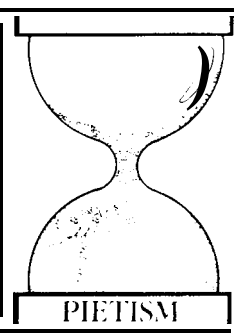


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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ASSURANCE AND LORDSHIP SALVATION

The Dispensational Concern

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th. D.

I **continue** our treatment of the question of Lordship Salvation. Dispensationalism as a system is thoroughly committed to an evangelical brand of antinomianism that removes the Law from consideration for the Christian. (Though this is not necessarily true for each dispensationalist as an individual, e.g., John MacArthur and Homer Kent.) According to Scripture, the Apostle Paul is "the Apostle to the Gentiles" (Rem. 11 :13; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim 1:1 1). Yet he declares the Law to be "established" (Rem. 3:31). He calls it "holy, just, and good" (Rem, 7:14). He posits it as the measure of love (Rem, 13:8-11).¹ Yet the dispensationalist says it cannot be a measure to determine a professing Christian's true commitment.

Dispensationalism is also fundamentally constrained to uphold the unconditionality of God's covenant. This is necessary in order to secure their doctrine of a Jewish kingdom with its restored sacrificial system,² rebuilt Temple, earthly rule (and second humiliation [Rev. 20:8-9]!) of Christ, and reversion back to an age of racial superiority for the Jews. It is held that unconditional covenants cannot tolerate the role of evidential justification in Lordship theology.

Lordship Salvation doctrine runs headlong into precious "dispensational truth." Hence, the widespread antipathy to Lordship Salvation-as evidenced in the strong dispensational "persecution" of John MacArthur for his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. His radio program was dropped from a number of dispensational radio stations

An Important Question

But now we must consider the whole question of *assurance of salvation*. Lordship advocates—such as myself, John Gerstner, Gary North, and others—are thorough-going Calvinists. We are committed to the absolute sovereignty of God and the glory of His saving grace—and the security which that sovereign grace affords. We are not Arminians who sing "If We All Get to Heaven" or "Every Other Day with Jesus." We rejoice to sing: "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me."

A dispensationalist non-Lordship advocate and acquaintance of mine, Rev. J. Kevin Butcher (who studied under Zane Hodges at Dallas Theological Seminary), has written an article which expresses concern about the alleged loss of assurance in Lordship advocacy.³ He writes: "If assurance of salvation is based on external works, how does one differentiate between works produced by the flesh and those produced by the Spirit" (p. 41).

In that this is a commonly expressed concern by non-Lordship dispensationalists, I will answer this question in this edition of our newsletter. My response—in classic preacher style—has several points.

Turning the Tables

To the dispensationalist's question "How does one differentiate between works produced by the flesh and those produced by the Spirit," we can turn the tables. We respond that, as a matter of fact, the "problem" is not simply one for the non-Lordship advocate. We would counter with a like question: "If assurance of salvation is based on faith alone, how does one differentiate between faith produced by the flesh and that produced by the Spirit?"

In our July newsletter we noted that the Bible indicates quite clearly that there is a *true faith* (produced by the Spirit) and that there is also a *spurious faith* (produced by the flesh). There is the genuine article and there is the imitation.

It is clear that Jesus encountered spurious believers-believers after the flesh—during His earthly ministry. Classic illustrations are found in John 2:23-25 and 8:30-44 (which are dealt with in my book *Lord of the Saved*, available from me for \$7.50 at the address in note 1). And He illustrated the problem in parables (e.g., Matt. 13:1-9). Also in that July newsletter we noted a classic illustration of such in the case of Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24). The "problem" of distinguishing "of the flesh" and "of the Spirit" is not unique to Lordship advocacy.

Assurance and Works

But we must respond that assurance is not based solely on works. Actually there are several avenues of assurance. Let me list a **few**, with very brief comments.

First, assurance is partly rooted in theological knowledge. There must be an understanding of the nature of salvation, i.e. of eternal life, for there to be a confident assurance. If someone is a thorough-going Arminian, he will not have an understanding of the sovereign and eternal nature of salvation. His own theology would wash assurance from His experience by teaching its impossibility. Analogously some of the early Christians were concerned that the Day of the Lord had already come or was past (2 Thess. 2:1 -2).⁴ They were therefore fearfully alarmed due to their misunderstanding of the apostolic message. A wrong understanding of salvation is inimical to assurance, just as a wrong understanding of eschatology is inimical to appropriate Christian action.⁵ So even a pure and simple faith, when confused by a misconstrued theology, can lack assurance.

