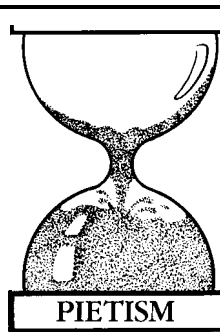


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Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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TEFLON THEOLOGY

by Michael R. Gilstrap

*"Let's get back to our Christian heritage.
God forbid!"*

It may surprise you, but this statement was not uttered by Norman Lear, nor did Madelyn Murray O'Hair say it. It wasn't even the pronouncement of a Supreme Court justice! As a matter of fact, the man who uttered that statement is known as one of American fundamentalism's most learned defenders of Christianity! The author of numerous books and articles, he frequently appears on Christian television and radio programs as an expert Christian "gun-slinger," hired to shoot down some evolutionist or secular humanist who is also appearing on the program.

The one who spoke that phrase is none other than Dallas Theological Seminary's professor of systematic theology, Norman L. Geisler. In a taped lecture entitled, "Christian Reconstructionism: A Biblical Critique," Geisler said not only that he would not want to go back to America's Christian heritage, but that he would not have biblical law over him as the standard of society.¹

Well, just for the record, he **does** have biblical law over him as the standard of society; he just refuses to admit it. It is like those people who say Christian Reconstructionists are trying to take over the world for Jesus. This is nonsense; Jesus took over the world at His resurrection, and said so (Matt. 28:18-20). Christian Reconstructionists are at most trying to get the world to acknowledge what is already true: that God created the world in six literal days and controls the world providentially (transcendence/presence), that He has placed His son Jesus Christ over the world (hierarchy), that He has established His law as binding on all men and institutions (ethics), that He judges all men **in history and eternity** in terms of His law (oath/sanctions), and that the Church, as His called-out people, will inherit the earth (succession/continuity).

Prof. Geisler hates this message. He hates Christian Reconstructionism because Reconstructionists confess that there is **only one valid law** because **there is only one sovereign Lawgiver**. He doesn't like the fact that Reconstructionists assert that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are covenantally binding on all men (which is why God sends people to hell for not obeying His law in Adam). His entire lecture is a smear job designed to lead people away from the real issues involved in our disagreements. (It is also filled with inaccuracies, such as the statement that Dr. Greg Bahnsen is R. J. Rushdoony's son-in-law. Prof. Geisler did not do his homework before attacking us. Our critics seldom do.)

The question we must ask ourselves is, "How does Prof. Geisler think anyone can escape the ethical demands

of God's law?" We know that he isn't an anarchist or a libertarian who rejects all civil law. What then does he do? Where does he turn? About halfway through the tape he asks **his audience**, "**What** would you do if someone said, 'I think the Koran should be the basis of law in America?' You'd say, 'Well no that's **their** religious book.'" Prof. Geisler says, "Precisely! The Bible is **your** religious book just like the Koran is their religious book."

He goes on to say, "**Anyone** who wants to make their religious book the basis of law is a threat to liberty. Just as we need to speak out against those who want to make the *Humanist Manifesto* the basis of law, so we need to speak out against those who want to make the Bible the basis of law. Both are extremes."

Okay, Professor: If we can't use the Bible or the Koran or the *Humanist Manifesto*, then what **should we** use as the basis for civil law? His response: "Government is not based on special revelation, such as the Bible. It is based on God's general revelation to all men."² Prof. Geisler thinks that by his appeal to so-called natural law, he thereby avoids the extreme of theonomy.³ A better way to read this is that he attempts to **escape** the requirements of God's just, holy, and pure law by appealing to pagan natural law.

He is not alone; the entire dispensationalist world is forced to do the same thing because dispensationalism rejects the Mosaic law as binding in any way in New Testament times. Thus, dispensationalists necessarily wind up proclaiming some version of the dualist theology of medieval Roman Catholic scholasticism, the 13th-century philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, who tried (and failed) to fuse Christianity and pagan Greek philosophy.

Paganism in Swaddling Clothes

Natural law has been and always will be a pagan concept. The system was invented by a handful of pagan Hellenic Greek Stoic philosophers in order to construct an alternative to the collapsing world of the Greek city-state and its political religion. They self-consciously invented a new religious worldview in order to justify the empire of Alexander the Great.⁴ Later, Roman Stoics adopted natural law theory in order to justify the expansion of the Roman Empire.⁵ **There was a deeply pagan and empire-justifying religious impulse in early natural law philosophy.** There

2. Norman Geisler, "Premillennial View of Law and Government," *The Best in Theology*, vol. 1 (Carol Stream, IL: Christian Today, Inc., n.d.): 259.

3. *Ibid.*, 259

4. Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), pp. 70-71.

5. Gerardo Zampaglione, *The Idea of Peace in Antiquity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1967] 1973), p. 139

1. "Christian Reconstructionism: A Biblical Critique" by Norman Geisler. Available from Quest Tapes, PO Box 38100, Dallas, TX 75238 \$400

still is. The empire it promotes is **the empire of self-proclaimed autonomous man**.

