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What Technology Professionals Need to Succeed

Divine Intervention

by David Becker

“... on His 2000th birthday, Jesus Christ has a small present for these blasphemers—Two digits—20!!! Or should we say, the LACK of those two digits. They

thought they didn't need the '20' in 2000. They will groan for those two digits, and God in His heaven will laugh, the Lord shall have them in derision.”

—from “Balaam's Ass,” a Web site devoted to Christian prophecy, piano tuning and Y2K.

You've got to give the year 2000 problem credit for being an ambitious little bug.

What started out as a pernicious but purely technical problem has become nothing less than the hand of God, poised

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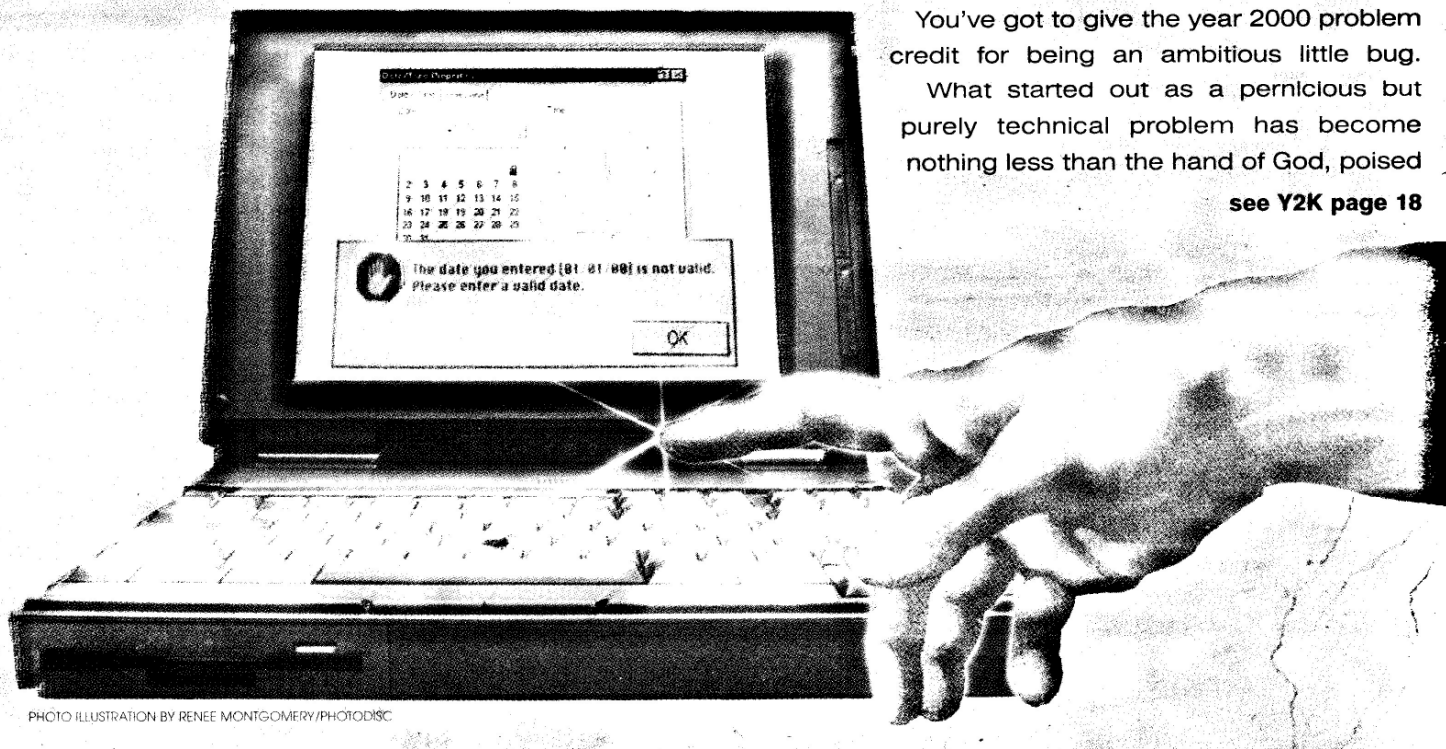


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Y2K

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to smite the wicked and prepare the way for a new reign of holiness.

At least that's the message emanating from hundreds of Christian Web sites, books, newsletters, conferences and sermons. From veteran doomsday preachers predicting social collapse to more mainstream Christian groups promoting disaster preparedness, religious groups have quickly become one of the most visible and influential elements of the Y2K community.

Christian broadcaster and former presidential candidate Pat Robertson has set up a Y2K bureau in the newsroom of his Christian Broadcasting Network. Author Hal Lindsey, whose *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the top-selling non-fiction book of the 1970s, has weighed in with *Facing Millennial Midnight*.

