

2000

# Better Safe than Sorry? Y2K, Preparation, and the Foreclosing of the Future

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## eCommons Citation

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## Better Safe than Sorry?

### Y2K, Preparation, and the Foreclosing of the Future

SUSAN BIESECKER-MAST

#### THE Y2K PHENOMENON

The discourse of Y2K has become pervasive. It warns us that at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 2000, personal computers, embedded processors, and mainframe computers may fail. It calls us to prepare for possible fuel and food shortages, power outages, and transportation stoppages. We see it in the computer and religious sections in bookstores, we find it in countless web sites, we come across it on the front pages of our newspapers, we hear it on radio and television shows, and we read it in magazines and published newsletters. This discourse is significantly affecting people around us. It is causing Americans to become anxious, stockpile food, buy wood-burning stoves, and even build homesteads in remote locations.

According to a June 1998 Gallup Poll, almost half (48%) of all Americans expect Y2K to cause major problems. Another 47 percent are anticipating minor problems.<sup>1</sup> In addition, 73 percent say they think Y2K will have minor effects on their personal lives, while 20 percent say it will have major effects.<sup>2</sup>

Although the percentage of Americans who are expecting major effects on their personal lives may not seem large, it is actually a staggering number, considering that it represents one of every five people in the United

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<sup>1</sup> Lydia Saad, "Most Americans Calm and Collected in Face of Possible Year 2000 Computer Chaos," *Gallup Poll Monthly*, no. 394 (July 1998): 17.

<sup>2</sup> Saad, "Most Americans Calm and Collected," 17.

States. A look at the impact that 20 percent is having on one supplier of nonelectric products may be telling.

For over 40 years, Lehman's Hardware of Kidron, Ohio, has been selling nonelectric products to the Amish of Holmes and Wayne Counties (the largest Amish settlement in the world). Judging from the expansions to the Kidron store and the construction of a second store in Mount Hope, Lehman's seems to have been enjoying a brisk business for many of those years. Recently, however, the Y2K phenomenon has brought national attention to Lehman's as the store where "you can find it if you can't find it anywhere else."<sup>3</sup> Sales at Lehman's have increased dramatically. According to Glenda Lehman, communications manager of Lehman's Hardware, sales of items that do not require electricity or natural gas for producing heat, storing and processing food, supplying light, and pumping and purifying water have doubled because of Y2K. As a result of this dramatic increase in sales, Lehman reports, Lehman's Hardware has had to add a second shift for filling orders and has dedicated four employees at a time just to taking calls for stoves. Although Lehman's Hardware typically ships orders within 24 hours, the store has recently been unable to fill orders in less than five to seven weeks because of Y2K. For some items, such as cookstoves, customers have had to wait as long as six months for delivery.<sup>4</sup>

Gary Stutzman, manager of Lehman's Hardware, says that the Y2K shopper is as likely to be working class as affluent, is thirty or more years old, and comes from anywhere in the United States. These shoppers get their information about the Y2K problem and advice for preparation from radio programs, religious leaders, newsletters, and books. Although most Y2K shoppers are well informed about the items they need to be "Y2K ready," Stutzman reports, most are not very knowledgeable about how to use them. Employees of Lehman's Hardware have spent countless hours with customers, informing them about how to install a hand water pump or explaining why a dryer vent cannot substitute for a chimney as a way to release smoke from a wood-burning stove. Whereas most Y2K shoppers buy supplies in anticipation of a temporary disruption, Stutzman says he sees about two customers a week who are making a dramatic change in their lives as they prepare to move out of the city or suburbs to set up a new, non-

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<sup>3</sup> I have turned the phrase here a bit to suit my sentence. The point is usually made in the following way: "If you can't find an item anywhere else, go to Lehman's." See Thomas Jr. Petzinger, "In Amish Country, a Store Is Swept Up in Year 2000 Panic," *The Wall Street Journal* (18 December 1998), B1.

