

# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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## DISPENSATIONAL SOCIAL THEORY

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Recent dispensationalist objections to Reconstructionist thought have highlighted a fundamental difference of approach between the two systems regarding a world and life view. This is particularly evident in socio-political issues.

Dispensationalism, which has dominated in conservative Christian circles in the last seventy-five years, lacks a coherent social theology. This lack is traceable to two basic dispensational factors:

(1) The "imminence" doctrine of the rapture. As Hal Lindsey put it: "We should be living like persons who don't expect to be around much longer."<sup>1</sup> As a theological maxim this undermines any long view of historical progress,<sup>2</sup> thereby reducing Christian involvement in cultural change.

(2) The rejection of Mosaic Law as a vital part of the Christian ethic, which rejection removes a large portion of relevant divine revelation from consideration. Noted dispensationalist author Donald Grey Barnhouse complained: "It was a tragic hour when the Reformation churches wrote the Ten Commandments into their creeds."<sup>3</sup>

By way of illustration of the problem with their approach to socio-political issues, I will list a few statements by dispensationalists that highlight a wrong methodology, a methodology that is intrinsically non-Christian. That problem is the tendency to let God's Word take a back seat when considering socio-political issues (Matt. 15:3). Often it seems that dispensationalists are content to function in terms of the general American status quo when dealing with cultural issues. Whereas the Reconstructionist is concerned to promote godly cultural transformation by turning to Scripture for direction.

The last quotation I will cite is the one upon which I will focus my attention, but the others illustrate the nature of the problem. Notice how these quotations leave the impression that Scripture is secondary to secular viewpoints and legal documents.

### Dispensationalists Today

*House and Ice*: "[A] serious reading of Reconstructionism raises monumental doubts about the compatibility of its

vision with the guarantees of liberty found in the Constitution. . . The first ten amendments would appear to face the quickest overhaul."<sup>4</sup>

*Geisler*: "Premillennialist don't need to achieve legally sanctioned superiority for Christianity, but equality before the law for all religions. The premillennial position therefore fits well with the First Amendment, which forbids the state's establishing (or preferring) one religion over another"<sup>5</sup>

*/cc*: "Premillennialists have always been involved in the present world. And basically, they have picked up on the ethical positions of their contemporaries."<sup>6</sup>

*Hunt*: "If [the Church] fails to deal in depth with social and political concerns that are dear to the hearts of readers, then at least the same complaint will have to be made against Christ Himself. When all is said and done, however, even Colson — in spite of an excellent discussion of the issues — is short on real answers. And so he should be if he is to be true to the Word of God in dealing with difficult issues upon which it makes no definitive pronouncements."<sup>7</sup>

And now the question, from Dr. Wayne House, to which my attention will be especially directed: "In light of the Reconstructionist endorsement of the First Amendment, isn't there a fundamental problem with application of the first four commandments of God's Law? If Reconstructionists converted 60% of the nation would not the First Amendment have to be thrown out, when the first four commandments were implemented?"<sup>8</sup>

### The Bill of Rights Issue

In response to this question perhaps the following will outline the nature of the Reconstructionist view and illustrate the dispensationalist failure in even posing the question.

First, for Reconstructionists the socio-political concern is fundamentally ethical, not legal. We desire that government be operated in terms of true justice and godly morality. For us the issue must be determined in the light of Scripture, for "shall not the judge of all the earth do right" (Gen. 18:25)? The civil ruler is prescriptively to be "a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil" (Rom. 13:4).

In debate, dispensationalists often turn to the Constitution for their source of right and wrong. But the First Amend-

1. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 145. See also: Dave Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1988), pp. 8-9.

2. It is an interesting anomaly of dispensationalism that, while it insists upon an imminent rapture since Christ's ascension, at the same time many dispensationalists understand the letters to the seven churches in Revelation to be outlining a long view of history, even up to our era! See: Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973), pp. 38ff.; C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1945), pp. 1331-2; E. Schuyler English, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 1353; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), p. 52; Charles C. R. Yrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), pp. 21 ff.

3. Cited in S. Lewis Johnson, "The Paralysis of Legalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 120 (April/June, 1963), p. 109.

4. H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), p. 77.

5. Norm Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," *Moody Monthly* (October, 1965), p. 130. In this article his second major point is: "2. The belief in religious pluralism."

6. Stated by Tommy Ice, April 14, 1968, in his and Dave Hunt's debate with Gary North and Gary DeMar.

7. Dave Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?*, pp. 85-86.

8. Wayne House, question from the audience at a meeting on July 20, 1969, in Dallas, Texas. Unfortunately, the quote is not exact, but drawn from my memory.

ment is not a first priority question in the debate. The Constitution deals with procedural law, not fundamental law. It *structures* our civil order; it does not *create* its ethic. So it is argumentatively wrong to put such a question as this as a fundamental question.<sup>9</sup>

*Second, Reconstructionists* point out that all law is by the very nature of the case an imposition of morality. And that morality must be rooted in ideas about ultimacy and value, if it is to avoid arbitrariness and relativity. And ultimacy and value are intrinsically religious concepts. Consequently, a law system will necessarily be religious in fundamental nature. Thus, the question arises: From *Which* religion will it draw its meaning? The Reconstructionist is confident that God's Law (in both Testaments, 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Matt. 4:4; John 17:17) is adequate to form a moral base for a civil law order. God's Law is "holy, just, and good" (Rem. 7:12), is designed to restrain evil men in a righteous way (1 Tim. 1:8) by punishing criminal infractions in a just manner (Heb. 2:2) — as all men should know (Rem. 1:32).

