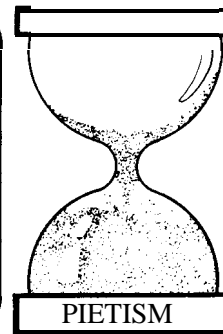


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Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



December, 1993

DISPENSATIONAL METHODOLOGY IS CONTAGIOUS: Part I

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

Since I write for Gary North's Institute for Christian Economics, I suppose I am somewhat in his image. In 1980 he produced a manuscript for 270 page book in just two weeks! (North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory* p. vii).

Being only a dim reflection of Gary, though, I cannot do as well. However, I will produce this newsletter in one week (hey! it's eight pages of double-spaced manuscript!). One qualification, though: My teen years were identical to the Beatles' years: I became thirteen in 1963 when the "British invasion" began and I ceased being a teenager in 1970, when the Beatles disbanded. Consequently, I may need "eight days a week" to do this!

A Review of a Review

Now what am I getting at? This morning I received a phone call from my good friend, Rev. Charles Roberts of Sumter, South Carolina. Charles asked me if I had seen the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* that he had just received in his mail. It contained a heated review of my *He Shall Have Dominion* (Herman Hanko, *PRTJ* November, 1993) 33-37). When I went home for lunch, I found the issue in the mail. I am delighted Charles informed me of this review, or might have missed it. I do not normally read *PRTJ* because they have been stuck on the theological issue of common grace for thirty years.

A response to this amillennial review of my postmillennial work in this newsletter on dispensationalism might seem out of place. But as soon as I had read it I thought: This review follows the same pattern as the assault on *House Divided* by John Walvoord. The pattern is the "old hit-and-run ploy."

Hanko's review, much like Walvoord's, generated heat, but no light. I could tell both of these men disliked my books and that they disagreed with particular points, but could not see where the argument was supposed to have failed. Like Walvoord, Hanko failed to engage the *argument* of the book except in the most cursory way. This is a worse mistake on Hanko's part for two reasons: (1) His review was several times longer than Walvoord's; he had space available. (2) He is a reputable reformed scholar that has the capacity to do better.

Let me begin my two newsletter response to this review, which involves dispensational methodological hit-and-runism. My approach will basically be *seriatim* response. I am astounded that Hanko claims to have actually read the book. It rather appears that he skimmed it to find annoying statements! Or perhaps he asked a student to read it and underline things he thought were objectionable.

The Historical Question

Hanko (Review, p. 33): *There is some irony in Gentry's proof from the ancient church fathers. After deriding pre-mils for claiming that the early church fathers supported the pre-mil*

position, Gentry finds an abundance of "proof" that, after all, the church fathers were post-rol.

But do I argue for an "abundance" of proof that "the church fathers were postmil?" The unwary reader, exhausted from reading thirty years worth of exposition of the common grace question, would think I was making the opposite claim as the premillennialists, i.e., that all the church fathers were postmillennial! This is altogether incredible!

Actually on pages 73ff I am responding to premil arguments such as Pentecost's bold and erroneous claim: "premillennial belief was the *universal* belief in the church for two under and fifty years after the death of Christ." I mention this, then comment: "In that my primary concern is to provide data for tracing the rise of postmillennialism, I will only briefly comment on the general historical confusion regarding postmillennialism. But it does deserve at least passing comment" (*HSHD*, 73).

I note a few pages later that: "It is clear that postmillennialism has undergone much systematization in the post reformation era. In its simplest form, however, adumbrations of it appear in antiquity" (*HSHD*, p. 79). I am only arguing for "adumbrations" of postmillennialism that are detectable in some early writers. I mention mere "indicators" of "nascent postmillennialism" (*Ibid.*). I specifically cite comments from Origen, Eusebius, Athanasius, and Augustine (*HSHD*, pp. 80-87). These are only four fathers! I am primarily attempting to rebut the charge that Whitby founded postmillennialism in 1703 (*HSHD*, pp. 77-78).

I close that section in *HSHD* with this statement: "I have shown that postmillennialism is *not without historical precedent* in the early centuries of the Christian Church. Indeed, it has been the framework of *some* of the noted minds of the Church." Some "elements of postmillennialism" are merely "present in antiquity" (*HSHD*, p. 92). I did not make the "ironic" (Review, p. 33) assertion, as the premillennialist do, that "the church fathers [all of them? the majority?] were post-rol."

Creation Mandate Argument

Hanko (Review, p. 34): *Talking of the creation mandate, Gentry maintains that man continues to fulfill his creation calling and that, in the fulfillment of this calling, the kingdom of Christ will be realized here upon earth. This is a serious error, for it fails to reckon with the fact that man's total depravity and the curse upon the creation itself, make it impossible . . .*

Did he read the book, or didn't he? Does he review like Walvoord? I know he doesn't plagiarize like Lindsey (see *House Divided*, pp. 367f). The reader of his review would conclude two quite erroneous things about my argument from the Cultural Mandate: (1) I do not teach that it will be *redeemed* man under the blessings of God's redemptive covenant that will further the kingdom cause of Christ. (2) I do not deal with the problem of

total depravity.

