

Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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DISPENSATIONAL POSTMILLENNIALISM?

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Evolution in Process

True dispensational viewpoints are multiplying sufficiently rapidly enough (historically speaking) that one dispensationalist has lamented Marvin Rosenthal's *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (1990): "This reviewer sincerely questions . . . the necessity of adding a fifth position to an already overcrowded rapture **debate**."¹

Yet if we are genuinely trying to get at a fuller understanding of the truth of God's word, why should we lament continued rethinking and clarification of the **issues**?² **Eschatology** is not a game that allows only so many players on the field, as the preceding reviewer seems to imply.

In addition to Rosenthal's work, 1990 brought us another book that presents a new view that is, I believe, a hybrid of dispensationalism and postmillennialism. A mutant offspring, if you will. I refer to the postmillennial work *Zion's Glad Morning*³ by a new-found friend and neighbor of mine, Rev. Willard A. Ramsey. Despite the antithesis that exists between postmillennialism and **dispensationalism**, Ramsey has in a large sense brought them together in one **system**.⁴

As I begin, I will confess that Ramsey would vigorously oppose the label that I have ascribed to his view. He has told me that his view merely "retains" or "borrows" from dispensationalism or is "more palatable" to it. Nevertheless, in many ways I believe my label fits. His is something of a half-way house for restless dispensationalists. As might be expected of such an unusual position, the author was a **pretribulationist** from 1954 to 1967 (p. 5).

Interestingly, one who joined him in his **eschatological** evolution is his former associate pastor, Dr. Henry M. Morris III, who writes the Foreword to and endorsement of the book (p. x).⁵

Yes, Virginia, He is a Postmillennialist

We must note that Ramsey is unquestionably postmillennial. He proudly employs the term for his own position (e.g., pp. 10, 62, 74, 287), bemoans pessimism regarding the gospel (pp. 4-8⁶, 282ff), speaks clearly of "an **eschatology**

of Gospel victory" (p. 2), and holds to the return of Christ *after* the millennium (p. 15, 29, 54, 187ff) and in conjunction with a general resurrection (pp. 40-43).

He notes with consistent postmillennial concern that premillennialism "has caused immeasurable harm to the progress of truth and the power of the Gospel in the earth" (p. 3). And: "The premillennial claim that the conversion of the world is 'impossible' without the physical presence of Christ is absolutely groundless" (p. 232).

The Sterility of Cross-speciation

With so much going for him, how and where did he go so wrong to develop what I call "dispensational postmillennialism"? His problem seems to be his flirtation with the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism (per Charles C. Ryrie), particularly regarding matters relative to **hermeneutics** and **Israel**.⁷ Let me point out some of the areas in which his views gave me dispensational *deja vu*.

Without question *the* major reason for those elements of his teaching that I believe to be in error is his attempted **literalistic** treatment even of apocalyptic imagery, a common debilitating failure of dispensationalism. His "first rigorous propositional truth" (p. 12) involves his understanding of the "shaking of heaven and earth" (e.g., Heb. 12:26ff). For instance, he has a real concern for **literalism** when speaking of the stars falling (pp. 6-35, 200). "How — upon what exegetical principle — shall we spiritualize all these literal, physical passages that testify uniformly with one voice to the destruction of the universe?" (p. 16).⁸

The Star Spangled Banter

In a rather sensationalistic vein and with a quasi-scientific hypothesis reminiscent of dispensational literature, he continues: "In the process of the destruction of the universe, God has chosen to hurtle the stars toward the earth. . . . [A] convergence of the stars at a rate **near**⁹ the velocity of light . . . shows that a gravitational 'shock-wave' preceding the oncoming mass by a short time (hours or days) would 'red shift' the light of the sun causing it to appear red then finally dark. The moon would mirror this change. But as the sun dims, a 'blueshifted' eerie light from the converging stars would lighten the earth on every side (see Zech. 14:6,7)" (pp. 16n-17n). Coupling this with his **literalism** hypothesis, he concludes: "We would hardly expect the Lord to use this language to reveal political, social, or ecclesiastical turmoil" (p. 22).

7. It must be remembered that Ryrie does not even posit premillennialism as one of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 44.

8. Surprisingly, in another place he answers his own question quite adequately for us: "We must allow other passages using similar **symbolology** to interpret for us whenever such passages are available" (p. 198).

9. Here Hal Lindsey would probably have given the exact speed.

1. Gerald B. Stanton, "A Review of *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (Jan-Mar, 1991) 90.

2. Not that I believe that Rosenthal's book clarifies anything; but he certainly thinks so.

3. Willard A. Ramsey, *Zion's Glad Morning* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1990).

4. For a taped informal debate on futurism vs. preterism between Ramsey and myself, send \$5.00 to: Gentry, 124 Meadowbrook Dr., Mauldin, SC 29662.

5. This is ironic in that Morris' father is well-known for decrying the survivability of genetic mutations! But then again, this mutant view has not aown itself to be survivable yet.

6. "It is a very debilitating thing to be facing a hawest of five billion souls in an institution that has no prophetic future on earth" (p. 4).

But let us choose just one of his examples of the ultimate destruction of the universe, Isaiah 13:10ff (p. 25): "The stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine." And having taken the time to look up the passage, let us look at the context while there. Verse 1 clearly says this is "the oracle concerning Babylon," whom we know to have been an historical affliker of Israel. Verse 17 relates the oracle to the stirring of the Medes against Babylon, which, as a matter of historical fact, occurred in the sixth century B.C.