<sup>4</sup> Glenda Lehman, telephone interview (1999).

electric life in a remote location in southern Ohio, northern Michigan, or Montana.<sup>5</sup>

#### A RHETORICAL APPROACH

As a rhetorical critic, Y2K discourse is fascinating to me because it represents a clear example of a discourse that is having fairly widespread and significant impact on people's lives. It is a clear case of persuasion. It is important to me as a believer because Y2K discourse calls for a radical transformation of people's lives through Christian apocalyptic appeals. In this essay I offer an analysis of Christian Y2K discourse that aims to clarify not only why this discourse is so persuasive, but also how Christians in the believers church tradition might respond to it.

The popular Christian discourse about Y2K poses a simple question and calls for a correspondingly obvious choice. The question is "Do you believe?" and the corresponding choice is "Will you prepare?" For if you believe that at midnight on January 1, 2000, God will bring an end to the world as we know it by way of a computer glitch that misreads the year 2000 as 1900, then it follows that you should stock up on food and get right with God. It is an either/or situation. There is no in-between, if we approach the Y2K discourse as a matter of truth.

I will resist the temptation to engage this discourse in terms of its representational accuracy. My purpose is not to determine whether Y2K will be catastrophic. Rather than evaluate its referential validity, I inquire into its performative effects. Instead of asking whether this discourse correctly predicts the future, I ask what it does to our present reality in terms of how people live their daily lives and how they understand God and history.

My purpose in taking a rhetorical approach to Y2K discourse is threefold. First, by suspending the question of truth and asking a question of rhetorical effects, I can take this popular discourse seriously without granting at the outset its claim to truth in its predictions. Second, a rhetorical approach enables me to study how the discourse works and what its effects are. Third, a study of its workings and effects may provide occasion to move beyond the binary oppositions Y2K discourse seeks to pose between belief and unbelief, preparedness and foolishness. Resisting those binaries allows one to answer *other* questions of truth—questions not about the accuracy of its warnings, but about its faithfulness to the gospel. My purpose is to suggest an alternative believers church response to the apparently compelling urgency of Y2K.

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Stutzman, interview (Lehman's Hardware, 1999).

To conduct this rhetorical analysis, I use the theory of apocalyptic rhetoric offered by Stephen O'Leary in his book, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*.<sup>6</sup> O'Leary's theory will enable me to read Y2K discourse as an apocalyptic rhetoric that, in seeking to resolve a generic tension, may put us on the track of an alternative believers church response to Y2K.

#### THE RHETORICAL WORKINGS OF Y2K

In what has become a classic essay in the discipline of communication, Lloyd Bitzer argues that a discourse is rhetorical if it arises in response to a rhetorical situation. He defines a rhetorical situation as a context in which an exigence—an imperfection marked by urgency—calls forth a discursive response that can alter the exigence in some way. Thus, rhetoric, according to Bitzer, is discourse that is called forth by and seeks to alter some exigence.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The Exigence of Evil*

For O'Leary, apocalyptic discourse is rightly called apocalyptic rhetoric insofar as it seeks to resolve an exigence; namely, the problem of evil in human experience. O'Leary describes the exigence or imperfection that calls forth apocalyptic rhetoric in the following manner. "The problem faced by all monotheistic cultures is the perceived contradiction between the experiential reality of evil and the belief in an omnipotent and benevolent creator."<sup>8</sup> Apocalyptic rhetoric resolves that exigence, O'Leary argues, not by logic but by the use of ancient narratives that make sense of evil and promise an end to evil and human suffering.<sup>9</sup> In such narratives, "the mythic end of history represents the perfection of the cosmos through the purgation of the principle of evil in a final eschatological Judgment through which the divine sufferance of evil will be justified."<sup>10</sup> According to O'Leary we make sense of evil through these ancient narratives as we interpret them for our contemporary context.

I think O'Leary is right that we seek to solve the paradox of evil in the face of an omnipotent God through our interpretations and uses of apocalyptic narratives of the Bible. But I also think that evil presents

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

<sup>8</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 51.

an additional exigence today: the problem of what counts as evil. American Christians, the target audience of the Y2K discourses I am discussing, experience evil in such forms as high school or workplace shootings, environmental degradation, and drug abuse. Although many Americans experience contemporary American life as terribly wrong somehow, most do not have a clear sense of what the source or cause of that wrongness is.

