Y NOT 2 FREAK

Is the Millennium Bug Really Just a Fly in the Ointment?

by **G. Richard Fisher**
with **M. Kurt Goedelman**

Y2K — only two letters and a number, but it has some churches, ministries and individual Christians reeling with paranoia. This three-character abbreviation simply stands for the year A.D. 2000. However, the fear and trepidation arise not so much from the ushering of a new millennium, but from what some say will be a computer apocalypse on Jan. 1, 2000.

Due to enormous costs, at the advent of computers nearly 40 years ago, software programmers conserved on memory and data storage by using only two digits for the year-date code. For example, an entry for the year 1965 simply became 65. However, the number for the year 2000 will confound older computers as the 00 will be read as 1900, since these computers read dates as two-digit numbers. Other computers, equipped with fail-safe designs, will see 00 as an faulty input and simply terminate operations.

This, we are told, will confuse, cripple and shut down millions of computers and computer-driven mechanisms. According to alarmists, a monumental disaster is coming with massive computer shutdowns affecting every strata of society, including governments, financial institutions, utilities, hospitals, telecommunications, airline travel and on and on. As the final minutes of Dec. 31, 1999, tick away, millions of computers worldwide will be knocked out, sending business and the economy spinning and crashing into catastrophic global chaos.

A FRIGHTENING PLOT LINE

Doomsday is just a few short months away, they say. This massive shutdown will throw the world into upheaval. Some have scenarios that include the president declaring martial law or even the notion that these failed computers will usher in Armageddon, setting the stage for the Antichrist and the end. Most of the doomsday prognosticators have a book or program for sale on how to get ready, stockpiling food, water, gold, and in some cases, guns and ammunition.

The scenarios of what will happen nationally and even worldwide, range dramatically from catastrophic doomsday predictions to total disregard. There are various scenarios in between.
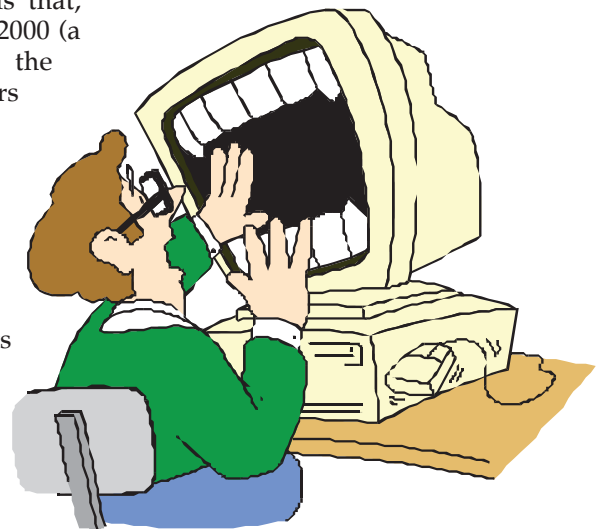
One extreme, worst-case scenario is presented by theonomist Gary North. North, on his web site, tells us that, ''At 12 midnight on January 1, 2000 (a Saturday morning) most of the world's mainframe computers will either shut down or begin spewing out bad data.''[1] It will create the greatest disaster since the great plagues of the 14th century. North claims that there is no standardized approach to fixing this problem. In fact, he asserts that computer programmers will vacate their jobs and head for ''safer places'': ''Will they quit? I'm betting my life on it. The exodus of program-

mers will begin no later than 1999.''[2] He also says that it is impossible to make computers compliant.

North has pressed his conspiracy theory ideas to the utmost degree. His web site contains hundreds of articles warning of the impending dangers. He has further put his reputation on the line:

''I have been writing for over a year on this with all the skill I have. I simply cannot get it across to all of you or even to most of you. I am never at a loss for words, but I am at a loss for persuasion. I have been unable to persuade the vast majority of my readers, after almost two years, that if the division of labor collapses, we will lose millions of lives. Joe Boivin, who was the Y2K director for Canada's Imperial Bank and Commerce until he quit, estimates that a billion people will die in 2000. He limits his discussion to the Third

World. I think we could lose half a billion in the urban West.''[3]

Chuck Missler, in his ''Supplemental Notes'' booklet, *The Millennium Bomb*' *Y2K*, provides ''Your Personal Action Plan'' and under his ''Family Logistics'' gives the following: ''Power, Water, Food (Ammo?); Barter Items: food, medical, et al. Location: depart urban areas; seek rural areas, smaller towns, self-reliant neighbors, etc.''[4]

Hal Lindsey and Cliff Ford co-hosted what was labeled as an ''International Intelligence Briefing'' television program: ''Y2K Special Report: Facing Millennial Midnight.'' In it the pair laid out their own worst-case scenario calling the Y2K effect ''the millennial bug'' and ''millennial bomb'' and said that it could ''unravel civilization.'' Although Trinity Broadcasting Network sponsored and aired the program (and has never been known for its discernment or a hesitancy to promote the bizarre or sensational), it was quick to issue an opening disclaimer that the views of Lindsey and Ford did not necessarily represent the views of TBN.