Other writers, from prophecy veterans such as Tim LaHaye to newcomers such as the intriguingly named George T. Apocalypse Montague, account for dozens of Y2K-related titles at Amazon.com and www.armageddonbooks.com, a one-stop shopping center for prophetic visions. Most spin familiar predictions of power outages, bank glitches and grocery shortages into all-out visions of doom.

Pat Boone has even gotten into the act, serving as celebrity spokesman for Y2Knet, a Y2K news site supported by gold coin sellers Swiss America.

None of which should come as much of a surprise, says Richard Landes, medieval history professor at Boston University and co-founder of the Center for Millennial Studies, an academic organization that studies apocalyptic thought in historical and modern times.

An American tradition

Apocalyptic belief has been a pervasive part of American religious culture for centuries. Doomsday preachers have a long tradition of folding current events into their scenarios. Add in the symbolic significance of 2000—in a recent *Los Angeles Times* poll a quarter of the respondents said they believe the onset of the new millennium will herald the second coming of Christ—and it's no wonder Y2K is being divided into 666.

"When we first heard about Y2K a few years ago, we said just wait until the religious people get ahold of this," says Landes. "It's made for them."

"It's a combination of religious symbolism and technological symbolism that couldn't be dreamed up to be more effective."

The first thing to realize is that doomsday thinking is a pervasive and consistent thread in Western culture, particularly American. Today's Y2K doomsayers share a lineage going back to the 19th century Millerites (who turned into the Seventh-Day Adventists) and beyond.

"There are some people who want to live on the brink of the apocalypse," says Landes. "It's an exhilarating place to live; it's exciting. That's been going on for 500 years. In Western culture, particularly American culture, we're born into that mindset."

One of the reasons apocalyptic thinking continues to thrive is that there's almost always something happening that can fit into an end-of-the-world scenario.

"[Prophecy preacher] Jack Van Impe gets on TV every Saturday and says look at this, here's a massacre, here's an earthquake," Landes says. "He's sort of sponge for bad news, all of which he believes is evidence the end is near. Y2K is a treasure trove for that kind of thinking."

"It's been a characteristic of apocalyptic

belief systems from the very beginning that whatever the current event—the rise of Islam, Hitler, the Gulf War—they always find the configuration of current events to be absolutely the evidence of the last days," says Paul Boyer, history professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Boyer, author of *When Time Shall Be No More*, a study of contemporary apocalyptic thought in America, says Y2K is particularly useful at a time when one-world government fears have replaced the Soviet Union as a source of anxiety.

Y2K is first domino

"The end of the cold war sort of removed the Soviet Union as the embodiment of evil," Boyer says. "The prophecy writers now tend to focus on multinational corporations, the computerized economy, all the structure of a global one-world government. When the antichrist gains control, he'll take over this centralized world economy, they fear. Y2K is seen as part of the mechanism that will bring that about."

Fearing the worst

"1999 has a weird, surrealistic feeling to it. Almost like a sense of impending doom ... The feeling of impending doom gets stronger when we consider

the world's desktop computers will also start spewing out bad data. Tens of millions—possibly hundreds of millions—of pre-programmed computer

While the colorful preaching and dire predictions of doomsday veterans have ensured a good deal of public attention, one of the more profound religious influences on the Y2K debate has gone largely unnoticed.

Christian reconstructionism is a little-known fundamentalist offshoot that seeks to establish a theocratic government that would rule America according to Old Testament law, including death by stoning for offenses ranging from sex outside of marriage (women only) to parental disrespect. The movement's leaders believe a major, society-crumbing disaster will be necessary to set up such an order.

One of the leading figures in the reconstructionist movement is Gary North, whose gloom and doom Y2K predictions have received widespread media attention, hardly ever accompanied by an explanation of his extreme religious beliefs. North has told reconstructionists they must practice "stealth politics," disguising their full agenda until what's left of society is ready for them.

Behind the scenes

"North certainly has an intense religious background but he has more or less hidden that background," says Aaron Lynch, editor of the *Journal of Memetics*, the study of how information and ideas

travel through a society. Lynch calls Y2K doomsaying one of the most arresting examples in modern times of "thought contagion," an extreme idea that worms its way into the public mind.

"One of the strategies of evangelicals is to soft-sell the overtly religious ideas they're selling," Lynch says. "Gary North has taken that to quite an extreme, and it's worked for him. Here you have someone who actually wants the end of the present social order to come, but he expresses that religious agenda in secular terminology."