Plato and Aristotle saw man as the center of all things. For Aquinas, what constitutes a "just society" is whatever man's "right reason" tells him is a just society. We know where such a philosophy inevitably ends up. The Marquis de Sade (from whom we get the word **sadism**) argued in the 18th century that because nature is sexually perverse and murderous, men can and should be sexually perverse and murderous. If the fallen, cursed world of nature and the fallen, cursed mind of man are your only standards of public truth and social ethics, you are in deep, deep trouble. This is exactly where Prof. Geisler is.

There is no way to escape natural law's pagan roots. Man's autonomous reason is said to be the means for knowing the content of "natural law." To argue for this position, you must affirm man's reason as being autonomous: to be "as God," knowing good [determining] and evil (Gen. 3:5). The biblical position is that man's reason must never be seen as the absolute means of determining the nature and content of God's revelation of Himself in creation.

The prophet Jeremiah asked, "The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked; Who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). Anyone who says that covenant-breaking man can properly interpret "nature," "laws of nature," "light of reason," "natural conscience," or any other synonym for natural law, and can use that interpretation as the basis for civil (or any other) law, is hopelessly self-deceived.

Who will ultimately decide what will be right and what will be wrong? To take a modern example, someone may use "natural law" – "a woman's right to privacy" – to justify the murder of 20 million-plus American babies over the last fifteen years, and 50 million a year, worldwide. By applying the darkened ingenuity of an evil heart, and by using the deformed witness of a fallen creation, **anything can be done in the name of "natural" morality**.

I must admit that I've pushed Prof. Geisler's position beyond the point he would be willing to go, but I have not pushed it beyond the point to which pagan natural law theory can lead. Prof. Geisler's compromised philosophical position, along with dispensationalist ethics as a whole, is **fundamentally a rebellion against the Holy Spirit and His work through the Church that empowers Christians to exercise dominion in terms of biblical law**.⁶ His philosophical system ought to be regarded by Protestants as medieval scholasticism in drag. It should surprise no one that he received his Ph. D in philosophy from a Jesuit university. In reality, Prof. Geisler's rejection of biblical law doesn't leave him with **natural** law; it leaves him with **no** law. He ought to be nicknamed **Normless** Geisler.

The Real Issue: Ethics

Readers of this newsletter expect a preponderance of emphasis on eschatology. After all, dispensationalism has a very distinct eschatology. But eschatology is not the most fundamental issue when dealing with dispensationalism (or any other theological movement for that matter) – **ethics is**.

6. Gary North, *Is the World Running Down: Crisis in the Christian Worldview* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1988), 302.

I need to emphasize this point early in the life of *Dispensationalism in Transition*. First and foremost, **dispensationalism is a denial of the authority of God's revealed law**. It is at root self-consciously lawless. The **real issue** when dealing with dispensationalism is ethical – ethical rebellion against the revealed law of God.

The rejection of biblical law is always ethical rebellion. Dr. North notes in his latest book, *Is the World Running Down?*, that "These people [dispensationalists] hate Old Testament law with every fiber of their being. They are at war with God's revealed law. They may mouth platitudes about 'honoring God's moral principles,' but they have for over a century categorically resisted every attempt to spell out specifically what these laws require, especially for society's institutions."⁷

Dispensationalism's thin veneer of man-made morality – no dancing, no smoking, no alcohol (especially wine at communion) – only serves as a cover for what is rampant immorality. Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart were both self-conscious defenders of traditional dispensationalism. They were both well-known defenders of Rapture theology. It is worth noting that just before the front-page news hit the wire services, Jimmy Swaggart was planning to launch a magazine called *Sound Doctrine* as an antidote to dominion theology. (Those plans have been indefinitely postponed.)

Meanwhile, adultery, lawless divorce, and lawless remarriage rage unchecked in fundamentalist church after church. In our own small town, two local evangelical leaders have had to step aside because of sexual immorality in the past two years. Every time this happens, the Church's good name and its good works suffer. Think of the thousands of orphans the Swaggart ministry supports; think of the mission schools. What happens to them now?

Conclusion

Fundamentalists proclaim a theology that denies the revealed law of God in New Testament times, and which therefore also denies the judgments of God in history. Should we be surprised that those who truly believe in such a theology should find that moral self-control is a burden too great for them? They too easily forget the words of the Psalmist: "I have stuck to thy testimonies: O LORD, put me not to shame" (Ps. 119:31). They never seem to recall that when men refuse to stick to God's testimonies, shame becomes inevitable. Dispensationalists keep preaching **Teflon theology**. And they keep sliding into shame.

Dispensationalists hate God's revealed law. This is the heart of the matter. Far more important than the timing of Jesus' return and other eschatological matters is this issue of their hatred for the revealed law of God. Dispensationalists have invented a false system of hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) and eschatology in order to justify this hatred intellectually.⁸ It never ceases to astound me that they still sing the hymn, "O, How Love I Thy Law." It is evidence of their intellectual schizophrenia. Just like when they sing, "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

7 *Ibid.*, 300.

8 *Ibid.*, 302.