Toward the end of the program there is a hedging and some ''maybes'' and ''perhaps,'' as well as asking people to use discernment. However, the overall impression from the bulk of the show will no doubt create paranoia and depression for some. And then there's the blazing commercial at the program's conclusion for Lindsey's latest volume, *Planet Earth: The Final Chapter*. ''This is the very best insight the Lord has ever given me on prophecy. And it shows how, in chronological order, things are coming together rapidly, to show that the return of Christ is very near,'' Lindsey boasts. He has been making the same declaration for over 25 years.

Yet, Christians do not find themselves alone on the doomsday bandwagon. As expected, the supermarket tabloids are jumping on the sensational aspects and at least one is reporting in bold headlines; ''WORLD COLLAPSE IN THE YEAR 2000. COMPUTER CHAOS: Bank records and transactions are lost! Defense systems fail! Social Security is wiped out! Nuclear power plants melt down! Power grids fail - throwing the world into total darkness! COMPUTERS WILL CRASH WORLDWIDE!''[5] As with Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast in the 1930s, these people seem to care little about the fear and confusion they are generating.

SOME R NOT 2 SURE

On the other extreme stands Nicholas Zvegintzov, a well-known computer expert and co-founder of Software Maintenance News. In his now famous article, ''The Year 2000 as Racket and Ruse,'' Zvegintzov asserts:

''Dealing with the Year 2000 problem is a simple software task. ... Solving the Year 2000 problem is an exercise for the software novice.''[6]

Dr. Quentin Schultze, professor of communications at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., says:

''Ambiguity produces a broad range of opinions, and Y2K is an ambiguous phenomenon. You can predict the weather reasonably well, but not perfectly, because there are too many factors involved. The same is true of the Y2K problem: There are too many factors involved. There's no one who can tell you precisely what's going to be affected. The sense I have is we are going to be moderately inconvenienced for a fairly short period of time. Society is not going to grind to a halt.''[7]

Scott Pinzon, president of Pinpoint Marketing Communications, writes in a recent issue of the Christian Booksellers' Association magazine:

''We can probably rule out a perfect transition to the year 2000 — after all, the U.S. government has to update Internal Revenue Service and Social Securities computers, and when did they ever bring a project in on time? But we probably also can rule out extreme 'meltdown' scenarios where the blackout lasts so long money loses it meaning. (So far, the shrillest doomsayers admittedly aren't computer experts.) ... The truth is, no one knows what will happen. This event is unprecedented; there's no 'last time' to compare it with.''[8]

Dr. James Dobson had a panel of ''experts'' on the subject on the Oct. 21, 1998, edition of his *Focus on the Family* radio broadcast. It was a cross-section with both extremes and the middle ground between the extremes. Dobson's own telling statement was, ''No one knows.'' While it is true that no one really knows for sure, there are some things we can know for certain.

So, is it the end of civilization as we know it or is it nothing to be concerned about? Is it doomsday or distraction?

APOCALYPSE R POPPYCOCK?

On the television program *Dragnet*, Sgt. Joe Friday used to say: ''The facts ma'am, just the facts.'' *Only facts, hard facts*, will help us here. Speculation, wild claims, doomsday scenarios, the marketing of books, dried food, and even guns is not the answer, *just facts*. We need to have informed opinions and make informed choices.

Even if the worst-case scenario were around the corner, should a Christian change anything he or she is doing? And wouldn't it be a time of unprecedented opportunity to witness and reach out, not retreat and hole up somewhere? Our Savior's marching orders in Matthew 28:18-20 do not change just because the going gets rough. Paul and the other Apostles faced misery and hardship and even death but made no extraordinary provisions as they plodded on preaching and teaching.

The Church has faced annihilation and death in past generations but stood its ground. In the face of the massacres of Nero, Peter and Paul did not advise the Church to go out and stockpile swords. What we do know for sure is that even if our country faces loss, it does not change what the Church ought to be doing. Psalm 46

still stands. God is our refuge and strength even if the Earth is removed. In fact, the worse it gets, the more opportunities for the Church of Jesus Christ.