When the Cold War ended, Americans' clear sense of the source of evil dissipated. Without an easily identifiable and external enemy (the Soviet Union in Harry S. Truman's postwar speeches or the evil empire in Ronald Reagan's exhortations), Americans are at a loss for how to organize or to give meaning to their experience of evil. Thus, in addition to the problematic paradox of evil for Christians, contemporary *American* Christians also have the difficulty of giving order to what seems a chaotic, unpredictable, and nonsensical experience of evil.

As an apocalyptic rhetoric, Y2K resolves both of these exigencies. Popular Y2K discourse tells the story of an impending end to evil that also makes sense of evil. In so doing, it explains the contemporary American experience of evil. According to the narrative offered by Steve Farrar in his book, *Spiritual Survival During the Y2K Crisis*, Y2K is the judgment God is poised to make of our immorality.

America is economically prosperous and morally bankrupt. We have aborted approximately fifty million babies in the last twenty-five years. Do you think that puts us on God's side? ... We have stepped across the line. ... And He may use Y2K to get our attention.<sup>11</sup>

Farrar goes on to charge us with idolatry. He says, "We are addicted to technology. We depend on technology. America worships technology. In this nation, technology is the god of choice."<sup>12</sup> That Y2K is God's judgment on our idolatry, Farrar continues, became clear to him through his extensive research of the Y2K problem.

According to Farrar, if Y2K is a technological glitch that will bring a catastrophic end to our world, then God must have a hand in this glitch. And if God has a hand in this glitch, then, so this reasoning goes, our love of technology must be the contemporary root of the evils we experience.

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<sup>11</sup> Steve Farrar, *Spiritual Survival During the Y2K Crisis* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 206.

<sup>12</sup> Farrar, *Spiritual Survival*, 1.

Thus, Y2K makes sense of our experience of evil as a judgment that God may bring at "millennial midnight." It also focuses our attention away from a confusing experience of many evils and toward a single, root evil. More importantly, Y2K discourse responds to our exigence by answering the question, Why is there evil? In addition, it constitutes our exigence by telling us how to understand our contemporary experience of confusing evils.

Y2K discourse responds to these ultimate and particular exigencies through three strategies or "topoi." Topoi are commonplaces or stable resources for persuasive arguments.<sup>13</sup> According to O'Leary, apocalyptic rhetoric employs three topoi: the topos of evil, the topos of time, and the topos of authority. The discussion above of how Y2K discourse organizes our experience of evil around Y2K as a symptom of a root evil—the idolatry of technology—describes this rhetoric's topos of evil.<sup>14</sup> In the next few sections, I will discuss the topos of time and authority in Y2K discourse.

### *The Topos of Time*

According to O'Leary, apocalyptic rhetoric always constructs an end to time because only thus can our experience of evil make sense as that which must give way to something altogether different.<sup>15</sup> "It is but a short leap from this proposition [that time must stop] to the apocalyptic positions that 'It is possible to know when time will end,' and 'The end is near.'"<sup>16</sup> More importantly, this argumentative leap changes the way the audience experiences time. "As argument, apocalypse seeks to situate its audience at

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent translation of Aristotle's treatment of topoi, see Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45–47.

<sup>14</sup> Other authors organize apocalyptic rhetoric around evil, but are not as explicit as Farrar. Hal Lindsey and Cliff Ford attribute Y2K to a government conspiracy, then invoke Revelation to suggest a connection between Bill Clinton and the antichrist. Although Shaunti Christine Feldhahn, the least sensationalist of the writers I read, does not make an explicit connection between Y2K and evil, she does say that this problem is not coincidental and that God has a larger purpose in it. Hal Lindsey and Clifford Ford, *Facing Millennial Midnight: The Y2K Crisis Confronting America and the World* (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Western Front, 1998); Shaunti Christine Feldhahn, *Y2K: The Millennium Bug* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Here O'Leary relies on Augustine's view of time: "Time must have its conclusion in some new state redeemed from present suffering; for who could bear an eternity of such misery?" O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 31.

the end of a particular pattern of historical time; to the extent that people adhere to apocalyptic claims, this perception of time is altered."<sup>17</sup>

