

Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

SCOFIELDISM

PIETISM

Vol. II, No. 11

©ICE, 1989

November, 1989

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

(PART ONE)

A Review of Dave Hunt's, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?*

by **Kenneth L Gentry, Jr., Th.D.**

Just When You Thought It Safe to Go Back to the Bookstore

We again review a current dispensationalist book assailing Reconstructionist thought. Due to Dave Hunt's sales record, this book may get a broad hearing. Consequently, our readers should at least be aware of it. We must always be aware of what Christians are reading and thinking, for "ideas have consequences."

I had the opportunity to meet with Dave Hunt in Dallas, Texas, this past July. He is evidently a concerned Christian, who is disturbed by anything detrimental to orthodox Christianity, as am I. Unfortunately, and with all due respect, I do not believe he understands properly *either* Reconstructionist thought *or* the Scriptures in dispute.¹ Such misunderstanding is epidemic in evangelicalism.²

Hunt's work is so error-laden, we should begin by noting a few samples of Hunt's

Argumentation Errors

First, *he is prone to careless statements*. For example: "That there is a spirit world. has always been the conviction of all mankind" (p. 13). "All mankind?" What about atheists, such as those mentioned on page 19?

"No one (not even Christ in the Garden) looks forward to death" (p. 60). "No one?" But in Philippians 1 was not Paul "in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart [i.e., die, v. 21], and to be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil 1:23)? Also Christ's situation was different: He was facing God's wrath!

"In the days of the apostles there was no central authority that held sway over the church and upon which rioters could exert pressure. . . . None of the New Testament epistles is written as though it came from a bishop or pope who had to be obeyed under threat of excommunication. ." (p. 125). Did the apostles lack obligatory authority (1 Cor. 5:3-5; 14:37)? Were they not a "central authority" for the church (Eph. 2:19ff)? Did not Herod think that killing James and imprisoning Peter would "exert pressure" on the Church, to the delight of the Jews (Acts 12:1-3)?

Second, *he uses boomerang arguments*. Of our desire to see the restructuring of culture upon Christian principles, he writes: "When confronted with an alleged key doctrine that men and women of God have failed to uncover from Scripture in 1900 years of church history, we have good rea-

son to be more than a little cautious. It takes a certain arrogance to claim to have discovered a vital teaching that the entire church has overlooked for 1900 years" (p. 224).

Historically, this assertion regarding reconstruction is simply false: What of the Puritan efforts in the 1600s? Or of Calvin's in the 1500s, which are mentioned (and distorted) by Hunt (Ch. 8)? Hunt himself even writes: "like many today, Eusebius believed that Christianity's conquest of the world was inevitable" (p. 112). And Eusebius lived A.D. 260-340!

But his statement is a self-vitiating argument for a pretribulationist (as he is, p. 241). Dispensationalist Alan Patrick Boyd has admitted: "Dispensational premillennialism is the product of the post-Reformation progress of dogma."³ Even House and Ice admit: "By the 1830s J. N. Darby began teaching that the time of the Rapture would be pretribulationist."⁴ And the *entire* premise of Hunt's book is that of pretribulationism, a doctrine discovered in 1830!

Third, *he is prone to faulty historical statements*. Of Nero's persecution, which began in A.D. 64, Hunt argues that "one of the few eyewitness historians of that day was Tacitus" (p. 100). He apparently is not aware of Tacitus' dates, for Tacitus was only nine years old at the time of the persecution's outbreak, and does not claim to be an "eyewitness."

Hunt alleges: "persecution arose during the reign of Domitian (81-96), a persecution which is described in the writings of Tacitus" (p. 102). But Tacitus *never* mentions such! In fact, this is one reason many scholars doubt a Domitianic persecutions On and on we could go.

Fourth, *Hunt is Arminian and does not understand Calvinism*: "God will not force anyone to go to heaven, for that would not be an act of love" (p. 28).⁶ Calvin "was not willing to allow the same freedom that God clearly allows. Calvin did not believe that man had the power to choose to obey God, to choose to do good. ." (p. 176). While attacking Calvinism⁷ he endorses *Anabaptist* thought, despite their being "far from perfect" in that "some denied the Trinity and were involved in polygamy" (p. 183).

We must move on to other matters!

3. Alan Patrick Boyd, "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)," unpublished master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977, p. 91, n2.

4. H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), p. 422.

5. See: Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), Ch. 17.

6. His example is not a good one. Should we forcefully drag someone who wants to die from a burning building?

7. See Dave Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1988), pp. 172-173, 176, 218, 235-236, 271, 326.

1. He admits to a lack of theological training (p. 69). Nevertheless, Hunt has at least studied Reconstructionist literature, which fact cannot be credited to Lindsey.

2. See for example: Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensation/ Theology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

The Hunt is On

The basic errors Dave Hunt searches out regarding Reconstructionism are two, as he sees them: (1) It takes our minds off heaven (in that it denies the imminence of Christ's coming) and (2) sets them on earth (in that it promotes cultural transformation). In other words, rather than encouraging Christians to "gather at the river" to await the Rapture, it urges them to go into the highways and byways to promote repentance among the nations.

Reconstructionism will cause the Church to succumb "once again to the unbiblical hope that, by exerting godly influence upon, government, society could be transformed" (p. 8). This is a "false dream" that deters Christians from "the possibility that Christ might at any moment take them home to heaven" (p. 8).

