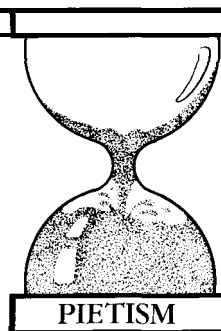


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# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH DISPENSATIONALISTS

### PART ONE

by Michael R. Gilstrap

St. Paul writes to the Colossians, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Col. 4: 6). This verse describes the speech of a wise man (v. 5). St. Paul writes that if we want to know how to respond effectively to those outside, then we must labor to make sure our speech is gracious.

Two issues ago, we discussed the paradigm shift taking place. In conservative Christianity, the old paradigm, dispensationalism, is being replaced by a new paradigm, covenantal postmillennialism. Although a lot of the activity in a process like this takes place among the "public defenders" of each respective paradigm, a great deal of shifting takes place on the interpersonal level.

One of the criticisms of our movement has been that we are poor, ungracious communicators. One reader wrote me, "Often the comments border on smart aleck or sarcastic. We are selling an idea that is hard enough for the entrenched to understand, let alone believe. I'm afraid that some of the caustic comments stop some from even considering our future-oriented worldview."

Now, I don't like to be criticized anymore than the next guy, but I figure it's part of the turf in a day and time like ours. Covenantal postmillennialism is threatening to the status quo of conservative Christianity. The old guards are not going to roll over and allow this theology to sweep through their churches, schools, colleges, and seminaries. Hardline representatives of dispensational theology are going to call us names. Some will even intimate that our theology is a curse. In the very nature of the case, we point out embarrassing inconsistencies the other side would rather ignore (like the prediction that Jesus will return in 1988!). Dispensationalists are going to attack us because we are attacking their system. Criticisms which arise because of that, must simply be ignored.

But what we cannot ignore is the accusation that we are *ungracious communicators*. In the first place, we are commanded to be gracious. If we are being ungracious, and at times I believe we have been, then we need to correct our behavior. Just as important, however, is the fact that if we are being ungracious in our communication, then according to St. Paul, we are *being ineffective in our communication*. That is a situation that *must* be corrected, because our entire reason for existence is to be effective communicators of the covenantal, postmillennial worldview. Our mission is to teach as many Christians as possible our worldview. Ethical demands are important, and in this case, ungracious communication misses the mark both *ethically* and *productively*.

This criticism prompted me to consider some general principles of effective communication and how they may be applied to the task of discipline our premill brethren with

our worldview. This exercise has been of immeasurable help to me, and in this newsletter, I want to share it with you. Frankly, we're not going to convert the Dave Hunts or Hal Lindseys of the world to our way of thinking. As a matter of fact, we don't need to. The ones we need to reach are our dispensational friends and acquaintances. The new converts will in turn reach their friends, and so on. The net will eventually spread, and before we know it, a covenantal/postmillennial worldview will be the dominant paradigm in conservative Christianity.

To get to that point, however, we must first of all become gracious, effective communicators. How should we approach the dispensationalist? More generally, what do we need to do to persuade someone we don't agree with?

### Look for the Motives

Communication experts tell us that the very first thing we need to do when attempting to persuade someone to change a firmly held position is look for the motives as to why that position is being held. Information is power, and we must learn to capture that information and use it. Find out about the other person. Who are they? Take the time to assess their interests, circumstances, and possible reasons for acting or believing the way they do. What influences (both personal and impersonal) contribute to the position? As you evaluate the individual you're dealing with, ask yourself, "IS there anyone in this person's life that I must *also* persuade to convince him?"<sup>1</sup>

Each individual will be different. The specific circumstances of one dispensationalist will differ from another. We need to take into account individual motivations, but more to the point of this article are the motivations that lie behind dispensationalism as a system. Let me see if I can give you some insights into some of the motives the developers of the system had for designing the system. By understanding these motivations, it will help *us* communicate more effectively with their followers.

One of the most powerful motivations for John Nelson Darby (1800-82), the early founder of the movement, was his desire to maintain decisively the truth that salvation is by grace alone.<sup>2</sup> The inviolability of this doctrine was affirmed from the very beginning of dispensationalism. It drove the early dispensationalists to depreciate the usefulness of the Old Testament, and to deny that the Old Testament law had any applicability at all. It even led some to assert that there were two ways of salvation, one for the Old Testament and another for the New.

Salvation by grace is still very important to the dispen-

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Williams, *Effective Communication Power* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1983), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977 [1960]), 33.

nationalist, as well it should be. As we discuss the issue of the Law with them, therefore, we must be extremely sensitive to this concern. We believe in salvation by grace as well, and we must show them how our understanding of Scripture does not violate that belief in the least.