But what do the *facts* show? Many banking institutions already have begun communicating with their customers. This writer's bank has informed its customers that it and all its branches have been working since 1997 to make its computers compliant and will be fully compliant by the end of 1998. So I know that this bank and all its branches are not planning to fail. They, as well, are monitoring and assisting all of their service providers, companies and correspondent institutions, including legal and public utilities.[9]

Preparations for those who buy into the doomsday schemes are also underway. For example, ''The Federal Reserve plans to have an extra $50 billion on hand in case worried Americans decide they would rather have more cash in their pockets than in their bank accounts.''[10]

On a local level, in a personal conversation with Charles W. Jarvis, executive director and chief operating officer of the Meridian Health System, I was assured that Meridian has been aggressively addressing and solving its Y2K problems, and will have full compliance long before 2000. Meridian directly affects me because it is an organization of four major hospitals in the four cities around me including the city in which I live. Jarvis says the whole health care industry is on the case.

In a personal conversation with a computer troubleshooter for Bristol-Meyer-Squibb, PFO was assured that the problem is being addressed and solved by that organization.

It makes sense just from the standpoint of human self-interest that corporations — either major or supporting — in the United States and even worldwide, would not just sit on their hands waiting for their computers to crash and the end to come.

Computer expert after computer expert all confirm that any computer made and purchased in the last two years is already compliant and cannot fail in terms of Y2K. The government is fast correcting the problem as well. The recently passed national budget included large amounts of funds for Y2K compliance.

Apple Computer executives have released information that Macintoshes have been compliant since their release and will be unaffected by any date change. In the letter from my bank mentioned above, the following is offered: ''Apple Computers assures that their Macintoshes are immune to the Millennium Bug.''[11]

In the area of air transportation, the problem is being dealt with from start to finish. Aircraft manufacturer Boeing has been working and continues to work to bring itself into Year 2000 compliance. Since dates do not affect airplanes in flight, only the scheduling of arrivals and departures, the Air Transport Association (ATA) is addressing the ground problems of fuel, lights, ground transport and travel agencies. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) claims to be doing well in regard to the Y2K problem and are stating that air traffic safety will not be affected.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has been working on its computers *since 1989* and assures that payments will continue uninterrupted.[12] And even though Medicare is not as far along as the SSA, a spokesman for the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) gives complete assurance that ''care will not be denied Medicare beneficiaries because of Y2K.''[13]

In 1997, the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors told the House Committee on Banking and Financial Services that compliance was crucial. So it appears that the problem is being addressed there as well.[14] Additionally, gas and electric company spokesmen nationally attest to the fact that they have been addressing the computer glitch and are working on compliance.

WHO STANDS 2 GAIN FROM THE SCARE?

Is the creation of fear and the offer of a product to alleviate that fear a new marketing technique? Is this not dishonest if the fear is really not based on reality and hard facts or even omitted facts? The AARP fears that scams may be the worst obstacle which will ''feed the greed and dishonesty of scam artists who are always on the lookout for new ways to pry money out of the unsuspecting.''[15]

The AARP's concern is right on the mark. With the doom and gloom scenarios being projected — both in Christian and secular forums — it opens a rich harvest for the unscrupulous. Con artists will have a field day preying on the elderly and uninformed. The climate is right for swindlers to bilk the unsuspecting out of money, credit card information, bank account data and other important financial elements, all under the auspices of being able to ensure personal Y2K readiness. The claims of assistance and remedy by the dishonest may well be the real millennium disaster.

FACTS 2 CONSIDER

Keep in mind that hundreds and hundreds of banks and financial institutions have failed in the last two decades and yet there was no major disaster that occurred. Three hundred failings alone occurred in 1988 and 1989. If the Y2K changeover disrupted a few hundred smaller banks it would not cause a ripple. We have been assured that the financial services industry has been working on the problem.[16] Remember also that the financial stability of some major countries has collapsed or faced near-ruin in recent years. And the effects of these foreign crises has not caused personal or national catastrophes in the United States.

So the facts show that many agencies including Social Security, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), the Veterans Administration (VA), Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and banking institutions, *have taken seriously the Y2K ramifications and are vigorously addressing the Y2K issues.*

Even The John Birch Society, not one to shy away from conspiracy theories, takes a more or less benign

view of the ''millennium bug'' doomsday predictions. Its Internet article is fact-filled, well-documented and balanced, which is a real surprise.[17] We must give credit where credit is due.

9 POINTS 2 PONDER

C.S. Lewis once suggested that truth can often be found between two extremes. His wisdom applies here although on a scale from 1 to 10 with 10 being doomsday, the facts indicate that we may hit 1 or 2 with small local inconveniences and not much more. What the facts show is this:

1. *There is a problem*. Everyone who needs to be aware of the problem seems to be aware. The problem is being addressed and solved at a rapid pace.

2. Any analysis of the problem *must* be based on *hard facts* and evidence. The problem should not be overstated but discussed realistically.

