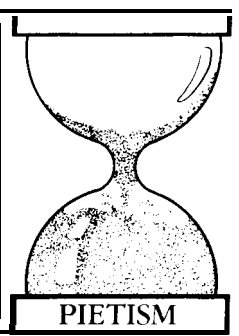


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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FIRST, THE HEAD GOES SOFT

by Gary North

I wrote the first two issues of *Dispensationalism in Transition*, beginning in January of 1988. I started this newsletter because I knew that 1988 was the year in which the dispensationally defined "Rapture" could not be delayed again if the movement was to **retain** the emotional commitment of its laymen, especially its brightest younger members, who are my selected targets. Dispensationalism's leaders had for almost four decades "bet the farm" on the state of Israel, which came into being in May of 1948. One generation after 1948, the pulp paperback theologians had repeatedly promised, the Rapture would surely take place. In fact, it was originally scheduled for 1981: 1948+40 - 7 (the seven-year tribulation period). A lot of dispensational prophets had assured their followers in 1980 or earlier that 1981 would be "the year." They bet wrong. There was one last chance: 1988.

Betting on the fact that the Rapture would not take place in 1988 - an exceedingly safe bet, theologically speaking - I started publishing this newsletter. I had an agenda in mind (as I usually do): **to challenge the leaders of the dispensational movement to engage in open theological combat**, something they had steadfastly refused to do since the mid-1960's. Furthermore, they had decided decades earlier to focus all their efforts on refuting other premillennialists and the amillennialists. They had written repeatedly that "postmillennialism is dead," and so had completely ignored the rise of the newer postmillennialism of the Christian Reconstruction movement. They had, in effect, built themselves a theological Maginot Line, with all its guns trained on rival "pessimillennialists." I knew enough about tactics to plan a Blitzkrieg around that line.

The Date-Setting Addiction

Little did I suspect that dispensationalism's "last hurrah" would begin that very spring, when Edgar C. Whisenant published his "two-books-in-one" paperback book, both of which appeared under several different titles, on 88 reasons why the Rapture would surely take place that September. Millions of copies were printed and distributed. Just about every dispensational church in America had members who were getting ready for the Great Escape. Everything was to be put on hold.

Predictably, nothing happened. "Wait," said Whisenant, "I forgot about the B.C. to A.D. shift. I lost a year. I should have said 1989." No; he should have said nothing. But he had said enough. The egg on the dispensational movement's collective face would stick for a long time. Or so I thought.

But wait! There has been yet another reprieve. Pat Robertson's recent newsletter identifies Israel's 1967 Six-Day War as the first time that Jerusalem was fully liberated from Gentile control, as prophesied in Luke 21:24. "The Six-Day War gave the Jews control over Jerusalem in June of 1967. That event started the cosmic clock tick-

ing. The length of a generation in the Bible is 40 years. Ten is the biblical number of completion. Forty years from 1967 is 2007."

But that's not all. America was founded in 1607 at Jamestown. Now, if you take 40 (the number of years in a generation) and multiply it by ten (the number of completion), you get 400 years. "The end of the 'generation' of Gentile decline coincides with 10 'generations' of America . . . the 'completion' in biblical numerology of the most powerful Gentile nation the world has ever known. Just 17 years from now." (*Pat Robertson's Perspective* [May-June, 1990], p. 5.)

This was enough to get me thinking. Let's see, if Bishop Ussher's chronology is correct, and the world was created in 4004 B. C., then 1996 will be the world's 6,000th birthday. Also, one day to the Lord is as a thousand years. Plus, only six days shall we labor. So, what is scheduled for 1996? It's obvious: a Presidential election in America. Now, if Pat could be elected President in '96, and again in the year 2000 (THE YEAR 2000!!!), he would get two full terms in office, and then, just 1260 days after his successor is inaugurated.

Perhaps I am becoming too prophetic. But you can understand how my mind started working when I looked at the numbers. Just as Hal Lindsey did in 1970. And Whisenant did in 1988.

The Lesson of Marxism

Sixteen years ago, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was thrown out of the Soviet Union. After he arrived in the West, one of his constant themes was the general loss of faith in Marxism in the Soviet Union. No one believes in it any more, he insisted. It is a dead ideology. Nobody can defend it, and nobody wants to. In 1989, its demise became visible to everyone.

The lesson we have learned from the demise of original Marxism is this: **when a movement dies, it dies at the top first.** Its head goes soft before its body grows cold. The faithful members keep coming to church long after the leaders have abandoned the original faith. The seminaries depart from the faith; then the bureaucrats on the various church boards; then the pastors; and last of all the laymen. Their checks finance this defection, start to finish. Naive laymen refuse to recognize the obvious: when the spokesmen at the top, especially in the institutions of higher learning and pulpit certification, cease to defend the original creed against all comers, the handwriting is on the wall for that denomination or group.

The Irreversible Shifting of Priorities

There is a progression in this slow defection. At first, the leaders think it is not worth their time to respond to serious intellectual challengers. They feel secure in their

tenured and well-policed places of instruction. Besides, they are too busy seeking loans for new building projects.

Second, the institution seeks accreditation from a secular humanist or theologically liberal accrediting organization. Once accepted, it then adopts the "neutral" academic standards of the accrediting organization. It quietly downgrades the original educational and credal standards, since tuitions are needed to pay off the debt. It begins to substitute less intellectually rigorous "Christian" psychology courses for systematic theology and the biblical languages. Its faculty begins to focus on general theological concerns – concerns of the academic guild – rather than the specifics of the older faith, meaning the creeds held by the dedicated supporters who financed the original buildings and paid the salaries for decades.

