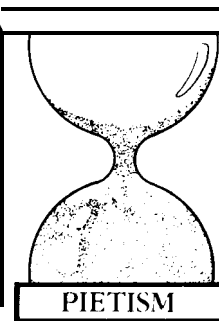


# Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## THE VANISHING FORTUNES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

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To the wary student of theology, there appears to be increasing evidence of a paradigm shift among **evangelicals** – a shift *away from* dispensationalism. Given the nature of our newsletter in particular and our interest in theology in general, such warrants our attention.

We live in a remarkable era theologically. Not only is postmillennialism exercising a renewed growth and nascent influence, but dispensationalism has fallen upon hard times. Though early dispensationalism greatly prospered on the evangelical Christians' hunger for Bible study, a growing number of dispensational believers is delving a little too deeply into such study. As a result of this, tremendous dissatisfaction is becoming a recurring phenomenon among dedicated dispensationalists.

### Lay Disorientation

Many thinking laymen, embarrassed at their naivete and disappointed with the superficiality of the system, are pulling up their stakes and forsaking the dispensational encampment altogether. Dispensationalist pop-theologian Hal Lindsey has sold multiple millions of **eschatological** works, which have been feverishly consumed by the faithful. And I do mean "feverishly."<sup>1</sup> His works are largely responsible for rapture fever among so many. Four-color, durable coated canvas wall charts have been drawn up (\$39.95), B-grade tribulation-horror movies produced (*A Thief in the Night*, etc.), fantasy role playing (Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal = Russia, Moscow, and Tobolsk<sup>2</sup>), rapture-guessing dates set (1988, 1989, etc.) – all to no avail.

Lindsey's famous forty year prophecy (based on the establishment of the State of Israel) has come and gone. And with zero historical effect. Whisenant, jumping late – and a little too hard – on the 1988 bandwagon, suffered an embarrassing fall, greatly disappointing many dispensational enthusiasts. Lindsey and Whisenant are cited as embarrassments to dispensationalism by dispensational theologian, Robert P. Lightner.<sup>3</sup>

Several books over the last few years have expressed concern over dispensationalism's decline. The most recent is probably Tim LaHaye's *No Fear of the Storm*. In that work he mentions:

This book was ignited by a letter I received from an old friend that contained a vicious and frenzied attack on the pre-Trib Rapture theory. Obviously, my friend had changed his views! We had corresponded at some length over my concern that he was working too closely with **Reconstructionists** who refused to accept the plain teachings of the Bible on the nature of the kingdom of God<sup>4</sup>

LaHaye mentioned several other such examples-all in explaining the rationale for his new book.

And, of course, my readers are probably familiar with Dave Hunt's lamentation: "Today, a growing number of Christians [sic] are exchanging the hope for the rapture for a new hope. . . ."<sup>5</sup> And House and Ice's concern that "the premillennial position is probably more on the decline at the present time than the other two views."<sup>6</sup>

Grace Theological Seminary (which I attended for two years and which has been a major dispensational academic institution) is undergoing a major reduction and re-vamping of their program due to declining student enrollment. In the "President to Pastor" newsletter dated "1st Quarter 1993" the following comments are found: "In 1981, Grace had nearly 450 students. This year, that number is 130." "At Grace, the number of Master of Divinity degree students was 310 in 1981. Today, there are 90."<sup>7</sup>

Declining interest, resulting in unprofitability, is claiming the *Grace Theological Journal*. It will soon cease publication altogether.<sup>8</sup>

The apparent health of Dallas Theological Seminary seems to be related to the theological development away from old-line dispensationalism. Tommy Ice, a Dallas Seminary graduate and my anti-Reconstructionist nemesis, has indicated to me in phone conversations that he doubts Dallas Theological Seminary will be dispensational in the next generation. And the seminary's *Bible Knowledge Commentary* seems to support his concern over changes in dispensationalism (though it is still dispensational).

1. See: Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991) and Gary North, *Rapture Fever* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993).

2. The scheme presented by Hal Lindsey in *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 64-65. But see: J. Paul Tanner, "Daniel's King of the North": Do We Owe Russia an Apology?, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (September 1992): 315-328. Also: "Ezekiel's ro's does not point to 'Russia' merely because the words sound similar. Neither should one identify 'Meshech' with 'Moscow' or 'Tubal' with 'Tobolsk.' Ezekiel had historical places in mind (not modern-day names) and these areas must be located in Ezekiel's time." Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983), 1299.

3. Robert P. Lightner, *The Last Days Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding the Different Views of Prophecy* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 171-172.

4. Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm: Why Christians Will Escape All of the Tribulation* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1992), 9.

5. Dave Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), back cover.

6. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), 210.

7. "Seminary education for the 21st century: An interview with top Grace administrators," *President to Pastor* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Grace college and Grace Theological Seminary, 1st Quarter 1993), 4.

8. *Ibid.*, 7.

## Theological Overhauling

Such upheaval is not lost on dispensational scholars. Dispensational theologians such as Robert L. Saucy, John S. **Feinberg**, and David L. Turner, to name but a few, are making serious (and **welcome!**) emendations to **dispensationalism**. And despite loud defenses of such as "fine-tuning," these men are not merely adjusting the system (which is always necessary within any theological system). They are bringing in whole replacement parts (engines, transmissions, and so forth) from other theological systems as they make fundamental substitutions in major components of the dispensational system itself.

