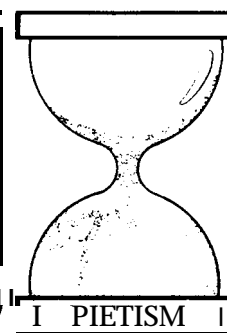


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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THE INTERPRETIVE KEY TO THE **OLIVET** DISCOURSE

(Part 2 of a Survey of Matthew **24:1-36**)

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A major preoccupation of the average dispensationalist today is the "soon coming" rapture followed by the worldwide Great Tribulation.¹ But as we showed in last month's newsletter, the contextual setting of Matthew 24 speaks of a time long ago and far away: A.D. 70 Israel.

Perhaps more significant even than Matthew's contextual flow is the Lord's statement in Matthew 24:34: "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled." Here we have an authoritative, clear, and compelling pronouncement of the *time* of the events recorded in 24:4ff.

The Importance of the Statement

We should be aware, first, that Christ is quite dogmatic when he begins a statement with: "verily." Hendriksen notes of the word: "In every case . . . in which this word occurs in the New Testament it introduces a statement which not only expresses a truth or fact . . . but an *important, a solemn fact*."² Thus, Christ draws the disciples' attention to what He is about to say, as in 24:2.

Second, the dogmatism of His statement is further underscored. He does not just tell them; He emphatically introduces what He is about to say by saying "I tell you." He has not left the temporal expectation to them to figure out.

Third, literally the Greek reads: "Truly I tell you that *by no means* passes away generation this until all these things happen."³ The "by no means" is a strong, double negative (Gk: *ou me*) and it is put early in His statement for added emphasis. He is staking His credibility,⁴ as it were, on the absolute certainty of this prophetic pronouncement.

But what does He so dogmatically tell them? Whatever the difficult apocalyptic imagery in the preceding verses (e.g., w. 29-31) may indicate (we will get to that in a future newsletter), Jesus clearly says that 'all these things' will occur *before* "this generation" passes away.

"This Generation" is "This Race"?

Now what is the time frame set so dogmatically before us by our Lord? What does He mean by "this generation"? This is where the heart of the futurist/preterist debate lies. To read Pentecost's latest book, however, the unsuspect-

ing reader would never know there was an issue to be resolved here. Pentecost just *assumes* his positions. This is certainly wiser than trying to prove it, especially since he has changed it from his earlier best-selling work.

According to the early (pre-transition) Pentecost: "the word generation is to be taken in its basic usage of 'race, kindred, family, stock, breed,' so that the Lord is here promising that the nation Israel shall be preserved until the consummation of her program at the second advent. . . This seems to be the best explanation."⁵

This interpretation is without basis for a variety of reasons. (1) Ridderbos correctly notes that such a view ends up as a mere truism if "this generation" simply means "Israel as a nation."⁷ For then it just says Israel will not pass away until all these things happen to Israel.

(2) Though the Greek *genea* ("generation") is commonly used in Matthew, it is *never* employed in the sense offered here! It is found in Matthew 1:17; 11:16; 12:39-45; 16:4; 17:17; and 23:36. It is only with great difficulty that any of these references may be contorted into the meaning "Israel as a nation."

(3) In the five other instances in Matthew where the word *genea* is coupled with the near demonstrative ("this generation") it clearly refers to the generation *then living*. These passages are Matthew 11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; and 23:36. In Scripture, the idea of a "generation" of people involves roughly twenty-five to forty years (Num. 32:13; Psa. 95:10).

"This Generation" is "That Generation"?

So now after overwhelming demonstration of the superficiality of such a view, Pentecost holds the following position: "Since these signs will all occur in the seven years of Daniel's seventieth week, the generation that sees the beginning of these signs will 'not pass away until all these things happened' (v. 34), for they all will fall within a brief span of time. Notice that these will *not* be signs given to a generation preceding the Rapture. Instead, these signs will be given to a generation that cannot begin until after the church has been translated."⁸

5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victory, 1990), pp. 255-256.

6. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 281. Cp. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948), 4:316. C. 1. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1945), p. 1034. E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Gospel According to Matthew* (New York, Revell, 1935), p. 179. William Ken y, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux, 1911), pp. 451-453.

7. H. N. Ridderbos, *Commentary on Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 450.

8. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 256. See also: Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* p. 89. House and Ice, *Dominion Theology*, p. 286-287.

1. See: Dwight L. Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillennial Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). Hal Lindsey has made a fortune off this concept and has invested it in long term real estate ventures. With the condition of the current real estate market, he may be praying more fervently for the rapture than ever before.

2. William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (NTC) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), pp. 289-290.

3. Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), p. 108.

