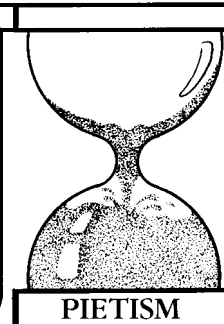


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# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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## DISPENSATIONALISM'S HERMENEUTIC: "LITERAL, EXCEPT WHEN EMBARRASSING"

by Michael R. Gilstrap

"Dispensationalism claims to be a help in supplying the answer to the need for Biblical distinction, in offering a satisfying philosophy of history, and in employing a consistently normal principle of interpretation. These are basic areas in proper understanding of the Bible. If dispensationalism has the answers, then it is the most helpful tool in Biblical interpretation. If not, it ought to be discarded as **worthless**"<sup>1</sup> (emphasis mine).

— Charles Ryrie

The edifice of dispensationalism is built upon two key pillars: their peculiar understanding of the distinction between Israel and the Church, and their hermeneutic or method of interpreting Scripture. Perhaps the most concise definition of dispensationalism is Ryrie's, and it reflects this two-fold structure: "The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the Church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well."<sup>2</sup>

Because the whole system of dispensationalism is based on their understanding of the distinction between Israel and the Church, and this distinction grows out of their hermeneutic, it seems reasonable to assume then, that if we show the bankruptcy of their hermeneutic, and then point out the error of these distinctions made by dispensationalists when discussing Israel and the Church, that the entire structure will come tumbling down. This may be more than can be expected since men hold positions for reasons other than sound theology.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, by showing the fallacies and cracks in the two key pillars, we will echo Ryrie's assessment, dispensationalism ought to be trashed.

### The **Consistent** Literalist

Dispensationalists use the phrase "literal interpretation" to describe their system of hermeneutics. What they mean by that is that when interpreting a passage of Scripture, every word should be given the same meaning it would have in ordinary usage. The meaning of each word is arrived at by grammatical and historical considerations.<sup>4</sup>

They even go so far as to say that *if* you are a literalist, then you are a dispensationalist; but *if* you are a nonliteralist, then you are not a dispensationalist. Thus, as we've seen, they believe that their system arises out of the con-

sistent application of this literal hermeneutic to the Bible, including Old Testament prophecy.<sup>5</sup> Dispensationalists believe no other system of biblical interpretation is as consistent as theirs; hence, their hermeneutic is superior to all others.

John Walvoord and Lewis Sperry Chafer go so far as to write that without this dispensational hermeneutic, it is difficult (if not impossible) to live faithfully. "It is obvious that, apart from the knowledge of dispensational truth, the believer will not be intelligently adjusted to the present purpose and will of God in the world. Such knowledge alone will save him from assuming the hopeless legality of the dispensation that is past or from undertaking the impossible world transforming program belonging to the dispensation which is to come."<sup>6</sup>

J. Dwight Pentecost raises the ante even higher. In his magnum opus, *Things to Come*, he writes, "It would be concluded, then, from the study of the history of interpretation that the original and accepted method of interpretation was the literal method, which was used by the Lord, the greatest interpreter, and any other method was introduced to promote heterodox. Therefore, the literal method must be accepted as the basic method for right interpretation in any field of doctrine today."<sup>7</sup>

Did you catch that? Pentecost says not only that the "literal method" was used by the Lord, but that the only reason any other method was introduced was to promote heresy! That is quite a claim for one's system of interpretation!

Now, why have I belabored this point? For one very simple reason: to demonstrate how important the literal method of interpretation is to the dispensationalist. Ryrie writes that it's crucial to understanding God's plan in the world. The very essence of dispensationalism, the distinction between Israel and the Church, arises from this hermeneutic. Walvoord and Chafer assert that the believer cannot be "intelligently adjusted" to the plan of God unless he employs this method of understanding the Bible. And Pentecost argues that it is the hermeneutic of our Lord Himself.

We can easily see that the highest importance and value is placed on the literal hermeneutic of the dispensationalist. We might expect that this method would be rigor-

1. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 21.

2. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 47.

3. See "Teflon Theology," *Dispensationalism in Transition*, vol. 1, no. 4.

Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 86-87.

5. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 96.

6. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, revised by John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1974), 127-128. Note carefully what Chafer and Walvoord say in this quotation. Dispensationalism is necessary in order to avoid the *legality* of the past and the *responsibilities* of the future. The entire system has been constructed to avoid the demands of God! For lengthier discussion, see Michael Gilstrap, "Teflon Theology," *Dispensationalism in Transition*, vol. 1, no. 4.

7. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., [1958] 1964), 33.

ously applied by the dispensationalist. Under no circumstance would consistent literalism be deviated from. This is the hermeneutic of Jesus, after all. What's good enough for Him, is good enough for us! The Bible says what it means, and means what it says. "Consistent Liberalism or Bust" is the slogan of the dispensationalist!

We shall see, however, that dispensationalism's "consistent literalism" is a lot of smoke. The vaporous qualities that characterize *dispensationalism* at other points are no less evident here. It is impossible to apply the method consistently without falling into the very thing Pentecost accuses the rest of us of advocating: heterodox. In fact, we shall see that *if* the dispensational hermeneutic is applied consistently, that is precisely where it leads: heresy.

