Y2K, The Apocalypse, and Evangelical Christianity: The Role of Eschatological Belief in Church Responses

Lisa McMinn*

Wheaton College

Apocalyptic beliefs in Christianity have endured for two thousand years and on occasion have motivated and justified radical and even revolutionary collective action (Boyer 1992). Why apocalyptic visions are part of some Christians' belief system is grounded in their beliefs about the end times, or eschatologies, that shape church cultures and subsequent behaviors. This paper considers cultural aspects of collective action, applying the concept of frames that give events meaning and inspire and legitimize collective behavior to Christian church responses to Y2K as a recent example of an anticipated apocalyptic event. Five interpretive frames linking eschatological ideation with specific collective behaviors are identified and discussed, as well as three corresponding strategic responses to Y2K that were taken by various kinds of Protestant Christian churches as they prepared for the ushering in of a new millennium.

Apocalyptic beliefs in Christianity have endured for two thousand years, occasionally motivating and justifying radical collective action (Boyer 1992). Berger's (1969) concept of plausibility structures offers an explanation for the adoption and retention of beliefs, such as apocalyptic endings of the world, even when those endings do not come as predicted. Plausibility theodicy explains how those advocating religious beliefs make sense out of events, giving events a "place" in the larger picture (1969:58-59). Linking plausibility structures imbedded in eschatological belief systems with subsequent behavior offers a sociological interpretation of the Y2K event as experienced by Protestant Christians.

Collective action and social movement theories have not often been utilized to explain the emergence and decline of religious phenomenon. Historically this was probably due to the reluctance to grant religious movements legitimacy along with political social movements (Hannigan 1991). Social movement studies tended to link politically motivated social change and emphasize

resource mobilization theories rather than ideologically or religiously motivated change geared at how individuals live (Williams 1994). More recently Williams (2000) suggested social movement theory that looks at cultural aspects of change would lead to a more meaningful analysis of Promise Keepers than theories considering political motivations alone. The emergence of new social movement theories gave cultural aspects of collective action legitimacy, correcting for a shortcoming of resource mobilization theories that focused too much on the availability and coordination of resources while glossing over questions concerning interpretation of events relevant to social movement activities and behaviors (McAdams 1997). A social psychological emphasis attends to cultural aspects of collective action by focusing on the centrality of social relationships and the need for solidarity between individuals' beliefs about the social world and the beliefs of the group (Gamson 1992). An analysis attending to cultural aspects of collective action explores connections between social relationships that are religious in nature and subsequent collective behavior.

Snow and Benford (1988) borrow from Goffman's (1974) concept of frames and discuss how ideological frames inspire and legitimize social movement activity. By giving events meaning, frames function as plausibility structures organizing experience and guiding subsequent action — whether individual or collective. Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) considered how frame alignment links individual and collective interpretative orientations so that individuals' values, beliefs and meanings and subsequent collective behavior are congruent and complementary. They identify four frame alignment processes that link individuals with collective interpretive frames.

These four processes were evident in churches and denominations attempting to convince individuals of the need to prepare for Y2K. *Frame bridging*, the first frame alignment process, is the recruitment tool that links the ideological construct (in this case the need to prepare for Y2K) with an ideological construct congruent with the collectivity (eschatological beliefs). *Frame amplification* occurs by emphasizing relevant values and beliefs. Focusing on prophetic fulfillment that suggested the imminence of the Second Coming of Christ amplified the belief that Y2K may be a fulfillment of end-times prophecies. *Frame extension* strengthens alignment by expanding the purpose of adopting behaviors associated with a particular belief. When church leaders extended the need for members to prepare physically for Y2K to also helping members see Y2K as a great evangelistic opportunity, their motivational power was strengthened. *Frame transformation* occurs when the proposed beliefs require considerable change in individuals' conventional lifestyles and new ideas and values are nurtured while old ones are effectively debunked (Snow et al. 1986).