North, who routinely refuses to speak with print publications, offers an extreme example of one of the dangers of Y2K

doomsaying. Given the technical nature of Y2K, religiously inspired predictions can easily influence general thought.

"The really powerful element of Y2K is that it's an apocalyptic prophecy that's entirely ecumenical," Landes says. "You don't even have to believe in God to be sucked into these predictions. The line between religious apocalyptic thinking and secular thought is very much blurred with Y2K."

"What we have with Y2K is a more robust strain of thought contagion that is able to spread in both religious and secular circles," Lynch says. "It's more contagious that way. It can spread from

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Christian to atheist groups back to Christian groups.

Lynch adds that the missionary/evangelical tradition of Christianity makes followers particularly adept at spreading a message.

"If your faith tells you the end is near and unbelievers are going to hell, that creates quite a sense of urgency," he says. "Doomsaying is a part of why these groups have spread so rapidly. When you add Y2K to that mix, it really puts it on a new level. You can see the end coming. It creates a more plausible scenario for a broader audience."

And the more that such end-of-the-world perceptions of Y2K become part of mainstream thought, the more they're likely to drive behavior during the coming months.

Self-fulfilling prophecy

"The last thing I want to see is everyone arming themselves to the teeth and running off to the country," says Steve Davis, a Y2K consultant and one of the first sources of Y2K information on the Web. "When people are scared, they behave differently than when they aren't. These people are predicting social chaos, and to some extent they're causing it."

The propagation of scorched-earth predictions also detracts from more mainstream efforts to prepare for possible Y2K disruptions.

"It's pretty boring to say you need to pick up some extra stuff when you're at the store and put some water in bottles," says Davis. "What gets attention are the extreme views, and people start to see it as an all-or-nothing issue."

"Many of the moderate groups advocating sensible Y2K preparation are facing ridicule because they're being lumped in with the extremists. People

hear these extreme predictions, they decide Y2K is all just a bunch of hype and they ignore it."

Which is where religious efforts such as The Joseph 2000 Project come in. Started by author and Christian speaker Shaunti Feldhahn, the group promotes a "balanced, Christian approach" to Y2K by helping churches build food and first-aid supplies, and training members in emergency services and other actions to help make churches important civic resources during any Y2K disruptions.

"What we're trying to do is help people bridge the gap between fear and denial," says Doug Standal, regional director for Georgia-based Joseph 2000. "We don't make any predictions, but there's enough evidence to suggest something is coming. In that case, the prudent thing to do is to prepare, just as you would for any kind of disaster."

Standal won't rule out the possibility of Y2K being part of a divine plan, but he says that doesn't alter the correct public response: Make sensible preparations and be ready to help your neighbor.

"We believe God is using Y2K as a wake-up call," he says. "If Y2K causes people to ask questions about their salvation, that's great. But this isn't the end of the world; that's ridiculous. This is an opportunity to minister to other people."

"We believe that if you do good work in the community, God will give you the opportunity to spread his word while ministering to people's physical needs."

Landes says he's encouraged by such attitudes and hopes they'll serve as a model for Christian involvement in Y2K.

"The religious involvement can make things better or worse," he says. "If religion urges people to stockpile weapons and get ready for Armageddon, then it's not helpful to our survival. If on the other hand religion is something that brings people together and promotes cooperation, then it can be a real asset in whatever problems we do encounter."

"At this point it's hard to tell who's prevailing. There are clearly a lot of save-your-skin type promoters, but there's also good evidence that Y2K is provoking a positive communitarian response."

Landes notes that if Y2K turns out to be more smoke than fire, most community and church groups are likely to donate surplus food to homeless shelters and other worthy causes.

"A Y2K well prepared for, that is not that serious, could produce a millennial jubilee that would surprise even the Pope," he says.

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We've known for years that Y2K was going to be an expensive problem to fix. Estimates of the global price tag for fixing the computer bug are creeping past the \$1 trillion mark.

What we didn't know is that everyone from Amish farm equipment stores to gold merchants would grab a buck or two from the millennial crossover.

Drawn by varying degrees of profit-seeking and genuine concern over possible Y2K disruptions of electricity, food supplies and other essentials, a new wave of merchants has risen to satisfy the needs of the growing Y2K survival crowd.

Folks such as Patrick Sullivan, a long-time computer consultant now devoting his energies full-time to Y2K OnLine, the Sunnyvale survival goods store he launched last year.

"I was out there working on NT systems, network maintenance, that kind of stuff," he says, "and I started to realize how much of an impact Y2K is going to have. I went through the four stages—shock, denial, oo on—and around the depression stage I met my partner [co-owner Geoff Metcalf]. We decided it's time to do something. We can't fix all the computers, but we can help people get ready."

