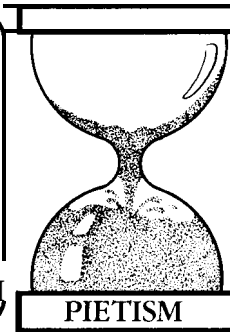


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol 1, No. 12

©ICE, 1988

December, 1988

DISPENSATIONAL RELEVANCE OR THEOLOGICAL SCHIZOPHRENIA?

by Michael R. Gilstrap

We have a saying in East Texas, "If you don't like the weather, wait awhile. it'll change." The same might be said of theology. If today's popular theological menu is not to your liking, be patient. Something will come along sooner or later that will satisfy you. One thing, however, that I never thought that I would see is a self-conscious dispensationalist defending Christian social action.

Much to my surprise and delight, I recently discovered just that, and I found him in the most unlikely of places: *the systematic theology department of Dallas Theological Seminary*, the bastion of dispensationalism.

Dispensational Radical?

I had gone to Dallas Seminary to do some research (they have a *fantastic library!*). While there I scheduled a lunch with H. Wayne House, an associate professor in the department of systematic theology. Dr. House is even more noteworthy, as far as we're concerned, because he is the co-author of *Dominion Theology, Blessing or Curse?* It has been published by Multnomah Press, and will be widely available by the time you read this.

After lunch, he invited me to attend his afternoon systematic theology class. He ushered me to a room of about 20-25 upper level students. As he announced the subject of his lecture, I was literally floored! He was continuing a series of lectures on civil disobedience. He opened his lecture by asserting that Jesus Christ is Lord of all (Phil. 2:11). He said "No institution stands outside the sphere of His lordship, including government." He then spent the bulk of his lecture defending the right of individual Christians to engage in civil disobedience. He used the illustration of the pastors' at Everett Sileven's church in Nebraska refusing to obey the judge's order to close the Church as an example of faithful obedience to God which was at the same time civil disobedience. He then argued that though the situations were different, the Operation Rescue missions, in defiance of law officials, is another example of civil disobedience. In the case of Operation Rescue, Dr. House noted that although *ethics/y* he had no problem with what was happening in Atlanta, he thought the demonstrations unwise at this time.¹

I left the class and my head was spinning. If you had asked me if such "radicalism" would have been taught at Dallas Theological Seminary, I would have replied, "Not in a million years." But I saw it with my own eyes. I

heard it with my own ears. When I left the classroom, I felt like I had been in the studio audience of a segment of *That's Amazing!* Nor is Dr. House simply a cerebral soldier. He leads his students to picket the local abortion chamber every day! He gives them extra credit for the activity. That really is amazing!

The Old Dallas Seminary

Lest you think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill, let me review where Dallas Seminary has been on such issues. Kenneth Kantzer did an interview with Dr. John Walvoord for *Christianity Today* (Feb. 6, 1987). As the second President of Dallas Seminary, he is the man most responsible for building Dallas Seminary into what it is today. In response to Kantzer's question, "For all of you who are not postmils, is it worth your efforts to improve the physical, social, and political situation on earth?", Walvoord said:

The answer is yes and no. We know that our efforts to make society Christianized is futile because the Bible doesn't teach it. On the other hand, the Bible certainly doesn't teach that we should be indifferent to injustice and famine and to all sorts of things that are wrong in our current civilization. Even though we know our efforts aren't going to bring a utopia, we should do what we can to have honest government and moral laws. It's very difficult" from Scripture to advocate massive social improvement efforts, because certainly Paul didn't start any, and neither did Peter. They assumed that civilization as a whole is hopeless and subject to God's judgement.

Now if that's not taking back with the left hand what the right hand just gave, I don't know what is. Walvoord really drops a double whammy on social action. On the one hand, he says that efforts to make society better are futile, and on the other he admits that the posture of the Apostles was most certainly an assumption that civilization as a whole is helpless and subject to God's judgment.

One may conclude, therefore, that in days past, Dallas Theological Seminary's official position has been at best to ignore Christian Social Action. After all, if the president of the school doesn't speak for the institution, then who does? But that doesn't seem to be the position today.

A Call to Activism

Dr. House's class might be labeled *Systematic Theology 407* in the DTS catalog, but it could just as well be called "A Call to Christian Activism." In a section from his syllabus titled, "What in the World is the Church Supposed to be Doing?", Dr. House begins by listing several arguments used by Christians for non-involvement in society

1. Dr. House believes that a Bush election will probably mean that Roe v. Wade will be overturned during Bush's administration. In the event of Dukakis' election, however, he was quick to point out that unhappy event would set the prolife movement back 30 years. At that point, then, it would be important to roll out the Rescue wagon.

and politics. The first listed is the “don’t polish the brass on a sinking ship” argument. That is, any attempts by Christians at temporal change are futile in view of the downspiral of corruption in the world in anticipation of the Lord’s soon coming. Another is “that time and energy in social action takes away from the more important task of preaching the gospel.” A third argument asserts that “social concern puts the Christian or Church in a compromising position with the world, or involvement with politics is contrary to the Christian life since the state is controlled by Satan.” Finally, Dr. House points out that “some advocate individual Christian involvement with society or even in politics but deny that the corporate body of Christians should ever speak on controversial questions.”