This paper examining the Y2K phenomenon considers the cultural aspects of eschatological beliefs as a framing tool that facilitated organization and activity. Three sources of data were used to explore the relationship between eschatological beliefs and Y2K activity. First, the summary tables of a survey conducted

by Barna Research Group in 1998 from a national survey of 610 pastors was used to compare and contrast interpretative frames. Second, informal interviews were conducted with ten people involved in church-related Y2K discussions, including the leader of a local church's Y2K task force, a pastor heading up a church response to Y2K, a representative of Capin Crouse Technologies, and the founder of Joseph Project 2000.

Approximately twenty-five other people were talked to over the course of the year through my Y2K task force involvement, attendance at a public forum on Y2K and through emergent opportunities as Y2K came up in conversation. I adopted a participant observer stance in interviews and conversations, taking advantage of my privileged insider position. I was one of them, a Christian with an awareness of, and in-group familiarity with, the significance of eschatological beliefs. Whether or not it was known that I was conducting research about Y2K, it was assumed that my participation came from a genuine interest in how Y2K might affect the church and how the church might respond to real or perceived needs related to Y2K. Third, with the help of a research assistant I viewed web site updates on the Internet several times a month from February 1999 through January 2000. Search engines were used to locate and in two cases contact groups recruiting people to join communities being formed in isolated areas.

Data were used to support a possible typology connecting eschatological belief to Y2K behavior and to illustrate frame alignment processes evident in various individual, local parish, and denominational responses to Y2K. The use of informal data collection techniques and convenience sampling proved useful for this study.

BACKGROUND OF Y2K AS SOCIAL PHENOMENON

In 1993 Canadian computer consultant, Peter de Jager, was one of the first to sound the doomsday alarm for the Year 2000 computer glitch (Feldhahn 1998), though the alarm was not heard by mainstream America until about 1997. Global efforts to fix the computer bug began, and ultimately over 500 billion dollars was spent in an effort to keep critical systems functioning once computer clocks turned to 2000 (Levy 2000). Some computer and financial analysts did not believe the bug could be fixed before January 1, 2000. Books were written, websites constructed, and newsletters circulated to warn people to prepare for a crisis.

Many conservative and evangelical Christians were active by 1998 establishing websites with information, services; and products available to Christians concerned about Y2K. Early in 1999 ads for survival products began to appear in *Christianity Today*, a publication directed at evangelical Christians. Thomas Clark, a self-described "informed fundamentalist," ran Y2K Prepare, an Internet business that sold food mills and offered information about food and water storage (Kellner 1999).

Shanti Feldhahn (financial analyst and one of a number of Christian authors who wrote about Y2K) claimed to offer a balanced Christian response to Y2K in her 1998 book. Feldhahn founded The Joseph Project, a grassroots Christian-led nonprofit organization heeding the call to prepare Christian communities for potential chaos and social crisis. The Joseph Project's stated purpose was "to prevent and respond to the potential impacts of the Year 2000 computer problem in a biblically balanced and professional manner, honoring and glorifying God in all we do" (Joseph Project 1998). Joseph Project gave specific guidelines for how individual Christians and Christian churches could prepare economically, physically and spiritually for potential disruptions caused by Y2K. By November 1999 the Joseph Project network had established 130 chapters in nine different countries.

While many different responses were present in the United States, the focus of this paper is the range of responses in Protestant Christian churches. The spectrum ranged from churches choosing not to address Y2K at all to those developing Christian communities in the remote mountains of North Carolina where Christians could purchase five-acre lots to build houses and plant gardens (North Carolina Community 1999). The spectrum of responses to Y2K reflected a comparable range of beliefs churches held about end time events.

CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

Consistent among Christian traditions is the eschatological belief that eventually Christ will conquer all God's enemies, and the kingdom of God will be established (Bloesch 1982; Erickson 1985; Bock 1999). Traditionally, Christians have held to one of three positions on how and when that kingdom will occur.