Of course, he would defend his view by a maneuver familiar to dispensationalists: "Telescopic Prophetic Vision," a double fulfillment of prophecy (pp. 170ff). Despite this, the fact remains that the Lord does employ such "language to reveal political, social, or ecclesiastical turmoil" — in Isaiah 13!

He employs terminology reminiscent of Ryrie, when he speaks of "face-value" interpretation (p. 6, 11, 30, 47). 10 He even scolds premillennialists (sc. dispensationalists) for not being as literal as he: "I have dealt more literally with the passages considered than it is possible for anyone holding a premillennial view to do. Indeed it is the literal meaning of the words of New Testament prophecy that drives the interpreter to a postmillennial position" (p. 62, cp. 24, 175). In fact, he admits his debt to premillennial hermeneutics: "I acknowledge also that a thorough understanding of the premillennial doctrines has helped me to avoid the needless 'spiritualizing' errors of amillennialism and evolutionary postmillennialism" (p. 2).

But he is not consistent in his literalism; he does allow some "spiritualizing": "We will not 'spiritualize' except where the Scripture spiritualizes for us¹¹ or except in those rare cases where a literal interpretation would trivialize God or otherwise contradict His Word" (p. 11). For instance, for Ramsey Zion in Psalm 110 (rightly) becomes heavenly Zion, as opposed to earthly Zion (p. 35). The tabernacle of David in Acts 15:13-18 is the Church, rather than the face-value tabernacle (p. 36). The 144,000 of Revelation 7 are not necessarily Jewish, despite the repetition of their Jewish lineage (p. 48n).

Maintaining the Sensational Market

Perhaps the most sensational element of dispensationalism is the future Great Tribulation. Ramsey has one available for the market, too. His future Great Tribulation is based on Ezekiel 38-39 (p. 39), which occurs after the future millennium (p. 75).¹²

But not to worry about the time delay, there are prophetically determined bad times just ahead for the avid readers of doom and gloom! Zechariah 12 speaks of a battle where "very likely atomic weapons would be involved" (p. 173). "I do not think things are going to get gradually better, but rather the world will go through a terrible convulsion and then things will get suddenly better" (p. 74). In fact, for all you Israel and antichrist fans out there, "there will be a third great world war, instigated by the would-be antichrist, with Israel at its center. . . Out of this confla-

gration the Jews will be converted. They will be baptized into these baptistic churches¹³ and go over the earth preaching the Gospel. . . These events, I believe, are on the near horizon, and many living today may live to see them" (P. 75). These prophetic events are near, and are to occur "possibly within the next twenty-five to one hundred years" (p. 95, cp. 77, 239).

Ramsey is also prone to rushed prophetic expectation. With dispensationalists, he feels we should be living in anticipation of these pending catastrophic events. "These events, I believe, are on the near horizon, and many living today may live to see them" (p. 76). "Surely the millennium [which these catastrophic events introduce] cannot be too far distant" (p. 239). The contemporary "apparent hardening of the Gentiles against the Gospel would suggest that their 'fulness' is at least near; or that 'the times of the Gentiles,' as Luke put it, is about complete" (p. 120).

Not surprisingly, Ramsey holds Israel's re-establishment in 1948 as a fulfillment of prophecy (p. 86, cp. 109) and as indicative of the nearness of the catastrophic millennium (p. 120). In addition, "it would be wholly appropriate, I think, for Israel to rebuild the temple as a symbol of their national heritage, but it can never be biblically used for ritual worship and animal sacrifice again" (p. 145).

Rugged Individualism

Ramsey does not appear to be as broadly read as he should be. For instance, his book shows no realization of Reconstructionist postmillennialism in his bibliography. This sometimes leads him to dispensational-like overstatements, such as: "I believe everyone would agree, Matthew 24:30 describes" the Second Coming (p. 18). A great many writers, of reconstructionist and non-reconstructionist schools, however, do not "agree."

But this would not bother my friend, for he is also an anti-creedal, non-protestant, independent in the true line of Christianity: the anabaptists. Consequently, Ramsey is certain God is leading him in his own novel interpretation in a way that He would never lead a godly group of biblical scholars to formulate a creed (p. 47). Unity "cannot be a slogan, a creed, a tradition, a program, a mission board, a denomination, a man, a school. It must be objective in nature; subjectivism is an unreliable guide" (p. 143). With all orthodox creeds he points to the Scripture as the objective standard of truth. But this in itself is a creed (in essence, he holds to a self-contradictory creed: My creed is no creed but Scripture), but goes nowhere in the interpretation of the Scripture, which is the issue at hand.

A certain superficial naivete is evident in his confident pointing to Romans 6:4 as destructive of aspersionist baptism (p. 140): I wonder whether in his baptismal action he re-enacts the crucifixion (Rem. 6:4,6) and "clothing" oneself (Gal. 3:27)? And elsewhere he sets forth 1 John 2:2 as deadly to limited atonement (p. 140), without realizing he has established the case for universalist by having Christ actually propitiating the sins of all people in history!

I hope this analysis of *Zion's Glad Morning* has been of interest to the reader. I felt I needed to critique this book before Tommy Ice writes to me on the matter.

10. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Living End* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), p. 37.

11. Which being interpreted means: "Where I want the Scripture to do so."

12. The "millennium" is still future, not beginning until a future binding of Satan (p. 9n).

13. Here his landmarkian tendencies surface, as elsewhere, when he speaks condescendingly of non-baptists and separates himself from protestantism (p. 75, 76, 62, 98, 228-229). The millennium will be glorious in its having churches that are "baptistic in kind but not necessarily in name," i.e. with no governmental unity (p. 75).