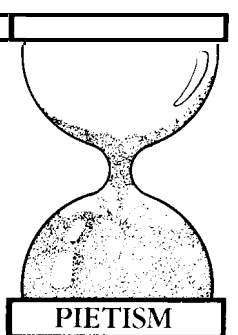


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Tradition Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## DISPENREFORMATIONALISM?

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(Note: If you have any issues or questions you would like to see addressed, please write to me at the I.C.E. address.)

In my traveling about and lecturing on eschatological issues in churches, I am often asked if dispensationalism is antithetical to reformed thought. I have even met a few ostensibly reformed Christians who claim to be both reformed and dispensational. In fact, one noted opponent of Christian Reconstructionism has even claimed to be reformed. Tommy Ice has written: "I agree that the Reformed faith (of which I am in that family) has historically placed a great emphasis, not on biblical law. . . My view [on the law] can be found within the historic Reformed faith as can your view."<sup>1</sup> I must confess that I myself at one time held such an erroneous opinion.

Nevertheless, historically speaking, dispensationalism is clearly antithetical to reformed theology. Unfortunately, many are led to assume because they hold to one or two of the "Five Points of Calvinism," that they are "reformed." The error of such thinking can be shown from a number of angles by comparing noted dispensational writings and the Westminster Standards, the most definitive and classic expression of reformed thought.

Interestingly, just a few days before writing this newsletter I was speaking with a new friend, who is a Bible church pastor here in Greenville, S.C. I learned he claimed to be reformed and that he graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. I asked him if he were a dispensationalist. He said he preferred not to use the label, but admitted that "in some sense" he was dispensational. When I asked him the series of questions below, I discovered anew the validity of the adage "a rose by any other name is still a rose."

### Admitted Systemic Differences

Reformed theology is covenant theology. Leading dispensational authors have properly recognized the systemic differences between the covenantal and dispensational theological systems. For instance, Charles Ryrie has written in rebuttal to covenant theology: "Covenant theology, then, because of the rigidity of its unifying principle of the covenant of grace can never show within its system proper progress of revelation. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, can."<sup>2</sup> L. S. Chafer also pointed out systemic differences: "The theological terms, *Covenant of Works* and *Covenant of Grace*, do not occur in the Sacred Text. If they are to be sustained it must be wholly apart from Biblical authority. . Upon this human invention of two cove-

nants Reformed Theology has largely been constructed."<sup>3</sup>

When I first applied to Grace-Theological Seminary in 1972, I inquired as to its Calvinistic theology. The letter of response read: "It is, of course, rather difficult to categorize a theological system. However, I suppose we would classify ourselves as moderate Calvinists. By moderate we mean that we affirm the security of the believer but at the same time reject the covenant theology which so typifies Calvinistic systems."<sup>4</sup>

Let me illustrate some crucial differences by a series of questions and a catena of quotations from reputable sources on both sides of the issue. Abbreviations for the Westminster Standards will be: WCF (Westminster Confession of Faith), LC (Larger Catechism), and SC (Shorter Catechism).

### 1. Did the Church Exist in the Old Testament?

#### Dispensationalism

"The church as the body of Christ is therefore a new entity, and the term *ecclesia* when used in this sense refers only to saints of the present dispensation. . It did not exist before Pentecost. . The concept of the body is foreign to the Old Testament and to Israel's promises. Something new had begun."<sup>5</sup>

"The nature of the Church is a crucial difference between dispensationalism and other doctrinal viewpoints. Indeed, ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the Church, is the touchstone of dispensationalism."<sup>6</sup> "It is quite evident from what has just been said that the dispensational understanding of the Church limits its building to this present age. It was something unknown in Old Testament times; it is a distinct entity in this present age."<sup>7</sup>

"[D]ispensationalism insists that the people of God who have been baptized into the Body of Christ and who thus form the Church are distinct from saints of other days or even of a future time."<sup>8</sup> "The covenant theologian denies the distinctiveness of the Church to this present age."<sup>9</sup>

#### Reformed Theology

"Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws. ." (WCF 19:3). "The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole

3. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:156.

4. Letter from John J. Davis to Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., November 16, 1972.

5. John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), p. 23.

6. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 132.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

1. Letter from Tommy Ice to Steven F. Hotze (November 28, 1988), p.

2.

2. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 19.

number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one. .“ (WCF 25:1). “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion. .“ (WCF 25:2).

“Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in his revealing to the church in all ages, by his Spirit and word” (LC 43). “The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion” (LC 62).

### 2. Is the Church Prophesied in the Old Testament?

#### *Dispensationalism*

“[T]he Church, though allowed for in the prophecies of old, was not foreseen in the Old Testament; that is, that it is a mystery not revealed until New Testament times.”<sup>10</sup> “The church age is not seen in God’s program for Israel. It is an intercalation. . The Church is a mystery in the sense that it was completely unrevealed in the Old Testament and now revealed in the New Testament.”<sup>11</sup>

“Not only do the Scriptures indicate that the church of the present age is a distinct body of believers, but there is good evidence that the age itself is a parenthesis in the divine program of God as it was revealed in the Old Testament. Generally speaking, however, those who distinguish clearly between the church and Israel have recognized the present age as an unexpected and unpredicted parenthesis as far as Old Testament prophecy is concerned.”<sup>12</sup>

#### *Reformed Theology:*

In the reformed quotations cited in response to Question 1, it is obvious that Reformed theology denies the hiddenness of the New Testament Church age in the Old Testament era. In addition, LC 45 deals with Christ’s “calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers,” which is His Church. In the proof texts appended to the answer, Isaiah 55:4, 5, which is clearly an Old Testament prophecy, is cited. So are Psalm 110:3 and Genesis 49:10. In defining the church “in all ages” in LC 62, the Catechism cites Psalm 2:8; 22:27-31; 45:17; Isaiah 59:21.

### 3. Does the Church Fulfill Prophecies Concerning Israel?

#### *Dispensationalism*

“The Church is not fulfilling in any sense the promises to Israel.”<sup>13</sup> “It is quite obvious that Christians are called the spiritual seed of Abraham, but the New Testament nowhere says that they are the heirs of the national promises made to the physical descendants.”<sup>14</sup>

#### *Reformed Theology*

Again, a consultation of the reformed theology references to questions 1 and 2 above will show the antithetical nature of reformed theology to dispensationalism. In addition, we should note that a number of the references used as proof texts for the visible church are drawn from passages dispensationalists normally apply to racial, national Israel. At WCF 25:4 is cited Psalm 102:28. At LC 62 is cited Psalms 2:8; 22:27; Isaiah 4:5-6; 59:21. At LC 63 proof

texts for the visible church include Psalm 31 :4-5; 115:1-9; and Zechariah 12:2-9.

### 4. Does God Have Two Peoples? Must Israel be Kept Distinct from the Church?

#### *Dispensationalism:*

“What, then is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism? A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct. . The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. . .”<sup>15</sup> “The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the Church.”<sup>16</sup> “[T]he dispensationalist recognizes two purposes of God and insists in maintaining the distinction between Israel and the Church.”<sup>17</sup> “[T]he clear distinction between Israel and the Church. . is a vital part of dispensationalism. All other views bring the Church into Israel’s fulfilled prophecies except dispensationalism.”<sup>18</sup>

#### *Reformed Theology*

“The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ.” (WCF 25:1 ). “God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws” (WCF 19:3). “It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man. . unto whom He did from all eternity give a people, to be His seed. . .“ (WCF 8:1).

“The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as under the law). . .“ (WCF 25:2). “The visible Church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion. .“ (LC 62).

### Conclusion

I first developed this series of questions in a former presbytery, when I became suspect of ordinands who kept entering presbytery while claiming to be premillennial but *not* dispensational. Some of their answers to other theological questions alerted me to the fact that they “knew better” than to claim to be “dispensational” when coming into a Presbyterian presbytery. (Few people have successfully rapped their shoe on the table, while uttering, “We will bury you” and remained in the organization.) Each time they were received I moaned, “There goes the neighborhood.” So these questions became helpful sorting devices to keep out the riff-raff.

It may sometimes be better for public relations to avoid certain labels, but the truth of the matter is: It is the content of dispensationalism that makes one a dispensationalist, not the label. Although under presbytery examination some men, when confronted whether they knew this Scofield, began to curse and swear saying, “I know not the man.” Yet, not only did I happen to hear the cock crow each time they answered, but I perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, and I marvelled; and too! knowledge of them, that they had been with Scofield.

10. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ, Louizeaux Bros., 1953), pp. 130-131.

11 *Ibid* , p. 136.

12. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 24.

13. R yrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 136,

14. R yrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 149

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45

16. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 159.