A premillennial eschatology is held by those who believe Christ returns to earth, conquers Satan, and then establishes a 1000-year benevolent reign on earth (Phillips and Okholm 1996). Proponents of this position see the world as getting progressively worse, moving toward an apocalyptic end that signals the return of Christ. Social events are interpreted through a filter that anticipates God's supernatural intervention in the events of humanity. The premillennial eschatological culture is most likely to interpret the Bible and biblical prophecies literally (Virkler 1981). Because socio-political redemption does not occur until after Christ establishes his kingdom, the focus of the Church is spiritual redemption. Engagement with the world is often limited to humanitarian efforts with an evangelistic goal (Bock 1999). If one believes the world is growing increasingly corrupt and cannot be turned from its depravity, than one will focus on that which can be saved — souls.

A postmillennial eschatology is held by those believing the millennial reign is not a visible reign of Christ on earth, but a spiritual reign of Christ through the Church which seeks to impact the world for God (Phillips and Okholm 1996; Bock 1999). A gradual permeation of society by the ethical principles of

Jesus is God's ultimate victory of righteousness over evil (Bloesch 1982; Erickson 1985). Proponents of this position see the world optimistically and work actively to bring about the kingdom of God by addressing social ills of the day. The call of the Church is a cultural mandate for full involvement in socio-political redemption (Bock 1999).

An amillennial eschatology suggests the millennial reign occurs between Christ's first coming (when God became incarnated in human form as Jesus) and the second coming (Bloesch 1982; Bock 1999). Thus, we are now living in the millennial reign. Christ has already bound Satan and established the kingdom of God through the Church and in the hearts of believers. The goal for the Church is not to bring the kingdom of God to earth, but to testify to the grace of God, to be a faithful witness of God's ultimate victory and sovereignty (Bock 1999). Amillennialists are not likely as optimistic as postmillennialists nor as pessimistic as premillennialists. As the world (and the millennial reign) nears its end, there will be increasing wickedness. Eventually Christ will return, establish a new heaven and a new earth and the world will be under the complete reign of Christ (Phillips and Okholm 1996; Bock 1999). Neither amillennialism nor postmillennialism is inclined to search for God's supernatural intervention as an agent in eschatological events. Holders of these positions are more inclined than premillennialists to interpret scripture symbolically, and do not consider the prophecies of scripture as literal predictions of the future (Virkler 1981).

Israel's regaining statehood in 1948 has been significant for many premillennial Christians who perceived the re-establishment of Israel as fulfilling a prophecy from Matthew 24. The passage urges Christians to watch for signs of the end times — wars, rumors of wars, false Christs, and the renewal of the fig tree (a symbol for the re-establishment of Israel). Jesus said when these signs have occurred, the present generation will not pass away until his return. Interpretations of Jesus' words as pointing to the state of affairs in the late 20th century encouraged many premillennial Christians to assume they would not see death before the Second Coming of Christ.

Christian Eschatology in the United States

The United States was founded in part on a postmillennial expectation that America would be the fertile soil bed for the New Kingdom. In response to America's newly won independence in 1776, preachers such as Timothy Dwight (1752–1817) and David Tappan (1752–1803) predicted that America would have established by the year 2000 a peaceful, benevolent kingdom prepared for Christ's millennial reign. Just as God had given the Jews Palestine, God would give North America to the new nation destined to fulfill the final plan (Boyer 1992).

Postmillennial views gave way to premillennial views during the mid-19th century with the rise of social problems that made the likelihood of establishing

a peaceful benevolent kingdom by the year 2000 unlikely (Marsden 1980). Premillennial Christians often dismissed efforts to fix social ills as unnecessary and poorly focused. Rather one needed to focus on saving that which *could* be saved — human souls. This movement away from involvement in attending to social ills of society corresponded with the rise of the Protestant fundamentalist movement.

Meanwhile, more liberal theologians and Social Gospel Christians continued their efforts to address social ills. They resisted premillennial interpretations of social events and literal interpretations of scripture that attempted to predict the future. Rather than see social events as holding spiritual significance in a prophetic way, they dismissed literal interpretations of apocalyptic prophecies. They maintained the view that their task was to work with God to help the world develop spiritually by redeeming it from oppression and injustice. The kingdom of God would be, or was already, being realized on earth (Bloesch 1982). For churches that do not endorse a premillennial eschatology the emphasis is on the present, and other-worldly eschatological discussions are largely absent (Bloesch 1982).

