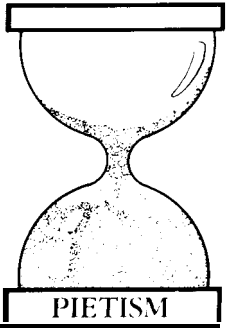


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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DISPENSATIONAL METHODOLOGY IS CONTAGIOUS: Part III

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As with the past two issues, we are reviewing a review of my book *He Shall Have Dominion*. The review is by amillennial theologian Herman Hanko. It appeared in *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* (November 1993) on pages 33-37.

I will confess that the greatest frustration I have as a postmillennialist is the lack of effort by many detractors to really understand the position.¹ The dispensationalists are notorious for such misconstrual. They are too busy cutting out headlines from the newspapers and pasting them on their book covers. Consequently, they do not have time to do the careful reading and theological analysis necessary to refute postmillennialism.

But here we have an amillennialist writing as if he were an operational dispensationalist! For us to consider the arguments of our opponents and show their similarity of methodological error is, I believe, helpful for our responding to objections. So consider this a field trip away from the dispensationalist morgue to see how the contagion of methodological error has infected those outside the camp of "dispensational truth."

The Kingdom's Nature

As I mentioned in my last newsletter, Hanko is quite alarmed that postmillennialists attempt to promote the cause of Christ by applying biblical principles to real life issues. In this he exactly parallels the lament of Dave Hunt: "Whatever happened to Heaven?" This exposes a fundamental error in amillennialism that has kinship with dispensationalism. His plaint is a choice statement of amillennial irrelevance and will be quoted at length.

Hanko (p. 36): *The post-rol theologians are preoccupied with this world. Gentry's book makes a few passing references to the fact that the kingdom is spiritual (225) and that perhaps the earthly kingdom will be preserved in the heavenly though transformed (301), but he has no time for this heavenly kingdom. He is preoccupied with this earth. The post-rol thinker will do all in his power to bring about this earthly kingdom.*

This notion stands in flat contradiction to the whole tenor of Scripture. God's purpose as He eternally determined it is to glorify Himself through Christ in the heavenly realization of the glorious kingdom which Christ came to establish. The original creation, the fall, salvation of the elect and the cosmos through the cross, all serve the purpose of God as He determined to realize it when Christ comes again.

In the meantime, God's people are called to engage in the work of gathering of the church, in representing the cause of God in a wicked world, in walking as pilgrims and strangers in the earth (cf. 1 Peter), in the suffering for the cause of the

gospel, and in seeking those things which are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1-3). Their hope is fastened upon the full perfection of all things when the world shall be destroyed, the wicked cast into hell, and the glorious kingdom established in the new heavens and the new earth.

This is absolutely beautiful! I wish he had reviewed my book *before* it was printed so that I could include this statement. Except for the reference to the present establishment of the kingdom, Hanko's statement could have been penned by Hal Lindsey (there are no big words in it to cause Lindsey any trouble).

Let me first consider the accuracy of his reflection upon my work. Or should I say, the *inaccuracy* of his reflection?

Hanko charges "Gentry's book makes a few passing references to the fact that the kingdom is spiritual (225)." Clearly the reader of this review would surmise that my understanding of the spiritual reality of the kingdom is merely "passing." He would almost certainly suppose that such "passing references" are contained only on page 225! This simply is erroneous.

Even a glance at the index will show several pages where the spiritual idea of the kingdom is mentioned: Pages 170, 225, 454-456, 474, 483, 485, 500 (see "Kingdom of God/heaven - spiritual," p. 576). And this index is nowhere near exhaustive. Gary North (my publisher) prefers more succinct indexes rather than exhaustive, minutely-detailed, bulky indexes, so I had to limit my index entries. There is much more in the book on the spiritual nature of the kingdom.

In fact, this is a *major* issue with me in that much of my argument is against the backdrop of dispensationalism with its full-blown, bureaucratic, floating-Jerusalem, political kingdom run by the glorified Christ as an earthly king sitting on David's literal throne and administered through immortal, resurrected saints over a world of mortals of mixed pedigree (saved and lost).² (Let me rest for a minute. I am exhausted after that last sentence. Also I get tickled when I think of the absurdity of such, and therefore must regain my composure.)

One can see more on the spiritual nature of the kingdom on pages 70-71, 216-231, 237, 360-365, 454-456, 482-486. In fact, in chapter four I introduce postmillennialism by giving a careful and extended definition of it. Point two on pp. 70-71 reads: "the fundamental nature of that kingdom is essentially redemptive and spiritual, rather than political and corporeal. Although it has implications for the political realm, it is not essentially political, competing with temporal nations for governmental rule. Christ rules His kingdom spiritually in and through His people in the world, as well as by His universal providence."

Regarding the important Kingdom Parables, I write: "In

Matthew 13, we have the famous Kingdom Parables that sketch some of the basic aspects of the spiritual kingdom that Christ was establishing" (p. 237).

