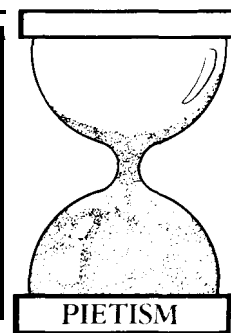


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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DISPENSATIONAL DEATH THROES

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

Our newsletter is entitled "Dispensationalism in Transition." Our focus is almost always on the old school dispensationalism of the PROWL type (Pentecost, Ryrie, Walvoord, Lindsey - I threw in the O just for fun). This is the brand of dispensationalism dominating the air-waves among televangelists, controlling chart-production commerce, and flooding the mass-market paperback industry. This is the dispensationalism that is "in transition."

But things are changing quite rapidly. It will not be too long before we have to give more time to the new and improved dispensationalism. This dispensationalism is known as "progressive dispensationalism" and is best represented by Robert Saucy. Progressive dispensationalism is gaining its following mainly among intellectual dispensationalists, not among populists. Consequently, we must still reckon with the overwhelming numbers of populists for awhile longer. So we will keep the fire under their feet for the time being.¹

I would like to present two interesting lines of evidence of the death of that Old Time Religion: PROWL-type dispensationalism. One is the existence of an ad hoc Damage Control Committee; the other is the transition within the administration of Dallas Seminary, long the leader in old school dispensationalism. Both have made the news of late.

Full Speed Ahead and Darn the Torpedoes!

The Damage Control Committee that of which I speak is not known as such, of course. Although it seems clear that it is a damage control phenomenon.

I have before me the January 10, 1994, *National & International Religion Report* (pp. 4-5). Both Gary North and Gary DeMar sent me copies of this report within days of each other. It is quite interesting. North's photostat has a typical hand-scrawled Northian comment at the top: "Classic sign of a failing movement: loss of understanding by former troops." I think he is correct.

The news article opens with these words: "Not enough clergy understand the importance of belief in a pre-tribulation rapture, PreTrib Study Group Chairman Tim LaHaye told NIRR."

The chairman of this "PreTrib Study Group" speaking here is the one who penned the following words in his latest book, *No Fear of the Storm*: "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! . . . [T]hat comforting belief is under greater attack today more than at any time in recent history Some have even abandoned this Blessed Hope, discarding their belief that the Lord could return at any moment" (pp. 9, 10, 14).

Regarding this tragedy, reams of paper floating on rivers

of tears are pouring into Christian trinket shops (a.k.a. book stores). Notice comments in two other well-known books.

Compare the words of Chairman LaHaye to those of Dave Hunt in his book, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?*: "Today, a growing number of Christians are exchanging the hope for the rapture for a new hope . . . that Christians can clean up society and elect enough of their own candidates to political office to make *this world* a 'heaven on earth'" (back cover). Hunt is a trained accountant. He knows what failing numbers mean for publishing royalties. He is probably more consistent than Lindsey and has no money invested for the future. (In the late 1970s I remember reading an article in *The Presbyterian Journal* about Lindsey investing large sums of money in long-term real estate developments! I wish I could put my hands on that news item.)

Another frenzied (and embarrassingly flawed) attack on Christian Reconstructionism is by Wayne House and Tommy Ice: *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*. In that work we hear a similar concern: "In fact, the premillennial position is probably more on the decline at the present time than the other two views" (p. 21 O). Upon reading such, I am caught in a liturgical quandary: shall I sing the *Hallelujah Chorus* or *Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow*? (And since I am not committed to liturgy, this all the more remarkable!)

The NIRR Report continues: "The group, dedicated to championing the position, held its second annual meeting Dec. 14-16 in Dallas." This is classic damage control: meet, eat, and retreat!

A Stitch in Time Saves Nine

A publisher with a vested interest in pre-trib fortunes sponsored the original meeting (which was a secret event): Harvest House Publishers. And the reason they gave for secretly rapturing down to Dallas last year is telling: "Last year's meeting, sponsored by Harvest House Publishers, was kept secret to prevent end-time extremists and date-setters from bombarding the group with requests and materials"! But then they let Hal "1988" Lindsey in! And Tim LaHaye, who wrote these words: "[P]eople today identify the focus on the Middle East as 'a sign of the times.' And they aren't far wrong [G]od's prophetic clock is beginning to move again . . ." (*No Fear of the Storm*, 18).

The most recent meeting in December, 1993, shows a mixed bag of speakers: John Walvoord, whom I respect as a theologian, gave the main address. Charles Ryrie and J. Dwight Pentecost, serious defenders of old school dispensationalism, were there. But they were joined by such lightweights as Kay Arthur (my former high school youth director in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and currently a popular women's speaker), Hal Lindsey (no comment), and Tommy Ice (see

previous parenthetical statement). According to the news report: "The 65 prophecy scholars, Christian educators, and authors were selected as representatives of their schools, ministries, and publishers."

