

Death is the backdrop of all endeavors by postmillennialists. The death of the sin-cursed body is the starting-point. Then the question has to be asked, How shall we then live? What kinds of institutions should we build? What kind of education should we impart to our children? How much capital should we invest in long-term projects? What kinds of books should we write? How, in short, should we fight? What can we leave behind that our own death will not swallow up?

Because postmillennialists know that they cannot assume continually that they have five good years left, and that they should assume that their organizations are not going to be left behind in

a world without the presence of other Christian workers, they have to think about the future. Because they know they will die, they can be optimistic about the future. They know that other Christians will persevere. They know that Christian institutions will survive to serve as salt for a world civilization. Because they will die, they think to themselves, they can build for the earthly future of others who will also die. Because their view of their own efforts is necessarily short run—one lifetime, at most—their view of the long-term effects of their efforts is implicitly long run. No one in this pre-millennium world gets out alive. No one will be raptured. No institution is left behind without any possibility of extension into the future. God will not pull the plug on history until the whole world is brought under His institutional sovereignty. There is hope for the kingdom of God on earth, precisely because there is no hope for God's people to escape the sting of death. Postmillennialists can rejoice in their own physical mortality. Their efforts can multiply over time, long after they are dead and gone. They are optimistic. They know, in principle, that they are future corpses. There is no escape. Once this is firmly in one's mind, one can get to work—work for the long haul. By God's grace, the results of such work will survive and prosper.

Johnny Appleseed's Legacy

When men look to the future, they can make minimal investments that can, if given enough time, become major sources of spiritual or financial capital. If the compounding process begins, and continues over a long enough period, the whole world can be influenced. The fact that we have short lifetimes does not mean that we cannot make long-run investments. In fact, this understanding encourages us to make these sacrifices today. We plant cultural seeds for the church's future.

We derive our meaning from God. Our work on earth survives, if it is good work. It survives in heaven (1 Cor. 3:11-15), and it also survives on earth. The Christian who is an optimistic future corpse does not worry that his work will go the way of the evolutionist's work, to be overcome by impersonal entropy. He does not worry about leaving behind a life's work that will be swallowed up in the horrors of the seven-year Tribulation. He looks to God in faith, knowing that Christ will deliver up a completed kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28).

We can plant a tree, and if it is cared for by those who follow us, it will bear fruit. We can plant today, knowing that there is sufficient time, this side of the millennium, for it to mature. It could be cut down in a war, as any good work can be at any time, but we know it will not for certain be cut down in absolute destruction during a Great Tribulation. The work of any godly man has a possibility of survival into the distant future. The rate of growth need not be large under such circumstances. Little by little, line upon line, his capital investment can prosper year by year. His spiritual successors can see to its care and maintenance.

Those who view God's history as a giant scythe which will cut down all the works of Christians on the final day (or rapture) except for internal, "spiritual" works, cannot plant cultural seeds with the same confidence, and therefore the same enthusiasm, as those who view themselves as future corpses whose work is long-term capital that can survive. On the day of judgment, the garden produced at last by Christian discipline and Christian capital will not experience a silent spring. It will be a thing of beauty, delivered to the Father by the Son as His fulfillment of the dominion covenant (Gen. 1:28). His people will share in His pride of workmanship. As His stewards, they will have a part in its historical fruitfulness. That fruitfulness will extend into the New Heavens and the New Earth.