INTERPRETIVE FRAMES LINKING ESCHATOLOGICAL IDEATION WITH COLLECTIVE BEHAVIORS

According to Snow et al. (1986) an action frame is an interpretive scheme that enables individuals to understand events in their lives. This paper identifies five interpretive frames regarding eschatology that inspired and legitimized subsequent behavior of churches as they anticipated the Y2K event. These frames were adapted from five of Erickson's (1985) key questions regarding eschatology. First, does the church see the world in largely optimistic or pessimistic ways? Christian churches inclined to see the world getting worse typically support premillennial views. They look for the fulfillment of prophecies pointing to a disintegrating world soon to confront the wrath and judgment of God, followed by the establishment of God's kingdom.

Second, does the church interpret prophecies literally or symbolically? Christian churches that interpret prophecies in a more literal way see fulfillment of end-times prophecies in the wars, rumors of wars, famine, pestilence and disease prevalent at the close of the 20th century. The biblical prophecy predicting the emergence of a one-world government led by an antichrist leads some to view the United Nations, The World Trade Organization, the European Union, NAFTA and OPEC as evidence of movement toward a one-world government.

Third, does the church see divine intervention or human activity as the agent of eschatological events? If a church anticipates God's divine intervention then events such as Y2K will be given supernatural explanations. If human

actors are assumed responsible for events such as Y2K then supernatural explanations are not sought.

Fourth, does the church look toward the establishment of a kingdom that is otherworldly, or do they anticipate the coming kingdom to be a continuity of this life? An otherworldly expectation leads to the belief that this earth must come to an end so that another can be established in its place.

Fifth, is the hope God offers only for members of the Church or is it redemption for the human race in general? If the hope is for the Church alone then evangelism becomes the important task of the Church. If the hope is for the human race in general, then issues of social justice become the task for the Church.

Eschatological beliefs inform a church culture's interpretations about how Christians are to be in the world but not of the world (John 17:15-18) and function to influence and justify collective action taken by churches in their responses to Y2K. What made Y2K powerful as an eschatological event was that it combined an apocalyptic date with an apocalyptic event (potential social/economic meltdown due to over dependency on technology) that could be interpreted as judgment on a world that had replaced worship of God with idolatry of science and technology. Y2K offered a tangible fear to attach to abstract anxiety about a world perceived as becoming increasingly evil. But for some Christians Y2K was primarily believable because it was the possible fulfillment of prophecy that might usher in the Second Coming of Christ.

Fundamentalist and evangelical churches tend to view the world pessimistically, interpret the Bible literally, look for supernatural explanations for human events, believe in the establishment of an otherworldly kingdom, and focus the hope for the Church on personal salvation. Churches with these interpretive frames were more likely to inform their congregations and organize forums and task forces to address issues raised by Y2K than churches that did not (Barna 1998). Members were encouraged to use this opportunity to save souls while there was time. Few churches expected the Y2K event to result in a true apocalypse; the strategy adopted was to use the fear of a potential crisis as an evangelistic opportunity to point the unsaved to the saving grace of God.

Conversely, mainline Protestant denominations tend to view the world more optimistically, interpret the Bible more symbolically, refrain from supernatural explanations for human events, believe the kingdom of God is being established on earth now, and claim the hope of God as inclusive for all for humanity. Churches with these interpretive frames were less likely to address the issue of Y2K — it was neither primarily a spiritual nor an eschatological issue for them. The collective behavior corresponding to the action frames of mainline churches suggested that to be in the world was to work to bring the light of Christ into broken institutions and social structures. Rather than alerting congregations to potential problems that may never surface, mainline denominations focused on meeting needs already manifest in society.

When these contrasting interpretive frames were compared with findings from the 1998 survey of pastors conducted by the Barna Research Group, data showed mainline denominations to be far less likely to alert their congregations to Y2K than were fundamentalist, evangelical, pentecostal or charismatic churches. This finding was supported by Ken Ii, a representative of Capin Crouse Technologies who traveled to churches and organizations during 1998-1999, giving lectures about responding responsibly to the anticipation of Y2K. Ii was not invited to speak to mainline churches, though Capin Crouse Technologies is a non-denominational organization (Ii 1999).