For most apocalyptic writers, the problem of identifying the end involves complex analyses of biblical texts and contemporary contexts. However, for the writers of Y2K discourse, the prediction is easy. Not only can Y2K authors give the year, but they can also, contrary to the warning in Matthew 24:36, give the day and the hour: midnight, January 1, 2000. Given that this apocalypse is precipitated by the "rollover" to 2000, we cannot but know in advance when this apocalypse will occur. No biblical analysis is necessary. Instead, all that is required is to explain the workings of the technological glitch. Thus, book after web site after news article describe the technical nature of the glitch and its relationship to the "rollover" in detail, regardless of how many times the audience is likely to have already read or heard it.<sup>18</sup> The audience must be reminded that the arrival of this historical crisis is clear, fixed, and fast-approaching. Shaunti Christine Feldhahn opens her book *Y2K: The Millennium Bug*, in the following dramatic manner: "As you read this, technology all over the world is ticking toward an event unprecedented in human history. Computers are about to encounter a year that does not begin with the number 19, and many will stop functioning normally as a result."<sup>19</sup>

When the apparent incontrovertibility of the prediction is followed by a description of why the problem cannot be fixed in time or of what disastrous effects it will cause, a compelling apocalyptic narrative emerges. So compelling is this narrative that it has significantly altered people's sense of time. The present becomes at most secondary to a dramatic end that seems very near.

### *The Topos of Authority*

O'Leary argues that apocalyptic rhetoric depends on a decidedly rhetorical version of charismatic authority. According to Aristotle, a speaker's authority or ethos can properly be called rhetorical if it emerges out of the rhetorical transaction itself. That is, it must be constituted out of the rhetoric itself and not out of the rhetor's prior reputation.<sup>20</sup> Following Aristotle, O'Leary sees the apocalyptic rhetor's ethos as constituted by the interaction between the rhetor, the audience, and the text. It works like this: as an audi-

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<sup>17</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Lindsey and Ford, *Facing Millennial Midnight*, 13–33; Farrar, *Spiritual Survival*, 19–30; Feldhahn, *Y2K*, 33–37.

<sup>19</sup> Feldhahn, *Y2K*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, John Henry Freese (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), book 1.



ence takes in an apocalyptic rhetoric, it has the option to accept the rhetoric as true or to reject it as false. That is true of any rhetoric. But what is unique about apocalyptic rhetoric is that if the audience accepts this rhetoric as true, then it is automatically positioned by that rhetoric as an audience capable of judging matters of eternal significance. The audience is thus positioned as a universal audience or as receiving the promise of a divine or universal perspective on history and evil.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, if the audience accepts the rhetoric as true and thus takes up the position as universal audience, then it also confers upon the rhetoric the status of truth and upon the rhetor the status of one who has charismatic authority to speak the truth about ultimate things. Thus the audience enjoys the position of knowing, of being in the know, and of having what we might call a final say – but only if it accepts the rhetoric as true, thereby granting the rhetor charismatic authority. A lot is at stake in granting such powerful authority – namely, the audience's own position as authority in matters of cosmic importance.

Consequently, Y2K "authorities" almost always make a point of telling their audience that they do not have all the answers and that the readers or audience must ultimately be the judge both of the truth of what is said about Y2K and about the right course of action. In this way the rhetors begin the process of subtly positioning their audiences as the ultimate arbiters. Thus, for instance, Shaunti Christine Feldhahn writes: "I do not pretend to predict the future with certainty. But I do wish to spark awareness, leadership, and reflection in the Christian community, as well as propose a Christian response."<sup>22</sup> Despite the complexity of the problem, Feldhahn urges, the reader should nevertheless take control: "My hope is that you will immediately begin to consider and prepare for the ramifications that will affect you and the people the Lord has placed in your path."<sup>23</sup> In both of these quotes, Feldhahn positions herself as the humble servant toward her readers' discovery of and response to truth.