I note that the Cultural Mandate is useful to show God's design for creating man (which fits well with postmillennialism) (HSHD, pp. 179-181). And it implies that to do so correctly man must be "under command to act obediently in terms of God's ultimate sovereignty" (HSHD, p. 179). I specifically argue against Hanks himself when I note: "Hanks's objection to postmillennialism's employment of the Cultural Mandate is rooted in a very deep sense of the genuine fearsome power of sin. The postmillennialist, however, sees God's continuance of the Cultural Mandate, but upon on a new principle: the very real and even greater power of redemption" (HSHD, p. 182). What is more, I have a whole section in the book that considers this objection to postmillennialism: "Sin Undermines the Postmillennial Hope" (HSHD, pp. 449-453). There I even cite Hanks and some of his fellow Protestant Reformed theologians!

Could anyone who had read my book really state that I "fail to reckon with the fact" of "man's total depravity" (Review, p. 34)? Perhaps I was not convincing, but I did "reckon with the fact."

The Abrahamic Covenant

Hanks (Review, p. 34): *Although Gentry is hard-pressed to find post-tilt ideas in God's covenant with Abraham, he finally discovers them in the promise to Abraham of the land of Canaan, which is said to be 'a type of the whole earth.' The fact that this promise includes nations is also proof that the kingdom shall be earthly.*

What in the world does he mean that I am "hard-pressed to find post-tilt ideas" and that I only "finally discover them" in the Abrahamic Covenant? On pages 189-195 of HSHD I carefully explain the Abrahamic Covenant from a postmillennial perspective. I suppose since I did not charge through the passage like a bull in china shop, I am evidently hard-pressed!

When I actually turn to discuss the Abrahamic Covenant, my very first sentence reads: "In Genesis the Abrahamic Covenant continues the redemptive theme begun in Genesis 3:15 and traced through Genesis 6-9. The active redemptive restoration of the fundamental relationship of man with God is greatly intensified through God's establishing His gracious covenant with Abraham and his seed" (HSHD, p. 189).

Interpretation of Prophecy

Hanks (Review, p. 34): *Although Gentry rejects a literal interpretation of prophecy in his vendetta against pre-mills, he adopts the same literal interpretation when he turns to prophecy as support of a post-tilt position. Isaiah 65:17-25, e.g., is said to refer to the millennium . . .*

My complaint against premillennialism is its a priori restriction of its prophetic hermeneutic to literalism. Neither I nor Hanks would ever say that no prophecy maybe literal. Hanks believes that the Messiah was literally born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2) of a virgin (Isa. 7:14). Are these not literal?

It is true that sometimes I interpret prophetic texts literally—when the context demands it. Hanks makes the exact opposite error of premillennialism (hence my interest in reviewing him in my dispensational newsletter!): He apparently demands a

straight jacket, a priori hermeneutic for all prophetic Scripture. At least that is the best I can imagine in light of his plaint against me!

As a good amillennialist Hanks would apply Isaiah 65:17-20 either to Heaven or the consummate, eternal New Earth. But how can the concepts of death, aging, birth, and curse have any symbolic significance for that glorious era? I dealt very carefully with this very amillennial problem, citing amillennial authors on the topic (HSHD, pp. 361-364).

Universalist

Hanks (Review, p. 35): *While Gentry himself does not want to be a universalist in the sense that all men will be saved, he nevertheless uses the so-called universalistic passages as proof of his position. This is strange and alarming. Does John 3:16, e.g., refer to God's love for all men? If this refers to an earthly kingdom, does the giving of God's Son so that believers may have eternal life refer to all men head for head? Or does it refer to all men head for head? What does Gentry believe?*

This is strange and alarming! Here is evidence of a reviewer who has not read the book he purports to review! He cannot convince me that he read the book, just as Walvoord could not trick me into thinking he read *House Divided*.

My position on the passages in question is identical to (or should I admit, derived from!) B. B. Warfield, the great anti-universalist Calvinist theologian. Hanks's reader will not have any inkling that I cite Warfield in my defense! I will be deemed a universalist, despite my express denial of universalist! (See: HSHD, pp. 295-298, where I defend the doctrine of eternal hell against annihilationists and universalists).

What are we to do with these apparent universalistic passages? Ignore them in the hope they will go away? Am I using a forbidden portion of Scripture?

In fact, in the very chapter from which Hanks is quoting, I have a major section entitled "Vastness, Not Universalist" (HSHD, p. 253). There I even follow Alexander and Matthew — Henry in suggesting that the ratio of the converted to the lost will be on the order of "five-to-one" (HSHD, p. 254).

What is worse, on the very page he references with great concern, I clearly argue that the word "world" speaks of the "system of men and things." The world is the system as such, not the conglomerate of all men, not the mass of individuals (HSHD, p. 264). I carefully tell my reader exactly what I believe, despite Hanks's query: "What does Gentry believe?" I write: "though these passages [e.g., John 3:16-17] do not teach an 'each-and-every universalist,' as in liberal thought, they do set forth the certain, divinely assured prospect of a coming day in which the world as a system (a kosmos) of men and things, and their relationships, will be redeemed. A day in which the world will operate systematically upon a Christian ethico-redemptive basis" (HSHD, p. 267).

I will conclude this review of a review in the next newsletter. *Special note:* Several readers over the years have asked me about my views of worship, especially about the issue of exclusive psalmody. I have a five tape series on the topic available for \$23.00 for those interested. Write to me at: 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

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