Data gathered from the survey, informal interviews, and monitoring of the Internet resulted in the development of a typology of three strategic responses taken by various Protestant churches as they sought to respond to Y2K in a manner consistent with an understanding of their Christian obligation. These three responses reflect a consistent frame alignment between eschatological ideation and collective behavior.

DISCUSSION: THREE STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO Y2K

Familiar biblical narratives represent the three responses taken by different Protestant Christian churches. The first narrative, the Good Samaritan story, tells of a Samaritan saving and tending to a stranger (Luke 10:29-37). The Good Samaritan represents churches whose collective action was influenced by an amillennial ideation that focused on redeeming the human race in this world. The second narrative is the story of Joseph, the dream-interpreter who became a counselor to Pharaoh during a severe famine (Genesis 40-47). Joseph represented churches influenced by a premillennial eschatology. They interpreted prophecies literally, looked for divine intervention as an agent of eschatological events, and worked to bring hope to the elect by preparing one's household and community for potential disaster. The third narrative is the story of Noah, the ark builder who, with his family and as assortment of animals, escaped death in the midst of Flood (Genesis 6-8). Noah represents Christians influenced by a premillennial eschatology that anticipated the Y2K crisis to be God's judgment on the earth for its various sins — one of which was being overly dependent on, and idolatrous of, technology. If Y2K did not usher in the apocalyptic end predicted in scripture, then at least it would end life as we knew it, and only those who were prepared would survive.

The Good Samaritan Strategy

Churches adopting the Good Samaritan Strategy were already engaged in responding to real social problems, working in part to redeem broken socio-political structures. They did not accept a rationale for preparing for problems that might not emerge. They were not looking for signs indicating the end of the

world was near, nor did they imagine that God was giving Christians the greatest evangelistic opportunity of the 20th century. Consequently, Y2K was largely a non-issue for them. Paul McCain, assistant to the president of the St. Louis-based Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, said:

> We're a bit skeptical when we see these dire predictions coming from groups who always make these dire predictions. We don't feel as churchmen that it's our role to get involved in this. We're going to keep on doing what we've been doing, which is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ (Kellner 1999:60).

Not all churches in the Good Samaritan category were mainline churches, though generally mainline churches in the United States do not place much emphasis on the end times and preparing people spiritually for the final judgment. Instead they emphasized bringing the hope and peace of God by meeting physical needs. Churches exercising a Good Samaritan Strategy were committed to finding God in contemporary society. While their actions might have been consistent with a postmillennial eschatology (working to bring the kingdom of God to earth) or an amillennial eschatology (believing they were already living in the millennium) eschatological issues were of little concern to them.

Since churches adopting a Good Samaritan Strategy did not attach much spiritual significance to Y2K, it was not perceived as an evangelistic opportunity of greater significance than world hunger, the war in Kosovo, slavery in Sudan, or the economic crisis in Western inner cities. These churches were not likely to address Y2K as a church unless a situation emerged after January 1, 2000 that demanded they do so.

The Joseph Strategy

The Joseph Strategy emerged from the Joseph Project 2000. In Hebrew history Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as God's warning that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph organized Egypt so that Egyptians prepared in the time of plenty for the time of famine. The Joseph Strategy incorporated churches committed to helping families prepare spiritually for Y2K and who sought to plan ahead in order that in the future they could respond to people who did not prepare. They did not promote Y2K as the event to usher in the end of the world, but as a crisis of unknown proportions that presented an evangelistic opportunity.

An ad in *Christianity Today* invited Christians to join Y2pray. "Become Y2PRAY COMPLIANT at y2pray.com. Join this relevant soul-winning strategy that thrills the heart of God" (*Christianity Today* 1999:21). The evangelistic emphasis of Y2Pray was summarized on its website: "After all, it's great to be prepared for the year 2000, but it's imperative to be prepared for eternity" (Y2pray 1999).

