



Dispensationalism in Transition



Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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BOY, O, BOYD!

(Part 1 of a series on Boyd's DTS Thesis)

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Introduction

As many of our readers know, Canadian dispensationalist pastor Alan Patrick Boyd has written a noteworthy master's thesis for Dallas Theological Seminary. It is entitled: "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)" and is dated May, 1977.¹ This Master of Theology thesis is signed by Dr. John D. Hannah, who is presently Dallas Seminary's Chairman and Professor of Historical Theology. Apparently, Hannah was in the Historical Theology Department at Dallas Seminary back in 1977.

Dr. Hannah's examining committee granted Boyd a well-deserved "A for the project, which makes profuse reference to the ancient sources in the original Greek and Latin. I estimate that this thesis is around 75% footnotes.² This scholarly 124 page thesis may be secured by inter-library loan through your public library. Though not without its flaws (e.g., occasional scanty treatment and presumptive conclusions), it really is quite helpful for exposing the anti-historical nature of the dispensational cause.

Cause for Dispensational Concern

That the historicity question is of concern to dispensationalists is evident from dispensational writings. For instance, consider John Walvoord's review of *House Divided*. Here is 400 page work confronting systemic dispensationalism head-on. But how did Walvoord review the book? He only dealt with Chapter 15, a twenty-four page study entitled: "The History of Theology on the Kingdom!"³

Our chapter on the historicity of dispensationalism apparently touched a raw nerve. Walvoord commented: "Though denied by Bahnsen and Gentry, the Christian church was predominantly premillennial in the first century and most of the second century until A.D. 190."⁴ And our readers are familiar enough with the attempts at historical

justification by H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice (*Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*), Deve Hunt (*Whatever Happened to Heaven?*⁵), and Hal Lindsey (*The Road to Holocaust*).

Recently my dispensationalist friend and adversary Rev. Tommy Ice⁷ called to inform me that he had been talking with Boyd. Boyd was surprised and dismayed that Reconstructionists were using his 1977 Dallas Theological Seminary's master's thesis in our anti-dispensational critiques.⁸ (Walvoord overlooked our references to non-Reconstructionists when he complained this historicity matter is "denied by Bahnsen and Gentry"). When Boyd wrote the historical study, he was a dispensationalist. According to Tommy Ice, he remains an ardent dispensationalist to this day.

It is certainly true that Reconstructionists have availed themselves of Boyd's historical critique of dispensationalism. I have a copy of the manuscript and have cited it in some of my books, including *House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensational Theology* (1989) and *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (1992). So have Gary North, Gary DeMar, and others. We all consider it to be a significant historical analysis.

Frankly, I was astonished when I heard that Boyd was surprised that his work was being employed against dispensationalism. What in the world did he expect? The work is one of the better insider exposés of dispensationalism that I have seen, both for what he proves (it is anti-historical) and what he assumes (the church experienced

1. As I prepared for graduation from Tennessee Temple College (with a B.A. in Bible), I applied to Dallas Seminary in 1973. I ended up going to Grace Theological seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana, however. I almost crossed paths with Boyd.

2. In the first 20 pages I counted 521 lines of footnotes and 157 lines of text. Nigel Lea is quite envious of this accomplishment.

3. See my response to Walvoord's review: "Where's the Saaf?," *Dispensationalism in Transition* (Nov., 1990). See also Gary North, "First, the Haad Goas Soft," *Dispensationalism in Transition* (Aug., 1980).

4. John F. Walvoord, "House Divided" (Book Review), *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 147:587 (July-Sept., 1990) 372. He doaa not tell us why most of the Church droppad premillennialism in A.D. 191; he just informs us that the Church was premillennial until A.D. 190. But I think I have if figured out: You take 1260 (the daya of Tribulation, Rev. 11:3) and subtract 686 (the number of the Tribulator, Rev. 13:18) and you get 584. From this you subtract the 70 weeks of God's time reckoning (Ore. 9:24) and you get 524.

From this you subtract 144 (from the 144,000 protected during the Tribulation, Rev. 7:4), leaving you with 360. The obvious next move that does not even need arguing is to get the square of fifteen (12 apostles plus the 3 of the Trinity), which is 225. You subtract that (see God's warning about subtraction in Deut. 4:2; a warning obviously not headed by the Tribulator) from the preceding 360 figure, which results in 155 from which the literal method would lead you to add (see Acts 2:41) the number 42 (Rev. 11:2). The figure arrived at is 197. From this you subtract 6 (Exe. 20:11), a work weak, which obviously indicates the Tribulation saints are weak due to persecution in the Tribulation. Viola! You get 191, a prophetically significant date due to Biblical numerics. This amply explains why in A.D. 191 premillennialism fell into disrepute: The Tribulation numerical symbolism in which apostasy is expected anticipates that result. What could be plainer?

5. See review in *Dispensationalism in Transition*: "Shall We Gather at the River?" (Nov., 1989) and "Whatever Happened to 'The Earth is the Lord's'?" (Dec. 1989).

6. See my review in *Dispensationalism in Transition*: "Dispensationalism's Achilles Head," Parts 1 and 2 (Aug. and Sept., 1989).