Regarding Luke 22:29-30, I observe: "The kingdom He is here bestowing upon them is not an earthly, political kingdom, for He expressly forbids such carnal kingly trappings: "And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves'" (Luke 22:26). His kingdom was a spiritual kingdom of humble spiritual service rather than regal political glory" (p. 485).

Note in the citation by Hanks above that he charges that "Gentry has no time for this heavenly kingdom." But in fact, the spirituality principle of the kingdom, the heavenly source of it, is a fundamental tenet of my postmillennialism. In fact, it is definitional, being the second point of my extensive definition. Hanks has simply misled his readers.

Now look what I have done! I have taken up so much space that I am going to have to hurry through the rest of the article. It's all Prof. Hanks's fault!

The Purpose of God

Hanks's second paragraph (as cited above) is really quite good. Except for the addition of five words. Those five words include the word "heavenly" placed before "realization" and the last four words "when Christ comes again." As a reformed postmillennialist I agree that God's eternal purpose is to glorify Himself. But I hold that God will glorify Himself in earth history, besides glorifying Himself "in the heavenly realization of the glorious kingdom."

I further agree that "The original creation, the fall, salvation of the elect and the cosmos through the cross, all serve the purpose of God as He determined to realize it." But I do not limit such to the time "when Christ comes again."

And what is it that God's people are to be doing while they wait for temporal history to end? Or to phrase it in dispensational terms: "What are God's people to be doing while eagerly awaiting the end of history?"

I agree quite a bit with the first sentence in Hanks's third paragraph as cited above. But I must ask Hanks what is involved in God's people "representing the cause of God in a wicked world"? Here is where the fork in the road appears. As a theonomic postmillennialist, I would argue that the way we represent the cause of God in the world is by promoting His Law-word among the nations (cf. Deut. 4:6-7). Are we limited to just walking around with placards of witness borne upon our shoulders? Or is that representation of the cause of God to employ the gospel of Christ to the conversion of souls, who will begin implementing God's righteous standards in all of their social and cultural connections?

Is our "seeking those things above" a call to sit in the closet and desire to go to heaven? Or is it a challenge to seek our worldview directives, our life's operative principles from their heavenly source, as revealed in Scripture?

I heartily disagree with his second sentence in that paragraph. I do not believe our "hope" - that is, the entirety

of our hope - is to be "fastened upon the full perfection of all things when the world shall be destroyed." True. I long to see my Savior face to face. And I greatly desire to be established in perfection in eternity. Yet, God has in fact fashioned me a body and providentially placed me on earth in temporal history for a purpose. And that purpose is not just to wait for the end, when all is destroyed. It is to promote God's Word and will among living men here and now. It is, first, to confront them with their sin and their need of the Savior. Then, having been saved by God's sovereign grace, they are to be directed to promote the righteousness of God in all of life. I argue this in *He Shall Have Dominion* and in *The Greatness of the Great Commission*.

Pessimism

Hanks (p. 37): *It is ironic that those who live by this hope are called 'pessimists' [T]he Scriptures are optimistic. They hold forth for the believer a glorious promise. The believer is saved from death and hell already in this life.*

This is ironic, indeed! In *HSHD* I quote Hanks himself regarding the pessimism to which I refer. On page 22 I cite his own statement: "we must indeed expect an age when the powers of darkness shall rule the earth." Consequently, "there is nothing optimistic here or filled with hope for the future."³

I expressly note that all Christians are ultimately optimistic, in that we all affirm the reality of salvation to eternal life in Heaven (*HSHD*, 17).¹ I call him pessimistic regarding a certain state-of-affairs, that is, God-ordained earth history and the Christian's hope of discipline the nations (Matt. 28:20) through the gospel and by the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

In addition, I carefully define in what sense I charge eschatological systems with pessimism (*HSHD*, 17). They are pessimistic in holding to (1) a history-long minority status for Christianity, (2) the irreversible trend to chaos in history, and (3) denying all hope for wide-scale success for Christian discipleship in the world. In other words, though Hanks is ultimately optimistic regarding eternity, he is presently pessimistic regarding the arena in which God has placed Him.

¹ For those interested, I highly recommend my seventeen tape course: "Postmillennial Eschatology" (Set #5), available from me for \$68. Learn postmillennialism while driving around in your car! Suitable for Bible study classes. Helpful tapes on postmillennial cultural concerns are: #1 "The Greatness of the Great Commission" (\$5); #12 "The Redemption of the World & Godly Dominion" (\$5); #13 "The Cultural Mandate" (2 tapes \$10). #21 "The Westminster Confession of Faith on God's Law" (6 tapes \$28). Order from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

² For tapes analyzing some of these absurd problems, you may order my two tape set: "Dispensational Distortions" for \$10. See address in footnote 1.

³ Herman Hanks, "An Exegetical Refutation of Postmillennialism," (unpublished conference paper: South Holland, IL: South Holland Protestant Reformed Church, 1978), 22, 23.