Steve Farrar, another Y2K "authority," not only claims humility; he also goes so far as to tell his readers that he is a reluctant author. "I didn't want to write this book because I realized I was deeply concerned about my reputation. I didn't want people to say, 'You heard about Steve Farrar, didn't you? What a pity how he went over the edge like that,' or some words to that effect."<sup>24</sup> A page later he continues, however, by adding that he was obliged to write the book. Thus, as claims for the author's authority

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<sup>21</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Feldhahn, Y2K, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Feldhahn, Y2K, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Farrar, *Spiritual Survival*, 6.

recede into a discourse of humility, service, and obligation, the position of the audience as ultimate arbiter comes into relief. But for readers to cash in on their position as arbiters of ultimate truth, they must first grant the status of truth to the rhetoric they are reading and confer charismatic authority to the author. If O'Leary is right, and I think he is, that is precisely the transaction that is under way in these passages.

#### PERSPECTIVAL EFFECTS

So far I have argued that popular Christian discourse on Y2K works in the following manner: through the topos of evil, it shapes our experience of evil by telling us what is wrong and by simplifying our confusing experience into a single, root cause. Through the topos of time, it promises a resolution of evil at the incontrovertible moment of Y2K—millennial midnight. Simultaneously, it reorients their audience's experience of time away from the present and toward an imminent end. Finally, through the topos of authority, it constitutes Y2K "authorities" as voices of truth by offering to its audience the position of those-in-the-know as that audience, in turn, confers charismatic authority (or the authority to speak the truth) to the authors.

Given the primary means or topoi through which Y2K discourse works as an apocalyptic rhetoric, I now speak to the effects it may have on its audience's perspective. I do this by using concepts borrowed from Kenneth Burke (a twentieth-century rhetorical theorist): the tragic and comic frames. According to O'Leary, apocalyptic rhetoric fits within one or the other of these frames or, more often, includes elements of one while fitting into the other. In what follows, I attempt to read Y2K discourse through these frames in order to take a broader look at the rhetoric that has been described so far.

#### *The Tragic Frame and Y2K*

According to O'Leary, apocalyptic rhetoric that fits within the tragic frame identifies a specific time for the apocalypse, personifies evil, and argues by means of an apocalyptic jeremiad in which present evils are worse than ever. It says that God is in charge of the impending crisis, predicts what will happen at the end, and poses a time limit for human agency.<sup>25</sup> Given these characteristics, this frame creates a closed-ended perspective on the world in relation to time: the end is near and predetermined. Although apocalyptic rhetoric in the tragic frame can arouse audience curiosity about the immediate future and heighten audience excitement about the impending crisis, it also forecloses the future. It thereby

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<sup>25</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 86–87.

undercuts human decision-making and action. Although the audience is not entirely stripped of agency at the end of history, it is put into the position of a participant in a drama whose end, however exciting, is given. Until the end, however, the audience may enjoy the ritual gesture of an apocalyptic rhetoric that "predicts, embodies, and enacts a revelation of Truth that remains true even if it fails to find or convince its historical audiences."<sup>26</sup>

Y2K discourse clearly exhibits all but one of these features of the tragic frame. As I have already pointed out, this discourse makes abundantly clear that the specific time for the apocalypse is known. Also, evil shows up in personified form. According to Hal Lindsey and Cliff Ford in their book, *Facing Millennial Midnight*, the antichrist is likely to be Mikhail Gorbachev, since he may be appointed as Y2K Czar, thereby taking control of the world's computers.<sup>27</sup> Just a few pages after this identification of the antichrist, Lindsey and Ford make the case for the apocalyptic jeremiad:

Today, all that is necessary to fulfill John's prophecy is someone to sit at a master keyboard and punch in a few keystrokes. So far, there is no master keyboard and no *one* person who can punch in the right combination of keystrokes on it.

Y2K may change all that. Whether we like it or not.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, this discourse presents a limit in time to human agency, after which humans can have no effect. Although a deadline is seldom identified explicitly in Y2K discourse, readers are constantly urged to take action now by preparing their homes and getting right with God — before it is too late. That the deadline is fast approaching is made clear in Feldhahn's call for approaching Y2K the same way emergency room staff approach accident victims — by "triage" or "by focusing on the most critical or savable patients."<sup>29</sup>

The one way in which Y2K discourses do not fit the tragic frame is in their equivocation about predicting *what will happen*. Whereas the question about *when* the crisis will hit is easily answered, the question as to what exactly it will mean is not. To be sure, predictions are made, but typically in the form of scenarios, vignettes, or novelettes — fictional accounts of the morning after Y2K. These predictions vary between Y2K books. They also

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<sup>26</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Lindsey and Ford, *Facing Millennial Midnight*, 208–9.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsey and Ford, *Facing Millennial Midnight*, 210–11.