7. For a taped radio discussion between Ice and me, entitled "Dispensationalism or postmillennialism?," aand \$5.00 to ma at: 48 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

8. Apparently he is not vary interestad in or even sparsely read in Christian Reconstruction since hia thesis has bean mentioned over a number of years in wr writings.

a "rapid departure from New Testament eschatological truth," [Preface, n1]). According to Ice, Boyd feels that his arguments have been taken out of context and wrongly employed in anti-dispensational polemics.

I propose to give a few issues of the newsletter over to a consideration of a few of the major contra-dispensational conclusions in Boyd's work. I do not see how his research has been inappropriately employed in the debate against dispensationalism. In addition, I think that our readers should become more intimately acquainted with the thesis and its utility in the eschatological debate. (All references to the thesis will be noted by parenthetical pagination, rather than be space consuming footnotes.)

The Thesis of the Thesis

In his Preface, Boyd notes that "the author would like to acknowledge, on the basis of classroom and private discussion, that Dr. Charles Ryrie, whose statements regarding the historicity of dispensational premillennialism in the Church fathers are carefully scrutinized in this thesis has clarified his position on these matters. Unfortunately, he has not published these clarifications, and it is hoped that he will do so in the near future" (Preface). It is obvious at the outset that Boyd is critically "scrutinizing" Ryrie's assertions on the matter of dispensational historicity. It is further obvious that Boyd disagrees with Ryrie's assertions, so that he expects Ryrie to change them in public. Unfortunately for Boyd, Ryrie's imminent change of position may take as long as the dispensational imminent rapture – thousands of years.

The first words of the actual text of Boyd's thesis opens with an offending citation drawn from Ryrie's *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (1953): "Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church" (p. 1). Boyd comments: "The purpose of this thesis is to determine the historical validity of this statement within the context of the patristic writings spanning the post-apostolic era until the death of Justin Martyr. In other words, the purpose of this thesis is to determine whether Dr. Ryrie's 'premillennialism' is similar to, or dissimilar to, the premillennialism exhibited in some of the patristic writings under consideration" (pp. 1-2).

Boyd goes on to point out in his first footnote: "It is the present conviction of this writer that there was a rapid departure from New Testament eschatological truth in the early patristic period. Therefore, it warrants the writer little concern that there are not roots of dispensational premillennialism in that period, but instead the roots of both post-tribulationism and amillennialism. The roots of dispensational premillennialism are Scriptural, and the most one could hope to find⁹ in the early patristic period would be some *remnants* of it (as this thesis demonstrates there are). Similarly, it warrants little concern that there is evident post-tribulationism and seminal amillennialism in these patristic writings" (Preface, n1).

9. Why? Why is it that "the most one could hope to find" would be remnants? Is this an historical law of some sort? Or a dispensational assumption?

In this series I will provide a seriatim survey of significant elements in Boyd's presentation.

And in this Corner. . . !

Boyd comes out punching in his Introduction following the Preface. On his first page, containing four lines of text and thirty-one lines of footnote material, Boyd notes that "it is very evident that a vital aspect of Dr. Ryrie's pre-millennial apologetic is based upon patristic eschatological thought. . . . The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether the reputed historical foundation for his premillennialism really exists" (p. 1, n1). In his conclusion, after only five rounds (i.e., chapters), he declares a TKO: "It is the conclusion of this thesis that Dr. Ryrie's statement is historically invalid within the chronological framework of this thesis" (p. 89). All that lies between these two statements is carefully presented, tightly-argued truth, based on the writings of Clement of Rome, the author of 2 Clement, Barnabas, *The Didache*, Ignatius, Papias, Hermas, Polycarp, Aristides, and Justin Martyr. He even includes the writing of the Gnostic heretic Cerinthus "since he was an early premillennialist" (p. 14), and "indisputably" so (p. 41).

The purpose of Boyd's thesis, then, is to demonstrate the error in declaring Ryrie's (and Dallas Seminary's) type of premillennialism, i.e., dispensationalism, to be the historic premillennialism of the early Church. Boyd is not impressed with the assumption of "continuative similarity of ancient and modern premillennialism" (p. 2, n.1). This, of course, is the major point of Reconstructionist employment of Boyd. Dispensationalism is fundamentally different from early premillennialism – *despite the recurring claims of its virtual identity with patristic premillennialism*.

Reconstructionists do not argue that the early Church lacked premillennial adherents.¹⁰ Due to the problem of Zionism in the early Church (see: Acts 10-11; Galatians), this is to be expected. Our use of Boyd is basically three-fold: (1) He demonstrates there are *fundamental* differences between dispensationalism and historic premillennialism that should forbid use of historicity arguments for dispensationalism (hence Boyd's special pleading for the rapid declension of patristic Christianity from the truth). (2) There are far fewer premillennialists in the first two centuries than dispensationalists admit. (3) There are early, nascent, fully orthodox, non-millennial views circulating in the early Church.

Conclusion

In that dispensationalism is in transition, it is important for us to understand some of the reasons for that transition. A part of that rationale is traceable to the historical question. As Jerry Clower would say, dispensationalism is "a new fangled innovation."

10. See for example: Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), pp. 238-243.