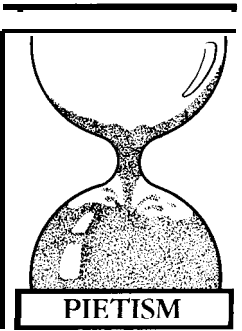


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# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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ROSH-HASH-ANA 1988

by Michael R. Gilstrap

*1988 is the rapture of the Church. This is what the prophets have been talking about for the last 3,400 years. There will be three raptures . . . three judgments . . . three nuclear world wars . . . and 5.7 billion people will either die or be raptured in the next seven years. But you brethren, talking to the faithful, are not in darkness that this day, the rapture, should take you by surprise. And we're to encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching. That's right, the Rapture will not be a surprise to the faithful. All the end-time events are now known, and the dates have been assigned, except the day and hour of your Rapture!"<sup>1</sup>*

—Edgar C. Whisenant

I converted to postmillennialism in college. Because I was attending a premillennial, dispensational Bible college, that wasn't a very popular decision. It wasn't long before I talked several of my friends into crossing the line with me. Being young and argumentative, we never tired of dialoging with premils. One of our favorite subjects was the rapture. Our favorite line of argumentation revolved around Matthew 24:32ff. There Jesus says, "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. . . No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

We would begin by getting our opponent to admit that the generation of the fig tree started in May 1948 with the establishment of Israel. Then, we inferred that the rapture should take place in 1981 (1948 plus 40 years less 7 years tribulation) if we were working with a pretribulationist, or that the rapture should take place in 1988 (1948 plus 40 years) if we were working with a posttribulationist. Quite honestly, most of the folks I talked to (including professors) were willing to grant the above premises.

Most, however, were unable to give a satisfactory explanation for the last part of the verses quoted above. When queried whether such precise date-setting violated Jesus statement in v. 36, "No one knows the day or the hour," most often we were stonewalled (by students) or branded troublemakers (by faculty). No one had an answer.

Enter Edgar C. Whisenant: prophecy buff extraordinaire and former rocket scientist. His books *The Rapture-Rosh Hash Ana 1988:88 Reasons for Rapture in 1988* and *On Borrowed Time: The Bible Dates of the 70th Week of Daniel, Armageddon, and the Millennium* have made quite a splash in conservative, evangelical circles. Both books,

along with a cassette tape of 10 pre-recorded radio broadcasts, went far and wide under the banner of the World Bible Society of Nashville, Tennessee.

Whisenant's basic premise is that the generation of the Fig Tree ends in 1988. The rapture must, therefore, occur this year. In response to an objection citing Matthew 24:36, he writes,

It is evident that, in the minds of most Christians today, Matthew 24:36 is believed to prohibit anyone from being able to see the day of our Lord's return approaching. Matthew 24:36 states that "No one knows about the day or the hour. . . ." In looking at this statement in today's world, you can easily see that is impossible to know the exact day and hour of the Lord Jesus' return.

If Jesus arrives at one particular instant of time, there are 24 time zones around the world, and each time zone has multitudes of Christians in it. How are you going to identify that particular instant in each time zone on Earth? Also, there are always two days existing on Earth at the same time; only at the exact second that the Earth passes through the International Date Line does only one day exist on all the earth. At all other times, there are two days existing on Earth at any one moment. So you can see the problem in trying to tell all the Christians covering the Earth at any one instant of time the exact day or hour of our Lord's return.

However, this does not preclude or prevent the faithful from knowing the year, the month, and the week of the Lord's return.<sup>2</sup>

Whisenant doesn't have any problem, therefore, in setting a range of dates. He is totally convinced that this is the time in history when the Rapture *will* take place, the 70th Week of Daniel begins, and the Great Tribulation gets underway.

As a matter of fact, Whisenant believes Bible prophecies have been being fulfilled left and right all along. He writes, "No other time in history — past, present, or future — will fit all the 886 end-time Bible prophecies of the Old and New Testaments perfectly to the very second of time as do the lunar dates of the seven feasts of Israel fit the Bible verses and the 70th week of Daniel years from Day of Atonement 1988 through to the Day of Atonement 1995 to verify that 1988 to 1995 is the 70th week of Daniel."<sup>3</sup>

Whisenant's books are long and involved and horribly difficult to read. The bottom line is that Mr. Whisenant pre-

1. From the introduction to the audio tape, *The Rapture-Rosh Hash Ana 1988: Five 15 minute radio programs*, by Edgar C. Whisenant.

2. Edgar C. Whisenant, *The Rapture Rosh Hash Ana 1988:88 Reasons Why the Rapture is in 1988* (Little Rock, AR: Edgar C. Whisenant, 1988), p. 3.