In October 1998 more than 320 people from churches in 30 states met together at the Christian Broadcasting Network's conference center to discuss evangelistic and practical Y2K preparations for churches (Kellner 1999). Johnny Crist, pastor of Atlanta Vineyard Christian Fellowship said, "This could be the church's finest hour, to be the hands and the arms of Jesus in a world that's totally unprepared" (Joseph Project 1999).

Churches whose action frames were consistent with premillennial views of eschatology were most inclined to adopt a Joseph Strategy. Denominations in this category included those with a heavy emphasis on mission, outreach and evangelism. Collective behaviors included development of a series of sermons addressing Y2K, creation of task forces to assess and address Y2K's impact on the community, and organization of forums held to inform community members. One Christian and Missionary Alliance church published its own statement to clarify the interpretative frame of the church in responding to Y2K. An excerpt of that statement read:

> After much research and discussion, based on the best information available to date, we recommend a conservative length of time for which to prepare for potential disruptions in basic services: one month. . . . The Year 2000 problem highlights our deep need for a real antidote to fear, confusion, uncertainty, helplessness and loneliness. Christ, as expressed through individual believers and the church, is the very antidote called for (BRAC 1999).

In May 1999, this church also hosted a forum where representatives from The Joseph Project, Capin Crouse Technology (a Y2K consulting firm), and local gas and electric companies presented information about Y2K and preparedness. Members were encouraged to invite non-Christian neighbors and friends to the presentation as an outreach ministry.

The Evangelical Free Church of America sent a letter from the President of the National Leadership Team to all EFCA pastors and leaders regarding Y2K. The following is an excerpt:

> The Y2K situation is a matter of personal concern for individuals and families as well as a corporate concern for the church at large. For the church, it is both a risk and an opportunity. The risk is that we will miss an opportunity to speak clearly and prophetically to an issue that is increasingly a matter of concern for our people. For church leaders to remain silent while their congregations grapple with uncertainty and even fear would be tragic, for it is in times of uncertainty that God's people most need to hear a word of hope and trust (Hamel 1999).

The Journal for the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC Life) published an article titled "Ministering to Victims of Y2K" in which Revell (1999) argued that prudent preparations for Y2K were biblical, and spiritual preparation was crucial to help point fearful people to God. These collective actions of Joseph Strategy churches focused on helping people prepare prudently but not extravagantly, while also encouraging members to use the opportunity for evangelism.

Noah Strategy

Most interesting to both the popular media and to students of collective behavior was the Noah Strategy, adopted by an elusive minority of Christians who left their communities to build arks in the wilderness, storing provisions so they could wait out the storm. These were Christians with action frames that inspired and justified apocalyptic visions associated with Y2K. They were not as committed to finding God in the midst of contemporary society as were Christians in the Joseph and Good Samaritan Strategies. Movements that practice high-risk activism (e.g. preparing for a radically different life after the world succumbs to the problems associated with Y2K) operate in an adversarial environment and need to create a protected subculture in which to thrive (Gamson 1992). Some Christians who sought to establish communities in preparation for Y2K used the Internet as a means of recruiting members into protective subcultures.

Christians in North Carolina recruited members who would be committed to working together to help each other survive the Y2K crisis (North Carolina Christian Community 1999). Individuals purchased lots (the smallest was five acres) for $10,000 per acre and were expected to build homes on them. They envisioned a community of Christians with diverse skills who voluntarily worked to help each other through the rough times. "Once the Y2K crisis is over, it's a great place to live anyway," they said. The community's covenant was short: they would abide by the laws of nation, value private property, and be responsible for the behavior and actions of their family, guests and animals. Subsequent e-mail correspondence with the founder revealed that as of January 12, 2000, three lots remained, and seven of the eight families who had moved into the community intended to stay.

Another remote community was established in northern California. Seven shares were available, seven acres each. According to the website, by January 5, 1999 four shares were still available (the site was unchanged as of January 2000). On their web page the founders said:

> We are looking for people who are serious about being part of a vital Y2K community. We envision a group providing security, Christian fellowship, schooling, and other types of support. We have two doctors as part of the group too. While we are being very careful to guard the privacy of our location, we can tell you it is in an established agricultural area with a small town . . . We have written up an extensive Document outlining what we are doing and why, the costs, the government, iotems (sic) shareholders are urged to store, a statement of faith, questionnaire, etc. (Northern California Community 1999).

