

A Y2K Message to the People of Oxford

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the seventh Sunday of Easter, May 16, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Acts 1:6-14.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A growing number of people believe the year 2000 will usher in a period of widespread power failures and possibly societal collapse. Some airlines have canceled flights for New Year's Eve fearing a computer glitch. Two of Kay's closest friends took their money out of the bank fearing losing it all. In a Time Magazine article I read where Diane and Bruce Eckhart bought a gas powered generator, a year's supply of dehydrated food, stockpiles of canned chicken chow mein and a water bed. They fear the collapse of public utilities including water supplies. In a pinch, they have an extra 300 gallons of water in the bed. Bruce Eckhart declares pessimistically, "There are not enough people on the planet who can fix this (Y2K) problem in time." The Eckharts have also laid in two rifles, a shotgun and a handgun. In the same article, I read that Jerry Falwell is selling a \$25 video on Y2K and Gary North, a very conservative Christian economist, recommends that Bible believing Christians buy gold and grain; quit our jobs, and find a remote cabin safe from the rioting hordes. He also recommends a two-year, \$225 subscription to his newsletter.

On the other hand the social security administration says it's ready for 2000. The IRS promises it will be. Some FAA administrators announced they've booked flights over New Year's Eve because they're confident of flight safety. A Year 2000 Message from the Peoples Bank of Oxford me that all the Y2K computer glitches will be fixed in time. And our denomination is planning a huge youth conference in Indianapolis, Indiana to which they expect 30,000 young people to attend.

What is the Y2K problem. The *Y* stands for year. The *K* stands for *kilo*, or thousand. So, Y2K stands for The Year Two Thousand. But what's the problem? Many of the world's computers, including the ones that run intercontinental ballistic missiles and electrical power grids contain a programming oversight that makes them incapable of reading the date 2000. To represent years, computers generally use just the last two digits. 1999 - is 99 in computer

language. And when it rolls over on New Years Eve at midnight to 00, computers, unless fixed, will conclude that the date is 1900. Unless fixed, the computers that run your mutual funds will tell you how much money you had invested 100 years ago - which for most of us is 0.

In a Y2K Preparation Guide, Mark Kellner writes, "While no one can predict what will take place when the calendar rolls over to the next century, it seems increasingly possible that anything from the videocassette recorder in the den to warning systems protecting the United States from nuclear missiles could go awry." Larry Burkett, an Evangelical Christian Financial guru, advises churches to prepare for Y2K. "Put in enough food so that you could feed half of your church families and half of the other families in the community." Mainline Christians are also urging prudence. Eugene March, writing in the January/February edition of *Presbyterians Today*, writes, "There are legitimate concerns centering around the very practical matter of making certain that the computers central to modern banking, communication, air traffic and the like are properly programmed so as to distinguish 2000 from 1900."

People in every age have approached the future with a degree of anxiety. Fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead his disciples expressed anxiety or curiosity about the future. "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Today we may be asking, "Lord, is this the time, the year 2000, when the electrical power grids will fail and nuclear missiles accidentally launched. Should I withdraw money from banks and buy silver and gold?" And to us, as to them, he says, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

Presbyterians believe in being ready for Y2K but not fearfully anxious. Fundamental to Christian belief is a rejection of idle speculation about the "times and periods that the Father has set by his own authority." No one but God knows what the future holds. We believe and hope and anticipate that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. We believe that God will win in the end. God will rule in the end. There *is* evil in the world but evil will not finally win. Despite the realities of sin, pain, disease, oppression and greed, God's good purpose will finally be realized. Wishful thinking? Or Christian conviction! God's sovereignty and freedom

are the bedrock for reflection on The Year 2000. Clearly we're living in times of uncertainty as we approach the year 2000. But uncertainty doesn't need to lead to despair or cynicism or panic. Christians reject both optimism and pessimism about the future. We don't believe that everything is going to get better and better automatically. We don't believe everything is going to get worse and worse. We emphasize confident hope. Someone has said that we *can't* do what only God can do, and God *will not* do what we can do. God's purpose doesn't depend on human achievement, though human participation is clearly sought by God. Eugene March writes in *Presbyterians Today*, "Christ's followers are called to vigorous engagement in God's world. The task is to establish communities that demonstrate God's purpose. Instead of worrying about or speculating about the end times, energy can be invested in addressing the many problems caused by sin. Injustice . . . is to be resisted as contrary to God's way. The brokenness of individual lives and the rips in the social fabric need attention. In the end, all that is outside God's purpose will be overcome. But until then Presbyterians, while watchfully waiting, will resist such evils. Jesus clearly set the agenda for the time remaining until he returns. Feed the hungry, heal the sick, care for the suffering, free the oppressed, preach good news to the poor and disenfranchised. God's full purpose remains to be accomplished, but its certainty is assured."

We don't know what will happen on January 1, 2000. But I recently reread a sermon Karl Barth preached on New Years Eve 1960 that is apropos to the Y2K problem. Barth was preaching to prisoners in a Basel prison in Switzerland. He based his sermon on Psalm 31.6, "My Time is Secure in Your Hands." He assured those prisoners that their time is not in their own hands, nor the hands of the parole board, nor in the hands of a dark, unfeeling fate, but in God's hands. In God's hands. Then Barth asks parenthetically, "Does God have hands?" Does God literally have hands? Or is this just a metaphor? Then he says, "Yes." God does have hands. Not metaphorical hands. Literal hands. "The hands of our Savior Jesus Christ. They are the hands which he held outstretched when he called; 'Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' They are the hands with which he blessed the children. They are the hands with which he touched the sick and healed them. They are the hands with

which he broke the bread and shared it. Finally, they are (God's) hands nailed to the cross . . . the strong hands of a father, the good, soft, gentle hands of a mother, the faithful, helping hands of a friend, the gracious hands of God, in which our time is secure."

The year 2000 is in God's hands. Not in the hands of the futurologists. Not in the hands of the computer experts. Not in the hands of a cold, unfeeling fate. But in the hands of God. What if when we feel anxious about the Y2K problem we listen again to what Jesus said, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses." What if before we went to sleep every night between now and the year 2000 we were to pray, "Thank you, Lord, that you hold the future in your hands. But as for now, Lord Jesus, fulfill your promise. Let your Holy Spirit empower me to tell others about you." What if on New Years Eve we were all to bow our heads, wherever we are and whatever we're doing and say, "Thank you, Gracious God, that our times are in your hand and under your authority."