<sup>29</sup> Feldhahn, *Y2K*, 77.

often differ within a single Y2K book. Thus, Feldhahn gives a series of vignettes set in a variety of contexts while warning repeatedly that no one really knows what will happen. Farrar uses the brownout, blackout, and meltdown scenarios of another Y2K "expert," Michael Hyatt, to describe the range of possibilities. Lindsey and Ford offer a novelette that, they insist, does not represent the worst-case scenario. This equivocation on the impact of Y2K is important. Although this discourse closes down the future by means of a date that is known, it cannot be certain that what is coming is the end.

### *The Comic Frame*

This inability to foreclose the future through the prediction of Y2K effects enables a reading of Y2K discourse from within the comic frame as well. According to O'Leary, the comic frame proposes that present evils may teach us something. Although we may not be able to avoid the impending catastrophe, we may be able to avoid its effects. We may be able to overcome evil through recognition, education, and reform. Thus, the overarching function of apocalyptic discourse within the comic frame is not to engage the audience in a drama about the end (as in the tragic frame), but to call the audience to transformation.

Y2K discourse exhibits all the characteristics of the comic frame. It admits that it does not really know what the outcome will be. Thus, Lindsey and Ford write, "So, what's it going to be? Will it be a nonevent, a brownout, blackout, or meltdown? The best we can do is to rely on the educated guesses of those in the Information Technology industry."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Feldhahn appeals to her readers to remember the contingent nature of predictions about effects. "Please remember that, while there is a great deal of credible evidence on the potential impacts of Y2K, all analysis of the problem is uncertain because of its uncertain nature."<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Y2K discourses insist that, in the context of uncertainty about effects, we have the opportunity to learn something important and to take decisive action. Farrar argues that we may be improved by our experience of Y2K, just as those who lived through the Great Depression were made stronger and better by their ordeal.<sup>32</sup> As to how we may avoid the effects of this impending crisis, Farrar tells us to ask ourselves some hard questions about our relationship to God. "Is your heart loyal to Him? Then

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<sup>30</sup> Lindsey and Ford, *Facing Millennial Midnight*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Feldhahn, *Y2K*, 67. Emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> Farrar, *Spiritual Survival*, 148.

you have nothing to fear. ... Because you love and fear Him, you and yours will be led by the Lion who is also the Great Shepherd of the sheep."<sup>33</sup>

In sum, Y2K discourse cannot be read as simply comic, tragic, comic within tragic, or tragic within comic. It equivocates. It insists that a crisis is coming and that it will arrive on a definite date. It says that the crisis cannot be stopped, that the devil is in it, that God is in control of it, and that time is running out. Yet, because it cannot be certain of the effects, it is unable to foreclose the future altogether by way of a prediction of effects. Thus, the discourse also exhibits the characteristics of the comic frame.

### *To Resolve a Tension*

In the conclusion of his book on apocalyptic rhetoric, O'Leary argues that the best relationship between the tragic and comic frames is a dialectical synthesis. The two frames constitute, at a theoretical level, two polar opposites. Whenever those poles are pulled apart and reified in their differences, O'Leary argues, they do not serve us well. When the tragic frame is emphasized, it strips human beings of agency except as participants in the ultimate end. When the comic frame is emphasized, the end is not taken seriously enough.<sup>34</sup> As he has already told us, the end is structurally essential to a new beginning, so we ought not give it up. What is best, he argues, is a synthesis in which a new beginning is recognized as the counterpart to the end or in which the end is sublated to the new beginning. "An adequate grasp of the human eschatological dilemma in the nuclear age requires a dialectical understanding, and perhaps a synthesis, of the tragic and comic perspectives."<sup>35</sup>

I have been arguing that Y2K discourse exhibits all but one characteristic of the tragic frame and all of the characteristics of the comic frame. Thus, Y2K discourse can be read as unwilling to settle easily within either frame. Put simply, the discourse seems both closed- and open-ended. However, Y2K discourse may also be read as seeking to resolve the tension between the tragic and the comic frame by way of a synthesis attempted in the call to preparation.