A Christian Y2K-ready, mission-based community that formed in Virginia intended to go beyond surviving Y2K. Their goals included a desire to "prepare and produce to the level that we can serve and reach out in a post-Y2K world" (Virginia Community 1999).

One methodological difficulty in this research is generalizing from groups adopting the Noah Strategy because they often resisted being identified and located. These isolated communities served groups of individuals joined together by their mutual beliefs in the apocalyptic visions of Y2K. A number of house churches had Y2K websites, but not much information was accessible from them. And what information was available may not have been representative of their views.

When individuals voluntarily leave a collectivity it is usually because their perceived needs are no longer being met (Kanter 1972). Since individuals do not always subscribe wholly to the action frames of the collectivities to which they belong, dissonance between an individual's belief and those of the collectivity may cause some members to leave. Christians who left communities to join others who shared their apocalyptic visions about Y2K illustrated the power of eschatological ideation.

Like the groups, individuals also seek justification for their perspective. One subject invoked Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 of the ten virgins meeting the bridegroom to justify an isolationist perspective. In this parable five of the virgins are wise and bring extra oil for their lamps. The five foolish virgins run out of oil and ask to borrow some from the wise virgins. The wise virgins refuse, saying they don't have enough to share, and suggest the others go buy some more. While the unprepared virgins are gone to obtain oil the bridegroom comes and those who were prepared go with him to the marriage feast; those who came late are locked out. Several similar conversations represented fearful individuals who adopted a fortress mentality, expecting the societal infrastructure to be destroyed, leaving them vulnerable to the unprepared who might attempt to steal from those who had stockpiled food, water and other supplies. To what degree such fear led to the purchase of extra locks and weapons is unknown; that it did exist was evident.

People who responded with greater concern to Y2K than others in their church communities were most inclined to adopt the Noah Strategy. Because of individual variance within any church collectivity, one's eschatological view will not always align with other views to influence one's behaviors. Not all members of a church will espouse the action and interpretive frames of the collectivity. As a participant observer I attended one church's Y2K task force meeting and identified multiple perspectives that ranged from telling people there was no need to prepare for a crisis to helping the church identify families with wells, generators and wood stoves. A spectrum of people crossing socio-economic and education lines adopted the Noah Strategy. Doctors, lawyers, and professors left practices and careers to build "arks" in the wilderness (Van Boven and Gajilan 1998). Some individuals went off on their own. Others followed charismatic persons to places like the community in North Carolina or to Y2K Sanctuary where families reserved an RV site for $5000, or to Safe Haven or Prayer Lake — other communities set up by Christians in remote areas.

THE TIME FACTOR

The passage of time emerged as an additional variable for those adopting the Joseph and Noah Strategies, altering frame alignment and subsequent behavior. From the latter part of 1997 through the early part of 1999 the level of interest and anxiety about Y2K appeared to be on an upward trajectory. Observations reported in Gary North's newsletter (an apocalyptic-type of newsletter) showed a lot of interest in survivalism during the first two months of 1999, resulting in an apparent shortage of supplies (North 1999). However, by March the public's mood had shifted, and demand for survival-related products dropped. The hoarding of groceries, gas, and money anticipated to occur during the fall of 1999 did not materialize. By December much of the public opinion about Y2K had shifted to imply that it had been much ado about nothing. Similarly, much of the activity on the Internet quieted down or changed tone. Internet postings showed a general shift away from "prepare for catastrophe" to "prepare to be a witness of God's grace." The November update by Feldhahn of the Joseph Project said:

> . . . [l]et me reiterate: we do not make any predictions or recommendations about the impact of Y2K. We simply recognize that the year 2000 problem poses a risk — not a certainty, just a risk — that the church should be prepared to respond to as a ministry opportunity and responsibility. God desires His church to always be 'salt and light' in the midst of any darkness (Joseph Project 1999).