Likewise there must be some apprehension of the nature of God. The believer must be aware of the possibility that God should lie. He must understand that the gifts and callings of God are without repentance. A newborn believer may come out of a social or religious context wherein God is not properly understood. Thus, it may take some further training in Scripture to secure His assurance. And this is

despite the fact that there is a pure and simple, Spirit-caused faith. This is not to say that all new believers may need some theological training before coming to assurance. Indeed, it may be that most do not; they may receive enough Scripture in their evangelistic encounter to appreciate this glorious fact of God's immutability. But the mere exercise of faith does not necessarily establish assurance.

Second, there must be a receiving of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Remans 8:15-16 says: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." Now it probably is the case that in most conversion experiences the Lord does minister the Spirit to the newborn child of God in such a way as to relate the security that is now His. Certainly in *all* conversions the Holy Spirit is operative (John 3:8). But His spiritual testimony regarding assurance of salvation may not be grasped by the newborn convert.

Third, obedience to the commands of God foster assurance of salvation. This seems abundantly clear in Scripture. And this, of course, is the main point of dispute between Lordship and non-Lordship advocates. Hear the Word of God on this matter. The entire First Epistle of John is an exposition of the theme of assurance rooted in good works. One of my most enlightening courses at Grace Theological Seminary in the mid-1970s was in Dr. James L. Boyer's Greek exegesis class, wherein we studied the Johannine Epistles. Dr. Boyer is a dispensationalist Lordship Advocate.

"And hereby we do know that we know him, *if*⁴ we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. (1 John 2:3-5).

"And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him" (1 John 3:19). "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God" (1 John 3:21).

"These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). The "things" he wrote were such things as mentioned in the preceding verses I have cited (and others). These "tests of life," these "checking of the pulse" tests bring assurance of eternal life.

Peter concurs with the Johannine emphasis: "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall" (2 Pet. 1:10). And because of such passages of Scripture, Paul can urge professing believers: "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobrates?" (2 Cor. 13:5).

Concluding Comments

We must make a theological distinction between *assurance* and *security*. The two are not the same thing. Assurance is subjective, rooted in the heart of the believer. It may wane and wane over time. Security is objective, rooted in the plan of God. It is eternal—whether the believer himself apprehends

it or not!

If we say assurance is essential to true faith, then we are ultimately saying: "No man is saved in Christ until he has come to believe that Christ has saved him forever," This would involve not *faith in Christ* for salvation, but rather *faith in faith*! R. L. Dabney rightfully notes that this requires a revelation beyond the Scriptures, because the Bible does not speak specifically to the individual in question.⁵ Nowhere in the Bible do we learn, for instance, that Ken Gentry is among the elect (even though my name, which is related to the word "Genesis" means "a person of good birth and breeding"!).

Assurance is initially and fundamentally rooted in the promise of God. He is faithful to His promise of salvation to the true believer. Certainly assurance can and should accompany conversion. In fact, it is the duty of the believer to be certainly assured of being in a state of grace. But one of the means of assurance that God has given us is that of cultivating assurance through Spirit-led obedience to His commands.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I will be speaking at eschatology conferences in Elkton, Maryland, on September 17-18 (info: 302-764-3988) and in Sacramento, California, on October 30-31 (info: 916-488-5569). I will also teach a course on eschatology at Christ College this fall. For more information call: (803) 288-8893.

⁴ For a succinct, eighty page introduction to the theonomic ethic you may want to order my: *God's Law in the Modern World* (\$5.50). Write to me at: 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636. I also have a six tape set for \$25 entitled: "The Westminster Confession on God's Law" (Stock # 21). God's Law tape topics: "Its Character," "Its Function," "The Graciousness of Law," "The Obedience of Grace," "God's Law and Man's – Government," and "Objections to God's Law."

⁵ In a humorous and yet penetrating way, non-dispensationalists note that dispensationalists believe that there is literally coming an era in which the lamb and the lion will lie down together – only to have a dispensationalist priest snatch up the lamb and slit his throat for an offering, while petting the lion!

⁶ J. Kevin Butcher, "A Critique of the Gospel According to Jesus," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 2:1 (Spring, 1989), 27-43.

⁷ For a detailed exposition of 2 Thessalonians 2 send \$3.00 to me: "The Man of Lawlessness" (see address in note 1 above). If you buy Gary DeMar's second edition of *Last Days Madness*, you will need this paper to correct his slight errors on this passage! Don't tell DeMar I said this; I will deny it if you do.

⁸ See Gary North, *Rapture Fever: Why Dispensationalism is Paralyzed* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1993). Available through I.C.E. for \$12.95 plus postage.

⁹ The "if" here is a third class conditional structure. It speaks of an undetermined possibility with the prospect of determination. We *know* Him if and when we *keep His commandments*.

¹⁰ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973 [1 878]), 703.

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