Sullivan's inventory is dominated by shelf-stable food, offered in packages that will feed one person for a month. He offers a few other items for cooking, storing water and other basics. Like most in the business, Sullivan seems quite sincere when he says his main motivation is to help as many people as possible prepare for what he expects to be serious disruptions in life. He notes he could make much more money sticking with his consulting business.

"We're not trying to take advantage of anyone," he says. "Our main message is just to get people to prepare, to think about what their needs are. Anything's better than relying real-time

on grocery stores."

Gary Meeks, owner of Life's Essential in Hayward, says most people in the "preparedness" business aren't in it for the money.

"I talk to other business people at Y2K conferences, and what I find generally is that people want to help other people get prepared," he says. "It's not like used car salesmen, where they're bragging how much they made."

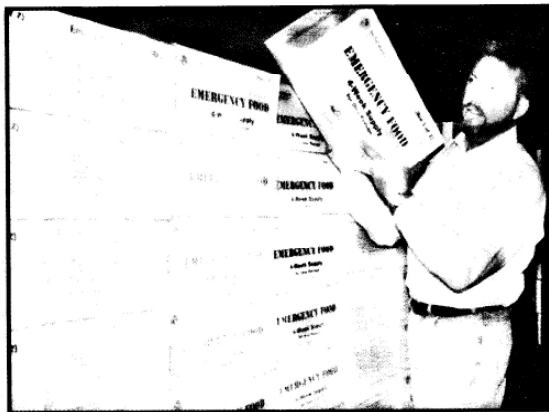
Meeks says he started selling dried foods and other goods a couple of years ago, mainly to help people put together earthquake kits.

"A first aid kit, a radio, some water—this is something that should be a part of your everyday life," he says. "But people in California don't like to do anything until after the fact."

Some of the biggest beneficiaries of Y2K survival fervor have been merchants who hardly fit the profiteer profile. Lehman's, a Kidron, Ohio, firm that mainly supplies goods to the area's Amish community, has seen an explosion of business from Y2K survivalists who have found the store is one of the few reliable sources for wood stoves and gas-powered refrigerators.

Pioneer Provisions of Bountiful Utah has been selling canned goods and other stockpile foods to area Mormons for 22 years; church doctrine calls for members to store a full year's worth of food in case of natural or economic disaster.

"Y2K has bought us a lot of new business, but we haven't changed our prices or anything," says co-owner Bryce Poulson. "We were in business a long time before Y2K and we plan to stay in business a long time after. Our business is based on the idea that people should be prepared, but they



Convinced that the Y2K bug will have a serious impact, Patrick Sullivan opened a Sunnyvale store selling survival products.

shouldn't have to drain their savings doing it."

Clearly some folks are getting into the Y2K business with nothing more than dollar signs in their eyes. The Y2-Kash Web site promises to reveal the secret of getting rich from the computer bug, mainly by selling how-to-get-rich kits to other entrepreneurs. (At the time this story was being written, the site www.y2-kash.com was up and running, but as of early last week it was not available.)

And few have much good to say about gold coin merchants capitalizing on a double set of doomsday fears: That not only will Y2K bring down the financial system, but the government will seize bullion and other non-collectible forms of gold.

"I think it's reasonable to suggest to people that they consider buying gold and silver now just on the basis of price," says Jack Bumb, owner, American Precious Metals in San Jose, where Y2K has helped inspire a tenfold increase in bullion sales.

"The antique coins is where you get

the operators. They're beating the drum as if the government is going to confiscate anything that isn't an antique collectible, and they're getting people to pay \$200 and \$300 premiums. Those people who are promoting this stuff take advantage of whatever vehicle looks expedient at the time. Now it's Y2K."

Take the example of gold merchant Swiss America, which also runs the Y2K News print magazine and Web site, where much of the news and analysis offered tends to bolster the "buy gold" message. (Y2K News editor and Swiss America CEO Tim Wilson was not available for comment before

press time).

Even well-intentioned survival merchants, however, play a role in promoting Y2K panic, says Aaron Lynch, editor of the *Journal of Memetics* and author of *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society*.

"The idea of Y2K as the end of the world was not created by business, but it has certainly been amplified by business motives," he says. "Anyone selling doomsday paraphernalia plays a role in spreading that message."

Sullivan says he goes out of his way to promote a sensible approach to Y2K preparation, advocating mundane steps such as buying extra underwear the next time you're at the department store. But he concedes some folks aren't thinking altogether clearly as the big date approaches.

"One guy called me up and asked me if I knew where he could buy a flint and steel, so he could start fires," he recalls. "Why not just buy a box of Bic lighters? They'll still work. Sometimes people overlook the simple solution."

—David Becker