Some of the changes are in areas once considered the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. By definition the *sine qua non* of a system are *essential conditions* of that system. The Latin phrase, roughly translated, is: "without which, there is none."

In his classic work, *Dispensationalism Today*, leading dispensational theologian Charles **Ryrie** set forth what he deemed (and others long endorsed as) the three *sine qua non* of dispensationalism: (1) A consistent separation of Israel and the Church, (2) a **literalistic** hermeneutic to justify such a separation, and (3) the priority of the glory of God in **history**.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately for dispensationalists, these *sine qua non* are being forsaken today. One can almost hear Ryrie lament:

Henceforth there is laid up for me a place in the dispensationalist Natural History museum, which Tommy Ice, the dispensational antiquarian, shall keep for me at that day: and not to me only, but unto both of them also that love this system. For Saucy hath forsaken me, having loved this present development in theology, and is departed unto academia; **Feinberg** to serious book publishing, Turner unto **semi-preterist** type thinking. Only J. Dwight is here with me. Take **Walvoord**, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for reminiscing. And Tommy have I sent to newsletter publishing. The cloak to hide myself that I left at Dallas at Chafer's grave, when thou **comest**, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the really old, **pre-shift** parchments.

The third element of **Ryrie's** *sine qua non* – the glory of God as the goal of history – has received scant attention. Reformed theologians have always denied that it is peculiar to dispensationalism.

Regarding Israel, **Feinberg** disputes **Ryrie's** formulation, noting that it is "not the key" and is "somewhat misleading" and that it is offers merely "a naive sense of **consistency**."<sup>10</sup> A new book edited by Dallas Theological Seminary professors, Craig A. **Blaising** and Darrell L. Bock is entitled *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*. Zondervan's catalog advertisement reads:

This book views Israel and the church as distinct theological institutions, but also as successive phases in a historically progressive and **eschatologically** converging redemptive program. This redemptive program accounts for both the similarities and the differences between

Israel and the church. The book suggests that the similarities are greater than dispensationalists have previously thought to be the **case**.<sup>11</sup>

New wave **dispensationalist** theologian Robert L. Saucy is creating a genuine wave-pool as a tourist attraction for dispensationalists. His studies on the kingdom and Israel are calling for a serious **re-thinking** of some fundamental issues in **dispensationalism**. Saucy's *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-dispensational Theology* is scheduled for release this month. Zondervan's catalog advertisement notes:

The book is solidly dispensational in perspective in affirming that the Old Testament prophecies are completely fulfilled in the future, that the nation of Israel has a prophetic future, and that Israel is not the church. Saucy departs from classic dispensationalism, however, in showing that (1) the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy begins in the present church age, and (2) there is a continuity between the church and the Old Testament messianic program rather than an unrelated mystery parenthesis.<sup>12</sup>

Of the second *sine qua non*, John S. **Feinberg** has charged **Ryrie's** view of **hermeneutics** as being "too **simplicistic**."<sup>13</sup> Even the Dallas Seminary produced *Bible Knowledge Commentary* has breached important elements of this **hermeneutic** – and in a contradictory fashion. In J. Dwight Pentecost's article on Matthew, we read of Matthew **24:29**: The Lord's return "will be accompanied by unusual displays in the heavens (v. 29; cf. Isa. 13:1 O; **34:4**; Joel 2:31; 3:15-1 6)."<sup>14</sup> This is old-line dispensational talk. In the Old Testament volume we read of the same language in Isaiah 13:10: "The statements in **13:10** about the heavenly bodies (*stars . . . sun . . . moon*) no longer functioning may figuratively describe the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East. The same would be true of *the heavens* trembling and *the earth* shaking (v. 13), figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing **destruction**."<sup>15</sup> Such examples could be multiplied to exhaustion.

## Conclusion

The good news is: Dispensationalism is being forsaken by many and, among those who remain behind, it is being radically altered in a **covenantal** directional **6** The bad news is: Like the Roman Empire, dispensationalism is so massive that it will take a long time to collapse. Hence, the tremendous flurry of sales of we-told-you-so books during the Gulf **War**.<sup>17</sup>

11. Academic and Professional Book and Software Catalog (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Fall/Winter 1992) 6.

12. *Ibid.* 3.

13. John S. **Feinberg**, "Systems of Continuity," in **Feinberg**, ad., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 73.

14. John F. **Walvoord** and Roy B. **Zuck**, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983), 78.

15. John A. **Martin**, in *ibid.*, 1059.

16. I have some tapes on related themes available at \$4 each: "Hermeneutics, Israel, and Dispensationalism," "BJU Student Questions Postmillennialism," and a four tape eat: "Preterism and Postmillennialism" (\$12).

17. Joa Maxwell, "Prophecy Booke Become Big Sellers," *Christianity Today* (March 11, 1991) 60.

9. Charles C. **Ryrie**, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 4346.

10. *Ibid.*, 71.