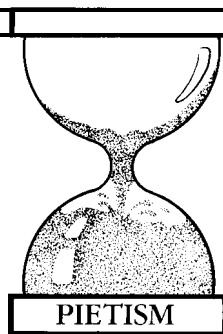


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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DISPENSATIONALISM'S ACHILLES' HEEL PART ONE

by Michael R. Gilstrap

William Everett Bell is a name that is probably unfamiliar to the vast majority of my readers. He has no published works to speak of. Doesn't have a TV ministry, and to my knowledge has never appeared on any of the major Christian talk shows. As a professor of religion at Dallas Baptist University, he doesn't have a particularly glamorous appointment. (DBU is a small, conservative, Southern Baptist school, meagerly existing in the ubiquitous shadow of Baylor University.) In terms of impacting the evangelical community at large, and from all outward appearances, Dr. Bell is simply one more insignificant and mediocre Christian college professor. Professors like Bell are a dime a dozen. Christian college faculties are glutted with this stereotypical Christian college professor.

Dr. Bell is, however, an anomaly. Unlike the average Christian college professor, his influence has been extensive and profound, particularly in the Southwest, and especially in the evangelical community surrounding Dallas Theological Seminary. In light of the fact that he hasn't ever published anything of consequence, this is even more surprising.

After completing his undergraduate work, Dr. Bell started his career as an accountant. It wasn't too many years later that he felt the call of God into a more uniquely Christian vocation. To prepare for it, he enrolled at Dallas Theological Seminary. Presumably, while at DTS, he decided he wanted to teach at a college, university, or seminary. His plan was to continue at DTS after earning the Masters in Theology to get a doctorate in theology.

He did not, however, anticipate the theological shift he underwent while at DTS. As he studied the distinctive of dispensationalism, he found them to be increasingly at odds with the Scriptures. A man with exceptional analytic abilities, he was unwilling to accept the conclusions of his professors without investigation. The more he investigated, the more he found the system lacking. Finally, he shed the shackles of dispensationalism, and plunged headlong into the historic premillennialism expounded by George Ladd. Although he did not reject premillennialism outright, he did reject what is the *sine qua non* of dispensational theology: the pretribulation rapture.¹

This theological transformation was deadly to his ca-

reer at DTS. Recognizing the impossibility of getting a doctorate in theology from DTS with his current views,² he moved to New York. where he matriculated into New York University, earning a Ph.D. from New York University in 1967.

Dr. Bell's doctoral dissertation is titled "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology."³ Like most dissertations, it was never commercially published. Unlike most dissertations, it is not simply an academic exercise that barely advances scholarly discussion. This dissertation was one of the first hand grenades thrown into the DTS dispensational stronghold. Because he wrote as an "insider," his work was profoundly disturbing to the Dallas faculty.

One story which circulated at DBU while I was there involved Charles Ryrie, the famed professor of systematic theology. Apparently, not long after the dissertation was completed, the DTS faculty was discussing this latest broadside by one of its graduates. It is said that Ryrie stood up on the floor of the faculty meeting and called Dr. Bell *the number one enemy of dispensationalism*. I realize that the story may be more myth than reality (but it *does* make a good story!). Nevertheless, the sentiment was there. *That* is undoubtedly *not* a myth. For dispensationalism, Bell's dissertation critiquing their theological movement was the hardest hitting, most accurate, and most difficult to answer ever to be written.

As a graduate of Dallas Baptist University, I was privileged to study under Dr. Bell, and in fact, he is the main reason I attended DBU in the first place. I am very pleased to be able to introduce to you, through this newsletter, his argumentation in criticizing dispensationalism. Although written over 20 years ago, it is still, in my opinion, the best piece of work done in analyzing dispensationalism and its *sine qua non*, the pretribulation rapture.

Bell's Thesis

What makes this dissertation so profoundly devastating to dispensationalism is that for the first time, an author went directly to the core of the dispensational system: the distinction between Israel and the Church. Bell recognized that all other previous criticisms were off the mark because they did not zero in on this distinction. In commenting on

1. Contemporary dispensationalists wish to dispute the assertion that the pretribulation rapture is the hinge pin of their whole system. This assertion is without substance because without a pretribulation rapture, one has no way of maintaining the radical distinction between Israel and the Church.

J. Dwight Pentecost clearly understood this when he wrote that a denial of pretribulationism is a denial of dispensationalism (J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., [1958] 1964), p. 164).

2. Dallas Theological Seminary in the past was known for denying doctorates to worthy candidates because of an inability to sign a statement of faith which included belief in premillennialism and the pretribulation rapture theory.

