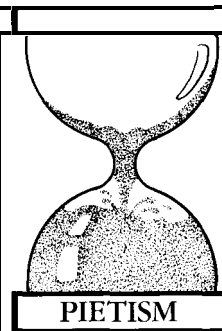


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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THE PARADIGM IS SHIFTING

by Michael R. Gilstrap

In a letter I received yesterday from a dispensationalist author, he pointed out that the belief among current dispensationalist scholars is that dispensationalism is in its fourth phase of development. In the same letter, he advised me that he had just gotten off the phone with Hal Lindsey, and that Lindsey had told him once again that he had made a mistake in *The Late, Great Planet Earth* by "implying the forty year thing." Lindsey now believes it was wrong to speculate on such a thing.

Quite understandably, dispensationalism is undergoing a transformation. As noted in earlier issues of *Dispensationalism in Transition*, the pillars upon which the entire structure is built have developed serious cracks. Dispensationalism must modify if it is to survive. Although unavailable as I write this, by the time you read these words an article on current theological developments in the dispensational system will have been published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* by the man many in dispensationalism consider the movement's leading scholar, Craig Blaising.

Dispensationalism is in transition – and this situation presents tremendous opportunities for us to share our understanding of the future, and hopefully impart to many others the postmillennial vision we share.

The Importance of Paradigm

What's happening to dispensationalism in 1988 is that the prevailing paradigm is shifting. Thomas Kuhn first pointed out this phenomenon in his work on the history of science.¹ Kuhn's major contribution has been to show the domination exercised on scientific thinking by the structure of basic beliefs into which all related scientific facts and theories must fit. The structure gives coherence and unity to the various bits of data. Kuhn called this structure or framework a *paradigm*.

According to Kuhn, scientists ordinarily do not venture outside their paradigm. For example, ptolemaic astronomy (belief that earth is center of solar system with sun, moon, and planets revolving around it) went on adding planetary epicycles to remove observed discrepancies in planetary movements. Irregularities and anomalies were set aside or otherwise accommodated by *ad hoc* modifications to the system. As time went on, the technology for observing astronomical phenomena improved. The list of anomalies grew longer and longer until a sense of crisis within the scientific community pushed it to examine its assumptions about the universe. Scientists were forced to search for alternatives.

At this point, Copernicus came along and proposed a new *paradigm*, a new structure or framework for interpret-

ing the facts and theories. He challenged prevailing presuppositions regarding the universe, and a scientific revolution took place – the revolution from ptolemaic astronomy to Copernican astronomy. A similar process took place in the shift from Aristotelian to Newtonian physics.

Kuhn also observed that during the time period the paradigm shift is taking place, adherents of two different paradigms will be competing for the allegiance of their colleagues, and later in the process, for the allegiance of the public. This competition, however, is not a simple marshalling of facts and proofs. Kuhn speaks of it in terms of a *conversion*:

Though each may hope to convert the other to his way of seeing his science and its problems, neither may hope to prove his case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs. Before they can hope to communicate fully, one group or the other must experience the conversion that we have been calling a paradigm shift. Just because it is a transition between incommensurable, the transition between competing paradigms cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like a gestalt switch it must occur all at once or not at all.²

Notice what Kuhn is saying. In the battle for men's minds, competing paradigms do not "prove" their validity. In the nature of the case, the paradigms are "incommensurable," that is, they lack a common basis of comparison. Two-way communication is very difficult between the paradigms because of this. Often during the process leading up to the paradigm shift, each side seems to be talking *through* the other, rather than *to* the other.

As the adherents of the new paradigm pile anomaly upon anomaly, pointing out irreconcilable irregularity after irreconcilable irregularity to the defenders of the old paradigm, the crisis level mounts higher and higher until something akin to critical mass is reached. The switch is flipped, and the new paradigm has prevailed – the revolution has taken place.

Out With the Old

The same thing is happening today within conservative Christianity. The old dispensational paradigm is being replaced. There are too many anomalies and irregularities. A sense of crisis grips the dispensational community. A transformation is taking place in which the most cherished presuppositions are being challenged.

I believe we are witnessing a theological paradigm shift from the premillennial, dispensational worldview to a post-

1. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

2. Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms & Revolutions*, (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 1980), 225.

millennial, covenantal worldview. *A revolution is taking place within Christianity, and it has been in progress for 20 years.*

Dispensational scholars are resisting this revolution because previous commitments and presuppositions have permeated all their thinking. Kuhn argues that any paradigm shift will only prevail when the older generation has been "converted" to it, or has died off and been replaced by a new generation. Both are taking place today within dispensationalism.