"Preparation" is, on my reading, the key term throughout Y2K discourse. It is the term that solves the problem of the contingency of the end insofar as it provides the warrant for us to radically transform our lives, embark on a new beginning, and make a fresh start in the name of the end. Thus the end seems to be sublated to the beginning insofar as it serves as the impetus for our transformation.

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<sup>33</sup> Farrar, *Spiritual Survival*, 221.

<sup>34</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 222.

<sup>35</sup> O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 222.

The claim that these Y2K authorities make is simple: "Better safe than sorry." It is better to prepare now for a catastrophe and be wrong, than to wake up New Year's Day freezing and hungry. Lindsey and Ford admit the contingency of their predictions, yet insist on preparation. "Y2K may not impact us quite as severely as we anticipate, but if you are prepared for the worst, then anything less than that will be a pleasant surprise."<sup>36</sup> Farrar argues that everything is ultimately in God's hands, but he also says, "Yes, we are to do what we can do. We are not to be lazy sluggards or foolish procrastinators."<sup>37</sup> After grounding her appeal in Scripture, Feldhahn argues, "In response to the Year 2000 threat, we must be neither panic-stricken nor complacent; we must be ready."<sup>38</sup>

To be ready for Y2K, we are told, we should stockpile nonperishable food (since there will be no fuel for making deliveries), establish a clean water source that does not depend on electricity, set up a wood-burning heating source (since the flow of electricity and natural gas will probably stop), take our money out of the stock market (since it will surely crash as all economic activity comes to a halt), buy gold and silver (since only they have real value), stock up on items we can trade (since dollars will be useless when the paper money "con game" collapses), move out of the city (where riots and looting are sure to break out; after all, if "they" are willing to riot over one court case, think what "they" will do when they're hungry), and get a gun (after all, it's biblical to protect yourself). These are the preparations we are advised to make. These are the contours of the life this discourse calls us to. Sound familiar?

As I read these lists of Y2K preparations, images of *Big Valley*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Bonanza* come to mind. I can almost feel myself bouncing along the Oregon Trail in my covered wagon, keeping my eye out for coyotes and Indians. It is the frontier we are being asked to recreate.

The frontier has been defined since the nineteenth century as "a place occupied by fewer than two people per square mile."<sup>39</sup> Since around the end of the nineteenth century, the American frontier has been declared closed. By that time, all land had been explored, documented, and/or settled. One way to tell the story of the United States is by plotting the various attempts to recreate that frontier ever since. We have sought to do it by giving birth

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<sup>36</sup> Lindsey and Ford, *Facing Millennial Midnight*, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Farrar, *Spiritual Survival*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> Feldhahn, *Y2K*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1994), 67.

to a New Deal, sending a man to the moon, and colonizing cyberspace. Now Y2K discourse is inviting Americans to "return" again to that space in which living in a cabin "stressed the courage of the builder and the challenge that the surrounding wilderness represented,"<sup>40</sup> in which men were not emasculated by the machines that did their work,<sup>41</sup> and in which the frontier enabled "a constant reinvigoration of the country and its people."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the Y2K calls for preparation represent yet another effort to instantiate the frontier, not in some ideological mindscape or hyperreal cyberspace, but in our daily living space.

Judging from the Gallup Poll indicating that 93 percent of all Americans expect problems in their personal lives due to Y2K and from the dramatic increase in sales at Lehman's Hardware, this call to preparation—this invitation to a fantasy about a return to a frontier in which our societal evils disappear—appears to have been heard and heeded.