3. Whisenant, p. 27.

diets in his book that Jesus will come to rapture the Church sometime between sundown September 11 and sundown September 13, that is, during the Jewish festival of Rosh Hash Ana.

Most dispensationalists I've spoken with think Edgar C. Whisenant is a nut. They are embarrassed by his excesses and horrified at the amount of time and money that went into the promotion and distribution of the books. Some dispensationalists, however, were a little reticent to judge Whisenant. The unspoken sentiment seemed to be, "What if he's right?" Since I'm writing this on September 14, at least twelve hours after the rapture showdown, I think it is safe to assume that *all* dispensationalists now think Whisenant at best eccentric, at worst, a nut.

I disagree with these assessments. It's too easy to dismiss Mr. Whisenant as a nut. If you haven't seen his book, then you haven't missed anything. It is the most grotesque piece of publishing art I've seen in a long time. The cover is a stark white with bright red, backdropped letters. Everything is in capitals, including the text of the book. One gets the feeling that Whisenant is screaming at the top of his lungs at you while you read the book.

Whisenant is an eccentric, and an argument may be made for calling him a nut. In my mind, however, Mr. Whisenant is first and foremost a victim. He is a victim of that theological system we know today as dispensationalism. The excesses of his predictions are all inherent in dispensationalism as it has been articulated since the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible.

Unlike Mr. Whisenant, most dispensational writers have shied away from precise predictions, but some have boldly drawn the inferences the system demands. Hal Lindsey, the most popular dispensational writer of all time (almost 22 million copies of *Late, Great Planet Earth* alone), writes:

When the signs just given begin to multiply and increase in scope it's similar to the certainty of leaves coming on the fig tree. But the most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the "fig tree" put forth its first leaves.

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, *this generation* will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34).

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs — chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things [rapture, tribulation, etc. -MRG] could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so."<sup>4</sup>

In another book, Lindsey exclaims,

WE ARE THE GENERATION HE WAS TALKING ABOUT! I say that because, unmistakably, for the first time in history, all the signs are coming together at an accelerating rate.

All these signs, and many more which are just as visible, point to the fact that this generation is the one

that will see the end of the present world and the return of Jesus Christ.

Jesus went on to say, "No one knows the day or the hour" of His return. But he tells us how to "recognize" the generation during which He would come. We won't know the exact day or hour, He said, but we can know the general time.<sup>5</sup>

Edgar C. Whisenant is not a nut he's a victim of decades of teaching that argue that the Church is a parenthesis in history. According to dispensationalists, the Kingdom of God and God's prophetic program were interrupted by the Jews rejection of Jesus the Messiah. The Messianic Kingdom was stalled thereby. Because of the Jews rejection of Christ, the Church age, totally unforeseen by Old Testament prophets, was interjected into history. According to the theory, that age closes with the Rapture of the Church into heaven, followed by the Great Tribulation (7 years), followed by the Second Coming, by which is inaugurated the Millennium and Messianic Kingdom.

Because of the crisis presented by the failure of Jesus to return in 1988, dispensational scholars are rethinking their system. Many are horrified by the deformed directions taken by some of their disciples (Lindsey, Whisenant, et al). Some are even beginning to abandon their rejection of the present reality of the Messianic kingdom. They are beginning to see a connection between the church age and the messianic kingdom. Robert L. Saucy writes:

Without giving up the fulfillment of the promises for the nation of Israel when Christ returns to reign in open glory, this form of dispensationalism agrees with nondispensational premillennialism that it is preferable to interpret this age as the first phase of the fulfillment of the one promised Messianic kingdom. The present age involves the spiritual aspects of the Messianic kingdom, that is, the blessings of the New Covenant (i.e., regeneration, the indwelling Spirit, etc.). The remainder of the -- promises including those concerning Israel and the nations will find their fulfillment following the second advent.<sup>6</sup>

At least some dispensationalists, therefore, are willing to admit that the Kingdom of God, the messianic reign of Christ, is in some sense a present reality. Happily, this opens the door for a great deal of further dialogue on many of the particulars of His reign.

I have argued that Edgar Whisenant is a victim. He is also a victimizer. How many thousands of dear Christians were misled by his intemperance? His book is a pitiful example of pushing dispensationalism to the limits. All Christians should be saddened by the ridicule and defame this work has brought on the cause of Christ in this country. Most news media carried at least some mention of his excesses. We who are non-dispensationalists, however, should not gloat over the embarrassment of our brothers. Rather we should welcome the opportunity to share with any who will listen why we think dispensationalism as a whole is deficient, and why it naturally leads to the prophetic dissipations of Edgar C. Whisenant.

5. Hal Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 162-163.

6. Robert L. Saucy, "Contemporary Dispensational Thought," *Tyndale Student Fellowship Bulletin* (March-April 1984), pp. 6-7.

4. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1970), p. 43.