4. He contrasts the durability and integrity of His prophetic word here with that of the material universe (24:35).

Walvoord concurs: "The most natural meaning, however, is to take it as normally used as a reference to a period of twenty-five to forty years. But instead of referring this to the time in which Christ lived, it refers back to the preceding period that is described as the Great Tribulation. As the Great Tribulation is only three-and-a-half years long, obviously, those who see the Great Tribulation will also see the coming of the Lord."⁹ Walvoord also refuses to consider the most obvious and legitimate interpretation: that it refers to the generation who actually heard Jesus.

Pentecost's new view involves him in question begging. He considers it obvious that "these signs will be given to a generation that cannot begin until after the church has been translated." Where is the rapture mentioned here?¹⁰ He must *assume* his dispensational system in order to reinterpret the passage to *uphold* the system.

And what of Walvoord's statement that "this generation" actually "refers back to the preceding period that is described as the Great Tribulation"? This also assumes the Great Tribulation could not have occurred in the first century – simply because of dispensational requirements. I agree that "this generation" refers back to "the preceding period that is described as the Great Tribulation." But the passage clearly has Jesus speaking to His disciples almost 2000 years ago, when He ties it to "this generation"! So, the Great Tribulation is tied in with the subject of His discourse: the destruction of the Temple (24:2).

"This Generation" is "This Generation"

A simple reading of 24:34 leaves the undeniable impression that these things were to occur in the generation of the original disciples. First, contextual exegesis helps us resolve the "problem" of the meaning of Matthew 24:34. The phrase "this generation" appears in the very context intimately related to and leading into Matthew 24 (cp. 23:36-38 with 24:1-2).

In Matthew 23:36 "this generation" unquestionably speaks of Jesus' contemporaries, as even dispensationalists are forced to admit.¹¹ There Jesus is condemning His contemporary adversaries the scribes and Pharisees (23:2, 13-14, 16, 23, 25-27, 29). He specifically comments that His contemporary opponents will "fill up the measure of the guilt" of their predecessors (23:32), by persecuting Jesus' followers (23:34), so that "upon you [Scribes and Pharisees] may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed" (23:35). He concludes: "Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation." This employs some of the identical terms and is equivalent to 24:34.

Second, the Matthew 24:34 passage is most clearly given to the disciples in response to their question of the temple's destruction (24:3). Christ says "when ye shall see all these things" (24:33). Here he employs the plural, per-

sonal pronoun "you" for emphasis, though it is unnecessary in Greek.¹² He is speaking to the disciples who "came unto him privately" (24:3). He is telling them that they themselves would see "all these things" come to pass. Matthew has *not* omitted all response to the question regarding the destruction of the temple, as per dispensationalism!¹³

Third, the "all these things" (and the "verily" and "I say unto you") statement found in 24:33-34 picks up on the original statement in 24:2: "See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." This has to do with the temple's destruction.

As I have already indicated, I agree with Walvoord that those who were to see the beginning of the signs mentioned are to see the Great Tribulation (23:33). But then Christ expressly tells *who* will see those signs: "this generation" (24:34), i.e., to whom He is speaking. Before closing let me briefly cite one additional line of evidence.

Signs for "This Generation"

It is important to notice that the approaching destruction of the temple is preceded by certain signs, signs which Jesus did not want them to confuse (24:4ff). The first few mentioned are but pre-indicators of the looming judgment (24:8). This point is quite significant because later on, when He turns to consider His glorious Second Advent (24:36ff), He specifically says of "that"¹⁴ distant event there will be no such signs (24:36-44). This would seem evidence enough to separate the eras at that point, *but not before*.

Conclusion

Because of such observations, one wise dispensationalist, D. A. Carson, speaks of the "highly artificial" attempts by fellow dispensationalists to reinterpret the word even though it is obvious it "can only with the greatest difficulty be made to mean anything other than the generation living when Jesus spoke."¹⁵ David Turner agrees.¹⁶

Jesus expressly teaches that the prophetic events of verses 4-31 – "*a// these things*" – will come to pass in "this generation." And just forty years later, the Jewish War with Rome brought the total and final destruction of the Temple (24:2). I agree with John Gill: "This is a full and clear proof, that not any thing that is said before [v. 34], relates to the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and the end of the world; but that all belong to the coming of the son of man, in the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the end of the Jewish state."¹⁷

12. The Greek reads: *houtos kai humeis hotan idete*, which may be literally translated: "so also ye when ye see." Notice the reduplicated "ye."

13. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 276. See also: Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 249. Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:86. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 381.

14. A far demonstrative, in contrast to the near demonstrative "this" in v. 34.

15. D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:507.

16. David L. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10:1 (Spring, 1989) 7. Turner calls his position a "preterist-futurist" view, p. 26.

17. John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, rep. 1976), 7:296.

9. John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), pp. 391ff.

10. Walvoord notes of Matthew 24: "An important notation should be made at this point that the Rapture of the church and the close of the Church Age is nowhere mentioned in this prophecy." Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), p. 381.

11. Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," in Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983) 2:75. John F. Walvoord, *The Nations, Israel, and the Church in Prophecy*, 3 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 2:106.