*Third*, in light of the resistance to codifying the first four commandments, I would like to ask: Ought there to be laws prohibiting Satan worship (as per the First and Second Commandments)? After all, Satanism is a religion. Should Christians stand up for the legal right of Satanists, as Geisler's quote above would encourage? Ought there to be civil laws against public blasphemy of God's name (as per the Third Commandment)? There are, after all, contemporary laws against defamation of character and slander regarding human relationships.<sup>10</sup> Ought there to be Sunday closing laws (as per the Fourth Commandment)?

*Fourth*, as dispensationalists well know,<sup>11</sup> we do not deem the First Amendment *necessarily* to be antithetical to the first four commandments, *when the origins/ intent of both the First Amendment and the first four commandments is understood*. Historically, there were, for example, laws prohibiting blasphemy,<sup>12</sup> witchcraft, and the opening of non-essential businesses on Sunday<sup>13</sup> in the very colonies which adopted the First Amendment. That being so, how can the First Amendment necessarily be antithetical to First Table law?

*Fifth*, the whole idea behind the First Amendment must be grasped in order to understand the matter aright. Does House endorse the Supreme Court's *reinterpretation* of the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment, that has oc-

curred largely since the War Between the States? Or would he be more comfortable with its true *historical* meaning?

Actually, the First Amendment originally had no effect on the laws in individual states, such as anti-witchcraft, Sunday-closing, and blasphemy laws. In fact, the Supreme Court originally held that the Bill of Rights was *not* binding upon the state legislatures (*Barron v. Baltimore* [1833]). It was not until *Gitlow v. New York* (1925) that this was changed.

The First Amendment was a prohibition on Congress designed to prevent an established *national* Church. One interesting reason for this was due to the fact that most of the colonies had *their own* established churches (a practice we do not endorse). Even liberal Justice Hugo Black has admitted: "Indeed, as late as the time of the Revolutionary War, there were established churches in at least eight of the thirteen former colonies and established religions in at least four of the other five."<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the "religion" protected in the First Amendment was "Christianity," not Mohammedism, Shintoism, or any non-Christian religion. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story (served 1811-1845) noted in his authoritative work: "Probably at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, and of the first amendment to it, the general if not the universal sentiment in America was, that Christianity ought to receive encouragement from the state so far as was not incompatible with the private rights of conscience and the freedom of religious worship. An attempt to level all religions, and to make it a matter of state policy to hold all in utter indifference, would have created universal disapprobation, if not universal indignation. The real object of the amendment was not to countenance, much less to advance, Mahometanism [sic], or Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity; but to exclude all rivalry among Christian sects, and to prevent any national ecclesiastical establishment which should give to a hierarchy the exclusive patronage of the national government."<sup>15</sup>

Sidney Ahlstrom, in his noted work, has commented: "With the ratification of the federal Constitution (1787) and its first ten amendments (1791), the full range of Protestantism possessed liberties enjoyed nowhere else in the world. Roman Catholics suffered legal disabilities of various sorts, but in no other thoroughly Protestant land were they so free."<sup>16</sup> The states that adopted the Bill of Rights distinguished even between Protestantism and Catholicism, how much more between Christianity and pagan religions.

## Conclusion

The dispensational approach to socio-political issues is basically non-Christian. The Christian approach to culture should be analysis by reference to God's Word, not by Geisler's "natural law" or House and Ice's "wisdom approach." Nature is fallen; natural law bows to the arbitrary assertions of sinful man. The "wisdom approach" to determining which Old Testament laws we should follow<sup>17</sup> was the approach of Eve in Eden. She thought she would "be wise if she chose whether or not to obey God's word (Gen. 3:6). But true wisdom is found in submission to God's Law (Deut. 4:6; Psalms 19:7; 119:98; Proverbs 28:7; Jeremiah 8:8).

9. This was House's *only* question at the Dallas meeting. It occurs early in House and Ice's, *Dominion Theology* (Ch. 4). It is Geisler's second concern in his article (see above, note 5).

10. The recent uproar over the Supreme Court's allowing flag burning has been quite interesting. I have noted dispensational Christians lamenting the decision, even though they could not endorse any legislation rooted in the first four of God's Ten Commandments, one of which involves blaspheming the holy name of God! This is a disturbing "country first" patriotism.

11. "The Bill of Rights is often applauded by theonomists, such as Gary DeMar." House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, p. 77.

12. James Kent, *People v. Ruggles* (an 1811 appeal from a New York lower court), is interesting evidence in this regard. Kent upheld a stiff fine against Ruggles for blaspheming the Trinity. Kent cited William Blackstone's statement that public blasphemy was an offence at common law. He noted that "the people of this State, in common with the people of this country, profess the general doctrines of Christianity" and to publicly "scandalize the author of these doctrines, is a gross violation of decency and good order." Cited in Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966), pp. 123-124.

13. In fact, the Constitution gave the President Sunday off from consideration of bills from Congress (1:7). Sunday closing laws were not dismantled in South Carolina until 1987.

14. *Engle v. Vitale*, 370 U. S. 421, 427-28 (1962).

15. Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, 2:593, 595.

16. Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1975), 1:460.

17. House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, pp. 186-187