The second motive that is foundational to dispensationalism was the renewal of a fervent, any-moment expectation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This position has become so important that to most dispensationalists, to deny the immediate, any-moment aspect is tantamount to denying the Second Coming. We must assert that we do not believe in the imminency of Jesus's Second Coming, but we most certainly believe that Jesus will one day return bodily to this earth! As we seek to convince our brother or sister, we can emphasize the reality of this expectation, while at the same time endeavor to explain the true meaning of such passages as St. Matthew 24:29-31 or Revelation 22:12-13 or 1 Thessalonians 5:2.

Related to this motivation is the deep ground christology played in the attractiveness of dispensationalism.<sup>3</sup> This motivation becomes crystal clear when the reason dispensationalism spread to the United States is considered.

It appears, then, that America was attracted more by Darby's idea of an any-moment Coming than they [sic] were by his foundational concept of the two peoples of God. Postmillennialism made the event of the millennium the great object of hope; but Darby, by his insistence on the possibility of Christ's coming at any moment, made Christ Himself, totally apart from any event, the great object of hope.<sup>4</sup>

This is an important point. The blessings of the millennium aren't our blessed Hope – Jesus Christ Himself is (Titus 2: 13). We postmils at times fail to emphasize this strongly enough. Because of our propensity to get caught up in the excitement of our postmil vision, it seems to dispensationalists that we are depreciating the importance of the person of Christ. It is almost as if the *blessings* of the Kingdom are more important than the *Blessor*. When discussing this issue with dispensationalists, we have to be sure we clearly state our position, asserting that Jesus Christ is the "Blessed Hope," and affirming that the blessings of the millennium flow from the work of the Blessor on the cross.

Another important motivation that went into the development of the dispensational system is a reaction against Darwinism. Poythress has some profound observations.

Darwinism together with the growth of other sciences has radically undermined the previous broad Western cultural commitment to a Christian or at least semi-Christian worldview. Dispensationalism has answered the challenge of the supposed exact truths of the sciences with an exaltation of the exactitude of the truths of Scripture. Scriptural use of figurative, not-so-perfectly-clear, or not-perfectly-precise language can easily seem like a liability. Hence there is pressure on dispensationalism to believe that the Bible has a great **degree of precision in its language and to interpret its language in the least figurative way possible**. *To leave dispensationalism might*

*seem akin to leaving behind both the claims that the Bible can really stand up to the standards of modern science and the certainties obtained by operating with precise, everywhere-clear-cut language (emphasis mine).*<sup>5</sup>

This point is extremely important in dealing with dispensationalists. One of the reasons there is such a strong reaction to "symbolical" or "figurative" interpretations is the fear that if we interpret the Bible symbolically, we open the lid to a Pandora's Box of subjective interpretations. We all love certainty and stability. Even if it's not really true, we like to believe that all is right with the world – life is business as usual. For the dispensationalist, any method of interpretation that purposefully provides for "symbolical" or "figurative" understandings of the text, is immediately suspect. As Poythress observes, the dispensational hermeneutic has a great deal more baggage attached to it than is immediately apparent. As we present our case to dispensationalists, it is important that we recognize it. Our approach must take into account these important issues, and in the presentation, pose the questions and deal with them.

Finally in terms of detecting motivations as an aid in convincing the dispensationalist, we must recognize the principle that people tend to avoid things that make them uncomfortable. No one purposefully inflicts discomfort on himself if it can be avoided (masochists being exceptions). As Everett Dirksen said of politicians, "When they feel the heat, they begin to see the light".

Because a **covenantal/postmillennial worldview** is a threat to the evangelical status quo, our position makes evangelical uncomfortable. Recognizing this, we must try to make those we present the issues to as comfortable with us *personally* as possible. A particular dispensationalist may not like your position, but you want him to think you're a great guy. A good personal relationship will allow the second phase of overcoming the knee-jerk reaction to discomfort to take place: desensitization. We cannot make **our position non-threatening** to the dispensationalist – covenantal postmillennialism is a tremendous threat. But what we can do is present our position in such a way that our opponents are desensitized to the threat. Not recognizing the danger a dispensationalist is in, he doesn't multiply the guards and barriers shielding him from considering the merits of our position. By dropping his guard, it gives us a perfect opportunity to convert him!

Please don't misunderstand this point. We are not trying to "trick" anyone! What I am saying is that the development of good personal relationships is *the* most effective way to get those we disagree with to listen to us. This will be impossible to do if we think about it as a "technique" or a "trick." To personally disciple someone requires something much more profound than any technique can offer – it takes genuine Christian love for our brothers and sisters. With St. Paul we must say, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well . . ." (1 Thess. 2:8).

To paraphrase it for our purposes, we must learn not only to share our postmillennial/covenantal worldview, but our lives as well. We must demonstrate our love *for* dispensationalists before they will listen *to* us.

Next month, in part two of this essay, we shall consider three other key ingredients.

5. Poythress, *Understanding*, 58.

3. Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 19.

4. Daniel Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," (Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, 1957), 92-93. Quoted in Poythress, *Understanding*, 19.