3. William Everett Bell, *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (School of Education of New York University, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1967).

the merits of George Ladd's, *The Blessed Hope*, Bell notes that it, like so many of its contemporaries, suffered "from the drawback of dealing primarily with symptoms rather than basic causes."⁴ He goes on to point out that Ladd "fails to penetrate to the root of pretribulationism, i.e., the dichotomy between Israel and the New Testament church and thus leaves modern pretribulationists confident that their foundations are still secure."⁵

Bell doesn't make the same mistake. The entire dissertation is devoted to proving that the dichotomy between Israel and the Church as presented by dispensationalism is a false dichotomy. Dispensationalism argues that "the Christian church of this dispensation constitutes a unique group of believers, separate and distinct from believers of past and future dispensations. Instead of inheriting the promises of ancient Israel, the church was conceived of as having an entirely new and distinct set of promises of its own. Israel's promises would be fulfilled literally to real ethnic Israelites in the coming millennium. The church was viewed as a parenthesis in God's dealings with Israel."⁶ Dr. Bell's argumentation is devastating to the dispensationalism system. He rightly understood that if this plank fell, dispensationalism would fall. The distinction between Israel and the Church is dispensationalism's Achilles' Heel. In my opinion, dispensationalism as a theological movement has fallen. It is now in the process of passing off the scene.⁷ This dissertation has had a great deal to do with facilitating that process.

Bell's Arguments from Scripture

Bell's argumentation includes historical and logical arguments, but we haven't space to include those. Our main concern is with his arguments from Scripture because it is there that the rubber meets the road. We won't even have time to cover all his scriptural arguments, but we will deal with some of the most compelling.

1. The "Better Things" of Hebrews 11:39-40. The writer to the Hebrews says, "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us" (Heb. 11:39-40 NKJV). Bell notes that "this passage appears to teach that the Old Testament believers were included in the "better things" provided for New Testament believers."⁸ He quotes Delitzsch who writes, "The saints, then, of the Old Testament march henceforth at equal pace with ourselves in the perfect way of salvation now finally made known."⁹ F. F. Bruce is also approvingly quoted, "The 'better plan' which God had made embraces the better hope, the better prom-

ises, the better covenant, the better sacrifices, the better and abiding possession, and the better resurrection which is their heritage, and ours."¹⁰

By contrast, Bell quotes a passage from J. N. Darby's *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (V, 336) as representative of dispensationalism's understanding of the passage:

The Spirit does not here develop the entire context of this "better thing," because the assembly is not His subject. He presents the general thought to the Hebrews to encourage them, that believers of the present day have special privileges, which they enjoy by faith, but which did not belong even to the faith of believers in former days.¹¹

Bell immediately gets to the heart of the matter. "That which the writer obviously wished to regard as now common to Old and New Testament believers, Darby insists on denying to Old Testament believers."¹²

Bell argues that because the writer to the Hebrews includes Old Testament believers in the "better things" provided for New Testament believers, dispensationalism's insistence on the radical dichotomy between Old and New Testament believers is false.

2. Inhabitants of the New Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ. I have already dealt with the passage at the heart of this line of argumentation in a previous issue of *Dispensationalism in Transition*,¹³ so I will only briefly rehearse Dr. Bell's argumentation.

He first points out that Revelation 21:9-14 presents a picture of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city. It is clear from the passage that this city is to be the eternal home of the saints of all ages. The city is referred to in v. 9 as "the bride, the Lamb's wife." The inhabitants of the city include both Old and New Testament saints. St. John writes of seeing twelve high gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on them. He sees twelve foundations on which are written the names of the twelve apostles.

Because the Church is often referred to in the New Testament as "the Bride of Christ," it follows therefore, that Old and New Testament saints make up the Church, the Bride of Christ. He shows once again from the pages of Scripture that the distinction between Old and New Testament saints as promulgated by dispensationalism is in error.

Because of the importance of these arguments to our critique of dispensationalism, and due to the unavailability of Dr. Bell's dissertation to the general public, I will continue reviewing his argumentation in the next issue of *Dispensationalism in Transition*.

4. Bell, P. 17.

5. Bell, p. 17.

6. Bell, p. 90.

7. I deal with this notion of dispensationalism's passing in detail in my forthcoming book, *Dispensationalism Yesterday*.

8. Bell, p. 96.

9. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 11, pp. 293-294. Quoted in Bell, p. 97.

10. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 343-44. Quoted in Bell, pp. 97-98.

11. Bell, p. 98.

12. Bell, p. 98.

13. Michael R. Gilstrap, "The Bride the Lambs Wife," *Dispensationalism in Transition*, Vol. 2, No. 1.