At worst, people came to expect Y2K to trouble them in a similar fashion as a winter storm. Why the fears subsided is unclear, though one possible explanation is that people believed those working on the Y2K problem who reported that problems had been anticipated and fixed. Many churches represented by the Joseph Strategy found ways around the potential embarrassment that Y2K might not cause any disruptions by suggesting it was better to be prepared unnecessarily, than unprepared. So Revell concluded his article with:

> Y2K may pass with no significant disruptions in our nation. . . . Furthermore, God's people have no reason to fear or panic. The God who has reigned in all of eternity past will still be King January 1, 2000. But our King would not be pleased if Y2K catches us by surprise, leaving us unprepared to care for our families and for others. He expects us to be good stewards. We have every opportunity to be positioned as ministers in the midst of crisis, rather than become victims of crisis in need of ministry (Revell 1999:11).

These individuals who stopped purchasing survival products and the churches that softened their message illustrated the effect that the passing of time had on frame alignment and behaviors, especially as the Y2K event drew near.

CONCLUSION

Post-Y2K reflection has led some critics to wonder if the failure of Y2K to produce an apocalypse damaged the credibility of conservative Christians. Historian Richard Pierard (1999) believed the linking of the Second Coming with the turning of a millennium raised a number of ethical questions — one regarding exploitation of the fear that led to commercial gain for some Christians. Similarly, Joel Belz of *World Magazine* said in the January 15, 2000 issue:

> [w]hen our goofiness starts turning people off to the very truth we want to convey, something's terribly amiss. . . . For those of us who claim to have an eternally important message, getting a story like Y2K wrong does grave damage to everything else we say (11).

What damage this may actually have presented the Church is difficult to ascertain. However, given that apocalyptic predictions have been part of the Church's history since the beginning of Christianity, one might fairly assume the damage will be minimal.

Attending to cultural aspects of collective action by analyzing action frames and frame alignments provided insight into individual and church responses to Y2K. Interpretive frames linking eschatological ideation with collective behaviors were consistent with the data observed. Mainline churches, most often represented by The Good Samaritan Strategy, saw the world in more optimistic ways and interpreted prophecies more symbolically than fundamentalist and evangelical churches. Thus mainline churches were not looking for a catastrophic end to the world. They do not anticipate God's divine intervention in end times, so did not consider Y2K to be part of God's plan to usher in the end. Conversely the interpretive frames of fundamentalist and evangelical churches helped explain their participation in behaviors preparing them for a Y2K catastrophe.

Thus while frame alignment processes were predictably absent in The Good Samaritan Strategy (Y2K was a non-issue for them) and less observable in the closed workings of the Noah Strategy, organized attempts to convince people to prepare for Y2K were clearly evident in churches (primarily evangelical and fundamentalist) adopting the Joseph Strategy. *Frame bridging*, the alignment recruitment tool, was accomplished through sermon series and letters from church leaders linking the need to prepare for Y2K with eschatological beliefs. *Frame amplification* occurred with the emphasis given to Y2K as potentially the greatest evangelistic opportunity of the 20th century. *Frame extension* strengthened alignment by bringing together spiritual and physical preparation for Y2K for personal benefit and as a service to the unsaved and unprepared. *Frame transformation* occurred through Y2K forums and task forces, educating and nurturing more radical changes required of members to prepare adequately.

Y2K was attached to a specific date and technological glitch, likely making it a unique event. Yet end-times prophecies have been around since the beginning (Erdoes 1988). Occasionally an opportunity arises to examine a prophesied apocalypse up close. Two generations ago, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (1956) studied one such event, intimately following a small group of believers that thought the end was imminent. Y2K offered the opportunity to observe a larger-scale phenomenon, a social movement that affected Protestant Christians in churches across the United States over about a three-year span. The use of interpretive frame alignment processes to explain why some Christians responded as they did to Y2K offers historic and ideological context for their behavior. By demonstrating how potentially irrational behavior flowed out of plausibility structures related to eschatology, an explanation emerges that demonstrates internal consistency when behavior is understood from participants particular collective contexts. Exploring cultural aspects of collective action for collectivities that are primarily religious may yield a more thorough understanding of behaviors taken in response to perceived threat or opportunity than that achieved by resource mobilization theories alone.

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