### The Acid Test

There are any number of different ways to test the "literal" method. I remember some years ago an issue of *The Wittenburg Door* devoted to this subject. In that issue of "the Door" (as we affectionately called it), there was a "literal" drawing of Shulamith, the object of Solomon's affections in The Song of Solomon. She was replete with dove's eyes, goats for hair, sheep for teeth, yarn for lips, pomegranates sticking out of the side of her head, a pillar for her neck with shields hanging from it, two deer for breasts, and milk and honey drooling out of her mouth (Song of Solomon 4:1ff). What a sight! The drawing was hilarious!

Now either Solomon has very different ideas of what "beauty" is, or the "literal method" comes up a bit short when applied to the Song of Solomon.

Other examples may also be cited. David Chilton points to the 23rd Psalm as an example of a Scripture passage that must be read symbolically. If taken literally the Psalm would not even be true. The Lord *does not* make every Christian lie down in literal, green pastures!<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the best passage that illustrates the absurdity of the dispensational hermeneutic is Ezekiel 40-48. This is a description of Ezekiel's vision of the New Jerusalem, of which Revelation 21 is the New Testament parallel.<sup>9</sup> The dispensationalist, however, sees this passage as pointing to a future millennium during which God will fulfill His promises to Israel in a literal manner.

Note what Ezekiel sees:

- 1) A consecrated altar in the midst of the new temple (43:13-18). This altar will be for sacrificing burnt offerings (v. 18), for sprinkling blood on it (v. 18), for sin offerings (v. 19), for trespass offerings (40:39). The morning sacrifices will again be observed each day (46:13).
- 2) The Levitical priesthood is re-instituted in the sons of Zadok (43:19).
- 3) Meal offerings are offered again (42:13).
- 4) Ritual cleansing is prescribed for altar (43:20-27), Levites (44:25-27), and sanctuary (45:18).
- 5) Passover (45:21-25), the Feast of Tabernacles (45:25), and the year of Jubilee (46:17) will again be observed.
- 6) The Glory-Cloud will fill this new Temple just as it filled the Tabernacle and Temple (43:4-5).

From this list, we can see that if the dispensationalist

is right, the worship of the Millennium will be virtually identical to the Old Testament, Levitical economy. As a professor of mine once remarked about this very point, "That presents them with *insuperable* difficulties."

The problems with this "literal" interpretation are transparent. It is the clear testimony of the New Testament that the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant were but types or shadows of the once for all sacrifice of Christ (Heb 9:11-15; 10:1ff.). *There is no equivocation on the part of the writer to the Hebrews.* There will be no more animal sacrifices: "He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:9b-10).

A "literal" hermeneutic, if consistent, forces the dispensational interpreter into a hopeless dilemma. On the one hand, the New Testament is clear: no more animal sacrifices. On the other hand, a "literal" interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48 is clear: animal sacrifices will be reinstituted in the Millennium. What must be done to resolve the dilemma?

*Wease/ out of it!* Even dispensationalists recognize the heresy of arguing for the reinstitution of Levitical animal sacrifices. To solve the problem, they argue that the sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48 are "memorial" sacrifices, in the same way the Lord's Supper is a memorial. These sacrifices will not be propitiatory or in any way an atonement.<sup>10</sup>

There's just one slight problem: the text won't allow it. Ezekiel 45:17 reads: "Then it shall be the prince's part to give burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the feasts, the New Moons, the Sabbaths, and at all the appointed seasons of the house of Israel. He shall prepare the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings to *make atonement* for the house of Israel" (emphasis mine). The sacrifices are meant "to make atonement." Literally, the Hebrew reads "to cover, propitiate." Similarly in verse 20 Ezekiel writes, "And so you shall do on the seventh day of the month for everyone who has sinned unintentionally or in ignorance. Thus you shall *make atonement* for the temple" (emphasis mine). Once more, the same Hebrew word appears.

If we were to compare Leviticus 4 with this passage, we would see that in the case of each of these sacrifices, the remedy prescribed is for *sin*. Identical language to Leviticus 4 is used! Nothing whatsoever in the text of Ezekiel leads us to believe anything is in view other than propitiatory sacrifice. No where is a commemoration or memorial mentioned.

### Conclusion

How do dispensationalists respond to this line of reasoning? *They are typically silent.* Their "literal" or "plain" or "normal" interpretation does so much violence to the New Testament teaching that they are dumbfounded. Consistently following the dispensational hermeneutic leads the rejection of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. That, my friends, is heresy of the worst sort! *Dispensationalists don't reject Christ's sacrifice any more than they consistently follow their hermeneutic.*

If their hermeneutic leads to such grotesque interpretations of the Scriptures, what does that say about the validity of the hermeneutic? Is it really "the most helpful tool in Biblical interpretation" as Charles Ryrie suggests? Hardly. I tend to lean in the other direction, "it ought to be discarded as worthless."

10. Pentecost, Things, 525.

8. David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985), 16.

9. See David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987) for an indepth analysis of what these passages point to.