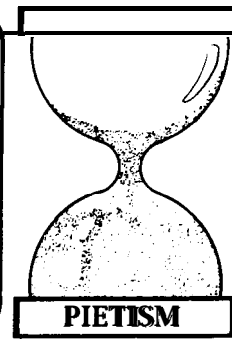


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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DISPENSATIONALISM AS A NON-PROPHET MOVEMENT (Part 13 of a Survey of Matthew 24:1-36)

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In this issue we arrive at a section containing the verse with which we dealt earlier in our survey of Matthew 24:1-36 (see: June, 1991). We come now to verses 31-36, which include the all important key text for the understanding of this section of the Olivet Discourse, verse 34. I want to consider this verse and its immediate setting in this issue and attempt to throw some additional light on it.

Late Great Profits and Prophetic Signs

Dispensationalists are not the only Chicken Littles guilty of misreading the signs, to be sure.¹ Yet they are certainly the pre-eminent profiteers of sign-reading and its sensational corollary, "newspaper exegesis." Two excellent works clearly documenting the embarrassing problem of erroneous sign-reading among dispensationalists are: Dwight Wilson's *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Baker: 1977; Tyler, TX: I. C. E., 1991) and Gary DeMar's *Last Days Madness: The Folly of Trying to Predict When Christ Will Return* (Wolgumuth and Hyatt: 1991). I highly recommend both of these works.

Of course, the foolishness of Saddam Hussein of Iraq/Babylon (Rev. 17:5) in the Persian Gulf War and the birthmark on Mikhail Gorbachev's head (Rev. 13:18) have not helped matters.² Recently I received a prophetic newspaper that mentioned the ozone hole in the upper atmosphere as the fulfillment of Revelation 6:14! Another mailing mentioned the computer industry explosion as a fulfillment of Daniel 12:4! But when all is said and done, the best-selling sign-readers always make their way to Matthew 24 to prove their point. And this despite the fact this passage undermines their prophetic viewpoint!

The Great Prophet and Prophetic Signs

We must recognize that a simple reading of Matthew 24:34 provides an unambiguous assertion that all of the things Christ the Great Prophet mentioned up to this point – i.e., in verses 4 through 34 – were to occur in the very generation of the original disciples: "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all

these things are fulfilled" (24:34). The phrase "this generation" here is identical to the "this generation" phrase of Matthew 23:36. For Matthew 23 the Lord rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees of His own day (Matt. 23:13, 14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). Then in Matthew 23:36 he assured them: "I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation." The woes He had just pronounced on them cannot be catapulted 2000 years into the future.

Neither may we hurl the events of Matthew 24:4-34 into the distant future. In fact, the whole impetus to this discourse is Christ's reference to the destruction of the historical Temple to which the disciples pointed (Matt. 24:1-3). Here we note that the approaching destruction of the Temple was to be preceded by a series of certain divinely ordained signs (24:4ff). The first few signs are general indicators of the final judgment on the Temple: "All these are the beginning of sorrows" (24:8). I have been showing over the last several newsletters how all of these signs did, in fact, come to pass in the era prior to A.D. 70. Just as surely as fig leaves indicate approaching summer (24:32), so do the events of Matthew 24:4ff signify the destruction of the Temple.

Profiteers and Prophecy

This point regarding historical signs is important in that the Lord then turns to consider His glorious Second Advent (24:36ff). He specifically says of that distant event there will be no such signs: "But of that day and hour no one knows. . . . As in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. . . . Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (24:36-42).

With these words the Lord turns to look beyond the signs just given for "this generation" (near demonstrative, Matt. 24:34) to "that day" (far demonstrative) (24:36). Thus, the Lord's attention turns to His Second Advent at the end of history. Although He gave signs regarding the events coming upon His own "generation," He carefully distinguishes His eschatological coming by denying signs.

This is no fun, however, so dispensationalists will, nevertheless, try to squeeze datable signs from the text. The classic illustration of this is Whisenant's Folly. Of verse 36, Whisenant argues: "In all four gospels, Jesus never deviated from the day and the hour as the limitation on his church's Rapture. God says what He means and means what He says. You don't have to help God say what God means to say. Jesus said that only the day and the hour was unknown. . . . The Greek words used by Jesus imply

1. The journal of the amillennialist Protestant Reformed Church noted in 1991: "At the moment what is happening in Russia, and for us because of the 'changes' in Russia (which some trust), seems to say that the anti-christ is not far away, to realize the one-world kingdom in which he will, because of the inventions, and the satellites which he will have placed in the sky, be able to rule the whole world and know whether all the citizens of his kingdom have that mark of the beast on their right hand or forehead." John Heya, "Our Hope for Our Savior's Return," *Standard Bearer*, 66:7 (Jan. 1, 1990), p. 152.

2. Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1991). Robert W. Faid, *Gorbachev! Has the Real Antichrist Come?* (Tulsa, OK: Victory House, 1988).

that, we can know the week, month, and year, but we cannot know the day nor hour."³

Dispensational writers who are somewhat more cautious than Whisenant, nevertheless, are tempted above that which they are able. They still toy with signs in order to stir the book buying public into a spending frenzy. Walvoord writes: "Though they will not know the day nor the hour, they will be able to comprehend the approximate time because the length of the total period is forty-two months (Rev. 13:5)."⁴ Barbieri is a little more vague, but still offers indicators: "The precise moment of the Lord's return cannot be calculated by anyone. . . But the period before His coming will be like the time *in the days of Noah*."⁵ Pentecost agrees: "While no one knows the specific day or hour in which Jesus Christ will return, people who properly understand and interpret the signs will know that they are living in the last days."⁶

There are problems with such hope in signs for Christ's eschatological coming, however. First, the whole point of Jesus' instruction here is that men ought *always* to be ready: "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (Matt. 24:42). If He suggests there are historical signs that will point to the particular era (within forty-two months, a decade, or whatever), and if these signs are to precede a *still future* (to us) eschatological event, then His whole point is undermined. For then His first hearers and those following them for the next 1800 years would not be compelled always to be ready! The signs pointing to that for which they were to be ready would still lay off in the future by thousands of years!

Second, the forty-two month period suggested by Walvoord is clearly erroneous. It is specifically tied to the first century, due to its temporal context. According to the Apostle John, the forty-two months of Revelation 11 are to happen "soon," they are "near" (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10). In fact, the words in Revelation 11:1-2 are drawn from Luke 21:24, which has to do with the A.D. 70 destruction of Israel (cp. Rev. 11:1-2; Luke 21:20-24; Matt. 24:15-17). Notice that the Greek words for "gentiles/nations" and "tread under foot" in Revelation 11:1-2 show a clear Johannine dependence upon the Lord's words in Luke 21:24.

Third, both the terms "day" and "hour" are used in Scripture in a non-literal way. The Greek *hemera* ("day") may be used in a non-literal sense of an era, such as the Christian era: "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2 b). And even *hors* ("hour") may stand for an expansive period of time: "Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour" (1 Jn. 2:18).

3. Edgar C. Whisenant, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could be in 1988* (Nashville: World Bible Society, 1988), p. 6.

4. John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), p. 389.

5. Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), New Testament, pp. 76, 79.

6. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1990), p. 256.

Apparently the two words here indicate that we cannot know the extent of the longer (day) or shorter (hour) time period before His Return.

Finally, we should realize that elsewhere Christ uses language that speaks more broadly. "And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority'" (Acts 1:7). It is extremely difficult to argue that Acts 1:7, which denies the possibility of knowing "times" and "seasons," can support the notion of signs that would signify short time frames.

The Lord's Second Advent is undatable. Christ does not suggest that it is merely inaccurately datable.

Conclusion

Although the Olivet Discourse is a favorite of the date-setting doomsayers, it should not be so. The verses so often set in our near future actually occurred in our distant past! Our study over the past year has carefully shown the specific relevance of Matthew 24:1-34 to the *first century*. Furthermore, the possibility of dating the Second Coming of Christ, which is mentioned in the later verses, is specifically decried by Christ (Matt. 24:36ff). For evangelical Christians to continually give credence to such date-setting antics is a sign itself. It is a sign that more sound biblical teaching is needed by the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It explains why Christian bookstores are largely trinket shops.

Although contemporary Christians are convinced that they are living in the last days, our grandparents living through World War I and our parents living through World War II had even clearer "signs." Hear the words of an earlier prophetic writer who later changed his views. Writing in 1918 Arthur Walkington Pink sounded the alarm:

"Brethren, the end of the Age is upon us. All over the world, reflecting minds are discerning the fact that we are on the eve of another of those far-reaching crises which make the history of our race. . . Those who look out on present conditions are forced to conclude that the consummation of this dispensation is at hand. . . . The sands in the hour glass of this Day of Salvation have almost run out. The signs of the Times demonstrate it. 'But,' it may be asked, 'Have not other ages, as well as the present been crowded with signs of distress?' Undoubtedly. . . . They unduly magnified the evil, and erred in their calculations. . . But today, the Signs are so plain they cannot be mis-read, though the foolish may close their eyes and refuse to examine them. What these Signs are we have shown at length in chapter six and if the evidence there furnished has not convinced the reader that the Lord is at hand, then there is little hope that any further arguments drawn from Scripture will do so."⁷

What is worse, this book was reprinted in the 1970s! How long will Christians continue to be Chicken Littles?

7. A. W. Pink, *The Redeemers Return* (Ashland, KY: Calvary Baptist Bookstore, reprint 191 S), pp. 318-319.