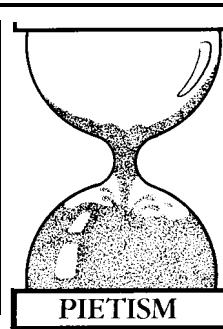


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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"FOREVER" DOESN'T MEAN "FOREVER"

by Michael R. Gilstrap

Mark Twain, whenever feats of heroism or ingenuity were being bragged about, would come forth with a little story of his own which usually climaxed the discussion.

"There was a fire in Hannibal one night, and the old man Hankinson got caught in the fourth story of the burning house. It looked as though he were a goner. None of the ladders was long enough to reach him. The crowd stared at one another, nobody could think of anything to do.

"Then, all of a sudden, an idea occurred to me. 'Fetch a rope,' I yelled, 'somebody fetch a rope,' and, with great presence of mind, I flung the end of it up to old man Hankinson; 'Tie it around your waist,' I yelled. The old man did so, and I pulled him down."

Twain was joking about his pulling Hankinson down. Everyone within earshot knew he was joking. Sadly, dispensationalists are not joking when they throw their hermeneutical "rope" to unsuspecting Christians. They pull their followers down to their harm. As noted last month, the dispensationalist's method of interpreting the Bible is at best misleading – at worst it leads to heresy. To follow it consistently does unmitigated violence to the New Testament witness.

Because of the importance of the "literal" method to the dispensational system, I want to emphasize again the shell game the major architects of the system are playing. By their own admission, their hermeneutic is indispensable to the whole system. Charles Ryrie is so bold as to proclaim that if their system is not the "most helpful tool in Biblical interpretation," then it ought to be discarded.¹

I agree. The dispensational hermeneutic ought to be abandoned because it doesn't work. They say they rigorously interpret the Bible by the "literal" method, but at numerous key passages their method must be significantly modified to interpret the text in light of the New Testament. Last month we looked at one passage where we found that if we follow the "literal" method, we would end up denying the once-for-all efficacy of Christ's atonement. This month I want to point out a series of passages that present insurmountable difficulties for the consistent dispensationalist.

When "Forever" Doesn't Mean "Forever"

One of the chief canons of dispensational hermeneutics is that the words of Scripture should be given their "plain" or "normal" meaning. Ryrie puts it this way, "This means interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking."² Lewis Sperry Chafer and

John Walvoord, former presidents of Dallas Theological Seminary, expand on the" thought:

In addition to determining the actual meaning of the words, proper interpretation assumes that each word has its normal literal meaning unless there are good reasons for regarding it as a figure of speech. For instance, the land promised Israel should not be considered a reference to heaven, but rather as a literal reference to the Holy Land. Likewise, promises given to Israel should not be spiritualized to apply to Gentile believers in Christ. The rule of interpretation is that words should be given their normal meaning unless the context clearly indicates that a figure of speech is intended.³

That seems straightforward enough. Unless the context clearly indicates a figure of speech, then the "normal" meaning prevails. Note the following promises or commands given to Israel. In each case it is "forever" or "everlasting." Let's see how dispensationalists handle these:

1. **Promise of the Land of Canaan** – "For all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever" (Genesis 13:15).

2. **Command to Keep the Passover** – "So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:14).

3. **Command to Keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread** – "So you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:17).

4. **Service of Lampstand in Tabernacle** – "In the tabernacle of meeting, outside the veil which is before the Testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening until morning before the Lord, It shall be a statute "forever" to their generations on behalf of the children of Israel" (Exodus 27:21).

5. **The Day of Atonement** – "This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your soul, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who sojourns among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (Leviticus 16:29-30).

6. **Circumcision** – "He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:13).

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

2. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 86.

3. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, revised by John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., [1926] 1974), 35.

7. The Throne of David – “He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:13).

8. Dwell in Jerusalem – “For David said, ‘The Lord God of Israel has given rest to His people, that they may dwell in Jerusalem forever’” (1 Chronicles 23:25).

9. Christ **reign personally in Jerusalem** – “I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcast a strong nation; so the Lord will reign over Mount Zion from now on, even forever” (Micah 4:7).