I will deal with the imminence issue in this newsletter and the cultural influence issue in next month's. Hunt's dispensational doctrine of imminence provides for him a dispensational doctrine of despair and retreat.

Hunt's Doctrine of Imminence

Hunt is alarmed at the success of Reconstructionism, which is supplanting dispensationalism: "Within the evangelical church today the numbers are dwindling of those who retain in meaningful form the hope of the imminent return of Christ to take them to the mansions of His Father's house before the whole world explodes⁸ in the Great Tribulation judgment and Armageddon" (p. 9).⁹ We only hope this is true!

Where's the Beef?

Certain of his evidences for the imminence¹⁰ of Christ's return are remarkable. With all due respect to our brother, and as we have shown above, confusion reigns supreme in his handling of Scripture. For instance, Acts 1:11 reads: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." Of this verse Hunt writes: "that didn't sound as though it would be very long until He returned. Had not Christ Himself told them, 'Verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come' (Matthew 10:23)" (p. 39). But is that so?

Regarding Acts 1:11: (1) Read the verse for yourself. Does it "sound as though" the Second Coming was near? There is *no* reference to its *time* at all, only to its *fact* and *manner*! (2) Was the Second Coming near at that time? As a matter of fact, almost 2000 years have passed since that statement. Well then, was the angel of God mistaken?

(3) On pages 256-257, Hunt interprets Acts 1:6-7 to refer to the Jewish millennial kingdom to be established at Christ's Second Coming. It is interesting that on his own view of Acts 1:6-7 (which appears just four verses previous to Acts 1:11), Jesus Himself indicated it would be a *long time* before His return to establish His kingdom. To the disciples' inquiry as to whether "now" was the time for the kingdom to be restored to Israel, Jesus responds: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons" (Acts 1:7). Rather than saying,

"Yes, it is near" (as Hunt should expect), Jesus speaks of "times" and "seasons." These terms suggest a long period of times and seasons¹¹ before His Return (as some of His parables do, as well, Matt. 25:5, 14, 19).

Regarding Matthew 10:23: Was Jesus mistaken? Did He mislead His disciples? If this reference is to the *Second Coming*, as Hunt thinks, then it was indisputably wrong! Notice what it says: "'Verily I say unto you, Ye shall *not* have gone over the cities of Israel, *till* the Son of man be come.'" I rather suspect that *Hunt* is wrong, not Jesus.

Confusion in His Imminence Doctrine

What are we to make of this doctrine of imminence? Consider two problems with Hunt's imminence doctrine:

(1) Despite holding to the "imminent" Return of Christ beginning in the first century, Hunt writes: "Moreover, since previous 'dispensations' in human history have occupied similar lengths of time, it hardly seems unreasonable that the church be on earth for 2000 years as well" (p. 39). But if His coming were to be 2000 years in the future (so far!), it was *not* imminent in the first century. In fact, Hunt writes: "While there are many indications that the Lord's return may very well be imminent for us, we now know in retrospect that it was *not* imminent for all those generations of Christians who came before us" (p. 59). What happens to Hunt's understanding of Acts 1:11 and Matthew 10:23?

(2) Hunt informs us that "Christ provided His disciples with numerous 'signs' which would let them know that His coming was near so they would not be taken by surprise" (p. 40). This is not only contrary to historic dispensationalism, which demands a signless Rapture,¹² but undermines Hunt's own peculiar doctrine of imminence, as well. Christ's Coming cannot occur until the signs appear in order to prepare His disciples! And the footnote he provides for this statement points the reader to another of his works, *Peace Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust* (1983), which show these signs are coming to pass *today*, not then.

In light of this, what becomes of his treatment of Titus 2:13? "One does not 'look' for someone who cannot possibly appear for many weeks, much less for many years. Such an expression would only be used concerning someone who might appear at any time" (p. 51). What about the signs we see only today? After all, regarding Christ's coming "we now know in retrospect that it was *not* imminent for all those generations of Christians who came before us" (p. 59).

Conclusion

As with each of the dispensational works critiquing Reconstructionism, Hunt's book is argumentatively flawed and theologically unsound. And as with the other dispensational works, this assault invariably hinges on Darby's new hypothesis of an imminent, pretribulational rapture.

As examples of Christian analytical literature, this work by a best-selling Christian author, along with Lindsey's and House and Ice's, are illustrative of the massive task of educational reconstruction that is necessary to create sound and biblical thinkers from among contemporary Christians.

8. Hal Lindsey has suggested Armageddon could be in the 1980s in his 1980 book entitled: *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*.

9. Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?*, cp. pp. 31, 42, 43, 82, 63, 68, 70, 72, 98.

10. Please note that we are denying the imminence of His Second Coming, not the Second Coming itself, as Lindsey has erroneously suggested (Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* [New York: Bantam, 1989], p. 231).

11. Notice also that (1) He compounds the time expectation by employing two terms and (2) both of the terms are in the plural.

12. "The hope of the return of Christ to take the saints to heaven is presented in John 14 as an imminent hope. There is no teaching of any intervening event. The prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of Christ is not qualified by description of any signs or prerequisite events." John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), pp. 78-79.