Having reached the edges of the frontier, I wish to return now to my point: Y2K discourses resolve the tension between the tragic and the comic frames through an appeal to preparation. These discourses call upon their readers to prepare because it is always better to be safe than sorry. But the kind of activity this call to preparation effects in psychological terms—as well as on the registers of nonelectric product consumption and even log cabin construction—is a performance of the frontier of the past. In this way, Y2K discourse inspires an enactment of the end in the here and now. For what is preparation but the creation of conditions in the present according to the presumed necessities of the future? While Y2K discourses disavow prediction of actual effects, their lists of preparations and fictional accounts of possible scenarios create in the present a world according to Y2K for many Americans. Even those who buy grain mills in preparation for only temporary disruptions have already entered into the performance. Even they have bought into this story of Y2K and are already living according to its end.

In the case of Y2K discourse, then, the synthesis that O'Leary prescribes fails. The end does not remain sublated to the beginning. Even as a new beginning is being produced through preparation, something of the end is left over in the form of psychological and other material effects. Thus, rather than the end serving as the means to a new beginning, the new beginning performs an end as those persuaded by Y2K give even the present over to the end.

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<sup>40</sup> Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in Grossman, *Frontier in American Culture*, 21.

<sup>41</sup> White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," 49.

<sup>42</sup> White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," 25.

So what is the problem with enacting the ritual of the end or with adopting a tragic frame in which we are participants in a drama of the end? The problem is that in enacting the end in the present or in crossing the divide to the end, those who prepare in this way for Y2K seek to take control of a history over which God is sovereign. Moreover, by performing the end in the present by their own preparations, these folks deny that the future has already been brought into the present through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and that God's reign continues in the present by way of the Holy Spirit and the church. In other words, Y2K preparations of this sort oblige us to forget the Cross and the Pentecost.

We know that the end will surely come. But we are not to know when or how. Therefore, we must be ready. But how can we be ready when we do not know what to be ready for or when to be ready for it? That, it seems to me, is the challenge of every present—to live not on a literal frontier in which your neighbor is a mile away, but to live on the frontier as a line between the old and the new, between the first and second coming, between yesterday and tomorrow.<sup>43</sup> To live on that frontier is to respond to Jesus' call and to look toward the future while resisting the temptation to foreclose it by forcing it into the present.

#### CONCLUSION

Hanging above the desk of an Amish employee at Lehman's Hardware is a cartoon clipped from a newspaper. The cartoon features an Amish man standing in front of a farm as a buggy passes. The Amish man is smiling broadly. His shirt reads, "Y2K Ready." Of course, the cartoon is humorous. But the question is why?

This image is funny because it undercuts that key term, *preparation*. Put simply, the Amish man, whose nonelectric life so many Americans are seeking to emulate, cannot prepare. He cannot prepare for Y2K because he and his people already live and have been living a life for which Y2K represents no crisis. His life is not changing and will not change because of Y2K. Y2K makes virtually no difference to him, except for the fact that he is having a heck of a time getting a cookstove from Lehman's in time for his daughter's wedding.<sup>44</sup> Thus, this image undercuts the rhetoric of Y2K insofar as it shows us that the one best prepared for Y2K is the one who is not preparing for Y2K.

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<sup>43</sup> Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier."

<sup>44</sup> Glenda Lehman told me a story about an Amish man who was terribly frustrated by the fact that, because of Y2K, he would not be able to get a cook stove in time for his daughter's wedding as his father-in-law had been able to do for his and his wife's wedding. Lehman, telephone interview.



This is not an insignificant point from the perspective of the believers church. The Amish are a people who must make a choice to join or not to join the church, to live or not to live by the *Ordnung*, to stay in or to leave the Amish church. They are thus a church community of adult believers. Their purpose in living as they do is not to be fashionable, trendy, or cutting edge, despite the tourist economy's purposes to the contrary. If they are trendy, they are only incidentally so. What shapes their life is not "triage," or urgency, or fantasy, but the effort to live the best they can as the body of Christ. That is their "preparation."

As promised at the outset, I have not speculated about what will happen at "millennial midnight." I must admit, as the Y2K authorities do, that I do not know. No one knows. It is possible that nothing will happen or that we will experience the end of the world as we know it—or something in between. But if, in the meantime, we seek to live as true believers, as the body of Christ, as the visible reign of God in the here and now, will we not, just like the Amish, be the very best prepared?