Where is the old guard? From John Nelson Darby to Charles Ryrie there has been an unbroken line of "dispensational apostles," heralding the undiluted gospel of dispensationalism. Modifications to the system were made to be sure, but the system as such was vigorously defended each generation. This old *guard* who once carried the banner for dispensationalism are now either retired, or have gone to be with the Lord.

There's no one to take their place. Men like Hal Lindsey have been discredited because of their outlandish predictions. The younger, more serious scholars within the dispensational community don't show the same interest in maintaining the status quo and patching up the old system. A glance through the faculty list at Dallas Theological Seminary proves that. Very few of the faculty are even writing books, and the ones who are, don't write books defending dispensationalism.

Most revealing, however, is the book one professor at Dallas co-authored with a pastor from Austin, Texas – a book attacking Dominion Theology. Due out in July from Multnomah Press is the title by Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: A Blessing or a Curse?*. Our theology, joined with the abject bankruptcy of dispensationalism, has created such a crisis that the old paradigm is publicly attacking the new paradigm.

In a real sense, the shift has already taken place. Yet it is a mistake to assume that dispensationalism is a thing of the past and we are in a "mopping up" operation – all that we must do is bide our time and eventually, a postmill/covenantal worldview will emerge. I don't believe that's the case. We must press on and continue to point out the irregularities and inconsistencies in the dispensational system, while at the same time presenting our understanding of the Scriptures in a clear, gracious manner.

The Failure of Dispensationalism

That leads me to this final section. Kuhn writes in the last chapter of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:

Probably the single most prevalent claim advanced by the proponents of a new paradigm is that they can solve the problems that have led the old *one* to a crisis. When it can legitimately be made, this claim is often the most effective one possible.³

The question we must ask ourselves then is: What are the problems that led to the current crisis in dispensationalism, and does the postmill/covenantal worldview provide better answers?

The most important problem that has led to the current crisis is the failure of the dispensational hermeneutic. As we've seen over and over, the "literal" or "plain meaning" method is insufficient to deal with the Scriptures without doing violence to the Scriptures, or seriously altering the

hermeneutic to avoid heresy.⁴ Although many are unaware of it, one of the early motivations for the development of the dispensational hermeneutic was the fear of subjectivity in interpretation. Dispensationalists had watched modernists and cultists twist the meaning of Scripture on the basis of their own subjective biases, biases arising from non-Christian religious presuppositions.⁵ Men had rejected the *ex nihilo* creation of the universe, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or the possibility of the miraculous by appealing to a subjective interpretation of Scripture. Dispensationalists abhorred this type of subjective hermeneutic, and sought to develop a hermeneutic to avoid subjectivism.

The pioneers of the movement wanted a hermeneutic that could stand up to the claims of modern science. Their fear of subjectivity led them to reject as much as possible "figurative" interpretations. According to dispensationalism, the Bible is written in precise, everywhere-clear-cut language whose "plain" meaning is easily discernible.

Has it worked? No. Interpreting some passages of Scripture "literally" often imports a meaning to the text unacceptable to dispensationalism, as we discovered the last two issues. Furthermore, the "plain" meaning led some dispensationalists to predict that 1988 would be the year of the great rapture – a prediction which continues to embarrass the die-bards.

Furthermore, the dispensational hermeneutic is designed to provide a consistent, harmonious method of interpreting Scripture which opens the Bible up to everyone. Yet, as we've seen, the system is anything but consistent. "Israel" does not always mean "Israel," nor does "forever" always mean "forever."

A covenantal hermeneutic, on the other hand, does not allow subjectivity to destroy the meaning of the text either. It takes care of the problem dispensationalists feared, but it also recognizes that the Bible, although the very Word of God, is nevertheless written sometimes in everyday and sometimes in literary language. The biblical language may not be the precise language of scientists or systematicians, but it is inspired and inerrant.

A covenantal hermeneutic leads the interpreter to read the Bible *biblically*, that is, to allow the Bible to speak for itself. We don't speculate or become abstract, but we pay attention to the Scriptures' own definition of its symbolism. Furthermore, the meaning of individual words are not infinitely precise, and the way a particular word is used (its sense) is determined in a large part by the context.⁶

More than any other factor, the failure of the dispensational hermeneutic has led to the inevitability of a paradigm shift. Other factors are certainly at play, but the most important is the failure of the hermeneutic. The switch has not yet been flipped in everyone's mind, but we're getting closer and closer. It may take another fifty years to complete the process, but a revolution is taking place!

4. See Michael R. Gilstrap, *Dispensationalism in Transition*, vol. 1, nos. 5 & 6.

5. Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 58

6. For further study see Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983); Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987); Tremper Longman II, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987); Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987); and chapter 2 in David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1985)

3. Kuhn, *Structure*, 153.