Dr. House responds to these arguments with a very broad brush. He charges such arguments with dualism, eschatological Gnosticism, and practical deism. Here’s what he has to say in his own words:

Without question the efforts that we make in changing the world in which we live and the attempts to correct wrongs and promote justice may seem pale in the light of some loftier eternal standard but I believe there is cohesiveness in the Christian worldview to be so involved. *It appears to me that the attempt to dichotomize the Christian existence into the now and the later is an unacceptable dualism and is in many respects an eschatological Gnosticism in which the later is real and important; the now is trivial and mundane.* Moreover, *it is the establishment of a practical Deism* (emphasis mine).

The type of view that compartmentalizes time so that certain works are “spiritual” and others mundane have [sic] established a difficult task for themselves. Clearly the preaching of the gospel is a major task for each Christian but *all of life is God’s work.*

The view that society is evil and politics is dirty has many shortcomings. Ail that touches humanity (but for the incarnation) suffers from the malady of sin. Sure, reaching out to the poor and wretched in society is not glamorous work but it emulates our Lord. It is as significant to minister a loaf of bread with a word of hope in Christ as to preach in the largest church. To stand to speak righteousness in the political world is reminiscent of John the Baptist’s criticism of Antipas’ adulterous affair or our Lord’s chiding of him as the “fox.” To be a Christian may require getting dirty. But if we seek to escape such we would need to abandon home and church, for sin dwells there too. *God has established all three and they are all our concern.*

Those are awfully strong words! “Eschatological gnosticism” is something I would expect from Gary North, but Professor Wayne House of DTS? Never!

Dr. House doesn’t stop there. In a section subtitled “A Biblical Basis of Christian Involvement in Society,” he uses the example of Jesus to argue for the social involvement of Christians. He says that Jesus was a man who was part of His world, and we must be careful not to view the Lord in a “gnostic manner,” that is, “in some mystical, ‘spiritual’ way, unattached to His earthly existence. Nor should we restrict His concerns for His immediate world – Judea – by making Him an apocalyptic Christ looking only for the establishment of His future kingdom.” In other words, what Dr. House is correctly pointing out is that we are to imitate Christ, and Christ was intimately involved in all aspects of the world in which He lived, and we should be too. He isn’t the “apocalyptic Christ” of some modern relig-

ious fiction (e.g., Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*). Rather, Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Dr. House also directly addresses the objection of Walvoord’s appeal to Peter and Paul’s apparent silence regarding social action. He writes:

I think too much has been made of this absence. I seriously believe that if Paul were with us today in a democratic country like America, he would have no hesitation in being active in society. He would urge Christians not only to pray for the king but to vote for or against the “king.” He would admonish leaders to follow the proper dictates of government as he gave them to the Romans (Rom. 13:1-4). He would exercise all the rights afforded him as an American to abolish social evils and to provide a political setting in which he could preach the gospel of Jesus Christ unfettered. The actions of Paul in the Acts and his letters indicate as much, and the actions of Jesus in Judea, whom Paul followed leave little doubt as to how he would act today.

Finally, I want to point out Dr. House’s understanding of the role of Satan in government. In his Systematic Theology 407 syllabus, unit four titled “Christians and the State,” he has a short section on the role of Satan. He writes:

Though I do not question that Satan influences unregenerate political leaders and societies, I do deny that the devil has authority apart from that specifically allowed to him by God. God allows Satan to exert authority only as far as it furthers His plans. Our God does not tremble on His heavenly throne, wringing His “hands” and worrying about what Satan will do next. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who controls the events and course of history,

Since Satan does influence ungodly men and nations, Christian communities should seek to become a leavening, countervailing influence in government and society. For the Christian, there can be no dividing line between “sacred” and “secular.” **Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Christians should proclaim this true and live in light of it.**

Conclusion

You can see why my head was spinning when I left Dr. House’s class. Instead of the “eschatology of defeat” I had expected, I heard optimistic hope. I fully expected to hear the familiar refrain of that old evangelical hymn “The Last Chapter” – *In time, in history, on earth, the Christians lose.* Or perhaps the chorus from another favorite, “The Anti-Christ is Coming!” – *The world is getting worse and worse – Anti-Christ is coming! The devil is running the world – Anti-Christ is coming! Quick, grab the brand from the burning – Anti-Christ is coming!*

Instead I found a godly, intelligent, Christian activist leading several classes full of future pastors, teachers, and missionaries to a more virile expression of the Christian faith.

The one thing that puzzled me as I drove away from the campus, however, was the question in the back of my mind about how long Dr. House could maintain his own dichotomy between his commitment to dispensationalism (as seen in his authoring *Dominion Theology, Blessing or Curse?*) and his commitment to long-term, meaningful, Christian activism. There seems to be just a tad of theological schizophrenia in this attempt to make dispensationalism relevant. My prayer is that his shift in practical eschatology will one day show up as a shift to a self-conscious vision of victory.