

Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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CONSISTENT LIBERALISM TESTED

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(Note: If you have any issues or questions you would like to see addressed, please write to me at the 1. C. E. address.)

One of the most effective lures with which dispensationalism has attracted Bible believing Christians over the years is their claim to consistent interpretive literalism. "Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. . . The dispensationalist claims to use the normal principle of interpretation *consistently* in *all* his study of the Bible."¹ For the unschooled or young Christian* who loves the Lord and is committed to His Word, the banner of "Literal unless absurd" serves as a virtual "X marks the spot," where he can put down theological roots.

False Association

I still have my notes taken in a course on Premillennialism as a Bible major at Tennessee Temple College in Fall, 1972. The professor followed the familiar dispensational practice of equating with liberalism the allowance of a non-literal interpretation in the non-dispensational hermeneutic. Ryrie himself extols the virtue of literalism along these lines:

Although it could not be said that all amillennialists deny the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, yet, as it will be shown later, it seems to be the first step in that direction. The system of spiritualizing Scripture is a tacit denial of the doctrine of the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Thus the allegorical method of amillennialism is a step toward modernism.³

Walvoord agrees: Postmillennialism "is a system of theology based upon a subjective spiritualizing of Scripture" that "lends itself to liberalism with only minor adjustments."⁴

Of course, whenever a non-dispensationalist is (falsely) associated with liberals in his hermeneutic method, the quickest response is to turn the tables on the assailant. It is easy to point out that many *cults* approach Scripture literally (Church of Christ, Scientist being a notable exception).

Consider the Mormon doctrine that God has a literal, tangible body. After citing Genesis 1:26-27 regarding

Adam's creation "in the image and likeness of God," LeGrand Richards, as an Apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints, wrote:

Attempts have been made to explain that this creation was only in the spiritual image and likeness of God. Joseph Smith found that he was as literally in the image and likeness of God and Jesus Christ, as Seth was in the likeness and image of his father Adam.⁵

Oops! A slight hermeneutic error has led Mr. Richards somewhat astray.

Origins

In the same work cited previously, Ryrie comments of the non-dispensational hermeneutic: "Spiritualizing, then, is the answer of the amillennialist to the problem of the interpretation of prophecy. It is the same as allegorizing, and this method of interpretation does not have a savory origin."⁶ But now what are we to think of his concern for the "spiritualizing" hermeneutic's "unsavory origin"? J. Dwight Pentecost gives an interesting historical argument for literalism:

[I]t is necessary to trace the development of the two different hermeneutical methods on which these [non-premillennial vs. premillennial] interpretations rest, namely, the literal and allegorical, in order that the authority of the literal method may be established.

The method employed in Rabbinism by the scribes was not an allegorical method, but a literal method, which, in its liberalism, circumvented all the spiritual requirements of the law. The prevailing method of interpretation among the Jews at the time of Christ was certainly the literal method of interpretation."⁷

In his establishing "the authority of the literal method" Pentecost's early arguments point to the *rabbinic* and *Pharisaic* methods of interpretation! That was the very method of interpretation that led to the rejection of Christ and to the call for His crucifixion. Speaking of "unsavory origins!"

The hermeneutical argument as promoted by such Dallas Seminary dispensationalists has been greatly exaggerated. For instance, John S. Feinberg, a noted contemporary dispensationalist, has been led to admit on the hermeneutical argument that "Ryrie is too simplistic."⁸ Neverthe-

1. Charles C. Ryne, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), pp. 86, 89.

2. I have never heard of a reformed scholar converting to dispensationalism, although there are a number of dispensational scholars who have converted to reformed theology (e.g., Bruce K. Waltke, Duane E. Spencer). Hence, my reference to 'unschooled' and 'young' converts.

3. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Bros., 1953), pp. 34, 35, 46.

4. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 34, 35.

5. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1958), p. 16.

6. Ryrie, *Basis*, p. 39.

7. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), pp. 16, 17.

8. John S. Feinberg, in Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), p. 73

less, the issue is still popularly promoted as *the* danger of a non-dispensational eschatology.⁹

Inconsistency

Besides being "simplistic," the dispensational claim to "consistent literalism" is frustrating due to its erratic employment. In this regard we should note (1) its inconsistent employment among dispensationalist interpreters as a *class* and (2) its inconsistent employment by dispensationalists as *individuals*.