Third, the institution's original faculty members depart. They resign in disgust, or get fired, or simply retire quietly. They are steadily replaced by teachers who are certified (Ph. D., Th.D.) by liberals as being technically competent in their academic specialties, but who make no attempt to relate their specialties to the original theological formulas.

I am not inventing all this. Talbot Theological Seminary no longer is staffed by hard-core dispensationalists. Grace Theological Seminary this year fired John C. Whitcomb, its only faculty member who was well known in the fundamentalist world, because he had publicly accused faculty members of having compromised the seminary's original theological standards. (The president of the seminary fired him just before Whitcomb was to retire – as symbolic an act as any bureaucrat ever devised.)

But what of Dallas Seminary? Consider the recent prediction of Rev. Thomas D. Ice, Dallas Seminary graduate and co-author of *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*:

By the year 2000, Dallas Theological Seminary will no longer be dispensational. [Professional] priorities are elsewhere than the defense of systematic dispensationalism from external criticism. (Interview with Martin Selbrede, *Counsel of Chalcedon* [Dec. 1989].)

His co-author, H. Wayne House, has resigned from Dallas Seminary and will be teaching at the Simon Greenleaf Law School. He was always far more an activist than a theologian, and his new calling reflects this commitment.

The end of dispensationalism is in sight.

Wahroord's 1953 Classroom Lecture Notes

In the July-September issue of Dallas Seminary's *Bibliotheca Sacra*, the major scholarly journal of dispensationalism, Dr. John Walvoord at last responds to Christian Reconstruction. Sort of. Specifically, he writes a book review of Bahnsen and Gentry's *House Divided: The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology*. He neglects to mention its subtitle. That is not all he neglects. He neglects to review the book.

I occasionally exaggerate for effect. Not this time. In a two and a half page review, Walvoord refers to the book only in the first two paragraphs (eight lines, total) and in the next-to-the-last paragraph. He does not state its thesis, only that he "has read few books with more errors of fact and half-truths about the doctrines being considered." (He does not identify even one of these errors.) He says it is a "diatribe."

For the next two pages, he simply restates what are apparently his 1953 class lecture notes on the history of premillennialism. He continues the tactic that Dallas professors have used constantly: to deflect all criticism of

dispensationalism by saying that the critics are simply hostile to premillennialism. "The debate against dispensationalism is a misguided one, because what is actually involved is the premillennial interpretation of the Bible." This is "the central issue." Central for whom?

Not for Bahnsen and Gentry, who were attacking dispensationalism, especially its antinomianism. Dr. Bahnsen's section of the book deals only with the question of biblical law. Walvoord never mentions this. He challenges *House Divided* by arguing that the early church held exclusively to premillennialism, a theory refuted successfully in a 1977 Dallas Seminary Th.M. thesis by Alan Boyd. This is the traditional dispensational apologetic: keep the reader's attention focused on historic premillennialism, so that he will not consider either the origins (late) or peculiar theological views of dispensationalism, which no group in church history held prior to 1830.

Almost the entire review is devoted to the Dallas Seminary version of the history of rival eschatologies. Finally, he does refer to *House Divided* again. And what he says can serve as an epitaph for dispensationalism:

A reasoned answer to this book would require another book of equal size, which the reviewer does not intend to write. When Whisenant announced that the Rapture would occur in September 1988, many people suggested that this reviewer answer that teaching. His answer, however, was, "Just wait." As the alleged date of the Rapture came and went, that teaching was seen to be wrong. The same will be true of dominion theology.

So, his answer is: "Just wait." But at his age, and the age of those few people who still remember him, one can hardly afford to wait. His followers, like Dallas Seminary's donors, have been waiting for generations. What kind of theological response is "just wait," when your critics have used your movement's mania for date-setting as one of the most obvious signs of its deformity? (See Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! [1977]* for hundreds of pages of these defunct prophecies.) When the widely acknowledged theological leader of a movement can only respond "just wait" to a book as detailed and theologically rigorous as *House Divided*, that movement is drawing near to the end. **When dispensationalism's premier theological journal runs such a review as if it were intellectually adequate, the movement is visibly brain-dead.**

Then Walvoord does what I never thought possible. He appeals to newspapers as the proof of his eschatology. "One wonders how the writers of this book can read the newspapers with their accounts of increased crime and a decaying church and come up with the idea that Christianity is triumphant in the world." Now, we say only that Christianity will be triumphant, not that it is triumphant today. But this is not the main point. Walvoord confirms what Bahnsen wrote in 1977 concerning dispensational theology: ". believers and unbelievers alike had been trained to interpret the Bible in terms of *extrabiblical* considerations (secular scholarship for the modernists, world events for the dispensationalists)." He called this phenomenon **newspaper exegesis**. (*Journal of Christian Reconstruction* [Winter, 1976-77], pp. 52-53.) Walvoord has confirmed this analysis.

Let me repeat my endless refrain: until a dispensational **theologian** decides to take us on in print, in a book-long defense of House, Ice, Scofield, Chafer, and, yes, Walvoord, we Reconstructionists know exactly where dispensationalism is headed: into oblivion.

Just wait.

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