The article continues: "A permanent research center will serve as a prophecy think [sic] -tank. The center (which will be funded by donations from congregations, organizations, and individuals) will promote the pre-trib position with publications, conferences, and other activities to help tell the church that Christ could return at any time."

Tommy Ice was elected to serve as Executive Director starting March 1st. (If you heard an explosion in Texas on that date, it may have been Tommy trying to use dynamite to start an earthquake to provide material for an end-times news release.) I know he is serious about this because he ordered over \$200 worth of Reconstructionist tapes (mostly mine) from Still Waters Revival Books just recently.

The news release continues with a remarkable statement: "LaHaye said too few young pastors have sufficient grounding in prophecy to feel comfortable preaching on the subject." I have never known that to hinder confident predictions from dispensationalist pastors!

To remedy the dearth of comfortable pastors (and to augment book sales): "The center hopes to provide a cassette-of-the-month club featuring prophecy scholars and inspirational pre-trib speakers to help pastors speak more authoritatively on the one-third of the Bible that is prophetic. The center also will help counteract the 'rash of unscriptural and harmful speculation' that members expect to plague the church as a new millennium approaches." "Expect"? Dispensationalists are *notorious* for such. Certainly there will be false prophecies abounding. There is money to be made! Look at *The National Enquirer*.

DTS Backs Off

Another sign of the dwindling fortunes of dispensationalism is the erosion of Dallas Theological Seminary as a stalwart dispensationalist institution. This has been occurring over the years, but with the election of its new (figure-head) president, Charles Swindoll, DTS is really on a slippery slope.

An interview with Swindoll appeared in the October 25, 1993, edition of *Christianity Today* magazine. The tone of the article was measured, but clear enough. There is evidence of the *transition* of Dallas Seminary's theology.

On page 14 of *Christianity Today* we read the interview: "Dallas Theological Seminary is known as the flagship of the dispensational movement. How would you evaluate the state of dispensational theology? And what is its future there?"

Swindoll answered: "I'm going to be very vulnerable with you: I think *dispensations* is a scare word. I'm not sure we're going to make *dispensationalism* a big part of our marquee as we talk about our school. I like to think of Dallas Seminary as a first and foremost a biblical school. And when you take the Scriptures as they are, dispensations take care of themselves. Most people are dispensationalists, but they don't know it."

He continues: "I'm a 1963 graduate of Dallas. Most graduates I'm in touch with were not rammed into a mold or

made to sign on the dotted line. The scuttlebutt has always been that at Dallas you're going to get dispensationalism crammed down your throat. Usually it's coming from people who have never been in the school. The word is out that Dallas is where you go if you're a little extreme on dispensationalism. That's not true at all."

I am not sure Grover Gunn and Curtis Crenshaw, authors of *Dispensationalism, Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow*, would agree that you did not have to sign on the dotted line there. I certainly had to sign on the dotted line at Tennessee Temple College. I would have been obliged to sign a dispensational doctrinal statement at Grace Theological Seminary also, had a partial rapture not taken several other students and me out of there and into Reformed Theological Seminary. But back to the interview.

Question: "When Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas seminary, used the term *dispensationalist*, he had something very specific in mind. He probably wouldn't recognize the dispensationalism being taught today at Dallas. Do you think the term is going to disappear as well?"

Swindoll: "It may, and perhaps it should. I grew up with the old Scofield Bible. I'm more in that camp than any other. But in the progress of revelation, there is the need to fit terms so they make sense, to use words that do not frighten or create misunderstanding." Apparently a lot of students were becoming frightened at DTS! It must have been terrifying. I know I was afraid to let the administration at Tennessee Temple College know that I had come to believe God was in control of the universe (I became a Calvinist while there). At that time, though, I was still a dispensationalist.

Conclusion

Keep a watch on the inter-dispensational debate. The low-wattage populist will kick and scream; the credible and studious progressives will continue to make emendations. And their emendations are in the right direction.

Addendum:

Christ College, where I teach theology and Bible, presently has twelve students. We are expecting twenty students this coming Fall, with one South African student. The South African student is Rev. Jackie Melakulu. We are seeking to raise the tuition support for him in his move to America to study at Christ College. If you would like to give, send a check payable to Christ College, P.O. Box 9084, Greenville, SC 29604. Mark it: Jackie Mehlomakhulu. Your assistance is greatly appreciated.

Greg Bahnsen and I will be speaking at a Bible Conference at Reedy River Presbyterian Church, March 19-20. Call 803-277-5455 for information.

¹For a two tape critique of old school dispensationalism ("Dispensational Distortions") send \$10 to me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636. Other tapes of interest: "Postmillennialism and Preterism" (4 tapes: \$20); "Postmillennial Hope" (4 tapes: \$20); "Postmillennial Eschatology" (17 tapes: \$68); "The Lord's Prayer" (8 tapes: \$37).