3. Many of the extreme doomsday views are based on incomplete facts, flawed information or missing data. North says that the solution is impossible, which flies in the face of all the facts and all the hard work to achieve compliance. The computer programmers are still working hard and diligently to correct the problem. They haven't headed for safer ground as North asserts. The doomsday reports and reporters are only as good as the information they have *or give*. Selling solutions and a vested interest should make us wary. If they were really interested in helping us, why not just give away the answer?

4. The problem has been and is being vigorously addressed and dealt with to such a degree that we can be assured that there is no major disaster or catastrophic collapse looming.

5. Some smaller businesses and banks could have short disruptions, which is unlikely, but even a small national recession is out of the question.

6. There may be a few bumps in the road and maybe even some minor disruptions but not a ''Chicken Little'' scenario.

7. In case there should be a few minor computer glitches locally, be ready for a long New Year's weekend by having on hand a few extra dollars in cash and a few extra of your prescription drugs. Tests have shown though that the glitches can be cleared in hours, if not minutes.

8. For your own peace of mind, ask people who provide your services, such as banks, druggists, utilities companies, hospitals, doctors, and so on, what they are doing to become compliant — that is ''Y2K ready.'' You will find that the problem is being addressed, if not already solved.

9. Regardless of the inconveniences, the Church of Jesus Christ should still be going about its business of winning others and making disciples, even using negative events to press home the claims of eternity (read the entire epistle of 1 Peter). There can be some great evangelistic opportunities here, so we should not even think of retreat.

The discernment periodical, *Calvary Contender*, warns: ''We are told the Internet is a-buzz with scare-narios, and, indeed we as Christians should be concerned as the time approaches, but not panic. Extreme fear itself could become a greater problem than Y2K. ... Stockpile if you wish ... but let's trust our God, use common sense, and not help dire predictions become self-fulfilling prophecies.''[18]

We need patience and perseverance, not paranoia. Let's remember the word of the prophet Habakkuk who faced a real catastrophe and holocaust:

''Though the fig tree should not blossom, And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail, And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold, And there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, And makes me walk on my high places'' (Habakkuk 3:17-19, NAS).

We cannot get preoccupied or side-lined with doomsday prognostications or predictions of disaster. We must be about our Father's business. No doubt the ''millennium bug'' clatter will come and go like so many other fads (the Belgium Beast, backward masking, Bible codes, the predictions of Edgar Weisanant and Harold Camping, to name only a few). One can only wonder if the propagators of paranoia are deceived or are just deceivers.

Endnotes:

1. Gary North, ''Gary North's Y2K Links and Forums, The Year 2000 Problem: The Year the Earth Stands Still.'' Available on North's web site: **http://www.garynorth.com**. See also his article, ''Awake Now! Blind Man's Bluff in Y2K,'' *The Midnight Herald*, Summer 1998, pp. 4-5.

2. Ibid.

3. David Becker, Religion & Politics Digest web site, ''A Billion Lives Lost, If Things Go Fairly Well,'' RPD 3396, 10/3/1998.

4. Chuck Missler, *''The Millennium Bomb'' Y2K*, Supplemental Notes booklet, published by Koinonia House, pg. 22.

5. *Weekly World News*, October 13, 1998, pg. 24.

6. Nicholas Zvegintzov, ''The Year 2000 as Racket and Ruse,'' *American Programmer* magazine, February 1996, pg. 3.

7. Pat Shellenbarger, ''Y2K,'' *The Grand Rapids Press*, Oct. 25, 1988, pg. J2.

8. Scott Pinzon, ''Millenium Bomb of Y2K,'' *CBA Marketplace*, November 1998, pg. 40.

9. Ocean Federal bank newsletter, August 1998, pg. 3.

10. Pat Shellenbarger, ''Power added to mash Y2K bug,'' *The Grand Rapids Press*, Oct. 25, 1998, pg. A18.

11. Ocean Federal newsletter, op. cit., pg. 4.

12. Robert Lewis, ''Beating the Bug,'' *AARP Bulletin*, October 1998, pp. 22.

13. Ibid., pg. 20.

14. Ibid., pg. 22.

15. Ibid.

16. David Wessel, ''Year 2000 Is Costly, But Not Catastrophic,'' *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 1998, pg. A1.

17. Dennis J. Behreandt, ''An Inquiry Into The Veracity of 'Millennium Bug' Doomsday Predictions,'' May 29, 1998. Available on The John Birch Society's web site, **http://www.jbs.org/y2k.htm**. See also Behreandt's article, ''Millennium Mayhem,'' available at: **http://www.jbs.org/tna/1998/vo14no19.htm**.

18. ''The Y2K Scare,'' *Calvary Contender*, Oct. 1, 1998, cited in *The Christian News*, Oct. 5, 1998, pg. 2.