Further examples of such promises could be multiplied endlessly. In each of the above verses, there either is one of two Hebrew words translated “forever” or “everlasting.” In both instances, the words mean “forever or perpetually.” In each case, the promise or command is given for a perpetual duration, *if we are to interpret the text “literally.”*

Consistent dispensationalists, therefore, are forced to conclude that there will be an unending Jewish national existence in the *literal* land of Palestine with a *literal* capital of Jerusalem, a *literal* Temple, and a *literally* active sacrificial system. Jews will *literally* celebrate the feasts, and Christ will *literally* reign on the Throne of David forever.

Some of the earlier dispensationalists, principally Lewis Sperry Chafer, held it,⁴ but modern dispensationalists recognize the unscripturalness of the position. What do they do? **They switch the pea.** In mid-stream, they change the rules of the game. “Forever” doesn’t *really* mean “forever.” We are not told up front that the rules have been changed; the code of silence won’t allow that. Passages like the following mysteriously begin to appear when one of the “forever” promises is discussed:

As the inhabitants of the city are contemplated it is observed that Scripture includes more than the church among the inhabitants. A city is seen to be the expectation of the Old Testament saints. Of Abraham it was said: “He looked for a city which bath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11 :10). In contrasting the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem in Galatians 4 Paul states that whereas the Jew in bondage longed for earthly Jerusalem, there is **held through the promise a greater city or dwelling place in the words, “But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal 4:26).** Old Testament saints are pictured in the words, “Ye come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem to the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb.12:22-23). It would appear then that the author includes not only the church, but the redeemed of the Old Testament as well as angels in the company of the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem.⁵

4. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. IV (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948): 315ff.

5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, [1958] 1984), 576.

Note carefully what Pentecost writes. He says that whereas the Old Testament saint looked for an earthly city, there is *really* a greater city or dwelling place. In fact, Old Testament saints are in view when the writer to the Hebrews describes entering into the city of the living God, the *heavenly* Jerusalem!

Now, whatever else this interpretation may be, *it is not literal*. God told Abraham He would give the land to Abraham and to his descendants **forever** (Genesis 13:15). To David He said that Israel would dwell in Jerusalem **forever** (2 Samuel 7:13). There is no mention anywhere of a heavenly city or a “new” Jerusalem. No contextual indicators point to figurative language.⁶ “Forever” simply does not mean “forever,” or “Israel” does not mean “Israel,” or “Jerusalem” does not mean “Jerusalem.” Whichever way we cut the pie, the dispensational hermeneutic is full of holes!

According to one of Pentecost’s former students, his position is that there will be a Jewish nation reestablished in the land of Canaan during the millennium. A new Temple will be built with the accompanying sacrifices, priesthood, and personal reign of Christ. However, at the end of the 1000 year millennium, the Jewish/Millennium saints will join with the church in the New Jerusalem and live there forever. In other words, the literal, earthly promises made to Israel, according to Pentecost, are to be fulfilled only for the thousand year millennium.⁷

As I said, they switched the pea on us. A thousand years is a long time, but it isn’t *forever*. The New Jerusalem is not a *literal* Canaan, either. In an effort not to openly contradict the teachings of the New Testament, the *literal* hermeneutic must be modified.

Conclusion

Once again, the question must be asked: If a hermeneutic leads to such transparent distortions of the obvious meaning of Scripture – so obvious that even defenders of the system recognize it – of what value is the hermeneutic? If we see that this hermeneutic leads us time and again into heresy unless we modify it, can we trust it at all? Even more to the point, if we have a suspect hermeneutic, do we build an entire theological system on top of it?

The answer is obvious. The dispensational hermeneutic has about as much value as a 1948 newspaper, *if our goal is to faithfully interpret Scripture*. But as we’ve seen, that is not dispensationalism’s goal. This entire system was constructed to escape the authority of God’s revealed Law.⁸ It has to be abandoned before it does any more harm.

6. See the earlier Walvoord/Chafer quotation In that place the Land of Israel is specifically referred to as *not* being a reference to heaven.

7. W. E. Bell, “A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology” (Ph.D. dissertation, 1967), 85.

8. For an elaboration of this thesis, see Michael Gilstrap, “Teflon Theology,” *Dispensationalism in Transition*, vol 1, no.4 (May 1988).