Consider Tommy Ice's attempted refutation of David Chilton's interpretation of the Greek *aggelos* (often translated "angel") in Matthew 24:31. Chilton sees these as "messengers" (i.e., preachers). A portion of Ice's response reads: "The final reference [by Chilton] to the seven angels of Revelation 1-3 is the most absurd of them all, since there is no conclusive proof that the *angelos* [sic¹⁰] are [sic¹¹] men instead of angels."¹²

Now are we to agree with this particular dispensationalist that to view the "angels" of Revelation 1-3 as *men* is an interpretation that is "the most absurd of all"? If so, what then are we to think of other dispensationalists who so interpret Revelation's "angels"? Consider John F. Walvoord's statement regarding Revelation 2:1: "The messenger of the church at Ephesus (which at that time was a large metropolitan city), was undoubtedly an important person and a leader in Christian testimony at that time."¹³ And what of dispensationalist Hal Lindsey's interpretation? "Each of the seven letters was addressed to a literal church, and in each church a special messenger or representative would receive the letter and present its contents to the congregation."¹⁴ Are these dispensationalists involved in an interpretation, which may be designated "the most absurd of all"?

Then what of the internal inconsistency of particular dispensationalists? The several Old Testament prophecies regarding David's reign in the millennium are not always literally understood. Literalist H. A. Ironside writes: "I do not understand this to mean that David himself will be raised and caused to dwell on the earth as king. . . the implication is that He who was David's Son, the Lord Christ Himself is to be the King."¹⁵

Neither is it necessary that Elijah's coming as prophesied in Malachi 4:5-6 be literally understood. Pentecost himself writes: "The prophecy is interpreted by the Lord as being fulfilled, *not in literal Elijah*, but in one who comes in Elijah's spirit and power."¹⁶

9. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), Ch. 14; Dave Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1988), Ch 12; Hal Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam, 1989), Ch. 3.

10. The proper Greek transliteration of the term is *aggelos*. Ice spells it phonetically, like it sounds (I wonder how he spells pneumonia?).

11. *Aggelos* is singular, thus calling for a singular verb ("is") rather than a plural ("are").

12. House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, p. 312.

13. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1988, p. 53).

14. Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Aria, CA: Vision House, 1973), p. 43.

15. Harry A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on Ezekiel the Prophet* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1949), p. 262 (cited in J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 498-499).

16. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 311 -313; cp. E. S. English, "The Two Witnesses," *Our Hope*, xlvii (April, 1941), p. 666.

The sacrifices of Ezekiel 45:15-17 are expressly said to provide "reconciliation." But J. D. Pentecost argues that "the sacrifices *will be memorial* in character."¹⁷

Isaiah 52:15 says of Messiah: "So shall he sprinkle many nations." The New *Scofield Reference Bible* comments: "Compare the literal fulfillment of this prediction in 1 Pet. 1:1-2." Literal? When was Jesus' *blood* literally sprinkled on the nations? Sounds like "spiritualizing" to me!

Absurdity

I am often challenged by well-meaning dispensationalists to point out the error of "consistent literalism." In such contexts I note that new converts to faith in Christ are generally directed to the Gospel of John as the first book of the Bible to read because of its simplicity. Following this sage advice, I suggest we also use John to expose the error of *consistent* literalism.

According to J. Dwight Pentecost (as cited above), the Jews of the first century were accustomed to literalism. But were not they often confused by Christ's teaching – *due to this presupposed literalism*? In John 2:19-21 the Jews think Jesus is talking about the physical temple when He says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." This false understanding even became a basis of a criminal charge brought against Christ when He stood before Caiaphas (Matt. 26:61). His disciples, however, recalled *after* the resurrection what Jesus really meant (John 2:22).

In John 3:3-5 a Pharisee (who employed Pentecost's interpretative methodology) was confused when Jesus told him: "Ye must be born again." Nicodemus' reply was based on his literalistic apprehension: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" But Jesus was speaking of a *spiritual* new birth.

When Jesus told the Samaritan woman that she should ask Him for "living water," she took Him literally – and – wrongly: "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water?" (John 4:10-14). Jesus was not to be interpreted literally.

When His own disciples returned to Jesus to find Him at the well, they were confused when He said: "I have food to eat that you do not know about." For we read: "The disciples therefore were saying to one another, 'No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?'" (John 4:31-34). Jesus was not speaking of literal, but of spiritual food.

And what of the uproar of the literalistic Jews when Jesus spoke as He did in John 6! Jesus taught: "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh" (John 6:51). What was the Jewish reaction? "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" (John 6:52).

Conclusion

The literalistic claims of dispensationalism are encumbered with difficulty. Not even dispensationalists – as a class or as individual exegetes – are consistent in the application of literalism. *Despite* their *a priori* hermeneutic imported into biblical studies, they themselves are driven by the text often to depart from their own principles. Perhaps this helps us understand why they are not ali Mormons.

17. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 525.